

# *Forage*

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
In the Department of Art and Art History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

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Photo: Carey Shaw.

## EXHIBITION STATEMENT

My intuition is the catalyst for the diverse assortment of materials I collect trusting that a deeper relationship will emerge over time. I am moved to make art outside of traditional practices, energized by both natural materials and found objects spotted in urban green spaces by virtue of chance encounters. Sooner or later, cycles of transformation evolve as I begin altering my collection of everyday materials into new objects or configurations exploring ways of organization and display. This ritual of care calls attention to histories of use, consumer culture, and values surrounding collecting and remembering in how we attend to and construct our personal narratives.

In this paper, I explore some of the social determinants of my artistic practice, track the things that matter to me, and account for the ways my everyday lived experience seeps into and informs my work. I situate the transdisciplinary terrain of my history alongside an engagement with contemporary artists who have influenced and impacted my MFA research culminating in this exhibition. *Forage* seeks to inspire a reflective response from viewers, possibly eliciting memories of their own collecting endeavours, the thrill of the find, and how these selected materials embody the energy of their existence.

As my art practice has evolved over the past two years, I have become aware that my forays into collecting and the types of materials and processes I am drawn to started in a childhood nurtured by the influences of my grandmothers. Juxtaposing my maternal and paternal grandmothers as the “the Country Mouse” and “the City Mouse,” the symbolic and emblematic cousins from Aesop’s Fable, has long been an amusing anecdote to which I attribute my ability to find inspiration in both urban and rural settings. Martha, my country mouse grandmother spent

her married life on Saskatchewan farms in the Rhein area and later moved to Tonkin, a hamlet near Yorkton, where she raised the final three of nine children. Violet, my city mouse grandmother moved from Winnipeg to Regina in her early twenties and raised four children. My way of living is a harmonized hybrid effect of sharing much time and space with each of these women.

My city mouse grandmother Violet had wonderful, brightly coloured, and textured plastic toys for us to play with and offbeat, kitsch collections of objects displayed in cabinets and on window ledges – the most prized of these being a large black glass stein with an image of “The Fonz” from the sitcom *Happy Days* (1974-1984). She spurred my vinyl record collection and, subsequently, difficult conversations with my parents with gifts like Madonna’s 1984 album *Like a Virgin* for my eighth birthday and the “unchristian” Ouija Board for Christmas. After school, we watched soap operas, which she endearingly called “the stories,” while experimenting with different hairstyles on me. On weekends, she would don a nice dress and encourage me to embellish myself in her collection of trendy, plastic jewellery and Grandpa would drive us to the Army and Navy Department Store for a “treasure hunt.”

My country mouse grandmother Martha also had colourful plastic toys to play with, though in unconventional forms: empty bright blue jars of Vicks VapoRub and Vaseline, each bottle she ever purchased cleaned and kept. More than remedies and cure-alls, these once purposeful containers became building blocks, both literal and figurative, alongside empty wooden thread spools. With such a large family, Martha’s entire house was a perpetual treasure hunt, and I was constantly engrossed in digging up tucked-away objects. During my extended visits in the summer, I would unfold and compare old letters in a research effort to design my own unique handwriting – I continue to write in this style. Martha loved to travel, as did her nine



children and their families; I watched their collection of souvenir spoons multiply throughout my childhood, resulting in an extended family of bear-shaped wooden display boards ambling across the kitchen wall. Other vivid oddities in my memory include a colourful collection of twisted glass vases, an enormous inoperative lava lamp, and stacks of the “TV Guide Magazine ” taller than my adult self stored away in the basement.

Prairie weather permitting, my grandmothers were eager to spend as much time as possible outside in their yards. Martha and Violet were both consummate gardeners, investing a lot of energy in growing food from their saved heirloom seeds; I enthusiastically embraced my role as garden guardian, learning by doing season after season in both urban and rural growing environments. Violet turned the entire backyard of their tiny urban lot into a vegetable plot with just enough room for a small concrete patio and my grandfather’s immaculately organized outdoor toilet-turned-woodshop. Their collection of garden décor resembled a small sculptural installation, with projects that brought Violet’s whimsical ideas to fruition. Quirky garden markers, outdoor placemats with bizarre pictures from grandma’s magazines laminated and mounted to cork-backed wood panels, and novelty owl-shaped oven mitts stuffed and fitted to wooden stakes, were placed in strategic locations around the yard.

