

SELENA INGRAM

2020 ART & ART HISTORY MFA THESIS EXHIBITION



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, detail of test installation on day 4

DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

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2020 ART & ART HISTORY MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

The *2020 Art and Art History MFA Thesis Exhibition* features the works of MFA candidates in Columbia's Interdisciplinary Arts and Media and Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts programs. The exhibition, which includes artists' books, prints, drawings, textiles, sculptures, photography, sound, projections, and installation works, represents the culmination of three plus years' worth of development of a cohesive body of work for each artist. This exhibition, taking place at the Glass Curtain Gallery has been postponed to a later date due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This edition of the DEPS Artist Profile Series intends to give you an in-depth look at the work to come as well as a deep glimpse into the artists process.

Participating Artists: Julia Arredondo, Mary Gring, Rebecca Grace Hill, Selena Ingram, Maria VanDyken Li, Skye Murie, and Andrew Shoemaker

The *2020 Art and Art History MFA Thesis Exhibition* is presented in conjunction with the Art and Art History department and Paul Catanese, Director of Graduate Studies for Art & Art History and Professor at Columbia College Chicago.

FRAGILE MORPHOLOGIES OF PULP BODIES

Selena Ingram explores the ways in which overlapping physical, social, and cultural ecosystems surround our bodies. Through research into anatomy, microbiology, and environmental science Ingram's projects evolve into both written and visual elements. The handmade paper she generates is made out of recycled materials, or out of other waste materials hoarded over time. The page substrate then visually parallels the unique materials our presence leaves behind at any given moment, whether that is personal waste, microbiotic impact, or other types of slowly degrading evidence. The final works stand in for the physical body, presented as a collection of detritus created by the ecology of her own body and the particular environment investigated.

Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies is an installation of handmade paper that functions as a mirror to the ongoing interchanges between our bodies, water and domestic environments. Paper sculptures of water fixtures like bathtubs and sinks, cast from the apartment where she lives, are covered in organic detritus, hair and soil; meanwhile, water trickles through the paper, dissolving the structures over time back into a fibrous pulp. This project visualizes a nexus highlighting the fragility of our relationship to the water infrastructure we are dependent upon, and the way our own embodied boundaries ultimately dissolve into trans-corporeality. Part sculpture, part pop-up amateur lab, part investigation of domestic sources of water, this project functions best as it falls apart, reckoning our continuous but permeable state.

Selena Ingram is an artist and researcher working in Chicago. Originally from Atlanta, Ingram studied Printmaking and Microbiology at the University of Georgia before pursuing her MFA in Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts at Columbia College Chicago. Combining interests in papermaking, bookbinding, microbial ecologies, and environmental research, Ingram's work ranges from traditional artist book editions to sculptural paper installations.

For more information on Selena Ingram:

<https://www.selenaingram.com/>



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies (Sink), 2020, handbeaten kozo fiber and rattlesnake master leaf fiber, with inclusions of horsehair, soil, and mica. Cast from sink in Ingram's apartment.



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies (Pipes), 2020, handbeaten kozo fiber and rattlesnake master leaf fiber, with inclusions of horsehair, soil, and mica. Cast from PVC pipes.



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies (Pipe Detail), 2020, handbeaten kozo fiber and rattlesnake master leaf fiber, with inclusions of horsehair, soil, and mica. Cast from PVC pipes.



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, test installation

Artist Note: In order to test the pumping system and general design, I set up a basic test with a handful of pipes, a sink, and a toilet, suspended above a small wooden basin that houses the pump and water tank. Materials included wood, assorted hardware, vinyl-coated steel cable, fishing line, airline tubing and plastic connectors, as well as handbeat kozo fiber and rattlesnake master leaf fiber, with inclusions of horsehair, soil, and mica.



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, detail of test installation, on day 1

Artist Note: Here you can see the sink and several pipes up close, along with the airline tubing and fishing line.



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, detail of test installation on day 4

Artist Note: Here you can see the sink, after soaking with water for a total of three days, has completely collapsed on itself. In the top right corner, a pipe has completely changed its shape as well.



