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## Rhythmic Ritual: Hand Papermaking as A Transformative Process

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RHYTHMIC RITUAL: HAND PAPERMAKING  
AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS

A Thesis

by

KEATAN T. MCKEEVER

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: 2D Visual Arts

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

December 2023



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AS A TRANSFORATIVE PROCESS

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KEATAN T. MCKEEVER

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December 2023



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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an exploration of the transformative processes of hand papermaking through various artworks situated between two- and three-dimensional forms. The conceptual motivations supporting my practice are informed by intuition, locally sourced materials, human connection, material structure, and low-tech approaches to the papermaking process. In the first portion of this thesis, I reflect on the experiences that led me to a focus in papermaking and the innovative approaches to the medium that were cultivated throughout graduate school. The second half follows the experimentation and limitations that informed my practice, the content of my work regarding material and structural qualities, and through my considerations on process, material, and content, I tether a relationship between my approach and other artists to contextualize how my work fits into the contemporary practices of artists working in similar approaches today.





## DEDICATION

The thesis manuscript and my body of work in handmade paper is dedicated to my daughter, Ona Flanagan, and to all the women who came before us.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The content of my thesis work has been many years in the making and is based on my deeply personal and intuitive journey through the transformative process of papermaking as an art form. I am particularly grateful to my husband, Michael, for encouraging me to continue with this work, who supported my vision and never stopped challenging me, and for always helping me develop my ideas.

I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude several of my professors whose counsel and guidance have been an invaluable part of my graduate studies – Dr. Christen Sperry Garcia, who advocated for me to begin and continue my graduate degree at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, my professor and mentor Timothy Gonchoroff, who has generously provided me his knowledge, expertise, and feedback on innumerable occasions, to Professor DM Witman and Professor Brandi Lee Cooper, who have given me their invaluable time and advice, and finally to Dr. Katherine McAllen for her collaboration and sponsorship throughout my curatorial opportunities.



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## CHAPTER I

### PROCESS: MATERIAL EXPLORATION

My MFA thesis exhibition developed through explorations in hand papermaking, and its unique transformational properties. From processing locally sourced materials into sheets of pulp, to the two- and three-dimensional potential of the medium, a material-based approach to hand papermaking is at the root of my practice. Themes of transformation and connection, the reconstructive qualities of paper, low-tech papermaking methods, intuition, and evidence of the hand are essential to the work I create.

My papermaking practice often begins with a walk; an action that places me in direct relation to my environment, and that allows me to focus and interact with it through curiosity and exploration. This curiosity is at the core of my artistic approach, and it precedes concept. I source local materials through spontaneity and intuitive direction, next comes a series of complex steps. Small-scale studies, labor intensive methods, and simple repetitive gestures that emphasize the importance of the transformative process which turns the gathered materials into paper sheets of processed material pulp. The sheets are again transformed into grid formations through layered and reconstructed paper artworks revealing many individual parts that coalesce into a unified whole. I am focused on the transformative process, both material and metaphorical, through every step. This focus on process rather than outcome marks a shift in my artistic practice. Through pivotal studio experiences, research, and newly becoming pregnant, I gradually

discovered my preferred medium. This following section describes key developments in my working process and how I relate to other artists approaching paper in similar ways.

### **Path to Papermaking**

Prior to a focus in papermaking, I had committed myself to appreciate the investigation of materials, and often worked with an array of mediums including metal, wood, cement, found objects and paper. My primary focus was the exploration of materials as an end to itself. I had developed a studio practice of sourcing local materials, and allowing those materials to guide me in the fabrication process that would produce the final piece without a preconceived conceptual agenda. Plasma cutting metal, screen printing with rust, creating cement sculptures with cardboard molds, and forming small sculptural works with natural and industrial materials were just some of the techniques I applied to my creative process. Although I was continuously encouraged to explore this experimentation in my early graduate studies, the search for conceptual focus and mastery of skill was always present.

Through working with these variations of material and technique, I often reflected on how the act of going through the artistic processes themselves and then finalizing the completed works were a sort of mirror of myself in relation to my environment. I was essentially deconstructing and reconstructing the natural and manmade world around me while experiencing my own version of transformation by doing so. By juxtaposing metals with organic plant matter, woods with concrete, and found materials imbedded in handmade paper, I began to think about my own associations with the constructed environment and how I related to this idea of transformation through natural and manmade material relationships.

