

Tending: Drawing and Gardening as Ecological Care

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

Megan Houching

12 May 2023

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Abstract

This practice-led research investigates how an expanded drawing practice explores the intimate collaborative relationship that has been progressively formed with two suburban vegetable garden sites and the more-than-human vitalities progressively encountered there. Parallel drawing and gardening processes have formed cyclical *drawing sites*, working simultaneously between labour-intensive graphite drawing work and garden compost drawings on the floor and calico substrates.

An ecological site-responsive approach has led to engagement with the garden as a materially active site. I have progressively developed homemade compost and garden soil as a regenerative drawing medium recycled throughout the duration of the project. This provided the potential to investigate the crucial acts of tending to often unseen labour and care, which led me to understand compost and garden soil as a complex accumulation of vitalities. This research has fostered the ecological engagements occurring in/with soil and investigated how these engagements may provide a relational understanding of the fluctuating nature of my vegetable garden as an everyday environment and as a generator for drawing.

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Introduction

It has always been drawing. It feels like drawing is a part of me - of my being. Drawing is a constant in my life; I always return to it. I'm fond of drawing's immediate nature, the simplicity of its directness and honesty. I undertake this practice-led research to dedicate time to critically deepen my knowledge about the expansiveness of what a drawing practice can discover and where it can lead me in this world. I feel a sense of genuine care to advocate for the medium and push it forward. Specifically, in times when more digital or technological means overpopulate, often overlooked manual thinking acts such as drawing.¹

In parallel, I work to form a more caring, ecologically conscious self through gardening modes; I take time daily to consider the unseen vitalities (or accumulated labours of care) and more-than-human beings who inhabit my vegetable garden. My research questions include:

- How can a durational ecological drawing practice nurture collaboration between myself and a vegetable garden site and its inhabitants?
- How can durational ecological principles challenge how I practise (draw) using garden soil compost as media, with the potential to transform how I relate with my everyday environments?

These questions have led to expanded drawing approaches and gardening processes embedded in accumulated tending and caring actions to foster ecological engagements. They create alternative waypoints to relate with environments and reveal unseen vitalities within them.

The overarching term in the exegesis title, 'Ecological Care' refers to the/my caring commitment to collaborate with and make work in relation to my two home vegetable garden sites and neighbourhood ecologies. It is a caring approach to ecological consciousness and a way of being that has taken place

¹ Artist Tania Kovats talks about drawing being a tool for *Thinking Through*- therefore, a manual thinking act.

throughout the research duration by actively considering how I might carefully tend to my Drawing, Gardening, Walking and Composting practices.

I will begin this exegesis, part one, by introducing the two suburban garden sites that sit at the centre of the research, leading me to distinguish my practising as site-responsive. I am interested in the vegetable garden as a site of relational exchange that I explore through material-drawing modes. The project sites provide an integral opportunity to engage in the significant ‘doing’ actions that drive the nature of the practising.

Part two begins the recounting of an encounter with a mushroom. The underlying notion of the *unseen* derives from my fascination with the mushroom fruiting body (fungi organism), which critically uncovered the project's ecological methodological approach. Feminist philosophers Donna Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing and Robin Wall-Kimmerer collectively promote *multispecies companionships*,² which recognise an urgent need to actively reconfigure our relations to the earth and all its inhabitants³ – guiding my collaboration in the vegetable garden and learning more non-hierarchical, caring approaches to living in the world. My ecological practice has led to an ongoing *daily practising* routine and engagement. Ultimately, I am learning how to build intimate relations with nonhuman species.

Part three discusses drawing and gardening as like-minded parallel practices. I have progressively created durational *sites of work*; including compost garden soil drawings and a large-scale graphite documentation drawing in studio. In collaboration with these two sites, I also engage in ongoing labour-intensive drawing processes and small-scale spontaneous graphite ‘recordings’ of soil materiality and daily drawing encounters, activities and walks. I consider how gardening can synergise within a drawing practice to reveal profoundly critical ecological understandings. I introduce composting, focusing on its cyclical regenerative properties and the discovery of

² Donna Haraway's concept of ‘Companion Species’.

³ Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble*. Experimental Futures. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

‘composting drawings’ as a crucial understanding of the compost content’s accumulative makeup.

Part four leads on from these composting possibilities to the crucial formation of accumulating, tending and caring as processual phases—exemplifying *Unseen labour and care*. Feminist academic Maria de la Bellacasa’s notion of critical care promotes making time for more-than-human others or working with alternative temporalities. I engage in a range of *intensities of care practices*, including the notion of trace and revealing. I introduce the concept of *grounding/ungrounding*, reflecting on my tendencies to work between horizontal and vertical fields to gain multiple engagement entries into the drawing.



Figure 2. Hamilton Road Vegetable Garden. April 2022.

Part One: Site

The vegetable garden sites

I engaged with two home vegetable garden sites during this research: the first, Hamilton Road garden, was shared across eight units where one of my neighbours, Taane, was a keen gardener. His labour on the communal garden involved caring for, tending and working the soil for over ten years; I enjoyed appreciating the fruits of his labour. Taane had a great composting station, encouraging the rest of the residents to utilise it. He even helped my partner and I dig up another patch beside his three so we had space to grow food. And he gifted us some of his amazing homemade compost to activate and enrich the existing soil. This is the site where the teachings of gardening began for me.



Figure 3. Broccoli Harvest.
Hamilton Road Garden. 2022.

I had to move on from this garden in November 2022.⁴ I was lucky to have a new garden at Ardmore Road to develop relations. Nobody lived in the property previously, so the back garden had been left and neglected. I took hold of an existing raised bed, replenishing it with fresh soil and compost. I also bought myself a compost bin to set up, to create my own station, following in Taane's footsteps.

⁴ This didn't unduly affect the nature of the research as I was not making work on the site but using compost, soil as media.





Figure 5. Ardmore Road Garden Site. 2023.

Figure 4. (Previous page) Hamilton Road communal composting station.

The wooden garden waste holder is made by Taane with old wood pallets of mine from a previous art project. I loved having a resourceful neighbour!

Locating Site

At the beginning of the research, I was out in the garden on a daily basis and found a meditative state of working there. It was like a flow state in drawing;⁵ those times when you really gain an intense focus. I acknowledge daily gardening habits as a significant driving force in discovering site-related work to emerge in my practice and my overall outlook on everyday ecological being. Miwon Kwon states in ‘One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity’ that there is a dominant drive in site-orientated practices today concerned with merging everyday life, blurring the position of art/nonart. Hence, redressing ecological issues.⁶

I began to think about the garden site not just as a physical place but as an exchange of relations, both seen and unseen; such as the processes/actions/temporalities that I and more-than-human forces are engaging in. I asked:

⁵ Aotearoa artist Hannah Beehre’s Book *Drawing in flow* talks about the specific state that you reach in peak performance of drawing. It can be translated to any activity (such as gardening) something which you are focusing upon intensely. You gain a rhythm, intensity that sets you into a mode of unconscious doing.

⁶ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), P.24.

This image has been removed
for copyright reasons.

Figure 6. Richard Long, A Line Made by Walking, 1967, Photograph, Gelatin silver print on paper and graphite on board. Image size, 375 x 324mm

how are these relations shaping my understanding of the constructed place and how I engage in making work?⁷ Architectural historian Jane Rendell describes the idea of “Relational Specificity”⁸ as “a way of thinking about the particularity of relationships between objects, people and spaces positioned.”⁹ I would like to extend this relation to include the more-than-human or unseen vitalities that are also in a state of constant relationality within the site. Understanding sites as exchanges of relations has influenced me to focus on the physical making, processes and time spent as the priorities of the work, instead of purely aesthetic outcomes.¹⁰ I began to consider how these exchanges of relations transform how we engage with natural environments or ecological systems.

Thinking about this dematerialisation of the artwork led me to think about British artist Richard Long's 1967 work, ‘A Line Made by Walking’. This work focused on the physical repetitive action of walking back and forth in a field on the same path until a visible indented line trace emerged. Long challenges the notion of drawing through the physical act of doing as the art itself, a work not defined by an object but by drawing on the trace of his footsteps and repetitive action.

Site in my practice is understood beyond an original location. Kwon suggests using other relational terms to reconsider the term site-specific practices, including ‘conscious’, ‘responsive’ or ‘site-orientated.’¹¹ I have understood my practising to fall under a site-responsive approach where the work is a response to my relations and active “doing” actions partaking in the garden site. The site is present to act as a critical generator of *thinking through my relations* that are accumulating over time.

Aotearoa artists Yukari Kaihori and Kate van der Drift's collective site-responsive practices have influenced my own approach to making work with the garden site. For example, Van der Drifts' practice involves working

⁷ Thinking about these types of qualities of site led me to ask: Has my previous study in Spatial Design influenced how I engage with site? By closely analysing a site to gain material or conceptual ideas about how it can drive or influence the work.

⁸ Term borrowed from Kwon's text *One Place After Another*.

⁹ Rendell, Jane. *Space, Place and Site in Critical Spatial Arts Practice 1*. 2007.

¹⁰ Kwon, *One Place after Another*. Describes contemporary site-orientated work leading towards this “de-aestheticization” and “dematerialization” of the artwork, which is ‘going against the grain’ to resist the commodification of art in the market.

¹¹ Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

closely and ongoingly with the Piako River, tracking the ecology, and creating what she calls “camera-less river-exposures.”¹² She described this process as capturing the *inside of the water*, which hints at a way of giving the river’s vitalities a form of agency. She also talks about her methods from her 2023 work, ‘Listening to a Wetland’ as enabling the river to “write its own image.”¹³ I resonate with an approach that minimises human intervention in the work,¹⁴ which is crucial to allow the emergence of vitalities or unseen energies. In my later durational soil floor drawings (2022) and the calico soil works (2023), I began to work with the compost garden soil more considerately and expansively, which was more effective in the material outcome. When I made the 2023 work ‘Sediment Trace’, I refrained from applying the soil or calico with my hands, instead pouring soil sediment and letting it take shape.

