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PROCESS AND PLAY:
INVESTIGATING CONNECTIONS AND FORM

by

Mary Catherine Fruehan

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Arts in
Studio Art
at

Lindenwood University

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PROCESS AND PLAY:
INVESTIGATING CONNECTIONS AND FORM

A Project Report Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts, Media, and Communication
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Studio Art
at
Lindenwood University

By

Mary Catherine Fruehan

Saint Charles, Missouri

[December 2022]

ABSTRACT

Process and Play: Investigating Connections and Form

Mary Catherine Fruehan, Master of Arts in Studio Art, 2022

Thesis Directed by: Grant Hargate, Professor

This project focuses on the body of sculptural work I created and the influences and outcomes surrounding it. Throughout this project, I focused on making both physical and conceptual connections and working with materials in playful and novel ways. Process, play, and experimentation all came together to create improvisational works of collage and sculpture. These works, often made from repurposed, discarded or mundane materials, have formal references to functional or recognizable objects, but the focus is on the relationships and connections between pieces. An ethos of resourcefulness and “making do” permeates the work, much of which is built with tenuous attachments and unconventional approaches. My process revolves around the connections between learning, playing and making. It privileges spontaneity and risk-taking over predetermined outcomes—venturing without knowing where you are going while making use of what you have. This exploration culminated in a series of small-scale sculptural works that came together as a set of installations and permutations. These investigations also resulted in tangential explorations that will provide potential avenues for future bodies of work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Professor Grant Hargate, Professor Joseph Weber, and Professor Dennis Schmickle for their guidance, expertise and advice. They helped me develop my voice as an artist and push my work and ideas further. Their encouragement, feedback and guidance were invaluable, and without it I would not have been able to make the work that I did. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for his support and for all he did to help me throughout the process.

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Introduction

For my project, I created and developed a body of sculptural work with auxiliary drawings and collages. Throughout this project, I have been working towards creating a cohesive body of original work—refining materials, processes, forms, and influences to produce sculptures and drawings that are all in conversation with one another and seem to belong in the same space. A large part of what I was setting out to do was to develop a voice in my emerging work. I was also interested in the artmaking process itself. As an educator, I wondered what overlaps there may be between pedagogy and studio practice, how one might inform the other. The connections I found were fascinating, with pedagogical practices that mirrored to studio practices of working artists and vice versa. I started focusing increasingly on the role of play and experimentation in learning and in art making, and this heavily informed my work.

From the onset, I knew I wanted to create a series of sculptural works accompanied by drawings. I had previously been making small-scale and playful sculptural work in which I was focusing on form. These pieces alluded a little bit to function, but they felt like small sketches. I wanted to delve deeper into making work that was more conceptually meaningful, and I wanted to further explore why I was interested in the forms that I was making. I knew I would need to develop my artwork itself, as well as develop an understanding of how it related to other work being made in my field. In order to do this, I considered the form, material, and methodology that I was drawn to and did research on other artists who worked in similar or relevant ways. I also had ongoing conversations about my work with my committee, where we discussed form, process, and meaning. The emotional and conceptual content of the work evolved throughout the process. It was never fully premeditated, but I felt that it came into focus as I continued to work towards what initially seemed like a hazy destination. Through the practices of making and

conversation, meaning and clarity slowly started to emerge from the work as I created sculptures, drawings, and collages in tandem with one another. Being able to work with multiple media helped me to think through my processes and better understand what I was making. In many ways, the work stemmed from a personal place of memory and emotion, but I feel that it resonated beyond just my own experience. I have come to better understand my own improvisational and playful making process, as well as the work that has emerged from it.

Literature Review

When conducting research for my project, I was interested in three primary questions revolving around my studio work—what is the relationship between process and outcome, what are the implications of the materials I choose to make my work out of, and how does my work fit into existing conversations about sculpture? These questions serve as points of departure for me to investigate how my work fits into the existing context of my field. They also have many answers, so I started narrowing down the scope of these questions and looking for resources and references that felt relevant to the work that I was making. In my research, I found that these questions are linked together in many ways, with themes and narratives that weave them together. The sources I collected range from educational research, writings about artists, their work and its reception, and interviews with artists about their studio practices and processes. These sources built on each other to create foundations for my own work and help me to put myself in dialogue with past and present artists.

Process and Play

In my work, I am interested in the link between artmaking and learning, and how meaning can emerge from process. Artists take a wide variety of approaches to their art, with varying degrees of preconception with regards to form and meaning. I am interested in artists whose practices are playful and improvisational, which is how I approach my work, and how their processes relate to learning. Process is something that is often discussed both in art and in education, though it is not always clear what it means or what about it is valuable. In Harold Rosenberg's famous 1952 essay "The American Action Painters," he describes the processes of artists who would become known as part of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' and object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.¹

In Rosenberg's description of the paintings as an event, he is focused on the process and moment of creation rather than the image itself. Process, while often spoken about in art education, is most often relegated to the context of measuring progression. Jack Richardson and Sydney Walker discuss how process has been typically viewed as the development of technical skill and progression toward more skillful outcomes that are increasingly similar to exemplars. They compare this to the concept of the "process of process," which they say "represents a movement through the immeasurable intricacy of relationships produced by the experience of making art."² In the process of process, the artist considers past and future events as they make artworks,

¹ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" In *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, edited by Ellen G Landau (Yale University Press, 2005), 189-98.

² Jack Richardson and Sydney Walker, "Processing Process: The Event of Making Art," *Studies in Art Education* 53, no. 1, (2011), 9.

influencing and being influenced by the relationship of process and artwork. This echoes Rosenberg's focus on the action and event of artmaking, rather than privileging the final "picture" as the primary focus, and instead puts importance on the relationships as a product of making.

These notions of relationships being at the center of process are echoed by Julia Marshall and Melissa Vashe, who point to connection-making as the underlying foundation of learning, conceptual processes, meaning-making and abstract thought.³ Marshall and Vashe frame imagination as creating "novel connections" between existing things, not as originality. Melody Milbrandt and Lanny Milbrandt add to the discussion surrounding concepts of creative thinking and problem solving, maintaining that creative thinking processes are not adequately taught in schools and that traditional structures do not support students' "sustained creative involvement."⁴ They go on to state that process-based art and creativity help people connect through the arts, enforce social bonds, and bring people together. According to Olivia Gude, quality arts engagement should help us to make new meaning and rethink our perceptions of the world around us, rather than serving as facsimiles and trite representations of preconceived concepts.⁵

In her article "Principles of Possibility: Considerations for a 21st-Century Art & Culture Curriculum," Olivia Gude advocates for a new set of principles to replace the modernist framework of the Elements of Art and Principles of design that so many curriculums are still built around. Gude outlines several "Principals of Possibility" that she advocates for as a

³ Julia Marshall and Melissa Vashe, "Mining, Bridging, and Making: Developing and Conveying Concepts in Art," *Art Education* 61, no. 1 (2008): 7, Accessed June 21, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27696257.

⁴Melody Milbrandt and Lanny Milbrandt, "Creativity: What Are We Talking About?" *Art Education* 64, no. 1 (2011), 8.

⁵ Olivia Gude, "New School Art Styles: The Project of Art Education," *Art Education* 66, no. 1 (2013), 7-8.

groundwork for meaningful and authentic curriculum, including *Playing* and *Not Knowing*. Gude discusses the importance of playing with materials and how they interact, stating that “learning begins with creative, deeply personal, primary process play.”⁶ In addition to creating space for play in curriculum, Gude discusses the importance of emphasizing *Not Knowing*. This means that students reevaluate things that they once believed and were certain of. Students “learn how to play not just with materials, but also with ideas” and begin to understand differences between representations and realities. This embrace of “not knowing” opens up possibilities for new ideas and ways of constructing and representing reality.⁷ This is a skill that is essential in art and beyond, and it supports an environment for connection-making.

Gude is not the only art education researcher interested in play and process. Eliza Pitri and Marissa McClure Vollrath have studied play in their experiences working with young children, analyzing its role in artmaking. Pitri’s definition of play supports Gude’s—freely chosen and without extrinsic goals, concerned with process rather than results.⁸ She discusses her work with young children in which she uses artistic play to facilitate and promote “divergent thinking, spontaneity, risk-taking,”⁹ “reasoning, and problem solving”.¹⁰ Vollrath writes that incorporating play in her elementary classroom became an agent for meaningful and motivated student choice.¹¹

⁶ Gude, “New School Art Styles,” 7.

⁷ Gude, “New School Art Styles,” 14.

⁸ Eliza Pitri, “The Role of Artistic Play in Problem Solving,” *Art Education* 54, no. 3 (2001), 47.

⁹ Pitri, “The Role of Artistic Play.” 47.

¹⁰ Pitri, “The Role of Artistic Play.” 49.

¹¹Marissa McClure Vollrath, “Play as Process: Choice, Translation, Reconfiguration, and the Process of Culture” *Visual Arts Research* 33, no. 2 (2007), 70.

