

*In Search of Wholeness*

An Exhibition of video, sculpture, and photography

by

Clara Laratta

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thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

*In Search of Wholeness* is an exhibition of sculpture, alternative photography, and video. The work examines connections to healing and being. “The English ‘health’ derives from Old English ‘hæth’, which is related to ‘whole’ ‘a thing that is complete in itself’ (Oxford Languages). But what constitutes being whole? How does one know if they are whole or complete in themselves? And, if one is not whole or complete, how does one become, or ensure that they are? Is wholeness even possible if everything is in a state of flux: transient, ephemeral, and uncertain? Is completeness something to move towards? My research is a quest to answer these questions. It examines what I think I know, ways of healing and being, and familial connections. The artworks utilize food waste, found materials, construction matter, alternative photography techniques, and video, as material archives documenting aspects of healing. This cyclical story of healing draws on a lifelong journey with chronic illness. It moves between and merges, modalities, and connections to look at personal and collective healing. The works reference fragility and strength, dissonance and connection, loss, and hope – in essence life.

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Land Acknowledgement**

The land I was born, gratefully live, and continue my artistic practice on is the traditional territory shared between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee people (Hamilton, Ontario). This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. The University of Waterloo, where the work for this exhibition that this document supports, was completed, is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Chonnonton, and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land belonging to the Six Nations, land that was acknowledged and promised, but not honoured.

This acknowledgement is written with appreciation and recognition of the many Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island, who have, and continue to be, caretakers of this land. It is written by a descendent from lineages of European settlers who immigrated to Canada in the twentieth century, and an acknowledgement of the historical oppression of lands, cultures, and the original Peoples in what we now know as Canada – a site of violence, and attempted erasure – grave injustices against the very Peoples that are Indigenous to it, that continue today.

Over the past two years, researching wholeness in relation to healing, I continue in my attempt to find my place, in a land in which I was born and, also profit in. I am committed to learning, sharing knowledge, and holding inclusive space. I believe that individual healing occurs in conjunction with collective and planetary healing. Bearing witness to and enduring the atrocities of colonialism, the land continues to give – offering potentials for wholeness.

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## **Dedication**

*In memory of my grandparents, Chiara and Nicola Laratta, and Alfred and Philomena Nanni, whose memories, knowledge and lives were the initial inspiration for this body of work.*

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Each 14.81" x 14.5" (37,7 cm x 37 cm). Detail: photograph #12 of 14. Collection of The

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# Introduction

## Nourishment, Connection, Wisdom, Hope and Laughter

We chatted and laugh and when I held out my coins she waved them off, patting my arm and sending me away. A gift, she said. *Muchas gracias, senora*, I replied... I floated through the market with a sense of euphoria. Gratitude was the only currency accepted here. It was all a gift. It was like picking strawberries in my field: the merchants were just intermediaries passing on gifts from the earth... I looked in my basket: two zucchinis, an onion, tomatoes, bread, and a bunch of cilantro. It was still half empty, but it felt full. I had everything I needed...I was witness there to the conversion of a market economy to a gift economy, from private goods to common wealth. And in that transformation the relationships became as nourishing as the food I was getting. Across the market stalls and blankets, warmth and compassion were changing hands. There was a shared celebration of abundance for all we'd been given. And since every market basket contained a meal, there was justice.

—Robin Wall Kimerer<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Wall-Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 28-29.

Growing up, I spent Sunday afternoons with my parents, grandparents, brother, sister and a myriad of family members and friends. Some dropped in for lunch, some for dinner and a glass of homemade wine, and others for coffee and a piece of homemade pie or cake. The door was always open, the house always full, and there was always food on the table, and a lot of laughter. At the time I didn't equate these sights, sounds, aromas, delicious food, or touch, to wholeness. I didn't pay much attention to the knowledge that these familial rituals imparted. I have spent most of my life in search of wholeness, and I am only now realizing the value of these childhood traditions – the embedded knowledge – the transformative power of wisdom, connection, nourishment, hope, and laughter.

My artistic process is autoethnographic. The work draws on my lifelong experience with chronic autoimmune illness, including challenges I have faced as a female patient within Western healthcare.<sup>2</sup> The work is in part an archive of this ongoing health journey: the trials, failed attempts, perseverance, and transformation. It uses food waste, plant matter, natural and found material, textiles, alternative photography, sculpture, and video. At its heart, my thesis exhibition *In Search of Wholeness* (Fig. 1) examines ways of healing and being, what I think I know, familial ties and connections to the past, and a reframing of my thoughts. It is grounded in my belief that individual healing is tied to collective and planetary healing.

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<sup>2</sup> Autoimmune illness is a disorder where the body attacks itself causing havoc and sometimes irreparable damage as in the case with Insulin dependent or Type 1 diabetes mellitus. "...in which the body's immune system attacks and destroys the insulin-producing cells of the pancreas, thereby leaving the individual dependent on an external source of insulin for life" (Public Health Agency of Canada).

"Approximately 80% of all patients diagnosed with autoimmune diseases are women." (Angum et al.).

"There's nothing clinically wrong." "Maybe you're just stressed? You don't seem yourself lately." "Did you ever think it might be all in your head?" "It's silly, but I just feel like something's not right" ...I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and related disorders, then turned to "non-traditional" forms of treatment to deal with my uncharted illnesses... Auto-immune diseases...(are) chronic illnesses...thought to be triggered by either environmental irritants or an immune system confused as a result of overly hygienic environments and are not mental illnesses. However, because they often resemble other illnesses, are hard to diagnose, and three quarters of those afflicted are women, they have historically been wrapped in discourses of feminized hysteria and hypochondria. Often clinicians initially understand patients as merely over-reactive...so it takes an average of five years and five doctors to get diagnosed" (Fazeli).



Figure 1: Clara Laratta, *In Search of Wholeness*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2023. Photo: Clara Laratta

## Scent and Nourishment

### *Odor di verde*

Odor di verde—  
mia infanzia perduta—  
quando m'inorgoglio  
dei miei ginocchi segnati—  
strappavo inutilmente  
i fiori, l'erba in riva ai sentieri,  
poi li buttavo—  
m'ingombran le mani—

odor di boschi d'agosto—al meriggio—  
quando si rompono col viso acceso  
le ragnatele—  
guardando i ruscelli il sasso schizza  
il piede affonda  
penetra il gelo fin dentro i polsi—  
il sole, il sole  
sul collo nudo—  
la luce che imbiandisce i capelli—

odor di terra,  
mia infanzia perduta.