I was first introduced to handmade paper by South Texas College's printmaking professor, Eduardo Garcia, during my undergraduate studies in Biology, but it wasn't until the start as an MFA student that I began to seriously explore papermaking as an artistic medium. Prior to completing a socially engaged sculpture course during my first semester in graduate school, I had little direct experience working with public- or community-based art, but it was exactly this introduction that ultimately led me to reach out to a local environmentally focused organization the following semester to collaborate on a papermaking workshop that I would facilitate. From that first workshop forward, and through several paper-focused workshops that followed, hand papermaking slowly and organically began to show up in my artistic practice.

The shift to working solely in papermaking aligned with the timing of my pregnancy. I immediately reconsidered the time I would be spending in the metal and wood shops, which I had been primarily using to create work and fabricating found materials. Although I had taken preventative safety measures throughout my studies, there was no question in my mind whether I would be able to continue working in these areas in the foreseeable future. I took some time to reflect on my studio practice, where I wanted to take it, and what that would look like for me during such a personal change. With previous experience in papermaking and having hosted a series of papermaking workshops, the answer seemed to click into place while contemplating a refocus to more non-toxic materials, ease of at-home studio work, and a consideration to sustainable working hours with quick turn-around time from material to final product.

### **Personal and Material Transformation**

As my early papermaking practice unfolded, I noticed how the hand papermaking process felt like a parallel to my journey in pregnancy, and then motherhood, through the exploration of universal themes on creation, transformation, care, and change. The material selectivity that

often accompanies the nesting phase of pregnancy encouraged me to review and refocus my personal space. I only kept items that served multiple purposes to declutter and cleanse my material load, which included repurposing certain waste materials that easily accumulated like egg cartons, junk mail, packaging material, and toilet paper rolls, among other household items. This reprocessing of what I was bringing into my space through my papermaking practice became a powerful metaphor for renewal, rebirth, connection to process, and the material relationship that mirrored the interconnectedness between various aspects of my life and nature. I was transforming physically and mentally while becoming a mother, and the similarities in my papermaking practice that connected me to mindfulness, community, nurturing my environment, and personal growth allowed me to process some of my own experiences during this time.

The first major work that I implemented these ideas was in *Sand and Soil*, a diptych composed of handmade paper embedded with soil from the base of a mesquite tree and sand collected from the shores of South Padre Island. This piece features multiple single sheets of pulled pulp that are sewn together to reveal a concentric rectangle where the embedded sand or soil align. While reflecting on the personal, behavioral and cyclical patterns I had developed over a lifetime in my hometown, the meaning of this work unfolded as the soil gathered from the base of a mesquite tree, a staple of the South Texas landscape, represented the place I'm from and how it has grounded and shaped me, and the sand I collected from the local shore, a constantly shifting and malleable land, represented change and the material impermanence that's ever-present as time moves on. For the first time, I incorporated a sewing machine as a tool in my practice and stitched each sheet of paper together. After much trial and error with this method,



Figure 1: Keatan McKeever, *Sand and Soil*, 2021. Handmade paper, locally sourced sand and soil, cotton thread; installation



Figure 2: Keatan McKeever, *Sand and Soil*, 2021. Handmade paper, locally sourced sand and soil, cotton thread; detail

the piece came together in a way that reflected how my experiences were structurally connected to create who I am today. It was gratifying to recognize these qualities in a piece that is visually quiet and subtle after putting so much time in the hands of an experimental approach; I felt connected to the inherent unknown of how the piece would turn out through the process and appreciated how the work itself, as well as the meaning, developed as a personal response to the materials.

### **Material-Based Approach and Contemporary Influences**

While exploring techniques through alternative papermaking materials, and receiving research recommendations from instructors, I began to investigate other artists and papermakers who focus on material-based approaches in their own practice. Learning about the work of Anna Hepler, Hong Hong, Eva Hesse and Agnes Martin encouraged me to contextualize my own work and continue to approach my practice with exploration and direction.