Contrastingly, Martha had much more room to play, with a sweeping clothesline system bisecting an enormous garden and wooded area. The garden shed housed tools haphazardly, but the back wall contained a counter and shelves to showcase my findings as I pretended I was the shop keeper in the 1985 *Anne of Green Gables* TV series. Instead of offering dresses with puffed-sleeves or twenty-pound sacks of brown sugar, plant materials such as bygone blossoms and foliage, seed pods, fallen nests, old tools, bottles, and keys found in the yard were attentively assembled into varying harmonious orderings for my imaginary customers’ consideration. In the

evening after bath time and the dinner dishes were put away Martha and I would take a pair of flashlights and walk out to my garden shed shop so I could show off my wares and then wander the planted rows, admiring the day's work before bedtime.

As my art practice has evolved over the past two years, I have come to realize that this intergenerational impulse to explore, grow, gather, and sort has been foundational to my contemporary art practice. Prior to my MFA, I was primarily interested in printmaking. As I became comfortable with the foundational principles in the four traditional areas of lithography, screen printing, intaglio, and relief I began breaking with the established rules, rejecting the production of identical images. I started working on one-of-a-kind prints combining printmaking modalities, working with unconventional papers and inks, and responding intuitively to whatever transpired. During my MFA, typical materials in the printmaking lab readied for removal became my focus – the end of their intended purpose was the beginning of their life for me. Ink saturated tarlatan, broken aluminum screen printing frames, and reams of test prints – this signalled the transition from being a printmaker working with a method that produced a "series" to an artist who worked with collections.

Increasingly compelled to collect these destined-to-be-discarded materials, I shifted away from producing prints towards cultivating a deeper awareness of the materials and objects I was habitually collecting, starting to explore ways to transform and arrange them. I employ a preparatory methodology whereby I group and clip like-materials, affectionately referred to as *my bundles*, to an improvised clothesline structure constructed from screws and wire against the longest wall of my studio. This organizational structure allows me to continually consider these materials until conceptual notions of how to transform and arrange them begin to coalesce, guided by a sense of 'wonder' rather than a need to analyse and classify them.

My grandmothers inspired my love of plants, a catalyst for numerous trips I would take to botanical gardens across the world. I found further fascination with the ancillary functions of these expansive gardens: for example, entomologists and their protective display boxes, the herbariums' preservation and organisation method of pressing plant specimens to sheets of paper, and the organisation and display of ingredients used for the preparation of medicines in historical apothecaries. My art practice takes inspiration from the conventional curatorial care of biological collections by transforming, and then organising my own found and foraged collections of commercial and natural materials from one state into another. I cut petrified stalks of once towering garden sunflowers into several shorter segments and bundled them with a length of blue tarlatan tied in a bow. I form orbs by individually pressing pine needle quills into round forms. I undress wine bottles to store accumulations of like materials. Borrowing from the historical cabinets of curiosity, I use boxes that once contained music scrolls for player pianos from the early 20<sup>th</sup> as individual compartments to house small collections within a larger display system.

Often described as the “precursors” to contemporary museums, cabinets of curiosity were privately-owned collections which thrived across Europe from the late fifteenth century until well in to the eighteenth century. The term ‘cabinet’ was a flexible one. It might refer to the physical cabinet or apparatus which housed a given collection to the room or series of rooms in which the collection was housed and displayed to the collection itself. Collections were often kept within a private residence but might also appear in semi-public settings such as churches, gardens, libraries, meeting places, and coffee houses, as well as in purpose-built settings. Collectors were most often male and predominantly of the upper-class, such as royalty, the aristocracy, and to some extent the clergy, but some were lower-ranking scholars, physicians and

apothecaries who might retain a collection of specimens for study purposes, as well as the practical business of making medicines. Cabinets of curiosity typically comprised both natural specimens and objects created or modified by humans. Falling from fashion in the nineteenth century, they were replaced by public and private art museums.<sup>1</sup> The *Cabinets* had a profound influence on contemporary art during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, operating under different principles of organisation, display, and interpretation framed through distinct historical, social, and cultural contexts. Today, the museum has reappropriated the idea of the cabinet of curiosities,<sup>2</sup> with the cabinet itself becoming increasingly prevalent as a subject of study, critical tool, and *modus operandi* for contemporary artists, predominately within the realms of assemblage, installation, and conceptual art.<sup>3</sup>

