

A Very Long Engagement

By Frances Dorsey

The exhibition *A Very Long Engagement* emerges from several questions and a visit to an inspiring exhibition. The questions are: What is embodied in a ball of string? How does sustained time influence making? And, what gets you into the studio every day?

Humans have had a very long engagement with string, with the earliest evidence indirect but compelling. During the Gravettian Period (26,000 – 20,000 BC) bone needles begin to turn up, as well as beads of hard materials with increasingly small holes, evidence of the use of very fine threads of some sort, most likely spun from fibres from animals or plants. A carved bone figure of a Paleolithic figure (Venus of Lespugue, ca. 20,000 BC) displays a skirt made of twined strings, with carving detailed enough to reveal that it looks exactly like twisted string with frayed ends. Most amazingly, from a cave in Lascaux comes an actual piece of extremely sophisticated string: a small length made from three strands of two-ply twisted plant fibres fossilized through being encased in mud for 17,000 years¹. Nearby were small grooves cut or worn into contours of the rock walls of some of the painted caves that would fit something like a string guideline. It is possible that string may have extended along the walls of caves, so that people could move from one area to another by following the line.

It is this small piece of string that is most seductive – before making string early humans would have had to notice that cellulosic plant fibres could be teased free of their lignin casings, perhaps found after the winter had done the work, and twisted together to make a strand that had some strength. If several such strands were then plied together, the strand became string, with still more utility. Finally, if the twisted strands are plied together with the twisting directions reversed, then those strands will not unwrap from one another. The miracle of this small piece of string, which has persisted through all the centuries, speaks eloquently of our early capacity to think, imagine and create. We must have been fooling around with string-like processes for thousands of years before that, to have arrived at such simple elegance.

That string has existed for so many thousands of years is food for thought. Hunter/gatherers would have needed light, portable containers to carry their few possessions: string, nets, baskets. An intriguing proposition following on this is posed by anthropologist Mary Frame, who observes “The structuring processes used to order chaotic, loose fiber into utensils and shelter may have provided a tangible model for understanding and reflecting observed structures and phenomena in the natural world.”²

Mathematician A. T. Vandermonde observed, in 1771, in *Remarques sur des problèmes de situation*, that basket-making is a discipline most concerned with position – the

position of elements in space, as they interact around one another in a systematic and predictable way. The act of interlacing strands is a way of working that relies on predicting future locations of elements in three-dimensional space, as in topology, the mathematical study of position. César Paternosto develops the idea further to suggest that the patterns emerging from this natural arrangement of elements are essentially the abstracted motifs of stylized animals, lightning zigzags, the spiral rotation of the night sky, and so on. These motifs were used to express ideas, before writing was invented – on clay, cloth, stone, wood, and metal – throughout the world. Paternosto proposes that the human ability to think in abstraction had its roots in this material exploration.³

This kind of physical understanding and conceptual linkage is at the root of abstract thought, because it allows the maker, during the construction process, to imagine multiple possibilities and project the future. In a sense, the thought and subsequent understanding embodied in the ball of string is an essential part of what makes humans human.

Leaping to the twenty-first century, the exhibition *Life of Making*, at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art (2010), presented the work of three acclaimed artists: Jim Melchert, June Schwartz and Kay Sekimachi. The work exhibited was fresh, strong and had a quality of inevitability. The artists, in their late seventh, eighth and ninth decades of life, each spoke with delight and anticipation about seeing what would happen in the studio every day. For each, the membrane between the art of making and the art of living was so permeable as to be absent. For the gallery visitor it was a profound reminder that creative work extends to life's limits; age can bring consummate skill and brilliance of intent fully realized, not just diminishment.

The grace of long making is like that of two partners who have been jiving (or tangoing) together for many years. The complex and formal set of interactive moves have been worked out over long experience and the dancers *ad lib* with fluency and speed; ever new, variable and playful, the sum is greater than the parts. Likewise, the dance between material, hand and mind, practiced over many decades, regenerates itself, and the investment of time, attention and honed expertise contributes an ineffable quality to the work.

