

**FEELING
OF
BEING**

**A
WOVEN
HOME**

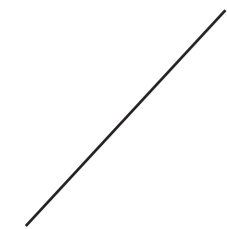


School of Art and Design, Auckland University of Technology.

*A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design.*

Xinhan Zhang 2025

Abstract



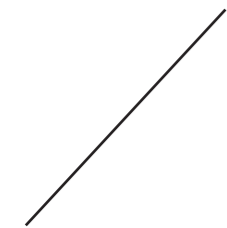
This practice-led research explores how basket weaving serves as a mode of making that visualizes the impermanence of my nomadic experience and expresses the notion of 'home'. Through an iterative process of foraging, collecting, and weaving with natural materials, I investigate how the act of making can embody themes of impermanence, memory, and belonging. The research draws upon personal narratives of displacement, where frequent relocation shaped an enduring search for home, one that is both transient and deeply rooted in lived experience.

Basketry, as both a physical and conceptual framework, becomes a vessel for exploring the dualities of home—presence and absence, containment and openness, rootedness and movement. By engaging with organic materials such as seed pods, bark, and plant fibres, I navigate the temporality of materials, allowing decay, transformation, and renewal to inform my making process. The fragility of natural matter mirrors the ephemeral nature of home, where memories and landscapes overlap, dissolve, and re-emerge. This research examines how the techniques of coiling, twining, and binding can translate affective experiences of detachment, serenity, and spiritual connection into tactile forms.

The theoretical framework integrates perspectives from Taoism, Wabi-Sabi aesthetics, and Eastern philosophies of impermanence, positioning weaving as a contemplative practice that aligns with the rhythms of nature. Just as a bird instinctively gathers and weaves its nest, my process of making becomes an act of constructing belonging—one that does not seek permanence but rather embraces fluidity. Through tactile engagement with materials, weaving serves as a meditative inquiry into home as an ever-evolving, ephemeral space.

This project contributes to contemporary discourse on materiality, affect, and craft by demonstrating how basketry can function as both a personal and philosophical meditation on home. It reinterprets basket weaving not merely as an artisanal technique but as a dynamic process of meaning-making, where material, memory, and movement coalesce. This research reveals how the impermanence of home can be held within the woven structure of a basket, allowing for both containment and transformation.

Contents

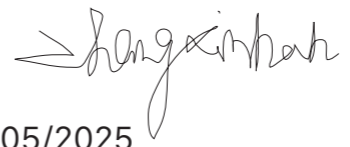


ABSTRACT	4	DESIGN PRACTICE	60
CONTENTS	6	Introduction	60
ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP	8	Stage One: Foraging / Collecting	63
LIST OF FIGURES	10	Stage Two: Experimentation with Various Forms	72
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	16	A Seed Pod Apocalypse	82
INTRODUCTION	18	Nesting: A Transitional Point in Conceptual Exploration	86
POSITIONING THE RESEARCH	20	Stage Three: Basket Weaving	88
CONTEXTUAL REVIEW	30	Material	89
'Home is where one starts from'	30	Form	99
The Poetics of Impermanence	33	Texture	102
Basket as a Metaphor of Home	38	Colour	102
Basket Weaving	41	Scales	102
METHODOLOGICAL STATEMENT	48	Technique: coiling and twining	103
		Making Process: <i>The Woven Home</i>	114
		CONCLUSION	132
		REFERENCES	134
		APPENDIX	138

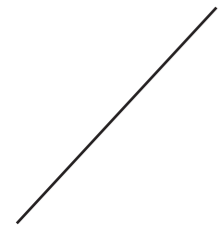
Attestation of Authorship



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: 
Date: 05/05/2025

List of Figures



Figures 1, 2.
The Golden ginkgo trees against the mottled ancient city gate. Xinhua Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing.

Figures 3, 4, 5.
Paved road with ginkgo and sycamore leaves. Xinhua Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing.

Figures 6, 7, 8.
Trees, reflections and a small lake next to my house, with the Purple Mountain in the background. Xinhua Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing.

Figure 9.
Chinese Baskets. Zhejiang Province, China. Xu, Huadang, and Jianzhong Zhang, 2020.

Figure 10.
Master of Bamboo-Japanese Baskets and Sculpture in the Cotsen Collection, 2007. Exhibition at Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

Figure 11.
My mom's bamboo baskets in home. Xinhua Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing.

Figures 12- 20.
Natural Objects collected in Albert Park. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figure 21.
Natural Objects collected in Albert Park. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figure 22.
My studio space with the inspiration and mood boards. Xinhua Zhang, spring 2024, Auckland.

Figures 23, 24.
Prototypes of a small basket shape. Xinhua Zhang, spring 2024, Auckland.

Figures 25, 26.
Visual diary at an early stage of research. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figure 27.
Drawings of basket development. Xinhua Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figures 28, 29.
The environment during the collection of materials in Albert Park. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figures 30, 31.
Weaving material made from Harakeke. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figures 32-37.
Fruits, seeds and branches that fall all over the ground after typhoon days. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Nanjing.

Figure 38.
Flower, stone painting. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figure 39.
Weaving with small objects. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figures 40, 41.
Part of the work (Harakeke leaf) fading over time. Left: winter 2024.
Right: Summer 2025. Xinhan Zhang, Auckland.

Figures 42, 43.
Weaving pieces inspired by nature. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024,
Auckland.

Figure 44.
Weaving pieces with natural fibres. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024,
Auckland.

Figures 45, 47.
Playing with fibres. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Figures 48, 49.
Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire. Xinhan
Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figures 50, 51.
Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire on corn
leaves. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 52.
Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire on corn
leaves. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 53.
Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire on palm
leaves. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figures 54, 55.
A long weaving piece with cotton and corn leaves. Xinhan Zhang,
summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 56.
The liquidambar styraciflua seed pod collected in Albert Park. Xinhan
Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 57.
Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on
seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 58.
Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on
seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 59.
Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on
seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 60.
Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on
seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figures 61, 62.
Materials. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 63.
Sally Blake, *Great Goddess*, 2022, Copper wire Artefacts, Grainger
Gallery Exhibition, Canberra, Australia.

Figure 64.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket Weaving. Xinhan Zhang,
summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 65.
Cotton thread coiling through coco rope. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024,
Auckland.

Figures 66, 67.
The contrast between regular and random. Basket side views. Xinhan
Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 68.
A basket with a seedpod shape. Tightly closed entrances result in no utility. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 69.
A basket with a sagging top structure. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 70.
Drawings of the basic structure of coiling. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

Figure 71.
Experimental sample—A coiled copper wire piece. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figures 72, 73.
A coiled soft cotton basket. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figures 74, 75.
A coiled basket. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 76.
Drawings of the basic structure of twining. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 77.
The basic processes of making a twining basket. Reproduced from Ed Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*.

Figure 78.
A twined basket. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 79.
The use of twining techniques. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 80.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 81.
A coiled raffia foundation. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figures 82, 83.
Twined basket foundations. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Figure 84.
A coiled soft cotton basket. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 85.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figures 86, 87.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figures 88, 89.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figures 90, 91.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 92, 93.
Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket Weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

Figure 94. Exhibition overview. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2025, Auckland

Figure 95, 96, 97, 98. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Paul Chapman, winter 2025, Auckland

Figure 99. Exhibition overview. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2025, Auckland

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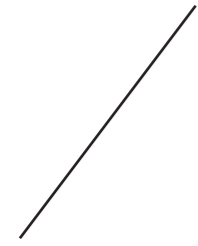


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Introduction



Over the past year's research journey, my project has been directed toward exploring how basket weaving provides a mode of making that visualises the impermanence of my nomadic experience and expresses the notion of 'home'. Through a practice-led methodology, I investigate how collecting and weaving with natural materials can evoke a sense of serenity, detachment, and spiritual connection. My work integrates craft techniques with theoretical frameworks, emphasising the materiality of foraged elements and the significance of basketry construction techniques. I reflect on the transient, evolving experience of home, as well as the broader implications of containment, repair, and contemplation.

This project examines how my experiences of mobility and shifting notions of 'home' affect my decision-making about material and weaving techniques. It also considers how the shared principles within Taoism, Zen, and Wabi-Sabi aesthetics inform a tactile, embodied understanding of impermanence through the weaving process. My approach is rooted in an iterative, exploratory process where making informs meaning. Rather than sticking to a predetermined outcome, I allow each stage of experimentation to lead organically into the next, embracing the unexpected.

This exegesis is structured into four chapters. Chapter one establishes the foundational positioning of this research. Chapter two contextualizes my research within theoretical and artistic discourses, examining relevant literature related to home, impermanence, and basketry. Chapter three discusses my methodology, detailing my practice-led approach and methods. Finally, Chapter four focuses on experimentation, analysing detailed processes and decision making, and discussing how my work contributes to broader conversations on impermanence and belonging.



Figure 1. The Golden ginkgo trees against the mottled ancient city gate. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing

Positioning the Research

My memory of childhood is tightly bound to departures and relocations. Before the age of 15, I was forced to move frequently with my family, each time uprooting me from the fragile sense of home I had barely come to understand. I lived in a house for less than a year before another move took me to unfamiliar surroundings. Each departure occurred before I had fully adapted to or comprehended the nuances of my temporary homes. This nomadic childhood fostered an enduring sense of mental insecurity—a restless displacement that I did not consciously recognize until much later. From kindergarten onward, I spent most of my time at schools far from home, returning only on weekends. This experience deepened my attachment to home, though it was always fleeting, a transient notion rather than a fixed reality.

I have no memory of the appearance of my first home, the house where I lived with my parents and grandparents, but my mother has often told me of its significance. From 2004-2012, our family moved many times in Nanjing, China. Each move gradually diminishes my sense of place. Now, when I occasionally flip through the old photos in photo albums to recall those short-lived childhood memories, I recognise that an appreciation of impermanence has been deeply rooted in my spiritual world. Even after 2012, when I stopped moving so often and had a relatively stable place to live, I still seemed to be in a state of homelessness, where a material, physical home could not accommodate my spiritual home. No entity or phenomenon endures indefinitely; no life is eternal; matter deteriorates, people die, memories are forgotten.

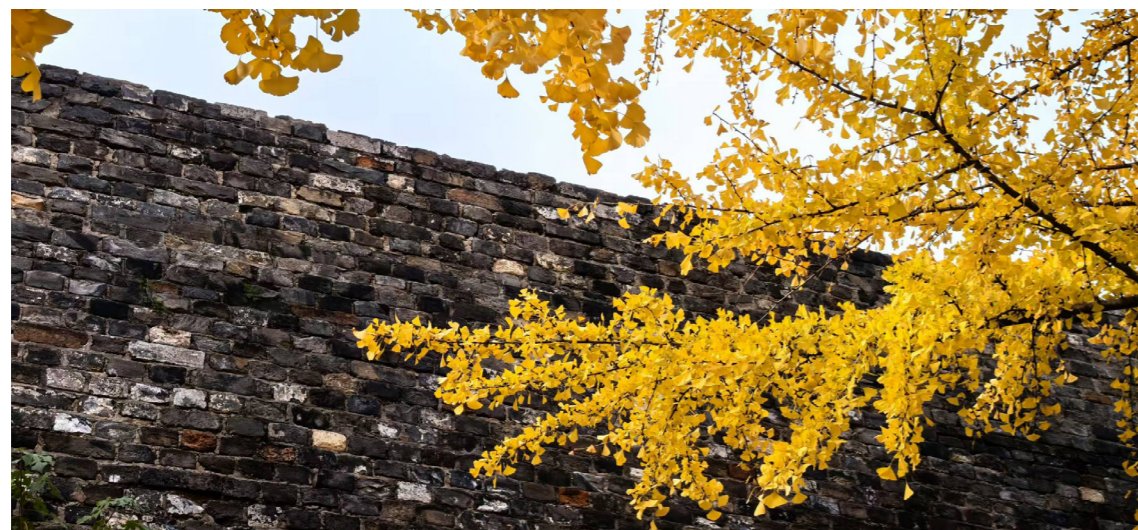
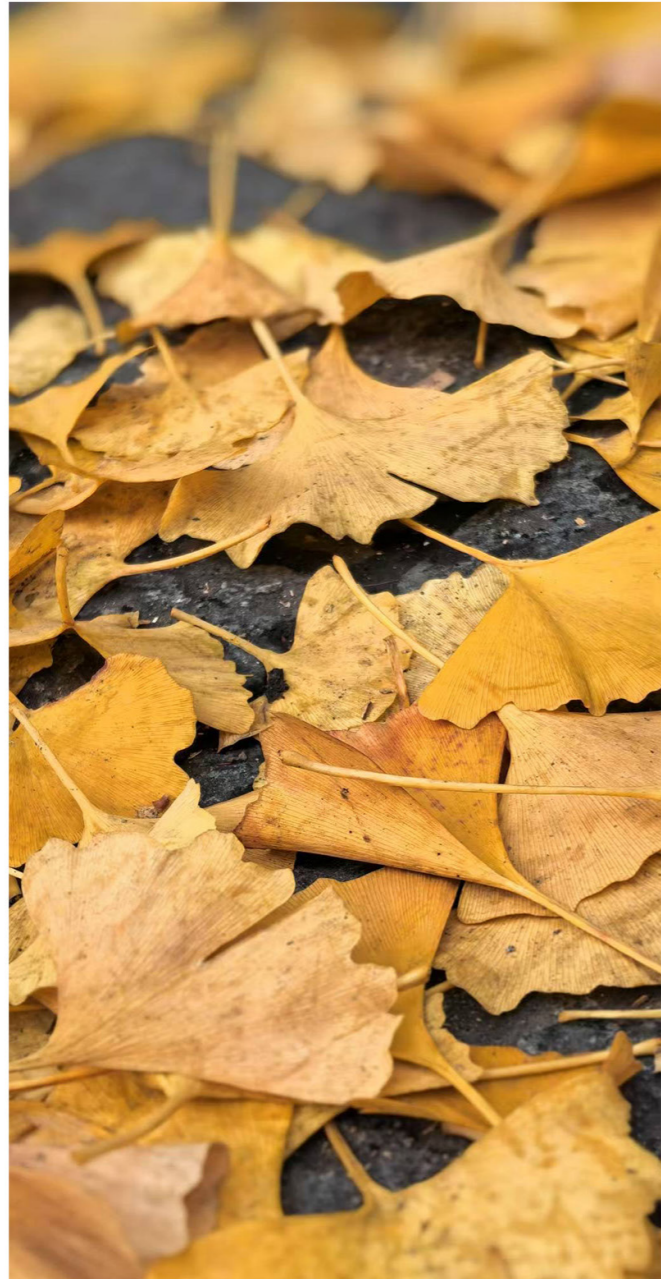


Figure 2. The Golden ginkgo trees against the mottled ancient city gate. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing

The experience of moving nine times during my childhood resulted in a state of a non-fixed home that shifted over time, with memories of restlessness and sensitivity lying dormant. One of the challenges of frequent relocation is the loss and forgetting of items. Yet, amidst the loss of tangible objects, the act of collecting items became an anchor. This experience prompted me to consciously and meticulously store and categorise my belongings and develop a habit of collecting. I believe objects have the capacity to evoke memories and narratives. Those once cherished homes, the nest that raised me, is long gone, maybe remodelled, torn down, or with luck still intact but now belonging to strangers.