Early in the first semester of my MFA program, some faculty members encouraged me to study the works of American contemporary artist Mark Dion after seeing how I organised my studio space: like objects organised into jars, boxes, and clipped to a makeshift clothesline. Dion is one of the foremost contemporary artists to consistently and candidly reference the cabinets of curiosity in his work, drawing considerable attention for his reinterpretations of conventions associated with this early form of archiving and interdisciplinary display.<sup>4</sup> A student of art, science, history, and popular culture, over the past twenty-five years, Dion continues to craft an expansive body of work investigating the role cultural institutions play in shaping our

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<sup>1</sup> Sotheby's Institute of Art, "Cabinets of Curiosities and The Origin of Collecting," Sotheby's Institute of Art, accessed May 29, 2021, <https://www.sothebysinstitute.com/news-and-events/news/cabinets-of-curiosities-and-the-origin-of-collecting>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas F Soapes, "The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics. Tony Bennett," *The Library Quarterly* 67, no.1 (1997): 78-79, [https://www-jstor-org.cyber.usask.ca/stable/40038564?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.cyber.usask.ca/stable/40038564?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Moore, "Links between the Renaissance Cabinet of Curiosities and Contemporary Artists' Works," *Financial Times*, October 11, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/55f966a4-2cfd-11e3-8281-00144feab7de>.

<sup>4</sup> James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: the Museum as Medium* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

understanding of the natural and built environment through the classification and display of artifacts.

Equal parts explorer, historian, naturalist, and collector of curiosities, Dion employs site-specific projects to create installations inspired by his passion for research and collecting. His large-scale installations evoke the past, embodying both the contemporary artist and archeologist while adopting methodologies common to botanists and naturalists.<sup>5</sup> With a spirit of adventure, Dion routinely embarks on collecting expeditions in locales ranging from antique and thrift stores to the edge of the ocean combing for interesting bits of material culture and nature, future fodder for collaborations with museums, libraries, universities, and municipalities around the world. Dion addresses contemporary environmental concerns with intellect, humour, and gravitas. In *Raiding Neptune's Vault: A Voyage to the Bottom of the Canals and Lagoon of Venice*, he combed the bottom of a canal in 1997-1998; in *Tate Thames Dig*, he scoured the banks of London's River Thames in 1999; and, in *New England Digs* (2001), he scrutinized the ongoing accumulation of ocean plastics in his own cultural backyard.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the early digs uncovered primarily glass and ceramics, this most recent one largely exposed ghost nets, plastic bottles, and Styrofoam, highlighting the realities of the refuse we leave behind. Each project has three phases: the actual dig, the cleaning and cataloguing of the finds, and the eventual display of artifacts in a contemporary version of the cabinets of curiosity.

Like Dion, I may borrow from a methodology, but unlike an authentic archaeological dig for example, my unearthing has no tangible scientific value. Instead, I employ metaphor to lend meaning to my gathering, ordering, and displaying, calling to mind the basement root cellar at

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Erickson, Andrea Barrett, and Lucy Flint, *Mark Dion - Misadventures of a 21st-Century Naturalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Dion, *Mark Dion: New England Digs* (Brockton, MA: Fuller Museum of Art, 2001).

my country mouse's home. As the self-appointed jar organizer, I had several criteria to consider after a long weekend of canning: style of jar, colour and texture of preserves, size, and quantity. Constant reorganization was a must as visiting family procured their preferences before departing. For me, the impulse to gather and what to gather is essentially ineffable. It is a way of extending my cultivated appreciation for and perpetual honouring of the rhythms of nature with its shifting forms and textures in a small Canadian prairie city with four distinct seasons.

While Dion routinely utilizes a display cabinet, other contemporary artists like Barry McGee employ a series of rooms for his installations that do not so much occupy space as engulf it. In 2005, I was living in London, England. Every weekend, I would meet up with a friend at Trafalgar Square to choose an exhibition at random from the *Guardian's* extensive exhibition listings. I don't recall what piqued our curiosity for McGee's exhibition at Stuart Shave's Modern Art Gallery, but one September Saturday we navigated our way to an obscure East London location, entering the exhibition space through the back of an overturned van planted partly in the alley and partly in the building. Energetic colourful patterns and sculptural forms poured into corners and seeped into adjacent rooms, walls overflowed with collections of framed illustrations and images that seemed to assimilate into a large, amoeba-like form - the interior of the neglected, upturned van became an eccentric viewing space.