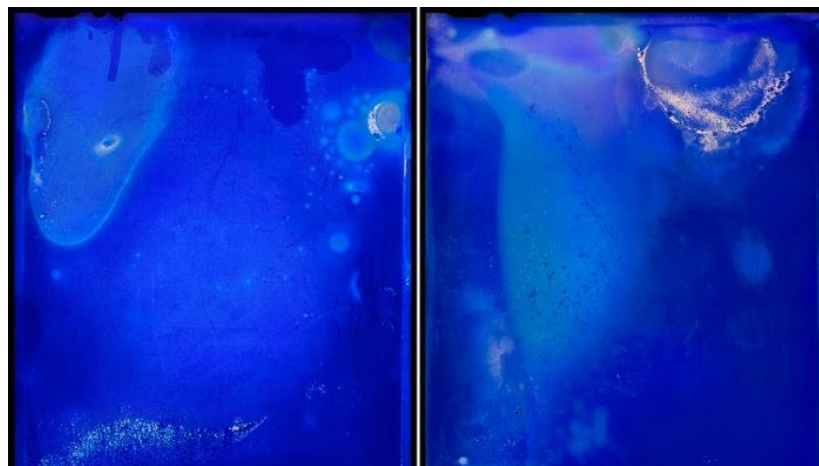


Figure 7. Kate Van der Drift, *New Moon to New Moon*, February 37°17'01.2"S 175°31'02.9"E. Chromogenic Photographs from 4.5" negative diptych. 1120 x 1530 mm (Total 2440mm wide) 2020.

Kaihari’s 2022 project, ‘Touching Time’, was a response to the Audio Foundation site where the exhibition was held in a nine meter basement underground. The CityRail link construction adjacent to the site intrigued Kaihari; they were excavating 26 metres below ground, away from our

¹²Kate Van der Drift, "Directional Listening: Fluvial Field Notes — Kate Van Der Drift," Kate Van Der Drift, last modified 2019, <https://www.katevanderdrift.com/directional-listening>.

¹³ Alena Kavka, "To See Obliquely: Kate Van Der Drift's Listening to a Wet Land," Circuit Artist Moving Image Aotearoa New Zealand, last modified February 2023, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/writing-and-podcast/listening-to-a-wet-land>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

everyday lives- in a place forgotten and unseen.¹⁵ Kaihori uses 17-21 million-year-old sandstone from the infrastructure site in her artworks and clay excavated about 3 metres deep, which she applies to paper, leaving it to gradually curl, dry and crack. (Fig.8) This project actively reconnects viewers back to the site, and the complex makeup of overlooked, subterranean materials and processes now made visible and fluctuating around us. Her attentive methods or processes with site and material to engage with more-than-human occupants is similar to Van der Drifts approach of giving a ‘voice’ to these materials.



Figure 8. Yukari Kaihori, *Touching Time*. Audio Foundation, 2022. Image taken by Grant Priest.

I enjoy Kaihori's approach of allowing the agency of the clay to emerge by leaving the clay to dry over the duration of the exhibition. For me, it's important that this state of change is made visible when working with sites.

Aotearoa artist Tiffany Singh has described site-responsive work as “An investigation of the site as part of the process in making the work.”¹⁶ Like Singh, the site has established itself as a multi-generative workspace where I am in a constant state of critically redefining my actions to challenge how I might think about the notion of the site itself. The artwork results from these accumulative engagements with the site, and I have learnt how to consciously guide these actions into an artistic outcome. The site offers a practical way to be in constant practice with these actions. Kwon states:

The “work” no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewers’ critical (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of their viewing. In this context, the guarantee of a specific relationship between an artwork and its site is

¹⁵ Yukari Kaihori, "Touching Time Statement," last modified November 2022, <https://files.cargocollective.com/697901/Artist-Statement-AF-Touching-Time-.pdf>.

¹⁶ Tiffany Singh, "SITE RESPONSIVE WORKS," Tiffany Singh Artist, last modified November 19, 2017, <https://tiffanysingh.com/site-responsive-works/>.

not based on a physical permanence of that relationship but rather on the recognition of its unfixed impermanence, to be experienced as an unrepeatable and fleeting situation.¹⁷

This emphasis on the verbal qualities of the making process, temporal unfolding and conditions of fleeting audience encounter leads me toward indeterminate, open methods. American artist Robert Smithson also amplifies the importance of ‘thinking and doing’ rather than purely on a tangible outcome. He describes this as going down a lot of blind alleys.¹⁸ I am interested in the relationship between drawing and engaging in processes at the garden site and the studio that the intangible aspects of labour in an artwork. My site-responsive, durational soil floor drawings have a collective temporal nature, akin to Kwon’s notion of “unfixed impermanence.”¹⁹

¹⁷Kwon, *One Place After Another* p.24

¹⁸Flam, Jack, (1996), *Robert Smithson: The collected writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley and California, p.175

¹⁹ Kwon, p.24

It was late Autumn 2020; It had been raining all morning; I could feel the brisk air on my skin. As I made my way to the entrance, I recall the bush's slightly fresh, musky, earthy scent, the translucent water droplets from the morning rain sitting on top of the leaves, trickling down, and ever so gently being swallowed up by the bush floor. It was quiet yet comforting here; all to be heard were the subtle movements and rustles from my fellow tree and plant beings. It slowed me down. My mind and physical body felt present. Just me and the bush. It was quite an intimate feeling to let yourself tap further into an environment like this one. That was the day I came across this magnificent singular mushroom perched under a tree sheltered from the rain. It was a rather large mushroom, perfectly formed, deep rich red tone with white bumpy markings on the top and a stark white textured stalk. It grabbed my attention immediately and gave me this funny kind of excitement inside. It pulled me closer, like a gravitational pull. I couldn't contain my curiosity. It was more than a mushroom but rather a mysterious little organism that wanted to learn more about.

Part Two: Ecological Thinking as a methodological approach

Mushroom Encounter

Anthropologist Anna Tsing in her text ‘Mushroom at the End of the World’, states mushrooms pull her back to her senses in the way that they unexpectedly pop up in good fortune. It is a ‘you just happen to be there’ moment.²⁰ A different reward from that of growing something in my garden, for instance. There isn’t labour or attachment involved. It’s a pure spontaneous encounter. Tsing says the ‘delight’ of mushroom foraging, provides an *impression* of a place.²¹ I’m drawn to processes with a *quiet* type of quality, like fungi that are going about these complicated processes and relations underground, away from human sight. This secret activity navigates my fascination for ecological thinking and beings. Fungi²² can be understood as a critical gateway into understanding the tentacular vibrancy of unseen life and processes that get neglected in our fast-paced lives. Fungi qualities correlate to many of the conceptual ideas visited, such as the unseen, familiar/unfamiliar, underground networks as collaboration, connection, encountering, intimacy, decomposition, and regenerating.



Figure 9. The encountered mushroom. For scale, it was approximately 15cm in height. Called Amanita Muscaria, they grow in symbiosis with birch and pine trees and are an accidentally introduced species to Aotearoa. Found at Kauri Point Centennial Park, Tāmaki Makaurau.

²⁰ Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2017. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Noting that Mushroom as the fruiting body. Fungi is the actual organism which is out of human sight- underground.



Figure 10. Zheng Bo, Drawing Life ongoing project, 31 May 2020, Pencil on Paper, 21 x 29.7cm.

Daily Ecological Rhythms

Hong Kong-based artist Zheng Bo has influenced my engagements in daily ecological practising or ‘Daily Rhythm.’²³ Bo calls these ‘Eco sensibility exercises.’²⁴ In their ongoing 2020 project, ‘Drawing Life’, they took the same walking route daily, dedicating time to sit and draw the local plants, weeds and foliage, which they call “plant neighbours.”²⁵ I am interested in Bo due to their commitment to multi-species vibrancy,²⁶ advocating specifically for plant forms and to de-centre humans to reshape responses to the climate crisis. Bo states that; “While drawing is a simple practice, it is also a way to see life, to sense life and to record life in all of its complexity.”²⁷ I am intrigued by walking and drawing as a daily ecological ritual.

Tsing, in her essay ‘Unruly Edges’, states, “Walking is the speed of bodily pleasure and contemplation.”²⁸ I have discovered walking and drawing synergise with this notion of contemplation. Implementing different types of walking-drawing exercises at the beginning phases of this research assisted me in understanding how an ecological methodology could successfully underpin my practice. This meant making work not purely tied to drawing but extending to more temporal or event-based ideas of daily everyday practising.²⁹

²³ Stephanie Rosenthal and Clare Molloy, "Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council," Zheng Bo

²⁴ Atmos. "Practicing Ecosensibility." Atmos. Last modified August 12, 2021. <https://atmos.earth/practicing-ecosensibility-zheng-bo/>.

²⁵ Stephanie Rosenthal and Clare Molloy, "Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council," Zheng Bo, last modified 2021

²⁶ Zheng Bo, "Art as Multispecies Vibrancy," Zheng Bo, accessed May 7, 2023, https://zhengbo.org/texts/2020_ZB.pdf.

²⁷ Stephanie Rosenthal and Clare Molloy, "Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council," Zheng Bo

²⁸ Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species," *Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2012)

²⁹ This sits with site-based work promoting doing-based actions as artwork.



Figure 11. 20 day walk and encounter install, Homemade Garden compost soil bed, with 18 daily encounter graphite drawings on paper. June 2022.

This was the first time I introduced the garden soil into the work or install which was a significant move forward for the project.

Familiarity



Figure 12. Hamilton Road lavender bush, Daily encounter. May 2022.