In 2015, I went to school in Singapore, and then in 2024, I travelled to New Zealand in the southern hemisphere to continue my education. Moving through different cultures, languages and geographical environments, I am attempting to search for a location where I can establish a sense of belonging. There is a whole street of sycamore trees in one of the homes where I used to live, and during the autumn season the ground is covered in a thick layer of light brown, dry, fallen leaves.(see figures 3, 4, 5) In Auckland, I found some strikingly similar landscapes. Thus, the images of two cities, situated thousands of miles apart, show a subtle overlap in my memory, and offer a quiet reassurance. I walk into the nature here, akin to a pilgrim or a quiet traveller. The act of walking and engaging with the natural environment enabled a gradual process of emotional openness. When I stepped into nature and experienced the sensation of the breeze and the aroma of the grass, I developed a sense of grounding to this place: the earth would allow me to fit in and share everything, and that brought a feeling of home.



Figures 3, 4, 5. Paved road with ginkgo and sycamore leaves.
Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing



Figures 6, 7, 8. Trees, reflections and a small lake next to my house, with the Purple Mountain in the background.
Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing

In my 'nomadic' experience of life, the land, plants, and landscapes have become a source of spiritual sustenance. Nature serves as a bond and an emotional cue of matter that connects my present life with my recollections. The subjective nature of the experience allows me to transcend briefly from the restlessness of my memories and to feel serenity and detachment through a contemplative philosophy. Through this interaction with nature, I experience a fluid, spiritual concept of home.(see figures 6, 7, 8)

The concept of this research project is the embodiment of my experience in nature. It did not emerge spontaneously; it has been refined through a process of continuous reflection and iteration. The making process begins with the most direct engagement with nature, including observing, collecting, and waiting. As a maker, I am driven to comprehend the essence of materials. The intrinsic beauty of fallen branches, leaves, seeds, and tree bark has a strong appeal to me and as such is a medium which I choose to be inspired by. Weaving for me is a philosophy of balance, whereby objects are placed in the appropriate locations and connected with materials in a skilful and aesthetically pleasing manner, creating a regular rhythm that extends the space created indefinitely. It offers a mode of production that perpetually intertwines materials and the maker's thinking. As the production progresses, I constantly unpack questions and discover myself, which in turn provokes deeper thoughts about the project.

I questioned whether the strong attachment to home embodied through making could be made visible? How to convey a conversation between the permanent and fleeting, the despair and comfort? How might materials and forms be employed to express this unnameable sense of detachment and serenity in a 3-dimensional way?

Contextual Review

‘Home is where one starts from’[1]

The concept of ‘home’ is the subjective experience of a process that is shaped by the individual's unique circumstances and context.[2] The residential environment, in particular, plays a significant role in influencing people’s ‘motivations, ideas and images’[3] about home. The concept of home encompasses not only the physical location where one resides, but also the movements and experiences that reshape and transform it. From a personal perspective, the tangible aspect of home-residence-habitat was a perpetually evolving experience, liable to vanish at any moment. As a setting for enduring daily life, the home offers physical cues that evoke memories, linking the past and future of its occupants.[4]

Ahmed Sara, a British-Australian writer and scholar, supports the perspective that home involves a complex interplay of feelings, memories, relationships, and places, encompassing both tangible and intangible connections.[5] They further suggest that the boundaries between home and self, as well as home and away, are permeable.[6] The concept of ‘being at home’ implies that the self is immersed in a place and that the environment permeates the self through the five senses. Therefore, the concept of home discussed here transcends the level of physical structure and is rooted in spiritual soil.[7] It can be defined as a place where the inhabitant feels a sense of grounding, a place of rootedness, and an affective and spiritual resonance.

[1] T. S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

[2] Carole Després, ‘The Meaning of Home: Literature Review and Directions For Future Research and Theoretical Development’, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 8, no. 2 (1991): 96–115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43029026>.

[3] R. J. Lawrence, ‘Understanding the Home Environment: Spatial and Temporal Perspective’, *International Journal of Housing Science and Its Application* 7, 1 (1983): 13–25.

[4] A. J Sixsmith and J. A. Sixsmith, ‘Transitions in Home Experience in Later Life’, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 8,3 (1991)

[5] Sara Ahmed, ‘Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, 3 (1999): 329–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303>.

[6] Ahmed, ‘Home and Away’.

[7] Pauline Dewan, *The House as Setting, Symbol, and Structural Motif in Children’s Literature*. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

The German poet Novalis posited that 'Philosophy is really homesickness—the urge to be everywhere at home'.**[8]** Shi Su, one of China's most esteemed poets and essayists, who lived during the Song dynasty, similarly observed that '此心安处是吾乡': *Home is where the peaceful heart is*.**[9]** Both authors underscored the notion of the homecoming of the mind and spirit, a silent impulse of emotion imbued with qualities of serenity and detachment. From this perspective, this research can be considered a journey of spiritual homecoming, or a return to one's metaphysical home. For me, the term 'home' refers to nature, a place where I feel full and complete, which provides the contours of a space of belonging, and in which immersion brings a sense of 'coming home' each visit. This concept of home is unique to me in that it is based on the subjective feeling of its impermanence, a combination of the states of 'coming' and 'leaving', 'reunion' and 'separation'.

The impermanence of my nomadic experience brings a deep sense of incompleteness and longing. When this impermanence is acknowledged and regarded as an integral aspect of the meaning of home, however, its negative implications are largely mitigated. It assumes a transcendent, serene, and contemplative quality, prompting a shift in focus towards more nuanced philosophical considerations.

[8] Novalis, in *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, ed. David Wood, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

[9] Shi Su, 定风波 [*Calming Wind and Wave*], (1083), <https://www.learnancientchinese poetry.org/2017/04/10/su-dongpo-calm-wind-and-waves/>



The Poetics of Impermanence

As early as the fourth century BCE, the renowned Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu recognised that the essence of life lies in the natural flow of things, with all phenomena being in a constant state of flux.**[10]** Through his observations of the workings of heaven, earth, and nature, Lao tzu discerned impermanence as the fundamental nature of existence. He emphasised the necessity of 'flowing with the moment' in order to navigate life, advocating for reverence towards nature and the harmony between humanity and the cosmos.**[11]** His acute attentiveness to the subtleties of nature suggested that static and permanent relationships do not exist; rather, all relationships embody contradictions, yet can achieve temporary equilibrium.**[12]**

[10] Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching : The New Translation from Tao Te Ching : The Definitive Edition*. Translated by Jonathan Star, (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008)

[11] Alan Watts and Al Chung-Liang Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975).

[12] Chun Shan, *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy: Dao of Inner Saint and Outer King*, (Berlin: Springer Berlin, 2014).

Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to China from India during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), encountering and subsequently merging with Taoist thought, the prevailing indigenous belief system of the time.**[13]** This interaction led to the emergence of Ch’an (Zen in Japanese), which had a profound and enduring impact on the intellectual and philosophical landscape of the East.**[14]** Taoist and Buddhist philosophies frequently converged on key tenets, one of which was the principle of impermanence.**[15]** In Ch’an Buddhism, impermanence is regarded as a fundamental truth: nothing is eternal, and all things exist in a state of continuous dissolution. Thus, Ch’an posits that the true nature of all things is emptiness, aligning closely with Taoist perspectives. Although impermanence may be interpreted negatively as a melancholic attachment to the passage of time, in the classical cultural understanding of the East, it is also a manifestation of beauty.**[16]** Things are beautiful precisely because they do not endure forever.

Many Ch’an monks were themselves artists, scholars, or philosophers, whose meticulous observations of nature reflected an intuitive philosophy that inspired their artistic instincts. Ch’an became the foundation for many Eastern values and ideologies, influencing not only artistic expression but also personal character and interpersonal conduct. Without an understanding of Ch’an, it is difficult to fully appreciate the essence of Eastern sensibilities.**[17]** For instance,

[13] Hai Cheng Ling, Jun Liu, and Tao Xie, *Buddhism in China*, (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, Bei Jing, 2005)

[14] Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art & Poetry*, (Singing Dragon, 2011).

[15] Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*.

[16] Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane, ‘Japanese Aesthetics’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>.

[17] Daisetsu Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

one characteristic of Chinese Song Dynasty ink painting was the employment of minimal brushstrokes to depict objects, combined with the extensive use of empty space. Consider the image of a solitary boat drifting on a vast expanse of water, enveloped in silence-this evokes the sense of isolation and transcendence intrinsic to Ch’an. Around the same period (Song Dynasty), Ch’an was transmitted to Japan, where it significantly shaped the development of the tea ceremony. The structure of the tea room, the utensils, and the rituals of tea preparation all pursued a state of simplicity, one that embraced the essence of primitive artistry and upheld an attitude of humility and reverence.**[18]**

Under the influence of Taoism and Ch’an, Japan developed its distinctive aesthetic philosophy, encapsulated in the concepts of ‘Wabi-Sabi’ and ‘asymmetry’.**[19]** In articulating this aesthetic, the scholar Daisetsu Suzuki frequently employed terms such as ‘tasteful simplicity’ and ‘tranquillity’. Wabi-Sabi emerges at the intersection of imperfection, antiquity, and unrefined natural beauty. The Taoist principle of ‘Wu Wei’ serves as a catalyst for a Wabi-Sabi perspective on the world, encouraging a slow and organic approach to experiencing beauty.**[20]** On an aesthetic level, the notion of ‘Sabi’ integrates religious, ethical, and philosophical dimensions, transforming Wabi-Sabi from a mood of melancholy, disappointment, and solitude into one of serenity and leisure.**[21]** The Japanese writer Jun'ichirō Tanizaki,

[18] Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

[19] Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

[20] Andrew Juniper, *Wabi Sabi : The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. (Boston: Tuttle Pub, 2003).

[21] Yoshinori Ōnishi, and Xiangyuan Wang, 侘寂：素朴日常 = わび、さび . [*Wabi-sabi: Simple Everyday*] (Taiwan: Da Jia Pub,2018).

in his work *In Praise of Shadows*, describes 'Wabi' as simplicity and rusticity, while 'Sabi' refers to the mindset that perceives beauty in such qualities.**[22]** This illustrates the transformative power inherent in aesthetic perception. Through an appreciation of nature, impermanence, and humility, individuals discover beauty in the delicate and seemingly arbitrary patterns that nature inscribes upon the world. Bent bamboo strips, worn wooden surfaces, cracks, and decaying plants are all seen as the physical manifestations of impermanence. Within the philosophy of Wabi-Sabi, elements that signify the passage of time are not regarded as deteriorating, but rather embraced as sources of beauty, embodying the essence of 'the wabi-sabi heart'.**[23]**

Both Taoism and Wabi-Sabi do not shy away from discussions of death and suffering; they recognise that the process of dissolution is already embedded within the very concept of existence. Instead of resisting this reality, they invite individuals to glimpse the tranquillity and transcendence that lie beneath the veil of melancholy. In this context, objects become 'vehicles for aesthetic contemplation'.**[24]**

Eastern philosophy is inseparable from nature. Whether through Taoism, Ch'an Buddhism, or Wabi-Sabi, nature has always served as an inspiration for introspective inquiry into fundamental truths. Aesthetic appreciation of nature is not confined to its external, static attributes but extends to the nuanced changes brought by the passage of time—an internalisation and spiritualisation of temporality. The Japanese scholar Ōnishi Yoshinori, encapsulates this sensitivity to the ephemeral nature of existence. Within this worldview, the perception of natural beauty acquires metaphysical and mystical dimensions.**[25]** The transient flow of nature, filtered through lived experience and the projection of human emotions, is ultimately seen as a symbolic

representation of the inherent void of existence.

