

2. The Wig I Made When My Hair Was Short

Lichen wig made of usnea longissima, salvaged t-shirt fabric, thread

2017

Megan Stein: Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge that I am conducting our interview on unceded Indigenous land known as Tiohiá:ke / Montreal, and that I am very excited to be talking to you (Natasha) today. First, a warmup question - can you please tell me about where you have decided to take this call, the space and things that are around you right now while we chat? Are you outside, inside? Have you prepared any snacks?

Tasha Lavdovsky: Oh yeah, great question. I am speaking from the Tsartlip Nation Land, and that is part of the WSÁNEĆ Nation in the Coast Salish territories, also referred to as Saanich, located on Vancouver Island. This unceded territory is where I grew up and I am very grateful to call it home. I am in the basement suite of my mom's house, and my mom, my sister and her son are upstairs. I am in my temporary bedroom, that is probably the most sound-proof room. I have my computer on the desk, a granola bar, some anti-anxiety tea, ashwagandha tincture - for anxiety, and an orange rosemary cider. Oh, and I already drank my glass of water.

MS: How many drinks is that, three beverages?

TL: Technically four if you include the tincture, haha. Well - I guess the tincture goes into the water ... and the water is gone ... So, it is really just three, haha. And it's dark, I don't have the lights on. My window is east facing, and it is getting on in the afternoon, so it is not very bright. It's a cloudy day and the sun is on the other side of the house.

MS: Very cozy, and with much hydration. So, how are your summer projects going? Can you give me a brief take on what you have been up to?

TL: My summer projects are going pretty slowly, but fairly consistently. I have been really interested in lichens for a long time. This past winter I realized they have been used to make textile dye for thousands of years. I wanted to try this, because I already have an understanding and am familiar with the different species here, along with my own collection of various species. In the way that I harvest and use them, I see them as a sustainable material. Lichens are very sensitive to the temperature, humidity, and airflow of their particular habitat. When the foliose and fruticose

species (that usually live on branches) fall after windstorms, they will not continue to live on the ground. I am living in a temperate rainforest where there are a lot of lichens: The Pacific Ocean creates really great air quality, so there are unique species here because of that.

I have collected these over time to make wigs, but the wigs require very specific species which are aesthetically pleasing and look like hair. So, I have a leftover collection of lichens, and when I realized I could make fabric dye with them it was a very exciting turn of events. I have collected white cotton clothing from thrift stores over the past ten years with the intention of dyeing it. In the past, I had reservations about gathering plants for the purpose of boiling them and killing them and making colours from them - it seemed harsh. The more I looked into it, I found there are many invasive plants and kitchen and garden waste that can be used to make dye. I am focusing on those as well as the lichens. Because I am new to dyeing, I am creating a catalogue of prevalent plants and lichens that I have around me, that I can collect in an ethical and sustainable way. So far this summer I have made tests with lichens, St. John's Wort flowers (non-medical), and Elder leaves.

Something that excited me about the lichen dye process, was that some of the lichens create pinks and purples from a fermentation process with ammonia. The ammonia extracts the chemicals that create the colours to make the dye. It is a long process, for months the lichens are kept in a jar with ammonia that must be shook every day. The traditional dye process appealed to me because it uses stale human urine, and I like to use natural materials. In early February I started a vat of urine and lichen. I brought it across the country with me in my car when I drove back to BC. I have tested it, by taking a cup of concentrated liquid, water, and salt, which is then heated and cooled in a very specific process, with the wool and fibres in the dye pot over the cooking stove. It takes three days. I dyed some samples and they turned out to be a really pretty dusty rose. I then poured the used, diluted urine/ lichen dye through a sieve into a jelly cake mould which I put in the freezer for about 2-3 weeks.

I like to use natural materials to make things, and to know where my supplies come from, and urine is easily

accessible. I really like to make sculptures that are performative and that kind of do their own thing - especially things that melt or fall apart. Even though I am using materials by manipulating them; heat and time take control. This releases my control over the process, while symbolically giving the materials agency. Also, just the fact that there is this fancy looking object, that is actually, pee, really amuses me.

I shot a time-lapse video of the frozen dye melting on a cake stand, staining a white tablecloth - a critique of British propriety. When I removed it from the mould, before placing it on the stand, I noticed the top did not fully freeze (the salt in the dye it made this beautiful crystalline texture) and most of the dye fell to the bottom.

Fancy jelly cakes originated in pre-Victorian British society (my mom's side of the family is from Yorkshire). I associate jelly cakes with the pretense of luxury and the presentation of wealth and class (for those who were able to afford the ingredients and supplies). Simultaneously, this luxury is associated with exploitation, because, in my mind, one cannot achieve the level of luxury that is seen in a lot of Western culture without exploitation of people, animals, and ecosystems locally and globally.

