



Diasporic Intimacy


Unfolding Balikbayan Narratives

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Abstract

For many in the diaspora, maintaining ties to their homeland is preserved through souvenirs and homemaking practices. The bonds Filipino breadwinners living overseas maintain with family back home is made tangible by sending *balikbayan* or homecoming boxes. This thesis examined the concept of diasporic intimacy in Filipino culture. I shape my understanding of this cultural tradition by investigating how an engagement with the *balikbayan* box might manifest as diasporic intimacy and weave narratives of home through *banig* or handwoven mat design principles. The research involved traditional *banig* weaving fieldwork in Basey province, in the Samar region of the Philippines, alongside personal reflections on the *balikbayan* box tradition.

This research grounds these cultural contexts through my relationship with my grandmother. A *banig* souvenir commemorating our time together during my research in Basey was a vehicle for design exploration. This practice aimed to entwine these Filipino traditions and facilitate emotional and cultural connections between me and her.

I utilised a practice-led, autoethnographic approach in which diasporic intimacy revealed itself through the iterative process of making a gift for my grandmother. Making, packing, and sending a *balikbayan* box and its contents sought to activate a space for intimate experiences under diasporic conditions. The outcome was a keepsake box incorporating *banig* design principles of multifunctionality and ornamentation. Applied *banig* patterns to the keepsake box's surface further illustrated layered narratives of home.

This research project was ultimately my journey home. It intended to contribute to the discourse on diasporic intimacy and how diasporic Filipinos make place between two countries.

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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.

Denise Jillian Saso
25 October 2024



Figure 1. Saso, Denise. My grandmother Beatriz and her *banig* (handwoven) bag. Cebu, Philippines, 2023. [Photograph]

Introduction

I visited my grandmother Beatriz's (Figure 1) house every Sunday as a child. Before my family and I arrived, she would have the living room ready for us, moving the armchairs and coffee table aside and unrolling the *banig*, or handwoven mat in its place. Family members would sit there watching television, eating, or taking an afternoon nap. The *banig* represented home and has shaped how I perceive and make space.

In the early stages of my thesis journey, I returned to the Philippines to research narratives within Filipino weaving traditions. My grandmother accompanied me to the province as I wanted to understand how they were produced and the stories behind the patterns. I am a *balikbayan*, a term referring to Filipinos living overseas who occasionally visit their motherland. *Balik* means “to return”, and *bayan* means “town or homeland”.¹ On my return to my grandmother, I came with a suitcase filled with gifts and commodities for my family, who welcomed me back. This suitcase was a *balikbayan* box, a tradition that signals our return, tied to the gift-giving practice of *pasalubong* or homecoming gifts.

Since migrating to New Zealand, I have cultivated a sense of sentimentality with objects that reference and connect me with loved ones back home. While these keepsakes contain personal narratives, they often memorialise past and cherished events. The connection with home I am particularly interested in the *balikbayan* box tradition, one that is constant and recurring.

This thesis is grounded in the concept of diasporic intimacy, aiming to understand how Filipino diasporic communities connect with and create a sense of home. Diasporic intimacy is underpinned by memories of home, expressed through keepsakes and homemaking practices. Scholar Svetlana Boym's work on ‘diasporic intimacy’ underscores the importance of shared memories and narratives.² Additionally, academic Margarita Levantovskaya notes that those who engage with diasporic intimacy do not seek to return to their homeland permanently but rather preserve a connection with it.³ Their research suggests the potential for a more detailed examination of how specific practices, such as the sending of *balikbayan* boxes, embody and facilitate intimate connections with home.

¹ Jane Alburo, “Boxed In or Out? Balikbayan Boxes as Metaphors for Filipino American (Dis)Location,” *Ethnologies* 27, no. 2 (2005): 137, <https://doi.org/10.7202/014044ar>.

² Svetlana Boym, “On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2, (The University of Chicago Press 1998), 521.

³ Margarita Levantovskaya, “Homes without a Homeland: Finding Diasporic Intimacy in Contemporary Russian-Jewish-American Fiction,” *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 4 (2017): 395. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48691441>.

This research asks,

How might an engagement of the balikbayan box practice manifest as diasporic intimacy, and weave unfolding narratives of home through banig design principles?

Through an autoethnographic and practice-led inquiry, this research considers the *balikbayan* box tradition and its content as the site of diasporic intimacy. The content— an ornate keepsake box, is shaped by me and my grandmother’s shared passion for *banig* designs. Hence, the *banig* design principles of colourful patterns and multiple domestic functions that serve a Filipino way of life, guide my practice. I shape my meaning of home by engaging with the loving practice of sending a *balikbayan* box and curating an intimate, unwrapping experience for my grandmother. In this thesis, the *balikbayan* box refers to the large cardboard box filled with gifts over time. The gift is the keepsake box, where the design and context gradually build throughout the research.

Chapter One introduces scholar Svetlana Boym’s concept of diasporic intimacy as the contextual basis of this research. I unpack the tradition of the *balikbayan* box, situated within the broader context of Filipino diasporic practices. Surface is introduced to create narratives of home through personal interpretations of *banig* patterns.

Chapter Two outlines the autoethnographic and practice-led research methodologies and discusses the methods employed. My diasporic experiences frames and informs my practice. Utilising a practice-led methodology helped curate tactile, intimate experience by following the *balikbayan* box tradition.

Chapter Three delves into creating and packing a keepsake box, examining how *banig* design principles and surface patterns convey narratives of home. My practice sought to evoke diasporic intimacy as an unfolding experience, revealed through the detailed and thoughtful construction of the keepsake box.

Chapter Four concludes and reflects on the findings, discussing the research’s implication for understanding diasporic intimacy and suggesting avenues for future research.

While the *balikbayan* box practice often shapes the identity and belonging of breadwinners who provide for their families, this research examines how children of breadwinners and future generations of the Filipino diaspora find their own sense of home through an exploration of this tradition.



Figure 2. Saso, Denise. Sinamay or plain weave pattern. Basey, Samar Philippines. 2023 [Photograph]

Figure 3. Saso, Denise. A zigzag-embroidered banig keepsake from Basey, Philippines. Auckland, New Zealand. 2023.

1.0 Contextual Review

1.1 Introduction

I posit my research by situating it in-between two spaces. The first space is my grandparents' bungalow house in the Philippines, where I spent most of my childhood. The second space is my current home in New Zealand. In between these spaces is a third space,⁴ formed by a series of personal conversations and diasporic experiences. This space speaks of migration from one country to another. A division by an oceanic distance, consequently, a separation from family. From this separation, I have lost that familial intimacy and a sense of belongingness while weaving through a different place. I unpack what it means to be home through the contexts of diasporic intimacy, the balikbayan box tradition and surface, tying the threads of memory and belonging together to narrate a personal meaning of home.

1.2 Diasporic Intimacy

To locate the autoethnographic research within a personal experience of a Filipino diaspora, I traced the origins of my grandmother's banig to her provincial hometown of Basey, in the Samar region of the Philippines. The banig is a hand-woven mat made of local *tikog* grass dyed in various colours.⁵ Banig designs in Basey vary in complexity, from the simple *surisuri* or windmill pattern in Figure 2, formed by the plain weave method, to the embroidered designs, such as the *siko-siko* or zigzag-patterned keepsake in Figure 3. These banig typically have a woven base with the patterns embroidered into it.⁶ (See Appendix 5.B for the banig-making process in Basey)

I have chosen the banig keepsake (Figure 3) I brought to New Zealand as patterned inspiration. The keepsake is a placemat of sentimental value, kept for the memories it evoked when my grandmother accompanied me on this research trip.

⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012) 218.

⁵ Elmer I. Nocheseda, "Mats: woven into history and consciousness" in *Rara: The Art and Tradition of Mat Weaving in the Philippines*. (Manila: HABI: The Philippine Textile Council, Inc, 2016), 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, 163.



Figure 4. Saso, Denise. The indoor living room banig at my grandmother's house. Cebu, Philippines. 2004 [Photograph]

My interest in the Filipino banig sits within the background of cultural displacement. As architectural graduate Karl Mendez notes, “I was raised in a developing nation, being indoctrinated to perceive our homeland not as a home to be but as a place to leave.”⁷ I resonate with his statement. Moving overseas for better opportunities has become a typical approach to life for many Filipinos.⁸ While we are known for our resilience and ability to adapt to new environments quickly, one still feels an inevitable loss of identity when assimilating to a different culture. Growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand, I changed aspects of myself to ‘fit in’ to a community, whether at school or a workplace, so much so that I felt like an ‘outsider’ in my ethnic culture. Author Rick Bonus described this ‘outsider’ contradiction where he was labelled by a local in the Philippines as “not Filipinos” while simultaneously told to “come back home [here] soon.”⁹ It is encounters like these that make me wonder, “Where do I belong and what does it mean to be home?”

So, what does it mean to be home? According to geographer and theorist Yi-Fu Tuan, home is the centre of spatial systems, a place of familiarity and security for us to return to.¹⁰ However, Tuan’s work refers to an attachment to place that does not fully describe the experiences of many immigrants—like me, who have a personal connection with two places. Authors Martin Manalansan and Augusto Espiritu contradict Tuan’s statement, describing home and return as “[...]no longer mere spatial endpoints or temporal nodes” rather, home is regarded as “scattered in the ambivalent moments and the spatial elsewheres.”¹¹ The understanding arising from this, as part of a Filipino diaspora, is that home exists in a different space. At its essence, home has less to do with a place than with our memories of it.

⁷ Karl Angelo Mendez, “Malaya - A Cultural Shift of the Filipino Diaspora”. (M.Arch Thesis, University of Auckland, 2020), Researchspace Auckland.

⁸ “Nurses’ lament: ‘Gov’t not giving us reasons to stay,’” Accessed June 2023, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1677299/nurses-lament-govt-not-giving-us-reasons-to-stay>.

⁹ Rick Bonus, “Come back home soon: The pleasures and agonies of “homeland” visits” in *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora*. (New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2016), 390.

¹⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, “Attachment to the Homeland” in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

¹¹ Augusto Espiritu and Martin F. Manalansan, *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora*. (New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2016), 4.



Figure 5. Saso, Beatriz. My grandmother's colourful banig in the living room. Cebu, Philippines. 2011. [Photograph]

Diasporic intimacy is entwined with memories of home, found in souvenirs or everyday objects (such as the banig), that memorialise aspects of the homeland.¹² These everyday objects do not reconstruct the narrative of one's roots but tell the story of being in a home away from home. As researcher Svetlana Boym writes, diasporic intimacy is "not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarisation but constituted by it."¹³ Intimacy is derived from the Latin *intimus* to denote 'what is inner-most', or 'very personal.'¹⁴ My understanding of intimacy is connected to my childhood home in the Philippines.

I associate home with the banig or handwoven mat in my grandmother's house. Its round, colourful and embroidered zigzag patterns along the edges occupied the centre of my childhood home in Cebu, Philippines (Figure 5). It was where my family and I would sit watching television, eating, or taking afternoon naps together. A banig is a perfect medium for people to commune and nurture relationships. The banig, for me, is what theorist Yi-Fu Tuan calls, "[...]a centre of spatial systems."¹⁵ It represented home and has shaped how I perceive and design spaces. Philippine Indigenous art scholar Elmer Nocheseda echoes this sentiment, noting,

And the banig surely would have reminded them of home. It will always make them feel like they have never left home. For home is where the banig is.¹⁶

The banig is appreciated for the multiplicity of its domestic functions; through these functions, it weaves together many aspects of life. In short, its function is life.¹⁷ Woven into the warp and weft are stories told in colours and patterns. These stories contain cultural knowledge and lived experiences about their maker and their homeland.¹⁸ For example, the *sikosiko* or zigzag patterns on my grandmother's banig is a characteristic design of Basesy province in Samar, Philippines. It is an ancient pattern passed down through generations of weavers, who give them

¹² Researcher Svetlana Boym coined this as 'diasporic souvenirs' or everyday objects "haunted by images of home and homeland." Boym, *On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes*, 501.

¹³ Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations" 499.

¹⁴ Audrey Yue, "Queer Asian Australian migration: creative film co-production and diasporic intimacy in 'The Home Song Stories.'" *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 2, no. 3 (2008), 238.

¹⁵ Tuan, *Space and Place*.

¹⁶ Nocheseda, *Rara: The Art and Tradition of Mat Weaving*, preface.

¹⁷ Yee I-Lann, "Tikar as verb", *Antennae: the journal of nature in visual culture* 55, (2021): 79.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

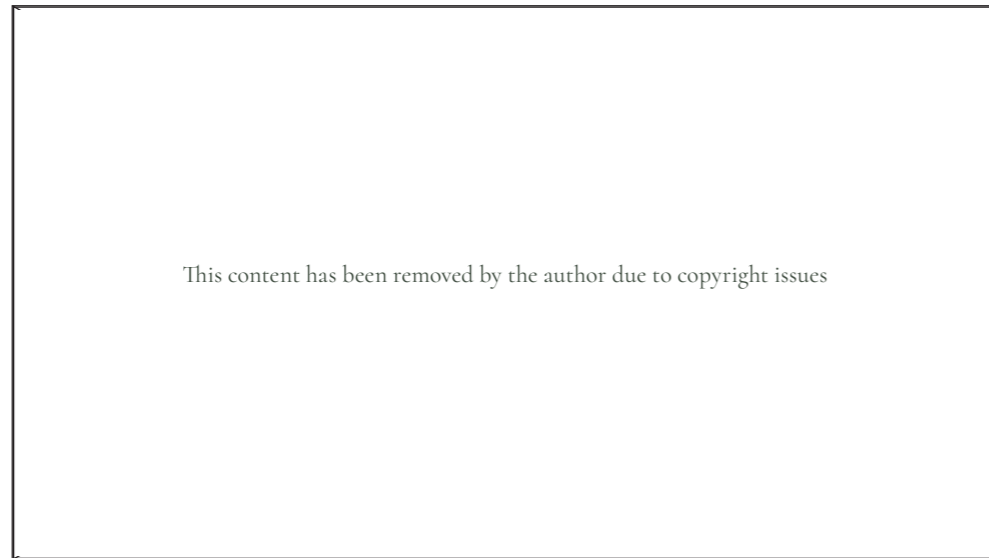


Figure 6. The sacred T'nalak textiles are woven by the T'boli Tribe of the Philippines. from "How the T'boli Women Weave their Dreams", accessed May 2023. [Photograph <https://fameplus.com/touchpoint/how-the-tboli-women-weave-their-dreams>]

new interpretations over time.¹⁹

There are various forms of textile patterns throughout the Philippines, with distinct visual characteristics and weaving techniques shaped by the locale. For example, the colour scheme and recurring animal and fauna motifs distinguish the T'nalak textiles of the T'boli Tribe from the South Cotabato region of the Philippines²⁰ (Figure 6). The traditional colours of the T'nalak hold symbolic meanings: white for purity, red for the blood of their ancestors, and black for the earth from which they came.²¹ These patterns are more than adornments—they have a narrative connection with their culture. As artist Yee I-Lann explains,

When we unroll a mat, it is not difficult to simultaneously unroll embodied attributes, along with its form and function—to find tacit knowledge about material culture, primordial spiritual life, and a living repository of narratives that built and build worldviews.²²

While I-Lann works with weaving communities in her hometown of Sabah, Malaysia, both Malaysia and the Philippines share similar cultures and weaving traditions.²³ I am interested in the possibilities of a banig-inspired keepsake, where uncovering a keepsake is like unrolling a mat: it unravels personal narratives of home and a home away from home.

¹⁹ Nocheseda, *Rara*, 245.

²⁰ Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia: Lang Kambay Dulay (Mindanao, Philippines). Directed by Quizon, Cherubim A. California. Fowler Museum at UCLA. 2010.

²¹ "How the T'boli Women Weave their Dreams," Fameplus, accessed March 2023, <https://fameplus.com/touchpoint/how-the-tboli-women-weave-their-dreams>

²² Yee I-Lann, "Tikar as verb", 80.

²³ Ibid, 94.

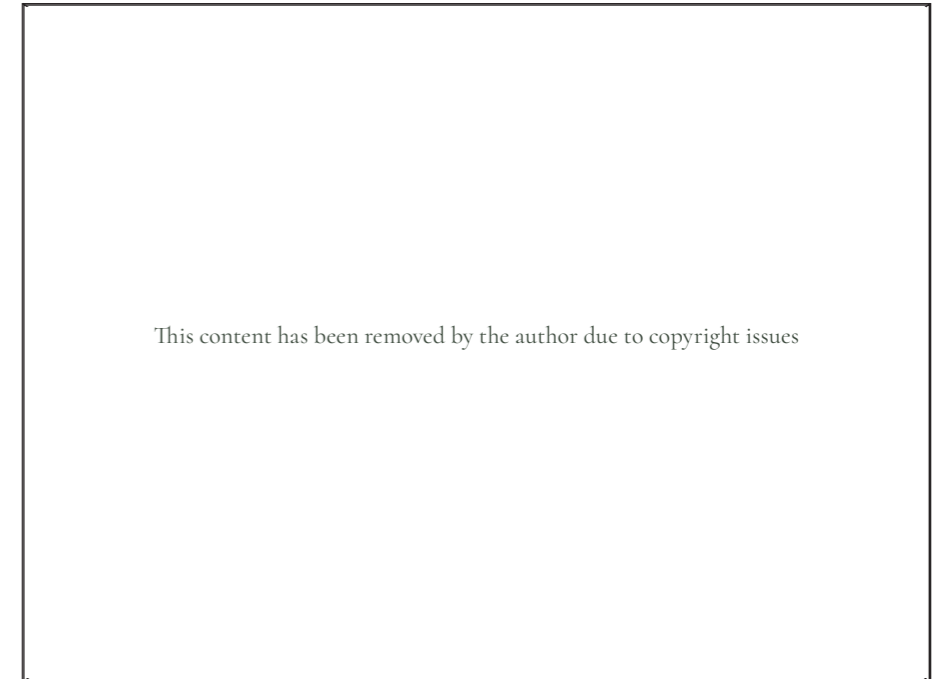


Figure 7. Craven, Mona. Stitched table cloths with whitework embroidery and indigo resist print. 2019. [<https://www.craftcontinuum.com/artist/mona-craven>]

Artist Mona Craven references diaspora and surface patterns in her work (Figure 7). Craven engages with her diasporic experiences through two personal mementoes, a christening gown and a South African textile called *Shweshwe*.²⁴ She investigates their fabrication processes—whitework embroidery and indigo resist print, respectively, whilst unpacking its traces of colonial and decolonial history and the cultural transference that occurred during this time. There are juxtaposing meanings associated with Craven's christening gown (the colonial) and *Shweshwe* (the colonised) clothes. Despite these disparities, a third space emerges, "cultural space", as she calls it, in which "meanings can be negotiated and formed."²⁵ The resulting stitched tablecloths tie the two narratives together. I am inspired by Craven's approach to combining two disparate fabrication techniques to create a self-expression, painting a portrait of her two distinctly different cultural identities.

