

LET US ROT:  
Understanding Death  
Through Multispecies  
and Creative Collaboration

by Sabrina Rose Capista

Supervised by Andil Gosine

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Let

Us

Rot



Understanding Death  
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Collaboration

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# Abstract

As a society we have become very uncomfortable, repulsed by and scared of all matters of decay, despite its inevitability in the shadow of all life. In rejecting death and the natural processes of decomposition we are more likely to participate in environmentally destructive habits that ignore our interconnectedness with other than human kin. It is often through spiritual belief systems and personal connection to land that perspectives of environmental ethics take shape. In the most physical sense, death and rot are incredibly fertile stages of life for various species and showcase the natural recycling process that takes place within our habitats. In an effort to challenge anthropocentric narratives around death, this portfolio explores the question; what can we learn about death and decomposition by communing with other species and organic material as an art practice? This project was achieved through the method of research-creation, emphasizing the process of experimentation by creating data, as opposed to extracting it. Working actively with natural materials and visual themes of decay, this series of mixed-media artworks acted as a meditation on death. Infused with personal experiences of heartbreak and loss, this project establishes itself as an example of creative collaboration with the natural world as an emotional processing tool. This work rejects comfort in the known and through surrendering to the relationships created between material and creator, brings forth reflections and insights on death as a necessary precursor to all life.

# Foreword

I entered this program with a fascination for fungi and a deep desire to explore the many ways mushrooms act as mysterious mentors of environmental stewardship. What began as a study of mycoremediation and the practical applications of fungi in environmental restoration has evolved into something quite different—yet still rooted in the same essence. Inspired by personal experiences of loss, I began to focus my attention on the natural process of rot and decay that accompanies death and there I found the mushroom again, agents of decomposition, alchemizing life from death. With perspectives on death being so intertwined with spiritual and religious teachings, I began to wonder what connecting with these species as a creative, spiritual practice might do for our understanding of death and decay as a necessary precursor to life, in both the physical and metaphorical sense.

In the ego's effort to create something meaningful it is easy, as an artist, to forget that even in the very personal, lies something of the universal to which people can connect. Throughout this process I have been encouraged to allow my personal experiences to bleed into the research, to which I am grateful. Curiously, following and weaving together hyphal threads of various frameworks has given me permission to infuse my creative and spiritual perspectives into this research, coming out with a collection of artworks that reflect my investigation of rot and death as a multispecies collaboration. This portfolio comprises 5 mixed media, eco art works and their accompanying reflections on the development, experimentation, and exhibitioning of these works as they relate to both ecological and philosophical themes of rot.

I couldn't quite tell you where my fungal obsession began, but I knew that learning about them elicited a childlike wonder and every time a mushroom revealed itself to me, it felt like magic. I hope that this project works to keep that very spirit alive. Until of course it's ready to die and rot and come alive once more.

“ One thing I want to say about research is that there is a motive. I believe the reason is emotional because we feel. We feel because we are hungry, cold, afraid, brave, loving, or hateful. We do what we do for reasons, emotional reasons. That is the engine that drives us. That is the gift of the Creator of Life. Life feels .... Feeling is connected to our intellect and we ignore, hide from, disguise, and suppress that feeling at our peril and at the peril of those around us. Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual research is a goddam lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people. Humans-feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans-do research. When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us.”

**-Eber Hampton**



# Table of Contents

Roots: Methodology & Framework.....	1
Birth: Hands that hold too tightly.....	3
Apoptosis: But the spores remain.....	9
Rebirth: The Bardo.....	15
Decomposition: 8 months post-mortem....	24
Death: Signs of Life.....	26
Hyphae: Exhibition Reflections.....	29
Conclusion.....	31
Acknowledgements.....	33
References.....	35

# Roots :

## Methodological & Theoretical Context

*Let Us Rot* has taken shape through the methodology of research-creation. This method is defined as one which “supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation” (Canada Council 2024). With this, the process of conducting research becomes the data itself, creating space for something entirely new to be born. In an article from research-creation scholar, Stephanie Springgay, she suggests that

“we need to shift from thinking about methods as processes of gathering data toward methods as a becoming entangled in relations...If method is pre-given and known in advance, it also suggests that data, is an already pre-supposed entity that is waiting to be captured, extracted, and mined.”(Springgay and Truman, 2018, p. 204)

This methodology gives permission for art, craft, and creative experimentation to be merged with academic research in a way that rejects extraction and exploitation, paralleling some of the themes which this research explores and the frameworks with which they are situated.