Anna Hepler is a contemporary American sculptor whose work explores multiple formats through the investigation of recurring themes, shapes, and images. Utilizing a mixed-media approach in ceramics, printmaking, textile and sculpture, her work is constantly evolving within a cycle of “elemental forms” and in a state of continual reinvention. Hepler’s practice is an intimate conversation with material, where she constructs remarkably diverse yet cohesive works. In her 2015 solo exhibition, *Blind Spot*, Hepler shows her ingenuity and proliferation as an artist with her ability to create multiple, related forms through various mediums and unexpected materials (Smith). *Crawler* [Figure 3], a bulbous sculpture made from recycled plastic that features concentric black and white lines in its woven design captivates the viewer with its simple yet sophisticated construction and presentation. Hepler reimagines and flattens this sculpture to inform the creation of a series of ink and dry point artworks on paper, *Gather*

and *Steps* [Figure 4], that illustrate *Crawler* from various angles. I'm not only inspired by Hepler's focus on and use of materials that produce monochromatic works, but also in her reinvention from one artwork to another with a subtle but obvious relationship between them.



Figure 3: Anna Hepler, *Crawler*, 2015. Plastic and fiberfill; 21x41x20"



Figure 4: Anna Hepler, *Steps*, 2015. Dry point on paper; 11x13"



I am similarly driven to explore the continual reinvention of a material, as I've done in *Finding Your Place* [Figure 5], an artwork that features excess pulped material from various completed artworks which have been reprocessed to create new forms in separate and individual grid systems. While Hepler has a more diverse selection of mediums in her practice, her interests in intuition, innovation, and material transformation are driving forces in my own practice.

Similar to Hepler's conversations with material through improvisation and experimentation, I also allow my impulses and affinity for immediacy to guide my practice through the papermaking process and sculptural construction of every pulled sheet. Whether she's utilizing organic and amorphous forms and I angular and rigid ones, I find a connection with her to the set of rules, framework and "elemental forms" that we each work within that allows the experimentation of every material to express its own connection to our individual personal psychologies (VAC of Richmond, 2016). Hepler's studio practice has encouraged me to feel a certain validation in my approach to investigating materials by testing dozens of techniques through the papermaking process with the reassurance that although only one out of many tests may work, the transformation of material by hand and the ongoing dialogue between the prefabricated and post-fabricated materials are essential components in the evolution of my practice.



Figure 5: Keatan McKeever, *Finding Your Place*, 2023. Handmade paper cubes using excess paper pulp; installation

The pull to extensively explore a single component present in a creative practice is also highlighted in Agnes Martin's body of work. A Canadian-born painter who made a home in the meditative and desolate landscape of the New Mexican desert plains utilizes subtle tones, her relationship to environment, and meticulous attention to detail to continuously push the grid into a visual symbol that touches on her inner dialogue. As with Hepler, the importance of self-reflection, self-imposed guidelines, and the reference to repetitive and ritualistic approaches to pattern drew me to Martin's work. I came to learn that Martin had a long and explorative journey