Pasturo, agosto 1934

### *Green scent—*

my lost childhood—  
when I beamed about  
my bruised knees  
& uselessly  
ripped out  
flowers, the grass at the edge of paths  
then threw them away—  
my hands encumbered—

smell of forests  
in August—  
noon—  
when face flushed  
cobwebs break  
& fording brooks  
stone skips  
foot sinks  
the chill seeps as deep as the pulse—

sun sun

on my bare neck—  
the light that lightens hair—

smell of earth,  
my lost childhood.

—Antonia Pozzi<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Antonia Pozzi, *Breath: Poems and Letters*, images of poem and translation, 62, 63.

Walking into my home as a child, I couldn't help but take a deep breath to enjoy the aroma of freshly baked apple pie, the scent of cinnamon filling the air. While my parents were at work, my paternal grandmother was in the kitchen cooking. My grandmother immigrated to Canada shortly after the end of the second world war with great trepidation and concern. She left the only home she had ever known and her family, which, being one of thirteen children meant leaving many, to move with her young child (my father), to meet her husband in a new, unknown world. She brought with her knowledge of plants and herbs, wisdom such as how dandelions were good for people with diabetes and arthritis, how to relieve cold symptoms with secret homemade remedies, along with which foods to cook together to create the most amazing aromas. I wish I had paid closer attention, not only so that I could have retained the knowledge, but also to have had a deeper connection with her. After years of looking to medicine and science to heal my chronic illness, and after many failures, I sought less conventional options, both out of desperation and with hope. I thought back to discussions with my grandmother and began to research peer-reviewed publications grounded in Western science, finding verification of what she said (Mahmoud 1).

The installation *Liaisons: husks, filagree and roots* is a visual reclamation of that wisdom, now validated and elevated through scientific proof (Fig. 2). It references various types of value, including use value – the way value is assigned to determine whether a plant is a desirable or a nuisance – how some government classification systems refer to plants as weeds, while other studies focus on their nutritional value and medicinal properties (Casas 4; Mahmoud 1; Ayeni et al. 2400; Rios Corripo et al. 146; Wu et al. 1132). In *Liaisons*, this imposed hierarchy is challenged by featuring the “weeds”, ground cherry husks, wild carrot filagree and black cherry roots, as negative

photographic shadows.<sup>4</sup> The photograms reference plants that I have personally used while attempting to heal from illness.



Figure 2: Clara Laratta, *Liaisons: husks, filagree and roots detail*, 2021. Photo: Clara Laratta

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<sup>4</sup> Photograms are an alternative form of photography where objects are placed directly on light sensitive photographic paper in a dark room. After the items are positioned, the paper is exposed to light and then developed and fixed, so that the image is stable.



These photograms scattered on the floor are held in place by reclaimed cedar boards. The cedar boards were removed during a home renovation and “saved” by my father. Bodily senses are referenced through the faint scent of cedar, as well as movement via the gallery’s air circulation and viewer traffic which cause the photograms to rustle. The resulting movement coupled with the gallery’s low lighting produce shadows on the wall that suggest blowing grass (Fig. 3). This dim lighting also alludes to comfort – the way lighting and silence are infringed upon by outside noise – an environment typical of conditions found during intervals of illness and recovery. Together, the black and white photograms, reminiscent of radiographs<sup>5</sup>, along with the reclaimed cedar, represent ties to the past. Ghostly in appearance, the installation holds the past much in the same way the body does. For example, x-rays that show broken bones that have healed, or scars on the skin.

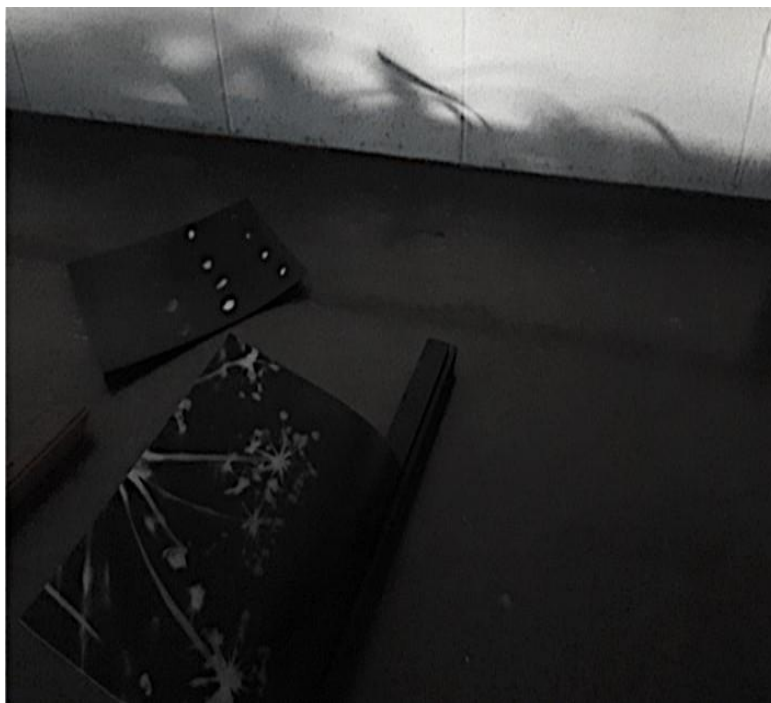


Figure 3: Clara Laratta, *Liaisons: husks, filagree and roots*, detail, 2021. Photo: Clara Laratta

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<sup>5</sup> Radiographs are also known as x-rays. They are medical images that use electromagnetic radiation to show internal structures of the body.

The title of the work, *Liaisons: husks, filagree and roots*, represents my ancestral connections to my grandparents via the specific plants used in the photograms and the cedar. The work reclaims information that was almost forgotten, and I find comfort in art historian, Hal Foster's article *An Archival Impulse* – how work produced from informal archives also creates new ones; how art can present historical information that is lost, displaced, or not easily accessible (5). Through Foster's discussion I realized that the making of these informal archives was a way to connect to my ancestral roots, to connect to my grandparents and their experiences as Italian immigrants (10, 22). This work is a response to the memories of my grandmother and was the starting point for the work in this exhibition. It was completed during the first term of my MFA and is an attempt to hold onto information she disseminated, to share it, and ultimately re-establish our connection.