Although this project has roots which are entangled and far reaching, it is set within the framework of spiritual ecology. Bringing together two areas of life, which are undeniably interwoven, spiritual ecology “refers to ways that individuals and communities orient their thinking, feeling, and acting in response to the intersection of religions and spiritualities with ecology, nature, and environmentalism” (Mickey, 2020, p. 1). My connection to the earth has been deeply spiritual and my spirituality is most present when I am connected to earth’s elements. Inevitably, this concept shines through in all of my work. In an interview for *Atmos* on the topic of spiritual ecology, Carol Wayne White defines spirituality “as a mode of reflecting, experiencing, and envisioning one’s relationality with all that is”, this is ultimately what I am doing as I undertake this arts-based research project (Tucker).

Deeply inspired by the work of Shawn Wilson in his book *Research is Ceremony*, this project follows the Indigenous research paradigm which suggests research, like most things, is relational, focusing on building relationships between ideas, participants, land, and the research one is engaging with. This holistic perspective invites space for personal motivations and emotions to be present within research, which feels necessary, especially where art and research intersect. Wilson likens research to ceremony and explains that “by reducing the space between things, we are strengthening the relationship that they share. And this bringing things together so that they share the same space is what ceremony is about.” (Wilson, 2008, p. 87) If there is one thread which strings this body of work together it is relationship. From the relationships to the people in my life that inspired a lot of this work, my relationship to the materials that formed in order to create the pieces, and my relationship to the earth that underlines it all. I use the word “my” loosely because despite the work being a personal process of creation and meaning-making, none of it is solely mine. Recognizing that within this paradigm, knowledge is gained through relationship, and reality itself is:

“a set of relationships, [that no one person can take] ownership [of]. That whole idea of ‘discovering’ something is not there, as what you are doing is just creating a new set of relationships. The idea belongs to the cosmos, to all of the relations that it has formed, not to the individual who happens to be the first to write about it.” (p. 114)

This research-creation project seeks to honour the process of research as ceremony by bridging the gap between humans and the environmental significance of rot and death, through forming material relationships with organic matter and other-than-human kin. By taking an arts-based approach, my intention is for this work to be accessible, allowing space for personal reflections and relationships to this work to be formed by anyone who connects with it.



*Hands that hold too tightly*  
2023

*3 piece installation: mixed yarn hand woven & crocheted. Resin coated fungi, flowers, & plant material*

## Hands that hold too tightly

### BIRTH

*At the time of creation, this piece existed outside the parameters of my main research project as part of coursework exploring environmental action through art. This piece and the intuitive, experimental process through which it came to be, later became a blueprint and inspiration for this project in its entirety. Creating living and dying works of art with the idea of collaborating with organic materials as an almost spiritual practice is a thread which weaves together this body of work.*

***Hands that hold too tightly*** is a mixed-media installation piece that combines textiles and earthen materials, including branches, fungi, and flowers in both their raw and chemically-preserved forms. What started with the broad theme of human ego versus nature, this project was inspired by the many ways in which humans feel entitled to the possession and control of nature as an entity that exists outside of themselves. This is something I have witnessed to varying degrees in my family, my friends, and even myself at times, but more apparently in the choices made by our government and the industries and corporations that our society depends on. The exploitation and over-consumption of natural resources is an all too common practice and is leading to rapid destruction and depletion on our planet. This piece was inspired by the striking contrast between earth's natural cycles of life, death, and rebirth and humanistic desires for perfection, permanence, and possession. I believe that the tension between these two realities leads to distorted relationships with the land, making it more difficult to protect and preserve it.

This work is grounded in Theodore Roszak's theory of eco-psychology, which strives "to see the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum" (Agosto Foundation, n.d.). Roszak's research emphasizes the interconnectedness of psychology and ecology and stresses the significance of their integration for the future well-being of our planet. Seeing the planet as a macrocosm of the human experience, he expresses that "if the self is expanded to include the natural world, behavior leading to destruction of this world will be experienced as self-destruction." (Roszak 12) Throughout his work he weaves in narcissism as a thread which plays a large role in the separation between human and nature, he suggests that at a young age we develop our ego when we disconnect our consciousness from our mother and begin to live a life which is our own. This is an important stage of discovery where we gain a sense

of 'self' and understand what it means to be an individual, but that stage is meant to be outgrown. According to Marcella Danon, who echoes Roszak's theory, "during adolescence, the sense of self consolidates and a deeper connection with the world must be regained, by integrating self-awareness with some awareness of the existence of others." (Danon 9) In our modern world, where individual needs are often placed at the fore-front, many of us have not outgrown this selfish, ego-centric developmental stage of our childhood, leading to a life of excess and over-consumption. This stunted development is represented in this installation through the chemically preserved elements of nature that are forever stuck in time.

