

فرن الأرواح

*Furnace of the Spirits*

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## Abstract

*“This is the good washing, this is (the washing) which separates the dirty body from the pure body. This is like silver mixed with lead, it is separated from it by this (process): one makes for it a cupel of bones, which is what is called the “head of the dog” and of which the common name is kūja—which is the crucible—and this must be made of burnt bones. One melts the silver in it, one gives it a strong fire: the cupel will absorb and receive the lead, the fire will make its subtle (part) fly away and extirpate it, and there will remain unmixed silver with no adulteration in it.”*

— Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurtubī (339-342 or 906-964) from *Rutbat al-hakīm (The Rank of the Sage)*

My practice occupies several crossroads—crossroads between pattern and poetry, ritual and time, artifact and the body, and obsession along with devotion. Curiosity is my primary medium. I draw somatic influences from my childhood and young adulthood as a ballet dancer; as a result, I seek to work viscerally. In my studio, to work viscerally means to reference my own body from a visual and an internal, felt perspective. Utilizing my dance background in unconventional ways outside of the pressures of the traditional Vaganova-style ballet studio in which I grew up is integral to my work. Subverting dance allows me to be both innovative in defining what dance is through a constant exploration and redefinition, as well as allowing space for kindness towards my physical form, a kindness that was out of the question in intensive ballet training. I no longer see my body as a tool to wield perfectly, but my apparatus in expressions of imperfect, asymmetrical, lively bodily autonomy. Freestyle movement as expression is a celebratory act of what is inevitable in human existence. One of many inevitabilities is the end of the experience in the imperfect human vessel.

My practice is influenced by the metallurgic process of cupellation, from both visual and metaphorical perspectives. Cupellation is a refining process in metallurgy where ores or alloyed metals are treated under very high temperatures, typically using hot air from a furnace, to separate noble metals from base metals present in the ore. I believe that a similar process of moving from impurity to purity is present in the collective human psyche in terms of our relationship to technological advancements involving the human body. Notions of high pressure and undergoing transformative processes seem akin to the scientific journey towards life-extending implementations, while the color changes involved in the cupellation process echo the human corpse in the decaying process. This shared quality of color change reminds me of the inevitability of death, but equally the transformative qualities in the processes of life. The human body is alchemical and mortal in tandem. Only a mortal existence can be an alchemical one, and an alchemical species such as humans comes with technology, the thirst for discovery, and the yearning to live without constraint. However, without death, life would have no meaning. My work is a meditation on the human body as artifact outside of time as we continue to attempt to escape aging, natural disaster, decay, and our inevitable transformation into something else entirely.

## **Materials & Techniques**

I formulate ideas the same way I go about utilizing materials, through a melding together and collaging of images, textures, and techniques. My intaglio practice at RISD has primarily utilized the toner transfer etching technique. I printed out copious sheets

with rows of small photographs of my brother and me, which I then cut and collaged onto my copper plates to create the silhouettes of organs. I find building up an image through using photographic images as building blocks to be quite sculptural, adding upon intaglio's already sculptural properties. In my opinion, intaglio printmaking is a significant contender with the modern-day digital image due to the way that the matrix embeds ink into its printing substrate, like a tattoo onto skin. With intaglio, especially in utilizing copper plates, imagery gains a dimensionality like no other. When I draw, especially with graphite, the embossment from my lines can be seen and felt on the reverse side of the page, a quality that is shared in the intaglio printed image. I bring the same energy to both 2D and 3D works, everything is carving, sculpting, and shaping. In my thesis work, I do not see my intaglio prints as being an edition, but rather sets of bodies that differ from each other through varying plate tone from print to print. I find that breaking the industrial nature of sameness in printmaking to be important in my practice, and print installation has been the best opportunity for me to express the versatility of the matrix outside of an editioning context.