## **Looking and Connection**

*Looking at the ashes of the burnt leaves, and remembering lost forms, I was filled with sadness. And despite an understanding that everything remains, I picked them up, stretched my arms as far as I could, and re-presented them to the world. The gesture encompassed the past and the present, leaving space for the future. I thought about time, and connection.*

In *Encompass*, my work with the mulberry tree, a gift from my grandfather that is growing in my backyard, begins as a drawing made using ashes from the tree's leaves that I collected in the fall. (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup> Each time I see the tree, I think of my grandparents, and my thoughts turn to their generosity, my childhood, and times spent together. In the making of this piece I grabbed handfuls of ashes mixed with charcoal and extended my arms as far as I could on the wall, repeating an action that symbolically embraces the past until no ashes remain.<sup>7</sup> The result is a circular-like form that



Figure 4: Clara Laratta, *Encompass*, 2023. Photo: Scott Lee

encompasses a variety of emotions from joy to sorrow. Charcoal is mixed with the mulberry tree ashes to accentuate the image and to embed numerous trees and organic matter while still maintaining

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<sup>6</sup> The mulberry tree is native to Canada and is the same genus as those found in Southern Italy, where my grandfather was born. Mulberry branches grow prolifically, and the tree fruits abundantly.

<sup>7</sup> “Cave paintings made using charcoal and other materials have been dated as early as 30 000” and were traditionally “made using charred sticks taken from a fire” (Harris, 301).

a sense of impermanence within the work (Harris 301). The drawing intertwines thicker lines produced by my palms with thinner ones formed by fingers. According to Oxford Languages, the title *Encompass* means “to surround and have or hold within”. With the awareness of loss, an act of healing begins, and the circular shape references a wide range of meanings from wholeness to inner truth (Magazù, 751).

The circular shape is seen in Elizabeth Doxtater’s *Art of Peace* exhibition (Fig. 5). In her work Doxtater tells the story of the Journey of the Peacemaker and The Great Law, describing how the formation of the *First Council Fire* encircles everything. During her artist talk, Doxtater said that she began studying the Great Law after a car accident explaining “Peace, Power and Righteousness” as a healthy mind and body, where unity and righteousness, justice, compassion, and forgiveness work to support a healthy outcome.<sup>8</sup> I found kinship in her story and fortitude in her words that “peace begins with one person” – a reference to the importance of forgiveness in healing and how this healing results in an internal peace that expands to others. Her work *First Council Fire* is an installation consisting of one hundred faceless cornhusk dolls that represent the five nations: fifty clan mothers and fifty chiefs. The dolls are placed in a circle, symbolizing the bringing together of the nations. Each cornhusk doll sits on a thin live edge tree slab, encircling the Tree of Peace. For Doxtater, The Tree of Peace, a white pine with roots spreading in four directions, signifies that any person can follow the roots to find protection. The women cornhusk dolls are placed on the outside of the circle because they “shape ... nations” (Doxtater). Doxtater’s artistic practice began as research

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<sup>8</sup> Doxtater also described her struggles to understand these teachings without her native language.

into healing after a serious life altering accident, and mine began while accumulating autoimmune diagnoses following decades of health struggles.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 5: Elizabeth Doxtater, *First Council Fire*, 2018. Permission © Elizabeth Doxtater.

In her book, *How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity*, Carolyn Lazard discusses the complexity of chronic illness, drawing links to the negative impacts of capitalism as a productivity

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<sup>9</sup> At the time when I was first diagnosed, I was attending community college. The workload was heavy, and I was away from home for the first time. I was not eating or sleeping well, going to school all day and working all night. I had no idea how these conditions were impacting my body. After feeling ill, barely able to climb the stairs to my apartment, I made a doctor's appointment. The physician said I looked fine but, at my insistence agreed to have blood work done. In my follow-up, I was told I was fine, but I knew I was not. These visits repeated until the physician I initially saw went on vacation, and his replacement reviewed the latest blood work. Upon seeing the results, I was told to immediately take an ambulance to the emergency room and was admitted. It was at this point I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

machine – how the body resists commodification by becoming ill.<sup>10</sup> In relation to Lazard’s writing, *Sickness and Study* (2015), an exhibition at the Walker Art Center was arranged (Fig. 6). It included fifteen cell phones mounted to a gallery wall. Each phone displayed a screenshot from one of Lazard’s Instagram posts. The images, taken during a medical procedure, consisted of Lazard’s outstretched arm, tubing and gauze covering where the needle entered her vein on her inner elbow, as well as her hand holding a book. In an interview with Pavel Pyš, a curator at the art center, Lazard commented on the work saying, “While it is deeply personal ... the images don’t confess much. Rather, they add to the mundane stream of Instagram, adding my sense of the “mundane,” which felt very different from healthy peoples’ “mundane” (Walker). The work highlights her experience, making it visible.

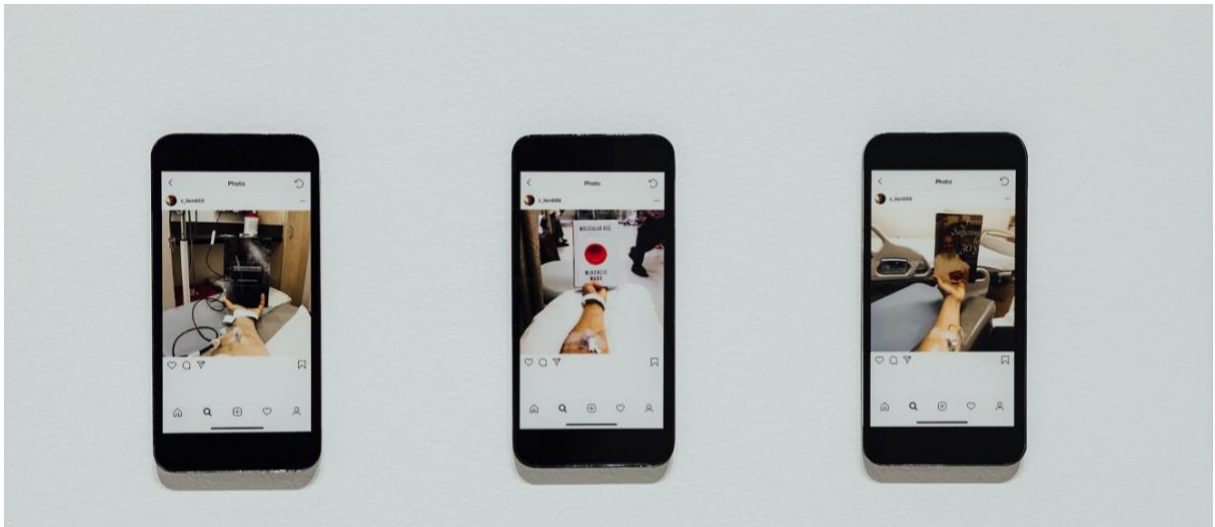


Figure 6: Carolyn Lazard, *In Sickness and Study*, 2015–ongoing. Permission © Carolyn Lazard

*Towards Wholeness* is another way that invisible aspects of life are made visible (Fig. 7). It ties different modalities of personal healing together within a spherical form made of plywood. I opted for plywood to fabricate the sculpture because of the layered manner in which plywood is made

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<sup>10</sup> In recounting her own story of autoimmunity and chronic illness, Lazard discusses the failure of the medical system, its ‘compartmentalized’ approach to health and its objectification of the body. She documents her wait for a diagnosis, alienation, difficulties in discussing illness and issues of living with an invisible disability, as well as her constant ties to the biomedical industry to live.

to provide strength. This mirrors my experience of the layered approach required in healing. The sphere's center is 66", my height and width with outstretched arms. The shape of a sphere references the human ovum, the beginning building block of human life, and as Doxtater discussed in relation to her work, *First Council Fire* – the encompassing of everything.



