

# Botanical Lace

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My thesis aims to approach the concept and forms of *decay* from a new angle and make them beautiful. The project references decay mostly through color, and relates to the way plants decay in some formal instances, as well as to other cyclic processes found in the lives of microscopic organisms. To provoke the realization of the relationship of decay and to the fullness of life, my work is installed in the tropical conservatory of the Matthai Botanical Gardens.

Originally I envisioned my pieces representing a garden, something beautiful that grows and takes over a space. The process of making I went through used a crochet technique that I have developed over time. This process employs my knowledge of traditional techniques in combination with my need to be spontaneous and work in a non-repetitive way. This is the main reason that I am choosing to crochet instead of using another technique like knitting or weaving. While crochet requires more control in some ways, as in consistency of tension, the practice overall lends itself to being more

freeform. My process requires an inflatable form as a base, as well as the application of a stiffening agent in order to preserve the form after removing the inflatable (see Fig 1). All of my forms are made with jute that I have dyed in a



Fig. 1 – Deflating the supporting structure after glue has been applied and cured.

specific range of colors that felt appropriate to represent the process of life and sometimes death in the plant world.

My work is a representation of the evolution of artistic process over time. This process has a common ancestry, but takes its tangents in differing directions. Like the tree of life, once you travel far enough down a branch of selections, the tip of that branch may seem almost unrelated, or ‘of a

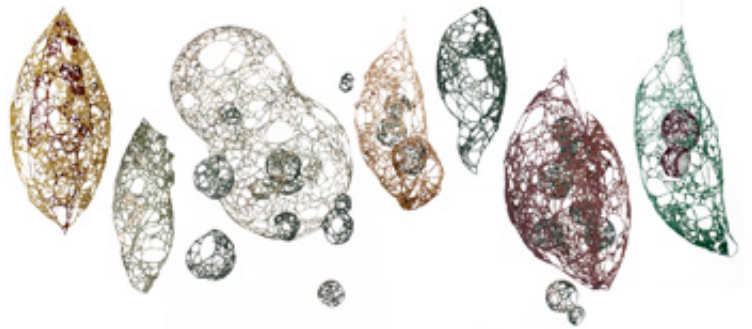


Fig. 2 - sample of the range of forms derived from the use of different sized inflatable spheres.

different family’ than the tip of the branch it is parallel to. My pieces are not direct representations of the process of evolution, but I do like to borrow the idea of a common ancestry, wherein the pieces are related by their essential building blocks, even if this is where their similarities stop (see Fig. 2). These pieces are thereby not all contained within the same family, and therefore will not be displayed as a logical progression like specimens in a museum. They will be displayed as living (and dying) things are displayed, in a greenhouse, scattered and paired thoughtfully with their distant relations, the plants.

I learned to crochet from my grandmother when I was only 5 years old, and I am the first self-declared artist in my family. However, I see both of my parents and all of my grandparents as artists as well. These six people have taught me more about art than my college education. My grandfathers were both fixers: one had a more rigorous sense of rules for the way things should fit together, which taught me a lot about building technique, while my other grandfather was the type of man who could fix a lawnmower

with a tube sock. These two men taught me how to build things just by allowing me to hang around while they worked, and play in scrap materials. Eventually my process of making and learning through imitation and play earned me the title of Maniac McGee with my own father. I've always been a champion of knots, both in making them and untangling masses of threads, so the idea of freeform lace comes naturally. This skill came by no mistake; my grandmother was a lace maker. Every suitable surface in my grandparent's house was adorned with a doily, which always was a useless object in my mind. I realize now that those doilies made my grandmother feel like she had a 'fancy' home, she was proud of them, and essentially, they were her artwork on display. After learning to crochet I became fascinated by lace that was so daintily made, but never had the patience as a child to duplicate such a thing. Instead when I was young I would spend my time attempting to crochet large mats from the tall weeds that my mother plucked from her garden.

It was my fascination with the outdoors that lead me to a summer internship on horticulture staff at Fredrik-Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park. During this time I learned much more than I could have possibly anticipated, and began to appreciate plants as individual entities. It was at Meijer Gardens that I first saw the work of Dale Chihuly in person. His pieces were scattered throughout the 40 acres of manicured grounds. People followed maps given to them at the front desk to "find the art." I found this idea exceedingly engaging to the public on so many levels, and set the bar high for myself to have a similarly styled exhibition (see *Fig. 3*). Originally I



**Fig. 3 – “Red Reeds” Dale Chihuly Exhibit 2011  
Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park.**

envisioned my pieces representing a garden, something beautiful that grows and takes over a space.