²⁴ Mona Craven, "Reflecting a Diaspora: In-between Whitework and Indigo." *Textile* 17, no. 4 (2019): 393.

²⁵ Ibid, 395.



Figure 8. Saso, Manuel. A balikbayan box we delivered for Christmas. Auckland, New Zealand. 2021. [Photograph]

Figure 9. Saso, Denise. Unpacking my visiting mother's Balikbayan box. Cebu, Philippines. 2011. [Photograph]

1.3 Balikbayan Box Tradition as Diasporic Intimacy

The balikbayan box tradition is a staple of every diasporic Filipino's transnational existence.²⁶ Balikbayan boxes, known as homecoming boxes, facilitate the relationship between the giver and recipient. Sending these boxes nurtures connections between my family and me across vast, oceanic distances.

The tradition begins with procuring and gathering an assortment of everyday consumer goods and gifts for my family in the Philippines, items they might want and need. These are kept in a corrugated cardboard box that is filled over time. Once full, the box is bound securely with packaging tape. My family and I are customarily accompanied by balikbayan boxes during our travels to the Philippines, signalling our return home, hence the word balikbayan or "homecoming". In instances when we are unable to return home, we send a box in our place (Figures 8 & 9). Balikbayan boxes come in standardised sizes (they can be as large as a "Mega Box" that is 900 mm x 530 mm x 610 mm)²⁷ and are offered by door-to-door balikbayan courier companies. These couriers collect the cargo boxes from the senders' homes and deliver them directly to the recipient.

²⁶ Frank Shyong, "Must Reads: These boxes are a billion-dollar industry of homesickness for Filipinos overseas," Los Angeles Times, April 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-balikbayan-boxes-20180428-htmstory.html>

²⁷ Kaykuya: Door to Door Delivery, Warehousing & Logistics, 2024, <https://www.kaykuyabalikbayanbox.co.nz/pricing>



Figure 10. Saso, Denise. A Balikbayan box in the form of luggage. I brought this with me when I visited my family in the Philippines, Auckland, New Zealand, 2023. [Photograph]

Balibkayan boxes are more than gift and care packages. On the surface, they contain personalised gifts and commodities from the sender's country, such as toys, bars of chocolates and canned goods (Figure 10); what lies beneath the surface is defined by the family's obligation to assist in the family's welfare. The Philippines is a family-oriented society and assisting their household is the primary motivation for many Filipinos to work overseas.²⁸ Filipinos fulfil their role with their family through monetary remittances. However, the most concrete manifestation of this kin relationship is sending balikbayan boxes.²⁹ The effort and care of filling a box becomes an intimate way of bridging the physical distance between family members and endows overseas Filipinos "with a feeling of belonging within the family."³⁰ This family obligation makes the tradition distinctly unique to Filipino culture.

Boym describes diasporic intimacy as "[...]intimate experiences occur[ing] against a foreign background."³¹ Elaborating on this theory, Philippine Studies academic Clement Camposano explains that diasporic intimacy is more than sentimental affections with souvenirs from home, but an engagement with the homeland's cultural tradition, embodied by sending balikbayan boxes. He states that diasporic intimacy is the "deliberate pursuit of domesticity under conditions of exile or physical absence of home."³² Hence, intimacy arises from the involvement of loved ones' everyday life in the household, such as providing the household's perceived needs.³³

As a child of a first-generation immigrant, I am not obliged to assist my relatives in the Philippines financially. However, I participate in the tradition because it allows me to nurture my relationships with my relatives from a distance. I send them gifts for their birthdays and Christmas holidays that I cannot spend with them. As I reflect on the different meanings of this tradition, I have come to understand that sending a balikbayan box is about the intention of giving and sharing experiences of what life is like in New Zealand.

²⁸ Albuero, "Boxed In or Out?" 139.

²⁹ Simone Christ, "Materiality and Economies of Migration" in *The Culture of Migration in the Philippines: Of Jeepneys and Balikbayan Boxes*. Berlin: regiospectra Verlag (2020): 189.

³⁰ Ibid, 191.

³¹ Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy" 499.

³² Clement C. Camposano, "Balikbayan Boxes and the Performance of Intimacy by Filipino Migrant Women in Hong Kong" *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 21, 1 (2012): 83.

³³ Ibid, 93.

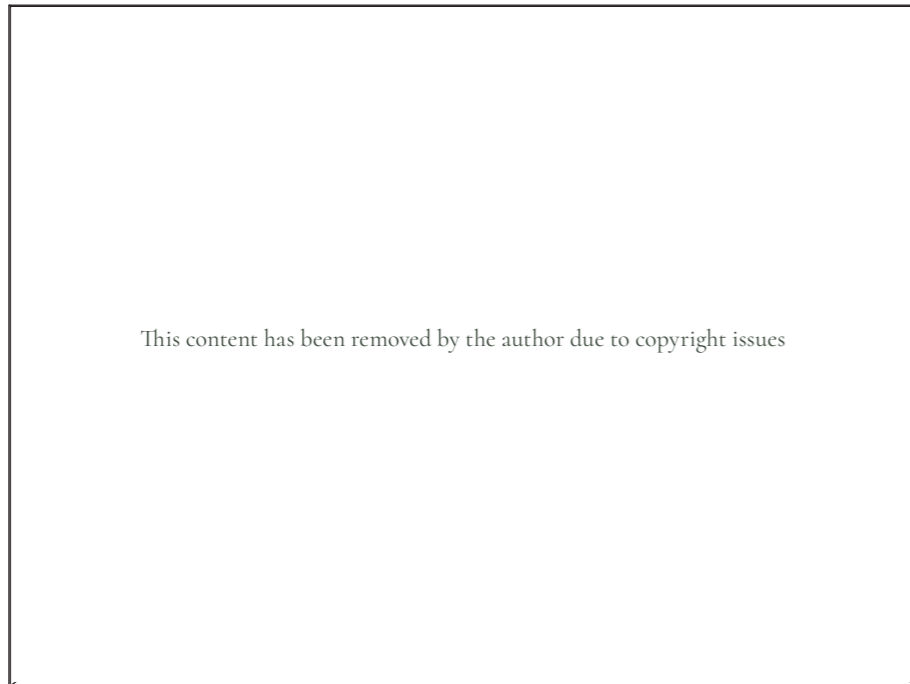


Figure 11. Balikbayan boxes in transit, April 2007. [Photograph, Jan Manton Art Gallery, Brisbane, <https://www.janmantonart.com/exhibitionarchive/2017/3/18/alfredo-isabel-aquilizan-belonging-in-transit-16-28-apr-2007>]

Artists Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan's installation *Project Be-Longing: In Transit* (2007) built narratives of home and migration through assemblages of personal belongings. Like many Filipinos seeking a better life, they arrived in Australia with their children and balikbayan boxes. Their relocation experience from Manila to Brisbane informs their artistic practice of collecting and archiving.³⁴

The structure of the balikbayan box is absent but alluded to, choosing to spotlight its contents (Figure 11). Doing so reveals intimate stories of the family's migration. One can gather the owners' identity and former domesticity from the organised assemblages of clothing, bags and books. Without the balikbayan box to ground these personal belongings, they are seemingly adrift in the gallery context, in a state of displacement. It speaks to the nomadic nature of the work, as it always occupies the liminal space between their former domesticity and their new settlement. However, we can only guess where the owners' new settlement is.

The balikbayan box for the Aquilizans represents migration. Even when diasporic Filipinos find a new home outside the country, engaging with the box and the tradition carries a sense of belonging that binds them to their motherland. Migration, as writer Gina Fairley notes, is about intersections: constructing our histories and our future.³⁵ Accumulated domestic objects conceptualise narratives of migration and the home left behind—they become mementoes, corporeal traces of lived experiences that record journeys and cherished memories. For myself, participating in the sending of boxes is to construct, and carve out my own meaning from a practice grounded on family obligation. I establish the balikbayan box tradition as a vehicle for reconnecting with home and creating space for intimate experiences.

³⁴ Zoe Butt, "Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan: another country." *ArtAsiaPacific* 54 (2007): 106.

³⁵ Gina Fairley, "Project. memory. migration: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan." In *Eyeline* 62, (2006): 47. 10.3316/informat.920480170696139



Figure 12. Saso, Denise. One of the banig weaving stores we visited in Basey. Basey, Samar Philippines. August 2023.[Photograph]

1.4 Surface

I see the balikbayan box as more than just a vessel for gifts; it is a conduit for endowing my grandmother with love. Through a treasured gift, I intend to memorialise the memories I shared with my grandmother. I remember the delight on her face when she saw the vibrant manifold of banig patterns at Basey province (Figure 12). We both have a fondness for colourful ornaments and so it seemed fitting to give her something influenced by this aesthetic—a box wrapped with colourful surface patterns.

In this research, surface is viewed as a medium for nurturing my relationship with my grandmother. Surface refers to the outermost layer of an object or material. As Author Joseph Amato writes, surfaces are the "points of connection and interactions among body, things, and the world."³⁶ It invites engagement and contemplation as we experience the world through sensations and senses.³⁷ When these sensations are rendered into images and symbols such as banig patterns, they can elicit responses, awaken memories, and become a subject of reflection.³⁸

³⁶ Joseph A. Amato, *Surfaces: A history* (University of California Press, 2013), 19.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 20.

As the contact between humans and the environment occurs on the surface,³⁹ a condition of ‘becoming’ and a connective, enveloping substance,⁴⁰ surface allowed me to express cultural narratives of home. Like surfaces, the balikbayan box acts as an intermediary between the sender and the recipient, bridging and facilitating dialogue between two places. Exploring tactile characteristics of a material is essential to experiencing surfaces; as artist Anni Albers explains, “We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form. Our tactile experiences are elemental.”⁴¹ Therefore, surface can be a medium for intimate experiences when delving into a material’s aesthetic quality and inner structure.

Expanding on Boym’s notions of intimacy and memory, I drew from Gaston Bachelard’s “Poetics of Space”, in which he metaphorically examines domestic spaces. The casket or chest symbolises an intimate space, containing unforgettable treasures that encapsulate past and future memories, explaining,

*The casket contains the things that are unforgettable, unforgettable for us, but also unforgettable for those to whom we are going to give our treasures. Here the past, the present and a future are condensed. Thus, the casket is memory of what is immemorial.*⁴²

The interior time of the keepsake box and the exterior time of the balikbayan box envisaged a space and time when my grandmother and I were together. In this research, I defined the keepsake box as an object inhabited by recollections and memories representing my relationship with her. They are “artefactual expressions of the self, vehicles of memory” and “transmitters of material reminiscences of the past to the future.”⁴³ The box creates a dimension of intimacy for me to express and transpose these recollections through banig-patterned surfaces. In a digital age where intimate connections are often maintained virtually, and intimacy during home visits is fleeting, I propose a keepsake box as a form of intimacy that can be engaged with through touch.

39 Yeseung Lee, ed. *Surface and Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central), 4.

40 Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5.

41 Anni Albers, “Tactile Sensibility” in *On Weaving: New Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). ProQuest Ebook Central, 44.

42 Gaston Bachelard, “Drawers, Chests and Wardrobe” in *Poetics of Space*, 112.

43 Cathleen Sarti, Heta Aali, and Anna-Leena Perämäki, *Memory Boxes. An Experimental Approach to Cultural Transfer in History, 1500–2000*. (transcript Verlag, 2014), 11.

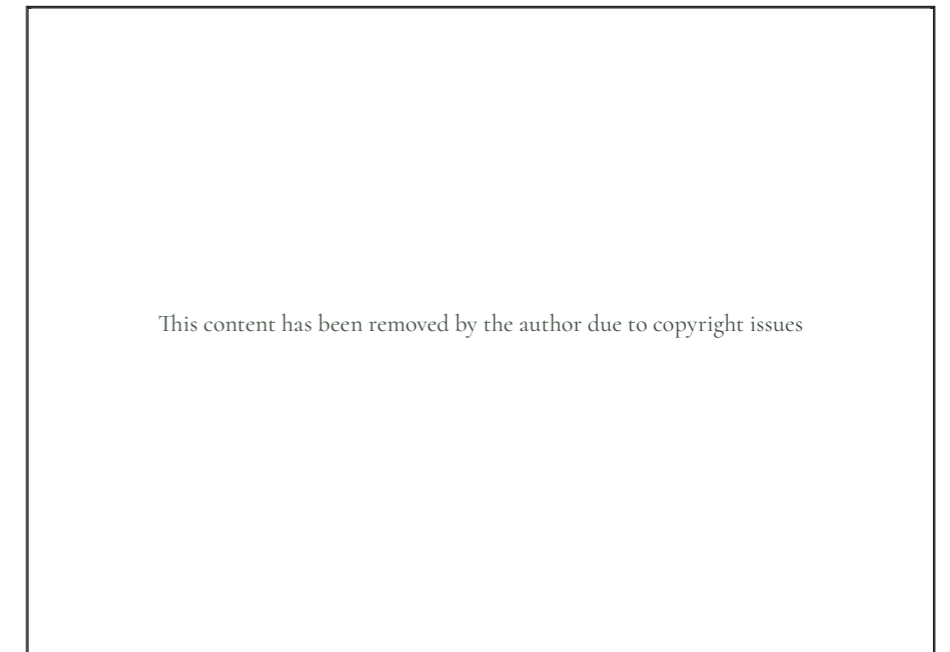


Figure 13. Paz, Jill, Laser engraved painting on a standardised balikbayan box. 2015. <https://jillpaz.com/journal/diasporicintimacyandthebalikbayanbox>.

Filipino-American artist Jill Paz also explores the intersections of surfaces and themes of diaspora in her work, *It’s a Journey Back that I’m Always Taking* (Balikbayan Box). Paz, like many diasporic Filipinos, participates in the balikbayan tradition. Yearning to connect with her Filipino roots, she utilises the balikbayan box’s corrugated surface as a canvas to understand place and home.

Paz laser-engraves images of her ancestors and works by renowned Filipino artist Félix Resurrección Hidalgo, into the surface of the balikbayan box (Figure 13). This process exposes the layers beneath, uncovering her past to ‘identify her relationship with the present.’⁴⁴ Through intricate laser engravings, Paz is engaging in an act of excavation, delving into her heritage and uncovering stories and connections that inform her present identity as a Filipino diaspora. For Paz, excavating the balikbayan box through combined analogue and digital techniques is a process of self-discovery and cultural reconnection.

1.5 Conclusion

I use the term diasporic intimacy to name and encapsulate my research project and to offer a lens of understanding the Filipino diasporic ways of place-making. Diasporic intimacy is underpinned by memories of home, through keepsakes and domestic making practices. The site of my diasporic intimacy is inspired by the banig’s multiple functions and colourful embellishments, manifested in a keepsake box. Memories and narratives of home are illustrated through surface patterns. I shape my personal meaning of home by engaging with the loving practice of sending balikbayan boxes to nurture family connections. For me, the balikbayan box tradition was intended to give and share my culture and experiences living in New Zealand with my grandmother.

44 Jill Paz, “Diasporic Intimacy and the Balikbayan Box,” accessed 2024, <https://jillpaz.com/journal/diasporicintimacyandthebalikbayanbox>.

2.0 Methodological Statement

2.1 Introduction

I am grateful to have been blessed with opportunities in New Zealand that my family in the Philippines does not have. Sending a gift as a balikbayan box is my way of sharing those blessings with them. This research project weaves memories and two places together, materially manifested through this tradition as a way of making place. Combined autoethnographic and practice-led research methodologies explore how I foster and express diasporic intimacy through drawing, pattern, and iterative-making methods.

2.1.1 Autoethnography methodology

Autoethnography grounds Filipino diasporic culture through my personal experiences. I draw upon memories of home by gathering, sifting and recollecting photographs to inform design decisions on banig surface patterns. Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis defined autoethnographic research as examining “the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.”⁴⁵ In this thesis, I am both the researcher and the subject. I examined analogue and digital photographs of my childhood home and my trip to Basey. I used drawing as a method for reflecting on these experiences. The insight gained from these reflections will be translated into pattern motifs.

2.1.2 Practice-led methodology

Practice-led research is a process of “knowing through making” whereby drawing, making banig, and iterative design explorations inform and shape my research project. Researchers Carole Gray and Julian Malins describe this research as a means of gaining “new understanding/insight through the experience of making/re-making.”⁴⁶ This methodology is suitable for my design practice, as generating new knowledge of various modes of making allows my keepsake box design to be iteratively refined in response to knowledge acquired. Additionally, I drew on philosopher Donald Schön’s concept of reflective practice, which is the process of analysing my own diasporic experiences, actions and design decisions to learn from them and extend my knowledge. Reflective practice gives context to my work, a continuous cycle of conversations with my making—examining, evaluating, and developing experiments that gradually build into a synthesised outcome.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014), 4.

⁴⁶ Carole Gray and Julian Malins, *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004) 104.

⁴⁷ Donald A. Schön, “The Structure of Reflection in Action” in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), 132.