Figure 7: Clara Laratta, *Towards Wholeness*, 2023. Photo: Scott Lee

The sphere's base is a plywood circle measuring sixty-six inches in diameter. The base is stained with black walnut ink made from black walnuts gathered from a tree on the property of my childhood home, a tree which I played under as a child.<sup>11</sup> Like the mulberry tree, black walnut trees are native to Canada (Quigley 124) and are a source of essential amino acids, vitamins and minerals

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<sup>11</sup> The black walnut ink was prepared by boiling the black walnut in its entirety for twelve hours, removing the nuts and then boiling the water for an additional three hours and allowing the ink stain to sit.



providing health benefits to those that consume them (Antora 1). Cabbage, a cruciferous vegetable, also known for its health benefits was used to stain the upright armature of the sphere.<sup>12</sup> Red cabbage juice was chosen for its ability to transform. When the cabbage is initially juiced it is a purplish red colour, but when it mixes with water it turns to cyan. Further colour variations of red cabbage juice depend on its' acidic or base environment.

*Towards Wholeness* addresses the body's ability to heal and the way hidden elements come into sharp relief as different modalities related to healthcare are employed. Invisible string is attached at measured intervals along the rim to form horizontal rows. The lines hold a collection of items used to heal my body: glass insulin vials, infusion tubing, dried fruit, and vegetable remnants such as celery and persimmon, small Mulberry twigs, family photos and pieces of my great grandmother's jewellery. The self-authored poem, engraved on the sphere's armature, considers the complexity of what it means to be whole (Fig. 8).<sup>13</sup> There are four verses that travel around the four faces of the sphere in circles with no beginning or end. The poem's process and form re-iterate that looking at wholeness and healing means looking at it in different ways, moving things around, and continuing to make attempts at it.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Chauhan et al. in *Phytochemical screening of red cabbage (Brassica oleracea) powder and juice - A comparative study*, red cabbage juice "reveals the presence of many phytochemicals such as alkaloids, glycosides, flavonoids, saponin, tannin, steroids, terpenes and phytosterols. The compounds isolated from this vegetable possess very important biological activities including anti-diabetic, antioxidant, hypolipidemic, antihyperglycemic, Cardioprotective and Anti-cancer" (196).

<sup>13</sup> Poem: healing the body, the mind, the soul, the heart, the past, it continues, pulsing / medicine, herbs, nature, thoughts and feelings, becoming whole, dear, old wounds, far beyond, infinity / disease, intertwined, contemplation, empathy, personal, each new outcome, interacting with many / ease, endless, liberation, connecting, healing, reverberating, being,



Figure 8: Clara Laratta, *Towards Wholeness*, detail, 2023. Photo: Scott Lee

Louise Bourgeois discusses ways of looking at healing in her much of her work. She states, “you have to tell your story and you have to forget your story. You forget and forgive. It liberates you” (Guggenheim 5). This repeats the earlier discussion surrounding Elizabeth Doxtater’s beliefs. The focus of Bourgeois’ work is on healing in reference to familial relations – her mother’s illness, her career, and her father’s long-lasting affair. In much of Bourgeois’ work, aspects of her own healing are positioned in relation to the wounds imparted by her father’s betrayal. In *The Cell (The Last Climb)*, Bourgeois uses spherical forms to suggest cells within the body, as well as a prison cell (Fig: 9). The cage is constructed with architectural components including stairs, “doors, windows, (and) wire mesh” from her studio (Guggenheim 2). Bourgeois uses objects from her lived experience to recreate the past: “perfume bottles, tapestries, lamps, mirrors and glass balls” (Guggenheim 2). Sculptures that represent the human body are also present. “The cells represent the different types of

pain: the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual...It's circular, going round and round. Pain can begin at any point and turn in either direction" (Guggenheim 2).



Figure 9: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (The Last Climb)*, 2008, steel, wood, blown glass, rubber, and spools of thread, 384.8 x 400.1 x 299.7 cm installed National Gallery of Canada Purchased 2010. With permission from the National Gallery of Canada and Copyright Visual Arts-CARCC @ Estate of Louise Bourgeois (Copyright Visual Arts-CARCC, 2023).

This circular process of pain is like the circuitous process of generational knowledge – how one story from the past loops onto another. My paternal grandparents had a common interest in plants. During our weekly Sunday lunches, my paternal grandmother often discussed ways in which plants were medicine, and, my paternal grandfather was an avid gardener. I began researching mulberry trees when I noticed the tree was looking distressed. I learned that it is not expected to survive much longer and that Canada's native mulberry trees do not possess the longevity of their southern Italian counterparts, the species common to the region that my grandparents are from, that

can live to be over six hundred years old (Palli et al.). This led me to take cuttings, in order to produce an archive of the tree's end-of-life stages. Once again, it reflects my desire for preservation, an attempt to hold onto matter through sickness and death. I then used these cutting, keeping the branches and leaves intact, to produce a series of lumen prints as another way to archive the tree's existence.<sup>14</sup>

*Grounded by Roots and Presence* is a lumen-printed diptych made from the Mulberry tree (Fig. 10).<sup>15</sup> Lumen printing is a hands-on, camera-less technique that uses the sun to expose photographic paper, leaving a trace silhouette of the object's shadow as the final image. Over time, the sun changes the colour from white to shades of blue, with the most exposed areas turning yellow.



Figure 10: Clara Laratta, *Grounded by Roots and Presence*, 2023. Photo: Scott Lee

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<sup>14</sup> In making *Grounded by Roots and Presence*, I placed a piece of the photographic paper behind the branches and leaves of the mulberry tree and placed a piece of heavy glass over top to limit movement. The sun shines onto photographic paper, exposing it while the leaves cover the paper limiting the light that passes through allowing the image to form.