In some senses I hope that my pieces still do this, but recently my thoughts have changed. The forms in nature that I am most inspired by are forms that have to do with the life cycle of the plant, such as pseudobulbs of orchids, a bulb-like structure that provides support for the plant and can act as a time capsule in times of stress, meaning they hold resources for survival on time scales of decades until conditions are favorable. Beans and seedpods inspire me, with their tremendous potential for life – there is no expiration date on a seed. Microorganisms can pick up scrap pieces of DNA left by other dead organisms and incorporate it into their own genome. Almost all organisms engage in some sort of symbiosis with microbes and microbes can have they're own endosymbionts (microbes living inside microbes!), the range of variation for survival is amazing. I take inspiration from the dead and lifeless leaves that get pummeled into the pavement until all that is left is their venation, which also happens to be their life-support system. From bulbs and seedpods I take inspiration for form, to relate these forms I have looked at microbial process, and the open lace technique I am using relates itself visually to the decay of a leaf. For this reason I have chosen to use colors that look burnt, rusted and decayed.

I am using jute fiber for all of the lacework pieces in my installation, for the reason that, after much experimentation in fiber, I came to the conclusion that the fiber should preferably be hairy, but not wooly, as plants can be hairy but wool is derived exclusively from animals. This decision left me with two options (out of the things I had worked with and decided looked good), cotton and jute. Both of these are plant fibers that

dye well and soak up stiffening agents. I finally decided on jute for the main reason that I am not trying to duplicate the lace my grandmother made, for which my grandmother used cotton: by using jute, I am staying in the same arena as cotton without being too close to traditional doily-making practices.

There are several reasons that I am choosing thread over wire, which would hold its shape on its own. The answer is in the patterning of the lace. In order for wire to hold a structure, you must make a stable framework that can hold the weight and shape



Fig. 4 – “Spore” studio shot and shot at installation site

of the form; this makes it

extremely difficult to create

any sort of asymmetry and does not lend itself well to leaving wide open spaces. If I were choosing to work with wire, I would have to give up the open lace, asymmetrical look.

The use of wire is also very inorganic in the sense that one of your first observations would be material choice. The look of metal would be enhanced as an opposite of the plant material when placed in the conservatory, my goal was to choose a material that would blend in enough with the foliage to give my pieces some level of camouflage as well as a sense of belonging (see *Fig. 4*). Hence my choice to use jute, a fiber that is made entirely from plant material.



These considerations aside, if I were to use wire it would then make it difficult to define myself as different from work that already exists, like Ruth Asawa's crochet sculptures. Although I do take much inspiration from what she does, I choose to borrow mainly visual cues from her work, especially her use of light, which almost seems to multiply the number of objects that she has on display. I do feel that my work is similar to Asawa's in the sense that she has created both hanging and free standing abstract objects, as opposed to more representational objects, like the crochet wire work of Anne Mondro.

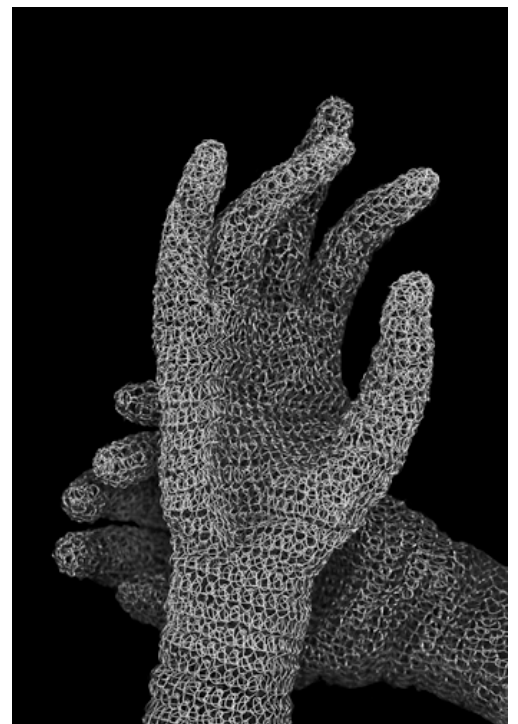
Asawa's sculptures are each entirely different and yet related through her process.

However, her forms lend themselves to a being more geometric (see *Fig. 5*), with many more hard angles and lines where I am aiming for soft curves, lumps and bumps.