The view inside the gallery possessed a striking similarity to a world already familiar to those who wander the city: the discarded remnants of urban material culture left behind, the contemporary archeology of the future. Empty bottles, spray-paint cans, tagged signs, televisions, wrenches, and scrap wood and metal make up just some of the materials he utilizes for his large-scale installations, catalyzed by a lived experience rooted in street culture. I am reminded of my city mouse's home in North Central Regina - an area that suffers a negative

reputation from crime and violence - where I looked forward to finding enticing new bottle openers to add to my collection on our many walks through back alleys to and from the park. Violet and I also spent many hours knitting and/or crocheting bright and cheery cozies to adorn “The Club” – an anti-theft device my grandfather employed to lock the steering column of his car protecting it from Regina’s notorious “Oldsmobile gang,” a group of teen car thieves in the mid-90s that targeted this make of vehicle. In McGee’s work, the milieu is the message - San Francisco’s Street Culture reimagined within the context of the museum through his open engagement with it. My friend and I have reminisced about this exhibition many times, but we could never recall McGee’s name. The summer before I started my MFA program, I happened upon a video of McGee speaking from his 2012 retrospective exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive on Art21.live – the always-on broadcast channel from *Art:21* – *Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* PBS series.<sup>7</sup>

McGee was affiliated with the intentionally lowbrow Mission School art movement of the 1990s and 2000s centred in San Francisco’s Mission District.<sup>8</sup> Using a visual vocabulary borrowing elements from pop culture like comics, vagabond art, and sign painting, McGee’s work addresses a range of issues, from individual survival and social malaise to alternative forms of community and communication. His work is both refreshingly casual in the gallery and surprisingly elegant on the street. Outside, he works with spontaneity in an environment unplanned; gallery shows typically require work made in an art-studio-silo with a provided and detailed floor map. The viewer’s intention shifts from actively seeking art in the gallery to

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<sup>7</sup> Art21, “Retrospective, Barry McGee,” August 9, 2013, video, 4:36, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/barry-mcgee-retrospective-short/>.

<sup>8</sup> Art21, “Barry McGee & Margaret Kilgallen in Place,” September 21, 2001, Video, 13:53, <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/barry-mcgee-margaret-kilgallen-in-place-segment/>.

stumbling upon it in the streets. McGee merges a resistance to authority and the establishment with the work itself while also showing signs of assimilation with the more formalized art world, altering the perception of and awareness around street art and its communal spirit.

McGee's assemblage of empty liquor bottles (untitled, 2006), painted with imaginative portrait heads magnifies inebriation, hinting at the underworld as do the television sets collected curbside from thrift stores – once-modern, desirable products now often-abandoned. The dynamic of consumer capitalism and its constant validation of the new is acknowledged by viewing new images through outdated technology. These forgotten and forlorn objects now serve as supports for innovative new images returning it to the mainstream as contemporary art.

Akin to McGee, in one series, I amassed a collection of commonly undervalued, mass-produced objects and byproducts reminiscent of my own everyday experiences, wonderings, and gathering with an intention to alter their utility. These include rusty nails collected during walks near demolition sites in the city arranged by size and distressed shape and pressed into a salvaged cedar plank, retail boxes deconstructed down to their 2D shapes to be replicated from scrap wood veneer and a patchwork of stitched-together kraft paper take-out bags, and metal springs retrieved from an outworn sofa-bed embellished in a coat of bright paint. These transformations ennoble these materials, making them into something greater than the sum of their parts while challenging visitors to consider their legitimacy as museum-worthy art objects. What is it that makes one thing ordinary and another extraordinary?

Heading into the final semester of my MFA program, I discovered the work of artist Lyndal Osborne through *borderLINE*, the Remai Modern's contribution to the 2020 Biennial of Contemporary Art co-hosted by the Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA). Housed in a small, intimate room within the larger open exhibition space was her mixed media installation, *Drought*.



Entering this dark-walled room with its dramatic and discerningly directed lighting emphasizing collected materials like bones, flowers, and leaves, I was immersed in a visual experience encouraging connections between thought and sensory perception distinct from the larger exhibition. Melding mystery, magic, and majesty, Osborne creates environments familiar yet strange, which speak to transformation within nature and issues relating to the impacts of agribusiness on the environment, the intricacies of stewardship, and radical approaches to resilience and renewal. Her primary media are odd and beautiful found objects that catch her attention on long walks near her Edmonton home or on her travels: kelp from an artist's residency in Newfoundland, a delimbed Christmas tree, sea sponges, and wasps' nests, to name a few.