Lichen dye has an exploitive history of people and the environment. Large quantities were collected to make enough dye for a skein of wool from a certain lichen species,



3. Work in progress
frozen lichen urine dye
2020

because they are so light and small. In England, they would collect crustose lichens that live on the rocks, as those often create the brightest colours. Before the industrial era there was a tendency for people to do this on their own, gathering a few bits and pieces here and there to make things for themselves that would last for years. But with industrialization, the exploitation level increased (low wages, collecting urine of poor people) to increase profits. It coincides with the colonization of Scotland, when people were removed from their land to create sheep farms in support of the textile industry. The people who lost their land were then asked to give urine and collect lichens for extremely low wages. This just scratches the surface of the extent to which England's obsession with wealth production has led to colonial atrocities all over the world. And of course I'm complicit in that history as well.

It is really interesting to see how all of these things intersect, for me, I get most passionate about projects when there are multiple angles. I often find that there is too much to talk about because there are all these tangents - I haven't

even talked about how lichens operate in their ecosystems, which is a whole other story!

MS: There is often so much history within any given material. In your work, the natural materials such as plants and symbiotic species like lichens, have their own plant history that exists before, and/or alongside the history of use by humans.

TL: It is interesting that you say that, I feel like there is so much to know about everything - one could spend their whole life just reading about a few things!

MS: What do you feel are the most important questions you are asking yourself in your practice right now?

TL: 1: In what way is this harmful? - To the environment or people through processes, materials, and messages. How can things can be misunderstood? I always ask this because I do not want to make art that hurts other beings. However, I do like to ride the line of making art that is somewhat provocative in a subtle way; that challenges rather than attacks. Some of my art makes people laugh unintentionally, which I like.

2: Am I just doing this because of how it will look? - Though I like things that look 'nice', 'crisp', and 'aesthetic', I like to push myself to consider this. Then, I can respond with all the reasons why it could matter.

3: How can the focus of a project be on the agency and autonomy of plants, animals, ecosystems, and other non-human beings, where the collaboration is less about using them as materials, and more about trying to represent their value in themselves?

MS: Do you believe in collaboration or competition for fostering artistic growth? Or do you believe both are necessary?

TL: As someone who works alone a lot of the time, I find myself collaborating with other people, the materials I use, time, and seasons. I really love talking to people about their work and sharing my work - it is much more motivating than feeling like I have to be the first one to release an idea. Competition can be misleading and in fact it does not allow for the space for creativity to unfold organically. That is why collaboration feels more effective, but not to say competition does not have its place.

MS: And perhaps similarity can be seen as an indicator of mutual cause that encourages multiple, separate lines of thought to converge.

TL: I really do believe that we are all connected by a collective unconscious, and that it is our culture's obsession with ego that creates the sense of competition and jealousy. I believe that our ideas are not ours, we tap into them. This is liberating because it removes possessiveness over a creative pursuit. In this mindset, when I see something similar to what I am working on it is an exciting moment of positive connection.

MS: I am curious - do you have a personal philosophy that shapes your view of the world?

TL: I feel like we are all connected: all humans, plants, animals, water, wind, and plate tectonics, are all operating in relationship with each other. I feel that rather than being separate entities, what is more important is how we relate and our relationship with the other perceived entities that make up the world. I really do believe that the well-being



left:

4. *Work in progress*

frozen lichen urine dye (made from fermenting *evernia prunastri* in urine for 4 months)

2020

right:

5. *Dye tests on wool*

Dyed with *evernia prunastri* lichen fermented in urine for 4 months (same dye bath from images 3 & 4)

2020

of others (human or non-human) has a huge effect on the well-being of everyone else, even if they do not know it. Part of my art practice for the past nine years has been a focus on making things that do not harm anyone or anything - which is obviously not possible. Humans are very destructive - there are not many lifestyles that a human can survive in where they will not harm something. When I think about making art that causes little harm as possible, it is an ideal. When I look at everything around me, I see what went into making it - the raw materials, processes, waste materials, assembly, energy, people - it's just endless. Every "thing" in our lives has an impact somewhere or on someone. That in itself is an example of how we are all connected. It is very overwhelming. Sorry that was not succinct!

MS: Do you believe in serendipity?

TL: Yes, definitely. But I also think that many things are not accidents. I believe that we are all connected, and there is a collective unconscious, and that humans have the ability to be sensitive to unconsciously perceived information, and respond to it without knowing it was there. I think that is a force in our lives that has more influence than most people usually consider. I also believe that the universe unfolds in mysterious ways.

MS: Do you think about metaphor in your work? At what point does the symbol of something become greater than the thing itself?

TL: Hmm. Usually that happens when something has been used as a symbol repetitively in culture and media - as far as when people look at the thing, they see what it symbolizes rather than the object. But as far as my own work goes, I don't think there is anything on first glance where the metaphor is taking over. I think most of my work uses metaphor, but I don't know how much others see it.