The amazing thing about Anne Mondro's work is her ability to create organic forms in three dimensions with her closed lacework. Unlike the open lace technique that I have used, Anne's work uses only increases and decreases to make the forms she creates. Most notable is her astounding ability to make complex yet still delicate and recognizable forms (see *Fig. 6*). This type of lace making is difficult in it's own right, I wanted my sculptures to appear light and almost transparent, which is not an association that metal easily



**Fig. 5 – Ruth Asawa and her sculptures, from [www.ruthasawa.com](http://www.ruthasawa.com)**



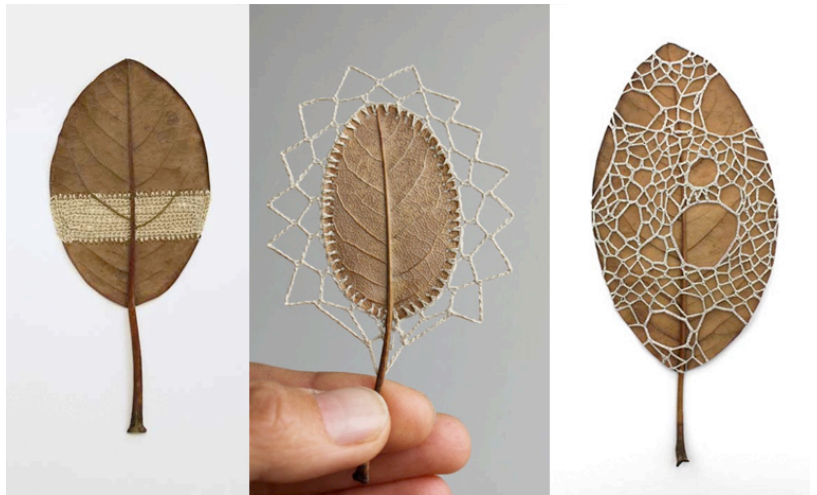
**Fig. 6 – Anne Mondro: "Sentient II" Digital Print 2010**

lends itself to. Metal has connotations of permanence that creates a large relational gap between it and organic material that has a life cycle.

While looking at other artist's work, I am most inspired by the direct

application of lace-making techniques to natural materials. Some artists choose to use this lace-making technique in a decorative way, which can lead to wonderment about what exactly was made by nature, and what by hand. If you think the same way I do, it may give you a new appreciation for the beauty of nature and the large extent of its

possibilities in the world of patterning, shape, function, and how these things work together. An example of a work like this could be the small pieces done by Susanna Bauer (see *Fig. 7*). The main draw to lacework like this, and even in more traditional lacework, is the sheer display of patient talent and a delicate handiwork.



**Fig. 7 – Susanna Bauer: from left “Band”, “Aura”, “Web”**



**Fig. 8 – Brent Fogt: Studio Installation, crocheted candle wicking and plant 2009**

Another artist who uses actual plant material in their lacework is Brent Fogt, an MFA graduate from U of M. His work, in my eyes, is a display of the type of obsessive making that often accompanies lace makers. In the pieces into which he has incorporated live plants, his waxed lace pieces act as a supporting lattice (see *Fig. 8*), as the plants

grow closer to their light source. I personally attribute his use of crochet lace making techniques to the natural mimic freeform lacework has to the process of growth. The holes in the lace allow for the plants to use these structures as a lattice to climb. This is something I that I have explored briefly (see *Fig. 9*), and would like to continue later in my work. Although the series I have most recently created did not, in my opinion, have room for this type of consideration.



**Fig. 9 – Hanging ceramic bean planters with crochet lattice structures. 2012**

I have little interest in the incorporation of performance or time based media into my sculptures, which leaves me with few options for the representation of decay. It is important, however, for me to distinguish if I am attempting to represent the process of decay, or just a snapshot of a moment in the life cycle. These pieces represent a moment in time that most people do not get to observe. The moment in the cycle where the death of an organism feeds the new life of the next new growth. Many of my pieces are titled after beginning of cycles: Bud, Pulse, Spore, Pod, Divide – but are physically made to have many large holes that imitate the process of decay and deterioration.

There is an excitement in discovering something that you are looking for, and when you are looking for something, you see a lot more detail than you would if you knew exactly where to go. Part of the reason my show was so enjoyable was because people really had to look to find my pieces hanging in the conservatory. You have to experience a sort of childlike discovery, in which you're not entirely certain what you're



looking for. Upon finding the pieces people would point excitedly, and because they had been forced to really study the plant material around the sculptures, they saw the relationships between the two. These relationships were both intentional in my placement and some were, excitingly, unintentional.

Overall, I must state, it is still important to me that these are plants, and the main reason is not so hidden in my inspiration of seeds. Plants have this amazing ability to reach for the light, literally. They twist and extend their bodies in whatever direction necessary to get some sunshine. The point here is that, although I am interested in that self-shattering single moment of almost instantaneous decay, I am conscious of the moments that follow. From decay comes a source for new life, this project has reached its high point, surpassed its prime for the time being. However, its life will inspire and inform the work that I will make from here forward, and hopefully it will inspire creativity or a new appreciation for others as well.

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[http://brentfomt.com/?attachment\\_id=121](http://brentfomt.com/?attachment_id=121)