Shortly after discovering Osborne's work, I was invited by a graduate committee member to consider the Australian Bowerbird as inspiration for an installation approach to my gathering and transformation of materials. These birds are renowned for their unique courtship behaviour: males build a structure, decorating it with sticks and brightly coloured mass-produced found objects in an attempt to attract a mate.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Osborne's own fascination with the bird emerged in a survey exhibition entitled *Lyndal Osborne: Bowerbird, Life as Art* at the AGA in 1997.<sup>10</sup> Ethical, lyrical, and ecological, I am drawn to how her aesthetically beautiful installations utilize natural found objects to evoke imperative social commentaries. Like Osborne, I treasure plants in both life and death by collecting and incorporating this natural material in an assertion that the service of plants does not end once the height of production has

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<sup>9</sup> John A. Endler, "Bowerbirds, Art and Aesthetics," *Communicative & Integrative Biology* 5, no. 3 (2012): pp. 281-283, <https://www.tandfonline-com.cyber.usask.ca/doi/full/10.4161/cib.19481>.

<sup>10</sup> Art Gallery of Alberta, "LYNDAL OSBORNE: Bowerbird, Life as Art," Art Gallery of Alberta, accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.youraga.ca/exhibitions/lyndal-osborne-bowerbird-life-art>.

passed. Collecting, storing, and organizing the foliage, seeds and roots serves as an archive with future relevance; observing, collecting, and transforming these materials from the world around me into objects highlights their transitory existence and the impermanence of the world and our place in it. Like the Bowerbird I treat the man made and natural materials in my assemblages with equal favour.

Selectively choosing the ordinary as the extraordinary subject - this is something I attribute to an ineffable intuitive impulse. However, through my MFA studies, I discovered likeminded contemporary artists like Dion, McGee, and Osborne, but it wasn't until I began reflecting on my own relationship to my art practice that I began to draw a deeper connection dating back to sharing time and space with my city mouse and country mouse grandmothers in childhood. This intergenerational relationship is at the heart of my exhibition, the influence of my grandmothers remaining immediate even after their human existence, resulting in a wide variety of artifacts and tokens from life. In the story of *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse*, the cousins realized, after visiting one another, that they were indeed best suited to their original way of life. Conversely, I was equally delighted with and fell easily into the rhythm of both grandmothers' environments never comparing the two, just content to be exactly where I was. A self-proclaimed "Jill of all trades," I have a new awareness surrounding the roots of my resourcefulness resulting from the coalescence of these experiences.

What is worth collecting? How do we honour perceived value? Who decides how we classify and display artifacts? What sort of stories do specific collections tell? By intervening in art-historical and museum-based systems of knowledge-making and keeping, I wish to attract viewers by intentionally leveraging an elegant aesthetic and merging natural history with its intrinsic ecological wisdom alongside repurposed mass-produced objects. The content and layout

of this installation are driven by an evocative impulse to arrange by size, shape, colour, and utility through a deep-seated trust in my intuition and skillset. While I take note of installation ideas that may surface beforehand, the freedom to respond in the moment as I work to situate these objects in the viewing space is vital to my process. This work and approach revitalise in me a sense of wonder for the world we live in, its beauty, fragility, and complexity and the urgency of caring for it.



