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Phantasmatic: Interrogating The (IM)Materiality Of Bodies Through Wool And Clay

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**PHANTASMATIC: INTERROGATING THE (IM)MATERIALITY
OF BODIES THROUGH WOOL AND CLAY**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Tyler Robert Sheldon, my best friend and partner who believes in me and supports me under any circumstances. *Ad Astra per Aspera!*

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ABSTRACT

Phantasmatic is an exploration of materials and materiality which relies on the concept of the phantasmatic body elucidated in Gayle Salamon's work *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. This thesis is an exploration of these ideas. In my work, I use wool and clay to represent the material (known) and phantasmatic (sensed) bodies in an effort to explore an expanded understanding of the body at large. My work is also an effort to expand my own understanding of my phantasmatic body and its relationship to (my) materiality.

INTRODUCTION

Everything begins with drawing—crafting a visual outline for my work. Drawing provides an efficient and direct way to plan my work. Before I began making work in wool or clay for this thesis, I sketched my ideas and planned my approach, clarifying forms before beginning actual work in clay. Drawing provided me a starting point; without it, I would have had significant difficulty knowing where to begin with materials that (in the case of clay) were somewhat unfamiliar. I’ve found that drawing has played a critical role in the development of my thesis work as it makes an intangible idea more readily available. I chose to expand the role of drawing from a method of planning to a means of investigation alongside the materials of clay and wool. Drawing is akin to thinking for me and is a way for me to engage with ideas, concepts and concerns.

I have conceptualized the phantasmatic body as a boundless and formless expansion of the material body, which can only be known through feeling. Through my engagement with the idea of the phantasmatic body I have found more questions than answers.¹ If the phantasmatic body is boundless and formless then that must mean that there is no discrete boundary between individuals.² I imagine, then, a possible ever-shifting network of phantasmatic bodies, in a constant state of flux, that make and remake interactions. As my work in clay and wool developed I relied on drawing to help me engage with complex ideas. It helped me envision the next step in my process when the way forward was unclear.

¹ Several further questions spring forth from this concept: How does one phantasmatic body interact with another when other bodies are encountered? Does the phantasmatic body of each individual then meld into and interact with another, creating a network of fluctuating connections? Are those connections made and remade as the bodies respond to each other? Finally, do these bodies respond to each other at all?

² Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 61.

Materials have always been a key component of my process as an artist. Materials speak volumes about the process of making and provide insights into the goals of the artist. I want my artwork to provide a method for the exploration of ideas through material awareness. Material awareness means that it is important to carefully consider the working methods that are available. Material choice is an important part of my artistic process. Every material has a unique set of considerations that are factored into its use. However, these choices may offer little to the viewer unless the viewer is in some way familiar with the materials used. There are clues on the surface of the work that may guide the viewer's perception, but they may not directly identify the materials used.

More to the point, I understand that the viewer has only the surface to guide them in their understanding without the aid of a label or artist statement. I find it important to reconsider my knowledge of a material, and to accept that there are possibilities beyond what I may know and accept as being possibly correct. I want to explore the potential that wool and clay hold as materials to communicate meaning. These materials share a history of functionality. Clay is a material with a long history that has been able to carry a heavy load of meaning in a variety of contexts, and wool has a long history of use as a material for functional objects as well as decorative work.

PROCESS

As a result of my research on working with clay and the processes typically associated with it, I have become aware of a linear progression in the making process. Clay can be reconsidered outside of the more usual linear process of mixing, forming, drying, and firing. The opportunities within each stage of the process allow for reflection and consideration. The act of mixing a clay body represents a chance to create a clay that suits a specific process or working method. Forming clay also presents a variety of approaches such as pinching, slab building, coil building, or wheel throwing. Each forming method has unique strengths and challenges that are opportunities to learn and reconsider material and process. Drying clay is typically a one-way linear process, where wet clay is the only stage that allows forming. As worked clay dries and progresses through the suede and leather-hard states, forming and alteration gradually become increasingly limited until the clay air dries completely. This final state is referred to as “bone dry,” and is typically a stage in the making process that would be followed by firing. Firing the clay creates a permanent structure.