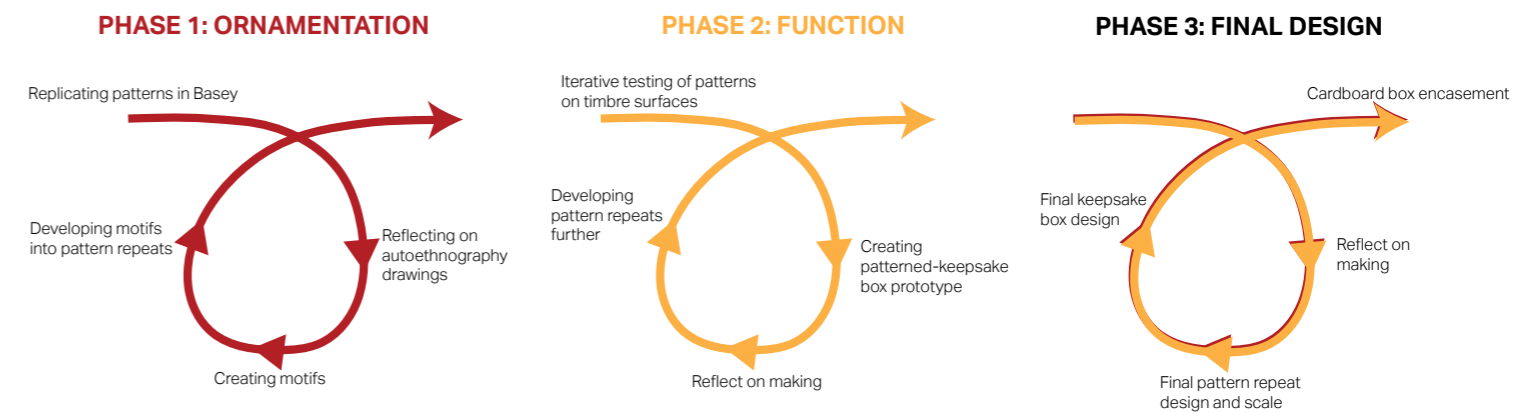


Figure 14. Saso, Denise. Knowing-Through-Making Diagram. 2024 [Digital Photograph].

My Knowing-through-making diagram (Figure 14) illustrates the iterative process of my practice throughout the three phases. Each phase is a cyclical process in itself, whereby I allow for a period of reflection during and after my making.

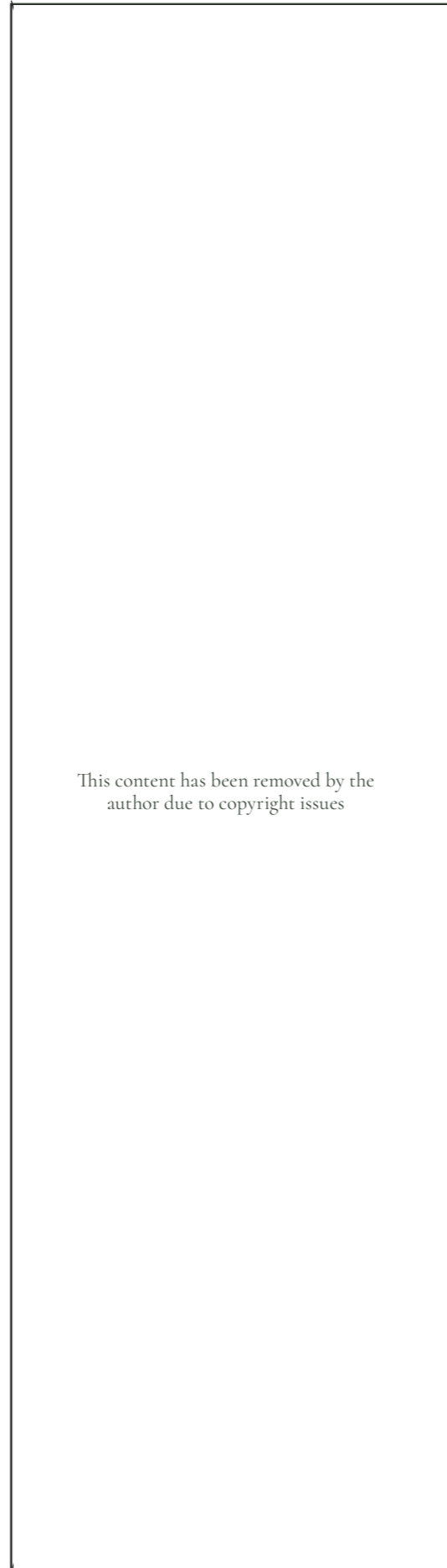


Figure 15. Lehmann Maupin, Do Ho Suh: My Homes/Staircases - 2 (detail), 2012, Photograph, [<https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/museums-and-global-exhibitions/do-ho-suh-architectural-ethnography-from-tokyo-guidebooks-and-projects-on-livelihood>]

2.2 Methods

I intended to evoke diasporic intimacy through analogue and digital fabrication methods.⁴⁸ The first method is autoethnographic drawing, in which I reflected on a series of analogue illustrations. The second method is pattern making, where I create banig-inspired patterns from my grandmother's hometown in Basey. The third method is iterative making which explored my patterns as a three-dimensional structure in the form of a keepsake box. The design generation did not follow a linear process; instead, my practice is continuously refined through iterative development and reflective practice.

2.2.1 Autoethnographic Drawing

Drawn methods in this research visualise ideas and document observations on the nuances of daily domestic life. This method was based on architect Momoyo Kaijima's concept of "architectural ethnography"—a term she coined.⁴⁹ Architectural ethnography is an extension of architectural drawing practice, often depicting details of inhabitation that "uncover realities that would otherwise remain unseen by those who experience them."⁵⁰ Artist Do Ho Suh captures this beautifully in his work, *My Homes/ Staircases - 2* (2012), where he examines the rooms of all the spaces he has lived in throughout his life from an isometric and sectional point of view (Figure 15). His work was part of the Architectural Ethnography Exhibition (2018) which Kaijima curated.⁵¹ In my spatial practice, I draw domestic architecture from the occupants' perspective to understand how they influence and are influenced by these spaces. This provided insights that informed a human-centred and context-sensitive design, particularly when creating a gift for my grandmother. I chose analogue drawings as they revealed humanist qualities and an interpretation of place.⁵² The interiors of my two homes in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand and Cebu, Philippines, were both drawn on-site and from memory (Figure 16). This approach helped me reflect on significant changes since my immigration to New Zealand. Understanding how I lived and how these spaces evolved became essential in designing the keepsake box.

⁴⁸ In the realm of interior design construction, digital fabrication techniques are used as a medium for experimental prototyping, decision making and problem-solving to formulate and realise complex artefacts. Anderson and Weinthal, *Digital Fabrication in Interior Design: Body, Object, Enclosure*, 2.

⁴⁹ Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder and Iseki, Yu, "A drawing is not a plan" in *Architectural Ethnography* (Japan: TOTO, 2018), 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Italy Architecture News, "Japan Pavilion presents Architectural Ethnography at the Venice Architecture Biennale," *World Architecture*, June 2018, https://worldarchitecture.org/article-links/ehgep/japan_pavilion_presents_architectural_ethnography_at_the_venice_architecture_biennale.html.

⁵² Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder and Iseki, Yu, *Architectural Ethnography*, 16.

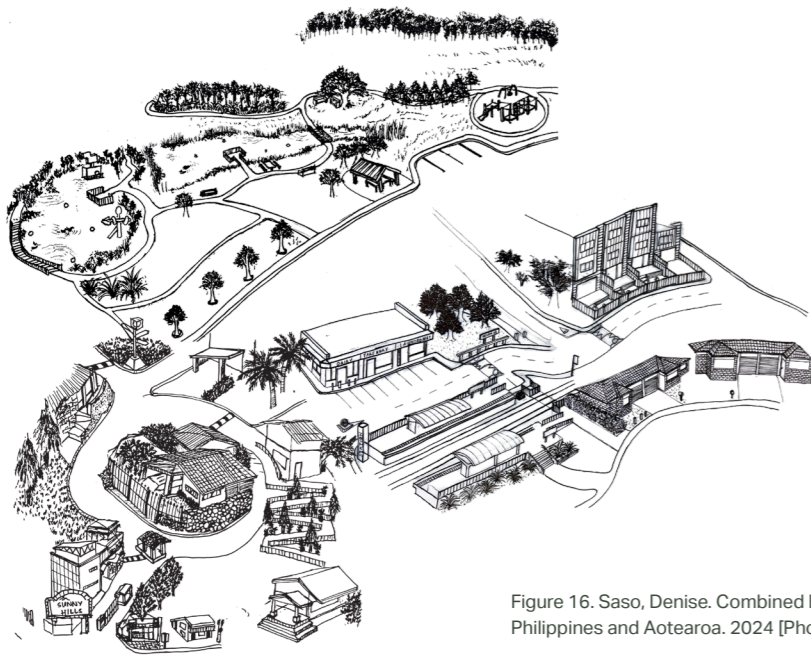


Figure 16. Saso, Denise. Combined Ballpoint drawings of my two homes in the Philippines and Aotearoa. 2024 [Photograph].

2.2.2 Pattern Making

Banig, as a textile, provides a narrative subtext connecting with specific places through materials, production techniques, patterns, and symbolic meanings.⁵³ I drew inspiration from Filipino weaving patterns to reconnect with my culture and grandmother. Banig patterns and designs are unique in the way geometry is formed through constraints of warp and weft. Banig weaving is an art form, and as a designer, I feel responsible for preserving and recognising this cultural tradition's knowledge that is ebbing away in the modern world.⁵⁴

This method unfolded in two stages: pattern replication and pattern making. Initially, I found myself unable to design original patterns, so, I analysed the relationships between motifs, composition, scale and colour, to inform my design expressions. According to researcher Jyoti Kalyanji, this method of learning patterns through replication builds tacit knowledge.⁵⁵ Tacit knowledge is viewed as knowledge acquired through experience and repeated practice.⁵⁶ Although Kalyanji's practice involved three-dimensional knitted textiles rather than surface, replicating existing banig patterns digitally built a repository of motifs to extend the development of my patterns. I emulated patterns encountered in Basey, Samar and inserted personal narratives. By using digital techniques to translate traditional banig patterns, I am connecting to my cultural tradition whilst creating personal meaning.

53 Alice Kettle, "Textile and place." *Textile* 17, no. 4 (2019): 334.

54 Marky Ramone Go, "'Banig' Artisans Weave Culture and Livelihood in Basey, Samar." *BusinessMirror* (blog). February 16, 2020. <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/02/16/banig-artisans-weave-culture-and-livelihood-in-basey-samar/>.

55 Jyoti Kalyanji, "Machine Crafted 3-Dimensional Machine Knitted Forms." MDes Thesis., Auckland University of Technology, 2013, 32.

56 Michael Polanyi, "The tacit dimension" in *Knowledge in Organisations* (Routledge, 2009), 109.

2.2.3 Iterative Making

Iterative making or prototyping is the process of generating, developing and refining ideas through testing and making.⁵⁷ It allows the generation and understanding of complex ideas,⁵⁸ where I reflect after completing each stage of making, examine its successes and failures, and "construct an understanding" from it.⁵⁹ This newfound understanding allowed further experimentation that tested the design's potential. The experiments gradually built into a synthesised outcome.

This method provided a structure and form to my surface patterns and explored how intimate experiences occurred through the balikbayan tradition. The keepsake box, wrapped in a cardboard balikbayan box, became a vehicle for intimacy through these processes. Understanding the process of making the final artefact reveals stories and embodies ethnographic knowledge.⁶⁰

The unfolding experience of the balikbayan box is explored through material, colour, size, proportion and design. The tools and techniques are interconnected as I worked with patterns and scale throughout the process. Laser engraving and wood staining allowed me to pattern the surfaces. Digital and analogue model making explored size and scale effects of patterns on the keepsake box. The act of unfolding, uncovering, and layering the box were considered to experience the balikbayan box tradition.

2.3 Conclusion

This research project integrates my personal experiences with analogue and digital fabrication practice. It seeks to explore Filipino diasporic culture and the notion of making home through the balikbayan box. The creation process is imbued with affection and centres on crafting a keepsake for my grandmother that will be packaged and sent to her as part of the balikbayan tradition. The aim was to curate an intimate experience for her as she unwraps the gift. Using drawing, pattern, and iterative making methods, I express my love for her, inspired by the banig design principles of vibrant ornamentation and multi-functionality.

57 Carey Jewitt, Kerstin Leder Mackley, Douglas Atkinson, and Sara Price, "The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods" (Second, 55 City Road: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2023) <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526417015>, 534-550

58 Carole Gray and Julian Malins, *Visualizing Research*, 113.

59 Schön, "The Structure of Reflection in Action," 129-130.

60 Maarit Mäkelä, "Knowing through making: The role of the artefact in practice-led research." *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 20 (2007): 157.

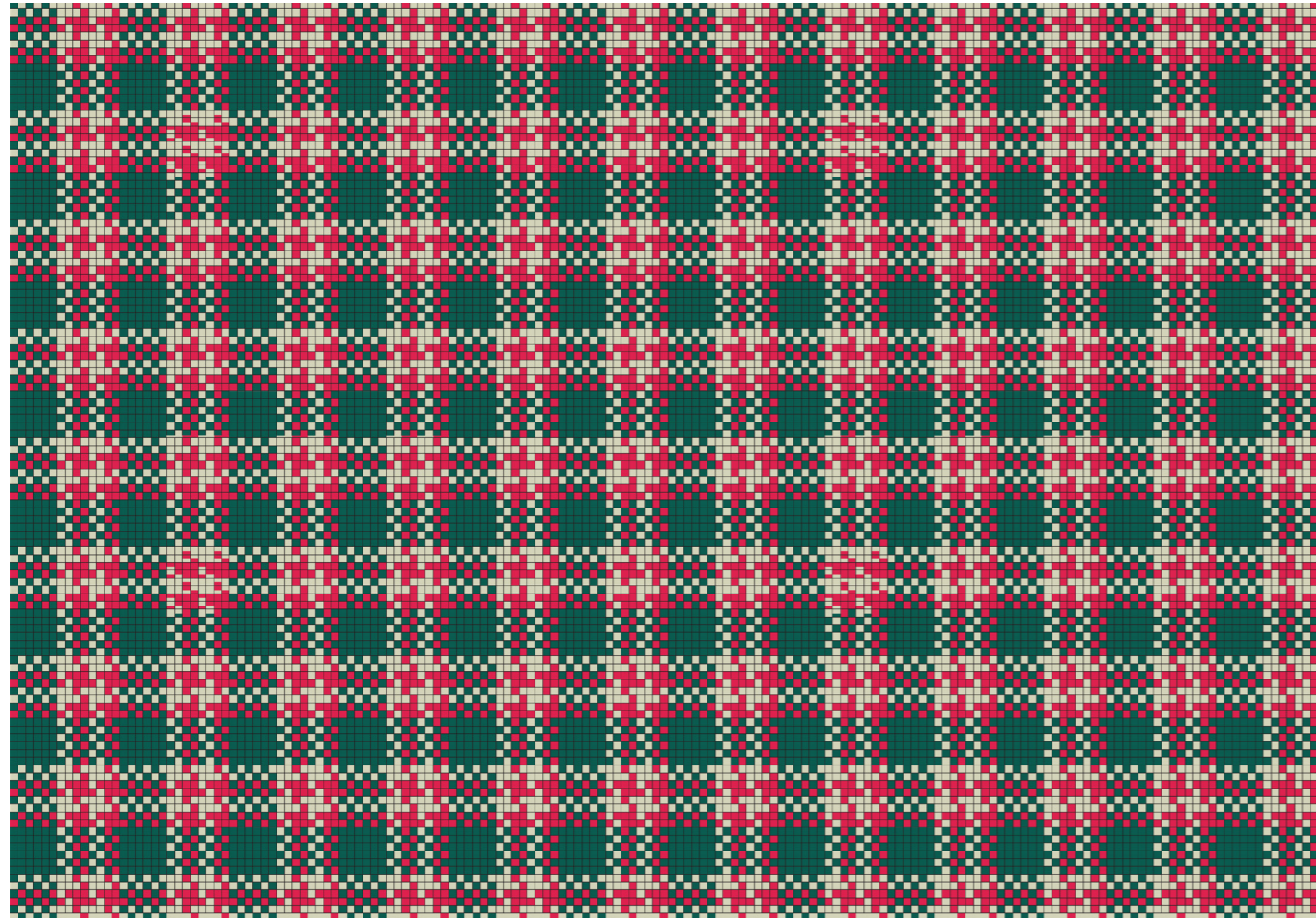


Figure 17. Saso, Denise. *Topotopo* Pattern reference image and replicated pattern. They are formed using two or more bands of coloured strips, crisscrossing at right angles every few intervals. 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

3. Analysis of Practice

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explored how digital and analogue fabrication methods were employed in the research project. The aims were to weave together narratives and memories through banig surface patterns, incorporate banig design principles into my practice and turn the unpacking of the balikbayan box into an intimate experience.

3.2 Pattern Replication

Patterns are seen as the “result of repetitions in time and space,” whereby repetition is “the main characteristic feature of the pattern and the condition of its infinity.”⁶¹ To create original pattern repeats, I first observed and reproduced the patterns I found in Basey, Philippines, to comprehend design relationships between colour, composition, scale and form.

I began by creating a rectangular grid composed of 5x5 mm squares to mimic the mat weave in my grandmother’s home. I then overlaid the pattern’s reference image to the grid size with a plain weave pattern (Figure 17). Using the image as a guide, I copied each pattern’s warp and weft (over- and-under movement), square by square (see Appendix 5.C). I then moved on to embroidered designs (Figures 18-22). Although the initial repetitive process was tedious, I began to work more efficiently once I became more familiar with the structure of the motif. Replicating these patterns allowed me to understand how they were composed and how to use these shapes to create original pattern motifs.