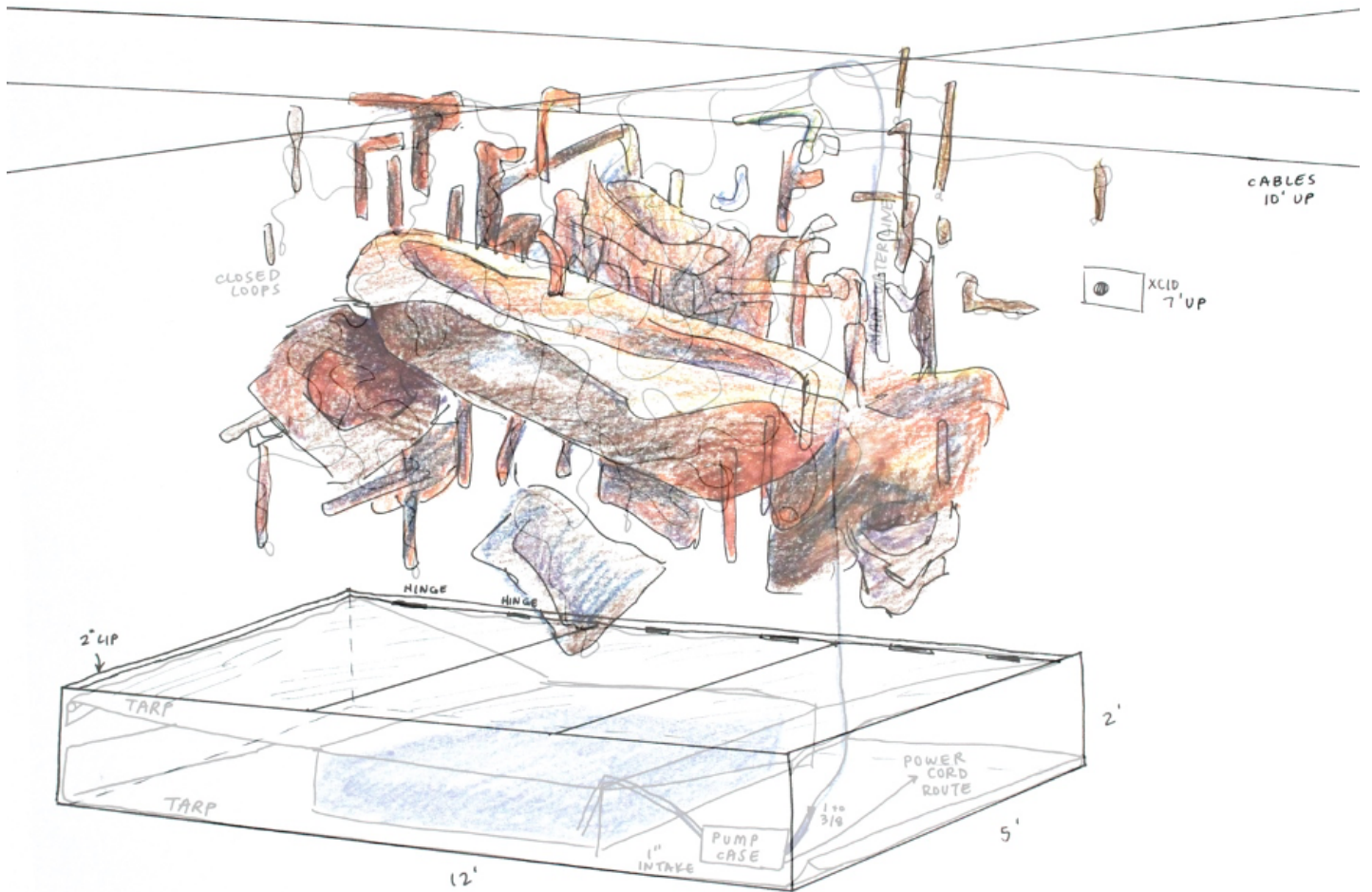
Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, bathroom casting process

Artist Note: In order to make the larger structures (which so far include sinks, toilets, and a bathtub) I cast from the apartments I live in. This image shows me pulling apart rattlesnake master leaf fibers in order to mix with the paper pulp, before I begin casting.



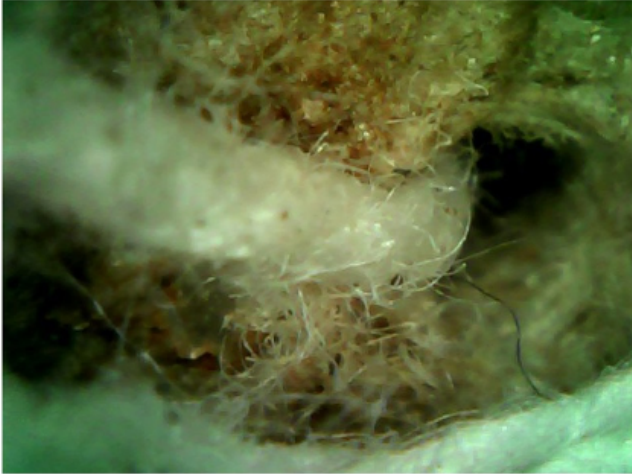
Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, bathroom casting process

Artist Note: This image shows my bathroom after I've tamped pulp into the shape of the sink. I cast different ways - tamped, wet sheet - in order to allow for water to degrade various structures at different rates. I also end up using pots, cups, and tulle in the process.



