

Thinking and Feeling through Materials

The process of art making is one where an idea, a question, or an inspiration, once seeded in the artist's mind, beckons them to follow through and transport the ethereal into the physical. The first step in this process, the first hint of material form, is often the most challenging because there is nothing but the artist's intuition to guide them forward. The seed must be concretized and tended to in fertile soil before the idea can grow large enough to speak back. This is the role that materiality and our interactions with material play in the creative process. In my work I am far less interested in reproducing fully formed ideas than I am in starting a conversation with the work that has yet to be resolved. As an artist I may be asking the questions, but the answers and the potential for new discoveries and revelations lie in my interactions and interrogation with the things that exist outside of me.¹ My aim is to grow and learn from the thoughts and feelings activated by process and material—and to allow the knowledge and memory of this process recorded in the work—to elicit an analogous conversation within the viewer.

The contemporary discussion on New Materialism centers on how thinking is influenced by physical material. In "Material and Mind" Christopher Bardt, an architect and professor at Rhode Island School of Design, examines the relationship between our physical surroundings and our perception as well as how our interactions with material are in fact a form of thinking, what he calls soft thinking. He writes,

¹ "Excerpt from Material and Mind", Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers suggested in their groundbreaking 1998 essay "The Extended Mind" that the mind is not encapsulated but extends outward, engaging and enacting itself with and in the environment. Their idea is at the center of the concept known as "extended cognition," which holds that the mind and its processes extend beyond the body into the environment within which an organism is embedded, and hence include aspects of the organism's interactions with that environment. Such a model of the mind corresponds with the notion of material informing thought, especially through action.

working with material—every material—is a journey, more interesting, without a destination, full of surprises and stubbornness, and, most of all, deeply transformative of our state of being... our mind and thoughts are continuously formed and influenced by the physical material with which we work and by which we are surrounded... to have thought informed from or by action—is given little credence. Yet, as everyone who works with physical material knows, thoughts continuously emerge from action and physical work. These thoughts may be considered lesser, more like hunches than the thoughts of “pure” thinking, but they are thoughts nonetheless. Insights, understanding, intuition, grasping—they may all be classified as “soft thoughts” more closely associated with feelings and empathic sensibility, with “I get it” and “aha”—but does their “softness” make them lesser thoughts?

Perhaps in large part, my commitment to art making and the reason I chose to devote so much time to my visual practice is based on an appreciation of and a reliance on this soft thinking. For me, to be in the studio, shaping a piece of clay or metal, having my hands in constant contact with a chosen material, feeling the resistance or acceptance of the form in response to my actions², are all acts of profound contemplation. The themes I tackle in my art—impermanence, change, and loss—are all mirrored in the techniques I employ as an artist. Examining my way of working, in the context of New Materialism, I can see how and why my processes have evolved organically and naturally to facilitate and reinforce my formal thinking.

By deconstructing and fragmenting my pieces and subjecting my surfaces to forces that mimic the passage of time and erosion, I am searching for ways to internalize and gain visceral knowledge of the natural forces that are constantly transforming, reclaiming, and redefining the world around me. Equally important is experiencing and conveying a sense of loss. Central to

² In “Material and Mind” Christopher Bardt writes, “All materials and physical media resist and react to action on them, each in its own profound way. Creativity is birthed in the crucible of resistance.”

my art, is not just showing how impermanence, loss, and rebirth are part of nature, but also making sense of it, to understand the mechanism and the forces at work. I meticulously build, alter, destroy, recycle, and re-envision my work in order to understand, embrace, and accept nature's impermanence.

I tear apart my finished canvases, breaking down the bonds of cotton fibers and the entanglement of my original composition and intentions. I fracture these existing connections in order to rearrange the fragments into new possibilities. I experience the emotions we all feel when faced with any act of change we are not ready to accept. Except in my case the act is deliberate and it pushes me toward contemplating acceptance through soft thinking. As I deconstruct and rearrange the fragments of my painting, I ruminate on the Anthropocene and geology, how rocks are formed in an ongoing recycling process under the Earth's mantle that breaks and fragments old realities into new possibilities and shuffles the record and memories of the past into new configurations. The soft thinking reminds me that while nothing ever stays the same nothing is ever completely lost.