⁶¹ Kerstin Kraft, “Textile patterns and their epistemological functions.” *Textile* 2, no. 3 (2004): 277. DOI: 10.2752/147597504778052711

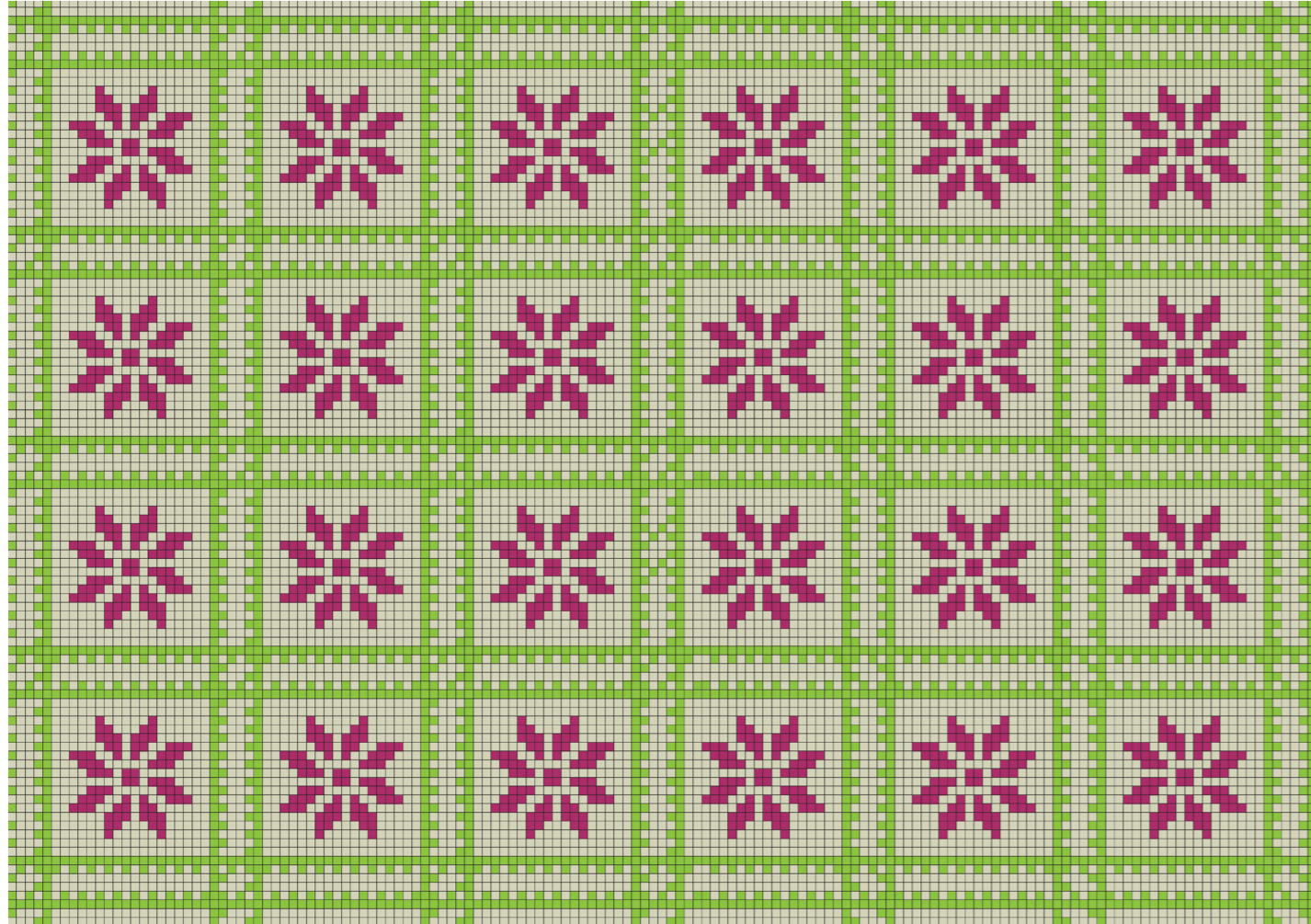


Figure 18. Saso, Denise. Replicated Pattern and reference image. 2023 [Digital image and photograph].



Figure 19. Saso, Denise. *Dahundahun* (Leaf) Pattern, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].



Figure 20. Saso, Denise. Replicated Pattern. Contrasting colours and line weight, such as the yellow squares, give the illusion of depth, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

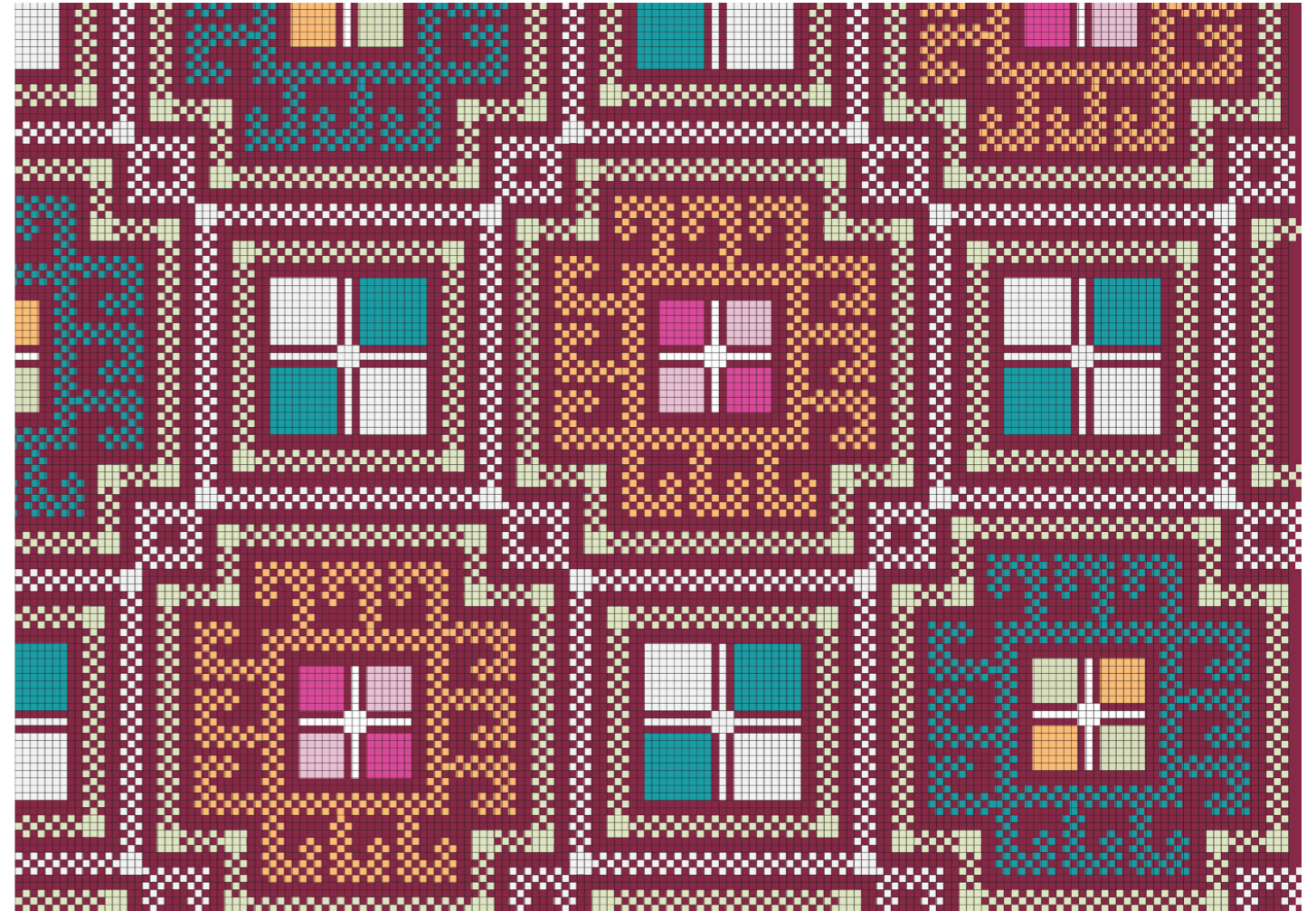


Figure 21. Saso, Denise. A kaleidoscopic Yakan pattern repeat, inspired by the textiles of the Yakan tribe, Philippines. The white grid motif is woven through to unite the other motifs, creating a complex yet harmonious pattern, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].



Figure 22. Saso, Denise. Untitled pattern and reference image. I interpreted this to symbolise similar and juxtaposing ideas; self-contained patterns inside heart-shaped geometries, constituent of an overall narrative, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].



Figure 23. A photograph of a banig picture-frame, exhibiting the contemporary design at Basey, Samar and the versatility of the banig. Here, the embroidered design is framed by the same material. Basey, Samar Philippines. August 2023 [Photograph].

3.2.1 Motif and Pattern Iterations

As writers Michael Hann and Ian Moxon note: “motifs are the building blocks of regular patterns.”⁶² As such, juxtaposing adjacent motifs together expands their meaning.⁶³ In Filipino weaving traditions, patterns often reflect the cultural and social context of the time. Weaving was originally a spiritual craft closely associated with religion.⁶⁴ However, like the weaving community of Basey, Samar, patterns change throughout time to adapt to shifting circumstances, such as the banig picture frame in Figure 23. The weavers of Basey, Samar, continue traditions and practices while giving them new interpretations. Their approach to life resonates with my experiences growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand. My relationship with family and home continually evolves as I adapt to new situations, and these relationships can be negotiated and reformed. My evolving relationships and life experiences I gained in Aotearoa New Zealand presented a chance for new perspectives and expressions of intimacy to surface. Thus, my patterns are interpretive motifs rather than an exact duplicate of patterns from Basey. The patterns centre around my relationship with my grandmother.

⁶² Michael A. Hann and Ian Moxon, “Symmetry” in *Patterns: Design and Composition*. (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018) 252.

⁶³ Ibid, 43.

⁶⁴ Patricia Araneta, “Woman as loom: the warp and weft of mat and cloth” in *Habi: A Journey Through Philippine Handwoven Textiles*. Ed Renee E. Guatlo (Habi The Philippine Textile Council, 2017), 93.

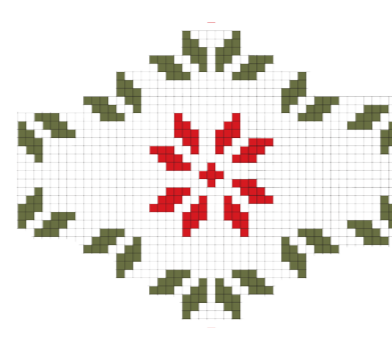
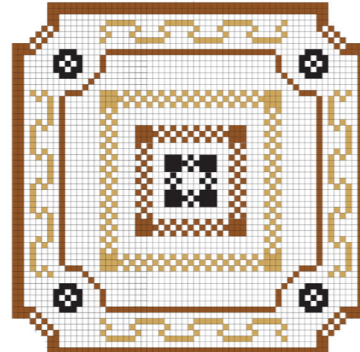


Figure 25. Saso, Denise. Sunflower motif, 2024.

Figure 26. Saso, Denise. The indoor living room. Cebu, Philippines, 2011.

Figure 27. Saso, Denise. The outdoor dining and living room. Cebu, Philippines 2011.

Figure 28. Saso, Denise. My grandmother at Saob Cave. Samar, Philippines, 2023.

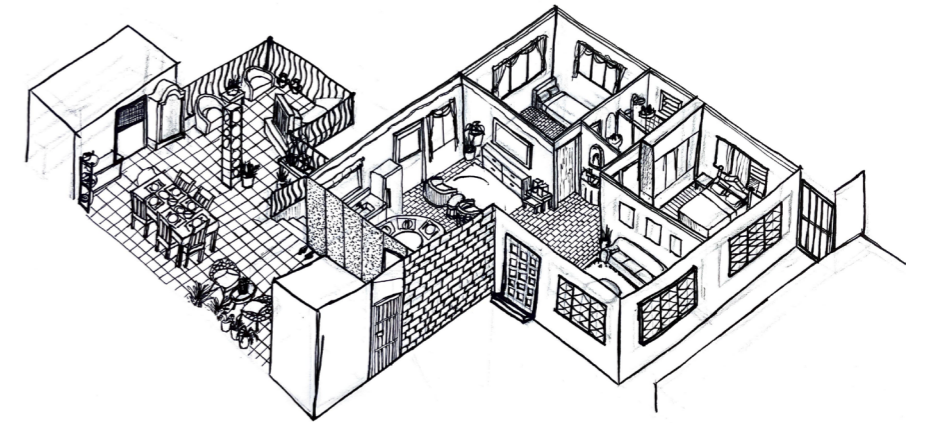


Figure 29. Saso, Denise. Inside my childhood home of Cebu, Philippines. The rooftops cut away to expose how my family and I inhabit these spaces, drawn during my visit home. 2023.

I recalled my drawings at the beginning of this research as an inquiry into the patterns and spaces of my two homes (Figure 29). Looking back, I see my attachment to home materialises through domestic architecture in ornamented fixtures and furnishings. These drawings marked the starting point for creating original motifs. I used my drawings and photographs of my home in the Philippines and Aotearoa as references. The process of recollecting photographs functions as a marker of events, and the narrative structure arranges these dispersed points.⁶⁵

The collection of objects my grandmother has collected over the years, and her varied tastes in interior design, make up the geography of my childhood house in Cebu, Philippines. The presence of sunflower imagery was notable around the household, as it is my grandmother's favourite flower. Using the shapes I had already established in the pattern replication method, I created a sunflower motif (Figure 25). I followed the same process for other motifs: gathering patterns and shapes from my old home and turning them into banig-like shapes (Figures 26–28). My grandmother's living room exudes warmth, with fixtures that complement the reddish hue of the hardwood flooring. I often find her here, playing on the keyboard and filling the room with music. Figures 26 and 27 show spaces the family often gathers in. These outdoor living and dining rooms are filled with sunlight and a cool breeze. It is where we communed and celebrated special occasions such as Christmas and birthdays. The bright yellows and blues in the outside décor reflect the atmosphere embraced in the generated motifs.

Another inspiration for pattern motifs was Saob Cave (Figure 28), one of the weaving communities my grandmother and I visited during my research trip to Basey, Samar, Philippines. The cave was tucked away and surrounded by local fauna and flora. My grandmother brought home green, diamond-patterned banig placemats and table runners as a memento of our journey.

⁶⁵ Daniela Petrelli and Steve Whittaker, "Family memories in the home: contrasting physical and digital mementos" *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 14 (2010), 154.

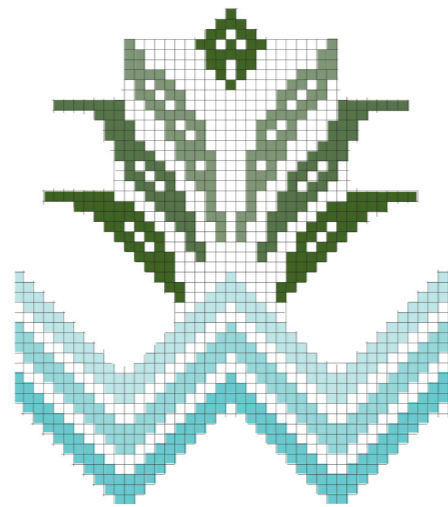
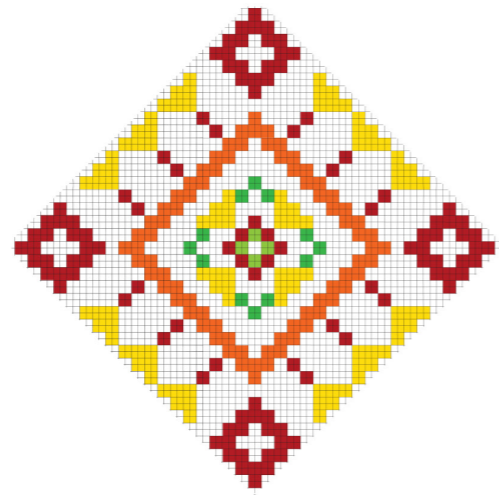


Figure 30. Saso, Denise. Pōhutukawa Motif. Auckland, 2023.

Figure 31. Saso, Denise. Monstera plant motif in my Auckland home. 2024.

Figure 32. Local fauna motif taken from my local neighbourhood reserve. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024.

Looking at these photographs allowed me time to reflect on the narrative I was building. I primarily drew from nostalgic moments I had with my grandmother to seek motif inspiration. My relationship with her has matured as I have since assumed a caretaking role. During the research trip to Baisey Province, I looked after her and provided her with items for daily use. The patterns are more than tangible reminders of our familial bond—they reaffirm our intangible connection and profound sense of closeness.

I considered the space in my home for shapes that echo my created patterns. For example, the red blooms of the pōhutukawa trees in my neighbourhood (Figure 30) are parallel to the sunflower motif. I aimed to create an opposite reflection of the sunflower motif, with the direction of the pōhutukawa motifs facing outward rather than inward.

I then transformed individual motifs into repeated patterns by reflecting, rotating, and scaling the shapes. Through this process, I realised the significance of composition and scale, especially regarding negative space. My first iteration (Figure 33) was too cluttered and lacked visual appeal. Negative spaces brought focus, clarity and balance to the patterns, as shown in another iteration in Figure 34. To achieve cohesion across the patterns, I started incorporating connecting motifs, which can enhance the meaning of adjacent motifs, as illustrated in Figures 35 to 39.

Developing motifs into patterns required establishing a solid knowledge foundation. This involved replicating and analysing existing patterns and utilising the shapes gathered to create original motifs. This process prompted me to reflect on my approach to pattern-making. At times, I was stuck on a motif or pattern and unable to move forward. It proved helpful to step away and return later with a fresh perspective. During these intervals, I repeatedly introduced new and unfamiliar pattern elements to break through creative barriers. Author Robert Fritz refers to this phase as “consolidating”⁶⁶ —I integrate what I have learned to advance my patterning skills and grow as a designer.

⁶⁶ Robert Fritz, *Creating: A Practical Guide to the Creative Process and How to Use It to Create Anything - a Work of Art, a Relationship, a Career or a Better Life* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1991) 207.