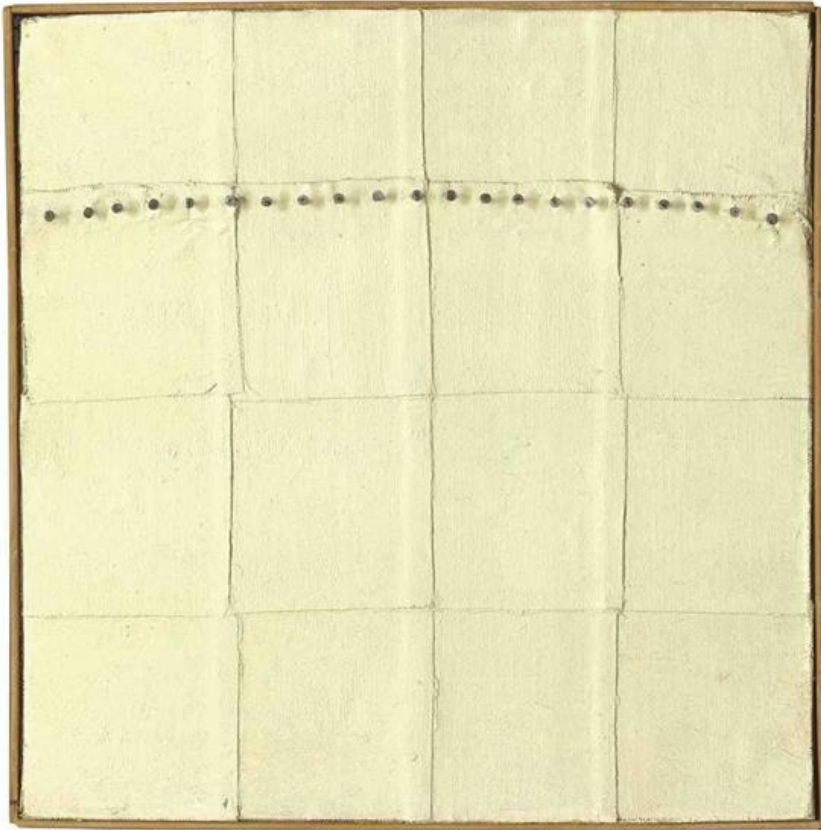


Figure 6: Agnes Martin, *Homage to Greece*, 1959

as a painter with multiple styles and influences in her approach until she came into her own practice during and after graduate school. She recalls never being satisfied with her work prior to finding the grid, and felt she only truly began her career as a painter after that pivotal shift (Regimbal). My initial connection to Martin rested in her established use of the grid, use of a pastel earth-toned palette, and influences from Buddhism that represented various emotional states in her work, but I began to find more inspiration in her path to becoming an artist as well. Her piece, *Homage to Greece* [Figure 6], is an assemblage of overlapping painted canvas with a single line of hammered nails in a horizontal orientation. This is “one of the earliest examples of her formally investigating the grid’s aesthetic nature” through the convergence of simple materials (Laing). The body of work featured after her solo exhibition with Betty Parsons in the

Fall of 1958 has been a particularly important catalyst for several of my own works. In one of my own, *Homage to Hannah O'hare Bennett* [Figure 7], I collaborated with American paper artist Hannah O'hare Bennett by reconstructing handmade paper coated with rust and wax that was created by her during her own graduate studies in 2017. Utilizing the paper she sent me, I uniformly cut and sewed them into a grid on canvas backing, and hand-built a floating frame not unlike the one Martin houses *Homage to Greece* in. Like Martin's journey as a painter and my own with paper, Bennett came into her papermaking practice and career during graduate school as well after having a drastically different creative practice prior. It wasn't until I began researching Martin's earlier work more in-depth during the writing of this thesis manuscript that I realized my use of a canvas backing, as well as the rust and wax that is coating the handmade



Figure 7: Keatan McKeever, *Homage to Hannah O'hare Bennett*, 2023. Handmade paper and cotton thread



paper, is reminiscent of Martin's use of materials like nails and gesso in *Homage to Greece*. Our overlapping similarity in the progression of our personal practices and the likeness of these two works feels serendipitous.

My thesis exhibition explores hand papermaking through the lens of the grid in a variety of forms. The twenty-two pieces in this body of work explore variability, connectivity, elements of immediacy, chance, and the tension between organic materials and manmade structures. Tethering between HyperProcess, process art, and material-based approaches, the nature of the material is both evident, exposed, and hidden. Some materials are processed beyond recognition, becoming a blended and unified mass in a sheet of pulled paper, while others are embedded or incorporated in a way that appears just above the surface, still perceivable in the final composition. Through certain limitations self-retained in my papermaking practice, an approach rather than content is often explored. Repetitive actions, highly controlled materials, and a logical system of organization lend themselves to a HyperProcess approach, but spontaneity, responses to time, sight and materials, and the infusion of human presence through the evidence of the artist's hand leans toward process art (Duggan and Fox, 10-15). This push and pull between two opposing approaches directly relate to the dynamic produced while working with the irregularity and unpredictability of organic-based materials in an ordered and logical method of transformation and construction.



Figure 8: Keatan McKeever, *Rhythmic Ritual* Exhibition view, 2023



Figure 9: Keatan McKeever, *Rhythmic Ritual* Exhibition view, 2023

## CHAPTER II

### MATERIAL: HANDMADE PAPER

The material qualities of handmade paper are malleable, delicate, structural, and easily lend themselves to the sculptural potential of the medium and connection to place. These qualities guide my practice to produce works that are dimensional and that reflect, however subtly, the materials I immediately source through my environment. Through the unique imprint of the maker's hand that often accompanies the production of handmade paper, subtle variations in thickness, texture, and imperfections become a testament to the aesthetics and visual touch of each finished work. While the connection between maker and material informs the unpredictability of papermaking, explorations in chance and spontaneity lead to variations in quality, color, and surface effects. The papermaking process is intrinsically both direct and indirect in relation to the maker. Aspects of the process require tactile and calculated skill, while others require the acceptance of variability and the unknown of how each material being processed will ultimately be transformed. The unpredictable and inherent variation in the final paper product is a pillar in my practice, and it's what allows each piece to reflect my environment, while this dynamic exchange has allowed me to pursue ongoing questions within a single material.