In the early conceptualization of this project I did not think this piece was necessarily personal. As someone who is passionate about sustainable practices and living regeneratively and reciprocally with the land, I knew the context was meaningful to me, but why was I drawn to this particular theme and approach? My mind spirals trying to make sense of it, manipulating meaning and overanalyzing it all.

Nothing.

I flip through my process book.

**Human Ego/**

"knowing"

holding on too tightly forever and ever

avoiding death

vs.

**Nature/**

in constant flux

moving through cycles of death, life & rebirth

becoming again

and again

Suddenly I recognize this project as a parallel of my experience living with an emotionally stunted parent who has been avoiding the inevitability of change by abusing chemical substances.

Forever stuck in time...



The journey of this project was rooted in experimentation and non-attachment. I intentionally chose to go into the making process without much of a plan, knowing that the natural materials would lead me.

What does it mean to work with the materials, instead of using them?

I began the physical making of this work by compiling materials that I felt would work well together, making sure to utilize materials that I already owned for two reasons: a) to not create excess waste through my consumption and b) to weave material elements that are connected to my personal past within the piece. The plants and fungi were collected during mushroom forays and walks around my neighbourhood and local parks. I chose to incorporate these natural materials because I wanted this to be a living work of art, a piece which shows the natural process of rot and decay, prompting you to reflect upon whether or not that has value in art.

What price would you pay for something that could not promise forever?

What worth can we find in something, when its very purpose, like that of the mushroom- is to decompose?

By pairing the raw, organic materials with artificially preserved ones I wanted to challenge the audience to question their notions of beauty and their desire to hold onto that which they deem beautiful and worthy of being kept. I also wanted to represent this idea of being stuck in time when one does not move past the developmental stage of the ego in adulthood. Perhaps it looks beautiful and stable, but what consequences could that bring?

What happens when one's biological process is stunted?

Do we have the right to play God and alter the organic processes of nature in the name of beauty?

The installation currently comprises three separate pieces, the first of which began as an experimentation on a hand loom. Weaving different yarns and strips of fabrics that have been part of previous projects of mine, creating a landscape which would later host fungi woven into the piece by wire. I have worked with combining earthen materials and textiles in the past, but this was my first time experimenting with resin and other chemical preservatives to attempt at capturing the flora and funga in their original state, this proved to be the most challenging part of the process. My first set of resin experiments were less than perfect, resulting in bubbly and uneven resin molds that did not turn out as 'beautiful' as I would have liked for them too.

Surrender the desire for perfection.

At this point I also tested out painting the resin on to the plant as opposed to pouring it over, along with using an acrylic fixative spray, these created more desirable results. The process of working with epoxy resin was an interesting moral dilemma for me because it felt like my experimentations, if unused for this project, were further contributing to this non-essential, non-degradable waste that is flooding our planet, but at the same time it felt like a necessary choice to carry out my concept.

Where do we draw the line?  
When is creating waste justifiable?

I began working on a second element by using the acrylic spray on a large mushroom cap sewn into a piece of fabric. I really loved the way this piece looked, especially paired with the first piece, but the acrylic spray did not work to preserve the mushroom and instead the mushroom began to mold, creating a smell of chemical rot...

Practicing non-attachment, I begin again.



In an effort to make use of the resin molds I had made I decided to create a mobile-like piece to display them on a myceliated branch. Despite them not looking 'perfectly' preserved, I see value in them anyways. Weaving in the imperfect parts of both myself and the natural world into this piece.

The process continues as a manifestation of the concept..



I continue to work with the materials to create my third piece. It flows more effortlessly when I am not forcing the materials to do anything for me. I don't quite know how to describe this process, there is no formula or technique, maybe it is just play. Which begs the question, when does the play end, how do I know when the piece is complete?

Can a living work of art ever be complete if it is always transforming?

I am aware that this piece as it stands may never look the same. Part of it may disintegrate, break down, and rot. It will not be showcased in its original state, so what does that mean for me as the artist?

I too, must allow my ego to dissolve.  
This project is not 'mine', but a collaboration with the world around me.

# But the spores remain

## APOPTOISIS

The life cycle of a mushroom both begins and ends with a spore. The spore finds a favorable environment and a strand of mycelium begins to emerge, signifying germination. This connection made between the spore and its substrate allows for mycelium to spread through it, signaling a bond forming. Now in a ‘perfect’ world we might have nothing but mutualistic bonds that equally benefit both parties harmoniously, but nature isn’t quite so simple. Instead, we have various ecological relationships, including ones where organisms feed off of dead organisms (saprophytic) or take over living ones to sustain themselves (parasitic).