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, Glass Curtain Gallery Installation Diagram

Artist Note: This diagram shows the visible installation and its guts in one image; the viewer would see a large suspension of 200 pipes, several sinks and toilets, as well as a bathtub, all above a wooden basin covered in screens roughly 5' x 12' x 1' in size. The "guts" consists of tubing sewn throughout the paper structures, with holes throughout the tubing allowing water to slowly leak out and soak through the paper; this all stems from a main tube leading to a shallow water tank and pump hidden in the basin.



Microscopic Studies, 2019

Artist Note: This is a collection of images taken at roughly 500x magnification of the surface of a paper pipe, showing the landscape of paper fibers, threads, and soil particles present in the material. Images like these will be included in the artist book edition I am making as part of the project.

INTERVIEW WITH SELENA INGRAM

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: Tell me about your background, what made you want to explore the connection between microbiology, science, and art?

Selena Ingram: Going into undergrad, I knew I wanted to take science classes as well as art classes, just based on my love for drawing and natural history. I started off declaring a double major in art and biology. After working in the university's dining halls in my first year, I managed to land a job in the Marine Science Department in a lab focused on microbial ecology. I loved that position and was lucky enough to have an extremely generous professor, several post-doctoral fellows, grad students, and staff who were happy to train me and allow me to run different types of experiments. I quickly changed my Bachelor of Science major to microbiology so that I could take more advanced classes directly related to the lab work. At the same time, I was also taking basic intro-to-studio art classes, one of which was a relief printing course. I absolutely fell in love with the wood carving process, and then the papermaking process, and then book binding... In 2017, I earned a BFA in Printmaking & Book Arts alongside a BS in Microbiology. Up until then, I had kept my print work and my lab work separate; my science classes were a relief from long hours in the print studio, while my long hours in the print studio were a relief from studying for microbio exams. It wasn't until after graduation, when I was looking at graduate programs and trying to figure out what I really wanted to do next, that I began reflecting on why I was so intensely drawn to both fields. There are tons of conceptual parallels, but honestly, I just have to admit I'm drawn to slow handiwork and puzzles, which apply to pipetting samples, microscopy studies, papermaking, printmaking, and bookbinding.

KF: What is it about papermaking that most appeals to you as an artist and as someone concerned with science?

SI: Papermaking is one massive experiment in versatility. Fibers can be made into paper sheets for printing, sculptures, imitation fabric, or yarn. Paper can be used to create delicate miniature forms or massive installations. There are endless possibilities, but regardless of what you're making, paper requires you to work in a scientific way—constructing hypotheses, experimenting with material and process, and problem-solving along the way to best produce what you envision.

Because of this, you have to learn a lot about the material itself in order to really control the outcome. Not unlike our bodies, paper pulp is highly dependent on water and sensitive to a range of environmental stimuli, even as it can be transformed from tough plant fiber to flexible paper sheet. Different taxonomic groups of plants, as well as different types of plant structures—seed, leaf, stem—produce different types of pulp. At a cellular level, plant cells contain a protein called cellulose which yields rigid cell walls, giving most plants their vertical-growing structure. Cellulose provides the basis for the strength of a sheet of paper; it is the cellulosic fibers that are focused on and isolated through cooking and stripping techniques.

Given the number of variables that could change the final pulp or paper material, determining whether a plant could be useful for hand papermaking involves a significant amount of bodily intensive labor, experimentation, and play at all stages of a plant's processing. The pulp exists as a peculiar state of fibers; at this stage the fibers make hydrogen bonds with water molecules, lending the thick, mushy physique. The pulp can then be manipulated into objects like sheets, molds, and casts, contorting shape and form as varied as the individual artist's hand. Once the pulp begins to dry, the hydrogen bonds between water molecules and fibers are replaced by hydrogen bonds between fibers instead. Ultimately, papermaking is a series of performances like foraging, cooking, and beating plants into pulp that, along with the materials' natural environment, are made present in the final product. It's the perfect medium for me to play with both creative and scientific concepts, as you can't overlook one or the other in this process.

KF: What first got you interested in using waste material for papermaking? And how do you determine what is usable as a material?