In my work, ‘20-day walk and encounter’, I took a 2km walking route on foot. It started out in my garden, followed a loop around the local park and back to my house, completed daily over a 20-day period (May 19 – June 8 2022). Whilst walking, I dedicated time to drawing something ‘in situ’ that intrigued me on the walk. By engaging in this method, I constantly practised a state of ecological consciousness. By taking time to sit and draw often unnoticed plants and life forms, as the days progressed, I noticed a shift in how I was engaging with my immediate environments. The walking route I had set out became increasingly familiar; I got to know the wild lavender bush planted under a tree on the grass berm and the overgrown purple flowers creeping down a green fence. These are *small moments* that I only became aware of by making time to observe and learn from alternative ecological temporalities of being; it is what I drive to experience.

Tsing states that when “You visit the spot enough...you have made a familiar place in the landscape. Familiar places are the beginning of appreciation for multi-species interactions.”³⁰ Like Tsing, I explore the *familiarity of places* such as my vegetable garden during planned encounters. It is also present with my drawings sites; the durational graphite

³⁰ Tsing, *Unruly Edges*

documentation work and compost garden soil drawings enable the close experience of multispecies interactions. Familiar, intimate relationships such as these drive sustained ecological engagements within my practice.



Figure 13. Megan Houching, Homegrown Eggplant (part of 20-day encounter drawing exercise) graphite on paper, 210 x 148.5 mm, 2022.



Figure 14. Megan Houching, Walking-drawing encounters pinned on the wall. Graphite on paper, 210 x 148.5 mm each. 2022.

Feminist academics Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing collectively promote non-hierarchical, caring approaches to living alongside more-than-human beings. I am interested in their focus on the *present* to actively address climate-based issues as the means to *work through* rather than *within* Western thinking dualisms. They make room for other beings. Haraway stresses that to ‘stay with the trouble,’³¹ we must not dwell in the future or the past, but rather as mortal critters: “[...] entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”³² Tsing’s approach poses the matsutake mushroom as a teaching on how to live amongst disrupted ecosystems. The Matsutake mushroom can grow in human-caused devastation and can even aid trees to grow in these harsh environments; further instilling the importance of symbiotic relations between more-than-human beings, and a potential for future collaborative liveability.³³ Indigenous professor and botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer states, “We don’t have to figure out

³¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016)

³² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. pg. 1.

³³ Tsing, *Mushroom at the end of the world*

everything; there is intelligence other than our own.”³⁴ I am interested in how unseen energies can guide my way into collaborative living in this world.

I am interested in how both Haraway, Tsing and Kimmerer challenge the language or grammar applied to describe more-than-human beings, that filter down into our consciousness and behaviour.³⁵ In her essay ‘Grammar of Animacy’, Kimmerer discusses that whilst she has a great appreciation and passion for scientific language as a method for: “revealing the intimate mechanisms of the world which polishes the gift of seeing,” there is still something missing.³⁶ Scientific language remains within the boundaries of the ‘seen’; what lies beyond the human grasp or understanding remains unaccounted for. Kimmerer states that “Unseen energies animate the world.”³⁷ I take this thought with me whenever I go about my practising. How can I utilise my art practice to bring agency to these unseen energies that I collaborate with?

I would like to recognise Aotearoa’s Indigenous whenua and pigment practices. I am not attempting to overstep my boundaries as a Pākehā descendent of settlers, nor to claim or appropriate this knowledge. Rather I would like to learn how I may respectfully navigate this area of art-making which upholds Indigenous practitioners; who are working with and reclaiming their knowledge for themselves and generations to follow.³⁸ The Aotearoa research collective ‘Kauae Raro’³⁹ has been helpful for myself to understand how to navigate ‘Wild’ pigment practices as non-Māori. Māori artist-writer Sian Montgomery-Neutze, states that non-Māori need to learn two fundamental principles working with whenua: accountability and Tikanga.⁴⁰ I am Manuhiri, a guest to the whenua I stand upon. I only engage in respectful, generous reciprocal relations.⁴¹ I am making the compost myself on the site of ‘my’ current home, however, would like to acknowledge

³⁴ Robin W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013)

³⁵ Tsing, and Haraway use terms such as ‘Assemblage’ ‘Companion species’ for instance.

³⁶ Robin W. Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 28, no. 2 (2017)

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Sian Montgomery-Neutze, "Advice for Non-Māori," He Kapunga Oneone, kauae raro, last modified March 2023

³⁹ Kauae Raro Research Collective, He Kapunga Oneone, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.kauaeraro.com/>.

⁴⁰ *Tikanga* refers to practices and values from mātauranga Māori, Māori knowledge.

⁴¹ Montgomery-Neutze, „Advice for Non-Māori, Kauae raro.

Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei iwi as holding mana whenua of this place, and the other iwi over time who may have lived there. The compost is then put into my vegetable garden, there is a mix of existing earth-whenua material within the compost, but I am not attempting to in any way take what is not mine to claim. All material is returned and regenerated to the site after use, which is important to uphold as manuhiri of this garden.



Figure 15. Cora-Allan Lafaiki Wickliffe, *Floating on the Manukau*, 2021, Whenua and Kāpia ink on birch plywood. Private collection.

From Otītōri Bay Rd, 2022. Image taken by Monique Redmond.

These paintings I enjoy for their narrower, longer canvas size and how the mountains feel ‘grounded’ within the canvas due to their placement. The different types of relationship of ground/s occurring here are interesting. Being the ground of the literal canvas, the whenua- ground, and the canvases are also not elevated they sit leaning up against the wall on the ground. I have been influenced to think about multifaceted relationships of ‘ground’ within my own practice.

Artist of Māori and Niue descent, Cora-Allan Lafaiki Wickliffe, regularly uses whenua within her own works, such as her 2022 exhibition ‘From Otītōri Bay Rd’. She presents a series of landscape paintings from her residency at Parehuia. Wickliffe engages in an intimate state of gathering and collecting whenua-based pigments from the land and seawater from Manukau Harbour as a base for the pigments. She gradually attends to “the subtleties of the whenua on which her residency was based.”⁴² I am intrigued by her whenua-based pigment gatherings in order to connect herself, and the viewers to place.

⁴² "Cora-Allan Wickliffe: From Otītōri Bay Rd," Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery

Specifically, I was looking at the organic way she has applied the whenua to the surfaces. You can see where she has physically rubbed the pigment over the surface with her hand in a swooping-like motion leaving muddy grainy overlaps. (Fig 16). I also enjoy the rawness of the material, akin to my own compost soil drawings. I can physically feel their organic earthiness.

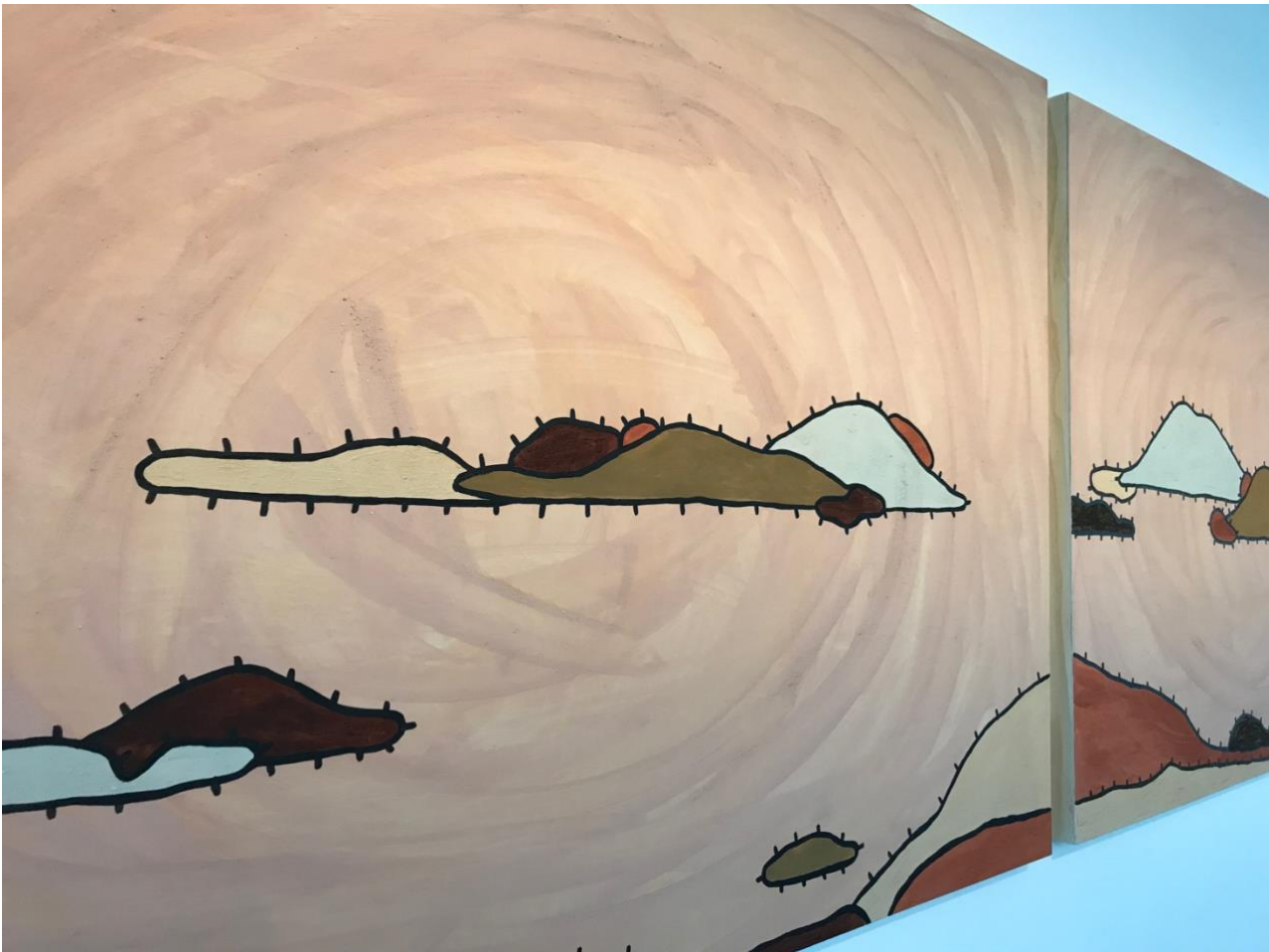


Figure 16. Cora-Allan Lafaiki Wickliffe, Looking to the whenua, 2021, Whenua and Kāpia ink on birch plywood. Private collection. From *Otītōri Bay Rd*, 2022. Image taken by Monique Redmond.