## **Low-Tech Papermaking and Locally Sourced Materials**

Hand papermaking involves the transformation of raw materials through a series of interconnected processes, including pulping, sheet formation, pressing, and drying. A brief description of the papermaking process will be helpful to understand what follows. The process used in my work is traditionally termed “Western papermaking”, which is where material in its raw state is processed to break down the fibers, filaments, and structural bonds making up the original material. In my practice, this processing includes cutting, cooking and blending. The raw materials are transformed into a paper pulp, where the broken-down matter is combined in a vat of water; paper sheets are formed while submerging a mould and deckle into the vat and allowing the water to drain from the pulp upon emergence. Once strained and dried, the broken-down materials merge together creating a bonded sheet of paper. Traditionally, this process incorporates tools and techniques that are often time consuming or expensive. In Asia, mulberry bark, hemp, and cotton rag are boiled and hand-beaten for hours during the pulping process, before being added to large-scale vats and skillfully pulled through a similar sized Sugeta. In western practices, the Hollander Beater, a large machine used to process plant or textile-based materials into a pulp, is used in contemporary papermaking. These machines often run upwards of \$5,000 used, and closer to \$10,000 new. Plant materials are also often bleached, dyed, strengthened, and thickened using chemical additives in the production process in paper mills and modern paper studios today (Watson, 33-35). Without the access to proper tools typically found in an established papermaking studio, the need for low-tech methods in papermaking and a necessity for immediacy throughout the process led me to investigate and discover alternative methods of production in my practice.

Through sourcing regional plants and gathering local waste products such as egg cartons, junk mail, shipping and packaging material, and recycled paper or textiles, I began processing these materials using experimental methods. I relied heavily on four primary approaches to turn almost any material into pulp, which were hand-processing, natural fermentation, boiling and blending. Using all, or a combination of the four, I was able to successfully pull continuous sheets of pulp with most of the materials I came across. Plant materials such as palm fronds, Calla Lily leaves, Mesquite bean pods, and fir needles to name a few, were much denser and stronger in fiber structure than recycled paper-based products, and it was necessary to break down the cellulose in the plants to create a pulp. Marie-Jeanne Lorente reveals clear and illustrated instructions on how to turn an array of plants into useable handmade paper in her book *The Art of Papermaking with Plants*. I often referred to the accessible at-home recipes in this book to harvest and prepare the plants correctly, as well as gauge the cook time.

Materials consisting of recycled paper and paper-based products like egg cartons, paper towel rolls, and junk mail are significantly simpler to process. I would simply need to shred, pre-soak and blend the raw materials to achieve the desired oatmeal-like pulp consistency needed to form sheets of paper. Using these types of materials, I could easily pull a sheet of paper from start to finish in a single day, then allow the paper to dry overnight. Because of this level of



Figure 10: Workshop view, 2023. Plant materials, paper pulp, and tools

immediacy, I favored egg cartons as the primary base for my handmade paper. Egg cartons accumulate quickly in my household, are uniform in color within the carton itself with little to no ink or text left behind once the labels are removed, but they can also vary in color depending on where the carton is sourced. With additions like cotton thread, wool filaments, or plant fibers, the prepared egg carton pulp can be made stronger through the papermaking process which creates a strong base for more structural and dimensional work. Additionally, because of its inherent neutral color palette, materials added into the egg carton pulp can easily be included to achieve distinctive characteristics in each pulled paper. In spite of the basic description of the methods and materials I utilize that depicts the process as relatively uncomplicated, there is infinite

potential in papermaking based on details such as the maker's skill level and experimentation, processing time, drying techniques, the material to water ratio, and even factors beyond control.