These ideas of process, the unknown, and play extend beyond the classroom—they are a crucial aspect of the studio practices of many artists. In an interview for PBS’s *Art21* series on contemporary art, artist Sarah Sze discusses the “crucial” role that improvisation plays in her work, noting that the spontaneity of the work is the most exciting part for the viewer and artist.¹² She describes her work as a “moment in time,” referencing the in-process nature of the work as she plays and tinkers with the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar, life and art.¹³ “Sze sees sculpture as evidence of behavior, and she makes her own process of experimentation apparent in her work.”¹⁴

Artist Jessica Stockholder also discusses similar concepts of improvisation and exploration in her interview with *Art21*, but she touches on the concept of play in her process.¹⁵ She frames intuition as a way of thinking, and she notes that in her work, she benefits from the discomfort of trying to put together the multiple ways in which the brain works. She has harnessed this sense of exploration and “not knowing” to push her work in innovative and intuitive directions. “It’s odd to be in the studio and not know what you are going to do...” Stockholder reflects, “you know, I think being an artist and choosing to put yourself in a circumstance where you don’t know just how things are going to work out and what you are going to do is very exciting and rich, and also difficult.”¹⁶ The way that Jessica Stockholder

¹² Sarah Sze, “Sarah Sze: Improvisation | Art21 ‘Extended Play,’” *Art21*, July 27, 2012, YouTube Video, 0:40-1:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xk1597J5g50>.

¹³ Sze, 1:30.

¹⁴ Frauke V. Josenhans, “Sarah Sze: The Hidden Poetry of the Everyday,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, (2017), 18.

¹⁵ Jessica Stockholder, “Play,” *Art21*, October 7, 2005, Video, 3:08-3:43, <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/jessica-stockholder-in-play-segment/>.

¹⁶ Stockholder, “Play,” 3:52-4:57.

discusses her process relates heavily to Julia Marshall's concepts of venturing.¹⁷ She does not know exactly where she is going, but she is acutely aware that she is moving into uncharted territory, and rather than turn away from the difficulty and discomfort of the state of not knowing, she embarks on excited exploration. Stockholder makes explicit connections between her own studio process and play. When discussing her work and her interest in pleasure, she notes, "I think that what kids do that's play is a kind of learning and thinking. And it's a kind of... a kind of learning and thinking that doesn't have a predetermined end... so I think I'm involved in that."¹⁸

In an interview where the discussion centered around minimalism, Richard Serra discusses the limitations of intention as being central to artworks. He and the interviewer discuss Sol LeWitt's famous quote that "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art," and Serra challenges this idea by saying that it "cancels out" play, process, and experimentation.¹⁹ Serra is critical of Minimalism in the interview, noting that the ideals it was predicated on were not of interest to him. "Minimalism was completely divorced from process," he says, "whereas I was interested in manifestations of making, looking, and walking."²⁰

All of these artists employ improvisation and play in the process of their artmaking, and all allow process to guide their making. They demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between making and discovery, between process and meaning-making. In my own work, I am engaging in this way of making. Rather than approaching my work with a premeditated plan, blueprints, or a

¹⁷ Marshall and Vashe, "Mining, Bridging, and Making," 21.

¹⁸ Stockholder, "Play," 12:32-13:07.

¹⁹ Richard Serra and Hal Foster, "Down and Dirty Minimalism" In *Conversations about Sculpture*, by Richard Serra and Hal Foster (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018), 23.

²⁰ Serra and Foster, "Down and Dirty Minimalism," 37.

fully realized concept, I am engaging in a process of spontaneity, discovery, and emergent meaning.

Drawing as Thinking

Drawing has traditionally been associated as a preparatory stage in which an artist plans a more finished work of art. Many artists, however, use drawing as a process-based way of thinking rather than a stage of outright planning. Richard Serra is best known for his sculptural work, but he draws daily in a notebook and maintains that this an essential process for him to extend his thinking. He contrasts his drawings, which he uses as a means for self-understanding and “probing vision,” with minimalist drawings that indicate how to build something or serve as an illustration or diagram in some way. “For me,” Serra says, “drawing is an alternative language. One of the reasons I find it interesting is that it is self-referential. You can understand how someone thinks by analyzing how they draw. The thought process is usually clearly revealed in someone’s handwriting...someone’s mark-making.”²¹

Lee Bontecou and Eva Hesse, both celebrated sculptors, also created drawings that were tangential to their sculptural works. Both artists had process-heavy studio practices, and their drawings were autonomous from their sculptures. “You can travel miles within a drawing and not have to take all the baggage along,” said Bontecou.²²

In my own work, I am using drawing in an exploratory way. It allows me to think through concepts related to my work and extends my understanding of the work. These are not

²¹ Eric R. Davis and Richard Serra, "Extended Vision: Richard Serra Talks About Drawing," *Art on Paper* 4, no. 5 (2000), 61-62.

²² Mona Hadler, "Lee Bontecou and Drawing: From the Real to the Strange" *Woman's Art Journal* 35, no. 1 (2014), 23-32.

illustrations that will later be executed through sculpture or painting, but rather marks that promote thinking and process.

Materiality and Craft

In my own work, I have been drawn to materials that have historically been tied to function or “craft.” These materials—wood, wire, clay, fiber—carry connotations of the handmade as well as the mundane. I have been interested in the implications of these materials and what they may add conceptually to the work. I am also interested in making visible the process of creation—the time and labor put into an object. Both materiality and the way of making of objects carry baggage within the arts discourse of the last century.

Classifying, categorizing, and mapping the progression of works of art throughout history has constituted a large part of traditional art historical practices. Fine art, decorative art, fiber art—these categories have created divisions within the arts that have had a dramatic effect on how society perceives artists and their work. It was not until the 1870s that “craft” emerged as a distinct term that identified a category of certain handmade objects. Before this time, there was no value judgment attached to objects made by hand rather than machine. People had used whatever tools were available to them to create polished objects, unconcerned with how they were made. The dawn of Modernism changed this perspective. The first person to champion “craft” as a category was William Morris, who had become disillusioned with the industrialization of production and the wide availability of objects. Morris believed that “craft” should be given significance as a form of artmaking rather than being lumped in with manufacturing.²³ Since its appearance, craft has been a shifting category that has become the subject of much disagreement. Some embrace the term as one of inclusiveness and a celebration

²³ Edward S. Cooke Jr., "Modern Craft and the American Experience," *American Art* 21, no. 1 (2007), 2-3.

of the human hand, while others use the term pejoratively to describe artworks that do not measure up to the high intellectual standard of fine art. Still others feel that certain works of craft are worthy to be recognized as art, transcending the realm of “mere craft,” while others are not.²⁴

In “Modern Craft and the American Experience,” Edward Cooke grapples with the concept of craft and notes how it has been coupled with other subcategories of art (including decorative art, folk art, and design). He argues that the categorization has less to do with what craft actually is, and much more to do with “what it is not, in opposition to other endeavors.”²⁵ What all of these “categories” have in common is that they were deemed not to fit the definition of true art. Qualifying categories such as decorative, applied, or fiber arts have been attached to certain aesthetics and ways of making so as to distance these practices from those of sculpture and painting and heighten the status of the latter. In many circumstances, discussions of categorization have eclipsed those that surround the work itself.²⁶ The contradictory nature of these categories is constructed, having nothing to do with any innate form of truth and everything to do with surrounding (and often unacknowledged) cultural contexts in which meanings laid down by critics and institutions surface as dominant.²⁷

In 1969, the Museum of Modern Art had its first show of “fiber arts” in an art context. The only written coverage of this show was by celebrated sculptor Louise Bourgeois, who said:

A painting or a sculpture makes great demand on the onlooker at the same time that it is independent of him. These weavings, delightful as they are, seem more engaging and less demanding. If they must be classified, they would fall somewhere between fine and applied art...The pieces in the show rarely liberate themselves from decoration.²⁸

²⁴ Cooke, “Modern Craft,” 2.

²⁵ Cooke, “Modern Craft,” 2.

²⁶ Elissa Auther, “Classification and Its Consequences: The Case of ‘Fiber Art,’” *American Art* 16, no. 3 (2002), 8, Accessed September 9, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109422>.

²⁷ Cooke, “Modern Craft,” 6.

²⁸ Auther, “Classification and Its Consequences,” 7.

This insistence upon categorization is a symptom of the lurking ideologies surrounding the art world. These designations perpetuate the hierarchy created between art and craft, creating value judgements on the basis of socially constructed categories. Many artists are reluctant to be categorized in a way that highlights their relationship with craft, such as the label of “fiber artist,” because having a qualifying sign attached to their artworks (in this case, “fiber”) implies that their work is not truly art. Auther notes that much of the discussion surrounding these categories involved trying to negotiate a place in the realm of art (rather than craft) for fiber artists, but points out that these discussions did not call attention to the construction of these labels and their subsequent hierarchy. Instead, they “mov[ed] objects from one category to another, maintaining the subordination of craft to art.”²⁹ These arguments do not challenge the ideologies that create the signs and categories in the first place.

T'ai Smith discusses the label of “craft” in her article "The Problem with Craft." She notes that this label refers to a wide range of makers and art forms, including quilters, furniture makers, indigenous artists, artists who work with fibers as a sculptural medium, and glass blowers.³⁰ In fact, the range of materials, purpose, and skill level of these makers is so diverse that it seems they are grouped less around what they are than what they are not. That is to say, their greatest commonality resides in their “otherness” compared to the paradigm of European sculptor or painter.