These philosophical and spiritual perspectives continue to shape and inspire this research, as well as my personal values. From a life shaped by dislocation and restlessness, I have discerned an underlying natural rhythm and logic. Amidst multiplicity and change, a deeper constancy and order persist. This seemingly paradoxical relationship allows me to experience the beauty that emerges from the cyclical movements of nature—an aesthetic reflection of life's impermanence.

[22] Jun'ichio Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, (S.L.: Vintage Classics, 2019).

[23] Yoshinori Ōnishi, *Wabi-sabi: Simple Everyday*.

[24] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art*.

[25] Yoshinori Ōnishi, *Wabi-sabi: Simple Everyday*



Basket as a Metaphor of Home

In the *Tao Te Ching*, there is a passage that describes the hollow shape of a vessel:

埴埴以为器，当其无，有器之用；凿户牖以为室，当其无，有室之用。【26】

The meaning is that, when making pottery from clay, it is necessary to create a hollow space in the middle of the vessel so that it can fulfil the function of holding objects. Similarly, when building a house, the hollow space formed by the doors, windows and walls is essential for the house to fulfil its function. In addition to delineating the fundamental function of the container, Laozi has elucidated a dialectical interpretation of the concept of emptiness. The assertion that 'empty does not mean nothing' is predicated on the existence of the void, which is indispensable for the containment of objects. So, he says '故有之以为利，无之以为用': *the blankness gives a purpose to a space*.【27】 The Taoist philosophy of emptiness challenges conventional understandings of void as a lack. Instead, emptiness enables receptivity and function. The

interwoven structure of baskets creates both form and space, making it capable of holding, carrying, and transforming without clinging to its contents. This dynamic interplay of presence and absence mirrors the Taoist worldview, where flexibility and non-resistance allow for organic adaptation.【28】

Extending the metaphor, the concept of home can also be understood as a woven vessel rather than a fixed structure. As previously argued, the domestic environment, akin to the metaphorical basket, is characterised not solely by its physical dimensions, but also by the relationships, memories, and transient moments it encompasses. A physical dwelling provides a space, yet it is the interactions within that imbue it with meaning. The transient nature of home mirrors the basket's adaptability—it is a site of gathering and dispersal, of holding and releasing. This perspective is especially pertinent in a contemporary world marked by mobility and flux, where homes must often serve as spaces of impermanence rather than permanence. In this project, the process of constructing the basket is analogous to building a home. The porous nature of the basket allows it to breathe in the same way that a home embraces impermanence and fluidity rather than rigid permanence.

Basket-making itself is an act of yielding to the natural properties of its materials. The fibres must be woven with an awareness of their natural bends and resistances, rather than forced into artificial rigidity. This methodology reflects the Taoist principle of inaction/non-attachment (Wu Wei), or effortless action, which advocates for aligning with the

[26] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*.

[27] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*.

[28] Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*.

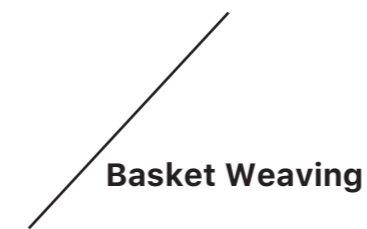
natural course of things, allowing processes to unfold organically rather than imposing strict control.**[29]** The British anthropologist Tim Ingold articulates a similar perspective, noting that basketry is not merely a technique but a 'life process',**[30]** one that embodies the unfolding of relationships and materials over time. He observes: '... in so many myths of origin, the world itself was conceived in a basket. There is a sense of containment as encompassment, as all-in-one...'**[31]** He also writes, 'To basket the world is to restore things to the temporal current of their ongoing creation. It is to recognise that there can be no pattern without rhythm. For every pattern records the movement of its formation, and to read it one must be able to enter into this movement and to join it with the arc of one's attention'.**[32]** This passage highlights the temporal nature of both basketry and memory. The act of weaving is inherently rhythmic and participatory, much like the construction of relationships and communal ties within a home or society.

[29] Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*.

[30] Tim Ingold, 'To Basket the World'. In *The Material Culture of Basketry: Practice, Skill and Embodied Knowledge*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2020): 265–70.

[31] Ingold, 'To Basket the World'

[32] Ingold, 'To Basket the World'



Basketry is a culturally significant and versatile craft with deep historical roots, embodying both practical utility and artistic expression across various cultures.**[33]** It requires intricate knowledge of materials, plants, and environmental conditions. The selection and preparation of fibres, such as bamboo, willow, rattan, and reeds, demand an understanding of regional ecology and seasonal availability, making basket weaving a sustainable, resource-conscious craft.**[34]** The mathematical precision involved in interlacing patterns, calculating tensions, and ensuring structural integrity highlights cognitive skills that parallel principles of geometry, engineering, and architecture.**[35]** Coiling and twining represent two common techniques in the art of basket weaving, having been employed across diverse cultural contexts and throughout various historical periods.**[36]** It has been particularly prevalent in regions abundant in soft plant material, where it has flourished as a popular medium for both artistic expression and practical applications.**[37]**

[33] Ed Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*, (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, 1986).

[34] Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, *Making and Growing: Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts*, (Routledge, 2016).

[35] Stephanie Bunn, 'Making Plants and Growing Baskets', In *Making and Growing*: 20.

[36] Stephanie Bunn and Victoria Mitchell, *The Material Culture of Basketry*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

[37] Bunn and Mitchell, *The Material Culture of Basketry*.

As one of the oldest forms of material culture, it has served not only as a means of storage and transportation but also as a medium for storytelling, spiritual practice, and social identity.**[38]** The craft encompasses a wide range of applications, from household essentials such as baskets for food storage and fishing traps to ritual objects adorned with feathers, shells, and symbolic patterns that denote status, religious beliefs, or communal traditions.**[39]** In many societies, baskets are integral to rites of passage, including birth, marriage, and funerary customs, reinforcing their cultural and ceremonial importance.**[40]**

Basket weaving in East Asian traditions, particularly in China and Japan, is deeply intertwined with cultural identity and daily life. In these societies, basketry extends beyond mere utility, embodying artistic refinement, regional craftsmanship, and spiritual significance.**[41]** In traditional marriage customs and funeral ceremonies, baskets have important symbolic meanings, establishing a tangible connection between daily life and religious practice. *Chinese Baskets*, by Berthold Laufer, is one of the earliest comprehensive studies on Chinese baskets and it filled a gap of serious scholarly attention on Chinese basketry. Laufer observes that artisans crafted flower baskets, picnic baskets, and travel baskets with meticulous attention to detail, often incorporating materials such as lacquer, wood, and metal to enhance their visual appeal, demonstrating the fusion of practical craftsmanship with artistic expression.**[42]** Laufer emphasises that the various functions and meanings of these baskets illustrate their indispensable role in shaping the cultural landscape. In Japan, bamboo basket weaving is closely associated with Ikebana, the art of flower arranging, reflecting a holistic approach to mastering art that unites body, mind, and spirit.**[43]**

Furthermore, basketry remains an evolving art form, continuously adapting to contemporary needs and artistic innovations. It has found new relevance in modern design, museum collections, and sustainable craft movements. Artists such as Sally Blake (discussed in detail in Design Practice chapter) draw inspiration from natural structures, basketry techniques, and seedpods, reimagining these forms through unconventional materials. Her use of copper wire, for instance, challenges traditional expectations of fibre-based weaving and offers a contemporary interpretation of death, fragility, and transformation. Blake's work exemplifies how craft today is not only a continuation of ancient practices, but also a dynamic site for material experimentation.

[38] Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*.

[39] Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*.

[40] Willeke Wendrich, 'Archaeological Basketry and Cultural Identity in Ancient Egypt', November (2020), 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350094062.ch-003>.

[41] Patricia Graham, 'Japanese Appreciation of Chinese Flower Baskets', *In Japanese Bamboo Baskets: Masterworks of Form and Texture*, ed. Joseph N. Newland, (Los Angeles: Cotsen Occasional Press, 1999), 60–83.

[42] Berthold Laufer, *Chinese Baskets*, (Chicago: White Lotus, 1925).

[43] Maggie Oster and Mark Seelen, *Bamboo Baskets: Japanese Art and Culture Interwoven with the Beauty of Ikebana*, (Aurum Press Limited, 1996).

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Figure 9. *Chinese Baskets*. Zhejiang Province, China. Xu, Huadang, and Jianzhong Zhang, 2020.

Figure 10. Master of Bamboo-Japanese Baskets and Sculpture in the Cotsen Collection, 2007. Exhibition at Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.



Figure 11. My mom's bamboo baskets in home. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Nanjing



Methodological Statement



This creative design practice is inspired by the impermanence of my nomadic experience, in which the research inquiry is guided through practice-led approaches and engages in a journey of self-discovery through personally transformational thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. This research is primarily advanced through practice and is informed throughout by personal reflections and interaction with materials. Making forms by hand engages the researcher in a dialogue with the matter and subjective experience.

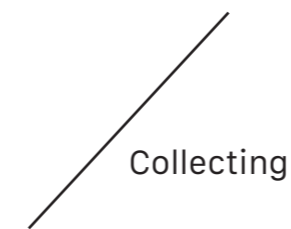
A framework of self-discovery and practice-led research builds a space for the physical and emotional elements of the material to be expressed and contextualised. It attempts to reveal how these elements influence and extend the researcher's perceptions of the notion of home. The project enhances understanding of affective cues, demonstrating how the relationship between basket weaving, home and experience elicits affective resonance through tacit forms.

This project uses a practice-led research approach driven by a contemplative philosophical attitude. When we build the connection between materiality and ourselves, we 'use hands to stroke its texture to smooth the creases, or to feel its texture or weight, and collectively these are vital contributors to our internal understandings'.^[44] The theories I explore, focus on experience and its connection to inner emotions, inspire the development of this practice-based project. In this research context, deep experience through interaction with

[44] Ian W. King, "What to Wear?": Clothing as an Example of Expression and Intentionality', *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal* 1 (2015): 59–78.

the material is embodied in the form of tacit knowledge. 'Craft relies on tacit knowledge ... is acquired through experience and it is the knowledge that enables you to do things as distinct from talking or writing about them'.**[45]** The experiential understanding that emerges from emotional engagement with the material fosters creative associations and design metaphors, guiding the iterations of practice.

Employing methods such as prototyping, mood board, collecting and documenting, this project reflects on the intertwined nature of materials and subjective experience. It explores the role of basket weaving in transferring the affective experience and the essence of impermanence.



The purpose of collecting is to incorporate the designer's 'nomadic' life experiences and narratives into the woven material. This exploration is inspired by the subjective experiences of walking and foraging in nature (see figures 12–20). The materials I collect, including plant fibres, wood, stone, shell, and seedpods, serve as the fundamental components of basket weaving, and the hand serves as the guiding needle and thread that directs and connects the paths. As Anni Albers writes, 'What I am trying to get across is that material is a means of communication'.**[46]** The material tells of memories, perceptions, and the emotional perspective of designers. The fusion of different materials can produce engaging relationships in which opposing qualities co-exist and create tension. They act as a spiritual link between the designer's memories and experiences, communicating with the viewer and evoking affective resonance. The method of collecting, deconstructing, and reconstituting materials reveals the possibilities of basket weaving as a spiritual vehicle. The fusion of mixed materials enriches the materiality of the texture, forming a natural, organic and Wabi-Sabi aesthetic form.

[45] Peter Dormer, 'Craft and the Turing Test for Practical Thinking'. In *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

[46] Anni Albers, 'Material as Metaphor', Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, 1982, <https://www.albersfoundation.org/alberses/teaching/anni-albers/material-as-metaphor>.



Figures 12-20. Natural Objects collected in Albert Park. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland



Figure 21. Natural Objects collected in Albert Park. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland

Prototyping

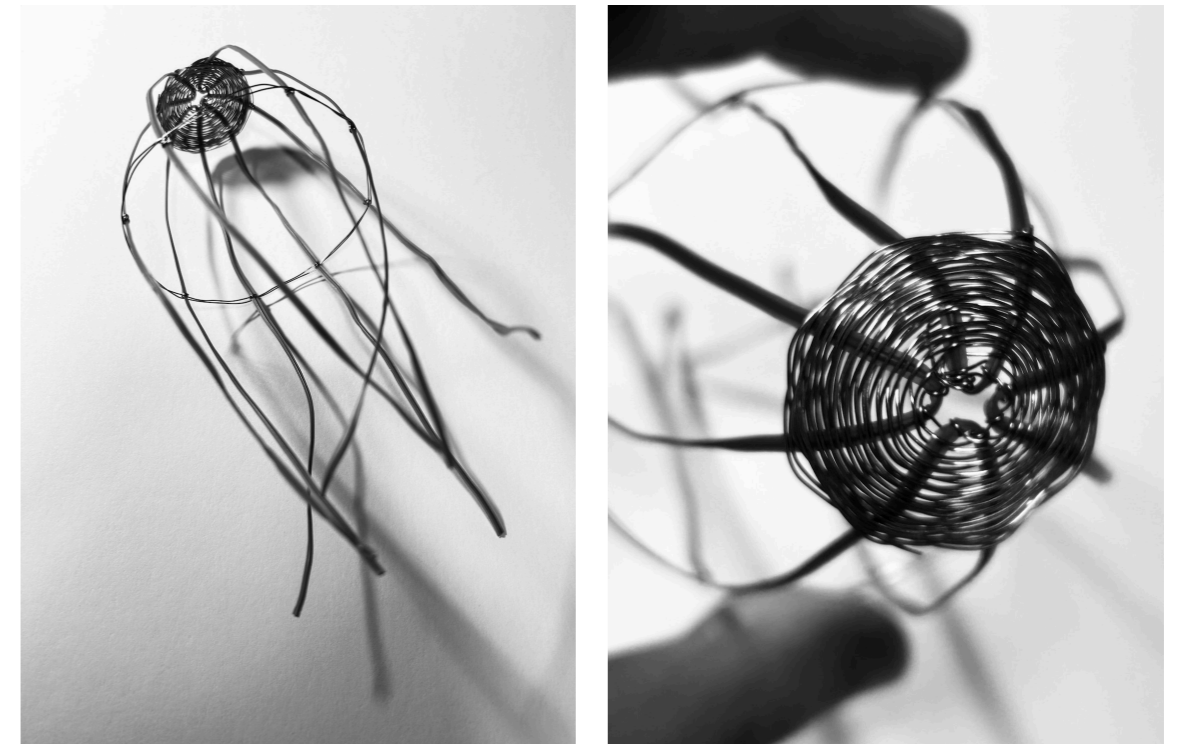
My aim is to use the opportunities for practice, testing and comparison provided by prototyping to explore material properties, structural integrity, and aesthetic qualities before finalising a design. The use of prototyping methods allows me to experiment with diverse materials, colours, techniques and forms to construct creative, three-dimensional performances. It also reveals potential problems such as issues with material choice early in the process, helping to assess durability, flexibility, and the overall tactile experience of the piece.