*But the spores remain* is a collaboration with fungi of the *Trametes* genus. Delicately woven through burlap with thread on canvas, inspired by the handful of polypores I had once collected that were so fragile, they could have fallen apart completely before my hands finished the piece.

*Trametes* are mostly saprophytic fungi, “which means that [they produce] enzymes which decompose dead matter, providing nutrients to the mushroom” and recycling what would otherwise be waste material (Cavert). Often found on dead hardwood laying across forest floors or growing on conifer trees that are dead, wounded or occasionally, fully alive. I find myself continuously drawn to fungi as a medium and metaphor, perhaps because as suggested in the article *The Dead Who Would Be Trees and Mushrooms*, “fungi are in all cases a powerful rhetorical device and motif for embracing decay. They straddle the worlds of the living and the dead by transforming decaying organic matter into nutrients for living plants to use.” (Gould et al. 173) Within this piece, they can be seen as a symbol not only of decay, but of the sometimes unequal relationship dynamics we find ourselves in, where the nourishment of one comes with the death of another.



*The crumbling of something*

*But the spores remain*  
2024  
*Trametes & textile on canvas*  
12” x 12”

*not meant to last*  
*still tangled & intertwined,*  
*dissolving by the day,*  
*but the spores remain.*

Initiated by the ending of a relationship,  
this project invited the energy of death and decay  
and now it seems I can't get away from it.  
Another little death of me in the ending of a relationship that both fed  
and  
fed off of me  
And now I'm not sure if what remains is enough  
or how to move forward with this much vacancy.  
How much do we have to spare in our own little deaths  
and at what rate can it happen without being too depleted?  
Do we need a rock bottom,  
a ground zero,  
before rebirth?



Like most living beings, humans are moving towards their death a little each day through the process of apoptosis. Everyday, without our awareness “close to 10 billion of our cells, having become inefficient, die in the apoptosis process, with each one of these cells, luckily, being replaced right away by a new functioning cell” (Beliveau et al. 62). On a cellular level our body is constantly moving through cycles of death and rebirth. Beyond the physical body, this can also be true within our work, relationships, desires, and many other areas of our lives, all of which contribute to fueling our life force. The more that we accept this natural process and hold space for all of the little deaths that we experience throughout our lifetime, perhaps we can be better equipped to handle the big ones, and the less aversion we might have to the growth and change that typically scares us.

The process of crafting this was spontaneous, much like my previous works with organic material, it felt like a challenge in presence and non-attachment. Combining the various weights of materials; the bouncy canvas, the loosely woven plant fibres, and the thin, crunchy polypores. When I initially started draping the burlap onto the canvas, attempting to give it dimension, it didn't exactly “cooperate”. Each time I would sew it down in one place, it would shift from the place I had planned for it to go next. When I loosen my grip and remember that I am working with this material, not against it, it begins to fall into place. This is a lesson I am constantly re-learning through this artistic practice. When you are in any kind of creative collaboration with someone or something, you cannot maintain full control, no matter how hard you try. This surrendering can put you in a vulnerable position, but is also where a lot of life's magic can happen. As I assembled this work, little pieces of the mushroom would break off and get caught between the burlap, becoming a symbol of all the hidden ways that our messy pasts can shape us. In working with these very dry and fragile fungal beings I began to see parallels to the tower card within the tarot. When faced with the sudden collapse of something that you previously relied on, you are left to clean up the rubble. No matter how much you clean up what has been broken, there are always little pieces of debris that remain.

On a personal level, this artwork acted as a processing to the messy entanglement of relationships that aren't always reciprocal and the fragility of friendships built on unsteady foundations. When zooming out, I see it as a recognition of how the little deaths we experience get carried with us and how endings are never quite the end. With that mentality, we can become more accepting of change and perhaps even death, as a continuum of life.

“What then is decay? Watching a compost heap transform into fertile soil it can seem like decay is genesis. Decay is the first scene in a comedy of mycelial threads and millipedes and sprouting wildflowers, seeds invisibly deposited by a bird flying overhead. Sometimes I think about death as being the transition from a solitary aliveness to an anarchic polyphony of aliveness...

**A**m I decaying? Well, yes. But decay is always a day, a microbe, a rootlet, away from sprouting. Maybe I'm losing touch with a self, and melting into a more-than-human mind.”