In the way that a process can map itself onto a group and shape it (the invention of string and human thought), so sustained making might similarly map itself onto individual makers and shape them, as in the three artists noted above whose daily existences have become inextricably melded into a life of creation and exploration. The decades invested in pursuing their chosen disciplines must surely have shaped the ways they each approach problems and questions, and informed the caliber of their responses. The refining process emerging from millennia of skilled making by humans around the planet might also, if valued, shape the way we ask questions today and seek answers.

What then, about the relationship between work and time for other contemporary artists who have been engaged in a train of thought or practice for many decades? Or those who have been deeply engaged for a shorter time but with an ancient, rigorous and notably time consuming process? How does time write on the work? The worker? Does the craftsmanship gained from long practice add inherent value or content to whatever is made? Does the haptic shape the way we think? As fruit ripens it gains sugar, colour, flavour, vitamins and desirability. As processes (and artists) ripen we often dismiss them as “no longer relevant”, preferring instead the astringent dryness of the merely new. Yet perhaps it is only with ripeness that we can begin to understand all that is contained in that ripening process.

Visual products that contain a quality of tactility are often dismissed as merely physical, without intellectual charge. In the same way, we often carry uninvestigated assumptions about how age may affect creative production, perhaps assuming that creators similarly lose physical or intellectual dexterity over time, or perhaps just lose interest. The proposition that the work, and subsequent pleasures of tactile engagement, just gets better and better is as inspiring as it is provocative to consider.

The six artists included in *A Very Long Engagement* have been working with string, using slow and accumulative processes, some for a long lifetime. Several have moved from skill through mastery to a kind of haptic thought. Several began to work with a specific technique or material to achieve a specific end, and found that the voices of the process or material became the impelling ideas. For each, the physical act of making, refined over a lifetime, is as integral to the work as the work is to their lives.

Pat Hickman has been working with hog-gut sausage casings for many decades. The daughter of a butcher, her choice of gut reflects a circuitous route back to a kind of basecamp, through several degrees, years of living in places as disparate as New York, Honolulu and Istanbul, and a realization that Alaskan native people had used gut to make waterproof garments from ancient times. Bringing such accumulated vantage points to the exploration of this particular material has resulted in a rich and ever-shifting body of work. Whether the gut appears as a membrane, in *Ripples*, or whether the filament quality of length results in netting or almost hieroglyphic information, as in *Mnemonics*, the conversation between artist and material probes, pushes and asserts.

Hickman studied music, English language and literature, and finally textiles, and her work reveals a rhythm and cadence of sentences and phrases from this background. Using long tubes of translucent gut as both structure and surface, the work evokes memory, loss and emptiness. The process is additive, drawing on meanings derived from the very materials used as well as the forms they assume. The visceral qualities of the gut are palpable yet oddly narrative – gut as empty container as well as signifier. Another element in the current work is what is sometimes referred to as “river teeth”: the wooden branch insertions into a tree trunk that are the last parts of a tree to decay. When trees fall into a river they slowly decay, nourishing the life in the river. The places where the branches were formed, however, are made of tougher stuff and tenaciously

remain, recalling the tree, or the immovable moments in our lives. By wrapping gut around these forms, Hickman is producing a very unusual kind of sausage – the casing no longer does its original job of holding soft minced ingredients together long enough to be cooked and consumed. Instead, it is protecting something much tougher than itself, and perhaps allowing it to seep out over time, in the same ways that other nourishment makes its way through us to sustain our lives.

In Hickman's work, one gets the sense of what is absent and beyond language; in the way described by John Updike, "we would-be novelists have a reach as shallow as our skins. We walk through volumes of the unexpressed and like snails leave behind a faint thread excreted out of ourselves. From the dew of the few flakes that melt on our faces we cannot reconstruct the snowstorm."⁴ Similarly Hickman alludes to, but does not touch, the emotional ground zero of what has gone.

