

Part 1: How We Understand Matter

The genesis of Ten Thieves Artist Collective can be traced to my visit to the *Milk of Dreams* exhibition at the Venice Biennale, 2022. Inspired by Cecilia Alemani's curatorial vision based on post-human feminism, I gathered a group of peers to read and discuss the ideas and theories presented in the exhibition. Shortly into our gatherings, I was invited to guest curate an exhibition at the Langham Cultural Center. I knew immediately that it would be the perfect opportunity to bring the work of collective members together in an exhibition of new works shaped by the themes explored in our discussions.

The name Ten Thieves Artist Collective was inspired by Shakespeare's writings, particularly his depictions of thieves during the plague. At the time of our first meetings, the COVID pandemic had just ended. Thievery, an enduring metaphor for the colonial-settler legacy. Extending that metaphor, the exhibition was titled *LOOT*, adopting a satirical and self-reflective gaze into colonialism. As the project evolved it became clear that the theme of the exhibition would be an investigation of new materialism, focusing on the artists' relationships to matter.

Art has long stood at the forefront of new modes of thought and perception. The erosion of classical humanism, consolidated during the Renaissance, began in the late nineteenth century. The emergence of realism challenged idealized representation and class-centred hierarchies. This shift continued throughout the twentieth century in an explosion of artistic movements, each offering nuanced and radical ways of seeing, understanding, and rethinking matter itself. Today, artists of all identities, races, genders, and classes dismantle this restrictive and damaging paradigm inherited from humanist traditions. Their practices re-orient, reimagine, and speculate on futures that are inclusive, plural, and just. At the center of this revolution is matter itself: intelligent, vital, and self-governing—a living force.

How might artistic practices lead us in a necessary shift in how we understand matter? How can art tell a new story that moves beyond the narrative of matter as inert, extractable, and endlessly available?

The Ten Thieves Artist Collective takes up these questions in its inaugural exhibition, *LOOT: Orienting to Matter*. Rather than treating materials as passive resources, the artists in this exhibition engage with matter as a messenger, an actant, a presence, a language. Through their varied processes they challenge the dominant reasoning of classical humanism and propose new ways of working—ones grounded in reciprocity, accountability, and care.

LOOT asks how the choice of art materials and artists collaborating with matter can open up conversations that foreground ethical explorations and a reverence for materials beyond the studio. *LOOT* invites the viewer to reconsider their own relationships and understanding of matter, not just as materials but as the physical and

spiritual substrate of life. *LOOT* re-imagines a posthumanism that is feminist where new alliances form between species in a world that is shaped by respect and connectivity and stewardship.

Part 2: Elemental Magnitude of Matter

Through studio visits and writing about each artist's work, I came to see the depth of *LOOT: Orienting to Matter*. Unexpected connections and crossovers emerged from the artists' varied practices and material use. Sub-themes engaged with the four elements—the transformative nature of fire, the ground plan of connectivity, the expansive language of water, and the transcendent time of flight—revealing the elemental magnitude of matter. This holistic view of matter wraps around each artist's material choices and understanding of the agency of matter. The exhibition continues the conversations begun over the past three years of what it means to be human within a more-than-human world.

Susan Andrews Grace employs recognizable iron-rich objects taken from sources of gendered industrial and domestic work collected over many years and creates stains on canvas, which are abstract at times and at other times, strikingly graphic. *Glyphs and Grammar* are impressions that capture traces of the original object while resisting literal representation.

The work is guided by sensitivity to what Jane Bennett calls thingness: the embedded vibrancy of matter. In this way, the glyphs exude the numinous quality of a relic, holding both immanence and impermanence.

The glyphs do not read like written language but as painterly symbols, allowing the viewer's gaze to wander. The work invites us to question how symbols become gendered and what kinds of language we bring to their interpretation.

The glyphs, by-products of metal's entanglement with oxygen, capture metal's return to minerals. The artist asks us to reflect on a broader material perspective: matter as a shared matrix for life and its enduring capacity for renewal.

Eimear Laffan uses "words as her matter"—an expression borrowed from Ursula Le Guin—by playing with the shape of the poem and the distances between words. Both *Sea Pot* poems stretch outward, from shore to shore, from horizon to horizon recalling the expansive water drawings of Vija Celmins, which capture the surface tension of the ocean's skin. Like Celmins's drawings, these poems are both opaque and translucent, opening and collapsing as waves do, reflecting the animacy of a living body. What forces propel us to open and close? What is the nature of our own bodies that we come to be so akin to this watery body? If the nature of matter is to move, how is it we work with this constant in our lives, in our own bodies?

As I read the *Sea Pots*, I imagine my body floating in the water “navigating the cross stitch” of this moving form, a buoyant container, porous sieve of flesh—its salt content akin to the sea—yet dense enough to sink. In this recognition of the movement of kinship, a “needling of time”, the reader is asked to hold on, lest we slip into the water and disappear. The poems remind us that our bodies are also water, precariously suspended in it.

In *Little Swimmers*, **Maggie Shirley** explores connectivity with locally sourced materials—beeswax and forest lichen—proposing an unconventional pairing that departs from the heteronormative models of reproduction. New life driven by an instinctual drive often emerges from intimacy between strangers. These collaborations are symbioses that form the foundation of emergent forms.

Shirley twisted and formed materials into small animated forms in a flocking pattern that suggests the flow of sperm towards an egg. They resemble a swarm, a pod, a herd—ribbons of energy—becoming, always becoming.