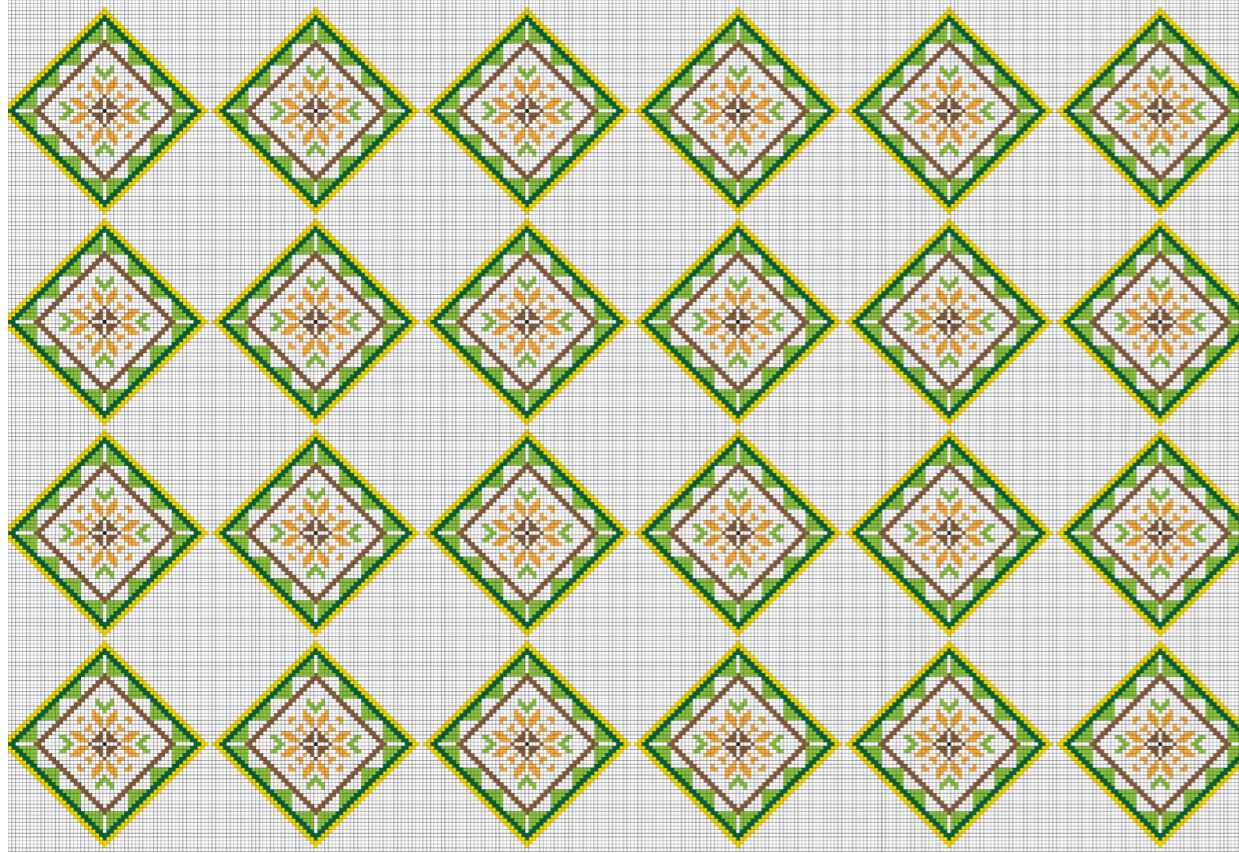


Figure 33. Saso, Denise. The first sunflower pattern repeat iteration. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

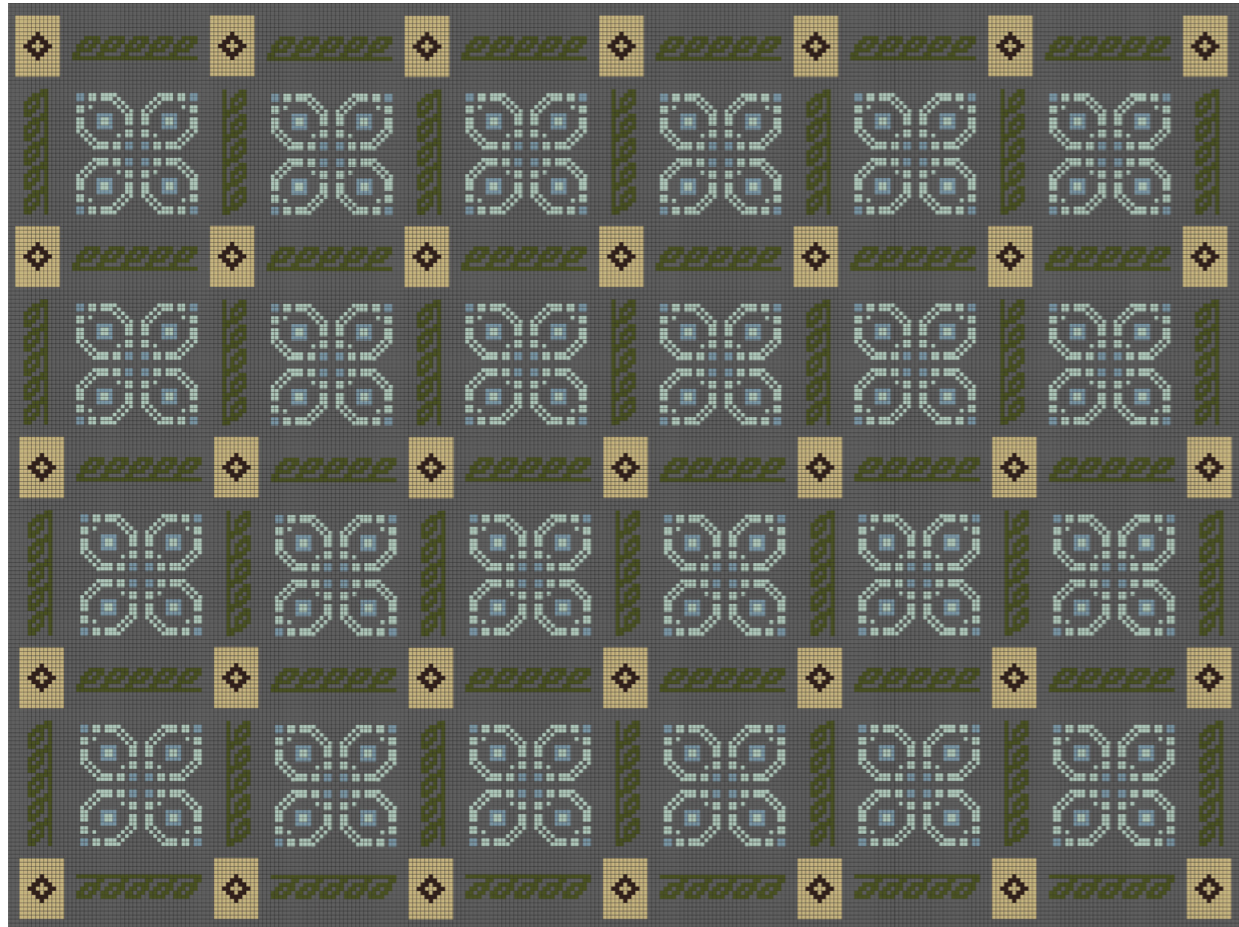


Figure 34. Saso, Denise. Second pattern iteration. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

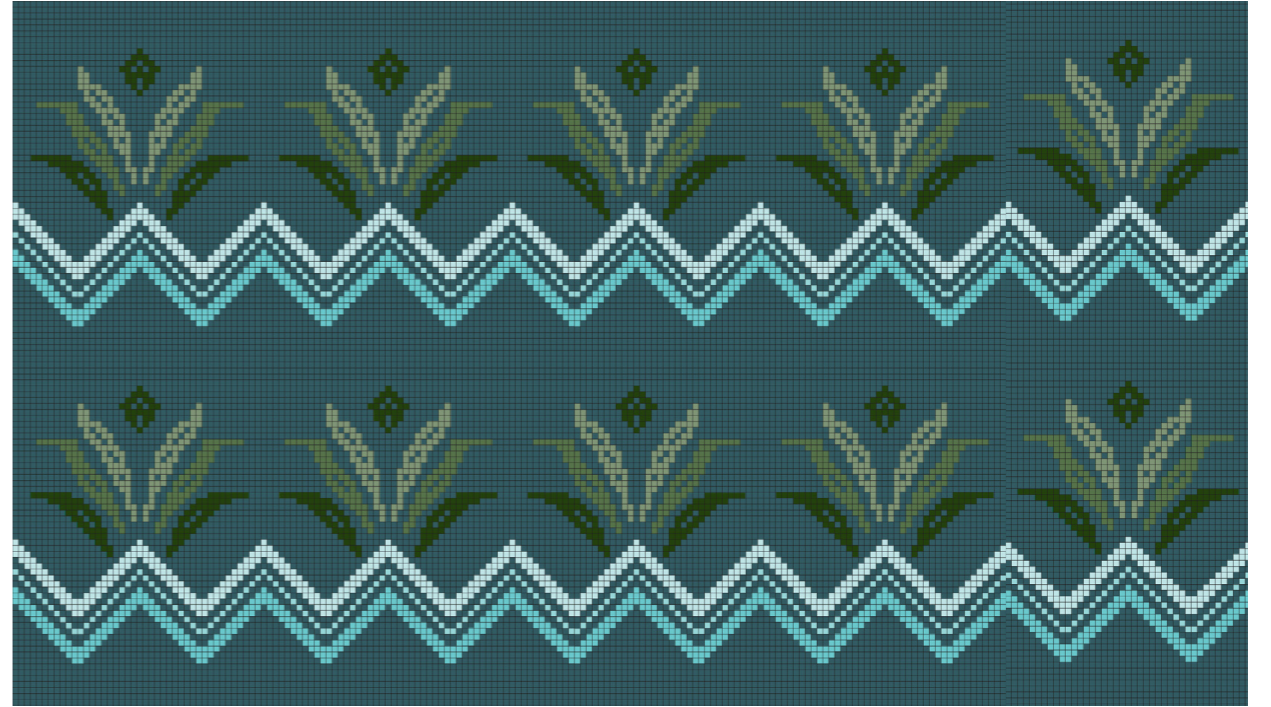


Figure 35. Pattern Repeat Iteration 3. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024. [Digital Photograph]



Figure 36. Pattern Repeat Iteration 3. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024. [Digital Photograph]

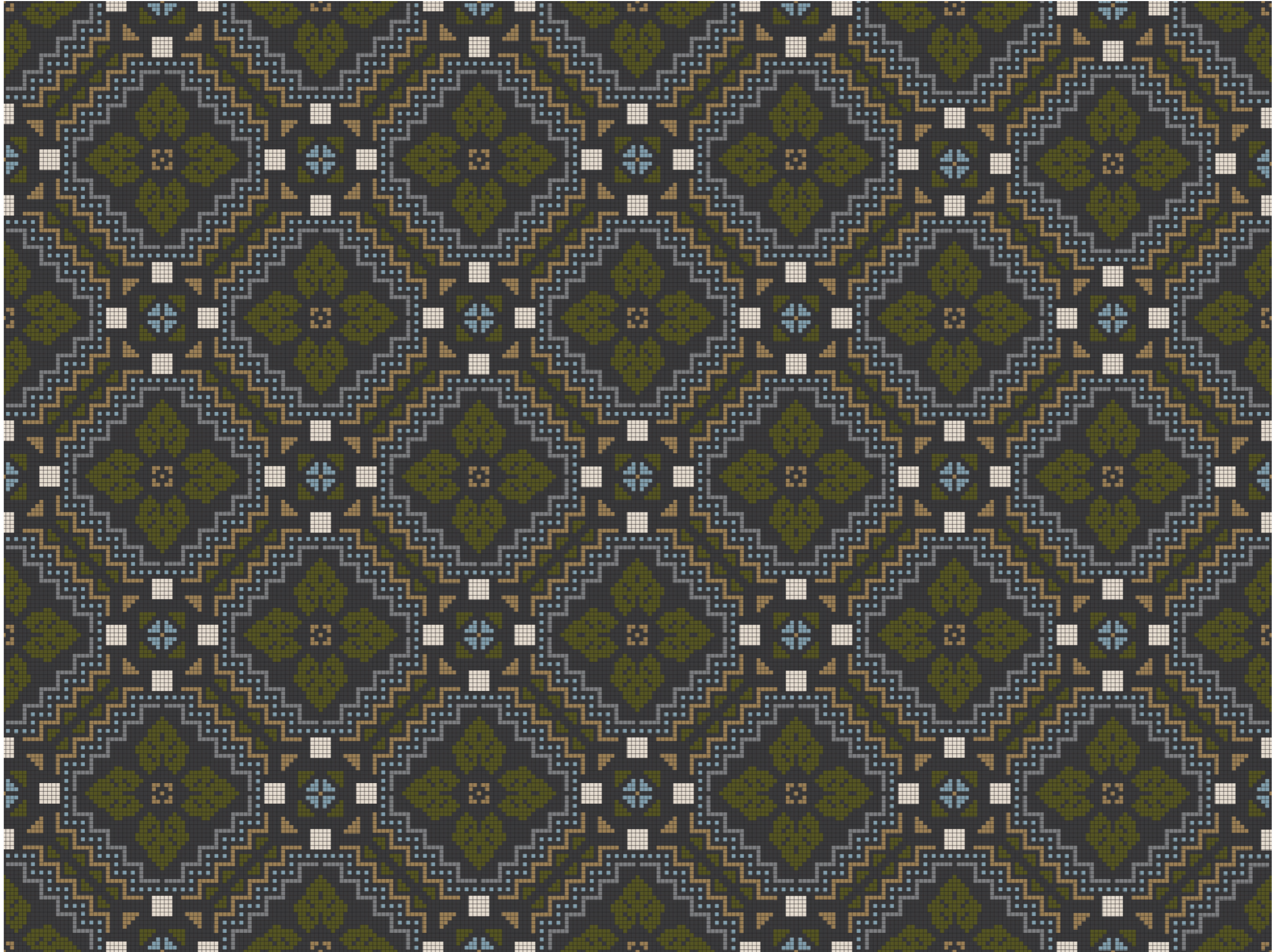


Figure 37. Saso, Denise. Monstera plant pattern repeat. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Digital photograph].



Figure 38. Saso, Denise. Pattern repeat. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Digital photograph].



Figure 39. Saso, Denise. Pattern repeat that combines Aotearoa and Philippines motifs. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Digital photograph].



Galaxy A51



Galaxy A51



Galaxy A51



Galaxy A51

Figure 40. Saso, Beatriz. Recent photos of my grandmother's redecoration of the dining and living room. Cebu, Philippines, 2023 [Photograph].

3.3 Keepsake Box Iterations

Building upon pattern repeats from the previous method, iterative making sought to evoke diasporic intimacy through banig design principles of multi-functionality and ornamentation. This process emphasised hapticity by combining surfaces with layers of patterns and various techniques, enriching the tactile and visual experiences of the final product. Uncovering and comprehending layers of history and stories within domestic spaces I have lived in allowed me to draw connections with different images and express these interpretations through patterns.

I turned to the domestic spaces of my homes to comprehend how they influenced my design choices. My interest in interiors was cultivated while living with my grandmother. Her favourite pastime was remodelling and decorating the house (Figure 40). Every few years, furniture would shift and move between rooms, and the walls would be painted in a different colour. I would help her rearrange the furnishings and put them away in storage containers. As I grew to share this passion with her, she would occasionally show her latest design with gusto. For this reason, I always took her lifestyle of creative recreation and current preferences into account when making design choices. The keepsake box needed to complement her home's existing décor and colour schemes, allowing her to use and rearrange the box around the house as she pleased.

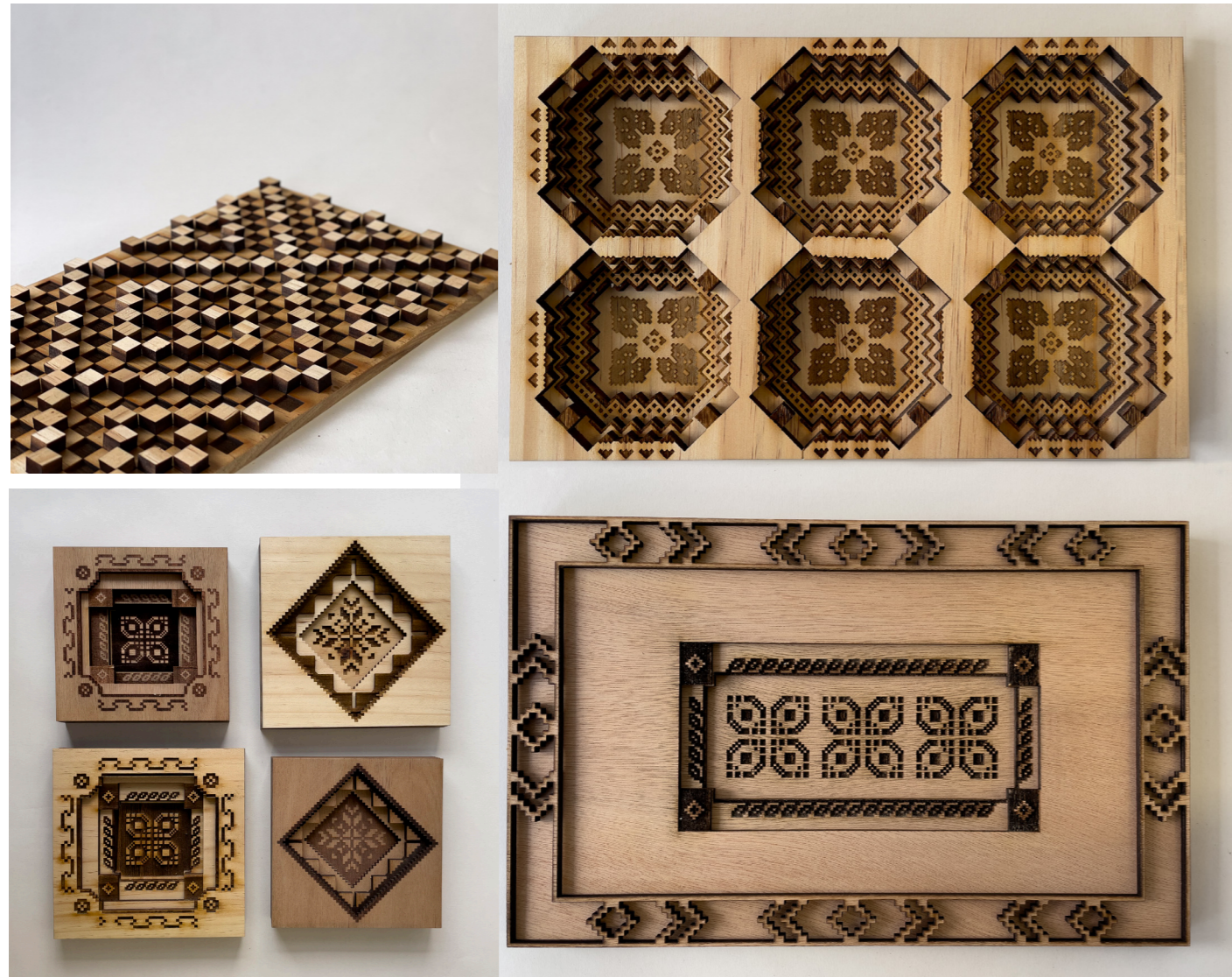


Figure 41. Saso, D. Laser cut and engraved warp and weft explorations with pine- wood. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 42. Saso, D. Large scale, engraved motifs. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 43. Saso, D. Laser engraved pattern repeats at 1:25 scale Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

3.3.1 Laser Engraving Texture

Laser engraving techniques as a mark-making tool were applied to develop surface patterns further. This exploration translates woven digital patterns as laser engravings on plywood and cardboard surfaces. Initial explorations revealed residues of horizontal lines, where the burned portions resembled the handwoven banig. As I reflect on it, the rhythm of a laser engraving machine follows an X (weft) and Y (warp) axis, much like weaving a banig. Thus, engraving plays a significant aesthetic feature in my design.