Part Three: Methods: Drawing and Gardening as parallel practices

Drawing in the expanded field

My practice-led research has led me to redefine my personal perceptions of what drawing *is* or what drawing could *be*. This has involved deeper experimentation and engagement with drawing materials, processes, sites, and concepts. American painter Amy Sillman has described drawers as people who tend not to know what they're doing.⁴³ I too, believe this is what lies at the heart of drawing practices. Since I have become more comfortable with this feeling of indeterminacy, I have introduced more expansive drawing methods that I have formed into regenerative processes or *sites*.

Drawer Louise Despont talks about the drawing process as akin to “putting one foot in front of the other.”⁴⁴ I have been influenced by the way she embraces a form of indeterminacy. It's a case of giving some of yourself over to put trust in the back-and-forth engagement taking place. Despont doesn't search for an answer, rather she seeks this intangible feeling of the unknown that happens during the process of drawing.⁴⁵ She works with this feeling as a tool for decision-making that leads to the unfolding of a drawing. I have taken on this approach, in an attempt to be more open to the underlying *force* of feeling. Putting trust into the process leads you to the eventual outcome. American artist Manny Farber has described this slow-building type of making as *termite-like*:

[it] feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement.⁴⁶

I slowly and patiently chip away at many things at once, that may not always

⁴³ Menil Collection, "Conversation with Amy Sillman: Drawing in the Continuous Present," *YouTube*, January 2017.

⁴⁴ Art21, "Louise Despont Draws Deep Art21 "New York Close Up"

⁴⁵ Despont talks about only being *responsible* for part of the drawing. There is an underlying force of energy that works alongside her a subconscious happening.

⁴⁶ Manny Farber, "White Elephant Vs Termite Art," *Film Culture*, Winter 1962

be accounted for. This can be transferred to the actions of gardening as the accumulation of actions; building on something gradually. Drawing feels quiet in nature;⁴⁷ on the sidelines or preliminary. It's intimate. I believe drawing retains quiet confidence.⁴⁸ There is space within the drawing field to test out ideas exploratively.

Drawing sites

My art-making has taken place across various *drawing sites* that work in parallel and sustain one another. I have discovered that introducing my practice to more experimental, regenerative drawing methods has led to a deeper engagement with the site of my vegetable gardens and their more-than-human inhabitants. There are two main drawing sites supported by other experimental drawing activities or slower, labour-intensive processes. The first is the compost/garden soil drawings, and an associated series of installations; and the second is a large graphite drawing made in studio. When I say *site* in a drawing context, I use the word in the sense of 'paying a visit to the work', along with notions of site-responsivity.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ There is an interesting parallel between drawing and my earlier discussion of mushrooms /fungi also having this 'quiet-like quality' - something you don't realise it's happening until it's there physically.

⁴⁸ *Quiet confidence* refers to drawing having an underlying trust and patience behind its process.

⁴⁹ During a supervision meeting, Monique Redmond described that she felt as if she *was visiting each site of work (such as the graphite work or soil drawings)*. I was fond of this language to describe my work. It has now assisted me in viewing the drawings sites as a place in themselves which you step into, spend time with. It makes the works feel more like lively forms of beings which you can form a relationship with. I also draw on Kwon, as outlined earlier (p. 15).



Figure 17. Megan Houching, Soil drawing, August Iteration one. 2022. At this stage I was more focused on my intervention in the soil through mark making which was a critical point. I believe as I progressed further this switched to minimize my human intervention to better allow the soils vitalities to emerge.

Site 1: Compost/garden soil drawings, installations



Figure 18. Megan Houching, Soil drawing, Iteration one. August 2022.

I use homemade compost garden soil as drawing installation material on the floor and calico substrates. One of the most significant breakthroughs for this research was finding the potential in my vegetable garden as media-exploring the compost garden soil as a materially active medium. This drawing is a durational, collaborative work, which I understand as closing the gap between my making methods. When I say this, I have been searching for making processes in conjunction with my labour-intensive drawing process, to generate ideas by simultaneously working on these two drawings.

I engaged in four main iterations of the garden compost floor drawing works over a 6-month duration.⁵⁰ In the first iteration, as I began experimenting with the soil on the studio floor (August 2022), I noticed my natural ‘drawing’ tendencies coming through in how I treated the soil; it was just as I treated the graphite on paper (liquid and dry). It’s always a slow, attentive process where I deliberately take time to ponder each mark I make and its relationship to the previous ones. I was beginning to learn how to apply the soil to the floor substrate. The floor drawings in Fig 17-18 were a crucial point where I understood myself materially activating the soil.

⁵⁰ I will refer to each iteration number and their relevant explorations and findings throughout.



With the late 2022 to early 2023 soil drawing iterations, I experimented with different tonal ranges by diluting the soil with water and using clay dispersed through some of the soil to create lighter, more ochre tones or to mix it in with the deeper browns. It felt a little like painting by numbers. I was actively looking for gaps and spaces on the floor substrate which needed to be filled or tended to. Like constant modes of problem-solving, some parts of the soil slowly fade or get washed away, or dry and crack. I enjoyed the fact that I would come into the studio the next day to find the work to have transformed overnight. It's always in a state of flux. Its unpredictable nature and the fact that I was working under those conditions intrigued me. I also enjoyed the states between the wet and dry aesthetics.

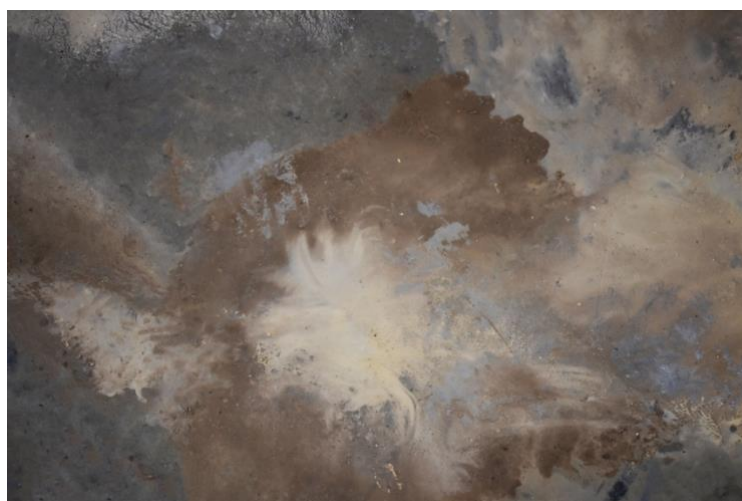


Figure 20-21. Megan Houching, Soil drawing, Iteration three.
October 2022.



Figure 22. *Muddy Water Falls*, 1984. ©Richard Long. DACS/Copyright Agency, 2023.



Figure 23. Megan Houching, *Soil drawing Iteration four*, December 2022. Influenced by Long's wall mud pouring's.

Richard Long, mentioned earlier (p.12), has predominately used mud as a drawing material. What I have observed between my and Long's practice is an engagement in what I frame as simple art activities that are often materially responded to through personal experiences in natural environments. Long states, "I like simple, practical, emotional, quiet, vigorous art"⁵¹. He describes his mud works as another *physicality* of practising, like walking.⁵² My experience resonates with these different types and scales of bodily engagements with sites and materials. Hence, applying these engagements such as walking encounters, daily gardening, drawing, and composting.

Long's mud works have influenced my ongoing collection of techniques for making soil drawings. For example, in his 1990 work 'White Water line', he poured liquified white clay in a continuous line pattern across the gallery floor. And, in his 1984 work 'Muddy Water Falls', he poured diluted mud from up high, and down vertical walls to pool and accumulate where the wall met the floor. For the 1989 'River Avon mud drawings', a series of ten mud-dipped papers, Long submerged sheets of paper into the river mud, hanging them up, leaving the mud to slowly drip off the bottom edge, creating slight variations of streaky watery mud.

⁵¹ Richard R. Brettell and Dana Friis-Hansen, *Richard Long: Circles, Cycles, Mud, Stones* (Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 1996)

⁵² Ibid.

Writer Dana Friss-Hansen, in his essay ‘Context and Continuity’, says what differentiates Long from similar artists in the field, such as de Maria or Smithson, is their monumentality and approach to scale.⁵³ Long's practising remains within the boundaries of his own *physical capabilities*, often using simple small-scale actions to create large-scale works.⁵⁴ For instance, his works made with handprint mud gestures repeated all over the gallery walls. I also engage in similar accumulative small-scale labour informed by Long's approach.