**-Sophie Strand**

# The Bardo

*“Grief expressed out loud, whether in or out of character, un-choreographed and honest, for someone we have lost, or a country or home we have lost, is in itself the greatest praise we could ever give them. Grief is praise, because it is the natural way love honors what it misses...If we do not grieve what we miss, we are not praising what we love. We are not praising the life we have been given in order to love. If we do not praise whom we miss, we are ourselves in some way dead. So grief and praise make us alive.” -Martín Prechtel*



## Contextual Threads

In response to my engagement with the works of Andil Gosine, particularly his book *Nature's Wild*, I was inspired to reflect on my own wildness, investigating my existence as animal through the transitional lens of decay. During this time I was mourning the loss of a long and meaningful relationship, while also studying various spiritual traditions, their rituals around death, and perspectives of the afterlife. Whether there is the belief of a heaven one transcends to or various lives through which the soul incarnates, it is clear that within many spiritual traditions, death is not seen as an ending. This is reflected in our natural environments, where death is more of a recycling, a circular economy “where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated” (Circular Economy Introduction). When an organism dies, that very death sustains the lives of scavengers and decomposers, who keep that energy flowing through the ecosystem. So despite any belief that us humans can ascend beyond earth after death, in the most physical sense, we return and remain within it, feeding the lives of other species. This current of thought resonates with the deep ecology framework that was developed in the 1970's to counter eco-movements that were solving environmental problems through a singular, human-centred lens. The deep ecology movement sees “man [as] an integral part of nature, not over or apart from nature” and does not simply place value on other species in relation to their usefulness to humans (Devall 310). In an effort to bring this framework into conversations of death, queering the multispecies relationships that form within spaces of decay, I couldn't help but parallel this personal loss to a kind of death, of both the relationship and the person I was within it.

I began to recognize heartbreak, much like decomposition, as a transitional process that is required before a rebirth can take place. This work, entitled *The Bardo*, is representative of the liminal space after death. Described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, this word is most often used to describe the “intermediate state between death and rebirth, but in reality bardos are occurring continuously throughout both life and death, and are junctures when the possibility of liberation, or enlightenment, is heightened” (Rinpoche 11). This notion of rebirth is not reserved only for the physical time of death. In Zen Buddhism, for example, it “is often taken in a more figurative way, as that the process of rebirth is from moment to moment, so that one is being reborn so long as one identifies himself with a continuing ego which reincarnates itself afresh at each moment of time”, and to that, I do (Watts 69).

So as part of the processing of this ending I created a textile installation to represent the multispecies collaboration that is decomposition. Recognizing all the possibilities that are present within death, decay, and loss and how we are never quite alone in that process. In recent years, ethnographers have begun examining these realities through storytelling and art, working to understand “how ‘the human’ has been formed and transformed amid encounters with multiple species of plants, animals, fungi, and microbes. [Not just celebrating] multispecies mingling, [but exploring] a central question: Who benefits, *cui bono*, when species meet?” (Kirksey, 2014, p. 2) Different from the other pieces in this project, this installation did not work with found organic material or other species directly as a medium, but instead as symbolic inspiration.



## Installation Breakdown

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Central to this piece is a burlap sack resembling a compost heap. Within the compost heap contains memorabilia of my relationship, with photographs, letters and trinkets woven into the burlap. Through the weaving, some areas are more visible than others, symbolizing the process as not yet complete. Creating a microcosmic ecosystem within the gallery space, surrounding the compost heap is a collection of death-eating species including a coyote, raven, a few detritivores and saprophytic plants and fungi. In an effort to decenter humans from death, this installation demonstrates a non-hierarchical ecosystem where every species has intrinsic value, playing their own unique role. I chose to include these particular species because I wanted to highlight the diverse ways that death can fuel an ecosystem.



*The Bardo*  
2025  
Mixed media sculpture  
(textile, clay, acrylic, love letters, photographs, *Coprinopsis* ink & trinkets)

The raven, a carrion-eating bird who was more specifically chosen because of their mythological connection to death. The raven carries symbology across many cultures, sometimes as a messenger of death, and others as part of the story of creation, but most commonly as an emblem of transitions and transformations.



**Raven (*Corvus corax*)**

**Millipede (*Eurymerodesmus* spp.)**



The earthworm, dung beetle, and millipede are all detritivores that gather nutrients from feeding off of decomposing plant and animal material, along with feces.



**Earthworm (*Lumbricus terrestris*)**

**Wood blewit (*Clitocybe nuda*) & Magpie inkcap (*Coprinopsis picacea*)**

The mushrooms represented are wood blewits and magpie ink caps, both of which are saprophytic, growing out of environments like leaf litter, compost, or humus rich soils.



**Coyote (*Canis latrans*)**

To represent the scavenger population, those which consume dead animal bodies, we have the coyote, who along with hunting its prey, also helps to break down dead material.