Papermaking has become very important in my practice because it allows me the satisfaction of having a part in every stage of the material until the piece's final state. Like an alchemist, I must get to know my material from its inception to its desired form. I yearn to have material processes in my life because of how removed modern civilization is from the making of the items we consume and utilize. Handmade paper plays an integral role in my sculptural language within my thesis work and serves as a malleable

sculptural medium with endless possibilities. Handmade paper serves as a carrier of light, sound, and tactility in the atmospheres it allows me to create. This is because it allows me to have control of fiber length, color, and texture. The marriage of metals, such as copper, bronze, aluminum, and handmade paper allows me to blur the lines between hard and soft, as well as thick and thin. The visual and structural nature of eastern fibers, especially kozo, excites me to push the medium beyond traditional usage. I desire for my eastern papers to have a lot of body, texture, and personality, akin to a heavy weight cotton paper but with moss or felt mixed in. Overall, my absolute favorite part of the papermaking process is dying my fiber. Observing the transition of the fiber color from its original pale state is a pleasure that is simple in execution, yet enigmatic in action. I also enjoy adding copper shavings or other light catching mediums such as mica powders and luster pigments into my pulp, creating fibers that look more solid like stone with crystal particles when the fiber is dry. However, my use of LED lights in collaboration with kozo fiber in my work breaks the illusion of the fiber being solid; elements that break boundaries between soft and hard are satisfying for me in that they create curiosity in my installation space.

As an artist interested in the use of sound technologies, I have begun to experiment with disguising hardware in paper pulp pieces. I like to think I am making shells or cloaks for the blocky hardware, such as subwoofers or small speakers, that I use in my pieces. Within my thesis installation, the paper piece cloaking the subwoofer serves as protection, limitation, and discovery simultaneously. It is both garment and

organic emergence, construction by hand and by nature. Accompanying the digital sound piece is sound of the kozo fiber, reacting to the rumblings with its own auditorial interpretations. I constructed my cloak by casting thick paper sheets into vacuum formed molds and then adhering them together with glue and thread. My long-time practice of carving clay aided me in the designs for my kozo fiber molds. These designs are meditations on looking at the skin on my hands under a microscope.

I have been intrigued by German death practices from the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>- centuries, primarily the practice of the *Leichenhaus*, a waiting mortuary where dead bodies would wait to be proclaimed officially dead in a fire-heated room. In late 1700s Germany, there were physicians who believed that the only way to tell if someone was dead was to pause prior to the burial process to observe signs of rot—bloating, smelling, and so on. The bodies had bells attached to them, which would ring or sound if the body moved (although most sounds made were false alarms due to the bodies releasing bacteria gases from the intestinal tract during decomposition). These bodies were always observed by an attendant out of the fear of burying a body alive. The addition of bells sewn onto the kozo comes from this *Leichenhaus* practice. My lanterns in this body of work, cast aluminum and bronze accompanied by hand formed and etched copper, as well as handmade kozo paper emitting LED light, also nod to the *Leichenhaus*. Moreover, the whip stitch running throughout the kozo references surgical stitching, both representative of the human body in a transitory, transformative space.

I utilize my subwoofer as an auditory focal point, whereas smaller speakers sit alongside it to articulate higher notes as accents, providing a necessary distortion of my tracks. Within the three tracks in my installation, the first two require the subwoofer as their main point of interpretation and expression. I worked on all of my recordings to suit the subwoofer's emphasis on bass, but the first two tracks most of all. In the making of the sound piece, an important point of consideration was the depths of the earth, mining, and metals. In my material considerations, I find it important to consider the materials utilized in the making of the tools required to produce digital music such as the mining of metals. In my thinking, the expression of the metals coming from the depths of the earth would express said depths through relentless bass that digs and digs until it hits hot earthen core, nature's crucible.