SI: Funny enough, another connection between science and art is the sheer waste of it. Printmaking, at least the editioning that I was doing, requires many pristine sheets of paper, a portion of which aren't even included in the final edition due to print errors. Sometimes I would make the matrix for a print and, too late into the project, realize I didn't even like it. As soon as I found out I could tear up waste prints to make new paper sheets, I started doing so, and that just became part of my practice.

On the other hand, everything had to be sterile in the lab, which meant that everything came wrapped in tons of plastic. The lab I worked in focused on marine microbial ecology and a general, overarching concern is the increasing level of microplastic pollution in bodies of water that then makes its way through marine life and food chain. I couldn't quite reconcile with the fact that I was dependent on plastic in order to carry out research on a subject that in turn is heavily impacted by plastic use. To be clear, sterile wrapping and packaging is vital for lab work (you definitely don't want stray bacteria or other microbes roaming about), but I started collecting some of the large plastic packaging bags our incubation bottles were shipped in, really out of guilt.

The waste materials I collected—whether paper, plastic, fabric scraps, dirt, or otherwise—were also practical in the sense that I was recycling material and giving new life to waste. The paper sheets are never pristine but instead function to preserve detritus, my own or environmental, depending on the conceptual basis of the project. There's certainly a point where recycling fiber won't work, and I have to purchase and supplement in new fibers in order to make large sheets or a large quantity of smaller sheets. However, I try to continue to reuse papers after each project and keep all the scraps for later.

KF: How does the process of formulating a project usually look for you? You've stated in relation to your book work that "the final book stands in for the physical body." How does the process of crafting and finalizing a piece reflect the human experience for you?

SI: I find my projects are different ways of my own processing of and responding to my environment. Projects stem from very intimate, personal experiences, that I try to wrestle with and make sense of in the broader context of what's going on around me. For example, throughout my graduate studies I have been fascinated with ways the tangible book and handmade paper can embody particular personal experiences, or capture a specific definition of "body." Is one's body defined by the amount of microplastic ingested?

The amount of plastic waste created in a month? The number of bathrooms I was sick in? The text messages exchanged, or screenshots saved? If these items or images are held on pages by the reader, bound with a spine, what do they learn about (my)self? In this sense, I found what I was really investigating through books became not necessarily the physical human body (or, more specifically, my own singular experiences), but the complex networks of interactions we are always engaged in within our environment - whether that is physical, cultural, macro- or micro-biotic in scale. I also found that regardless of how we might categorize objects as "art" objects or otherwise, people still have very visceral and specific memories, feelings, and sensations that can be provoked quickly through material alone, particularly unexpected material.

I found my own thoughts on this reflected in ecofeminist, post-humanist theories like those penned by Stacy Alaimo. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Alaimo extensively investigates ways our selves are the culmination of numerous overlapping forces, ranging from the social, political, economical, and environmental processes reverberating through and from ourselves. Alaimo's feminist posthumanism which she terms "trans-corporeality" has been a transformational framework around which my convalescing research and art making precipitates. Trans-corporeality captures the way we are but a nexus of many different exchanges that impact us just as we impact them, within a network of intra-active material agencies linking biological phenomena to class, social and economic structures, to political issues, to other organisms within the ecosystem and vice versa. It also illustrates how, while we may choose to focus on a particular aspect of our bodies, and consider ourselves separate from our environment (a human vs. nature dualism), we are never actually independent from our environment. It further encourages the study of and tracing the effects of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchal hierarchies, and other systemic oppressions have on a person, and even the ways these oppressions affect or are mitigated by surrounding ecologies. I'm interested now more than ever in making work that

highlights these connections, through the lens of my own experiences, as our actions reverberate through each other. The current pandemic we find ourselves in eerily illustrates Alaimo's concept - an illness, not stopped by constructed borders or boundaries, bringing chronic issues of citizenship, healthcare, empathy and economic modes (among countless other complexities!) to a head.

KF: Your thesis project, *Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies*, involves the gradual dissolution of the paper sculptures back into pulp via water. Considering how thoughtful you are about recycling materials and waste; do you have any plans for the life of this pulp once it is broken down again?

SI: Yes! Ideally, I would use the pulp again to make more sheets and then create more sculptures. Because of the sheer quantity of paper structures, I had to order the base kozo fiber from a papermaking supply company, which I then added soil and other collected inclusions into during the process. That being said, my goal was to then reuse the pulp and any paper sculptures still standing to make more structures, to show the project in other spaces, and to re-make the installation specific to each new iteration without needing to purchase or collect new materials.

KF: While the pieces of *Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies* were cast directly from your bathroom, they are not presented in the same literal manner of a bathroom, but rather suspended in the air. What are you hoping to inspire in the viewer with this choice of presentation?