**Ghost pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*)**

Finally, we have the ghost pipe, a plant who unlike most who get their nutrients from the process of photosynthesis, must rely on a network of roots and fungi to obtain their nutrients.



**Dung beetle (*Scarabaeidae* spp.)**

These are just a few of many species whose lives are nourished by the death and decay of another within that ecosystem and ensure that these valuable nutrients are not wasted.

## The Making Process

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The idea for this project came to me in the midst of a field trip to a school garden, where I got to witness the rich, abundance of life crawling through the compost bins. I began collecting photographs, letters, and memorabilia from my relationship that I no longer wanted to hold on to. The idea of just throwing these things in the trash or setting them on fire (as some might do), didn't quite resonate with my ending. But the idea that none of it would go to waste, that it would slowly be broken down to feed new life, felt much more true. In this process I noticed an overwhelming desire to photograph, re-read, and take my time with each thing; not quite ready to let go, despite the certainty of the ending. It is not lost on me that this product of creation is still very much memorializing this chapter of my life, but the process of intentionally cutting up each thing and weaving them into the compost heap was an exercise that allowed for an energetic shift through the transformation of each material.

I proposed this piece with the idea that it would be a mixed media installation, with a textile focus, but I didn't have a set plan for how each species would be constructed. Instead, I would play with the materials at hand and discover how each creature wanted to be made. At some point in time this began to be characteristic of my creative practice and although rewarding, it tends to cause me a great deal of stress. Actively deciding to give up some control in pursuit of making something that did not just come from my mind alone, but through my body's relationship to the materials.

Having to trust completely in my own process is  
vulnerable and exhausting  
and yet the only way I know how to make meaningful work.

Like life,  
trusting in the process  
instead of following a prescribed path  
or executing a plan.

*Letting the work make you.*

The development of each animal, plant, and fungi in this project was very much an experimental process. While the focus was not to make each creature a hyper-realistic representation of the real species, I was challenged by the task of making 3D pieces that still captured their essence in some way. The making of each element was accompanied with different musings and meandering questions. I began with the mushrooms, struggling with them initially looking "too crafty". I spent some time reflecting on why this would be a problem, attempting to understand the childish, at times negative connotation associated with those words. In breaking down what makes something look crafty I come to realize that it is the obviousness that someone's hands were involved in the making of that thing and can therefore be imperfect. The idea that something is crafty, tethers the creation



*Untitled  
2025  
Digital collage*

to its maker; which is actually quite radical in a world of AI generated art and industrial mass-production. It is in the making of something where "meaning and knowing [can] unfold in sentient reciprocity between people and materials in real-time movement." (Hofverberg & Kronlid, 2018, p. 958) After establishing these roots I was able to move forward without this fear, knowing that through this process I was doing the very thing which I set out to do. Cultivate meaning through the relationships formed with materials.

As I began the soft sculptures of the raven and coyote I had to resist the urge to simply obtain a sewing pattern to execute the animals seamlessly. Intimidated by the potential of failure and the risk of creating something that looked nothing like the creatures which I was irreverently trying to recreate, I knew that simply using a pre-existing pattern would limit the potential takeaways revealed in a trial and error process. There is a lot of waste that comes with trial and error, making moves without certainty means often having to scrap what you've done. The part of me that is working on a timeline, desiring flawless and easy execution of the project at hand resents this, but even worse is the wasted time that goes into incessant deliberation without action, in fear of failure. Within this dance, I am led to accept that the only way to navigate the process of "not knowing" is through doing and how abundantly fertile that space is. Everytime I must undo something, I unravel previous threads of knowing, forming new pathways of knowledge through my own experience. Each soft sculpture was partially stuffed with fragments of memorabilia that were used within the compost heap, representing the transfer of nutrients from species to species.

The bugs and ghost pipe were both sculpted through clay, a medium which always feels to me like a direct portal for earth connection through the hands. Initially, I had visions of crocheting the ghost plant using a translucent filament to mimic the see-through nature of the plant. I was quite attached to this idea, searching high and low for the right material to execute this vision, to no avail. Eventually, I had to let go of this idea. Much like the ghost pipe itself which defies characteristics of what a plant should look like, I had to allow my representation of it to take on a different form as well.

Throughout the many months between the inception and installation of this work I was invited to question any notion that our life or death is ever in solitude. To believe this is to ignore the multispecies intermingling within and around our human bodies, separating ourselves from nature and rejecting our animal nature. When we center humans in death, we reject our sacred wildness. When we reject our wildness and see animals, plants, and fungi as "other", it becomes a lot easier to pardon the environmental destruction that has taken place at our hands. So whenever you are given the chance, it is a worthwhile pursuit to spend a little time connecting with the other-than-human worlds at our fingertips and feet.