Elissa Auther discusses how the concept of the “decorative” was set in opposition to modernist ideals in her article "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg." She argues that this hierarchical positioning of the

²⁹ Auther, “Classification and Its Consequences,” 8.

³⁰ T'ai Smith, "The Problem with Craft," *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016), 81.

decorative was born out of the subordination of craft in relation to art.³¹ We hear this paradigm echoed in Louise Bourgeois's pronouncement about the fiber arts show in which pieces "rarely liberate[d] themselves from decoration."³²

In her article "Contemporary Craft: The Look of Labor," Jessica Poser examines the role of craft in contemporary art education curriculums and the social constructions that surround the way it is (or is not) taught. She notes that "craft often inhabits a marginalized and frequently feminized and domesticated realm among the modes of production often done for and within the home, and runs the risk of being thought of as handiwork or busywork."³³ These associations of works that are considered to be "craft" or "decorative" are inextricably linked to the identities of the maker, including but not limited to gender.

The Visible Hand

These dynamics come in to play in the sculptural work of Lee Bontecou as well. In "The Terms of Craft and Other Means of Making: Lee Bontecou's Hybrid Trajectory," Elyse Speaks examines the role that craft and gender—which were frequently addressed in criticism of the work—played in the creation and reception of Bontecou's art. Her work, sewn and tied together on welded steel and wire frames, is often described in relationship to its creation. Bontecou's inclusion of fabric and stitching in her work, often associated with femininity and domesticity, contrasted with the scale and form of these works, which were commonly thought to be formally "masculine," referencing the industrial and sometimes frightening. Speaks argues that the dominance of craft in Bontecou's work benefited its reception, and that such terms were used in

³¹ Elissa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004), 342.

³² Elissa Auther, "Classification and Its Consequences," 7.

³³ Jessica Poser, "Contemporary Craft: The Look of Labor," *Art Education* 61, no. 2 (2008), 801.

almost exclusively favorable ways when referring to the work rather than pejoratively. In fact, the handmade nature of her work and the visibility of her labor were held in high regard, admired by artists (including Donald Judd and Eva Hesse) and critics.³⁴ The visibility of the making of these pieces was viewed as personal and individual language specific to Bontecou, and “that labor was read to be in service of a personal rhetoric, the presence of its components was viewed as both commendable and original.”³⁵

Bontecou’s work pulled from many realms of making, including hobbyist pursuits of model-making, domestic practices of stitching, and sculptural uses of steel and torch. “Yet it was those very principles,” says Speaks, “and the uncompromising individuality to which they amounted, that held her work critically apart from craft as conventionally understood. In a way, the great purchase of Bontecou’s approach is its intractability in the face of both terms, craft and art, which sustained even as the work managed to collapse such distinctions.”³⁶

In creating work that defied and collapsed boundaries and classifications, Lee Bontecou may well have laid the groundwork for other artists to follow in her wake. Some now feel that the borders between art, craft and design are becoming increasingly fluid, and artists are regarding their craft-based knowledge as a value-neutral tool, rather than something that inherently adds or detracts from the value of the work.³⁷

³⁴Elyse Speaks, "The Terms of Craft and Other Means of Making: Lee Bontecou's Hybrid Trajectory," *Art Journal* 71, no. 4 (2012), 55-58.

³⁵Speaks, "The Terms of Craft," 57.

³⁶ Speaks, "The Terms of Craft," 71.

³⁷ Ruth Chambers, Mireille Perron, Judy Anderson, Eliza Au, Zimra Beiner, Kim Huynh, Amy Malbeuf, Dorie Millerson, Gilbert Poissant, and Amélie Proulx, "Re-Negotiating Materiality: Craft Knowledge and Contemporary Art," *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 42, no. 1, (2017), 22-31.

In an interview, artist Helen O’Leary discusses how everything she uses is handmade, in service of what she calls “the shortfall from the perfect.”³⁸ She talks about influences in her life, going in depth about growing up on a farm in Ireland, her father, and how he would build things like windmills from scraps. She described it as “utopian,” with everything handmade.³⁹ Her practice privileges the “craft” of the handmade over the machined, though does not directly engage with discussions surrounding craft as a category of visual arts. In this context, the visibility of the craft of the objects is part of the conceptual fabric of the work. The visibility of the hand and act of making is intentional.

Craft and Process in Dialogue

When considering the roles of materiality, craft, and art, it is worthwhile to examine the quilters of Gee’s Bend. This group of women living in rural Alabama came into the spotlight in the late 1900s for their graphic and improvisational quilts. These quilts were notable both in their design and materiality—they were made with salvaged fabric scraps pieced together to create large, colorful objects that looked like modernist abstraction. These pieces were made out of necessity using materials that were available. Women needed to keep their families warm, and so they used old clothing, flour and fertilizer sacks, factory leftovers, and other fabrics they could repurpose to create quilts in a wide array of colors and compositions. In their article “Diversity of Contemporary African American Art,” Valerie J. Mercer et al. note that “making warm

³⁸ Helen O’Leary, “Helen O’Leary – Refusal – Wexford Arts Center” (James Bell, October 23, 2013), YouTube Video, 5:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDBeFegBv0s>

³⁹ Helen O’Leary, “Meet the Artist: Helen O’Leary.” (TheMACBelfast, February 15, 2016), YouTube video, 8:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JyOYG_LJds

bedding out of fabrics that typically had outlived their original function and were cut and pieced together again was part of daily life.”⁴⁰

In her article “‘But a Quilt Is More’: Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee’s Bend Quilts,” Vanessa Kraemer Sohan discussed the trajectory of fame and controversy surrounding these objects. They were exhibited in museums, transcending the label of “‘mere’ craft” and being hailed as works of high modern art. This phenomenon received criticism from a range of perspectives. Some quilters believed the workmanship of the quilts to be lacking or sloppy⁴¹ while other people argue that Western aesthetics do not provide an appropriate framework through which to appreciate and analyze these works⁴². Some are concerned that the interest in the Gee’s Bend quilts represent an overly narrow and fetishized view of African American quilting practices, omitting those who do not work in this loose and improvisatory style,⁴³ and controversy remains about the ways in which many of these objects were acquired.⁴⁴ In Michael J. Prokopow’s review of the exhibition *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* at the Whitney Museum of Art, he even suggested that the inclusion of these works in a gallery “could well represent an exercise in institutional colonialism insofar as the objects on display are decontextualized and therefore rendered safe.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Valerie J. Mercer et al, “Diversity of Contemporary African American Art,” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 86, no. 1/4 (2012): 121.

⁴¹ Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, “‘But a Quilt Is More’: Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee’s Bend Quilts,” *College English* 77, no. 4 (2015): 297-308.

⁴² Michael J. Prokopow, “Material Truths: *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* at the Whitney Museum of Art: An Exhibition Review,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 38, no. 1 (2003): 62.

⁴³ Sohan, “‘But a Quilt Is More,” 302-303.

⁴⁴ Sohan, “‘But a Quilt Is More,” 310.

⁴⁵ Prokopow, “Material Truths: *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* at the Whitney Museum of Art: An Exhibition Review,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 38, no. 1 (2003): 63-6.

There is no uniform consensus on how we should contextualize these pieces. Many of the quilters themselves resist such classification, as these external markers have little to do with their own experience and contexts. Mary Lee Bendolph, one of the most famous quilters of Gee's Bend, reflects that her community never called what they were doing "art," but goes on to describe ways in which they would show and judge each other's work, and then experiment in their own quilts based on what they saw from others.⁴⁶ These women are engaging in intentional learning and making—however they see fit to name it—and external codification carries little weight within this context.

It is this relationship between intentionality, experimentation, and learning that I find interesting and bears such a striking relationship with the studies in art education I have discussed previously. Each is very much focused on the process, and the outcome is not wholly predetermined. While the quilters of Gee's Bend have produced diverse and abundant examples of quiltmaking, I am most interested in those works created freely without pattern. These pieces whose form emerges through process and the product of improvisation, trial and error, carry a sense of history and serve as a documentation of the actions and processes of their own making.

Sohan also discusses the role of "women's material culture" as a form of discourse in which the making practices women engage in become varied literacies.⁴⁷ She argues for quilts as a form of discourse that should be considered within the context of writings and to "think of the needle as the pen," "blur[ring] the lines between the verbal and the visual." Sohan investigates the vernacular and rhetoric of making, "explor[ing] how the Gee's Bend quiltmakers 'select

⁴⁶ Sohan, "But a Quilt Is More," 301.