In a traditional photographic practice, prints are then fixed with a chemical developer that alters the colour of the image but preserves the print.<sup>16</sup> In this specific work, I have chosen not to preserve the originals, to not use any chemicals, but to leave them in a fugitive state. As such the prints will undergo a natural aging process in which the images will slowly disappear if they are exposed to light.

In making this work I produced one hundred lumen prints as a closed archive. Each lumen print was also digitally scanned, serving as both documentation and secondary archive. From these scans I chose two to enlarge and print with reactive dye using an inkjet printer.<sup>17</sup> The images are printed on silk georgette, a natural protein-based fibre.<sup>18</sup> They are fifty inches, the width of my body when in the position of a hug, and sixty-six inches long, my height and the height of my late grandfather. Each of the prints are stitched to two branches from the mulberry tree and suspended from the ceiling (Fig. 11). The blue in the prints is reminiscent of the sky on the day they were exposed. The sculpture is one hundred inches wide and sixty-six inches long and hangs from the ceiling with garden wire. The remaining lumen prints are stored in an archival, light-safe box. They exist but are not part of the exhibition.

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<sup>17</sup> During the reactive dye printing technique high-pressure steam binds the colour to the fabric (Contrado).

<sup>18</sup> According to Padaki in *Advances in Understanding the Properties of Silk*, most silk is "...generally known as mulberry silk, as the silkworm feeds on the leaves of the mulberry plant... the production of silk does not require harsh processing conditions. Silk fiber is secreted by several species of insects to build protective structures external to their body, known as cocoons. Sericulture is the term used for the agricultural activities associated with the production of silk. Sericulture is a labor-intensive agriculture-based allied industry with sequences of environmentally friendly processes to produce silk fiber"(1,2).

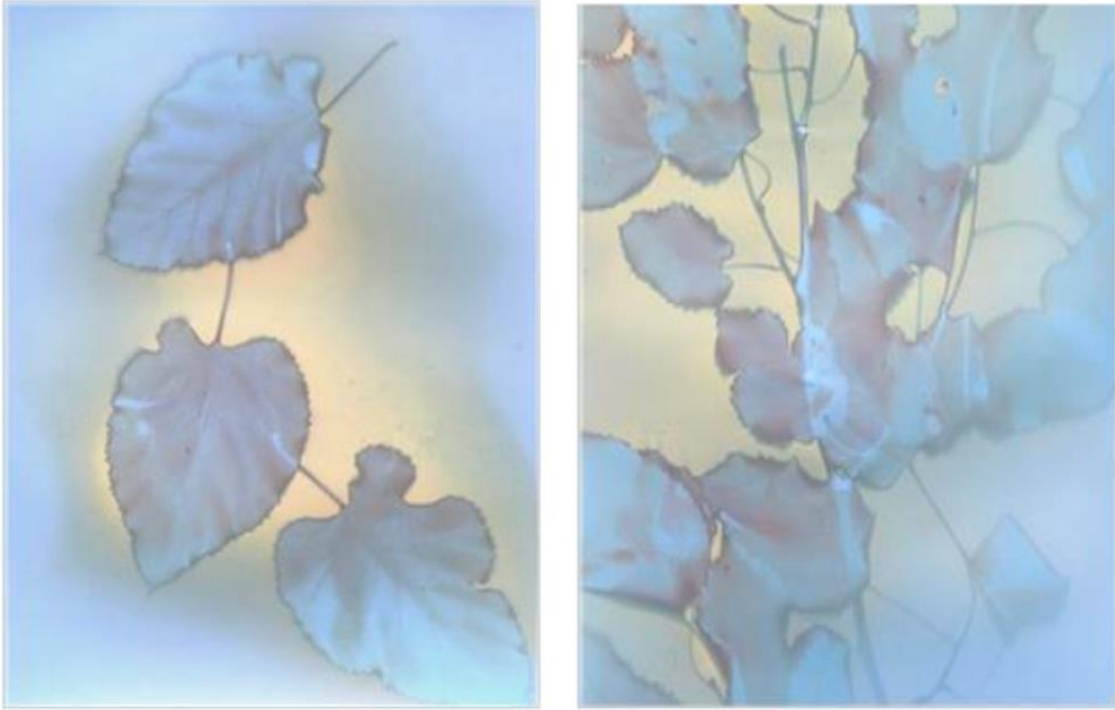


Figure 11: Clara Laratta, *Grounded by Roots and Presence*, detail, 2023. Photo: Clara Laratta

The choice of lumen prints was initially due to its one-to-one relationship with the plant matter: the physical connection of the material to the print and the blue ethereal colour. The decision to scan and enlarge the work functions as an homage to my grandfather where the fabric's translucent lightness underscores life's ephemerality. This dichotomy, the impulse to preserve and control, along with a desire to let things run their natural course is present in much of my work, an awareness of the tenuous balance between life, healing, survival and death. It is reminiscent of a quote by artist Lyndal Osbourne.

dried out remains of nature's seasons. All have gone through their prime of life and now remain as relics of past glories. The objects are then recreated by me as a direct response to my encounters ... I am expressing in my work images which are about timelessness and regeneration. In one sense it is a form of purification, but it is also a way to understand death and to celebrate life through our need to define and humanise our existence on this planet.

—Lyndal Osbourne<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lyndal Osbourne, *Home Page*, <https://www.lyndalosborne.com/>.

## Taste and Wisdom

I have acquired the taste  
For this astringent knowledge  
Distilled through the  
Stringent application of the scientific method,  
The dry martini of the  
Intellectual world,  
Shaken, not stirred.  
But does this mean I must eschew  
Other truths?

—Liana Christensen<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> From the Essay “*The Bats of Wombat State Forest*” in the book *Wild Familiars* (9)



In January 2022, I found myself in a discussion about the anti-inflammatory effects of celery juice and started drinking litres of it with the hope of reducing the inflammation in my body.<sup>21</sup> Having tried it before but unable to palate the taste, I thought maybe this time it will work. The good news is that it did help, but the bad news is that my health situation is chronic and complicated, and after nine months my symptoms returned. I once again found myself thinking about my Italian grandmother, wishing I could remember more of her medicinal home remedies. *Keep Trying* references my daily consumption of celery juice over a one year period. (Fig: 12).



Figure 12: Clara Laratta, *Keep Trying*, installation, 2023.

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<sup>21</sup> This was based on a discussion surrounding Anthony Williams, a proponent of celery juice as an herbal medicine for over forty years according to Chris Mann in, "In the Spotlight: The Medical Medium." Williams, receives information on healing disease from the Spirit of Compassion (Heal Documentary).