Prototyping allows an intuitive and reflective dialogue between designers and their work; 'It is where the present meets the future, the abstract and concrete intertwine in a dance, and potential realities flicker into existence. Prototyping in one way or another is a part of every design process'.^[47] Iterating and refining basket samples allows different weaving techniques to be compared, and personal emotional narratives to be embodied within the design context. I also make mood boards (see figure 22) during prototyping to show design ideas and expand sources of inspiration: samples of raw materials are tested and adjusted at different scales and arranged freely on my mood board to show the path of existing and potential design ideas. The categorisation and integration of colours and design approaches plays a key role in my design process. Additionally, analysing the work of relevant designers and extracting features and patterns that resonated with my own design proved to be beneficial. These prototyping approaches helped me document the changes in decision-making that occurred at various stages of the process.

[47] Pieter Jan Stappers, 'Prototypes as a Central Vein for Knowledge Development'. In *Prototype: Design and Craft in the 21st Century*, 2013, 85–98. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350036031.ch-006>.



Figure 22. My studio space with the inspiration and mood boards. Xinhao Zhang, spring 2024, Auckland



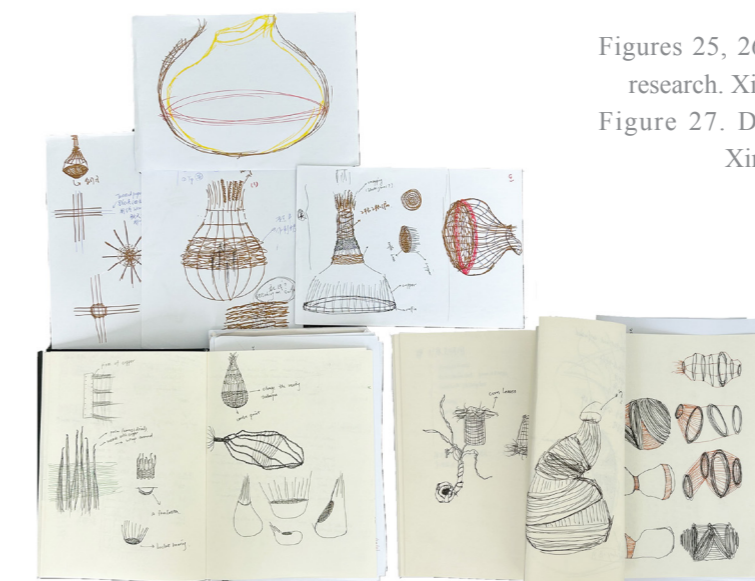
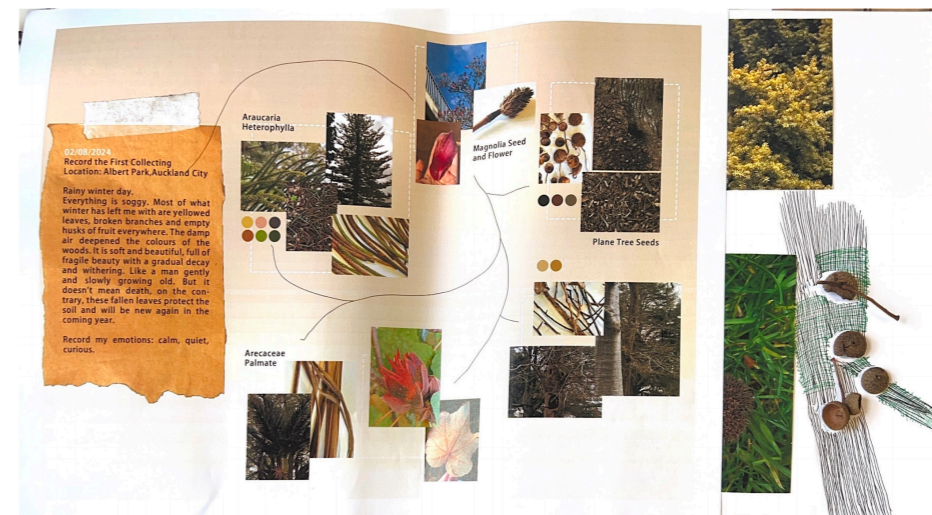
Figures 23, 24. Prototypes of a small basket shape. Xinhao Zhang, spring 2024, Auckland

Documenting the Design Practice

This method aims to track material exploration, technique development, and conceptual refinement. It captures potential creative ideas that are easily overlooked and provides a reflective review of the shortcomings, failures, and successes that occur during the design process. As Petreca et al. write, 'Practice-related researchers push this examination into a more direct and intimate sphere, observing and analysing themselves as they engage in the act of creation'.^[48] The actions of the hand in stretching, twisting and deforming the materials cause the objects to produce various forms at different stages and the necessity arises for tools that can rapidly document the process.

Photography was the principal method of visual documentation I used to capture the intricate details of texture, form, and material interactions when weaving. It enables a range of subtle changes in the work to be saved rapidly, and I worked with software such as Photoshop for post-processing and colour calibration. A diary, both visual and written, allows for the recording of sketches, structural experiments and textual content that convey tacit knowledge. In the course of uninterrupted recording, the initial model of the final work was gradually developed. This reflective process allows the researcher to capture and convey the subjective experience, sifting through the many possibilities to find the most relevant design decisions that best reflect the research question.

[48] Bruna Petreca, Sharon Baurley, and Nadia Bianchi-Berthouze, 'How Do Designers Feel Textiles?' (Paper presented at the *International Conference on Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction (ACII)*, (2015): 982–87. Xi'an, China: IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACII.2015.7344695>.



Figures 25, 26. Visual diary at an early stage of research. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland
Figure 27. Drawings of basket development. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

Design Practice



Introduction

The influential Chinese philosopher 庄子 (Zhuangzi, 369BC–286BC) considered that the intuitive knowledge is rooted in the mutual interpenetration and fusion between the cosmos and all things.[49] During the Tang Dynasty, the Zen master 南泉普愿 (Nansen, 748–834) stated, 'People of the world look at these flowers as if they were in a dream'.^[50] (collected in *A Compendium of the Five Lamps* by Pu Ji) This brief yet profound remark encapsulates Zen's aesthetic attitude towards nature — 'an absence of selfhood'^[51] and the dissolution of boundaries between subject and object, 'merging into one absolute emptiness'.^[52]

In the final stage of my design practice, I conceptualised basket-making as the act of constructing a home for myself. Some of these baskets lack practical utility and cannot serve as storage vessels, reflecting my experience of home as an unstable, impermanent space, from which I have been compelled to relocate frequently, and which has failed to provide a lasting sense of security. The final collection distills these experiences into sculptural forms that are contemporary and abstract while still embodying a natural, unrefined simplicity. Within this context, I—as the designer—become inseparable from my creations. Through the projection of emotions, the boundary between subject and object dissolves.

This perspective resonates with the poetry of 与謝蕪村 (Yosa Buson, 1716–1783), the Edo period haiku master and painter. In one of his poems, he writes: 'A butterfly sleeps on the temple bell'. Here, the image of a delicate, ephemeral white butterfly resting upon a massive bronze bell—a symbol of weight and permanence—creates a striking contrast between the transient and the enduring.^[53] This contemplation of impermanence and juxtaposition of elements has

[49] Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*.

[50] Pu Ji 普济, 五灯会元 [*A Compendium of the Five Lamps*]. (1252).

[51] Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

[52] Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

[53] Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*.

been a recurring theme throughout my design practice. Handcrafting serves as a medium through which the metaphor of home and its emotional nuances are woven together.

When describing the essential qualities of Wabi-Sabi design and its underlying philosophical foundation, Andrew Juniper states, 'Sobriety is a natural extension of the resolute modesty found in Wabi-Sabi thought'.^[54] This implies that designing and creating should be undertaken with an acute awareness of impermanence, imperfection, and the continuous transformation of all things. He further argues that Wabi-Sabi art is inherently organic in nature, where 'the tides of time imprint the passing of the years on an object'.^[55] In this way, my making process becomes a microcosm of lived experience—a space where the invisible forces of time, memory, and impermanence manifest tangibly.

By drawing upon shared principles within Taoism, Zen, and Wabi-Sabi aesthetics, I approach this project as an exploration of perception and materiality. The following sections will unfold through three interconnected stages: foraging, experimentation, and final basket-weaving.

[54] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art*.

[55] Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art*.

Stage One: Foraging / Collecting



Figure 28. The environment during the collection of materials in Albert Park. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland



Figure 29. The environment during the collection of materials in Albert Park. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland

This stage began during a wet, moody day in July in Auckland. At first, I wandered around aimlessly through parks, inspired by nature with an open mind. I observed flaming maples, dead broken branches, and scattered petals. I searched for materials such as delicate magnolia seeds, patches of sycamore seeds and heterophylla leaves; I harvested harakeke and dead plant seed pods; and I stripped bark, stems and leaves (see figure 28). I harvested, combed and dried the leaves, the tips of my fingers saturated with their flesh and tinged with a faint herbaceous scent. In this long, serene process, I obtain bundles of fibre from the leaves (see figures 30, 31). Now in communication with my fingers, the plant is no longer itself, but is transformed into a material, a tool, a medium through which I can express my feelings. The change in the structure of the material gives it a new language.



Figures 30, 31. Weaving material made from harakeke. Xinhua Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland

Zooming in on the camera can capture the rich textures and organic complexity. The intertwined, braided leaves and branches create a sense of movement and entanglement, while the scattered oak leaves add a quiet contrast of stillness (see figure 29). The colours are earthy and deep, with dark browns, rust-like reds, and hints of green evoking a feeling of decay, renewal, and the cyclical nature of life. The soothing sensation of walking in nature reminds me of the park near my house, where I feel introspective and grounded.

Foraging is a deeply immersive sensory experience, where the boundary between the self and the environment begins to blur. It can evoke a mix of emotions—curiosity, nostalgia, even longing. There’s a feeling of intimacy with nature, of gathering not just materials but stories: the crispness of dry leaves underfoot, the roughness of bark, the damp scent of earth, and the way light catches on different textures. It is about noticing—paying attention to the overlooked, the discarded, the seasonal shifts in the land, and the way materials feel in my hands, their weight, flexibility and scent. The environment has been shaped by time—weathered, worn, yet still carrying its essence. I get inspired by the beauty of impermanence—how materials are constantly shifting, decaying, reforming and bringing a deep appreciation for the present moment (see figure 32–37). Sometimes foraging feels like an instinct, a response to the landscape. There’s something intimate about bringing a piece of the outside world into your own space, bridging the gap between external and internal landscapes.

My interest in nature is deeply rooted in my reliance upon it for serenity, detachment, and grounding. It offers a spiritual home that connects me to the ever-changing cycles of life. Each foraging experience becomes a dialogue with the transient homes of my past, forcing me to reflect on the contemplative, symbiotic relationship between myself and the natural world.

Autumn and winter provide materials that speak in ways that mirror my own experiences, particularly the beauty of decay and death, the transformation of plants through the seasons, and the quiet, muted tones of the natural world. I'm drawn to the calm, wilted hues that evoke a sense of stillness. My practice involves picking up materials that have already fallen to the ground, and, when they are no longer useful, returning them to the environment. Rather than discarding them, I honour their lifecycle by reintroducing them into nature. The dynamism of natural matter creates an open space for experimentation, where the work evolves alongside the material itself.

The challenge lies in navigating what these materials once were, how to preserve their essence, and how to re-form them through design. In this process, I am not merely manipulating materials but engaging with their natural rhythms—transforming decay into something new, while embracing the impermanence of both the material and the work itself. This reflective and iterative process helps me to better understand the interdependent relationship between my practice and nature, grounding my work in the cycles of growth and decay.



Figures 32-37. Fruits, seeds and branches that fall all over the ground after typhoon days. Xinhao Zhang, autumn 2024, Nanjing



Figure 38. Flower, stone painting. Xinhao Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.