⁴⁷ Sohan, "But a Quilt Is More," 295.

from, (re)structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social worlds [they] inhabit.”⁴⁸

Sohan begins her article with a quote from Gee’s Bend quilter Mensie Lee Pettway:

We was taught there's so many different ways to build a quilt. It's like building a house. You can start with a bedroom over there, or a den over here, and just add on until you get what you want. Ought not two quilts ever be the same. You might use exactly the same material, but you would do it different. A lot of people make quilts just for your bed for to keep you warm. But a quilt is more. It represents safekeeping, it represents beauty. And you could say it represents family history.⁴⁹

Sohan pulls from Bruce Horder’s work on writing composition to further her point on making as a form of discourse, and in doing so she addresses both the categorization and the methods of creation surrounding these works. She notes that these quilts “have been produced both outside and within the boundaries of tradition” and goes on to maintain that “if we hear the dissonance in critics’ efforts to situate and describe the Gee’s Bend quiltmaking tradition, we can see how the idea of tradition itself should be thought of ‘not as a fixed body of knowledge but an action’” (as quoted in Lu and Horner, 2000, p. 389).⁵⁰

If we hold this as true, then traditions are not an immovable and immutable object to be lived under, but rather an ever-changing and living context within which artists work. This implies that there is a reciprocal relationship between the maker and the tradition, one both informing and being informed by the other.

If we consider language practices within a temporal-spatial framework—that is, within the time, place and space of their production—we can see how “mere” repetition becomes impossible: each individual language act becomes a site for difference and meaning-making because it is always being recontextualized—reformed, reinvented, and reconstructed—by its users, and ‘is thus the ongoing emergent product of practice’ (as quoted in Lu and Horner, 2000, p. 588). Users constantly translate and renegotiate

⁴⁸ Sohan, “But a Quilt Is More,” 296-297.

⁴⁹ Sohan, “But a Quilt Is More,” 294.

⁵⁰ Sohan, “But a Quilt Is More,” 298.

meaning and through that renegotiation are able to “rework particular conventions” in both expected and unexpected ways (as quoted in Lu and Horner, 2000, p. 597).⁵¹

By making within and outside of tradition, makers are both engaging in a cultural discourse and making meaning by making work that is different in some way. This way of making becomes conversational, with artistic choices and actions serving as a language that contributes to this dialogue. This way of framing making is in contrast to many traditional ways of viewing “craft” processes in which repetition is seen as both essential to the making and as a reason that it may not be viewed with the prestige of objects such as paintings or sculptures.

I am drawn to the resourceful and improvisational nature of these quilts. Their materials are found and repurposed for a function. Their design is the result of many actions and choices made in response to material and aesthetics. In my own work, I am piecing together salvaged bits of material in a similar way, though without an actual function tied to the product. Like the quilters of Gee’s Bend, my process is emergent and responsive. One decision begets another, and the object serves as a record of the histories of the materials and a documentation of the maker’s actions.

Methodology

My goal for this project was to create a body of artworks that was cohesive and meaningful. In order to develop the work and its meaning, I had to conduct research alongside my artmaking process. I started my qualitative research by considering three facets of my studio work: process, form, and materials. I knew I was interested in working in a somewhat improvisational way, building forms without knowing exactly what would emerge. I like the exploratory nature of that kind of working and the discovery that can come out of it. As I started

⁵¹ Sohan, “But a Quilt Is More,” 298.

to do research on process and artmaking, I became interested in the relationship between educational research and studio practices and how they might support each other.

I started doing research about inquiry and process-based art education practices and how they can help students make meaning in art. I was interested to know if and how these approaches might compare to how professional artists work. Artists take a wide variety of approaches to their artwork, but I focused on artists who worked in an experimental and responsive way. I watched and read interviews with these artists about their processes and their studio practices. I found meaningful connections between how these artists approached their work and how art students might approach work in a process-based classroom, as well as how I could approach my own work.

I also did research on how drawing might integrate into one's studio practice as a tangential, non-preparatory step. All of this research helped me to lay the foundation for the way I was approaching building in my studio. My drawings and sculptures evolved out of the process of creating and arranging parts, without a fixed idea of the final outcome. I used drawing as a way of extending my thinking and working through concepts, but they were not blueprints or illustrations of work to be made.

I also knew that there were certain materials that I was drawn to using, and I wanted to do research about how these materials have been used historically and what kinds of implications that might have for the interpretation of my works. I relied on qualitative research to explore these topics. This helped me to better situate how these works might be perceived, as well as consider the importance of these materials in relation to the processes I was using. In researching the traditional uses of materials like wood, fiber, and ceramics, I came to realize that they are often associated with "craft," and that the maker and origin of these objects comes into play. I

became interested in how some made objects, such as the Gee's Bend quilts, seem to span an art- and non-art world, occupying an in-between space. This helped me to consider the kinds of intentions, techniques, and materials that might put an object in that space. This informed some of the forms that I started making, particularly those that referenced some kind of functional or useful object.

For the studio work in this project, I started by collecting materials and tools. I set parameters on the kinds of materials and methods I would use to make the work, and I knew that I wanted it to in some way reference functionality. I had wood (both new and found), assorted fibers, ceramic, wire, masking tape, cardboard, a few pigments (crayons, colored pencils, paint and graphite), and some found objects. I wanted a limited palette of materials to choose from, and I was interested in working with materials that are mundane and accessible. I also wanted all of the connections in the work to be mechanical. I had pliers, a drill, a few knives, scissors, and a hand saw as my primary tools. These hand tools helped me to slow down and put limitations on what I was able to do and what forms I was able to make. These limitations helped to unify the work and push me to find novel solutions and connections that I might not have investigated if I had set about building in a different way. As I built within these parameters, a logic of construction began to emerge. This helped me to start to develop a visual language that I could rely on to make the works feel cohesive and in dialogue with each other. Once I felt like I had a way to explore form, I continued making objects and paying attention to the meaning that was made through their creation and juxtaposition. The meanings of many of these forms did not become evident until after their creation.

Many artists work in a way that is improvisational and exploratory, but each of them bring their own experiences to their work and process. My experiences, memories, and

perspectives are imbued in my work, and this results in a very different outcome than what would come from other artists engaging in similar practices. I think that my approach to linking art and education is part of my unique perspective on my studio work. Many educators' pedagogy is informed by the work and processes of artists. I am just as interested, however, in what artists can learn from education and how engaging in active inquiry and implementing pedagogical strategies in my own studio can influence the development and meaning of my artwork.

Production and Analysis

Through this process, I was able to build a cohesive body of work. My development of a visual and material language has provided a coherent foundation for work that is otherwise exploratory and unpredictable. Though I did not always know where I would end up from the outset of a piece, the works that resulted from my process are united by an emergent concept and emotional quality.

When I started with this body of work, it took me a long time to figure out why I was making what I was making. I knew there was something I couldn't put my finger on. Every explanation I tried to pin on it felt like it wasn't really getting to the heart of the matter, like it was tangential. While in the studio, I thought about my own past experiences and memories, and I knew these things I was thinking about were related, but they felt too specific, as though they were just hitting on a part of it. It took a lot of making and experimenting to start to understand what they had in common that spoke to something more universal than my own experience. This helped me to better understand my own process and artmaking approach, as well as the work itself. My process for creating these works was playful and experimental, and I would almost always set to making something without knowing where I would end up or what the finished

form would look like. The same holds true for the conceptual aspect of my work. It is difficult or impossible to understand until the work is complete, because without the process and experimentation, it does not have the ability to emerge.

The impetus for my work revolves around emotion and attitude—how you approach and deal with a situation, and the emotional effect that results from that. I believe in the importance of approaching problems resourcefully, playfully, and experimentally. Both in learning and in making, I am seeking to embrace “venturing” and “not knowing.” These values are based in my own observations and experiences, but I believe that many are relatable to others as well.

I admire the ethos of making do with what you have, and even when circumstances are imperfect or challenging, trying anyway and taking risks. Some of my pieces are fragile and vulnerable feeling, as though they were created inexpertly and may fall apart at any moment. I often make connections or repairs that are awkward or tenuous, or that highlight the brokenness of an object. I want to infuse a sense of humor or playfulness into these moments as well as an awareness of the person making the repair or connection. I also think that making vulnerabilities and potential failure visible, put on display, is an opportunity for empathy and connection. This concept of connections has come up again and again in my research and process, though in different ways. Marshall and Vashe argue that connection-making is the foundation of learning, conceptual processes, meaning-making, and abstract thought.⁵² In my work, I am often playing around with varied and unconventional methods of creating physical connections. Through the visibility of process and the maker in my work, as well as through its emotional content, I am seeking a point of connection with the viewer.

⁵² Marshall and Vashe, "Mining, Bridging, and Making," 7.

Part of my process was creating a series of drawings and collages in tandem with my sculptures. These did not serve as preliminary sketches, but rather as ways to extend my thinking and bring ideas to the forefront. Though these may not be as resolved as the sculptures, they have been helpful in progressing my concepts and clarifying the direction of my work. This has also resulted in some work that does not seem like it fits directly with the sculptures I am making now, but may provide fruitful directions for new work in the future. Collage has become a go-to method of drawing for me because the method of creation is similar to sculpture, but without any of the material limitations. I can still “build” my imagery, but concepts can be fleshed out more impulsively, ideas can be expanded upon without any constraints. It is easier to play around with how to occupy space, and I am able to think this out on paper a little bit before moving to three-dimensional work. These collages have been made up of both drawings I have made and photographs that I have taken.