During the juicing process, the pulp is left as a by-product. I then boiled and dried the pulped remnants, moulding them into vessels. Many vessels failed, but some, those that are visible in the installation, survived. In the initial stages, the intact vessels, further transformed through warping, drooping, and flattening – actions dependent on humidity, temperature, weather, and time – another mirroring between the work and the body. The way the body is affected by what it encounters. The futile nature of the juicing process and consumption also links *Keep Trying* to the many remedies I have tried over the years in my quest to feel better. The vessels vary in size with different shades of brown and green appearing. Most have areas that are not complete, and the long strands resemble the fibres of muscles (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: Clara Laratta, *Keep Trying*, detail, 2023.

The forms are also reminiscent of human skulls bringing imagery of ancient relics to mind. The vessels sit on top of two custom built, elongated, pine tables, stained with celery juice.<sup>22</sup> Pine is a building material that indicates construction – the re-building of a structural support for the body. The netted tabletops are made from woven jute, a natural material that allows the vessels to both breathe and be cradled. A narrow console-like table was used as a base for the celery vessels in reference to the home. Generally console tables are found in entrance ways and do not have enough support to hold heavy objects. The entrance way is a space that welcomes visitors into your home, like the “V” shape that the tables are positioned. I was also drawn to the word console which in its use as a verb means to “comfort (someone) at a time of grief or disappointment”, a social attempt at healing (Oxford Languages).

The vessels are stacked precariously with one end tapering down as the viewer follows along the first table. At the end of that table is a cylindrical celery vessel. The second table holds six vessels that start off small, grow larger, and then splay and retract, gradually becoming larger and more fully formed at the V’s open end, referencing the non-linear process of healing.



Figure 14: Lyndal Osborne, *Tracing Tides – A Topographical Investigation*, detail, 2022. Permission:

© Lyndal Osborne

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<sup>22</sup> The pine trees are native to Ontario and the celery is sourced from a local organic farm.

In her show, *Tracing Tides – A Topographical Investigation*, at the Red Deer Art Gallery and Museum, Lyndal Osborne collects waste – dried natural and man-made items found along the shores of National Parks in New South Wales, Australia (where she immigrated from) and Newfoundland, converting them into sculpture (Fig. 14). The materials are displayed in a darkly lit room, on black, two-tiered, square tables. In her work, Osborne collects and transforms, often dyeing pieces, presenting the materials as a personal archive documenting her travels, observations, and the conditions of the places she visits. Lobster tags, organic objects, and wires are examples of what can be seen in the work that is gathered and presented in large groupings. One thing that the items share is that they washed up on shore, an expulsion of material from an ocean perhaps attempting to heal itself.

## Touch and Hope

When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust,  
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.  
I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.  
Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.  
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine.

— Mary Oliver<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, *When I Am Among the Trees*.

The sculpture *Sociogenome* is a continuation of my work with the mulberry tree. It is comprised of its branches, string and silk thread (Fig. 15).<sup>23</sup> The genus is said to have health benefits and is important to biodiversity, referencing social connections on a larger scale (Ambrose, J et al.; Palli J, et al.).<sup>24</sup> *Sociogenome* was constructed by wrapping and tying strings and silk threads to the branch. Some of the smaller branches that cascade down and outward were tied with more tension to make a wing-like form. While working, slowly and in a meditative fashion, I thought about the people who I have interacted with over the past year. The wider strings represent close relationships and as the strings become thinner, they reflect the connections of acquaintances. The silk thread relates to mulberry trees, as its' leaves are fed to silkworms to produce silk. The title references the study of socio genomics, how human genes adapt to social conditions, mapping how individuals can impact our physiological health (Cole, S90).

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<sup>23</sup> Socio genomics is an area of study researching “conceptual relationship(s) between genes and the social world” (Cole, S84)

<sup>24</sup> In my grandfather’s dialect the fruit is “*a mura*” – from the Latin *morus*.

According to a review by Elisana Lima Rodrigues et al. “due to phenolic, flavonoid, and anthocyanin compounds, the species *Morus* provides health benefits related, for example, to immunomodulatory, anti-inflammatory, and anti-nociceptive activity.” The National Library of Medicine explains that Phenolic acids, readily absorbed through intestinal tract walls, are beneficial to human health due to their potential antioxidants and avert the damage of cells resulted from free-radical oxidation reactions. On regular eating, phenolic acids also promote the anti-inflammation capacity of human beings.

A recent study found mulberry trees in Southern Italy that were 647 to 666 years old. This study mapped their importance to biodiversity. (Palli J, et al.).



Figure 15: Clara Laratta, *Sociogenome*, 2022. Photo: Scott Lee, ed. Clara Laratta

Another study related to social connection that looks at ancient varieties of fruit trees, found some of the oldest species of mulberry trees in Southern Italy. “Each tree ... represents a hub for biodiversity conservation suitable for flora and fauna species of conservation significance” (Palli J, et al.). In addition to my familial connection to the tree and the mulberry’s relationship to healing, the tree was also selected for its poetic potential. An example can be found in the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses, Pyramus and Thisbe*, where he describes the mulberry’s fruit as a dark stain representing the blood of forbidden love (Chang et al.; Emerson). Although my relationship to the tree isn’t as tragic or dramatic as in this ancient poem, it binds the ideas of love, sorrow, and death, reflecting how social connections and the tree’s sustenance support health and well-being.

## Sounds and Laughter

We try hard to show ourselves...in our best light...not to make mistakes. But ...

(with) what we have done to the earth, maybe the whole system is a mistake. Coming to an artwork is trial and error...we should encourage each other to do the mistakes and not be ashamed ... most good things don't happen because but, instead.

— Pipilotti Rist<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Lund, Pipilotti Rist Interview: Freeing the Wonderlight. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Humblebaek, Denmark). 2019.



Reflecting on my childhood, I am reminded of the sounds. The table was not only a place of nourishment, but also a place full of sounds – stories, and laughter that allowed a lightness to fill the air. The videos in the exhibition, *No/Know* and *Childhood Memories: spin to release — it's taking a little longer to get up*, invite viewers to reflect on the imperfection that is humanity. *No/Know*, is a one-minute, six-second video. In the video I hang upside down against a red background and repeat the word “no” (Fig. 16). In performing this work, I found it did not take long to feel breathless and I had difficulty inhaling. This mirrors the difficulties of my internal dialogue – a self-talk that has a



Figure 16: Clara Laratta, *No/Know*, 2022. Photo: Clara Laratta

hard time saying “no” due to the learned behaviour of saying yes to everything. This declarative “no” is part of a process of unlearning. As my double-head turns to the side, the faces appear conjoined at the nose and as they move closer and the lips touch, it looks like they are kissing, a nod to self-love. The video loops providing a glimpse of an inner dialogue on repeat. The sound no/know refers both

to the act of saying no, learned and inherent knowledge, and the power of sound. Displayed on a monitor, the television references the shape of a box, something that contains the video much like the way information learned creates containers, systems that keep things in place and under control. Turned sideways, the monitor also infers a portrait orientation, relating it back to the body.