In my work I have chosen to reconsider this process and accept that bone dry is a state that creates an opportunity for semiotics (meaning-making) through the fragility of the clay body. Importantly, fragility and impermanence are a part of life and the material body. With the addition of paper pulp to the clay body during mixing, the “normal” linear progression can be challenged and reconsidered, creating opportunity for the revision and refinement of work that has already dried past the suede state. Bone dry clay is temporary and lacks the strength and durability that fired clay has. Bone dry clay can be reclaimed at any time, unlike clay that has been fired. Reclaiming clay refers to the practice of allowing dried clay to absorb water in a receptacle so that the clay can be recycled and reused, a process also referred to as “slaking.”

The fragility and impermanence of my work—utilizing clay in a bone dry state—is perhaps only available to a viewer familiar with clay.

MATERIALS

As a part of my practice I've utilized a variety of wools: Merino, Shetland, Romney, and Jacob wool. With use, I have discovered how these wools' individual qualities operate on their own and blend with other wools. Merino wool is fine, delicate, and smooth, yet it can create a firm felted surface rapidly with less repetition than other wools used in my work. Wet felting is a process that utilizes wool fibers, water, and agitation. The wool is arranged carefully around a resist, a "piece of plastic or other material used to prevent two sections of wool felt from sticking to each other while being made,"³ which is used to establish the shape of the wool. Water and soap are added slowly to encourage the felting process; this process creates a network of interlocked fibers. Agitating the wool and the water surrounding it increases the interlocking of individual wool fibers, and this creates a solid wool structure. The resist is then removed, and the hollow form can be molded and shaped to further define it. Working with wool requires planning to utilize it efficiently, especially when wet felting. I have discovered that for wool to retain its shape and achieve a fully felted form, it is necessary to allow for a shrinkage rate of at least 15% to 30% of the form's original volume.

Wet felting is a linear process that gradually produces a strong, self-supporting matrix. Wool roving, tightened and interlocked in this state, cannot be untangled. Despite the linearity of the forming process, felted wool does offer opportunities for flexibility; the felting process can be stopped at any point and can be continued again at any time. The wool matrix also accepts further alteration at the pre-felt stage. However, once the wool is fully felted making changes becomes more difficult, necessitating the use of another, sometimes complementary process

³ Ruth Lane, *The Complete Photo Guide to Felting* (Creative Publishing International, 2012), 233.

called needle felting (needle felting can be used on its own or in conjunction with wet felting).

To create the necessary interlocking between individual fibers, needle felting uses small barbed needles to manipulate the wool.

My goals for the viewer are as follows: I would like for the viewer to see the evidence of my touch, and to potentially question the purpose of the work (as both individual parts and a larger whole). Additionally, the viewer should recognize the potential significance of pair repetition and the number two throughout my work.

RESEARCH

To focus and define my research I read a variety of books that centered on transgender individuals, personal narratives, and history, as well as critical analyses of scholarship in transgender studies. These works include S. Bear Bergman's essay collection *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*; Leslie Feinberg's *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*; Susan Stryker's *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*; and Gayle Salamon's *Assuming A Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality*. My motivation for this line of inquiry was to expand for myself my understanding of and engagement with what it means to be transgender. Initially, I intended to create objects that would create an opportunity to examine my experience of dysphoria.⁴

As historian Susan Stryker notes, Gender dysphoria is defined thus in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association: "Gender dysphoria as a general descriptive term refers to an individual's affective/cognitive discontent with the assigned gender," and when used as a diagnostic category, it "refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender."⁵ Throughout my research I discovered stories of transgender people that I found insightful, painful, fulfilling, and beautiful. Yet, while these narratives provided me a sense of belonging, they did not provide a fruitful answer to the question of why individuals experience what has come to be described as "dysphoria." This line

⁴ "Gender Dysphoria." What Is Gender Dysphoria? 2016. Accessed April 18, 2019. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>.

⁵ Susan Stryker. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Hachette Book Group, 2017), 18.

of inquiry led me to question dysphoria as my main focus for this thesis—and though I had assumed that such would be the case, my research led me in a considerably different direction.