The forms I created were the result of process and experimentation rather than premeditated design, but they carry references of form and function that are pulled from my own memory and experience. The wire sculptures I built functioned as drawings in space, hovering somewhere between sculpture and sketch—studies for forms and line. In some of these forms, I have woven panels that stretch across the wire frame. These woven planes created a sense of interior volume within the form, making it feel more object-like and less like a drawing. They started to feel more vessel-like, referencing a net or screen as well as alluding to some kind of unknown function. I was also interested in the process of weaving directly on to the form. The process was slow, and so allowed me to make decisions gradually about how the form should be. The visibly handmade nature of the object also creates visual texture and a sense of labor and care that went into its creation.

The wall pieces rely heavily on improvisation. They were all built at roughly the same time, and I worked fluidly between them. These too have functional references in their forms, which evoke objects such as ladders, hinges, conduits, ropes, hooks, screens, and frames. When creating these works, I used a limited palette of materials. Wood, wire, fibers, and clay are the foundation of the work, punctuated with the occasional use of cardboard, graphite, and paint. By using these simple and accessible materials, I was able to imagine multiple possibilities for their use. I connected pieces with wire and wooden pegs, or through custom-made press-fit designs. Working in this modular and additive way gave me the flexibility to make revisions and to assemble and disassemble, connect and remove, all as a fluid process.

Many of these materials were found, whether they were pieces of wood scrap that had been hanging around for years, or fibers taken from old jeans that had outlived their usefulness, or branches taken from a tree knocked down in a storm. The reclaimed nature of these materials brings its own character to the work. It adds a layer of visual depth, as well as imbuing them with an ethos of resourcefulness and making do with available materials and knowledge. Found wood scraps, worn out jeans, clothespins, tie wire, and dowels are quilted together, often appearing to be in various states of completion or fragmentation. These works are assembled in an improvisatory and often modular way. I was particularly interested in how to connect and attach pieces, often relying on crude variations of peg-and hole attachments or makeshift hinges and pivots. This was often done in ways that were unconventional and inexpert—each connection is an investigation and a risk. For the fiber pieces, I was able to create new objects from worn out and cast-off fabrics by deconstructing and then binding the fibers into a new form. This resulted in organic and fluid rope forms that can be draped, looped, and piled. These undulating forms feel bodily and gestural, and their textured and accumulated surfaces shows the labor and

repetitive actions that went in to making them. I embarked upon building and making, putting significant time into the process without knowing what the outcome would be. Not all of these endeavors were successful, and the risk of failure was an inevitable part of making the work, but having many different pieces and parts gave me the ability to assemble and arrange them in many different ways. Because of this playful and experimental way of building, I was able to edit and rework these forms into indefinite permutations until I ended up with unpredictable forms that I found compelling in some way.

The clay and wire pieces were constructed in a similarly improvisatory way. I built the clay fittings and fired them without knowing exactly how they would work, but with a plan to use them to connect wire. I then started cutting and bending pieces of wire, paying attention to line and connection while building this form that used materials in an unintended and unexpected way.

By infusing playfulness and strangeness into making, and letting experimentation guide my process, I have been able to play with these emotions and ideas in a very physical way. Being willing to embark upon something without knowing the outcome is a risk and an embrace of vulnerability, both in art and in life. I hope that my work can be an entry point for some of these concepts of connection, empathy and emotions.

Conclusions

In this project, I met my goal of creating a cohesive body of work. I was able to develop a material and formal language as well as processes that suited my studio practice. I was also able to strengthen the conceptual aspect of my work and better understand how concept and form relate in my own art.

I believe that this work is an original and valuable contribution to my field. While there are many artists whose processes or materials I resonate with, my work is born of my own perspective and experience and is visually and conceptually distinct. Artists like Sarah Sze or Jessica Stockholder create improvisational installations, but their work is comprised of manufactured and widely varied objects and structures. While they engage with spontaneity and playfulness, their environments are at a different scale and engage in a much different way of making. My work embodies a similar spirit of play and exploration, but with a greater focus on building and transforming reposed materials at an intimate scale. My work does not just focus on the relationship of objects, but also their creation and craftsmanship, as well as how they connect to one another. While these small pieces come together in an installation-like way, the focus remains on these small forms and their intimate details. While my work is in dialogue with many other artists whose work is playful and improvisational, I bring my own experience and perspective to the work, which has a material and emotional quality that is specific to me. I am adding to this rhetoric of process and form with my own vernacular and working habits. I hope that my work is able to have an impact in the way that these artists work have had on me.

I think that this project's strengths lie in the formal and conceptual progress I made throughout the process. I travelled a long way with my forms, craftsmanship, and concept. I set out to improve and develop my work, and I believe I accomplished that. This project was completed as an online student, and one of the outcomes of this was that the work was both created and installed in my own home. This ended up being both a limitation and a strength. It is a limitation in the sense that the space I was working with was limited, both for the creation and installation of my project. These limitations also had an interesting impact on my work, however, and I think that making work for a space with unusual constraints actually worked well for this

particular body of work. The limitations of space were conceptually in line with my work, which was very much about making do with what is available and approaching limitations with a sense of playfulness and opportunity.

Throughout this process, my experimentation with form and materials opened up many new potential directions for my work. Because my goal was to create a body of work that felt cohesive and unified, I had to be disciplined in which directions I chose to pursue. This did include some false starts down paths that I had to abandon once they started to deviate too far, but I believe these will be fruitful directions for new work down the road. I have many collages and sketches and some sculptures that contain ideas that I am excited about but just did not fit into the scope of these projects. Some of the digital collages I made, for example, were exciting and employed many of the same approaches as my other work for this project, but they were visually distinct and felt like they were conceptually apart. I did not pursue them further for this project, but am excited to revisit them and see where that exploration takes me. All of the drawings and collages I made while working through ideas for this project, as well as those that I make in the future, will be an important jumping off point for new directions and explorations.

The work itself is playful and has an emotional or empathetic quality to it. Though born out of my own memory and experience, I felt that I was working with concepts that are more universal than my own personal experiences, such as how one responds to chaos or mistakes or other challenging situations, and being able to approach these parts of life with playfulness.

I became very interested in the value of play, and how its effects can translate to much more serious and important aspects of life. Throughout this project, I was able to research how many different people have been able to employ playful and improvisational processes to their work and lives, and it has had a huge impact on how I have approached not only my own work, but

also challenging situations in my own life. Play allows us to make creative connections, solving problems in new and unexpected ways and strengthening our ties to the world and people around us. There are times where play might seem inappropriate or frivolous, but I believe it to be important and serious work.