I explored the intersection of traditional motifs and modern, digital techniques by adding volume and thickness, and in keeping with the woven aesthetic of the banig (Figure 41). I separated each motif, assigning each one to a separate layer representing one of my shared memories with my grandmother. This approach resulted in subtractive layered patterns that created a sense of excavation, drawing one towards the box's interior through inviting openings. It is akin to unravelling layers of memory and meanings of home. This approach reminded me of artist Jill Paz's method of remediating fragmented aspects of her childhood house—through digitally fabricated paintings on existing materials and infusing them with renewed meaning.⁶⁷

To further develop the idea, I experimented with different types of wood, such as poplar plywood and pinewood. Initially, I focused on engraving the motifs directly onto the material and, inversely, engraving the space around them (Figure 42). I then moved on to engraving pattern repeats on larger wood panels at 1:25 scale (Figure 43). Through this experimentation, I observed that the patterns, when in proportion to the thickness of the material (4–6 mm), expressed themselves differently on various scales. Furthermore, it highlighted the significance of the thickness of the material, particularly for each assigned motif.

⁶⁷ Jill Paz, "Domestic Abstractions", accessed 2024. <https://www.silverlensgalleries.com/viewing-room/2021-09-09/domestic-abstractions>



Figure 44. Saso, D. Wood stain and wooden oil swatches on timber offcuts. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 45. Saso, D. Wood stain colours on engraved patterns. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024

Figure 46. Saso, D. Wood-stained patterns on poplar plywood and pinewood. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Photograph].



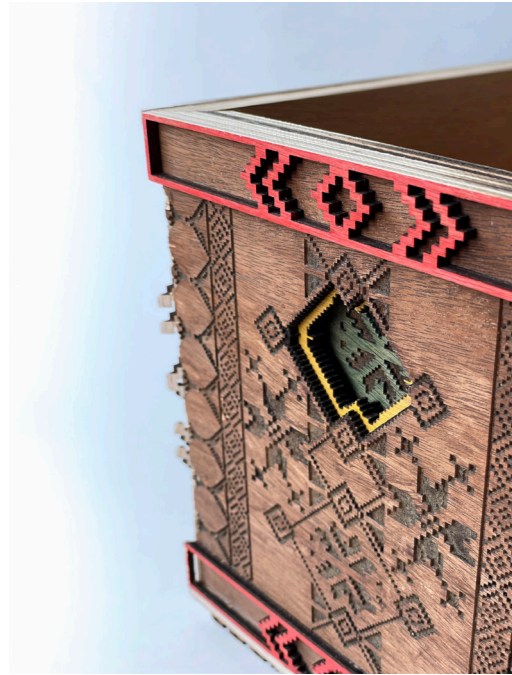
3.3.2 Colour

Colours are central to this design practice. Traditional banig colours were red, green, and yellow, made from natural dyes.⁶⁸ These colours were inspired by their locale, although commercial dyes are used in modern banig weaving. Test swatches on pinewood and poplar plywood offcuts investigated colour vibrancy and the ability to accentuate wood grain characteristics. I procured various sample pots of wood waxes, tinted oils and water- and oil-based wood stains. Although various water-based wood stains were available, I limited myself to a palette of reds, greens, yellows, blues and natural (brown). These colours were a personal preference, as they often featured in my grandmother's home.

Utilising the material offcuts from my laser engraving experiments, I applied one coat on one side and two on the other. The outcomes differed (Figures 44, 45 & 46), with specific colours seeming more diluted after the second application, and others appearing more saturated. Oil-based colours and water-based, brown wood stains bring out the wood grain. The most vibrant and grain-enhancing colours were applied to the negative spaces around the engraved patterns. As a result, the depth of the engraving and colour saturation enhanced the effect of the patterns. These colours did not have the same visual impact as the patterns I created digitally. However, these imperfect gestures impart a sense of intimacy as the hand-painted gift becomes a labour of love. Doing something by hand meant I invested a part of myself—my emotions, experiences and personality into the keepsake box. The surfaces of the timber emerge as a collaboration between myself and the material.⁶⁹ They are the product of my digital fabrication practice and the choice of material and finishes available in Aotearoa. Exploring surfaces through laser engraving and wood stains transforms the meaning of banig patterns when recontextualised through my diasporic experiences.

⁶⁸ Nocheseda, *Rara*, 69.

⁶⁹ Graeme Were, "On the substance of surfaces: Situating materials and design in Melanesian environments" in *Surfaces: Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth* (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=6119375>, 141



Figures 47 - 48. Saso, Denise. First keepsake box prototype at 1:25 scale. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

3.3.3 Keepsake Box Prototypes

Pattern elements and expressions can vary significantly depending on the scale within a spatial context or on three-dimensional objects.⁷⁰ Hence, the scale of pattern motifs remained a constant consideration throughout my practice. Repetition also plays a crucial role in defining the dimensionality and positioning of pattern units, with “symmetry and rhythm serving as systems to describe the temporal and spatial relations inherent in these patterns,”⁷¹ thus influencing various aspects of the design.

To test the expression of patterns at a larger scale, I created my first keepsake box prototype using 4 mm plywood, incorporating patterned embellishments and functionality (Figures 47-48). Building a physical model early in the research allowed me to test the shape and performance of the material through woodworking, laser cutting, and engraving. Physical prototyping also helps identify problems with actual fabrication,⁷² such as the combination of layered pattern engravings, wood stains, joins, and the pattern repeats that envelop the box.

The first prototype used existing layered plywood explorations and transformed them into four box panels. In terms of size, I referred to the “regular box” dimensions (580X500X430mm) from a balikkbayan courier company, Umac Cargo New Zealand.⁷³ I created the prototype at 1:25th of its scale to help evaluate my design ideas. The receding motifs on the sides of the box echoed that of the front, all the while designed to be integrated handles, combining ornamentation and functionality. The wood stains selected were red, green, yellow, with brown as the base colour. Using thin plywood and glued joints resulted in a less durable box. This prototype called for a more robust material and efficient construction techniques.

While the engraved patterns lacked visual continuity, it was balanced by the diamond-patterned trim enveloping the top and bottom of the box. I believe it is essential for the patterns to repeat across the box, as this repetition highlights the relationship between material, function, and ornamentation. I imagined how the box would look in my grandmother’s house and considered her taste and design preferences. I thought about where she might place it. I wanted it to seamlessly match the home’s aesthetic, allowing her to place it anywhere. Reflecting on this keepsake box iteration, I decided to work with solid timber for durability and incorporate a repeated pattern.

⁷⁰ Tonje Kristensen Johnstone, “The impact of scale on a block-repeated surface pattern in spatial contexts.” In *Ambience* 14 & 1013m, 7-9 September, 2014, Tampere, Finland (Tampere University of Technology, 2014), 4.

⁷¹ Kraft, “Textile Patterns” 274-289.

⁷² Do Young Kim, “A design methodology using prototyping based on the digital-physical models in the architectural design process.” *Sustainability* 11, no. 4416 (2019), 10.

⁷³ Umac Cargo New Zealand, 2024, <https://www.umaccargo.co.nz/rates-and-sizes>

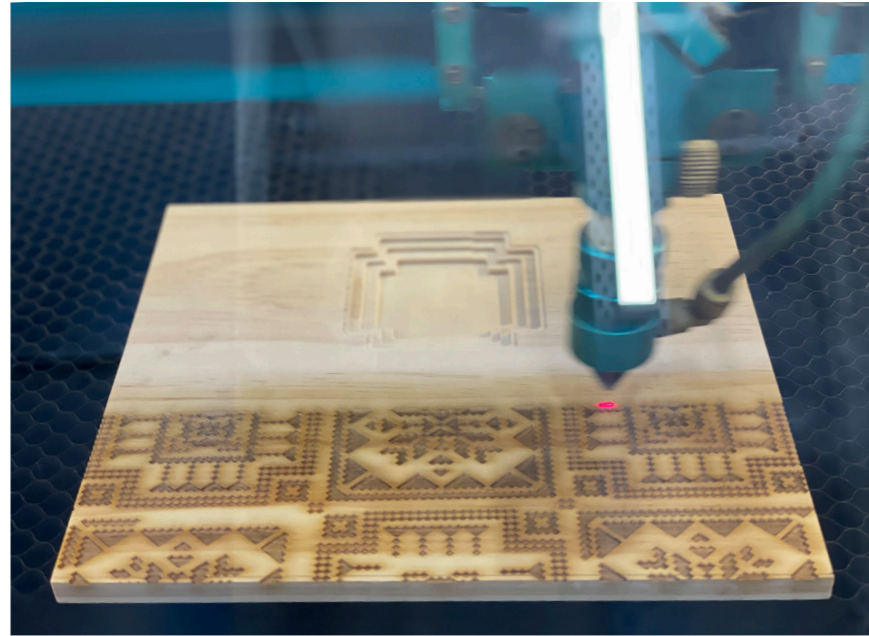


Figure 49. Saso, Denise. Laser engraving banig pattern onto a pinewood panel. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024

Figure 50. Saso, Denise. Second keepsake box prototype. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

The second prototype tested different parameters based on the previous prototype. I focused more on repeating and enveloping patterns while keeping with the colour palette of brown, green, yellow and red. I selected solid Hume pinewood this time, a material I had initially explored, to address the durability issues.

The layered pattern motifs were created using the CNC machine, excavating outlines of the motif. I chiselled away any unevenness on the surface to prepare the material for engraving. The patterns for this prototype were a new iteration that combined Aotearoa New Zealand and Philippine motifs as a merging of cultural aesthetics, then applied colour afterwards. The wood stains appeared more vibrant than the poplar plywood due to the Hume pine's light appearance and porous nature. My grandmother would prefer these bright colours as they match her home's existing colour schemes.

Despite the strengths of this prototype, it had its issues. The patterns appeared too flat and overcrowded, detracting from their visual impact. I attribute this to the lack of negative space between motifs and the square pattern orientation, which makes the box appear less dynamic. Finding the balance between pattern density and the colour palette became crucial in ornamenting the keepsake box. I also encountered issues with the material during woodworking. Solid Hume pine, while more durable than 4 mm plywood, is a soft wood and, therefore, susceptible to bowing. The second prototype showed that it was unfeasible to machine the motif outlines for integrated handles using the CNC alone as it was difficult to grasp.

As I worked towards refining the final design, I considered the following aspects: the ergonomics and functions integrated into the pattern, such as handles and storage. Ensuring the box's sturdiness and usability, such as ease of access for my grandmother, is also essential.



Figures 51-52. Saso, Denise. The exterior and interior of the first keepsake box. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024.

3.3.4 Design and Detail

This section ties all investigations and explorations together toward a final design. At this stage in my practice, I began to consider how the keepsake box, in detail, might be experienced and utilised by my grandmother. This thesis intended to send a balikbayan box to her in my place as a journey home. The question thus becomes: how can the keepsake box ‘speak’ for itself? How might the object communicate through function and banig-patterned surfaces? How might its design elicit emotional responses such as surprise and love?

I began my investigation by delving more into the multi-functionality aspect of the keepsake box. Banig weaving is an art form with different functions that served the Filipino way of life, such as sleeping, sitting and drying rice.⁷⁴ Author Rene Javellana describes Filipino art such as the ornate banig as having a “cultural utility.”⁷⁵ Therefore, visual expressions are an intrinsic aspect of Filipino design just as much as function. The keepsake box is designed for storage and is a piece of furniture to place my grandmother’s décor. The final design is intended to serve various roles around the house, whilst the embellishments on the surface complement the existing interiors.

I revisited earlier keepsake box prototypes and added functions, with accessibility in mind. I explored a recessed plinth base to prevent any toe injuries. I also considered a hinged lid to open the box and a sliding top (Figures 50 & 51). The lid’s design is a crucial aspect of the box as it is the first point of contact with the box and the threshold to its interiority. Our sense of touch is the primary conductor for sensing surfaces. When we touch an object, we receive signals that elicit a reaction. When the keepsake box is closed, it belongs to the domestic collection of objects or, as Bachelard describes it, the ‘exterior space’. From the moment the box is opened, the dialectics of its inside and outside no longer exist.⁷⁶

Earlier in my contextual review, I described that balikbayan boxes have standardised sizes provided by balikbayan courier companies. I initially adhered to the “regular box” size⁷⁷ to keep it true to the tradition. However, I ultimately found that the rhythms of the patterns on the surface spoke to the size of the balikbayan box. For me to envelop all four sides of the box with a pattern repeat meant increasing its scale. Diminishing the scale resulted in a much smaller box.

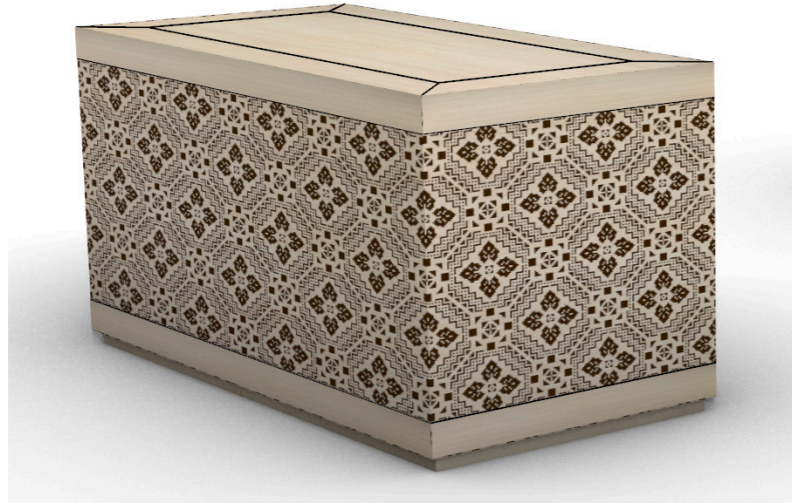
I also investigated the effect of a full-scale pattern repeat and the appearance of receding layers (Figures 53-55). Adding a trim on the top and bottom of the box was considered to frame and bring the patterns to prominence. The receding motifs, when stained with a different colour palette suggest interaction. Ultimately, the surface patterns dictated the final design of the handles. Biscuit dowel and splined mitre joins were a possibility, bringing the mitred panels together (Figure 59).

⁷⁴ Nocheseda, *Rara*, preface.

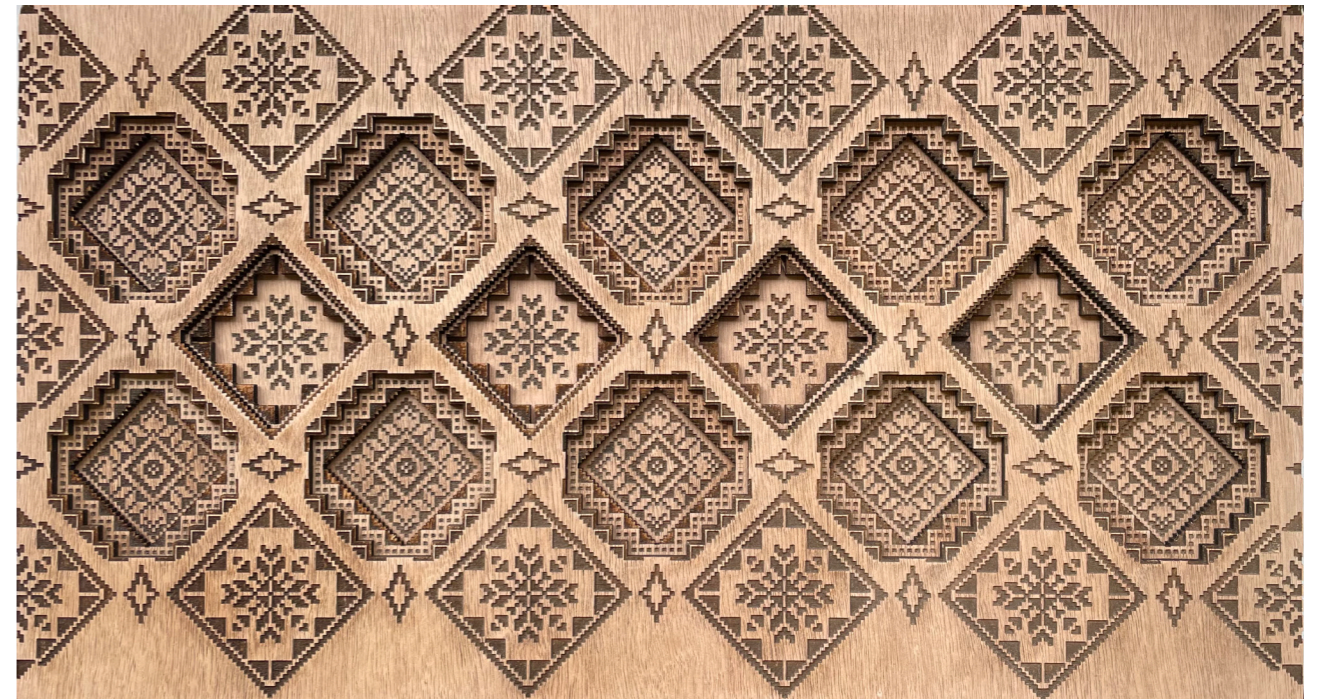
⁷⁵ Rene B. Javellana, “Reframing the imagined world” in *Weaving Cultures: the Invention of Colonial Art and Culture in the Philippines, 1565–1850* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 143.

⁷⁶ Bachelard. *Poetics of Space*, 113.

⁷⁷ Umac Cargo New Zealand, 2024, <https://www.umaccargo.co.nz/rates-and-sizes/>



Figures 53-55. Digital keepsake box prototypes wrapped with patterns. 2024 [Digital Photograph].



Figures 56-57. Investigations on a combination of two-dimensional and receding banig motifs at 1:2 scale



Figure 58. Saso, Denise. A more developed keepsake box prototype exploring a sliding top. 2024 [Digital Photograph].