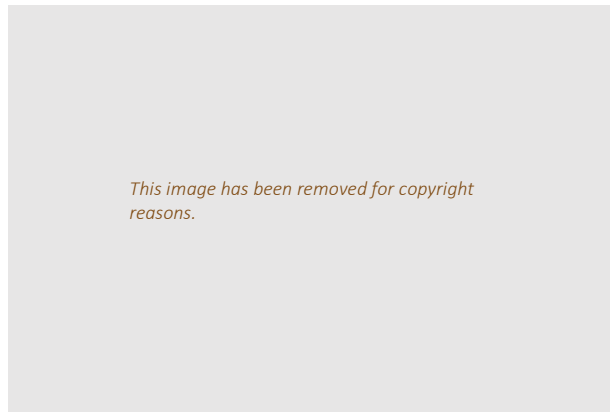


Figure 24. Richard Long, Image C from ‘River Avon mud drawings’ 1989.

Soil as regenerative temporal media

I am drawn to working with direct, at-hand drawing materials and processes such as graphite and compost, soil. I resonate with pushing the boundaries of simple materials for expanded discoveries within media and thereby gaining intimate relations-creating complex ideas with these simple methods and processes. I think we can overlook everyday materials’ criticality. It points to an advocacy for the complexity of overlooked things. (Such as compost or soil.) Making conscious efforts to the make-up of everyday materials as intricate temporal relations.

I understand soil materiality as a lively, vibrant, collaborative body. I am constantly regenerating this soil over time, which links to the intimate, durational making of relations to attempt to bring out these unseen vitalities

⁵³ Richard R. Brettell and Dana Friis-Hansen, *Richard Long: Circles, Cycles, Mud, Stones*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

within the soil. New Materialist Jane Bennett, in ‘Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things’, talks about the theory of vital materialism.⁵⁵ Included alongside my methods of decentering my own human agency through gardening methods to include and collaborate with other agencies present in the soil’s material makeup. Reviewing Bennett’s text, writer Erica Noble, states that Bennett is challenging humancentric worldviews of how “we conceive of there being inanimate matter and animated life and asks us to understand things and ourselves as complex “vibrant” materials constantly interacting with one another in not fully determinate ways.”⁵⁶ I am conscious of these dynamic relations within the garden compost soil in constant fluctuating states of interactions.



Figure 25. Megan Houching, Soil drawing, Iteration four. December 2022.

⁵⁵ Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*. Theory of more responsible, ethical engagements with the world.

⁵⁶ Erika Goble, "Beyond Human Subjectivity and Back to the Things Themselves: Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter," *Phenomenology & Practice* 11, no. 2 (2017)

Site 2: Large-scale durational Graphite drawing as documentation

This drawing is an ongoing large-scale graphite work on paper completed over eight months, during which I formulated an interest in how else I could *document* the soil drawing installation outside of photography. Spending time experimenting with the compost soil as a drawing medium led me to begin thinking about the minute engagements that are taking place within the soil. Its temporal nature intrigued me. I started to think that a photograph, whilst accurate in capturing these significant moments and happenings, was ineffective in capturing the actual event or the vitalities and energies that I felt and witnessed partaking in the soil work. In his essay 'Drawn to that moment,' Berger states that drawing contains the experience of looking by questioning an event's appearance. He further suggests that photographing is static because you stop for a moment. Therefore, drawing these moments can be understood as encompassing time.⁵⁷ This has influenced me to think about how I can encompass the accumulation of events or happenings through a durational drawn image in collaboration with the ongoing soil drawing works. How can a drawing encapsulate something so fluctuating in nature? It seems to me that by capturing soil moments through graphite, I am grabbing hold of them to re-experience or discover how they came to be in the first place. The drawing reveals the process of its own making; it is autobiographical. It feels as though I am progressively dissecting the soil work as it accumulates; the graphite work acts as a form of evidence portraying this assembly of moments displaced throughout time.

British artist Tania Kovats has described drawing as a process in which she translates her experiences into something she can see; this way, she can work things out, and without drawing, she cannot think⁵⁸. Therefore drawing as a process can be understood as a method of communication and manual thinking to give physical form to intangible thoughts or experiences. I believe this process occurs within my graphite drawing work. By thinking about the drawing as an active, communicative documentation of the engagements I am partaking in, I am progressively organising these parts, and the drawing is a result of that.

⁵⁷ John Berger, 'Drawn to That Moment'(New Society magazine, 1976)(Collected in the White Bird)

⁵⁸ Phaidon, "Tania Kovats - Why I Draw," Phaidon, 2021.

The piece of paper is large enough that I can sit in its centre and still feel somewhat surrounded by it. I have found myself dwelling here for hours; you can find me with my legs crossed under myself, my elbow resting on the paper to which I stretch out the top of my body in contact with the paper field. At some point in the process, it feels like I lose myself within this field; I become a part of it and all its relations.



Figure 26. Megan Houching, Durational Graphite drawing on Hahnemühle Stella paper, 1.5 x 1.5 m. 2022- 2023.



Figure 27. Megan Houching, Durational Graphite drawing detail on Hahnemühle Stella paper, 1.5 x 1.5 m. 2022- 2023.



Figure 28. Megan Houching, untitled soil documentation, Graphite on Paper, 2023, 210 x 148.5 mm

A5 soil documentation, graphite drawings on paper, and other works

Throughout these two main sites of work, I also have engaged in faster spontaneous drawing. I regularly print out photographs of the soil-drawing floorwork throughout its durational stages. Whilst I was working on the large-scale durational graphite work, I was also needing another form of drawing that was faster in its processes. I started to produce small A5 paper-sized graphite drawings of temporal happenings that were emerging in the soil. By completing these smaller drawings on a regular basis, I was gaging a deeper understanding of how to authentically display these marks created by the soil that was not representational. How can I use graphite and drawing techniques to create energy and dynamism within a work, and how can a drawing capture this vitality or force?



Figure 29. I started to pin the small graphite documentation drawings on my studio walls in conjunction with the photographs I take of the soil drawing durations and some textile prints of the soil that I briefly experimented with. (I was unable to continue to pursue this trajectory due to the Textile + Design Lab closing, but it led me in the direction of staining directly onto the calico instead.) The studio wall contained a range of accumulated different material explorations I enjoyed in its casual sense of arrangement.



Figure 30. Megan Houching, *Mushroom Encounter* from a daily walking exercise, Hahnemühle Stella paper, 594 x 841 mm. 2022-2023. This drawing was originally from a 'in situ' drawing of a mushroom I encountered. I decided to up-scale to this drawing to complete over a duration with my other drawing sites of work. This meticulous, labour-intensive graphite work is important for me to keep up in my practice.

Is a drawing ever finished?



Figure 31. Megan Houching, Soil documentation, Iteration three. Graphite on paper, 148.5 x 210 mm. 2022.

I have frequently pondered, will a drawing ever really be finished? I am drawn to working in a way with no exact finishing point. Berger has assisted me in understanding drawing as a set of accumulated *events* and *happenings* that, in their accumulation, are a totality. In 'Drawn to that moment,' he states:

From each glance, a drawing assembles a little evidence, but it consists of the evidence of many glances which can be seen together. On the one hand, there is no sight in nature as unchanging as that of a drawing or a painting. On the other hand, what is unchanging in a drawing consists of so many assembled moments that they constitute a totality rather than a fragment.⁵⁹

I have learnt that occasional restraint is more effective than trying to fill the whole page. I am comfortable leaving my graphite drawing work in a constant constructive state. Aotearoa painter Judy Millar, in 'The good oil' podcast, talks about her own experience of knowing when to stop with her paintings. She describes the process of "having enough gaps" or how "open or closed" should one should leave the work, and finding the right balance.⁶⁰ Drawing with the compost soil has assisted my comfortability in making fast responsive works that may never reach a finishing point.



Figure 32. Megan Houching, Soil documentation Iteration four. Graphite on paper, 148.5 x 210 mm. 2022.

⁵⁹ Berger, 'Drawn to That Moment'

⁶⁰ Douglas, Graeme. "The Good Oil Episode One: Judy Millar." Podcast audio. March 20, 2023.



Figure 33. Sarah Smuts-Kennedy working in her research garden, (Maunga Kereru. Tāmaki Makaurau) 2015. Image taken by Lottie Hedley.

How is gardening informing an ecological drawing practice?

Gardening encourages slowing down, patience, active tending, caring, and consideration for other nonhuman beings; these actions are repetitive. It never gets boring. In fact, I grow more of an attachment and reward as I continue. The garden is my nonhuman collaborator with whom I share intimate, co-dependant, reciprocal relations. Most importantly, gardening can be understood as decentring my human agency whilst not denying its specificity. Here, I am interested in my engagement in the garden's cyclical, temporal systems; how do these practical engagements and conceptualising my garden shape my ecological drawing practice? Spending time engaging in intangible, conceptual aspects of the garden has led me to more explorative drawing methods instead of counting on a representation of the garden site, like my earlier works of drawing produce from the garden. I have learnt that it is the intangible aspects of the garden and the actions that I am partaking in that have the potential to create work that can represent the garden site on a more intimate level. My experience and relational connection to gardening drive recent artworks; moving past visible or 'seen' qualities.

Aotearoa artist and biodynamic gardener Sarah Smuts-Kennedy has influenced my approach to studio/garden as parallel practices. One aspect of her practice centres around the research garden named 'Maunga Kereru'. Also of note, is her ongoing social project formation, 'For the Love of Bees', which advocates for biodiversity through urban farming, education, and

composting.⁶¹ Smuts-Kennedy also creates a localised ecological, climate change activism through gardening, with a particular focus on the well-being of soil. I am intrigued by how she understands drawing and gardening practices as a singular entity, progressively informing one another. Her work is also concerned with energy fields and ecological systems. The dynamic drawing works in 'Joy Field' (2021) are a vibrant expression of space and form that I understand as a spatiotemporal means to explore fields of energy. Giving form to intangible experience of unseen energies takes place within syntropic processes. I have taken her approach into consideration as I attempt to balance and foster the energies within the soil and other entities present within the vegetable garden. Focusing on these intangible ideas through mark-making, in my case with the soil itself, can be understood as a means of bringing these energies out.