The work of Sherri Smith engages beauty through structure and mathematics. Her early loom-controlled explorations of waffle weave resulted in remarkable and ephemeral architectural forms. Then came a several-decades long exploration of braids, plaiting, flat bands and optical illusion. A long series of low relief wall hangings plaited triaxially from three sets of flat webbing strips were dyed so precisely that as the viewer walked past each piece the visible colour and larger pattern would shift and dissolve as different planes became visible.

This work is at first glance cerebral, clinically impersonal, an exposition of whatever numeric system is under the microscope at the moment. However, much of it is breathtakingly beautiful, and possesses an emotional warmth that takes the viewer by surprise. In each case the structure itself seems to be the subject matter. Smith subsequently returned to the loom to weave a series of strip weavings based on the musical notation of gamelan music. The strips were tacked together at points so that the surface was active rather than flat, with the structure evident, paraphrasing the sound it derived from.

The new pieces included here are also woven in strips on the loom and then tacked together in a deceptively simple weave structure, and illuminate radiophotographs of planets. Smith comments: "NASA is generating such fine images for me all the time" that she has no need to look elsewhere. Further, she observes that the weavings were done "in the tradition of painters who painted the West before many Europeans went there."⁵ The weaving process is in fact so difficult that it was too complicated to weave in wide form, necessitating narrower strips. While each strip has a plain weave internal structure there is also an inlay of coloured cloth like a very elegant rag rug that carries the imagery. There is an amusing irony in using interlacing, arguably humans' first 'making' process, to display planetary data available only now through the magic of modern science and technology.

Rug maker Martha Stanley attempted to recreate a millennium-old Anasazi sandal as a way of understanding how, and with what meaning, the sandals were made. The sandals were not woven, but rather constructed of up to nine kinds of off-loom, woven

twinnings that resulted in particular kinds of patterns, in relief, on the soles. At least in their ceremonial role, the soles of each pair might have been knotted differently so that each sole for each pair was unique. Because the pattern was in relief the mark of an individual passing by could be recorded in the ground where they walked – legible to those who could “read” them. More importantly, the elegance of the structure reveals the ancient weavers’ wonderful appreciation of both the functional as well as aesthetic results possible from the complex manipulations of material and technique.

Stanley abandoned the limiting structure of the loom after re-constructing the sandal knotting process, as it presents her with the possibility of building rug structures in relief from all sides, working outward from any point. The direction and tension of knots determines the texture or raised pattern of the rug surface, in a sense the structure drives the colour and pattern of the rug. This raised texture reflects light actively as it imprints back on the soles of those who walk over the rug – so in a funny way the rug walks on the pedestrian.

Stanley is perhaps no longer primarily engaged in rug making but rather in discovering what she can do with the knotting process. Her questions have become quite focused; one has the sense that the rug itself is an inconsequential byproduct of an obsessed investigation of the structure proposed by the sandals. This is the esoteric quest of a very long engagement, as only someone who has used up conventional rug structures might be lured to this other, extraordinarily labourious way of making. Stanley describes being humbled and thrilled by the mastery and sophistication revealed by the choices of structure made by the ancient weavers. This reach back into time to revive and redeploy sandal structures echoes to the call of the little coil of plied string from Lascaux.

Printmaker Doug Guildford began to crochet around the time that his feminist friends began to learn how to repair car engines. Marine life, tidal flotsam, the junk washed up from a flailing fishing industry of his native Nova Scotia, are literal and figurative sources for his nets and sculptural forms. The continuous, crocheted construction of these organic objects, which will never be finished, has become an obsessive part of Guildford’s work; the making itself seems as, or more, important than whatever emerges from the end of the (crochet) hook. The repetition of gestures, the accumulation of effects, is the content of the work.

The *Working Drawings* are equally enigmatic, with images or motifs (often echoing the crochet interlacings) emerging and then being covered over, the way the tide goes in and out, dredging up one form or mark only to wash it out or carry it back into the deep. The detritus gathered on the floor of the gallery offers itself as a choice collection of treasure brought by the water, while at the same time revealing a high water mark for junk left by retreating tides.