I chose instead to focus on Gayle Salamon's book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, and the concept of the phantasmatic body as a way to understand my experience of my own body and dysphoria. I am interested in the idea that the body expands beyond the visible boundaries of materiality into a space that is boundless and formless. Salamon notes that "[i]f the phantasmatic can be described as something (or, more properly, something) that escapes our attempts to grasp or survey it, it would seem that the aspect of the phantasmatic that retreats from our perception is not the solidity of its materiality, but the solidity of our own knowledge of it."⁶ Similarly, Merleau-Ponty argues that the phantasmatic body "is indefinable . . . that which cannot be encompassed by our knowledge of it."⁷

In order to explore the expanded view of the body espoused by Merleau-Ponty and Gayle Salmon, I chose to use measurements from my body to provide a referent for the phantasmatic body. Since the phantasmatic is indefinable, I sought a means to imply its existence through the only individual connection to the phantasmatic body I have available: the material body and its concrete measurements.

I also chose to create associations between clay and wool so that the material body and phantasmatic bodies could be illustrated. I argue that the material body and the phantasmatic body are tied together and form the basis for the experience of the body. The clay acts as an indicator for the material body based on its standing associations with the body (due to its

⁶ Salamon, Gayle. 2010. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷ Salamon, "Assuming a Body," 61.

composition). I selected wool to act as an indicator for the phantasmatic body because of its history as a functional material devoted to the protection of the material body.

CONCEPT

I am intrigued by the idea of the phantasmatic body as an expansion of the more limited material body. The idea of the expansion of the body to include the phantasmatic was the result of my research to find meaning for myself and my experience. The phantasmatic body is boundless and formless, and it can only be known through direct experience.⁸ Due to its nature, the phantasmatic body is inherently unfamiliar and can only be understood on an individual basis.

In order to understand the possibility of the phantasmatic body I needed to tie it to a bounded form (my material body) so that I could have a point of reference to describe something that is considered boundless and formless. Thus, I used my height (and equal divisions thereof) to determine uniform spacing between objects. I also used my height to determine the height of some pieces. The space between the objects represents the phantasmatic body, and the wool beneath the vessel-like objects further suggests the phantasmatic body's presence in a physically conceptualized form. I chose to juxtapose wool with clay to create a clear distinction between individual parts of my pieces. Color is used to create formal relationships, but the visual difference in the surface of each material creates an opportunity to delineate the material body from the phantasmatic.

My intention was to create opportunities to highlight the existence of the phantasmatic body by indicating its existence via each piece with wool and negative space. Each part of my work recognizes that the negative or unused space accompanying a work is just as vital as the

⁸ Salamon, "*Assuming a Body*," 61. Salamon states that "the phantasmatic can be described as something . . . that escapes our attempts to grasp it or survey it . . . the aspect of the phantasmatic that retreats from our perception is not the solidity of its materiality, but the solidity of our own knowledge."

space the work actively occupies. The spaces between forms, typically described as unused or negative space, are filled rather than empty; wool, as an indicator of the phantasmatic body, is extended by that negative space. Extrapolating further from this idea, the space that any form inhabits (and the space that surrounds it) is an extension of that form's phantasmatic body. Furthermore, the space surrounding a form exists due to the presence of that form's material body.

My first piece, *Un-broken*, was created with an iron oxide-rich low-fire clay body that I pinched slowly into two hundred and four vessel-like forms slightly larger than my palm. Once each form was bone dry I broke it in half to facilitate for the viewer a visual clue of the significance of the number two. I also chose to break the clay vessel-like forms as a reference to my experience of dysphoria, which resulted from being assigned female at birth.⁹ I used beeswax mixed with lanolin (a byproduct of a sheep's wool production) and iron oxide powder to layer color in the interior space of my vessel-like objects. The mixture of beeswax and iron oxide acted as a bonding agent to adhere the broken parts of each vessel together. Each vessel-like object rests on an irregular, four-inch-diameter form made of felted wool. I permanently stained these wool forms with dye made from soy milk and iron oxide. Together, these two parts—the clay vessel-like forms and the felted wool forms—surround a circular space, which has a diameter equal to my full height. On two opposing sides of this inner circular space stand two taller clay forms that function as pedestals. These forms also imply vertical space that the phantasmatic body occupies within the delineated circular boundary.