Figure 59. Saso, Denise. Investigating how the mitre panels join with a biscuit dowel and splined mitre. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

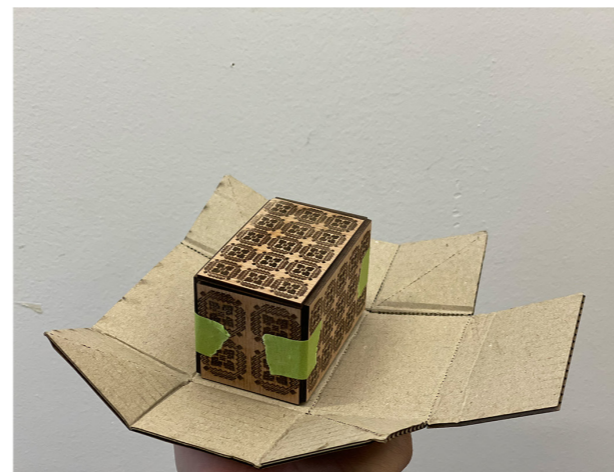
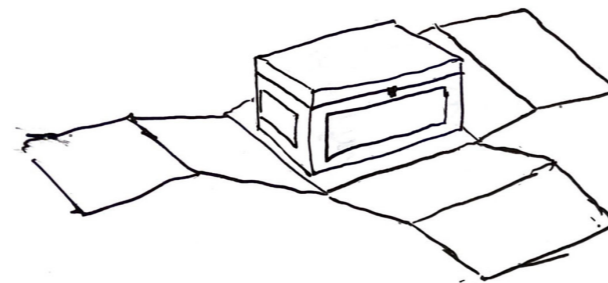
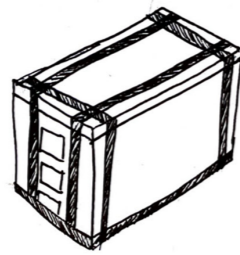


Figure 60. Saso, Denise. A 1:10 scale ideation of an unravelling balikbayan box. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

3.4 Assembling the Balikbayan Box: The Vehicle for Diasporic Intimacy.

Following the pattern and iterative making research stages, I began to consider how the keepsake box will be presented. I explored the ephemerality of the corrugated cardboard that would protect the keepsake on its journey to my grandmother. The motion of unfolding and uncovering the balikbayan box is designed to be an intimate experience.

Opening a balikbayan box is akin to opening a gift, as author Joseph Amato writes, “Packages and gifts excite expectations, delight and surprise, for we must unwrap them.”⁷⁸ The arrival of a balikbayan box is often accompanied by eager anticipation and communal celebration within my household. Its unpacking becomes a shared experience, eliciting excitement and nostalgia as family members gather around the box to savour its contents. In this moment, the physical distance that separates my loved ones and me fade into insignificance, replaced by the warmth of shared memories and reconnection.

Wrapping a gift introduces an element of surprise, and the material itself indicates the occasion.⁷⁹ In this case, the corrugated cardboard box, labelled with the sender and receiver’s names and addresses, mark the arrival of my grandmother’s gift—one that caters to her aesthetic preference and would support her creative lifestyle. To bring this research full circle, I intend to send the keepsake box, wrapped in corrugated cardboard material, to my grandmother. Figure 60 show the ideation of this concept, where each motion of unfolding the box reveals a narrative. I intend to engrave banig patterns onto the interior of the balikbayan box to introduce the keepsake box gift. Inside, the keepsake is filled with gifts and commodities curated for the rest of my family members. It will be filled over time, true to the balikbayan box tradition, and will be delivered as soon as it has been filled. In this way, the box becomes a medium for building meaningful contexts and maintaining loving connections with family back home.

While the corrugated cardboard quickly degrades and is susceptible to dents and scratches, its banal, pliable and unassuming qualities made it an accessible material to engage with. It can be engraved on and folded to form a mould to encase and wrap the keepsake. Marks the cardboard carries will bear unique traces of its journey from New Zealand to the Philippines. I embraced the transient nature of this material.

⁷⁸ Amato, *Surfaces: A history*, 31.

⁷⁹ Joy Hendry, “The purpose and meaning of wrapping” in *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation, and Power in Japan and Other Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 13.



Figure 61. Saso, Denise. 1:10 artefact prototype in the gallery space. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Photograph].

The cardboard box will serve as a preface to the keepsake inside, allowing for a narrative relationship between the balikbayan box and the keepsake box. They are not separate elements but constituents of a whole narrative. Once the final balikbayan box has been designed and cardboard cut, I intend to engrave patterns that will be folded and stapled to form a protective box for the keepsake. The act of folding brings surfaces together. When the final box is in a folded state, it is merely an object, something to be perceived. When opened, the box unfurls, and its walls fan out on the floor; it transforms into an intimate, communal space for my family (See Appendix 5A).

My diasporic experiences parallel the balikbayan box's journey from one place to another. However, just as the boxes ephemeral and transitory, so are my reconnections during home visits. I can only briefly capture that sense of familiarity with living in the Philippines before returning to my current home in Aotearoa, New Zealand. To practice diasporic intimacy is to be aware of this transient feeling.⁸⁰ The feelings are not a wish to return home permanently; rather, I wanted to preserve that connection by continuing a cultural tradition on my terms. The narrative thus becomes my journey home as I embody myself and my connections with home through this tradition.

⁸⁰ Boym, *On Diasporic Intimacy*, 501.

3.5 Conclusion

The objects that evoke intimacy are those that we construct ourselves. Earlier I defined intimacy as innermost and personal.⁸¹ I inferred this as an inward movement: unravelling the wrapping revealed the keepsake box gift. Within the box, the receding layered banig patterns that draws one to its interior.

Autoethnographic drawings, patterns and iterative making help build towards the final keepsake box design and the corrugated cardboard that encases the box. Replicating banig patterns proved conducive as it laid the foundation for how patterns are expressed on timber surfaces. Adding volume, dimension and texture on a pattern that is inherently two-dimensional was challenging but became an essential aesthetic factor of the box. Its structure allowed me to integrate functions like handles into the resolved design.

The iterative process of making an adorned keepsake began with exploratory testing on colour and the intersections of engraved and receding patterns. These explorations are funnelled into tests and investigations on tools and techniques that achieve my aim of incorporating function into banig-inspired ornaments. Digital fabrication techniques such as laser cutting and CNC machining supplemented my design where I fall short of woodworking knowledge. These techniques, while computerised and mechanical, did not remove the intimacy of engraved and stained surfaces but helped achieve my vision. Overall, these processes helped me build tacit knowledge that informed the final design.

⁸¹ Audrey Yue, *Queer Asian Australian migration: creative film co-production and diasporic intimacy in The Home Song Stories*, 238.

4.0 Conclusion

This thesis explored the concept of ‘diasporic intimacy’ within Filipino culture through the balikbayan box tradition and banig design principles. I began my thesis with an inquiry on traditional banig weaving practices in Basey Samar, Philippines, to reconnect with home and make place. Ultimately, I found it challenging to replicate the process in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite this, my visit to the Philippines raised questions about the nature of the Filipino diaspora and prompted me to unpack my own experiences.

The project’s focus shifted as I explored alternative ways of reconnecting with home, and it led me to consider the significance of the balikbayan box. My longing for my grandmother became the central anchor of this research. In this sense, weaving became a metaphor for bringing together two Filipino traditions—the banig and the balikbayan box—to narrate my journey home.

Diasporic intimacy is manifested through the making and packing of the keepsake box. Unwrapping the balikbayan box becomes a site of intimacy and unfolds memorial narratives within the keepsake. The banig patterns wrap the keepsake and become a physical archive of memories. Accumulated built narratives engraved on the surface and layered patterns are heightened by my relationship with my grandmother. Like the banig, the keepsake box becomes a physical representation of me and my grandmother’s cherished memories and shared experiences. The engraved ornaments on the surface embellish the box and serve as storage or a table around her home, referencing the multiplicity of functions in the banig mat. Overall, the keepsake and balikbayan box have the capacity to communicate and elicit responses by experiencing their hapticity.

The balikbayan box tradition for me, as a child of a first-generation immigrant, is the reciprocity in gift-giving. The nurtured connections go beyond physical objects; intimacy lies within the intent behind making and sending gifts. Therefore, the love I pour into my efforts is returned through an acknowledgement of my grandmother receiving it and hearing of her reaction.

The lack of documentation on banig patterns and the challenge of replicating weaving techniques limited my exploration of this Filipino tradition. These obstacles, however, opened new avenues for exploration in design practice. Future research could investigate the interplay between traditional banig patterns and digital fabrication, preserving knowledge and culture using current design

methods. Another potential avenue is to extensively document the meanings of not only banig patterns but Filipino woven textiles as a whole.

The significance of the research project is in its contribution to the discourse on diasporic intimacy, offering a unique perspective on how Filipino traditions can be reinterpreted and adapted in new contexts. It underscores the importance of cultural heritage in maintaining connections across spatial distances and contributes to the broader understanding of the Filipino diaspora. My practice emphasises the adaptability and resilience inherent in diasporic practices and provides a tangible means of exploring my culture. At its core, this project is about reconnecting with home—my grandmother, by keeping with some traditions and making them my own.

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Figure 7. Craven, Mona. Stitched table cloths with whitework embroidery and indigo resist print. 2019, [<https://www.craftcontinuum.com/artist/mona-craven>]

Figure 8. Saso, Manuel. A balikbayan box we delivered for Christmas. Auckland, New Zealand. 2021. [Photograph]

Figure 9. Saso, Denise. Unpacking my visiting mother's Balikbayan box. Cebu, Philippines. 2011. [Photograph]

Figure 10. Saso, Denise. A Balikbayan box in the form of luggage. I brought this with me when I visited my family in the Philippines, Auckland, New Zealand, 2023. [Photograph]

Figure 11. Balikbayan boxes in transit, April 2007. [Photograph, Jan Manton Art Gallery, Brisbane, <https://www.janmantonart.com/exhibitionarchive/2017/3/18/alfredo-isabel-aquilizan-belonging-in-transit-16-28-apr-2007>]

Figure 12. Saso, Denise. One of the banig weaving stores we visited in Basey. Basey, Samar Philippines. August 2023. [Photograph]

Figure 13. Paz, Jill, Laser engraved painting on a standardised balikbayan box. 2015. <https://jillpaz.com/journal/diasporicintimacyandthebalikbayanbox>.

Figure 14. Saso, Denise. Knowing-Through-Making Diagram. 2024 [Digital Photograph].

My Knowing-through-making diagram (Figure 14) illustrates the iterative process of my practice throughout the three phases. Each phase is a cyclical process in itself, whereby I allow for a period of reflection during and after my making.

Figure 15. Lehmann Maupin, Do Ho Suh: My Homes/Staircases - 2 (detail), 2012, Photograph, [<https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/museums-and-global-exhibitions/do-ho-suh-architectural-ethnography-from-tokyo-guidebooks-and-projects-on-livelihood>]

Figure 16. Saso, Denise. Combined Ballpoint drawings of my two homes in the Philippines and Aotearoa. 2024 [Photograph].

Figure 17. Saso, Denise. Topotopo Pattern reference image and replicated pattern. They are formed using two or more bands of coloured strips, crisscrossing at right angles every few intervals. 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

Figure 18. Saso, Denise. Replicated Pattern and reference image. 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

Figure 19. Saso, Denise. Dahundahun (Leaf) Pattern, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

Figure 20. Saso, Denise. Replicated Pattern. Contrasting colours and line weight, such as the yellow squares, give the illusion of depth, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

Figure 21. Saso, Denise. A kaleidoscopic Yakan pattern repeat, inspired by the textiles of the Yakan tribe, Philippines. The white grid motif is woven through to unite the other motifs, creating a complex yet harmonious pattern, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

Figure 22. Saso, Denise. Untitled pattern and reference image. I interpreted this to symbolise similar and juxtaposing ideas; self-contained patterns inside heart-shaped geometries, constituent of an overall narrative, 2023 [Digital image and photograph].

Figure 23. A photograph of a banig picture-frame, exhibiting the contemporary design at Basey, Samar and the versatility of the banig. Here, the embroidered design is framed by the same material. Basey, Samar Philippines. August 2023 [Photograph].

Figure 25. Saso, Denise. Sunflower motif, 2024.

Figure 26. Saso, Denise. The indoor living room. Cebu, Philippines, 2011.

Figure 27. Saso, Denise. The outdoor dining and living room. Cebu, Philippines 2011.

Figure 28. Saso, Denise. My grandmother at Saob Cave. Samar, Philippines, 2023.

Figure 29. Saso, Denise. Inside my childhood home of Cebu, Philippines. The rooftops cut away to expose how my family and I inhabit these spaces, drawn during my visit home. 2023.

Figure 30. Saso, Denise. Pōhutukawa Motif. Auckland, 2023.

Figure 31. Saso, Denise. Monstera plant motif in my Auckland home. 2024.

Figure 32. Local fauna motif taken from my local neighbourhood reserve. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024.

Figure 33. Saso, Denise. The first sunflower pattern repeat iteration. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 34. Saso, Denise. Second pattern iteration. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 35. Pattern Repeat Iteration 3. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024. [Digital Photograph]

Figure 36. Pattern Repeat Iteration 3. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024. [Digital Photograph]

Figure 37. Saso, Denise. Monstera plant pattern repeat. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Digital photograph].

Figure 38. Saso, Denise. Pattern repeat. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Digital photograph].

Figure 39. Saso, Denise. Pattern repeat that combines Aotearoa and Philippines motifs. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Digital photograph].

Figure 40. Saso, Beatriz. Recent photos of my grandmother's redecoration of the dining and living room. Cebu, Philippines, 2023 [Photograph].

Figure 41. Saso, D. Laser cut and engraved warp and weft explorations with pine- wood. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 42. Saso, D. Large scale, engraved motifs. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024.

Figure 43. Saso, D. Laser engraved pattern repeats at 1:25 scale Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 44. Saso, D. Wood stain and wooden oil swatches on timber offcuts. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 45. Saso, D. Wood stain colours on engraved patterns. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024

Figure 46. Saso, D. Wood-stained patterns on poplar plywood and pinewood. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Photograph].

Figures 47 - 48. Saso, Denise. First keepsake box prototype at 1:25 scale. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 49. Saso, Denise. Laser engraving banig pattern onto a pinewood panel. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024

Figure 50. Saso, Denise. Second keepsake box prototype. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figures 51-52. Saso, Denise. The exterior and interior of the first keepsake box. Auckland, New Zealand. 2024.

Figures 53-55. Digital keepsake box prototypes wrapped with patterns. 2024 [Digital Photograph].

Figures 56-57. Investigations on a combination of two-dimensional and receding banig motifs at 1:2 scale

Figure 58. Saso, Denise. A more developed keepsake box prototype exploring a sliding top. 2024 [Digital Photograph].

Figure 59. Saso, Denise. Investigating how the mitre panels join with a biscuit dowel and splined mitre. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 60. Saso, Denise. A 1:10 scale ideation of an unravelling balikbayan box. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024.

Figure 61. Saso, Denise. 1:10 artefact prototype in the gallery space. Auckland, New Zealand, 2024 [Photograph].

5.0 Appendices

5.A Gallery Exhibition



Fig 1. Saso, D. Gallery Exhibition. 2024.



Fig 2. Saso, D. Lifting the lid of the balikbayan box encasement to reveal the gift—the keepsake box. 2024.

The cardboard box, lovingly addressed to my grandmother, is bound in frieze-like patterns.



Fig 3. Saso, D. Commodities and gifts inside the keepsake box. 2024.



Fig 3. Saso, D. Opened balikbayan box. 2024.

5.B. Banig-making process in Basey province

The labourious process of making a banig are grouped into four stages: cultivating the plantation, harvesting and preparing the plant fibres, weaving, and finally, embroidery.

Cultivating the plantation

The weavers of Basey use two types of plant fibres: the *tikog* grass and *buri* palm, each serving a different purpose. The *tikog* plant are used for the *banig* as it grows abundantly in the area, and it is easier to weave. The *buri* palm is used for embroidery due to its superior capabilities for absorbing dye more than *tikog*.

The *tikog* or *tikug* is a type of grass plant that grows around swampy lands and rice paddies in the Samar and Leyte Region. The stems are characterised as shiny and smooth and grow up to 1 to 3 metres in height. *Buri* palm trees grows in mountains and forested areas.



Fig 4. Saso, D. A bundle of harvested *tikog*. 2023.



Fig 5. Saso, D. Harvested *buri*. 2023.



Fig 6. Saso, D. Dried *tikog* and *buri*. 2023.

Harvesting and preparing the tikog fibres

Long and mature leaves are harvested and bundled (figs. 4-5) After, *tikog* and *buri* are hung outdoors to dry for two to three days, allowing the gradual removal of moisture (fig. 6). The crown or ends of the plant are then cut (fig. 7). A canopy was recently built to keep the drying process operational during the rainy season (fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Saso, D. Chopping off the crown of the *tikog*. 2023



Fig. 8. Saso, D. Harvested *tikog* and *buri* drying under a canopy. 2023

Dyeing in various colours - The weavers use a commercial dye suitable for plant fibres, which were procured from Manila. A scoop of chemical dye is poured into a large pot of boiling water, letting it simmer for a minute. The dried *tikog* or *buri* is then slowly dropped into the pot (fig 9). The weaver stirs the pot every now and then, ensuring all areas have absorbed the colour. Light colours such as yellow and orange can be done within two to three minutes, while darker colours such as violet and black take longer to absorb (fig 10).



Fig. 9. Saso, D. Dyeing a bundle of *tikog* in the colour purple. 2023.



Fig. 10. Saso, D. Dyeing a bundle of *tikog* in the colour purple. 2023.

Once fully dried, the dyed *tikog* and *buri* are then softened and flattened, making them pliable for weaving. Using a dried bamboo stalk, a small bundle of dyed *tikog* is pressed manually four times or until the desired level of softness is reached (fig 11). This takes about an hour. Recent innovations such as the flattening machine speeds this process up by half (fig 12), where small bundles *tikog* are fed through the machine.



Fig. 11. Saso, D. Flattening the dyed *tikog* manually using a piece of bamboo stalk. 2023.



Fig. 12. Saso, D. Flattening the dyed *tikog* with a machine. 2023.

Weaving

In banig weaving, the weaver uses her body as the loom, with her foot pressing down on the mat to keep it taut, performing what a loom would do. It is often difficult to distinguish between the warp and weft as you would in loom weaving—these functions are often interchangeable.

At the banig's inception, a weaver pins down the strands of that may be considered the "warp". As the banig develops, she sits on the edges to maintain the tension between the strands. The weaver can adjust the tension of the warp by swaying forward and backward, fully engaging her body in her craft.



Fig. 13. Saso, D. A weaver using her foot as a loom. She begins weaving from the edges and works her way towards the centre. 2023.

Weavers in Basey employ the *sinalasala* or the plain weave technique¹, which consists of an over-one, under-one pattern. This technique involves two to four strands that interlace alternately, either obliquely or parallel to the edges of the mat, in a biaxial (two-axis) direction. The strands are woven tightly together to create a nearly continuous surface, forming a four-sided rectangular mat. The technique is simple, yet firm and strong as it creates the necessary tension that makes the mat's structure durable.