Lichen, perhaps one of the earliest colonizers of the planet, once covered vast expanses of Earth’s surface, converting bedrock to mineral substrates so as to allow other plants to take root. Its resilience lies in symbiosis: algae enable photosynthesis, while fungi provide the structural support needed to lift life up away from stone and toward the sun. Beeswax, produced collectively within the hive, forms the honeycomb that houses eggs and larvae, sustaining future generations.

Shirley’s combining of unconventional reproductive forces asks us to question what constructs and forces guide our chosen intimacies? And how do we form new alliances between our own species and another?

Hildur Jónasson contemplates rapidly disappearing old growth forests. Efforts to preserve them are overshadowed by profit-driven industries. Most Canadians have never stood beside an old-growth tree, yet the idea of one is mythic and lives in the collective psyche as a place of spirit and renewal, a monument of awe.

Hildur Jónasson engages this tension between reverence and loss, using all natural materials to make twenty-four prints from a wood-grain-textured plate. Jónasson calls her stitching the prints together “repair and care”, creating a suspended, multi-layered, quilt-like form. She made her ink from the charcoal of a fire-charred tree combined with a water-based binder. This considered sourcing of materials brings a personal narrative to the work, and a knowledge uniquely relevant to the area where she lives.

Old Growth Forest Meditation invites reflection on both the magnificence and ephemerality of old-growth trees. It asks us to pay attention to how we inhabit the world; its subtle tones of grey and delicate swaying give a ghostly presence. I am reminded of

Jónasson's Icelandic roots and how the work merges two disparate yet similar landscapes. Fragile, yes, but resilient too, the work reminds us that in the sixth extinction, it is we who will be gone.

Carol Wallace's sculpture, *Seeing Through Stone* is an arrangement of delicate and translucent orbs, created through a process akin to casting. Beginning with the sewing of starch treated silk organza into small sacs that are then filled with sand, and then steamed so it holds a rigid form. Once cooled, the sand is poured out, leaving behind a hollow orb as a vessel of memory.

Sand, granulated minerals of eroded rock, sourced from the beaches of Kootenay Lake, itself sourced from the surrounding mountains tells a story of container and contained. Wallace reflects on her own body, a casing, through which mineral nutrients move, forming an active interconnectedness with a place she inhabits and places beyond.

Wallace, a geologist and artist, invites us to reflect on matter. The phrase “rock solid” comes to mind, only to be undone by the image of sand released and the resulting hollow orbs—states of becoming that speak to impermanence. Time is Wallace's material.

For **Jim Holyoak**, the imaginary is matter. Through fantastical images of the invisible, Holyoak draws the mythic realm into ecological discourse and material existence, recalling paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, shaped by stories carried on colonial ships returning from the so-called New World. The stories were speculative encounters with the Other, often imagined as monstrous. The meeting of the monstrous remains alive in Holyoak's practice, inspired by what exists at the margins of natural history, science, and ecology. Creatures such as moths, micro-plankton, and bats occupy his most recent work.

Houses for Bat, two bat houses made from salvaged cedar, reference the ecology of home, the hibernaculum, as a site of refuge and protection. In light of the precarity of the bat population in British Columbia, threatened by habitat loss and white-nosed syndrome, this work functions as an act of care and compassion. The houses, intended for relocation into the forest, are adorned with pyrographic drawings of insects and moths—food sources for bats—to entice bat occupants. Holyoak proposes a world in which the monstrous is reimagined as a gift rather than a threat.

Marnie Temple's *two sisters* tells a tragic story from the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade: two sisters cross the ocean, one survives, the other dies. Because the ship must return with equal ballast, rocks are placed in the ship's belly for return voyage, substituting human life.

In this installation, Temple begins with a base of rocks, gathered from her own land, part memorial, part foundation. The artist then works with a thin line of black fleece, entering into what she describes as a flow state, akin to automatic writing. The fleece moves across the rocks before it ascends to the ceiling to reach a disc of black fleece symbolizing the night sky—perhaps the sky that once guided ships in their passage. At this point, the fleece turns white, marking the sky with attentional drawings.

Earthen rocks and celestial sky, connected by a vertical line, reference a World Tree linking the underworld, earth, and heavens—or matter and spirit. Along this vertical axis, artist-like healers move between the unconscious and conscious realms. For Temple, the working of land-based and domestic materials into personal and ancestral stories creates a stream of connectivity in a passage of transformation and renewal.

Genevieve Robertson grew up living and working in forests of western British Columbia—an experience that continues to shape her art. She is drawn to the apocalyptic landscapes left by forest fires, sites of devastation, adaptation, and restoration. These environments exist in the liminal zone between life and death: a charnel ground from which new life emerges. It is here that Robertson sources her materials and aesthetic language.

Her process begins on site, and includes collecting, documenting, and recording of the burnt landscape. Returning to the studio, she mixes botanical and mineral materials she has gathered, with binders to make inks and paints.

The diptych, *Fireweed* *təṭqmitp / təṭqitəmíx*, (*Epilobium angustifolium*), emerged from this process. Fireweed, known for its resilience and adaptivity, thrives in disrupted and decaying soils across much of the Northern Hemisphere. A botanical shapeshifter, it alters its form depending on what is required by the environment in order to survive. By embedding parent material into the work as both actant and content, Robertson's *Fireweed* celebrates what posthuman feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti identifies as the foundational qualities of matter—agency, intelligence, and self-governance—aligning her work with aspirations of new materialist thought.

The artists in the exhibition LOOT, consider, how might we re-engage with matter in a world that is struggling to thrive under continuing colonialist agendas of power and wealth? How can we envision the materiality of art in a world on the brink of collapse? Can art with its intimate relationship to materials provide important new perspectives on matter?

Deborah Thompson, Curator