The impulse to say yes or, offer help, even when detrimental to my own health is buried deep within my social and personal histories, and is something that I've only recently begun to question. I thought there was no harm being done and that my body could handle it. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her book *The Second Sex* "the body is not a thing, it is a situation"(46) and "one is not born, but rather becomes, (a) woman" (283). *No/Know* began as an investigation of the self, a practice session, to allow the integration of knowledge while illuminating the struggle found in breaking free of patriarchal indoctrination. Even with an awareness of this indoctrination, breaking out is not as easy as one would think, then again without challenging beliefs there can be no transformation. The video was a process to move from saying "no" to integrating this "knowing" more holistically. Pipolloti Rist, in an interview at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art said, "I give the same importance to looking inward and outward" (Lund). She discusses how, the way you grow up becomes your norm and that you only see differences in what is considered the norm when you are exposed to others. Rist goes on to discuss that norms are necessary to live in society but, warns of how humanity quickly adopts conventions without question, due to not having enough time to either investigate or change them.

In her work, *Open My Glade, (Flatten)* Rist, uses video and the screen, to discuss themes of breaking out of the box (Fig. 17). Originally made to be seen in Time Square, co-opting the billboards used for advertising, Rist rebels against societal expectations of showing oneself in their "best light" (Rist). The work shows a woman trying to escape from a box – she pushes her face up against the glass, moving and distorting it, while trying to escape and at the same time challenges thoughts of

perfection. The work highlights the invisible limits placed on women and works with video to reframe thoughts of perfection in relation to the female body. In this work Rist symbolically uses the breaking out of a literal box, while in *No/Know* and *Food for Spirit*, another performance to camera, by Adrian Piper, the focuses are on internal dialogues and outside forces (Fig. 18).



Figure 17: Pipilotti Rist, *Open My Glade (Flatten)*, 2000, video installation by Pipilotti Rist (video still), © Pipilotti Rist, Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine.



Figure 1: Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirit*, 1971. Fourteen gelatin silver prints (reprinted 1997) Each 14.81" x 14.5" (37,7 cm x 37 cm). Detail: photograph #12 of 14. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Family of Man Fund. © Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin. With permission from Adrian Piper Research Archive.

In *Food for Spirit*, Piper reads passages from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, causing her to reach a dissociative state while taking a self-portrait. "I rigged up a camera and tape recorder next to [a] mirror ... so that every time the fear of losing myself overtook me and drove me to the 'reality check' of the mirror" (Piper, 54 55). Through taking these images Piper was able to archive her appearance and the experience, while recording the passage that propelled her "self-transcendence", doing so through an autotheoretical practice. In the images Piper stands facing a mirror, naked, clothed, or partially clothed, holding her brownie camera in front of her to get the exposure. The images are taken of the mirror with her reflection in it and are often either over or underexposed, this along with the flash seen in the mirror, sometimes obscure Piper's image.

*Childhood Memories: spin to release – it's taking a little longer to get up* is a response to the medieval healing tradition of San Rocco (Fig. 19). In this thirty-second looped video, I spin under the same mulberry tree. The video is shot in portrait format and projected on the wall to an approximate one-to-one ratio to the mulberry tree.<sup>25</sup> My finger can be seen in the corner of the lens, providing the viewer's eye with an anchor or place of rest – to not get dizzy.

The viewer experiences the action from my point of view and although the freedom of spinning may be overshadowed by the disorientation of spinning and tension in the fall depending on the viewer point of view, for me there was some joy in the experience.

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<sup>25</sup> The red mulberry tree is a dwarf variety and stands at ten feet tall, the lower end of their expected height which is generally ten to fifteen feet.



Figure 19: Clara Laratta, *Childhood Memories: spin to release – it's taking a little longer to get up*, detail, 2022. Photo: Clara Laratta

The video was developed as another informal archive of the past, as well as a response to the folk healing tradition of *San Rocco*. The title of the work relates to my childhood memories of spinning and has a connection to folk healing that is still practiced in the town where my grandparents were born. It has ties to the past and the present, and the sounds in the fall impart the importance of levity as another component of healing. In her book *Rhythm is The Cure: Southern Italian Tambourine*, Alessandra Belloni outlines traditional healing ceremonies in the region my family

immigrated from (6). She discusses a dance that originated in the middle ages and explains how people danced to the rhythm of San Rocco (Ritmo Di San Rocco), moving in circles, to allow them to reach a euphoric state, releasing their fear of death from the bubonic plague (48). But instead of reaching the desired euphoric state required for the release of fear, I quickly fall to the ground, learning that spinning until you fall isn't as fun, or as fast, as it was as a child. I look at it as something I did because I wanted to experience it, to reflect on and respond to a folk healing tradition, something that perhaps my ancestors partook in. In doing so, it parallel's the quote at the beginning of this section "do the mistakes and not be ashamed ... most good things don't happen because but, instead" (Rist). Showing the entire experience humanizes it and I don't have any concerns about presenting myself in a way expected by society. For this reason alone it was important to show the fall.

## Conclusion

If the world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced it will be by ordinary people, people whose love for this life is even greater than their fear.

— Joanna Macy<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Parallax Pres, Joanna Macy homepage, <https://www.parallax.org/authors/joanna-macy/>, nd.

Macy's quote about healing the world opens possibilities for wholeness. It speaks to people taking action and allowing healing to proliferate through their efforts. She emphasizes the importance of having a love for life, implying that fear can inhibit wholeness, and that if individuals can find the courage to act and to let their love for life and the world move them towards making positive changes, they can heal themselves and in doing so allow the world to move towards wholeness. "To be alive in this beautiful, self-organizing universe – to participate in the dance of life with senses to perceive it, lungs that breathe it, organs that draw nourishment from it – is a wonder beyond words" (Macy). I chose to end this paper the way it began, and in the way that I move through my research, my life and making work, with a spirit of reciprocity, mutuality, and transformation.