Once the weaving of the banig is finished, the spine framework or structure of the banig are typically established on the edges. The remaining strands along the sides are folded to secure the weave. These strips are folded diagonally to form the edges of the banig and woven back into the body to hold it in place. To create a larger *banig* that exceeds the *tikog* sedges' natural length, a splicing technique is used, where the ends of two *tikog* strips are overlapped. This forms the *banig*'s structural spine, with the strips being plaited together to conceal the splice.



Fig. 14. Saso, D. A close up of the folded edges of the *banig*. 2023.



Fig. 15. Saso, D. A group of weavers working in Saob Cave. 2023.

Since banig are commonly used for sleeping, it is no surprise that they are woven according to bed sizes, such as single, double, and family size—indicating how many people can lie down on the banig. A family size typically accommodates three to four people. For a master weaver, weaving a single-sized mat can take up to three to five days. Additionally, Basey weavers also create placemats for dining tables, usually sold in sets of six or eight.

Embroidering

Once the banig is completed, it is handed over to the embroiderer. The embroiderer begins by sketching the outlines of her design with chalk as a guide. She then cuts strips from the strands of dyed *buri* to match the width of the openings in the woven *tikog* banig. Using the metal ribs from old umbrellas as a needle, she carefully threads the buri strips through the small openings in the weave.

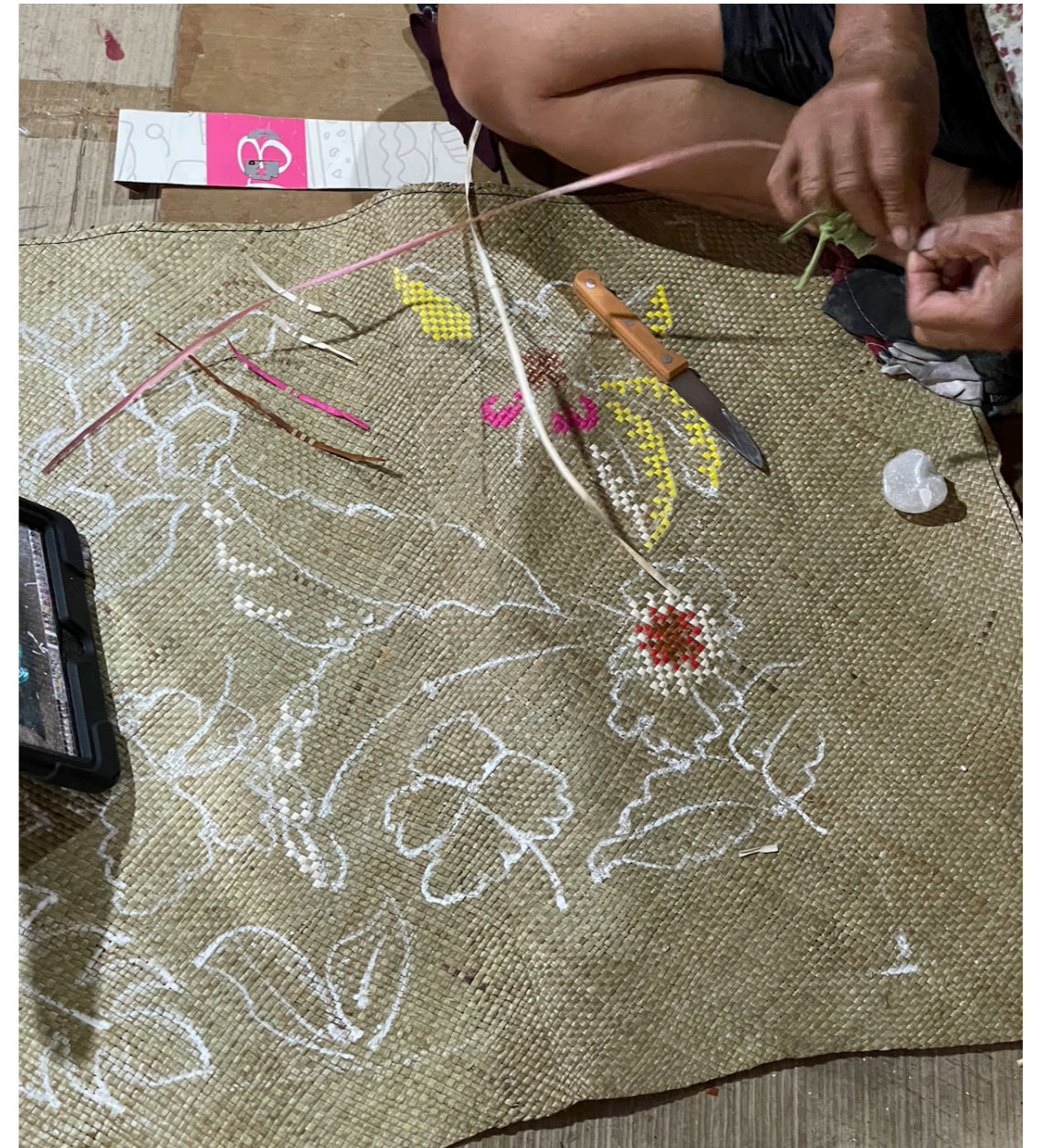
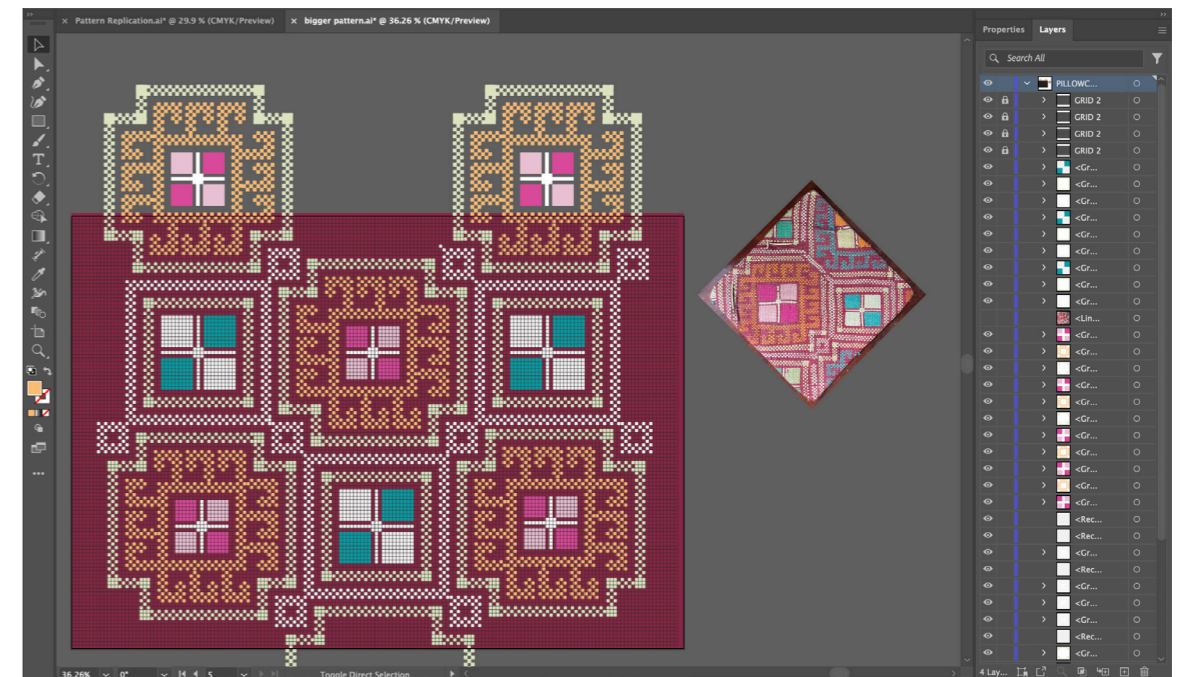
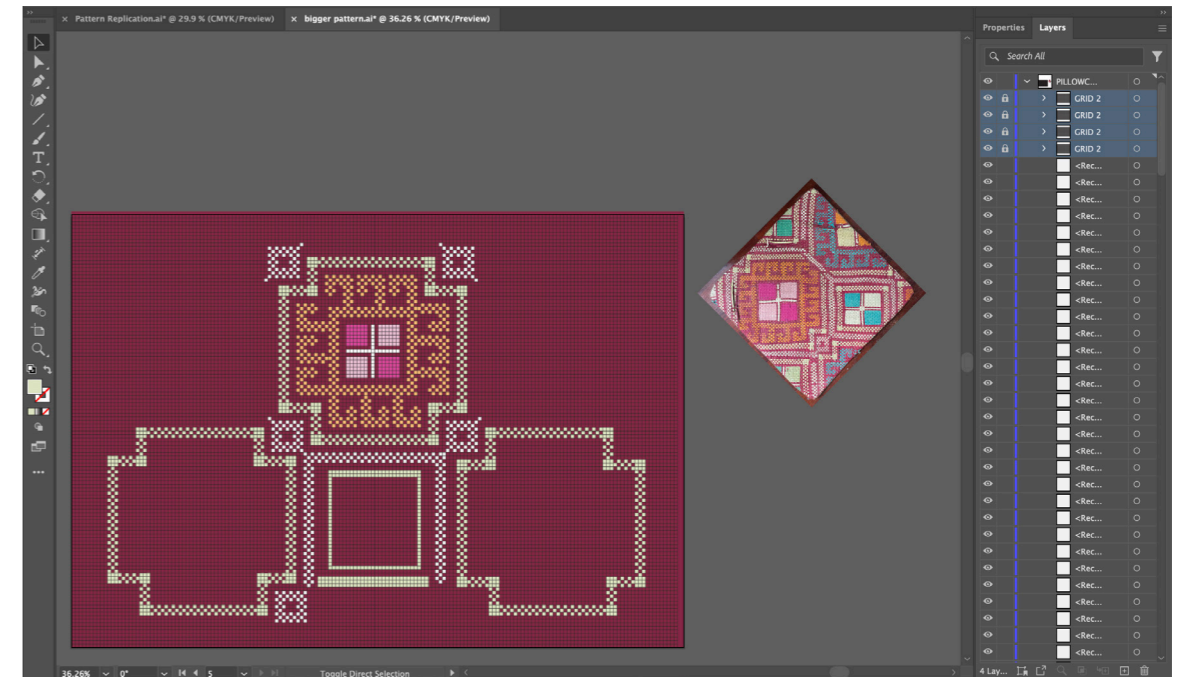
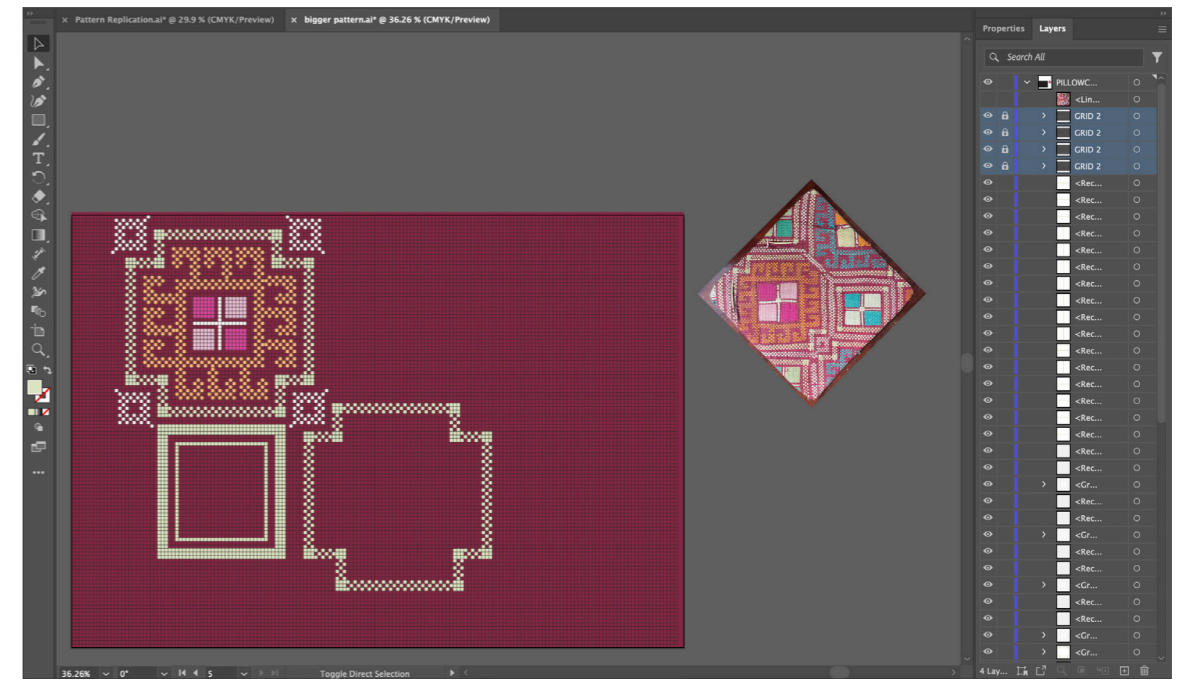
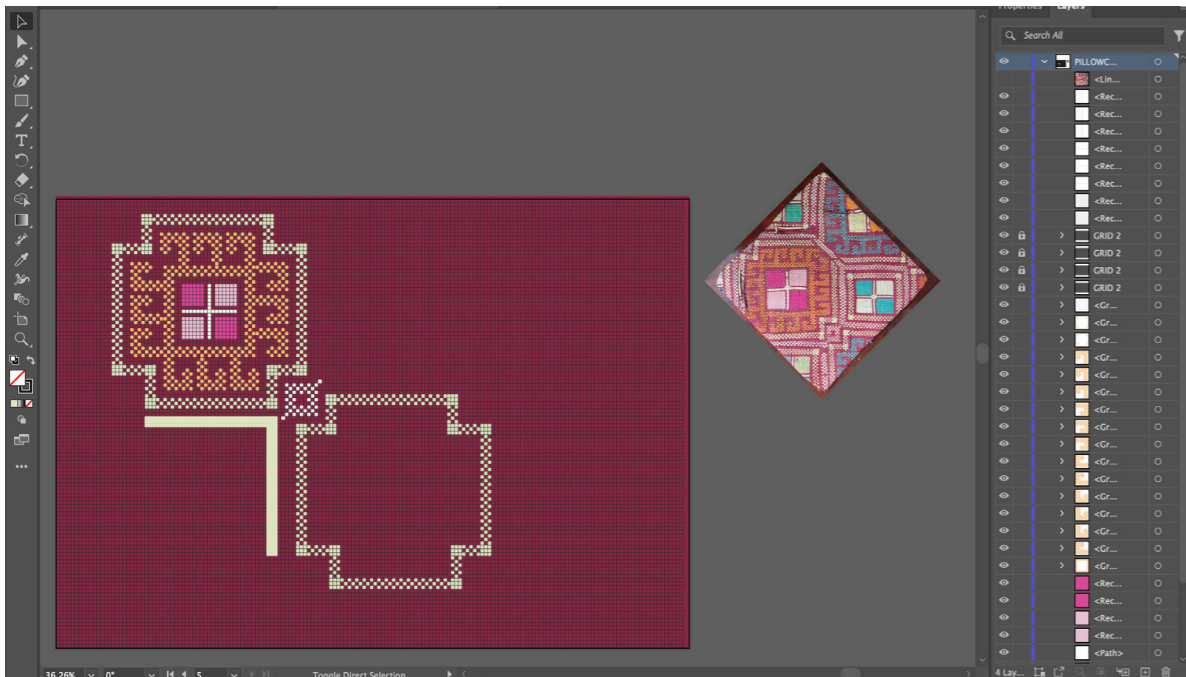
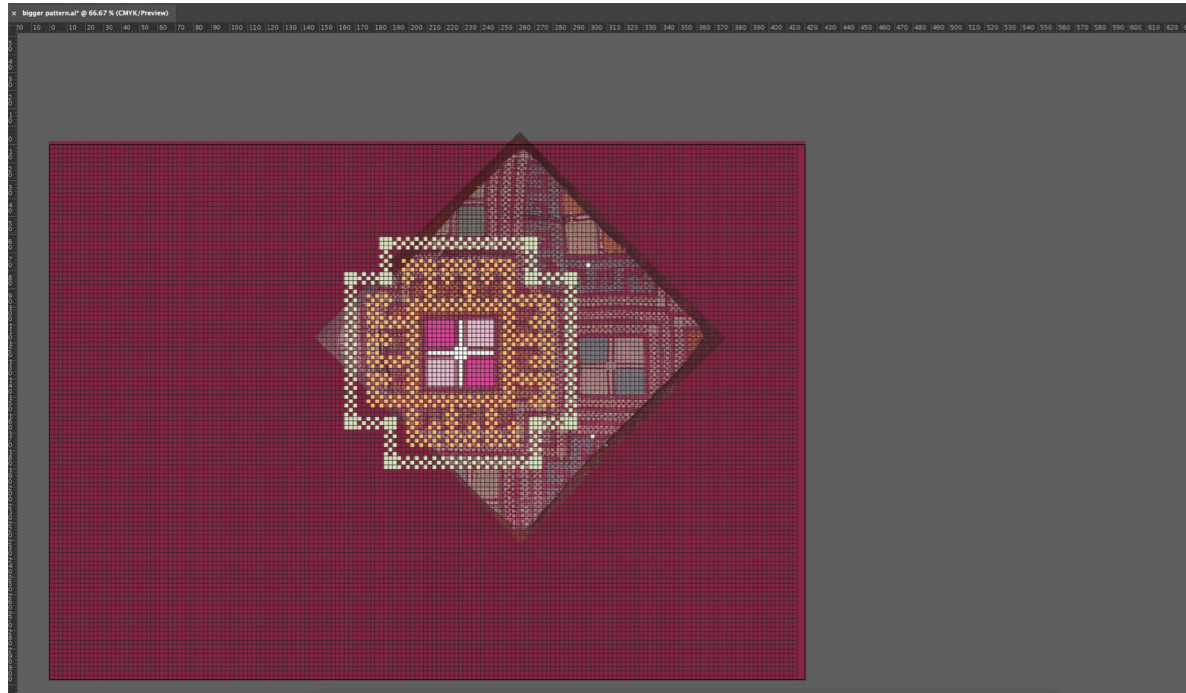


Fig. 16. Saso, D. A weaver embroidering the plain, white *banig*. 2023.

¹ Nocheseda, Rara: *The Art and Tradition of Mat Weaving*, 53.

5.C Pattern Replication Method



5.D Mind Mapping