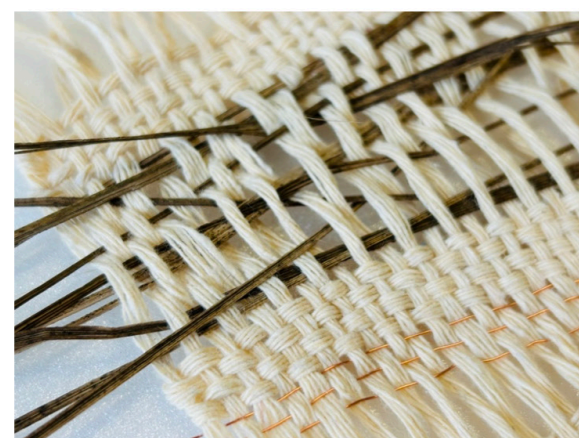
Figure 39. Weaving with small objects. Xinhao Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

Stage Two: Experimentation with Various Forms

This stage of my research focuses on experimentation and testing with two-dimensional forms, exploring how natural materials behave under manipulation. Having gathered and prepared materials, I investigate their transformation through bending, deconstruction, and even destruction, examining the instability and shifting states of organic matter. Natural materials are inherently fluid—changing in colour, drying, and deteriorating over time—allowing time itself to become an active participant in the work (see figures 40 and 41). Time is inscribed within matter, guiding its movement from one state to another while retaining its essence. Through this process, I seek to understand how materials record traces of their own existence, carrying the marks of transformation. During this period, copper wire was introduced into the fabrication process. Its qualities enable it to be used as a suitable material for weaving, which is described in detail in the next stage.

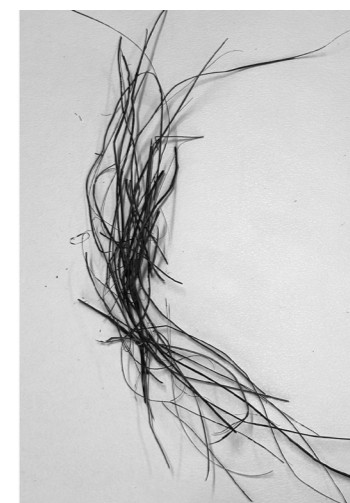
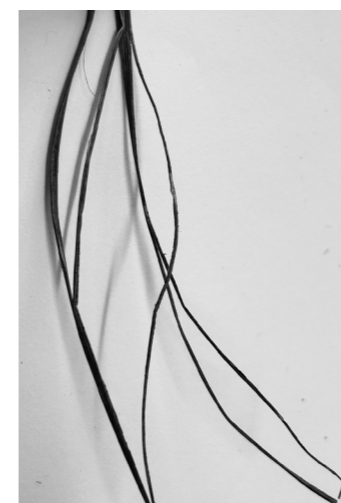


Figures 40, 41. Part of the work (harakeke leaf) fading over time. Left: winter 2024. Right: Summer 2025. Xinhan Zhang, Auckland.

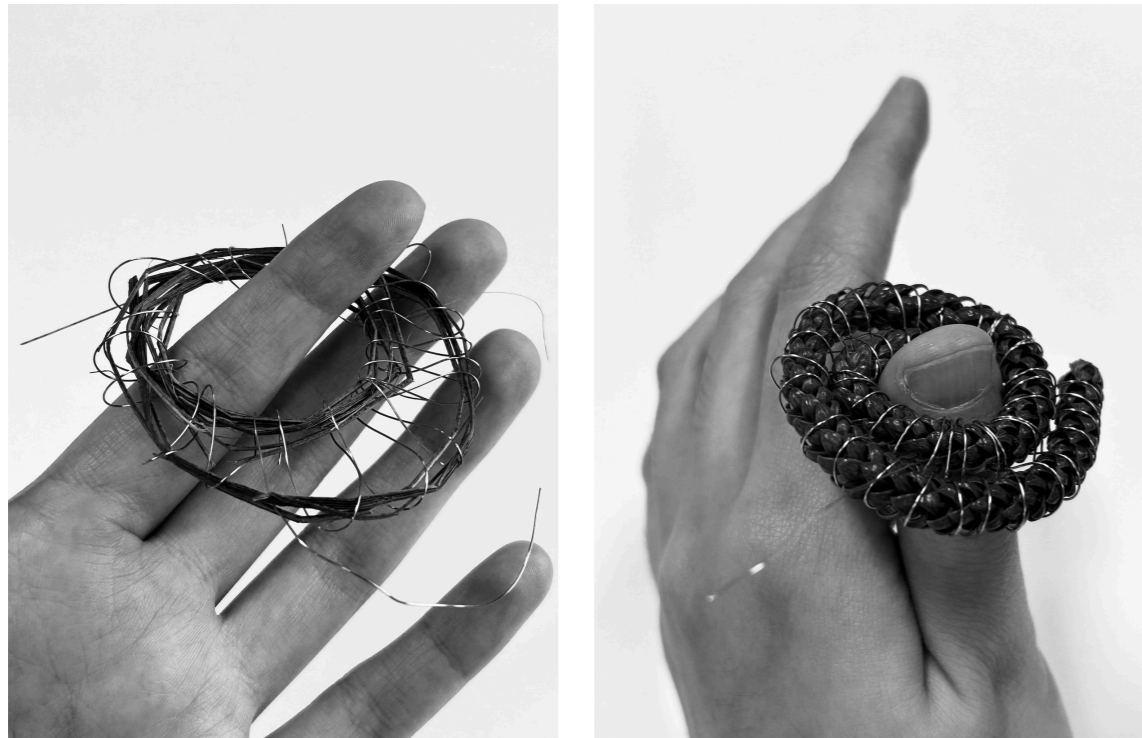


Figures 42, 43. Weaving pieces inspired by nature. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.
Figure 44. Weaving pieces with natural fibres. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.

This phase of experimentation also challenges my default use of materials. For instance, as can be seen in figures 44–47, by breaking down palm leaves into fine plant fibres, I created a thread-like material that can be woven alongside cotton yarn, producing a richly textured and tactile surface. I work with understated, earthy tones, drawing colour inspiration from surrounding landscapes and botanical details. When weaving these natural fibres with cotton, some fragile fragments inevitably flake off. Rather than preserving their integrity, I allow them to wear, fade, and shift over time. I find beauty in the imperfect traces left behind, the small remnants that speak of materiality’s transient nature.



Figures 45-47. Playing with fibres. Xinhan Zhang, autumn 2024, Auckland.



Figures 48, 49. Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland.

Through curling, wrapping, and binding, my exploration gradually moves from flat, two-dimensional surfaces toward more three-dimensional forms. The structural changes emerge organically through the material's natural aging process. The bound curly leaves (see figure 48 and 49) begin to dehydrate, shrinking inwards, causing the intertwined metal wire to loosen over time. What starts as a tightly woven form slowly opens up, creating an ever-changing textile where material and memory intertwine.



Figures 50, 51. Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire on corn leaves. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



Figure 52. Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire on corn leaves. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

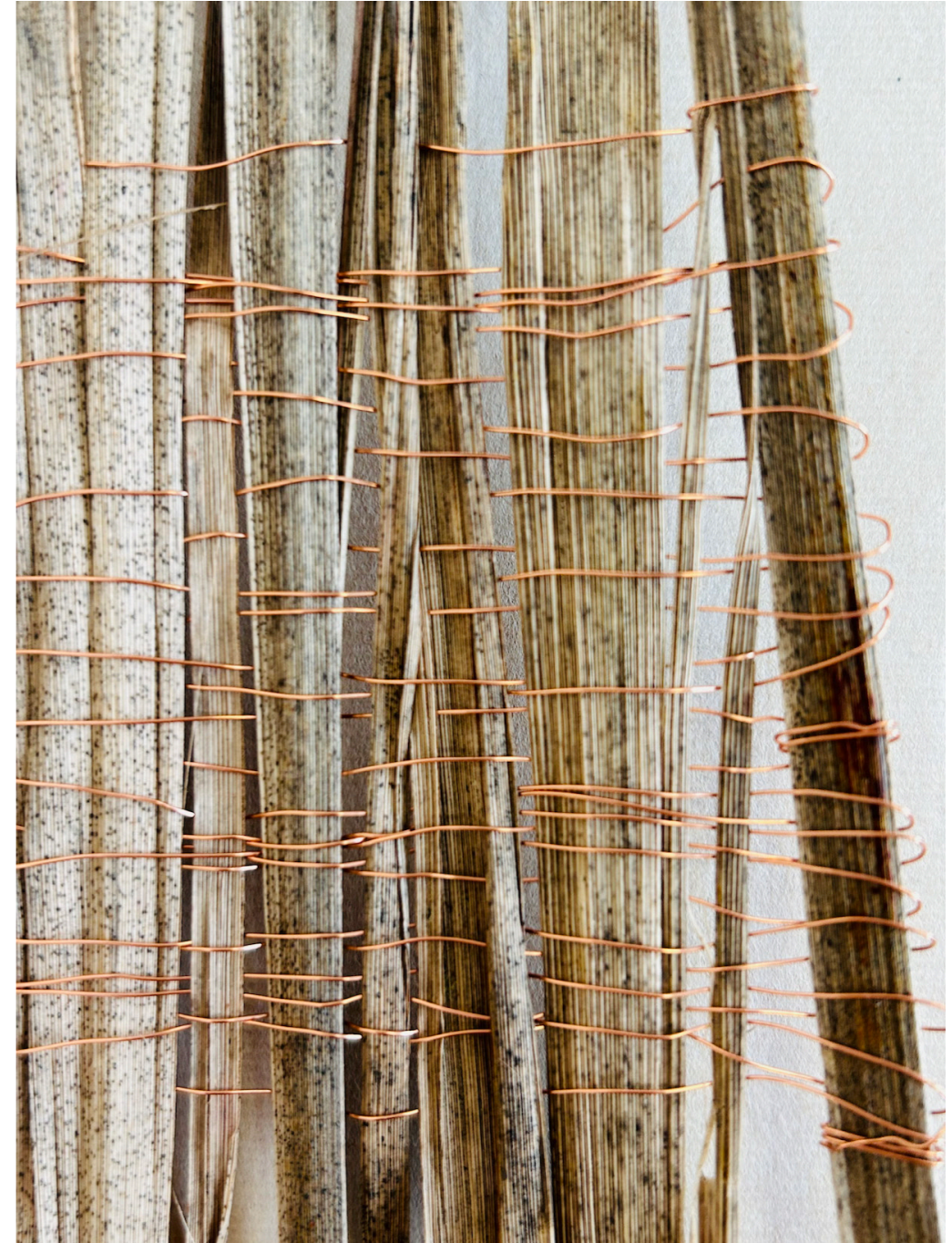
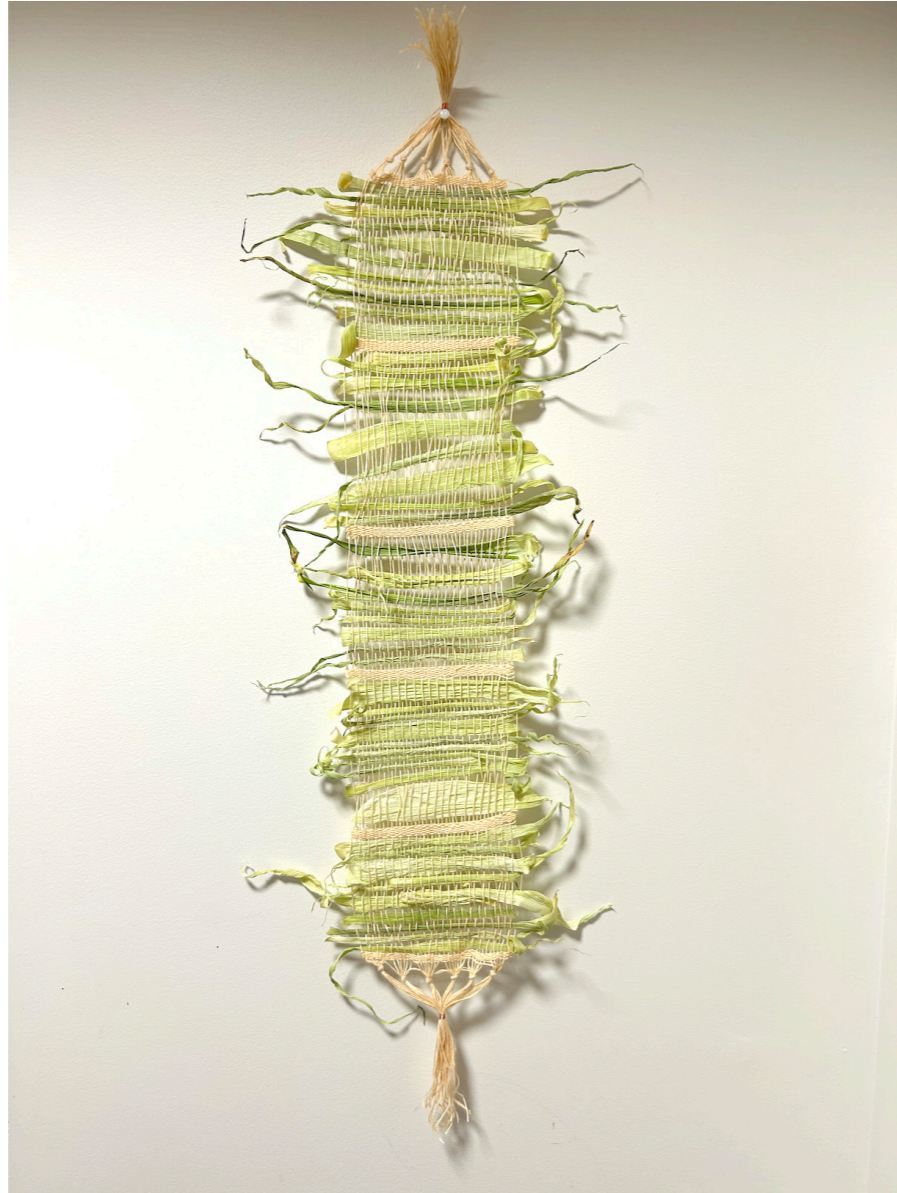


Figure 53. Experimental Sample—Winding and binding of copper wire on palm leaves. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Figures 54, 55. A long weaving piece with cotton and corn leaves. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland.