My second piece, titled *Implication*, was created by wet felting with a resist; this facilitated the creation of hollow forms. This piece's thirty-four hollow forms are stained with a

⁹ Susan Stryker. "*Transgender History*," 12.

mixture of soy milk and iron oxide so that they are visually similar in color and form to the wool in the first piece (*Un-broken*). It was my intention to create a consistent language of form throughout both pieces so that they could be associated with each other visually.

My goal for *Implication* is for it to isolate the phantasmatic body from any reference to the material body. Put another way, it is another, different attempt at indicating the phantasmatic body. This piece occupies a space equal to my height in a strictly horizontally oriented circular form.

My third piece, *Extension*, utilizes two large wet felted hollow forms that are connected together by parallel felted cylinders of wool. *Extension* uses many of the same techniques and processes utilized in *Implication*. However, while *Extension* is visually similar to *Implication*, the hollow forms are markedly different in certain ways. They are larger, are connected together, and have outer parallel tendrils that are half the length of the connecting felted cylinders in the center. These felted forms rest on irregular unfired clay bases that are broken in half. My goal for *Extension* was to emphasize that the phantasmatic body is a “nonthing” that extends beyond the boundaries of materiality.¹⁰

My fourth piece, *Connection?*, represents a change in my work that accommodates an understanding of how drawing can function beyond a means for planning or thinking. I have begun to consider drawing as a means of artistic expression rather than simply a means for planning work in other media. Drawings as objects are close to lacking materiality.¹¹ Drawing seemed to be a perfect fit to explore the phantasmatic body not only as a boundless “nonthing,” as Salamon describes it, but as an opportunity to question how the phantasmatic bodies of

¹⁰ Salamon, “*Assuming a Body*,” 61.

¹¹ Dexter, Emma. 2013. *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*. Phaidon. 007. Emma Dexter describes drawing as “at times close to being the holy grail of the dematerialized object.”

multiple individuals may interact with each other. Perhaps individual bodies connect and disconnect, forming a network of relationships. *Connection?* follows this concept of a linked grouping. The piece is a group of eight drawings on heavyweight white paper. Each of the eight drawings is torn down to a size of 17 1/8" x 17 1/8"; this number is derived from my height. For these drawings I utilized layers of gray pastel underneath layers of white grease pencil. I wanted these drawings to in some way suggest the phantasmatic body's lack of materiality. I found that white grease pencil lacked a level of visual interest, and this necessitated the layering of gray pastel underneath the pencil. My goal for *Connection?* was for the forms in the drawing to visually relate to the white of the paper through the use of color.

My fifth piece *Convergence* is a diptych that utilizes heavy gloss gel medium on heavyweight white paper, which I have torn down to 17 1/8" x 17 1/8". Salamon states that the body itself is "a mixture or amalgam of substance and ideal located somewhere between its . . . quantifiable materiality and its phantasmatic extensions into the world."¹² I have understood this to mean that each material body is *coupled with* an individual phantasmatic body. It is my goal with *Convergence* to tackle this question: how do individual phantasmatic bodies respond to each other? Similarly, in *Connection?* I envisioned individual bodies creating a network of connections, yet it is possible that these individual bodies respond instead by converging (even if only fleetingly) and becoming one body. In *Convergence* I changed my strategy for referencing the phantasmatic body. Throughout my earlier work I relied on a vessel-like form that was derived from the first piece, *Un-broken*. However, in *Convergence* it is necessary to discard this form to reference the possibility of phantasmatic body becoming a singular form. My goal for

¹² Salamon, "Assuming a Body," 64-65.

this piece was to investigate the use of heavy gloss gel to reflect light, to suggest the possibility of individual phantasmatic bodies converging to become one body.

EVOLUTION OF APPROACH

My work has changed during my time attending graduate school in part because I have also changed dramatically as a person over the course of the program, both personally and professionally. I believe the exposure to a new setting has created the opportunity for me to prioritize my work and has also influenced many changes in that work's conceptualization and making. The guidance and mentorship of faculty encouraged me to accept the possibility of exploring my ideas and pushing my work beyond what I was familiar with. I have grown in my understanding of myself and my work. I have also formulated my own answer to the question of what art is, and what it can be for me as an artist. My goals began to shift once I felt that I'd amassed a level of technical information and a broad grasp on the materials and processes I found compelling. My interest shifted from the exploration of material and process to a focus on concept and the relationship between concept, process and material.