8 months post-mortem



*In the midst of working on The Bardo, I was reached out to by my ex-partner offering to return something I had made for him (a garment which ended up in the compost heap). Following that encounter I was struck by these words, which came fully formed, and demanded a textile piece of their own. Warranting no explanation but the words embroidered by my hands.*

# Signs of Life

DEATH

How is it that, now  
I keep stumbling upon death  
Is it just the season  
or have I just become more attuned to it?  
Tree branch growing through the eye  
of a racoon skull  
Tufts of matted fur from a rabbit foot,  
bone exposed and broken.

“Death isn't oblivion. It's the great remembering. I pray to the dead to help me remember who I am while I'm still alive.”

**-Perdita Finn**



*Signs of life 1*  
2025  
Inkjet on mixed textiles, organic material  
(goldenrod & blue jay)  
21" x 23"



*Signs of life 2*  
2025  
Inkjet on mixed textiles, organic material (lichen,  
Ganoderma & horse chestnut)  
20" x 27"

As I immersed myself in this research project over the past two years I started to see signs of death more than ever before. I began collecting these moments, holding on to dead plants and photographing the bones of animals whose bodies had otherwise decomposed. In an effort to expand this visual library of death I posted a call out for others to contribute their own photographs which reflected this theme. I experimented with printing these photographs using my inkjet printer on several different fabrics, with the idea of creating a textile archive of rot. When I landed on a fabric that I liked, I printed and stitched together all of the images in a way that resembled a photo album. Although I had executed my original idea, it didn't feel quite right. I played around with adding beaded embroidery on top of the images to add dimension, but I was feeling called to abandon the piece and take a less strategic approach. I am reminded of this quote from a study on human-material relationships formed through craft within environmental education:

“making should not primarily be approached as projects, i.e. processes that start with an idea about what we want to achieve – an artefact – where practitioners impose forms that are internal on a material world ‘out there’ (20f ). [Instead, making as a] growth process of joined human and material forces: I want to think of making, instead, as a process of growth. This is to place the maker from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials. These materials are what he has to work with, and in the process of making he ‘joins forces’ with them, bringing them together or splitting them apart, synthesising and distilling, in anticipation of what might emerge. (21)” (Hofverberg and Kronlid, 2018, p. 958)

Starting off as a project idea that was simply executed, my first iteration of this piece was not a growth oriented process. In putting this aside and beginning again with a process centered in play, I return to a more familiar place of creative expression that aligns with the body of work I had produced thus far. Mixing and matching organic materials and photographs, experimenting with different compositions, and using various stitches by machine or hand felt a lot more like a growth process. A joining of forces between me and the materials resulted in something of a collaged-scrapbook feel; a keepsake of the signs of rot and death I had stumbled upon while working on this project.

The completed works displayed a more chaotic, organic energy that felt more resonant of nature's cycles and lessons, or so I thought. It wasn't until my friend Emily pointed out that this piece, much like *Hands that hold too tightly*, speaks to that same theme of holding onto something through chemical or technological means. Using a camera and an inkjet printer to capture and memorialize these moments, holding on to death in a way that would not be physically possible without these technologies we have become reliant on. I think this is a perfect example of what makes the process of art making as a research methodology so special. It is often not until you have completed the work or until you share the work with others, that meaning is revealed and isn't that true of life too? Sometimes we need to see the thing all the way through before we can understand the “why” of it all. Where I could have chosen to call this pair of collages “Signs of Death”, it felt fitting to title them “Signs of Life” as a nod to all the life that came before and the life that will come after.



*Untitled*  
2025  
*Inkjet & mixed textiles*

# Exhibition Reflections

As part of Andil Gosine's Nature's Wild exhibition series and York's 31st Eco Arts Festival, this collection of work was showcased in the Crossroads Gallery in March 2025. Students, professors, and friends filled the gallery space, navigating the visual poetics of rot as developed through this research-creation project. *The Bardo* installation sat in the center of the room, while the rest of the pieces lined the gallery walls. Modern Biology's *Mushroom Dance* played through the speakers. In the corner of the room lied a journal where patrons could reflect and respond to the following questions:

*What are you letting die in you?*

*Who is that death feeding?*

A common thread amongst many of the answers was perfectionism, a need to let that part of them die. This felt fitting, as much of the process of creating these pieces in collaboration with plants and fungi involved relinquishing any notions of perfection. In my experience of working with organic materials, there is no choice but to surrender control. I believe that stepping out of the mindset that perfection is the goal, makes room for many more perspectives and possibilities to take root. Another common response was around letting go of fear; fear of loss or abandonment. Ultimately, this whole project was a processing of those fears and the very death-like nature of any great loss. It is no surprise that exploring these concepts through art would be a valuable tool, but the added layer of accepting the process as a collaboration with forces outside of one's own contributed to an even deeper understanding of death and loss.