A Seed Pod Apocalypse

As I push beyond the limitations of two-dimensional weaving, I begin transforming natural materials into three-dimensional sculptural forms.

The liquidambar styraciflua seed pod (see figure 56), with its spiked surface and hollow interior, captivates me. Its porous shell once protected seeds vital for life, but now they are dispersed, the pod is left as a fragile remnant of its past purpose—an empty nest. This echoes my reflections on home, belonging, and the traces left behind by impermanent dwellings.



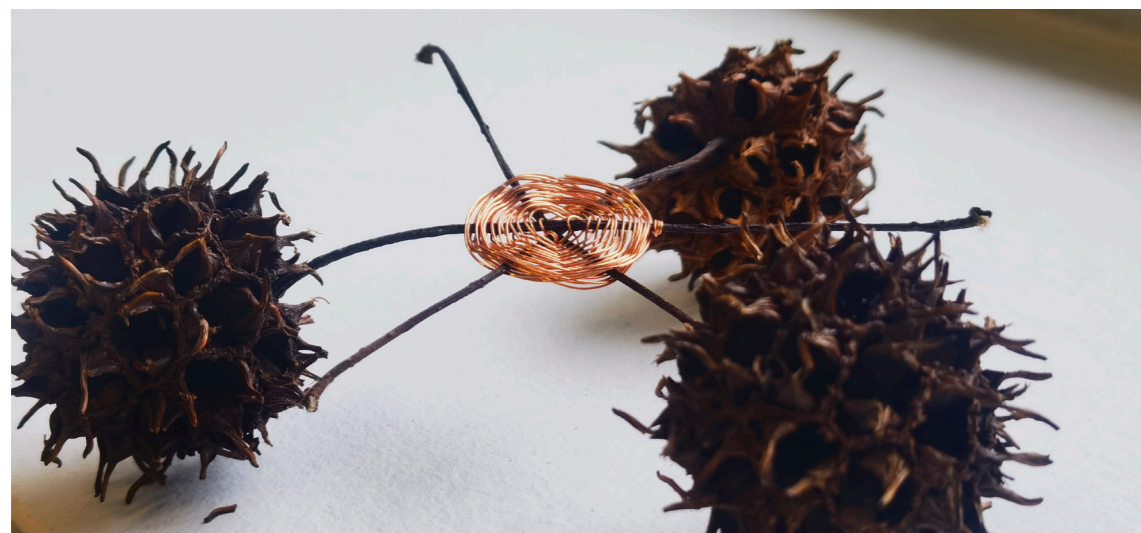
Figure 56. The liquidambar styraciflua seed pod collected in Albert Park. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Figure 57. Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

While collecting seed pods, I accidentally snapped a slender branch. The sudden break evoked a sense of impermanence, a fleeting reminder of the fragility of existence. Instinctively, I attempted to repair it, wrapping fine copper wire around the broken part like a careful mending gesture. Initially, I sought to restore its completeness, but through the making process, I realized that the break itself held meaning. Why repair something that is irreparable? Breaking and peeling away are not losses but transformations—states of being that reveal deeper material narratives. Instead of erasing the break, I used copper wire to connect the separated parts, using its silhouette to outline a space between connection and absence, the tangible and intangible (see figure 57).

Using three seed pods arranged symmetrically to form a relatively solid triangular structure, the twisting, looping, and interlacing of materials is presented in three dimensions through copper wire (see figure 58). Twining became a method of uniting separate elements, requiring balance, dexterity, and sensitivity to material tension. The rhythm of weaving gradually expanded from the connecting points in the centre outward, providing a form of contemplation that expands the self into a relationship with the wider surrounding space.



Figures 58, 59. Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

A seed pod without its seed is like an abandoned house—it once sheltered life, containing the full meaning of a home, but now exists as a hollow shell. Where is its home? It was once connected to a tree, which drew nourishment from the earth, forming an intricate, interdependent system. This cycle—seed, growth, fruit, death, and renewal—parallels the weaving process, where layering and intertwining create structure over time. By twisting the copper wires in a circle, the plant structures that could break at any moment are temporarily protected to honour and preserve the object's existence in the present moment (see figure 60). The spiky parts extend beyond the boundaries, exhibiting a tension that is not constrained. The interplay between the hard, metallic sheen of copper and the dry, delicate seed pods creates a dynamic contrast—one that reflects both tension and harmony, fragility and resilience.

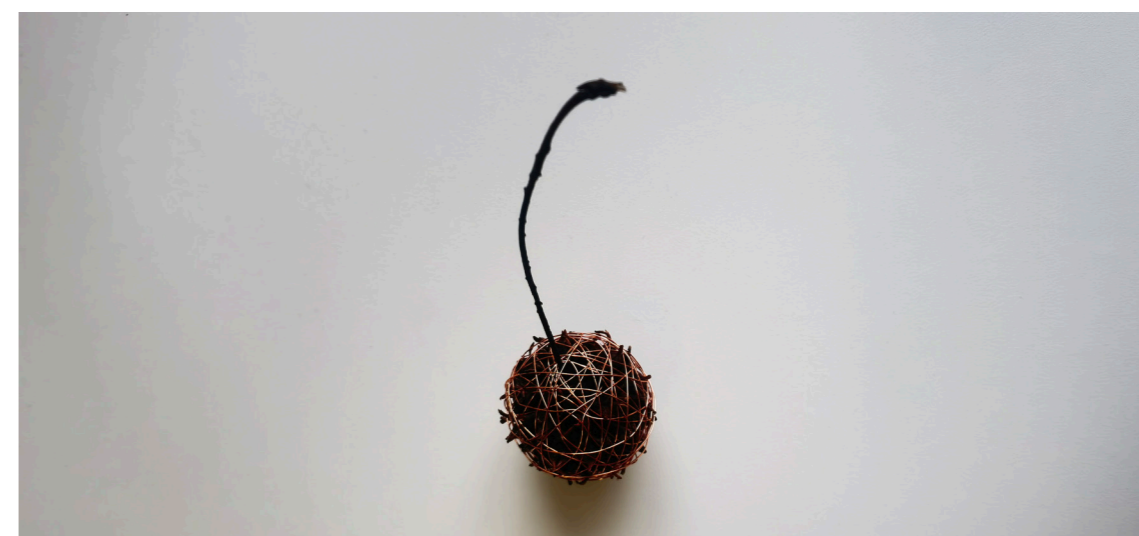


Figure 60. Experimental sample—winding and binding of copper wire on seedpods. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

Nesting: A Transitional Point in Conceptual Exploration

The act of weaving extends beyond the creation of objects; it is a process of constructing belonging. Much like birds instinctively build nests to contain and protect their young, weaving involves the gathering and assembly of materials to create spaces—whether physical, emotional, or conceptual—where things can rest. The function of a bird’s nest, offering shelter from environmental conditions and predators, closely parallels the role of the human home, which provides security, comfort, and a sense of place. However, the concept of home is fluid and subject to change over time, shaped by personal experiences and memories. While a physical space may gain significance through association with lived experiences, home also exists as an abstract, shifting notion—a sense of foundation, familiarity, and belonging. For individuals with transient lifestyles, such as my own, home remains in a constant state of impermanence, its presence dissolving with each relocation, leading to a perpetual negotiation between attachment and loss.

I observe a series of parallels between my research and the behavioural patterns of birds. My nomadic experience reflects the migratory nature of birds, whose movement across landscapes mirrors my shifting relationship with place. During the colder, more barren seasons, I engage in foraging, collecting materials such as dead branches, bark, shells, stems, and leaves—the very elements that birds instinctively seek for nest construction. My material selection aligns with avian tendencies; I am drawn to objects with a soft metallic sheen, reminiscent of birds’ affinity for reflective or luminous materials.

Birds select nesting materials based on local availability rather than camouflage, resulting in nests that naturally reflect their surroundings. **[56]** This decision-making is analogous to my own: for both the birds and I, the plant matter and structural elements incorporated into our work are inherently tied to the landscapes we inhabit. If this research were conducted outside of New Zealand, the material choices and visual outcomes would inevitably differ.

The concept of nesting within this research developed progressively, informed by the act of foraging, the materials available, and the environment in which the work took shape. Weaving serves as a means of making sense of gathered materials, a process of understanding them through tactile engagement, movement, and repetition. This transformation—from fragility to structure, from loose fragments to a cohesive form—reinforces the conceptual alignment between weaving and nesting. The interlaced forms of basketry echo natural processes of construction, evoking the ways in which nature weaves, binds, and adapts over time. Additionally, weaving is an inherently temporal practice; materials shift, settle, and bear the path of forming, encapsulating the passage of time within their lives.

[56] Susan D. Healy and Maria C. Tello-Ramos. ‘Bird Nest Building’. In *The Material Culture of Basketry: Practice, Skill and Embodied Knowledge*, (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 15–21.



Stage Three: Basket Weaving

The progression from foraging and material collection (Stage 1) to experimental weaving and structural exploration (Stage 2) has provided a foundation for deeper conceptual and material investigations in Stage 3. The transition from two-dimensional material studies to three-dimensional forms, particularly in my experiments with twining and coiling, also marked a turning point where the structural potential of basket weaving became a tangible response to my research questions. As I move into Stage 3, the final phase of my design practice, these discoveries now inform the making of woven forms that not only serve as physical manifestations of impermanence but also actively engage with the philosophy of Wabi-Sabi and Taoist notions of fluidity. At this stage, weaving is no longer just an experimental method; it becomes a contemplative process, a way of constructing a home that embraces both absence and presence, structure and openness. The techniques of basket weaving—coiling, twining, and binding—serve as a means to articulate the complexities of belonging and detachment, allowing the final works to emerge as expressions of home that are ephemeral yet grounded in material and memory.

Material

As my practice evolved, I began incorporating select shop-bought materials. This shift was not a departure from my conceptual grounding but rather a necessary extension of it. The foraged materials—while rich in texture and metaphor—often have limitations in terms of structure, scale, or availability. Introducing manufactured elements allowed me to continue the act of weaving as a meditative and exploratory process, testing forms and spatial relationships that natural fibres alone could not support. I chose mainly organic elements to express the sense of time and impermanence through the natural rhythm of their life. Each material plays a role in the evolving conversation between concept and making. The materials I choose are divided into three parts:

- 1) purely natural materials that have not been processed by machine
- 2) 100% natural origin man-made products, mainly: cotton string or rope made from twisted strands, sisal fibres, coir fibres and raffia
- 3) copper wire

The material choices I made aim to reflect the paradoxical contrasts inherent in the themes of impermanence, restlessness, and adaptation, while also aligning with the Taoist and Wabi-Sabi principles that underlie my work. Each contrast speaks to a broader meaning of order and disorder, permanence and decay, structure and organic fluidity.

Copper Wire and Natural Plant Fibres



Figures 61, 62. Materials. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

The interplay between industrial copper wire and organic plant fibres encapsulates the relationship between permanence and ephemerality (see figures 61 and 62). Copper is malleable and conductive, and it develops a patina when exposed to air and moisture, metaphorically suggesting existence and the passage of time. It retains oxidation as evidence of exposure as an act of preservation, just as I carry the imprint of previous environments, even as they dissolve into the past. In contrast, the natural plant fibres, which fray and break apart, surrender to the cycle of decay, reinforcing the idea that home is not fixed but is, rather, like a bird's nest—something that must continuously be rebuilt and redefined. This mirrors my own experience of moving from place to place, where traces of past homes linger in memory but physically erode over time.

On the aspect of making (see figure 64), copper wire is soft and easy to shape and is able to accommodate repeated twisting and winding during basketry, which enriches the layers of materiality of the work. Sally Blake, a Canberra-based visual artist working across textiles, drawing, and sculpture, considers copper to be both fragile and resilient—qualities that make it an apt material for expressing themes of new life and inspiration (see figure 63). In her work, she extensively employs copper wire to emulate the delicate yet enduring nature of seed pods. As she explains, 'I can use it to twist and coil into organic forms. By using fine wires, the works can look quite fragile, but the wire is strong enough to hold the open forms'.^[57] Her exploration of copper demonstrates how its inherent contradictions—its malleability and strength, its delicacy and durability—add depth and complexity to the work, enriching its material and conceptual significance.

[57] Sally Blake, as quoted in Arnesia Young, 'Intricate Copper Wire Forms Explore Innate Connections between Humans and Nature', *My Modern Met*. October 24, 2021. <https://mymodernmet.com/sally-blake-copper-wire-basket-art>.

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Figure 63. Sally Blake, *Great Goddess*, 2022, Copper wire Artefacts, Grainger Gallery Exhibition, Canberra, Australia.



Figure 64. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket Weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

Rough Coconut Rope and Soft Cotton Threads



Figure 65. Cotton thread coiling through coco rope. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

The coarse, fibrous texture of coconut rope evokes an impression of strength and security. Cotton, in contrast, is gentle and yielding, a material associated with comfort, warmth, and domestic familiarity. It speaks to the tenderness of home, the desire for softness amid the roughness of impermanence. The interweaving of these two materials represents the coexistence of strength and delicacy within the experience of belonging—the necessity of resilience, yet the craving for gentleness in the process of creating home (see figure 65).