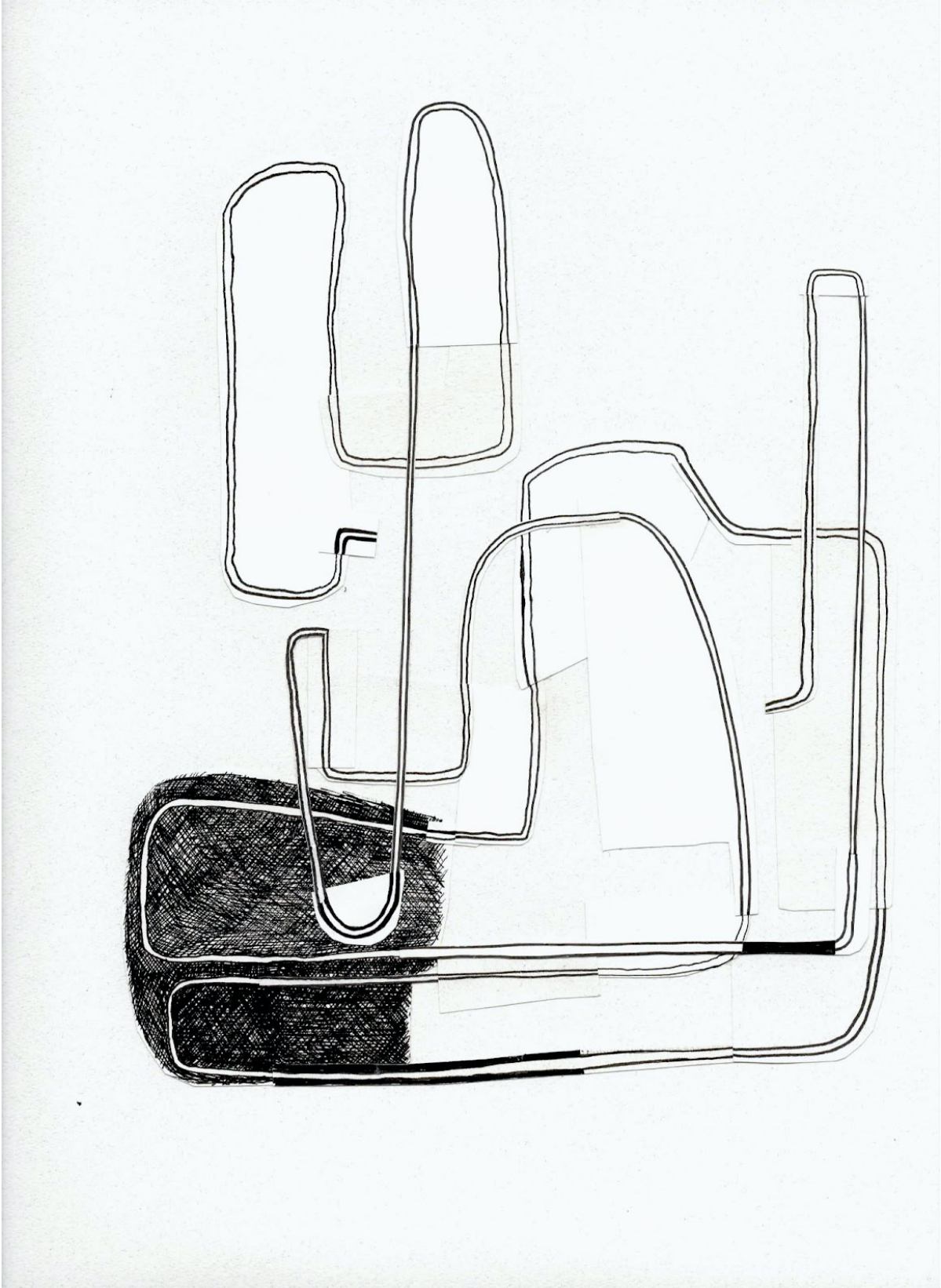


Figure 1 *Collage Study*, 12 x 9", Ink on Paper, 2022

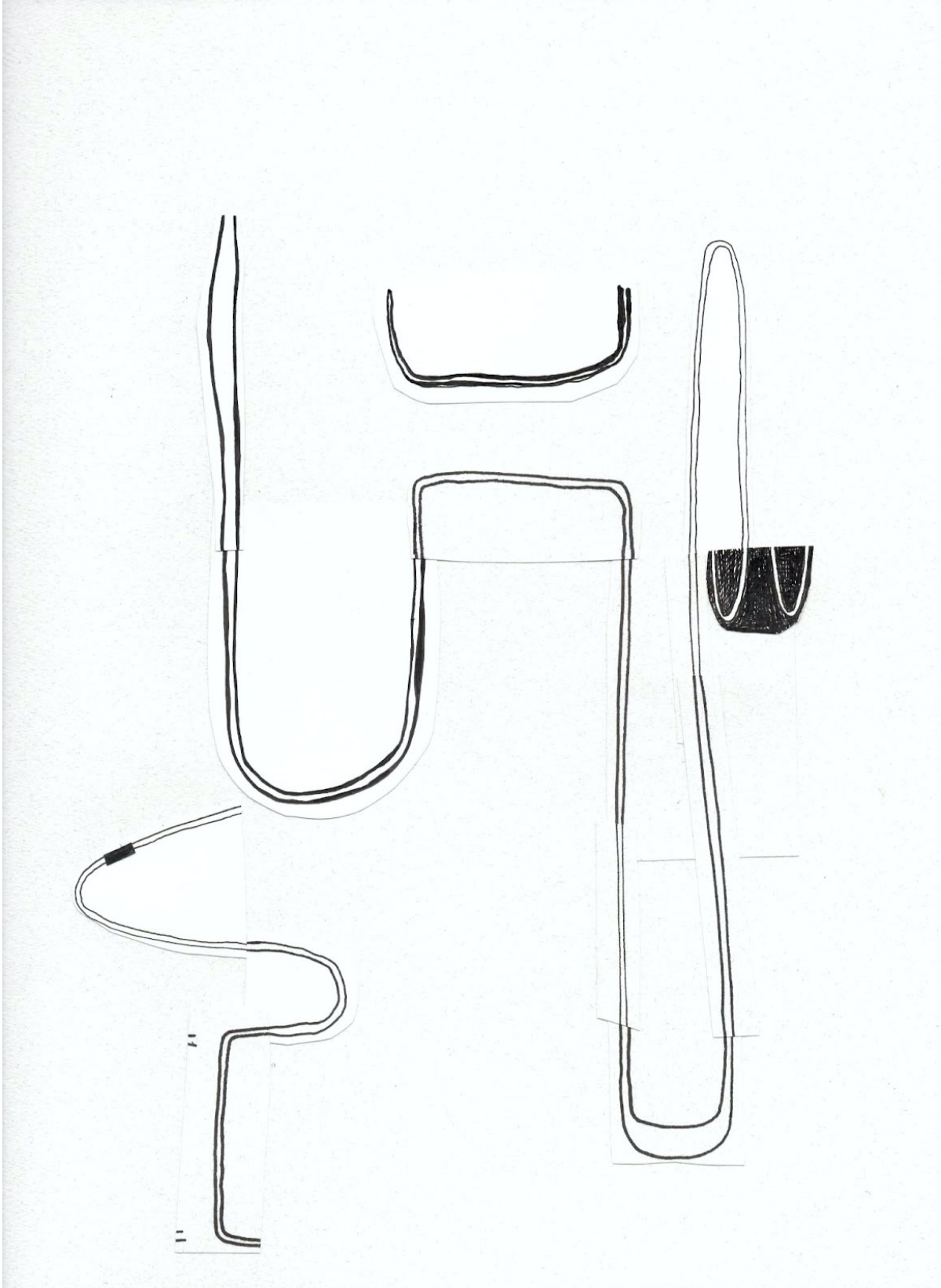


Figure 2 *Collage Study*, 12 x 9", Ink on Paper, 2022



Figure 3 *Collage Study*, 17 x 14", Inkjet Print on Paper, 2022



Figure 4 *Collage Study*, 17 x 14", Inkjet Print on Paper, 2022

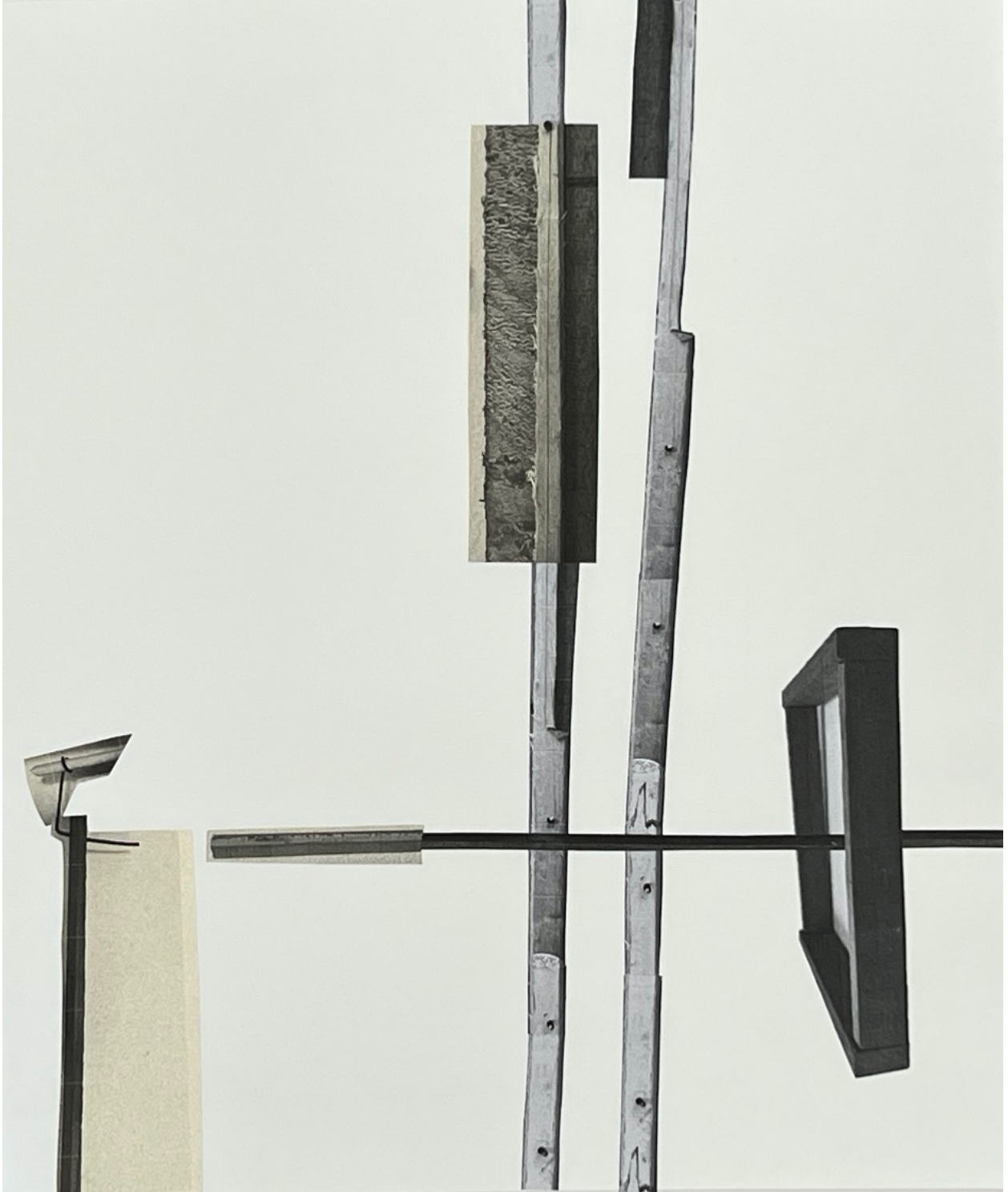


Figure 5 *Collage Study*, 17 x 14", Inkjet Print on Paper, 2022



Figure 6 *Ladder Composition, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, 2022*