MS: It's difficult when you start to think about it because so much of the English language is built on metaphor - things referencing other things, the way that we understand actions or what a thing is, is usually in reference to another...thing...

TL: I guess I am thinking of it really literally, objects or images bringing forth immediate associations. Everything I make

has multiple metaphors within, but in what ways were you thinking?

MS: The reason I wanted to ask you that question is because of your interest in lichens: beings that are symbiotic between fungi and algae, which can be seen as indicator species - that in itself is a powerful metaphor of collaboration, conversation, and interconnectedness. Your processes and how you speak about lichens make me curious if you thought about the language that you use to describe your work, being a part of the work as well.

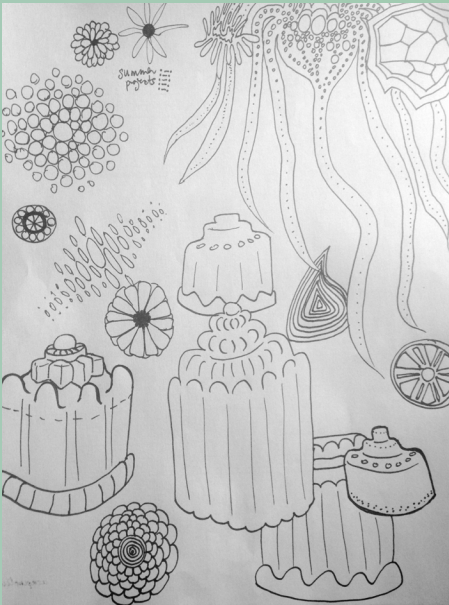
TL: I think I struggle with the language bit when it comes to synthesizing my ideas, I am a visual learner and communicator. I also naturally want to be straightforward and scientific in my writing. I could talk for days about lichens, but not in an artistic way.

MS: Hmm, yes, it can be one of those things that if you point directly, it can fall flat. However, if you reference around something it can end up holding greater significance because there is space for varied interpretation within the guides you set out.

TL: Totally, I have to stop myself from being very literal, where a metaphor can hit one over the head. I think that there are so many important metaphors in the things that I work with - lichens especially. I think lichens are so amazing. I loved Scott Gilbert's quote, "We are all lichens now"¹ that begins Chapter two of Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble*. When I read that I thought, that's what I have been trying to say this whole time but was too embarrassed to say! So, metaphor... that is a metaphor - "we are all lichens". **Yes.**

✿ Natasha Lavdovsky works in a variety of mediums (including, but not limited to: drawing, textiles, printmaking, film photography, digital videography, sculpture, claymation, and nature installation). Natasha currently lives near the ocean in Pacheedaht Nation territory on the west coast. She is remotely pursuing an MFA degree in Intermedia with Concordia University.
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1. Haraway, Donna J.. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016.



left:
6. Doodle while
talking with
Megan
2020

below:
7. Performing
essential services
at the powerlines
experimental
dance
2020



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1. Do you have a recurring dream/nightmare in your sleep?

So many! I am chased by a grizzly bear or black bear a couple times a year. All my teeth become loose and I spit them out into my hand pretty often.

2. Best places to "accidentally" bump into you?

When I was in Montreal: the path along the river, just south of the "beach" in Verdun. In Victoria: the beach in front of the Ross Bay Cemetery, or the Moss Street farmer's market 30 minutes before it closes

3. What historical figure, living or dead, would you most like to have dinner with?

Jesus- to see if he lives up to the hype.

4. If Hollywood made a movie about your life, who should play you?

Parker Posie (but on stilts).

5. If you could reincarnate as a plant, which one would you be?

A red huckleberry bush near a stream in a protected forest so that birds and bears could eat me, I could listen to the flowing water, and live to be hundreds of years old

6. If you could be texture, what would it be?

To the touch: a basalt outcrop, smoothed out by millenia of ocean wave/river erosion (the kind of rock that is so smooth that it's soft enough to rub on your face). Visually: a big leaf of macrocystis kelp

7. Which superpower would you like to have?

Being able to swim in the ocean and breathe underwater for an unlimited amount of time

8. Do you believe that alternate universes exist, and if yes, what universe are you currently in?

Yes. On a scale of zero to 10, between a horrendously unbearable universe, and a blissfully wonderful universe, we are at around a 4, 5 or 6 depending on your privilege or incarnation.

9. Is there any artist that you would like to share your studio with?

Werner Herzog to share a studio with because I think he'd be fun to talk to. Louise Bourgeois to have a studio visit with because she was brilliant.

10. What is the oldest piece of art that you have kept of your own creation?

Not sure at what point a drawing becomes art, but I have some zigzag scribbles from when I was 2.