## Letters of Copyright Permission

**CL** Clara Laratta 1:18 PM  
Image inquiry  
To: elizabeth.doxtater [REDACTED]

Hi Elizabeth,

[REDACTED] I would like to know if it is okay to include an image from your exhibition at the the McMaster Museum of Art in my thesis support paper.

Kind regards,  
Clara

Found in Inbox - Exchange Mailbox

**ED** Elizabeth Doxtater 1:23 PM  
Re: Image inquiry  
To: Clara Laratta

Of course!  
In Peace and Friendship  
Elizabeth

**CL** Clara Laratta March 24, 2023 at 10:01 AM  
Re: Image Inquiry  
To: [REDACTED]

Dear Carolyn Lazard,

[REDACTED] I found an image of the work on the Walker Gallery site that was taken by Bobby Rogers and would like to know if it is okay to include in my thesis support document.  
Please let me know if you are okay with this.  
Kind regards,  
Clara

**CL** Carolyn Lazard 6:16 PM  
Re: Image Inquiry  
To: Clara Laratta

Hi Clara,

You are more than welcome to use the image on the Walker's website with their credits. Thanks so much for including my work in your scholarship.

Wishing you well,  
Carolyn

**CL** Clara Laratta  
Question  
To: Lyndal Osborne  
March 20, 2023 at 8:16 PM



Hi Lyndal,

[REDACTED]

I'm in the process of writing my thesis and have included a discussion and some images I took of your exhibition at Red Deer and just wanted to make sure you are okay with that before submitting it. Please let me know your thoughts. Kind regards, Clara

Found in Inbox - Exchange Mailbox

**LO** Lyndal Osborne  
Re: Question  
To: Clara Laratta  
March 20, 2023 at 8:06 PM

Hi Clara,  
Of course I'm OK with you including some ideas you might have about the piece in Red Deer. Thanks for asking.

[REDACTED]

Good luck,  
Lyndal  
[See More from Clara Laratta](#)

**CL** Clara Laratta  
Re: Question  
To: Clara Laratta  
March 21, 2023 at 5:21 PM

Hi again Lyndal,  
Is it okay to include the images I took of your work at the Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery, or just the discussion?  
Kind regards,  
Clara  
[See More from Clara Laratta](#)

**CL** Clara Laratta  
Re: Question  
To: Lyndal Osborne  
March 21, 2023 at 5:22 PM

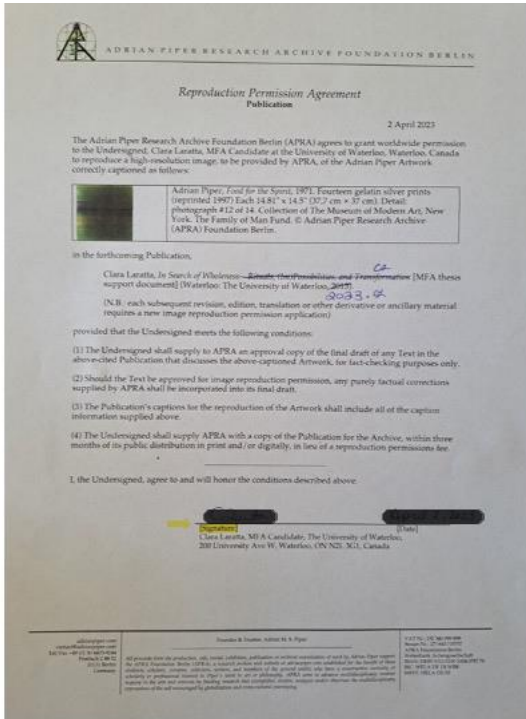


[See More from Clara Laratta](#)

Found in Inbox - Exchange Mailbox

**LO** Lyndal Osborne  
Re: Question  
To: Clara Laratta  
March 21, 2023 at 7:38 PM

Hi Clara,  
Feel perfectly free to use the images too. No problem.  
Lyndal



Montreal, April 6, 2023

Clara Laratta  
MFA Candidate,  
Dept. of Fine Arts  
University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario

**Subject: Louise Bourgeois artwork – Permission grant**

Dear Clara,

We are answering your request to obtain permission to reproduce a Louise Bourgeois artwork in your thesis support document at University of Waterloo, titled:

*"In Search of Wholeness"*

We are pleased to inform you that permission may be granted to reproduce the work listed hereafter, in printed copies of your dissertation for your personal use, and at the UW's online digital repository, contingent upon respect of the following conditions:

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Best regards,

Agent des droits d'auteur/Copyright Agent

T: [Redacted] - E: [Redacted]

AC [Redacted] 8:27 AM

Re: Video still inquiry  
To: Clara Laratta

Hi Clara,

Please find in the link some images of the requested work:  
<https://media.hauserwirth.com/transfer/6d62f2fa5058da7d7ee28c13dd16e696f84193b6b79c45418017c0b7d879142>

Captions:  
**Open My Glade (Flatten), 2000, video installation by Pipilotti Rist (video still)**  
 © Pipilotti Rist  
 Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine

I hope that's fine, otherwise please let me know.

Wishing you all the best for your thesis.

Best wishes,  
 Anna

[Redacted]  
 Artist Liaison

**HAUSER & WIRTH**  
 Limmatstrasse 270  
 8005 Zurich  
 Switzerland

T: +41 [Redacted]  
 M: [Redacted]  
[www.hauserwirth.com](http://www.hauserwirth.com)

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**Ivan Jurakic**  
UWAG MFA exhibition documentation  
To: Clara Laratta

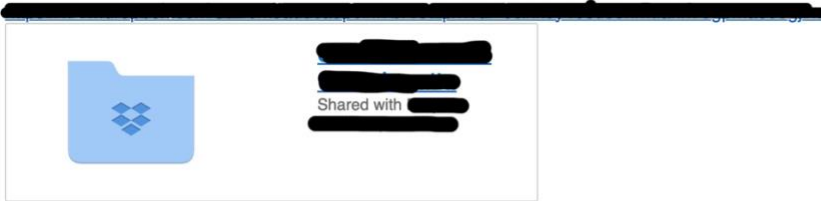
1:44 PM



**Siri Found a Contact**  
Ivan Jurakic

Add X

Hi Clara  
Congrats on completing your thesis review! Here's the Dropbox link to the documentation of your exhibition. Please credit all images--Photo:  
Scott Lee  
Talk soon  
Ivan



--  
Ivan Jurakic, Director/Curator  
University of Waterloo Art Gallery  
Driving: 263 Phillip Street, Waterloo  
Mailing: 200 University Avenue West,  
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1  
[uwag.uwaterloo.ca](http://uwag.uwaterloo.ca)

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