When I rust the surfaces of my sculptures, mixing iron oxide powder with water and spreading the thick slush on my paintings and sculptures, my mind flows freely—following along with my strokes. I think of our long history of using ochre pigment and I feel a connection with our past. I think of the Australian Aboriginal people and their reverence for this naturally occurring pigment. I am reminded how grounded and far reaching aboriginal understanding of origin is; how pigment, concept of place, and sacred history are all intertwined under what in English they refer to as—country.³ I watch the surface of my work slowly dry and transform

³ In *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*, Hetty Perkins, an Aboriginal curator at the Gallery of New South Wales explains the general meaning of “country.” Further details are sacred and secret in Aboriginal culture, but the word “country” implies a beautiful sense of rootedness.

from a dark gun metal color into a garden flowering with yellow ochre, burnt sienna, and burnt umber, and I feel connected and at home.

Given how our minds and thoughts can be influenced by our interactions with material, I wonder if my artistic processes are responsible for influencing my way of thinking and allowing me to embrace nature in a way that modern culture resists. For most people rust is unwelcomed. Its presence is a constant reminder of a reality society wants to hide. The constant effort and maintenance it takes to keep rust at bay is in part necessary to uphold the delusion—that controlling nature is possible. Christopher Bardt points out that “there’s a powerful human tendency to avoid doubt. It is a tendency so strong, as political science researchers have discovered, that belief in wrong opinions is unaffected by factual corrections and even strengthened when confronted with such information.” If our adversity to doubt can be exploited by consumerism to keep us from questioning the fallacy of unsustainable practices and resource depletion then perhaps the findings of New Materialism can offer a way to use materiality, emotions, and soft thinking to circumvent our collective stubbornness and blind spots.

In *Remnants* I rely on the material properties and imbedded knowledge in the space to elicit an emotional response in the viewer and initiate soft thinking. At 38 feet by 13 feet, the physical confines of the installation space induce a sense of unease and anxiety bordering on claustrophobia. The moisture in the room, can be felt on the skin and seen on the surfaces of the materials present. Looking up at the wood planks in the ceiling, one can see the dilapidation and the ring stains of old recurring leaks. The brick wall confronts us with the deterioration and spalling caused by the freeze and thaw cycles. On the opposite wall, mold has taken hold in the drywall, providing clear evidence of where the moisture lingers, along the floor and in the corners where the scarce sunlight barely penetrates. In the room the visual and

olfactory reinforce each other, the mustiness is accentuated by the dust swirling in the air, forcing the visitor to push through and breath in the very essence of decay. Without the artistic interventions there is a palpable repulsion that pushes most visitors away.

The objective of the installation is to guide the viewer through the details and hold their hand in this moment of discomfort long enough for the materials to speak their truth. In this way, in this moment of unease, as the viewer finds themselves unsettled and away from their reality, they are open to receive new thoughts inculcated by the environment. The message to be heard is that the water this building was designed to harness is the same water that is causing it to decay. Understanding the resistance of the natural world is the key to living harmoniously with nature. Denying this resistance has consequences that we can no longer afford maintain. In his lecture on planetary aesthetics, Howard Caygill explains that “the knowledge generated by environmental art practices, enlightens us as to the fault lines, where the planet is being broken and torn apart and where it is holding together.” With my work I am building upon the findings of New Materialism and Environmental Aesthetics to break through the barriers of societal norms and allow the materials themselves to speak directly to the viewer.

Works Cited

Bardt, Christopher. *Material and Mind*. Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2019.

Finlay, Victoria. *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*, Reprint, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004, pp. 25–68.

Howard Caygill, Professor of Philosophy, Aesthetics and Visual Culture. His lecture on “Planetary Aesthetics” is part of the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, lecture series “On the Anthropocene: Either/Or, Part II”. Live-streamed Sept 25, 2021