*Regular Weaving Techniques and Messy,
Random, Plant-Fiber Binding*

Weaving, by its nature, is an act of imposing order—warps and wefts interlace in a structured, repetitive manner, creating a pattern that suggests control, permanence, and intentionality. This structured technique can be seen as a metaphor for the human impulse to create stability, to construct a sense of home through familiar, predictable patterns. It represents what is structured and known—the traditions, forms, and systems that define domesticity and belonging.

However, an element of chaos, imperfection, and organic spontaneity is introduced by deliberately disrupting this order with messy, entangled plant fibres (see figure 67). These loose, unstructured bindings resist the rigidity of traditional weaving, reflecting a more natural, intuitive way of forming connections. This tension between the structured and the chaotic mirrors the way I experience home—not as a singular, permanent construct, but as something that emerges through adaptation, through an accumulation of materials, memories, and fleeting moments of stability.



Figure 66. The contrast between regular and random. Basket side views. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Figure 67. The contrast between regular and random. Basket side views. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

Form

As previously described, I liken making baskets to building my own home, through which I express my understanding of my spiritual world. As can be seen in figures 68 and 69, I chose to make baskets that are not functional, as the home I remember living in is only a vague remnant. Artistic baskets are more likely to draw attention to the form and tension of the work itself, and through the characteristics of the materials that embody localised shapes, it is possible to experience more intuitively the emotions behind the process of making them.

The choice of a more sculptural form often undercuts the focus on the functionality of the work. The free form of the material itself provides the shape, rather than the intervention of my ideas and tastes.**[58]**



Figure 68. A basket with a seedpod shape. Tightly closed entrances result in no utility. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Figure 69. A basket with a sagging top structure. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

Texture

I avoid smooth, reflective, or modern design materials, favouring organic and natural textures that allow the surface to exude its rough unevenness. I pay attention to the random cracks, crevices and breaks that appear. The touch of the fibres on the surface of the stems and leaves forms the dry and rough texture of the basket. The free and rough leaf tips rub against fingers when touched, creating an ancient and serene tactile sensation. The texture possesses complexity and randomness, with different combinations of materials forming a gradation of rich visual and tactile experiences.

Colour

The natural materials fade with the passage of time, and vibrant colours leave space for softer tones. As the moisture in the plant fibres slowly disappears, the volume diminishes and the edges curl up, leaving behind the natural signs of air-dried ageing.

Scales

The decision to work on a smaller scale is both a practical and conceptual choice in my practice. Basket weaving is a time-intensive

process, and creating smaller pieces allows me to explore a range of ideas without being limited by the demands of large-scale production. Also, smaller baskets are intimate, personal, and easily carried—reflective of a nomadic need. They have more variation and instability than the huge, human-equal height baskets, which echoes my context.

Technique: Coiling and Twining

Coiling is one of the oldest known techniques of basket-weaving, where a flexible core material is wound into a spiral or coil and stitched together with a finer material (see figure 70). It creates a strong, stable structure, with the coiled rows often stitched together using a specific binding pattern. When coiling, I can always add and change new materials or use different colours. The flexibility of the technique allows for creativity and innovation. Coiling is also durable, as it produces a stable chassis, strong enough to withstand the weight of increasingly taller baskets. This method allows for organic, non-linear growth, where form emerges gradually rather than being predetermined. In my practice, coiling represents the gradual construction of home—how belonging is not an instant state but is something built over time, layer by layer. Each stitch in the coil functions like a tether, binding past to present, much like my experiences in different places are woven together to form my evolving sense of home. It is a meditative way of allowing for irregularities and unpredictability.

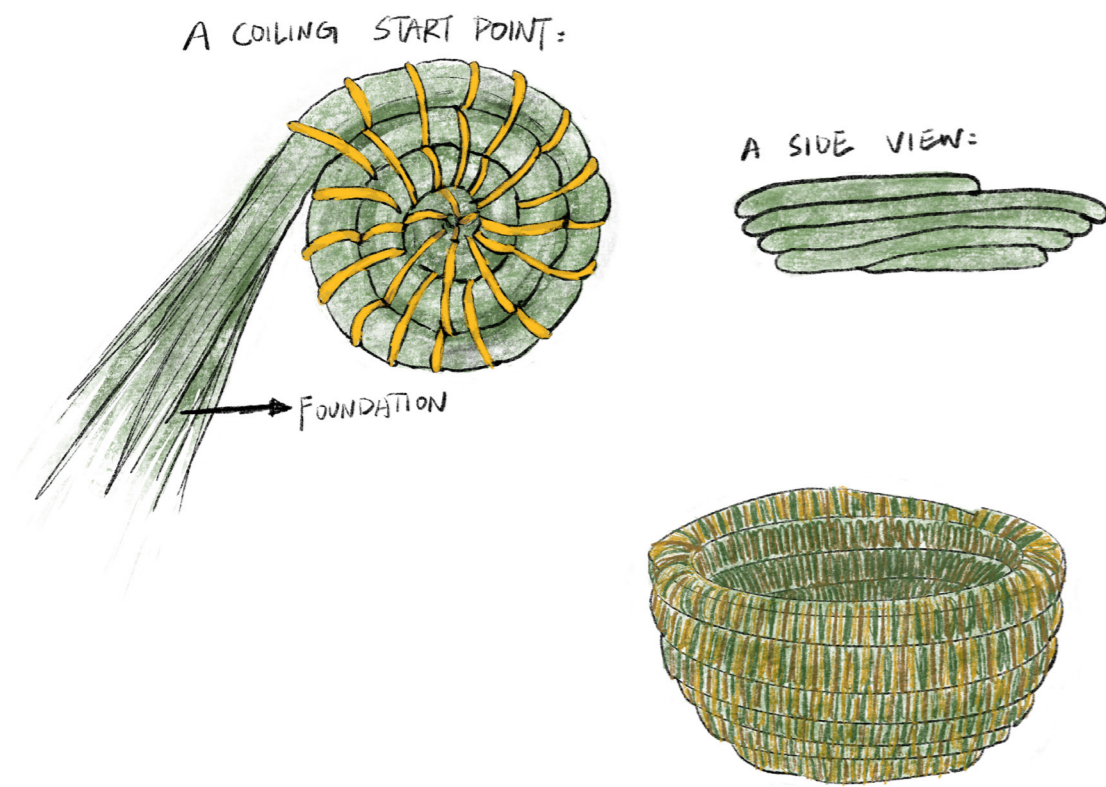


Figure 70. Drawings of the basic structure of coiling. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

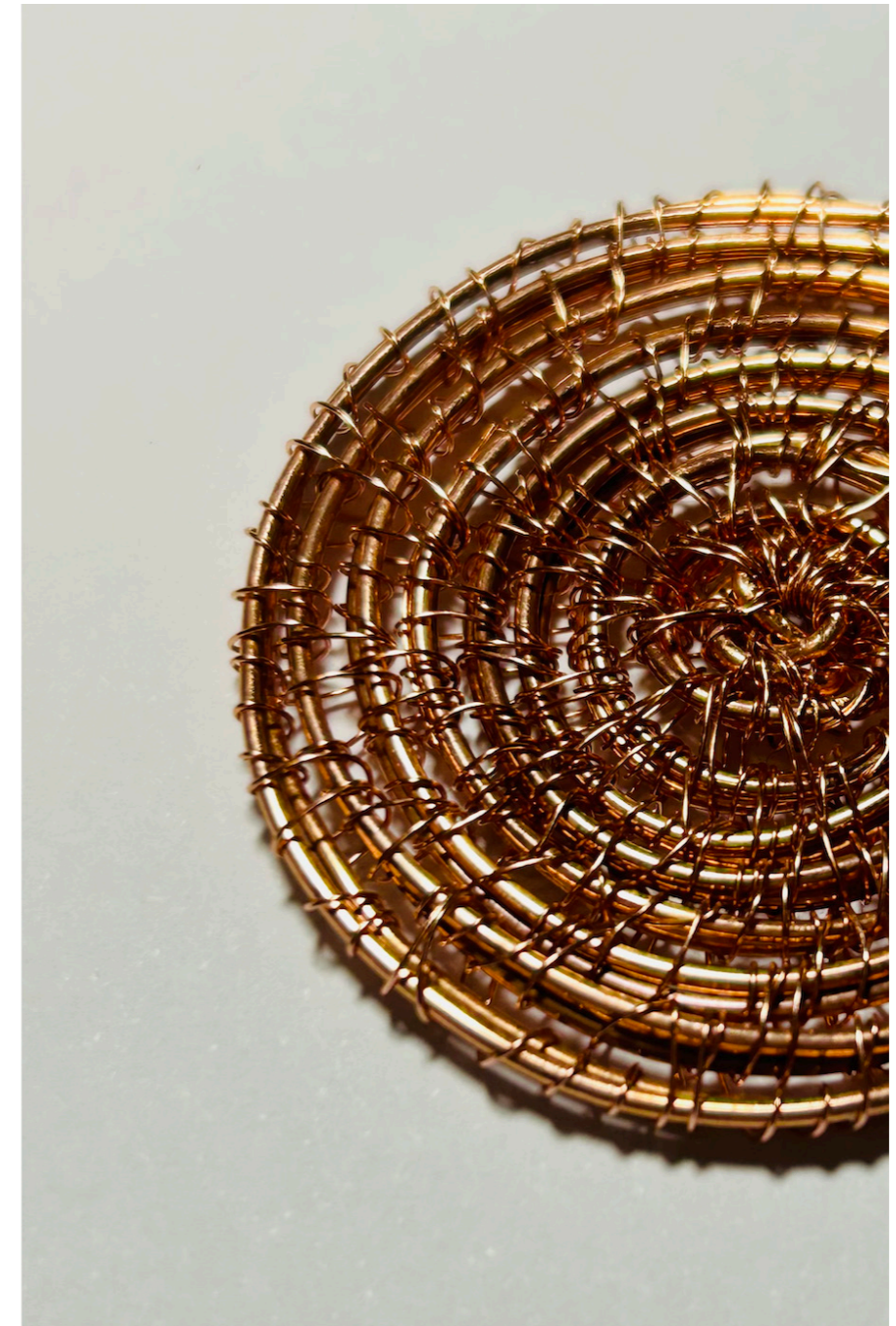


Figure 71. Experimental sample—A coiled copper wire piece. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Figures 72, 73. A coiled soft cotton basket. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



Figures 74, 75. A coiled basket. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

Twining is a basket-weaving technique in which two or more weft elements (horizontal materials) are twisted around vertical warp elements to create a tightly interlocked woven structure (see figure 76). This method results in a basket that is both durable and flexible. As they twist around one another, ‘an exact grip is created and is stronger than the combined tensile strength of the strands themselves’.[59] It represents connection and interdependence—demonstrating how seemingly delicate materials, when intertwined, acquire strength and resilience. Given its structural similarities to fundamental weaving techniques in textile production, twining also allows for the creation of intricate textures and decorative patterns through variations in weft colour, material choice, and the direction of the twist.

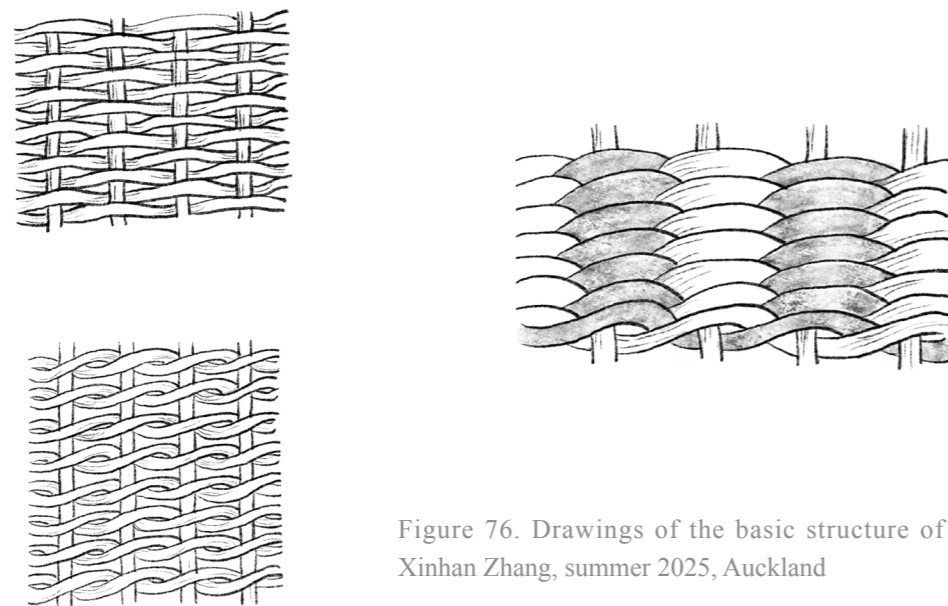


Figure 76. Drawings of the basic structure of twining.
Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

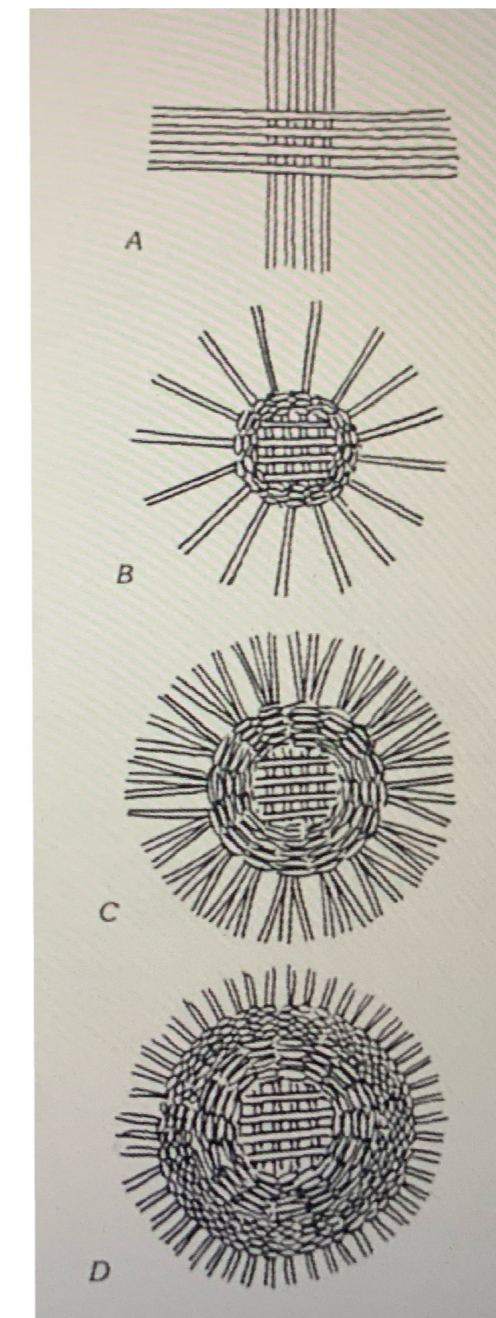


Figure 77. The basic processes of making a twining basket.
Reproduced from Ed Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*.