Figure 7 *Found Objects*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Gesso, Graphite, 2022



Figure 8 *Untitled Study*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Earthenware, 2022

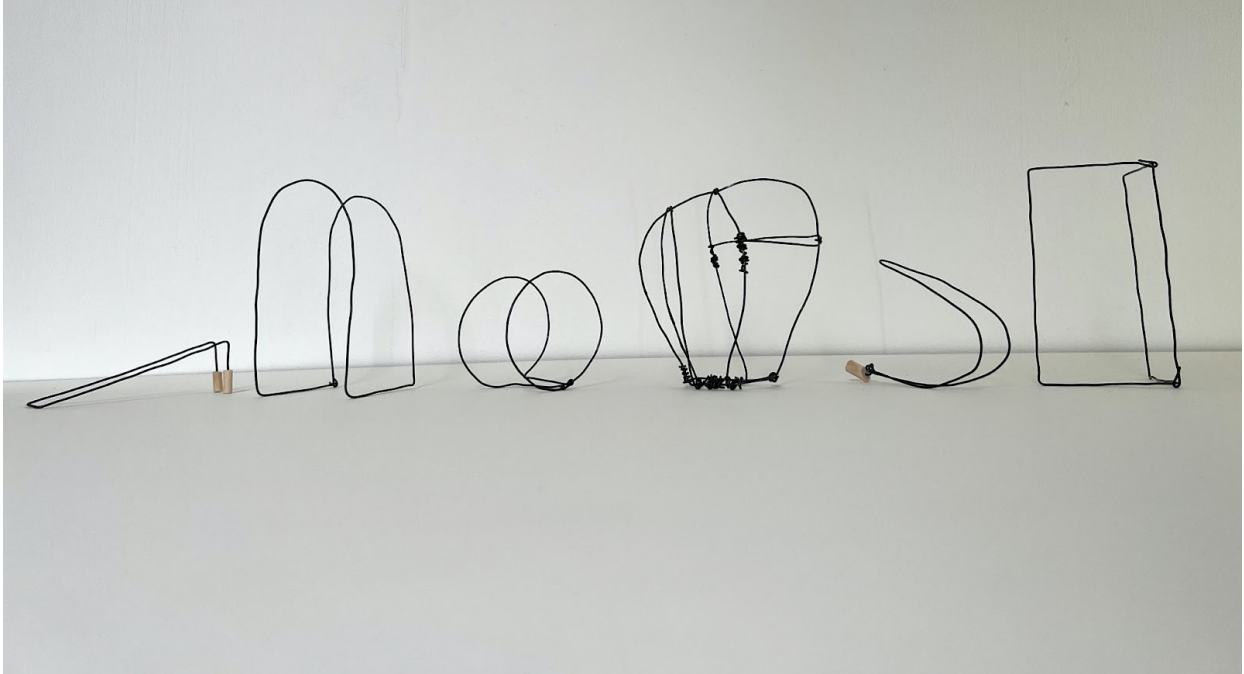


Figure 9 *Wire Studies*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, 2022

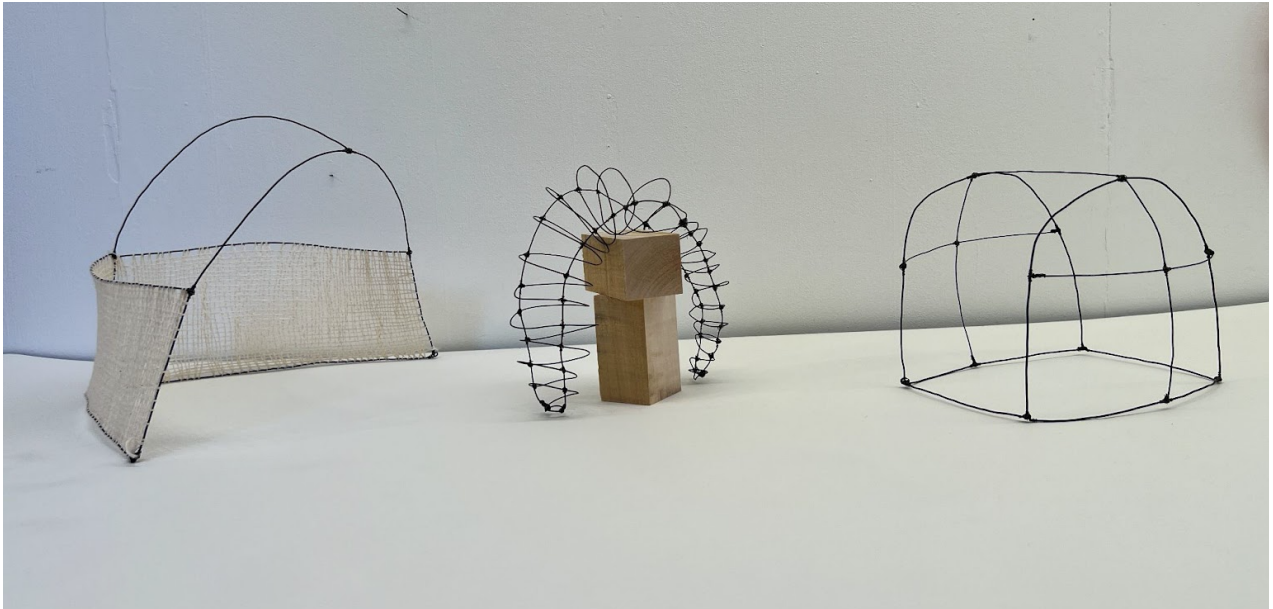


Figure 10 *Wire Studies*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, 2022

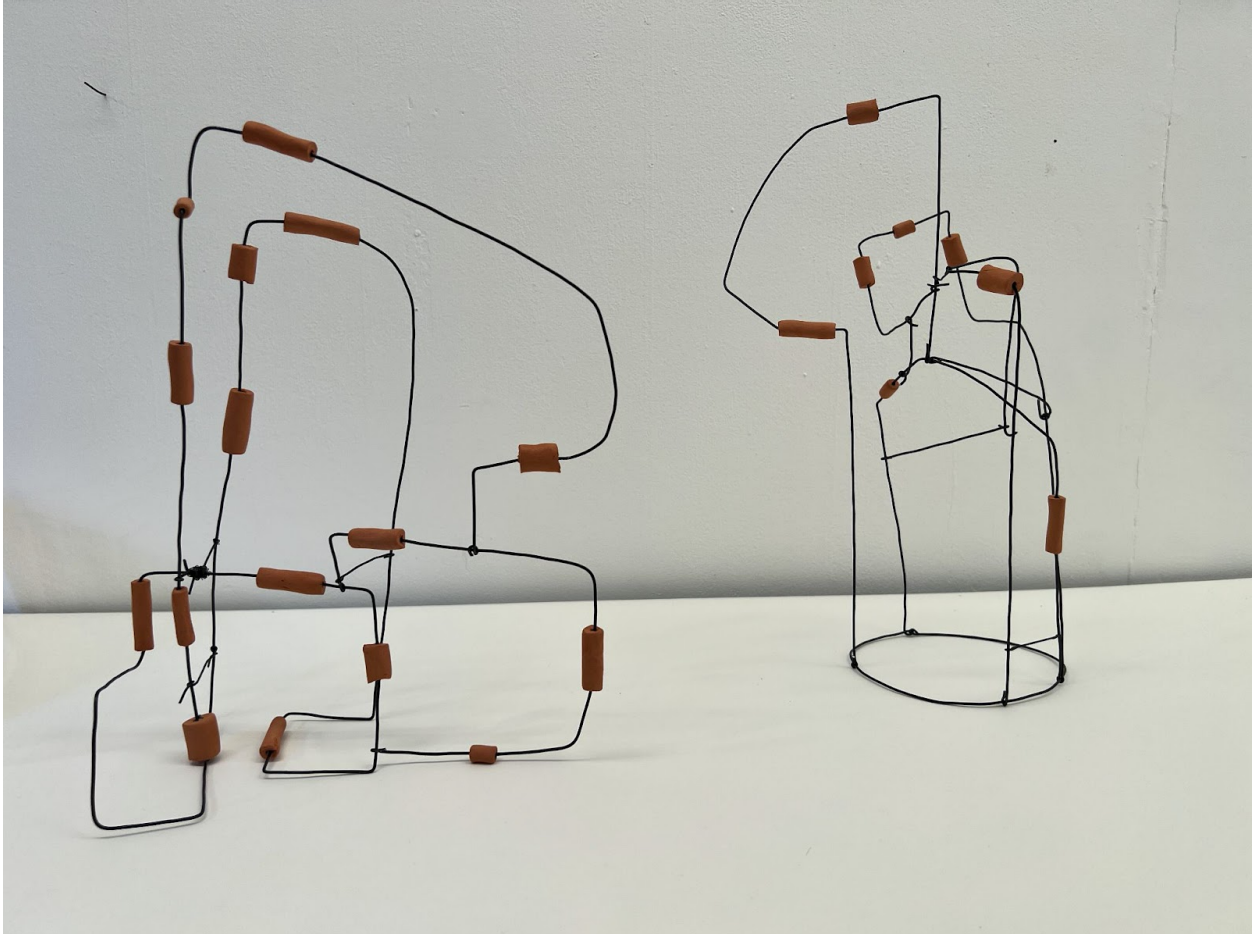


Figure 11 *Wire Studies, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Earthenware, 2022*