The crocheted nets and ropes harvest the bounty of the tide as well as provide shape to Guildford’s time. Though presented here in the pristine gallery, they would be as comfortable at the edges of the water or in any other natural surroundings. The act of

crochet reads as a kind of wordless conversation with a syntax, definitions, a rhythm, and acquires meaning through Guildford's attention.

Jozef Bajus trained in traditional textile practices in his native Slovakia, and over decades of working has developed an assemblage process that leans heavily on textile structures and is characterized as an accumulation of small units – a hallmark of most textile processes. The predominant medium here is paper, in part because of its fibrous, percussive qualities and relationship to cloth, but also because of the physical possibilities inherent in paper itself. Other materials are also used; these intrinsically valueless components build and combine into multileveled (both physically and conceptually) compositions that clarify the particular idea he is considering.

Earlier work utilized small pieces of torn paper reassembled by chance selection and stapled back into whole sheets – repaired but in disruption. The tender mediation between the ripped up pages of drawings and the mending back together by such careful actions is both texturally rich and also abject.

Bajus' subject matter revolves around chance, disruption, the application of orderly and predictable systems to something that is, either literally or metaphorically, uncontrollable. The array of pattern, shape and scale, layered and juxtaposed against one another, forms some kind of language that appears to carry compelling information. Cut and folded paper, tarpaper, junk mail all gain meaning through the care and attention that has been deployed in the gathering together of the units. There is tension between the random bits and orderly arrangements they have been coaxed into.

In several of the pieces included here, *Black Cheerios*, and *Focus - Nuclear Clean Up*, digital images were printed, sliced up and meticulously reassembled. In the series *Prayers for Jacqueline*, imagery was sliced into narrow strips and then rewoven loosely and irregularly, as if Bajus were attempting to bind the fissure, fix the irreparable, and identify signs of rationality in the face of the dice toss that we all face at each moment in our lives.

At first appearance it seems contradictory to include the work of Dorie Millerson within an exhibition premise that purports to exemplify the intrinsic worth of long making, after all she has just barely embarked upon her professional career. However, another constant for all the artists in *A Very Long Engagement* is the importance of the rendering to the ideas that animate the works. In each case, without the expertise built from long years of practice, the work could not have been thought of or have come into being. And, Millerson's work is built upon a mature understanding developed from long careful attention to stitching and sewing as well as other interlaced structures.

For the last decade Millerson has been working with needle lace and thread, in a technique that draws from both a venerable lace tradition and personal invention. It is precisely the thread's ability to form attachments, link memory, people, places and events that has pulled her in this direction. Lace is most commonly associated with embellishment, a decorative finish to a sumptuous garment or household drape. Lace is

valuable and rare because it takes so long to actually make it, requires skill gleaned only through long practice and patience, and is seen as an essentially useless luxury, worn only by those who do not need to work. Millerson's obstinate insistence that needle lace has relevance in the twenty-first century is both absurd and moving.

Here, lace is a conduit, connecting the past to the future, literally sewing people's lives together, linking land bodies, as in *Bridge*, offering a way over. These string constructions are tiny yet they project huge shadows. One is reminded of hand shadow animals, or the way that burning torches once lit the irregular walls of caves, evoking creatures and spirits in the imaginations of early humans.

The works in *A Very Long Engagement* form a kind of network of linked ideas, processes, physical properties and material qualities. The references move forward and backward in time, contain and give a shape to time, consume and record time, while remaining embodied in static objects. Gathering up strands, binding them together somehow, making conceptual or physical sense of them, seems tedious but is also unfettering. For each of the artists, decisions made long ago about process and material have led to a remarkable level of mastery and have shaped the way they meet and question the world, informing the work as surely as the work has informed their thought.

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¹ Barber, page 43.

² Frame, page 57.

³ Paternosto, page 160.

⁴ Udike, page 228

⁵ Smith, conversation 2012