Figure 34. Sarah Smuts-Kennedy 'Joyfield', soft pastel on smooth cotton rag 640 gsm, brass, 524 x 1067 x 25 mm each panel: 1524 x 3404 x 25 mm overall. 2021.

⁶¹ Hannah Cole, "JOY FIELD," ART DEPT, 2021.



Figure 35. Monique Jansen and Huhana Smith working on Liquid Contingencies exhibition, 2022. Weed mat stencil. Image taken by Maija Stephens.



Figure 36. Monique Jansen placing Biochar bags into Waikōkopu stream. Image taken by Maija Stephens.

Another artist-gardener, Monique Jansen, regularly composts her drawings, regenerating them – which she describes as “closing the ecological loop.”⁶² Jansen is relevant to this research for her commitment to how ecological thinking can be applied to drawing practices. She is also working on a collaborative Biochar project with Huhana Smith. The charcoal is made from agricultural waste on the land. The biochar is then put into donated coffee sacks and placed in the Waikōkopu stream to act as a filter, regenerating and restoring. This biochar has also been experimented with as an expanded drawing medium, including stencilling onto large hemp weed mats, and was exhibited in ‘Te Au: Liquid Contingencies’ at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth in 2022. After the exhibition, the work (biochar) was returned and regenerated to aid the wetland restoration.⁶³ This labour spurred me to think about being resourceful and open to ecologically expansive drawing materials and their life cycle. Hence, I proceeded to utilise compost as a regenerative drawing medium and use material substrates such as calico, which can be composted and regenerated. Her parallel interest in gardening

⁶² Rebecca Reed, "2013 Inaugural Winner Monique Jansen Parkin Drawing Prize," *Parkin Prize*. March 28, 2022

⁶³ Monique Jansen, "The Kuku Biochar Project, APRIL 2021 — Drawing Open," *Drawing Open*. April 23, 2023

and permaculture as an engagement in small-scale local climate crisis response is also contextually relevant to my research aims.

Possibilities of composting



Figure 37. Hamilton Road Composting station, 2022.

Composting as a process fascinates me due to its regenerative and cyclical properties, a significant context in my practice. I have been educating myself on how to make my own compost at home for the past year or so; luckily, Taane, my previous neighbour, kindly shared his methods. I began to explore how I could integrate composting methods into my practice to inform ecological making in my drawing practice.

Influenced by Jansen's composting, her drawings led to my 2022 durational artwork, 'Composting a drawing into my vegetable garden'. I utilised old drawings to make paper. I made a drawing on this homemade paper, embedded flower seeds and composted the drawing back into my vegetable patch to decompose and start a new life form. I was curious about how physical drawing could participate in an ecological engagement, passing through many living processes to which the result is giving back to the original ecosystem I am working within. I was also intrigued by making paper from my previous drawings, which felt like a mode of making and un-making. The previous drawings' traces of labour and care are still contained within the newly constructed drawing. These small vital pieces of information are a waypoint in understanding the complexities, histories and traces this compost soil holds. It also parallels the unseen vitalities I am constantly collaborating with; not everything can be physically seen, yet what is *not* seen is making up these complexities.

Once this artwork completed its decomposition process, my fascination turned towards the compost content as *traces* as the drawings were no longer there physically but now in a decomposed state which is then generated into my soil drawings. I thought about the extensive labour and time of making the compost. The traces and timescales that had taken place within the compost soil were more intriguing for me than the actual physical material itself, which is a result of these accumulative events happening over time. Significant similarities exist between my drawing and composting processes

in that they only get richer as they accumulate. For example, I tended to small, scattered workings over eight months in my durational documentation graphite work (Site 2). Understanding the graphite marks as accumulations leads to an intimate understanding of the soil material itself and its life processes over the research. I would describe them as *un-seen labours of care* to which I'm simultaneously tending.



Figures 38-39. Megan Houching, Composting a drawing into my garden, Durational event. April 2022. Images taken by Shannon Garizio.

Part Four: Tend/ing Care/ing Ground/ing Unground/ing

Formulated times of engagement: exploring the temporalities or intensities of tend/ing or care/ing

With the processual practices I engage with, I find it helpful to give myself conditions to work within. This is a way of navigating between different temporalities or intensities of a care practice; since I engage with more labour-intensive drawing/gardening processes in parallel to faster, more experimental ones. Working durationally enables me to form an attachment, or an affective and practical investment in a garden or drawing. This kind of care is built from emotional investment with the making actions. Working within set criteria or time restrictions creates a different intensity of care. Faster or shorter engagements with a *drawing site* challenge my perceptions or emotional attachments to the sites or labour I engage in. Working with a lower care intensity, it feels as though there isn't as much at stake. I like to be constantly in fluid motion between these multiple intensities of care.

To vary the duration as a 'setting' was a significant finding for this research, as a way to support the emotionally-invested, processual drawing practice with a timeframe where I didn't have the opportunity to ponder over the final outcome. I also needed an active supporting making method to keep up with what the drawing was doing. As the large-scale graphite drawing is slow progress, I have learnt that I lacked a generator to keep the drawing information. I sometimes find my thinking going faster than the drawing. *The generator* can be identified as the constant changes to the floor-based soil works or the small-scale soil graphite drawing documentation works; I could engage in more experimental processes. I began to 'make' work to inform the processual drawings or labours I collaborate in. I have found that working simultaneously between fluctuating intensities or temporalities of care enables a more in-depth approach to expanded drawing practice.

For example, in March 2023, I set out a one-week time period in which I tended to a soil drawing on calico and, simultaneously, drew an A5 graphite drawing documentation on paper of a *happening*; a result of careful tending to the soil daily. Setting out this time constraint and engaging in daily tasks creates more formulated times of engagement with the making and the garden



Figure 40. Megan Houching, First Soil drawing on calico substrate. March 2023

site. I have been paying attention to how care is circulated within my practicing as I navigate between working on the soil work and the graphite drawing. As well as working out in the garden. I am intrigued by how I can translate these marks that have been formed through tend/ing/care-embedded actions into another mode of drawing and time. Drawing in this sense could be seen as a method and the means to reexperience modes of care to navigate the garden's ecological engagements and my relationship with them.

Accumulative labours of care

Something is intriguing about partaking in accumulative *labours of care* that cannot always be accounted for in the physical appearance of a 'finished' artwork. I am aware of them because I have actively participated in the making actions, but I question how I can inform the viewer of these events. What information is needed to understand the make-up of the raw soil material when it is 'installed' on the ground, beyond a wall text that lists the physical matter or a drawing medium? I place importance on the material's history, labour and traces that remain within the vitalities of the soil that I would like to make known within the work, specifically, my relationship with them. I have learnt that the soil only gets richer as it accumulates embedded tending/care actions, progressively leading towards a more empathetic mutual relationship with my garden.

There is reciprocity attached to caring, which writer Maria Puig de la Bellacasa describes as "Asymmetric and multilateral, collectively shared."⁶⁴ Working with my garden and composting methods is engaging in an interdependent relationship where care is constantly circulating between myself and the processes being taken care of within the literal composting and the vegetable garden. Through these relations, I have learnt that a caring, reciprocal conception of soil emphasises the embeddedness of unseen labours, which rely upon this interdependency to drive its continuance. Thinking with care can disrupt the reduction of soil to merely a resource for humans and how to think about soil instead as an accumulated set of caring and tending events.

⁶⁴ María P. Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p.192.

My artworks offer reciprocity to the vegetable garden system by regularly composting drawings to fuel the garden; the calico fabric works can be washed back into the gardens or composted into the soil, as I do not use any binding agents. This is beneficial for the living creatures inhabiting my compost and vegetable garden, such as worms, millipedes, snails and slugs, which feed off, decompose and are fuelled by my artworks that I compost. I understand my conscious choice of materials and processes (alongside my continuous acts of tending and caring for the garden) to be a form of negotiation. The temporary displacement of the compost and soil when working in a studio or gallery context is accounted for by later returning it to its original location.⁶⁵

Ecological care

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's chapter in 'Matters of Care', 'Soil Times The Pace of Ecological Care,' helps us think about extending 'care' to more-than-human others. She asks how the temporality of soil care offers different modes of making time, specifically those marked as unproductive in the dominant futurist drive.⁶⁶ I am interested in the notion of making time for the multiplicity of more-than-human others, a reciprocal, mutual relationship where the compost and the garden co-emerge. The term *making time* points to dedication and commitment with a large amount of care embedded. Bellacasa describes this as an ethical-political commitment to investigate the significance of neglected things and practices.⁶⁷ I dedicate time to being deliberately present with the task of gardening and drawing. This is crucial in dealing with undervalued practices such as ecological labour or working in the garden with the soil and its inhabitants. They can be considered undervalued as they do not work on a human timescale and require slower, more careful processes.

We tend to misunderstand webs of more-than-human agencies such as those in the compost. Zheng Bo states, "To develop our ecological sensibility, it's

⁶⁵ I understand that temporarily displacing the compost soil from the garden ecosystem will unfortunately harm the soil inhabitants/organisms (bacteria, fungi, algae, nematodes, etc.) possibly contained within the soil compost. Hence, it is important to me to engage in alternative acts of ecological care that promote long-term tending and caring to continually keep the vegetable garden system and its inhabitants thriving.

⁶⁶ María P. Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*

⁶⁷ Ibid.

crucial to start with how we think about time.”⁶⁸ Dedicating time to working on more-than-human time scales or with temporal rhythms is about learning how to work with these agencies for the outcomes that are successful for all parties, rather than solely human benefit.

Through art-making, I participate in human-soil relations by continuously *tending* to drawing, composting, and gardening practices. I consider these doing-based actions as acts of ‘Ecological Care’, demonstrations of my care and commitment to my local home ecologies through tending my garden or environmental noticing in neighbourhood walks. These acts are guided by a caring approach to an everyday ecological practice and way of being where my artworks are a result of these actions taking place.