My method has changed in several ways. I now read and research, looking for topics that I find interesting. During my research I take notes in my sketchbook (or in the reading itself) when a line or topic strikes a chord or seems somehow important or meaningful. After reading I try to find common topics within the readings, searching for cross-pollinating ideas. I also try to find the overarching topic that bridges the information selected, and try to connect it to something I have a personal interest in. However, during the process itself it does not seem nearly as orderly as is described here. A clear progression is not usually apparent until enough time has passed to look back on the research from a more objective perspective. Many ideas and "epiphanies" I have formulated have not seemed logical or helpful until much later in the process, or until after the completion of a given project. I have also discovered the need to be cognizant of the information and number of topics that I investigate at any given time.

CONCLUSION

My interest in the phantasmatic body is an ongoing source of inspiration and interest for me that provides a means to spur forward my growth and learning as an artist. I have found through my exploration of the phantasmatic body that my understanding of it has grown and changed; this progression is shown in turn in my work. Initially, I understood that the phantasmatic body was merely an invisible, boundless, formless “nothing” that was tied to the physical material body. However, my conception of the phantasmatic body has expanded to include new questions as well. I have found that their answers are not easily unearthed, but these questions nonetheless provide a means of moving forward in my evolving artistic practice. I have also discovered that questioning does not end when work is installed in a gallery. I noticed that a change in context from studio to gallery creates an opportunity to discover the work anew: it becomes somehow fresh again. The gallery also provides ample space to address and explore how a viewer may engage with the work. During my installation I aimed to facilitate a connection or a relationship between the pieces through the use of the space. By creating a triangular arrangement between specific pieces, I aimed to ground the work in the space of the gallery. I have come to realize that a variety of factors have the potential to change or enhance a viewer’s perception of my work. Thus, I have come to understand that my work is not done when pieces leave the studio to enter the gallery. On the contrary, there are ever more opportunities that await discovery and interrogation.

PHANTASMATIC
WORKS BY ALEXANDRIA J. ARCENEAUX



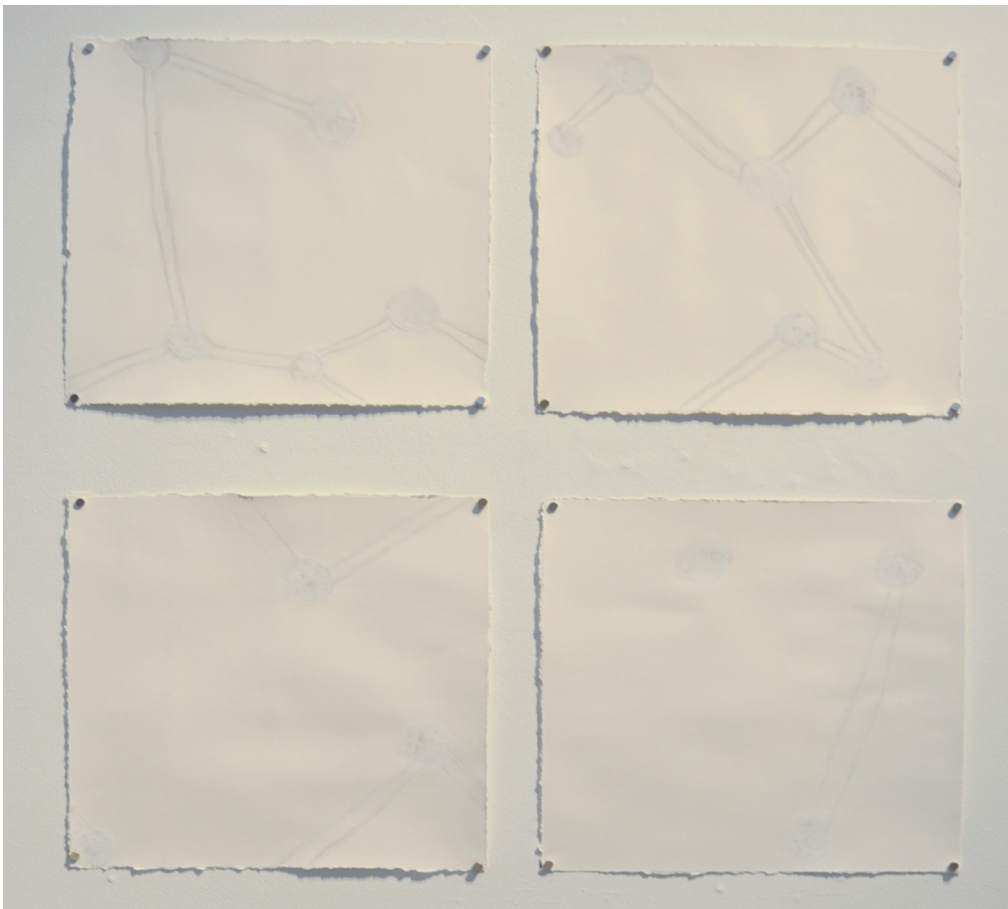
Un-broken, 2019, clay, wool, beeswax.