[59] Tim Ingold ‘To Basket the World’.



Figure 78. A twined basket. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

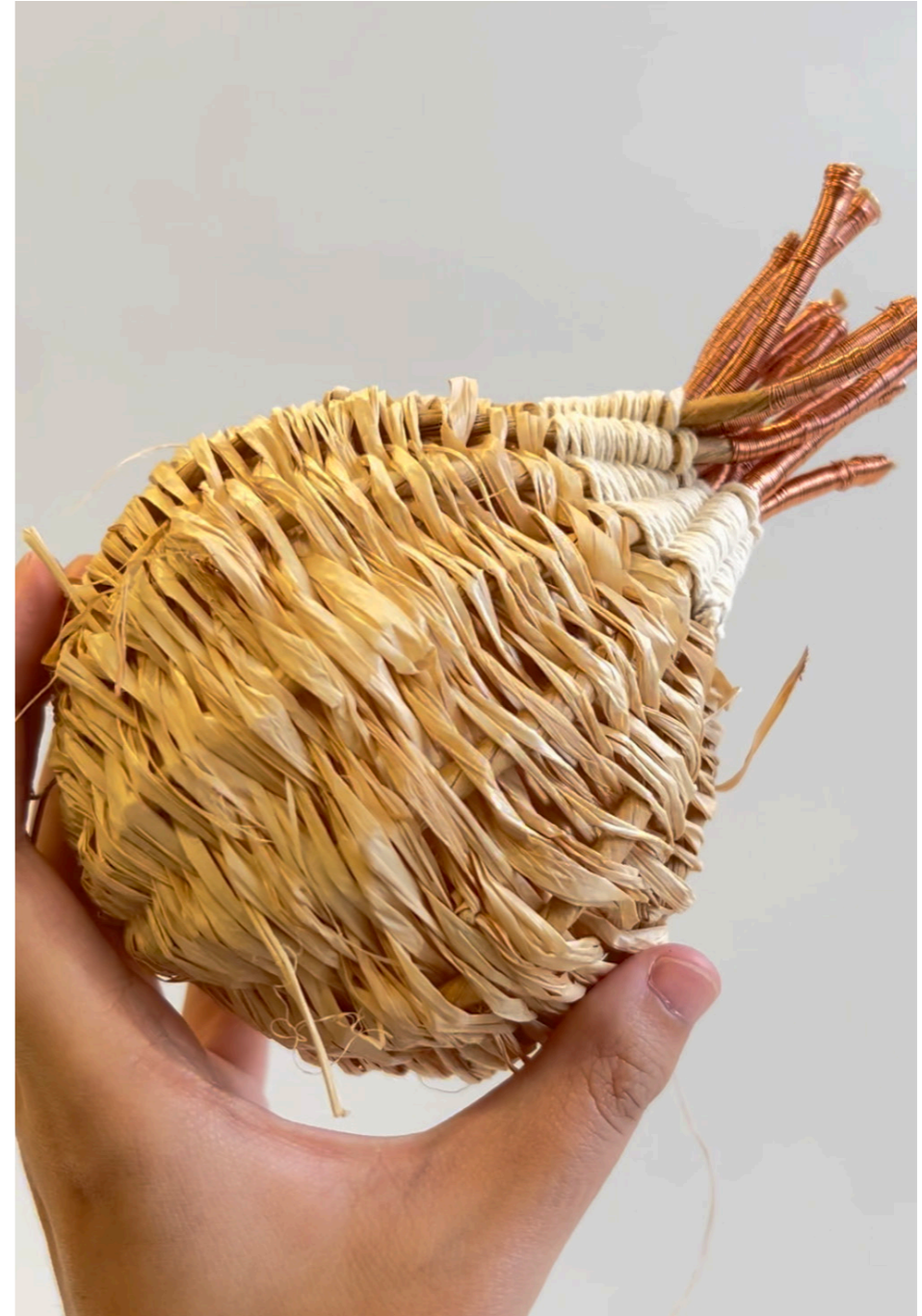


Figure 79. The use of twining techniques. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Making Process: *The Woven Home*

In both coiling and twining, I did not dominate the material but moved in harmony with it, allowing the form to arise naturally. Forms originate from a central point and expand outward, creating dimensional shapes that are not imposed by rigid external structures but emerge organically from within. The final form is not defined from the outset; rather, it emerges through the process of making. The slow, meditative nature of this process fosters an openness to unpredictability and transformation, reflecting the Taoist acceptance of impermanence—where change is not resisted but embraced as an inherent condition of existence. This approach resonates with the Wabi-Sabi aesthetics of Zen philosophy, capturing a sense of vitality and incompleteness that speaks to the transient beauty of the unfinished.

There is a well-known Taoist parable, 'Zhuang Zhou and the Butterfly',^[60] in which the philosopher dreams he is a butterfly, only to awaken and question whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. This story reflects the fluidity of identity and perception, much like how in the act of weaving, the maker and the material coalesce—the basket is not simply an object, but an extension of the weaver's movements, breath, and intention. This approach to making reflects the principles of Taoist and Zen philosophy, where the act of creation becomes an immersive

experience, dissolving the boundaries between subject and object and allowing existence to flow in accordance with the natural order.

My process of basket weaving can be broadly divided into three processes:

1. Expansion from Centre:

In my coil-basket making process, the stitching is done with a needle and is pulled tight to hold the foundation rows close together to form a strong and even base (see figures 80 and 81). In the twining technique, the centre point is more balanced. The distance between the stakes is determined by the specifications of the element, the type of structure, and its function. As the chassis expands, the spacing between the stakes becomes larger and new stakes need to be added to keep the basket tight (see figures 82 and 83). The commonality between these two drafting methods is that the baskets begin from a central point and gradually extend outward. This cyclical motion reflects the interconnectedness of all things, emphasising that nothing exists in isolation.

[60] The Book *Zhuangzi*, BC 476–221



Figure 80. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



Figure 81. A coiled raffia foundation. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland



Figures 82, 83. Twined basket foundations. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2024, Auckland

2. A Turning Point in the Transformation of Form:

The structure evolves, introducing changes in shape and tension.



Figure 84. A coiled soft cotton basket. Xinhao Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

The asymmetrical structure inherent to a coil basket is the primary factor contributing to its distinctive visual effect.^[61] In the piece illustrated below (see figure 85), the corn belt exhibits a spectrum of emerald and light-green colour variations, which are continually being added to, thereby endowing the surface with a seemingly random colouration. In certain sections, rough coco fibre rope has been utilised to emulate the colour and texture of the land. The shorter leaves, tipped with corn husks, are deliberately left on the exterior of the basket, thereby naturally creating a pattern that is characterised not by the decoration of the surface, but by the randomness of the material itself. I decided not to limit irregularity to the surface of the basket, but also make it part of the foundation. By manipulating the dimensions of the uppermost layer of the foundation and altering the direction of the coiling, the basket is imbued with asymmetry and variation, resulting in a paradoxical form that, while capable of collapse, maintains stability. The strong metallic flavour of the copper wire deconstructs the complete basket, while its ductility gives it the ability to weave in and out of the coils as a weft line, bridging the gap between the disconnected areas (see figures 86 and 87). The contrast between the lustre of the wire and dull texture of the basket is accentuated by its semi-open structure, resulting in the creation of a hidden interior space. From a technical standpoint, the copper wire also fulfils the function of providing support for the basket structure.

[61] Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*.



Figure 85. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



Figures 86, 87. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



Figures 88, 89. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



In my series, *The Woven Home*, copper wire—symbolising permanence and connection—is used in an attempt to mend and stitch together the ruptures of an impermanent basket. Through this, I seek to convey my experience of home as transient and fleeting, a space that offers only momentary belonging and security, yet one to which I remain deeply attached. From child who was powerless in the face of disappearance, I have become in adulthood a kind of witness to my life - living in a state of detachment and transcendence.

3. Layering upon the Existing Foundation:

The weaving materials are not made in advance but are added to as the basketry progresses. The form is built up incrementally, with each addition reinforcing the whole. When the surface of a coiled basket is entirely composed of the stitching element, the foundation becomes fully concealed. However, I deliberately chose a looser stitching technique, allowing the threads to visibly wrap around the foundation in continuous spirals. This approach ensures that the visual surface is shaped equally by both the stitching and the foundation, creating a dynamic interplay between the two (see figures 90 and 91). As noted in *The Nature of Basketry*, 'any colour of the stitching element is modified by the colour of the foundation'.^[62] The spiral movement of the foundation remains perceptible, highlighting the essential relationship between material and structure, emphasising the individuality of the elements and enhancing the overall expressiveness of the work. My fingers dance with the materials, and through the slow, meditative process of basket weaving, a sense of solidity, rigidity, and resilience emerges. Layers and layers of circularly stacked weaving patterns provide such a contemplative, reflective space that there is still a fleeting presence of the ever-present within the theme of impermanence, and they are both contrasting and mutually dependent.

[62] Rossbach, *The Nature of Basketry*.



Figures 90, 91. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland



Figure 92, 93. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Basket Weaving. Xinhan Zhang, summer 2025, Auckland

Conclusion



This research has explored the interwoven concepts of home, impermanence, and belonging through the lens of basket weaving, Taoist philosophy, and Wabi-Sabi aesthetics. Rooted in a practice-led methodology, the project has unfolded through an iterative process of making, reflecting, and reinterpreting, allowing new insights to emerge organically. Weaving became both a tangible act of creation and a metaphor for constructing a sense of home in an impermanent, shifting world.

By engaging with seed pods as metaphors for containment and transformation, and by working with materials through coiling techniques, this research illuminated how weaving can evoke feelings of grounding, memory, and connection. These acts—intimate, slow, and responsive—mirror Taoist ideas of attunement with nature, while the imperfections and irregularities in the woven forms embrace the Wabi-Sabi celebration of transience, asymmetry, and incompleteness. This approach resonates with my own nomadic upbringing, suggesting that home is not a place, but a process—a series of subtle relationships with environment, time, and material.

The shift from 2D experiments to 3D basket forms further revealed how embodied making deepens conceptual understanding. Through this material journey, themes of containment, change, and fluidity emerged as central to my evolving definition of home. The use of gathered and shop-bought materials reflects the tension between the natural and the constructed, further highlighting the complex, layered nature of contemporary craft.

Alongside these personal reflections, this research offers a contribution to the understanding that making can articulate, and hold, lived experience. Through the act of weaving, the project proposes a craft-based language for navigating impermanence—one that is both contemplative and grounded. It demonstrates how traditional techniques can be repurposed as tools for emotional and philosophical inquiry in a modern context. As I drafted this thesis, writing in both Mandarin and English, I encountered moments where language could not fully express what the hands understood. In these instances, making became a form of translation—a way to communicate what lived between words.

This research positions basket weaving not only as a practice of making but as a mode of thinking, feeling, and being. It opens a path for others to consider how craft might offer serenity and spiritual grounding in an uncertain, detached world—and how, through embracing the imperfect, we might find beauty, clarity, and connection.

Looking back on this journey, I now stand at a point that is not a conclusion, but a pause. What I have woven is a place I can return to, and leave again, always in motion, always becoming.

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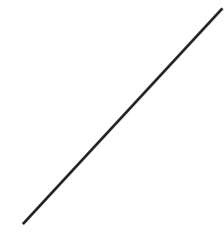
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Appendix



The collection, *A Woven Home*, was exhibited at *Te Wai Ngutu Kākā* gallery from the 10th to the 14th of June.



Figure 94. Exhibition overview. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2025, Auckland



Figure 95, 96. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Paul Chapman, winter 2025, Auckland



Figure 97, 98. Final collection: *The Woven Home*. Paul Chapman, winter 2025, Auckland



Figure 99. Exhibition overview. Xinhan Zhang, winter 2025, Auckland