SI: In focusing on the bathroom, I'm interested in narrowing focus onto a particular nexus where the invisible infrastructure of water becomes visible: the kitchen and the bathroom, the most common location to encounter water (speaking to infrastructure within the U.S). The faucet is the typical direct access point, whether it is the kitchen or bathroom sink, and most time spent in direct contact with water is within the structure of the bathroom. We often spend time in bathrooms working to make our bodies presentable in one fashion or another, disposing waste,

cleaning ourselves, belying the effort we spend exerting control over our bodies. However, this process becomes complicated when the body becomes sick, or in some way un-controllable: spending too much time in the bathroom, or discussing causes of improper waste disposal, are taboo. Those bodily functions - shit, piss, pus, mucus - we work to ignore, or at the very least avoid, because it's gross, regardless of the universality of bodily fluid. Like exposure to toxins crossing biological boundaries, body dysfunction becomes illustrative of the social boundaries that are so carefully constructed around what is considered healthy or hygienic and what is considered abject, that which is repellent or disgusting. Having spent years negotiating with my own body in bathrooms due to various gastrointestinal issues, I realized I had become particularly attuned to shame and anxiety over sickness, while fighting to return to "normal." Shame over bodily function can be compounded by societal pressure to perform gender in a particular manner.

Seeing these recognizable fixtures of water infrastructure immediately recalls the viewers back to the space they encounter these objects - namely, bathrooms and kitchens. However, only parts of the structures have been removed from these domestic spaces and recast in unfamiliar material, creating a sort of imprint or ghost of the bathroom or kitchen within the gallery. Instead of recreating these rooms in entirety, the sculptures hang in-between constant architecture and out-of-place, instead becoming liminal entities. The irregular paper surfaces are reminiscent of flesh or other biological formations, in stark contrast to the "clean" sharp grey metal or white ceramic fixtures typically in homes. Inclusions in and consequences of the paper—hair, smell, murky water—become abjections themselves, engaging Julia Kristeva's concept of body horror within the larger sculptural installation; they are stand-ins for our own physical detritus. The suspension of the sculptures allows for odd angles and dysfunctional positions of the fixtures to move the installation past mimesis into evoking the viewer's personal experiences of these spaces, while also rejecting the notion of control most viewers might associate with these spaces. The irregular material, with hair, soil and plant matter also brings forward an

uncanny, uncomfortable parallel between the viewer's body and these paper sculptures, which is amplified by the multisensory experience of the paper-body system in place. Tap water (1104 S. Wabash, Chicago) is used to feed the system, in the same way I would get a drink of water in the building. Water dripping, as well as the smell of soaking plant fiber and mud, engage the viewer's sense of hearing and smell. In much fewer words, I didn't want to recreate my specific bathroom for viewers, but I wanted to recreate the sensory stimuli and emotions I felt in bathroom spaces.

KF: How has the process of casting your bathroom in paper been? What has been unexpected and what have you discovered about this particular process while working on this project?

SI: I enjoy being able to work in my apartment, as difficult as it can be sometimes. It forces me to work slowly - casting a sink takes a few hours, and then up to three days to dry completely before I can move it; I have to carefully plan when I (& my partner) could afford to not use the sink or bathtub for so long, and simply be patient. I also enjoy being able to make objects without being entirely dependent on community studio spaces. As much as I deeply love the paper studio at Columbia, I knew I wouldn't always have access, so it was also important that I find a way to make things I was interested in but could also make without having to rely on an institution of some kind. I learned a lot of things about the sort of DIY papermaking process I was using through trial and error; I also learned my cats are obsessed with the smell of the pulp and like to roll around in finished paper sinks. It's also interesting the way that making paper at home begins to feel synonymous with other labor intensive, domestic activities like cooking.

KF: Do you think you will continue to cast familiar objects in paper after this project? What are you taking from this project that you feel you will explore more in the future?

SI: I think I will continue to cast objects in paper, but I truly don't know what is next. It's hard to focus on liminal potential "what ifs" out there, when right now I'm trying to find stable work

and navigate what art making means when there is so much struggling going on during this pandemic. I'm working to finish an artist book that was originally to be published and shown alongside the handmade paper installation; even in my writing for this book, I'm still trying to grasp what to make of the fact that my work, and musings on Alaimo's trans-corporeality, feels ghostly in the wake of current concerns about health and sanitation. Not that I have to have answers, but I'd like to make some sense of that ghost.

DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES



Fragile Morphologies of Pulp Bodies, 2019, detail of test installation, on day 1

The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. Design, animation and illustration by Graphic Design major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gianella Goan.

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