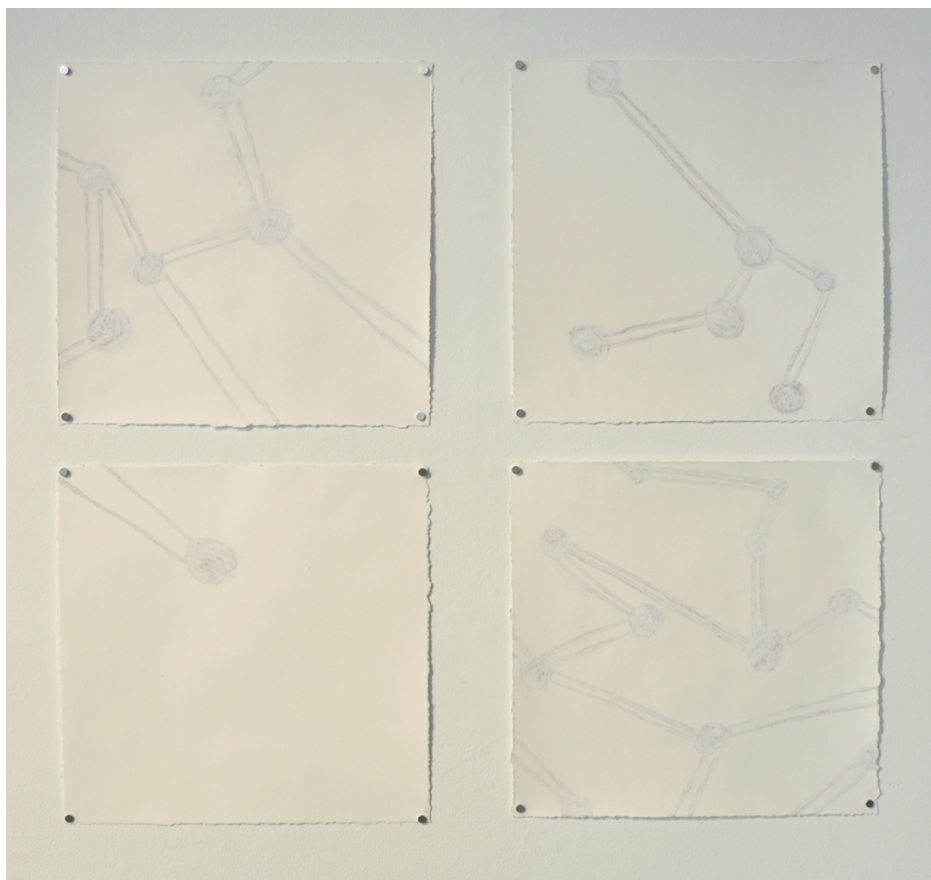
Implication, 2019, wool, iron oxide.



Extension, 2019, wool, clay, iron oxide.



Connection? (1 of 2), 2019, paper, pastel, grease pencil.



Connection? (2 of 2), 2019, paper, pastel, grease pencil



Convergence, 2019, paper, gel medium

VITA

Alexandria J. Arceneaux's work has appeared in the John T. and Connie Staton Art Gallery, the Mark Arts – Mary R. Koch Arts Center, and other venues, and has won purchase awards from several institutions. A multi-disciplinary artist, Arceneaux has worked in painting, drawing, printmaking, engraving, sculpture, and ceramics. They live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with their spouse, the writer and editor Tyler Robert Sheldon.