There needs to be a mutual balance between myself and the vegetable garden, and my drawing sites where the cycle of repetitive ecological care eventually becomes embedded within routine maintenance. To tend and care for over a length of time, while in turn, creating habitual actions.

Routine maintenance is an integral part of the care practices that I engage with as a drawer/gardener; maintenance suggests a form of conservation, continuation, and upkeep. I am intrigued by continuity, regeneration and the acts of accumulation present within my *drawing sites*. Bellacasa states that care work advances when done repeatedly: “Creating the specificity of a relation through intensified involvement and knowledge requires attention and fine-tuning to the temporal rhythms of an ‘other’ and the specific relations that are being woven together.”⁶⁹ I value repetitive caring embedded gestures and variable time scales within the processes I engage in while drawing and gardening.

⁶⁸ Stephanie Rosenthal and Clare Molloy, “Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council,” Zheng Bo

⁶⁹ María P. Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*

American artist Walter De Maria's 1977 work, 'The New York Earth Room', is a permanent interior earthwork containing 250 cubic meters of earth in 36000 cubic square meters of space and 22 inches deep.⁷⁰ This work requires similar durational tending and care-based actions to those that are crucial to my own practice. Bill Dilworth has been the caretaker of the work for 33 years. He waters, weeds and rakes, alternating directions weekly to maintain what Dilworth calls visual consistency. I am interested in this long-term maintenance of tending to a live artwork.



Figure 41. Walter De Maria, *The New York Earth Room*, 1977. © Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo: John Cliett, courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Fascinated by 'New York Earth Room', in August 2022, I started my second iteration of soil drawing, floor work. I had the idea of planting grass seeds into the existing first iteration soil work to physically engage with an act of 'durational tending.' Due to the dry conditions in the studio, the soil needed constant watering and spraying to keep it damp. I came in every single day to the studio to tend to the work for 14 days. I felt a responsibility; if I didn't, it would spoil what I had been attending to daily. By dedicating 30 minutes of my day to this work I now realise I was physically engaging in the intimate relations of *routine maintenance* and *daily ecological care*.

⁷⁰ Dia A. Foundation, "Walter De Maria|The New York Earth Room, 1977," Dia.

This work was successful in creating relational, vital co-dependency. Tending actions were needed to keep it going. After this work, I decided not to pursue ‘growing’. The ecological terrain I am now engaging with, toward the end of my thesis focuses on the *unseen*. I have recognised the agency of those processes of life and non-life. The soil itself doesn’t have the capacity to grow in the same way as a plant or the grass seed that I tended to. A plant’s outcome is anticipated; as is the grass seed. I know how it will turn out eventually. Working with the soil in an expanded drawing method instead has a more indeterminate result, leading to open-ended questions to explore.



Figure 42-43. Megan Houching, Soil drawing, Iteration two. Talk Week, August 2022.



Figure 44. Soil sediment generated throughout project duration. July 2022- June 2023.

Traces

I noticed that at the bottom of the containers I use to dilute and liquefy the garden soil, the sediment gradually separates from the water and sinks to the bottom, creating this intriguing brown slippery, slime-like substance. (Fig 44) The dispersed clay throughout the garden soil streams through the darker browns, a light earthy beige. It bubbles when it hits the muddy, murky water, and when I mix it around, the clay seeps, disappearing into the browns. It becomes a type of grainy, muddy, watery paste.



As I proceeded to work durationally with the soil over six months, this sediment built up, and I started to think about using this to make a new work. I understand *trace* as the passing or remnant of something. Could this mean that I'm giving agency in these traces that have passed through time within the gestures that makeup of the work in its current state? I am intrigued by how using this sediment in work is made possible, given that it's an active build-up of material leftover from previous making implies that working regeneratively with the same material will lead to more discoveries and deeper relations, further creating complex ideas with simple materials.



Figures 45-46, Studio soil traces, 2023.

I have also been paying attention to other forms of trace, like the soil that had stained through the calico whilst making it onto the wall behind, leaving my muddy hand marks and the watery soil marks between the calico and the concrete floor as they stick to one another and adhere momentarily in a mutual relationship. I leave these marks in my studio space as a reminder of the traced actions of past workings of the same regeneratively used soil.

In my work ‘Sediment Trace’ (2023), I began by soaking a 5-meter length of calico fabric in water. I first soaked the sheet in a bucket of water, then laid it on the ground, repeating to pour water on top of the calico. I walked over it, kneeling and standing on it, pushing it to bond with the floor. The water gradually seeps into the grains of the fabric and eventually dried and bonded to the concrete floor. The edges subtly curled up. The calico became pleasingly smooth and flat, with small hints of air bubbles trapped between the two surfaces: the underside of the fabric and the smooth surface of the floor. I found myself thinking about *grounding/ungrounding*.⁷¹ When the calico is bonded to the floor it behaved like the surface of paper and felt natural to work upon. This sense of bodily engagement, working on the ground, initially enabled me to have multiple entry points and closeness to the work, which I could then pin to the wall to gain some distance.



Figure 47. Megan Houching, Sediment Trace, Compost garden soil on 5 metre calico. 2023.

⁷¹ *Grounding/Ungrounding* see in-depth discussion under part 4.4. meaning my tendencies to work between horizontal and vertical fields/planes.



Figure 48-49. Megan Houching, Sediment Trace details, Compost garden soil on 5 metre calico. 2023.



Figure 50. Megan Houching, *Sediment Trace* detail, Compost garden soil on 5 metre calico. 2023.

Grounding/ungrounding



Figure 51. Megan Houching, *Sediment Trace* during the making 'ground' process. May 2023.

I have natural inclination to work between horizontal and vertical fields which I consider a *grounding/ungrounding* action in my recent artworks. There is an aspect of attempting to find a middle ground between these two planes. That is, becoming a part of a field, in which I become part of its relations; working between two planes enables a spatial reorientation of the drawing. To return again to Millar, the tendency to work between the ground and the wall is described as: "changing up the plane."⁷² She also mentions the practical element of this reorientation to exploit the fluid nature of the paint. Expanding my drawing materials to utilise the soil's fluid nature ultimately led me to establish this way of working. Working with the soil has also critically expanded my ongoing graphite drawing process so that I am able to gain new insights into the work.

To engage with and view the graphite paper drawing from above as well as on the floor became just as vital as this process had been for the calico soil drawings. I implemented multiple entry points of engagement with the work on the wall and the floor, sitting on the drawing, or standing above or at multiple points around it. This bodily engagement with the work became an ongoing working habit. This multidirectional approach to working enabled a sense of inhabitation within the drawing.⁷³

⁷² Douglas, Graeme. "The Good Oil Episode One: Judy Millar." Podcast audio. March 20, 2023.

⁷³ Scott Finkler, "Jackson Pollock – Surface, Space and Spirit," *ScottF Studio*. June 19, 2015

Conclusion

As this writing draws to a close I want to take you back to the very seed that planted the motivations behind the research – Drawing. This practice-led research has emphasized the lively, intimate acts of drawing as a new potential of ecological *being* or *seeing* in the world. I have made discoveries about drawing practice and challenged myself to think about unconventional drawing methods, such as using compost garden soil as temporal-based media in conjunction with other drawing-based intensive work.

I set out to pursue an authentic, intimate relationship with the site of my home vegetable garden, which I have progressively achieved by working with my *Hamilton Road* and *Ardmore Road gardens*. This formed an ecological care, site-responsive, collaborative approach to practising and became the work's main conceptual, physical and material generator. Having led me to a *spatiotemporal engagement*, I am more conscious of the vegetable garden's relationality. I now understand that I have been fuelled by each of these parts, focusing on the small accumulations of happenings, and seeking ways to bring out their agency or vitalities.

Feminist philosophers, Haraway, Tsing, Bellacasa and Kimmerer have located the act of care, labour, and attentiveness, and more-than-human agency in a critical framework for understanding the world. If we understand other species, earthly inhabitants and non-beings more wholly through gardening and drawing, humans also may become more self-aware of the ruinous state of our shared ecology and the imperative for regeneration. This understanding has been beneficial for my art-making in seeking out alternative ways to live in a more non-hierarchical caring way amongst all forms of beings.

Specifically, linking these actions to parallel drawing-gardening processes has led me to a deeper critical understanding of the acts of ecological drawing. I have focused my processual activities across regenerative *drawing and physical sites*. Thus, my current interests have shifted away from recreating purely representational images. Instead, by engaging in multiple intensities of tending or care as a practise framework, I use the soil/graphite to the collaborative advantage of bringing something 'out' of the soil – the

temporalities, fluxes, subtle movements and changes that make this material vigorous, dynamic, vibrant matter.⁷⁴ I am interested in the careful, attentive drawing event. Hence I have considered drawing's autobiographical potential for tending and caring the everyday events of my own life through the durational drawn image.

Leading towards the final exhibition, I have chosen two spaces that resonate with an 'in-between' state of the grounded/ungrounded image; my locations sit outside the ST PAUL St gallery interior spaces. The foyer sits in between the two galleries with large windows that are on the same plane as the front window box space. The window box has a multifaceted relationship with the ground; because it is elevated above the footpath the viewer stands at eye level with the 'floor' of the front box. This provides exciting potential with my floor working tendencies. I intend to develop this ground relationship with a durational soil drawing to be created over twelve days.

As I conclude this research I feel less at an endpoint than in the midst of a regenerative and lively cycle, just like my drawing processes and my vegetable garden dwellers. Here, I mark the end of this year and a half cycle that sits so close to me that I ambitiously hope to introduce a second cycle of further study soon. An ethical responsibility calls upon me to first promote the urgency of repairing human-soil relations in a time of ecological crisis, to contribute further creative knowledge, and advocate and commit to the rather wonderful, lively, dynamic medium that is drawing.