It is my belief that exploring themes such as these through the creative and spiritual practice of making is a powerful and accessible portal for developing wisdom. In hopes of continuing this research project further, my next steps would include guiding other people through this creative process centered around presence, non-attachment, and multispecies collaboration. Conducting participatory research to witness other people's revelatory processes and what hyphal threads might connect one person's experience to another's, weaving a greater web of knowledge within this context.



*Guests observing "Hands that hold too tightly" on opening night of Eco-Arts Festival, March 2025.*

## Conclusion

According to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the bardo state, the space between death and rebirth, is a 49 day period. The experiences of personal deaths and rebirths that inspired the works within this collection took far longer than that. As I contemplate the ending of this project I am met with a deep reverence for this period of my life in which I was able to focus on creative experimentation and connection to natural materials in the name of research. As much as I hoped this experience would be meaningful, I was many times met with doubts and anxiety throughout the process. I think that despite resonating with teachings which inspire a trusting in life's unfolding and practicing non-attachment to outcomes, we live in a world that very much wants to *know*, with certainty and clarity before moving forward. Unfortunately, I too am impacted by this desire, but I really do think that it takes something away from experiencing the mystery of life. Following through with this project was a resistance to this conditioning and I feel as though choosing to conduct my research in this way has truly created more space in my life for the ephemeral and unknown bits of life that often elicit fear. Recognizing the tension that exists between what I have come to know through this creative practice versus what is predominantly understood about death, this project has made me profoundly aware of the potential for research-creation practices to bridge gaps and alleviate those tensions. I cannot be sure of what any of this means in the grand scheme of accepting the literal death and decay of mine or my loved ones bodies, but I am leaving this project with a greater capacity to exist in these otherwise unfamiliar realms of rot.



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As previously mentioned this project was largely inspired by Shawn Wilson's, Research is Ceremony text which offered critical insight on relationship building within research and was influential in how I moved through this creation process. The work of researchers Remina Greenfield and Shuyi Cao has also been influential for me in my research process as well. Their articles on the aesthetics and politics of decay, along with their experimental art collective Decompose have profoundly shaped my perspectives on decay. My research feels like an extension of some of the questions posed throughout their work. A preliminary point of inspiration that came before beginning any of this research was the *Sympoiesis // Fruiting Bodies* (2023) exhibit at the plumb gallery, particularly the work of Rachel Crummey who explores collaborating with fungi to reveal non-linear and emergent intelligence. There are a few others that I wish to name as muses and foundational blocks for this research, including the works of Sophie Strand, Priya Subberwal, Mara June, and Ash Ritter. All of them are educators and writers who infuse magic and mystery into their ecological writings, queering topics of decomposition, death, and grief in an inspiring way.

Lastly, I would like to thank the non-human lives which made this investigation possible. The collaboration with plants, animals, and fungi as both material and muse is what, without a doubt, made this project so special.



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**Let Us Rot Exhibition responses to the following questions:**

\*What are you letting die in you?

\*Who is that death feeding?

Unchecked projections of my feelings onto others

Deeper awareness of others & myself

Structure & perfection

The ability to let myself let go

Perfectionism

Progress

The approval of others

Self authenticity

Putting myself & my work in a box

This death is feeding my creativity & authentic self

The need for perfection

Myself-giving space to be beautifully & authentically grotesque

Workaholism

Life balance

Bitterness & resentment for the things that have hurt me

My laughter, joy & silly heart

Pressure & expectations I put on myself

Negative energies

The need to fix & carry the burdens of others

The voice that demands progress, justice & change for myself & others

Fear of losing things in life

Anxiety

Fear.

It was always meant to decompose

Rebirth happens on its own timeline

This cycle is inevitable.

Fear of abandonment, fear of judgment, fear to be myself.

Unworthiness & self doubt, scarcity around love, pleasure & finances

This death feeds personal & collective growth, this death feeds alignment

The approval of my family

The need for personal joy & satisfaction

The feeling of the unknown

The pit in my stomach

Ever since covid I spend new years full of grief. I'm trying to let my need for control & fear of the end die.

My fear of dying

It's a fight though

You know

Which will win eventually...

\*Sigh\*