### **Asymmetry**

Throughout this entire body of work, from prints to handmade paper to metal sculptures, I have made a point to break symmetry. Even in instances when my work may seem symmetrical at first glance, asymmetrical balance is present. With my background in ballet training, and as a woman in modern western culture, to break the myth of beauty or the desire to attain bodily symmetry is a radical act of healing through honesty. I view symmetry as a state with no momentum, whereas asymmetry implies movement, process, transition, transformation, and liminality. Although my work celebrates death as a process in the cycle of transformation, I wish to express the evanescent, time bending qualities of the moments surrounding finality. Additionally, death is not a symmetrical

process, as I know from my own experience of the death of loved ones. In my spiritual heritage—an eclectic recipe to match my multi-cultural ancestry—neither is reincarnation always a perfectly peaceful, symmetrical process. The use of asymmetry allows me more freedom in my studio and in my corporeal life. Asymmetrical balance is a mediation.

### **Process Evolution**

My work has changed in a plethora of ways during my time at RISD, though I have retained certain parts of my previous practice such as the hands-on making sensibilities of sewing and intaglio printing. I made the conscious decision to move completely away from resin, which using metal and handmade paper has allowed me to do so, but with much more labor involved. I have become much more patient as I have moved into working in metals during this graduate program. The qualities I found gratifying in resin, such as light catching qualities and color variations, are attainable in paper and metal in a more mysterious, indirect way. Fine jewelry forming and saw work has made me more aware of all the tiny details; I now more than ever swiftly fluctuate between what I like to call “mini world” and works that compete with the size and scale of my own body. I am also fond of how metal reacts to environmental conditions and as a result patinas, whereas resin stays stagnant. I have observed here that there are some beautiful things that only time can do, and time can do them better than a speed patina or faux finish. This notion has worked its way into my thoughts on death as a transformation since time also works its transformative qualities upon me.

My work has also changed drastically in that I have been working increasingly photographically, which is very new for me. Working with photos of myself, along with that of my brother Ibrahim, has been a great experiment. I have been asked and encouraged multiple times throughout the years to bring my dance background into my studio practice. But my peers wanted me to engage in performance art, which then led people to want me to perform a ritual in front of them, knowing the spiritual lens I take to my work. As an ex-entertainer, I dance for myself, and I do not choreograph. I dance like I draw, sculpt, etc., which makes it abstract, spontaneous, and unplanned. I am no longer an entertainer, but an artist. I am not here to entertain; I am here to engage people. Entertainment is a different can of worms. Being able to move with my brother in front of an audience of one, our tripod camera, while documenting it for artistic purposes has been a great way to bring dance back into my work. It is also very new to collaborate with my brother, Ibrahim. My brother's understanding of the body through martial arts has been extremely influential in my work and has continued to blur the lines for me between what is dance, fighting, moving, and expressing oneself viscerally. I have always been one to collaborate with others, but working with my brother has been the most rewarding collaboration I have been involved in thus far.

My thesis work is what it is because of the utilization of sound. I have begun to use sound in my installations with a lot more technique. Now with the aid of sound editing software, I am excited to bring sound into my work to the same level as any physical material I may utilize. Within the sound itself, recordings of my dear friend and

opera singer Alison Hibsche are included in tracks 1 and 2, as well as poetry spoken by myself, and recordings I took of me playing a digital piano. Just as the movement in my thesis is not entertainment, neither is the sound component music. I aimed to create a soundscape that would bring the viewer in and hold them for an indefinite amount of time as the piece loops continuously. In the making of my thesis installation, I completed the sound piece first and then proceeded to complete the paper piece cloaking the subwoofer, which is a process order I'd like to further explore post-grad school. Sound is so influential in my day-to-day studio process via the headphones or speakers almost always present on my desk, so having more of my own expression in both my process and presentation space has been an integral part of my growth.

Allowing sound that I create to inform my physical making work is extremely liberating. Finding the courage to bring movement back into my studio practice has given me the ability to connect with myself and others in invigorating ways. The exploration of sonic material and digital sound has opened several imaginal avenues. For my thesis, I invite viewers to take a seat at a crossroads, and for viewers to become experiencers with me as human life as we know it becomes artifact, and as time transforms us all.

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*Installation Images*



