⁷⁴ *Vibrant matter* is New Materialist, Jane Bennett's term.

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Exhibition Documentation

ST PAUL St Gallery Foyer & Front Box

8-10 June 2023

Muddy, grainy, slimy, slippery, watery garden compost soil.

Pouring the liquidy, earthy paste onto the concrete floor, it creeps out from its centre. Seeping. Expanding.

Creating many soil pourings across the floor substrate, the soil builds up, pools with an ever-so-slight mound and momentarily creeps out of its containments.

The separate mounds meld together, merging and meeting one another, making their way in multiple indeterminate directions.

Their deep browns and ochre yellow tones split and swirl, slipping and moving, as I guide my fingertips along the liquid soil on the concrete surface.

The soil fluctuates between wet and dry states. It cracks, crumbles, curls, separates, and fades into chalky, dusty, flakey soil pieces.

I chip away slowly. Building,

Accumulating,

Growing,

Tending,

Caring.

* The compost and garden soil are homemade on two vegetable garden sites, which I have continuously regenerated into multiple installations and expanded drawing works throughout the project's year-and-a-half life cycle. Here marks the final inhabitation of this composted soil. All soil material used in this project will be returned and regenerated into my garden's ecosystem. Although this material comes from 'my' vegetable garden, I would like to acknowledge Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei iwi as mana whenua of the place of installation of this work. 'My' gardens themselves also occupy sites where iwi including: Ngāi Tai, Ngāti Tamaoho, Te Ahiwaru - Waiohua, Te Patukirikiri, Ngāti Pāoa, Te Ākitai Waiohua, Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua, Te Kawerau a Maki, Ngāti Whātua o Kaipara, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Te Ata, Ngāti Maru, Waikato, have lived over time.

1. GROUND

Site-responsive garden compost soil drawing that was worked on daily over a 12-day duration.
(ST PAUL St Gallery Front Box)

(All photos taken by Megan Houching unless stated otherwise.)



Photo taken by Paul Chapman.



Photo taken by Paul Chapman.







2. FIELD

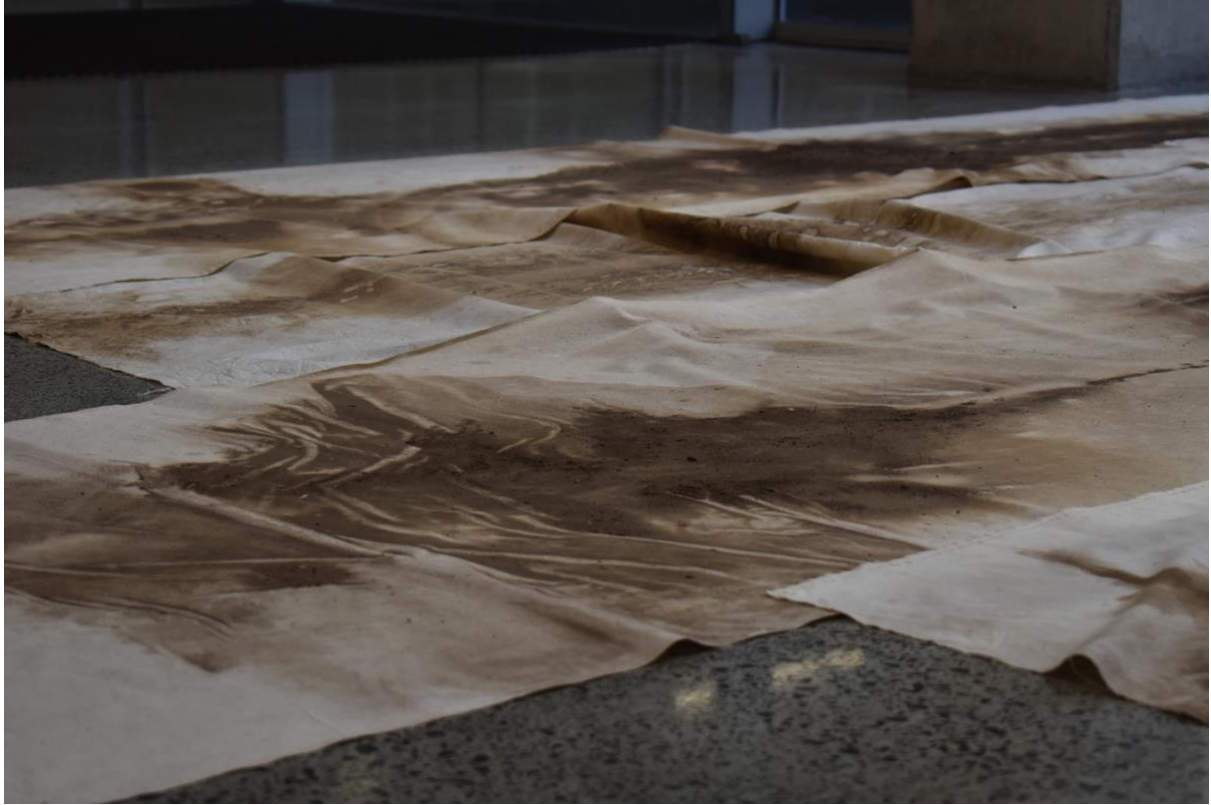
- *Pour*
- *Scrape*
- *Sediment Trace*
- *Squeeze*
- *Line*

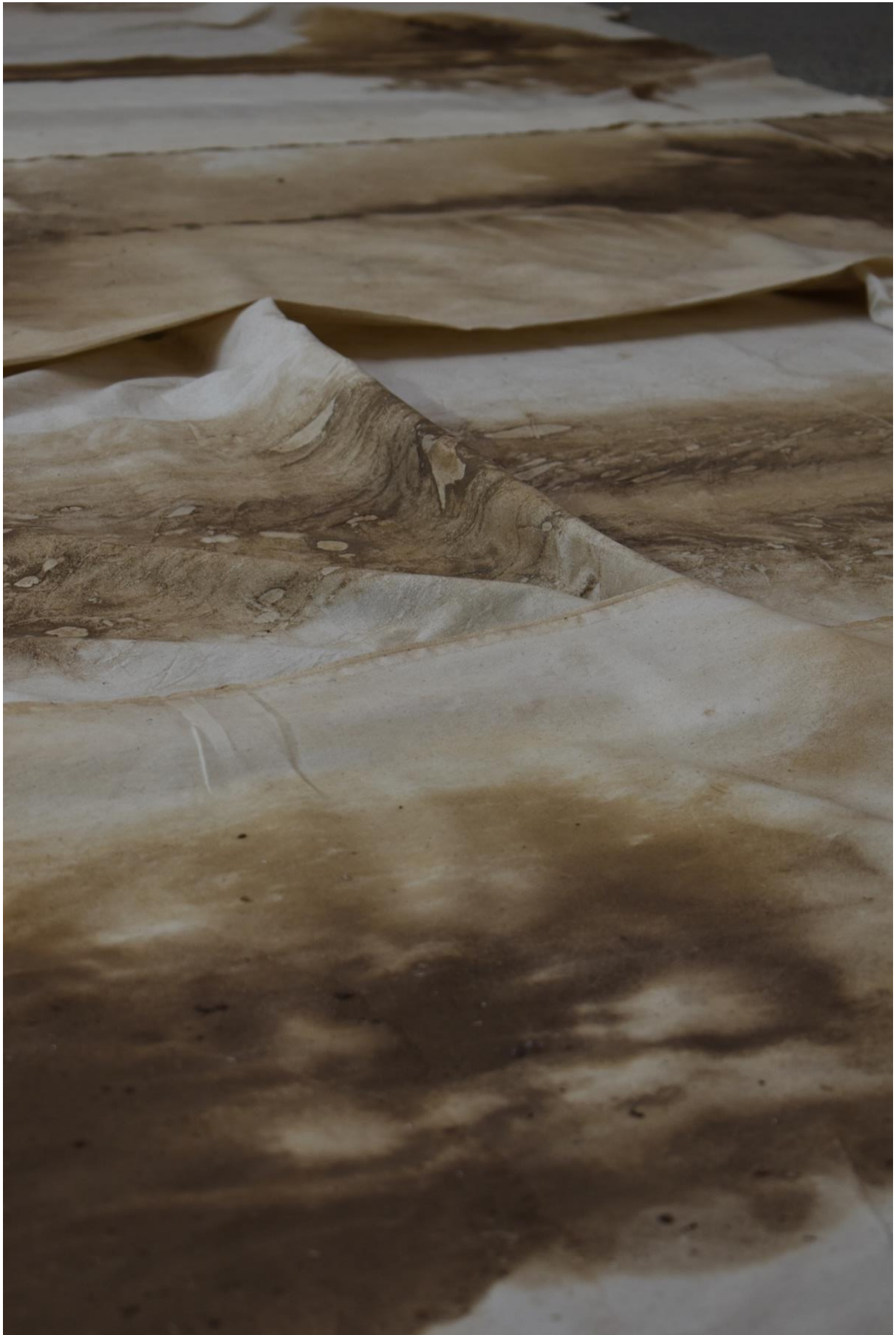
A series of five x 5 m (approx.) calico garden soil drawings, left to right looking outside.
(ST PAUL St Gallery Foyer)



Photo taken by Paul Chapman.







3. *Durational Graphite Drawing*

Garden soil documentation drawing with graphite on Hahnemühle Stella paper. (1.5 x 1.5 m)
To date, this drawing has taken eight months of invested labour from October 2022 – June 2023.
The drawing will be worked on continually for an indeterminate time period.
(ST PAUL St Gallery Foyer)



Photo taken by Paul Chapman.