### **Development of Papermaking Studio**

The importance of the curated studio became apparent to me early on through the experience of making my own tools and developing techniques that were accessible and worked within my practice. My mentor, Tim Gonchoroff, had experience with building mould and deckles, and generously lent me several of his personal ones to model mine after during the fabrication process. I was advised on the specific materials, such as marine-grade staples, water-proof polyurethane sealant, and a variety of mesh or screen options, to begin customizing my mould and deckles for durability. Once I was more confident with the basic construction, and through hours of research online, I additionally made my own versions of a Sugeta, a traditional Japanese style mould and deckle, as well as a larger moulds, around 20 x 26 inches, using a method utilized in Nepal for pulling Lokta paper. This variability gave me the ability to pull a variety of different sizes, textures, and thicknesses based on the combination of pulped materials being pulled in the mould and deckle, and I could make intuitive decisions on which one to choose to create unique and differing works every time. Apart from assistance with fabricating the mould and deckles, there were no courses, equipment, or community papermaking studios in my area or through the university, so a relationship between myself and my studio developed through intention and curation which created purpose, aesthetic direction, and a throughline in my work. In many ways my practice unfolded with an absence of other's influences or direct guidance in papermaking. Working independently in my practice enabled me to nurture a foundation in techniques, tools and artistic space that led to spontaneous and experimental

approaches to the medium based on the immediacy and availability of materials sourced through my environment. So much of my explorations in papermaking are possible through the foundation of certain conditions that are controlled and tested, but incorporating unknown materials and waiting to see the unexpected results after the water in the pulp evaporates is what inspires me to follow unanticipated directions as the work develops.



Figure 11: Workshop view, 2023. Materials, paper pulp, and tools



Figure 12: Workshop view, 2023. Papermaking tools and workspace.





Figure 13: Workshop view, 2023. Material studies and completed works in UTRGV studio.

## CHAPTER III

### CONTENT: TRANSFORMATION

The conceptual framework developed through my hand papermaking practice was grounded in the act of transformation. This quality is unique and inherent in the papermaking process where handmade paper often transcends its material form through the physical and metaphorical changes the raw materials undergo. Linking elements of repetition, observation, and experimentation, the transformative process reveals interconnection and reflection in my practice. As I discovered how I approached material and process, a conceptual groundwork developed through the transition of communicating a specific idea to exploring broader intentions that interested me in my work. In the following sections I'll discuss how my content has evolved through key explorations in immediacy, repetition, and the use of the grid.

#### **Explorations in Repetition and Ritual**

During my early evening walks I recurrently scavenge and source plant materials from the accumulated landscaping debris placed on the neighborhood's sidewalks for the city to collect. I came across a few whole palm fronds one day and dragged them home to dry, boil and process into pulp. The act of observing and collecting from my environment on these walks is a ritual. It allows me time to slow down with my daughter and be present in the demanding shifts of motherhood while balancing autonomy in my artistic practice. *Of the Sun*, a piece in a series of work with similar make-up, was inspired by that particular walk where I sourced the palm

fronds during a hot summer day. During the process of breaking down the palm fronds into a pulp, I noticed the shifts in its structural quality during the different stages of decomposition. While preserving its material integrity during a shorter boil time, I separated a portion of the fibrous plant that was about one to two inches long to incorporate into a base of egg carton pulp used to pull a series of paper sheets. Using the portion that was further boiled into an oatmeal-like pulp, I sculpted tiny cubes using a hand-cut mylar stencil which would be embedded in-between the afore mentioned pre-formed paper sheets. The finished piece surprised me with its dimensionality and transparency within a two-dimensional form, something I had not planned on during the processing and reformation of the materials.

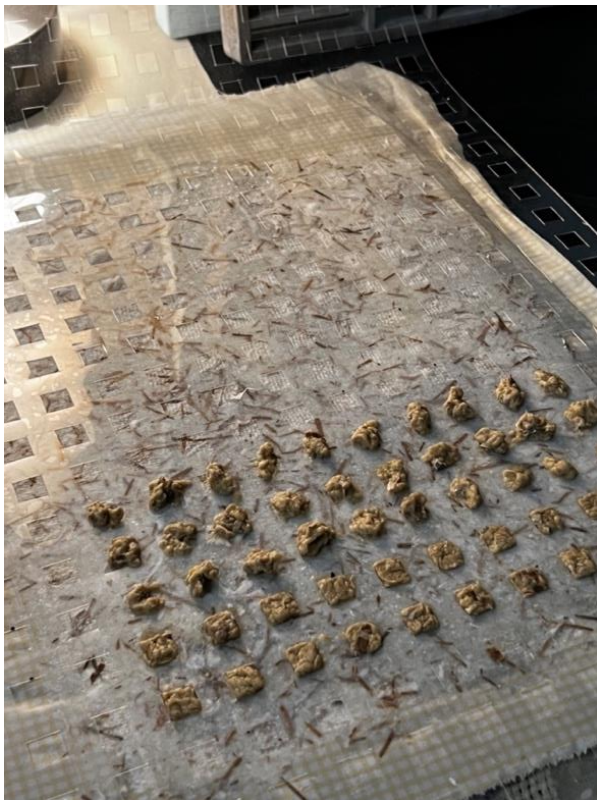


Figure 14: Material study, 2023. Handmade paper process using hand-cut mylar



Figure 15: Material study, 2023. Processed palm fronds embedded in handmade paper