Fig 01

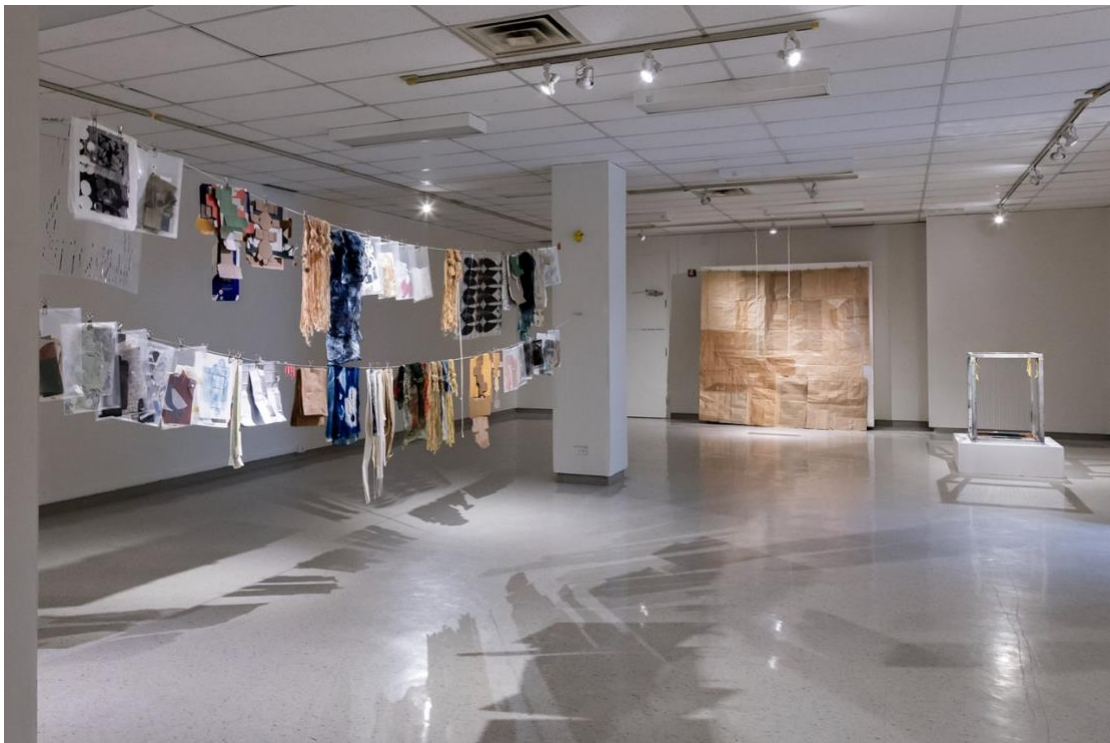


Fig 02

Fig 01: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Installation view gallery south end. Photo: Carey Shaw.  
Fig 02: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Installation view gallery north end. Photo: Carey Shaw.



Fig 03



Fig 04

Fig 03: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Installation view gallery south to north. Photo: Carey Shaw.

Fig 04: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Installation view of table and string line on back wall. Photo: Carey Shaw.



Fig 05



Fig 06



Fig 07



Fig 08

Fig 05-07: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Details from table. Photos: Carey Shaw.

Fig 08: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Installation view of table and two viewing pods. Photo: Carey Shaw.



Fig 09



Fig 10



Fig 11



Fig 12

Fig 09-12: Jasmin Fookes, *Forage*, 2021. Left viewing pod with player piano paper scrolls and illuminated prints on translucent papers. Photos: Carey Shaw.



Fig 13



Fig 14



Fig 15

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Fig 16



Fig 17

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Fig 18



Fig 19

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Fig 20



Fig 21

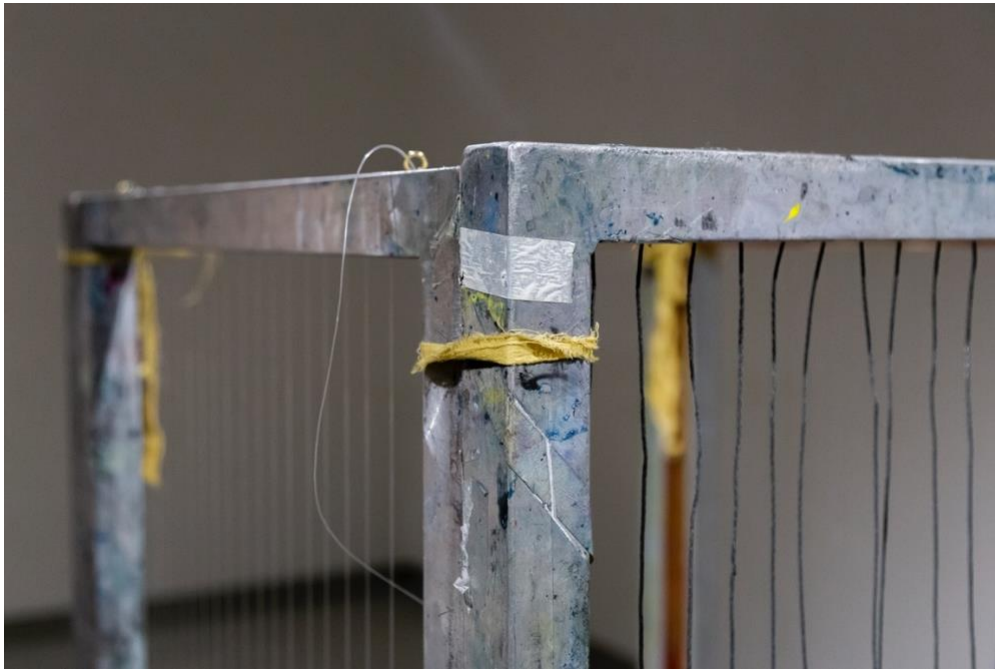


Fig 22

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Fig 23



Fig 24



Fig 25

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