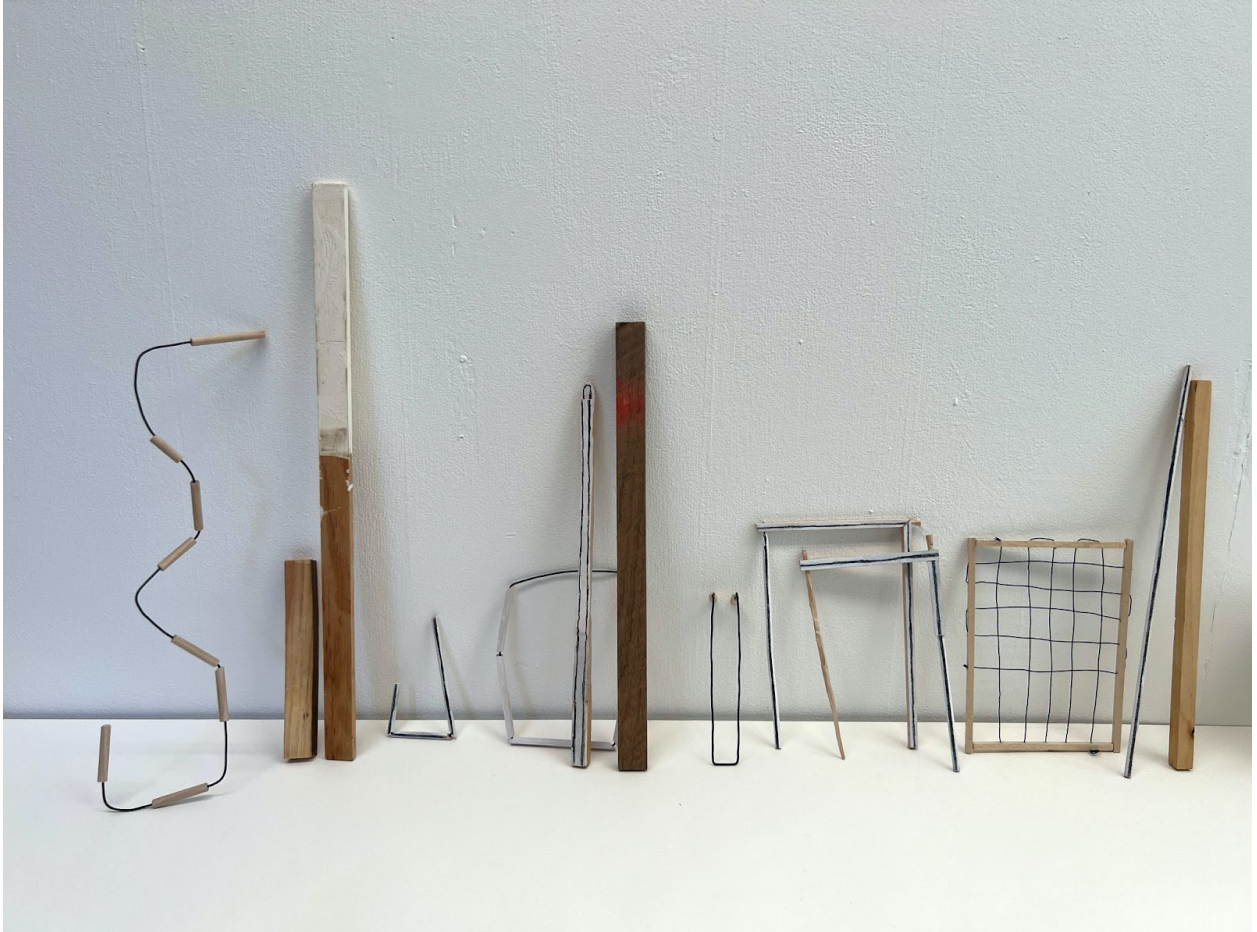


Figure 12 *Found Objects*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Paint, Graphite, 2022



Figure 13 *Untitled (Installation View)*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Paint, Graphite, 2022



Figure 14 *Untitled (Installation View)*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Paint, Graphite, Tape, 2022

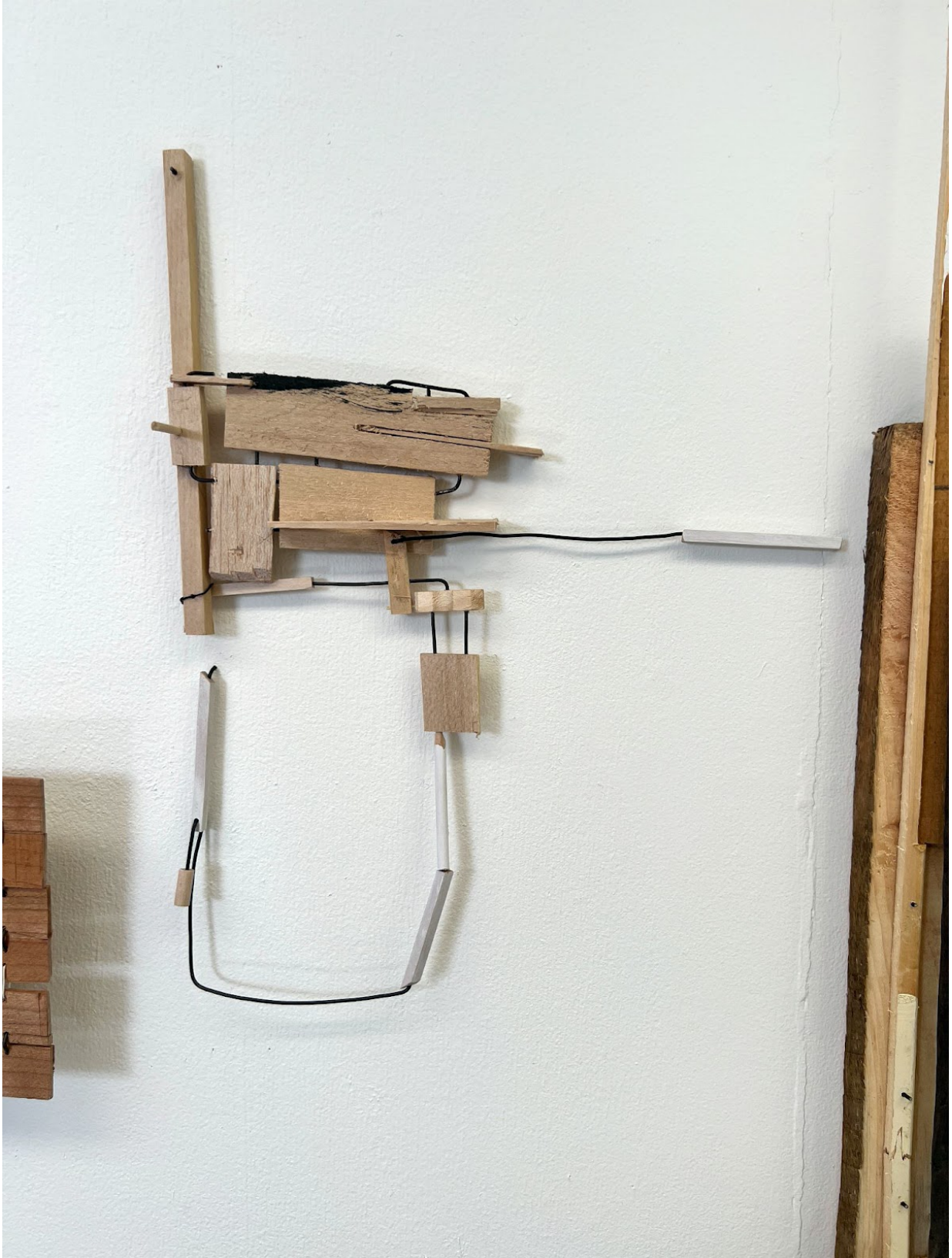


Figure 15 *Untitled*, 10 x 8", Steel Wire, Wood, Paint, 2022



Figure 16 *Untitled (Installation View)*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Paint, 2022



Figure 17 *Untitled (Installation View)*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Paint, 2022



Figure 18 *Untitled (Detail)*, 12x2", Steel Wire, Wood, Graphite, Paint, 2022



Figure 19 *Untitled (Detail)*, 48x8", Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, 2022



Figure 20 *Untitled*, 5x4", Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Paint, 2022



Figure 21 *Untitled (Detail)*, 8x10x6", Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, 2022



Figure 22 *Untitled (Detail)*, 10x12", Steel Wire, Cotton, 2022



Figure 23 *Found Objects*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Cotton, Paint, Graphite, Wool, 2022



Figure 24 *Untitled (Installation View)*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Graphite, Paint, 2022



Figure 25 *Untitled (Installation View)*, Various Sizes, Steel Wire, Wood, Graphite, Paint, 2022

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