I found myself drawn to specific qualities either inherent in the papermaking process or as a product of it, like a muted or earth-toned color palette and the commitment to repetitive actions through the use of the grid as a visual symbol. I became fascinated by the unpredictability and variation in color and texture of each work when I allowed the processed material to settle and dry, noticing characteristics altered by me in some way or another. In *Stardust* and *Set in Stone*, two pieces created by pulling separate sheets of paper consisting of egg cartons and a variety of recycled tissue paper in a pair of large moulds on my driveway. I incorporated a mixture of saw dust, dryer lint, eggshells, and beeswax within the pieces. The array of found materials I was able to unify into these works created such an unrecognizable appearance from the raw materials that it resulted in the work developing its own unique qualities beyond its original form. The feedback after exhibiting these pieces spoke of their characteristics being leather or hide-like, grounded, and earthen, like rocks in a riverbed, ideas of being stuck, and of being intentional with nature. The promise of multiple levels of meaning became a lesson I leaned into; to trust the materials to reveal content, rather than imposing a meaning.

As I reflect on my studio practice from start to finish, I notice how my relationship to sourcing materials and processing the forgiving and workable pulp is a freedom. There is so much room for potential and possibility in those early stages. While my process unfolds, the work hardens and is assembled into angular structures where the finished forms are still delicate because of the material nature of handmade paper, but they lack malleability. The grid gives me the gift of focus and limitation, where I'm able to push the material with intention and direction. In many ways these two approaches to process symbolize the shaping of one's life into something meaningful and purposeful. By building a tangible body of work through the

reconstitution of waste materials and the personal study of transformation, I often think about the conditions necessary to turn “bad” materials into something good.

### **Thoughts on Connection and Structure**

While transitioning into the role of a working mother, I didn't have the liberty of spending uninterrupted hours in the studio anymore. The accessibility that comes with incorporating a gridded system in both process and composition allowed me to begin and end production at will, which nurtured a path where I could continue creating work despite the new constraints that naturally arose in motherhood. Not unlike my papermaking process, where my emotional response to the expressive potential of the medium formed both the meanings and my work, both metaphorically and aesthetically. Connection, tension, order, strength and fragility, balance, and the interconnectivity of elements within a system, embody the ideas that inform and guide my practice while allowing me to process my own experiences of interdependence, collaboration, and learning to create a flow of communication within myself and with the new life I brought into the world. In many ways I was searching for a way to decipher this new and unknown reality; finding patterns in her behavior, building upon or transforming beliefs I once held, and linking all the small moments that make-up the bonds that hold me together. The grid expanded my practice with a chance to explore the nuanced layers of interpretation, understanding and significance that are found within a stratum of meaning. I could construct multiple forms of handmade paper into singular or various grids within grids that hinted at the depth and complexity found within a design, an idea, or a system.

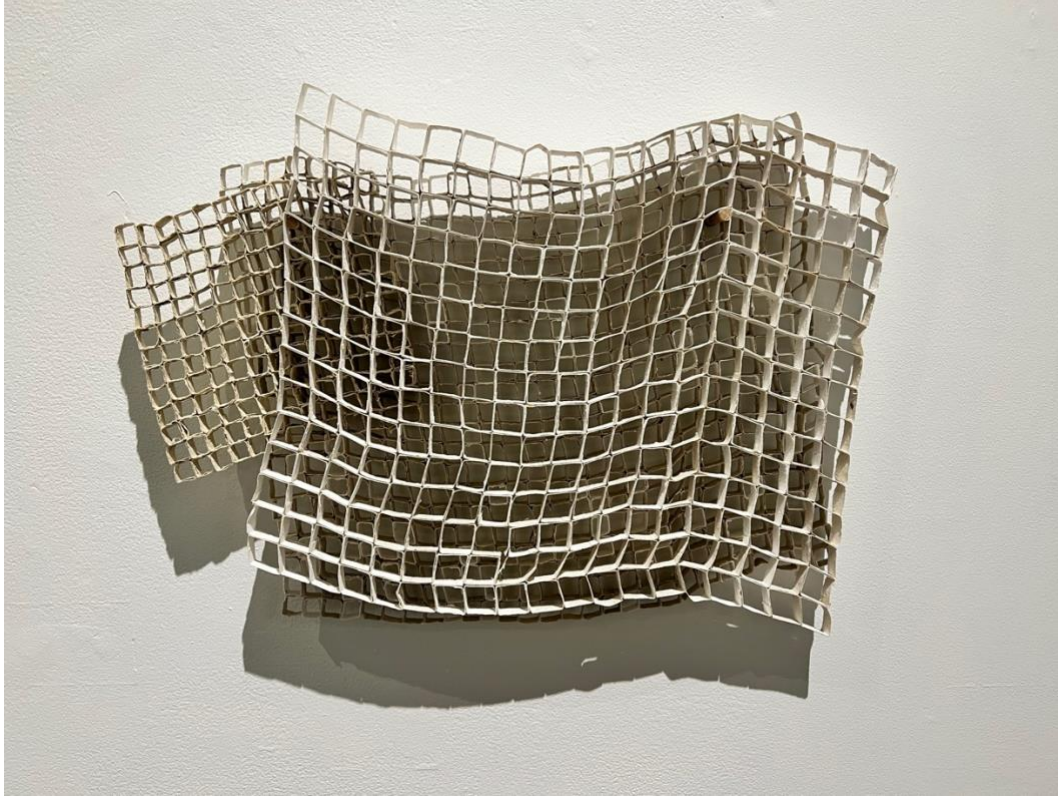


Figure 16: Keatan Mckeever, *Support and Balance*, 2023. Handmade paper and wooden dowels; installation

Two of my works titled *Support and Balance* [Figure 17] and *Together/Apart* [Figure 18] are examples of this visual language previously described. *Support and Balance* involves three separate grid forms made of handmade paper that can be assembled and draped on two wooden dowels in a variety of orientations and arrangements. This piece is unique among my other work in that it still contains elements of malleability and freedom of form that is characteristic of the pulping phase, and that the other pieces often lose once they are formally constructed. Because of this, the grid is able to be further transformed by the organic and expressive potential found in the piece. In comparison, *Together/Apart* is a wall installation comprised of 252 wooden dowels that are divided evenly to fasten the four corners of each paper, and 126 sheets of two types of handmade paper that are overlapping and assembled meticulously and exactly to create a large-



Figure 17: Keatan Mckeever, *Together/Apart*, 2023. Handmade paper and wooden dowels; installation

scale grid relief. Each component is set in a fixed location, unable to shift or move. While both pieces required a commitment to repetition and labor-intensive work, further reflections on *Together/Apart* evoked the feelings I was processing when amidst the newborn stage where countless hours were spent joined together physically and emotionally with little room for separation in those early months. Looking back, there was a sense of stability in our routine with certain aspects of caretaking expected and compounding day after day; nursing, sleeping, dressings, and our daily walks, like the four dowels holding us together.

## CONCLUSION

As I contemplate on the development of my studio practice during graduate school and the progression of my work, I can identify significant growth in every considerable detail between process, material, and content. These changes come together to reflect the shift toward a visual language focused on materiality and grounded in a psychological inner dialogue through a single medium, handmade paper. In response to working independently and experimentally, my studio practice found direction through material exploration and investigation. I want my sculptural forms to show both simplicity and complexity at the same time, and this focus contributed to a maturation in my work, both in the ways it is produced and in the various ways it can be understood.

As my papermaking practice further develops through intention and spontaneity, there is no doubt that it will continue to evolve. I look forward to incorporating more community-based papermaking in my studio practice that can create an additional layer through a collective dialogue, expanding the breath of my work while exploring new ideas within the medium.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Keatan T. McKeever received an Associate of Science in Biology from South Texas College in 2016 and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from The University of Texas San Antonio in 2018. She began her Master of Fine Arts studies at Texas Woman's University in 2020 before transferring to the MFA program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. McKeever received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in December 2023. She will begin the Expressive Arts Therapy Certificate program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley during the Spring 2024 term to further bridge the gap between her interests in psychology and the arts. She can be contacted at [keatan.mckeever@gmail.com](mailto:keatan.mckeever@gmail.com).