

ALWAYS PETAL BY PETAL

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction: Touch as Exploration .....	1
2.	Shadow .....	4
3.	Translucence .....	17
4.	Reflection .....	30
5.	Conclusion: Finishing Touch .....	35
6.	Works Cited .....	41

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Dot Dot Dash Tapered Tumblers</i> , Meredith Host, 2012 .....	3
Figure 2. <i>The Boarders</i> , Annette Messager. Centre Pompidou, 1971-1972.....	10
Figure 3. <i>Pigeon Memorial 2</i> (before), Jennifer Chua, 2013.....	11
Figure 4. <i>Pigeon Memorial 2</i> (after), Jennifer Chua, 2013.....	12
Figure 5. <i>Right After</i> , Eva Hesse. Milwaukee Art Museum, 1969.....	13
Figure 6. <i>Contingent</i> , Eva Hesse. National Gallery of Australia, 1969.....	14
Figure 7. <i>Accession II</i> , Eva Hesse. Detroit Institute of Arts, 1969 .....	15
Figure 8. <i>The Sound of 1000 Hands</i> , Jennifer Chua, 2014 .....	16
Figure 9. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> , Jennifer Chua, 2015.....	22
Figure 10. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (aerial detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015 .....	23
Figure 11. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (reflection detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.....	24
Figure 12. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (center space detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015 .....	25
Figure 13. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (installation of pedestal, detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015 .....	26
Figure 14. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (pedestal detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015 .....	27
Figure 15. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (porcelain detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015 .....	28
Figure 16. <i>Always Petal by Petal</i> (glass detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.....	29
Figure 17. Trays filled with porcelain on a wheeled cart .....	34
Figure 18. <i>A Thousand Tiny Deaths</i> , Jeanne Quinn. Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2009 .....	38
Figure 19. <i>A Thousand Tiny Deaths</i> (detail), Jeanne Quinn. Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2009.....	39

Figure 20. *feed/feel*, Gwendolyn Yoppolo. Trisolini Gallery, Ohio

University, 2009.....40

## **Introduction: Touch as Exploration**

During long walks as a child, I loved to run my fingers along the surfaces of my urban environment. Once out of the subway, I would reach my arm out and trail my hands across the brick and concrete walls of buildings, and the gated fences of nicer houses. Chain link fences were the best, offering a quick series of staccato thuds. These tactile experiences at the borders of the inhabited spaces I circumnavigated were a tactile exploration of the margins of public space, while also an imaginary experience of the building within. I never entered these other buildings, but my hands knew their surfaces, and I had an intimate knowledge of these buildings that could not be gotten from merely walking through.

As an adult, my environment has grown to include spaces such as museums that are touch-prohibitive, and this love of touch has developed into intellectual wandering, an imaginary exploration of surfaces. My sense of imagined tactile exploration was pushed further when I first encountered Meredith Host's functional ceramic tableware designs, and their clever use of pattern (Fig. 1). At the 2011 annual conference of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), she clarified that the patterns she uses in her work are inspired by a variety of sources, including toilet paper: “the prevalence of these dimpled decorations in our daily life renders them invisible, their utility questionable. We barely notice them and take them for granted” (Host 25). The patterns Host appropriates in her functional ceramic pieces are simple, their presence ubiquitous, and this simplicity yields deeper intellectual engagement with the touch as an interface with the world. I was drawn not to the brightly colored surfaces of her cups and bowls, but to the imagined sensation of touching the subtly stippled textures of toilet paper, a mundane, quotidian object. To touch an object is to know its textures, but to imagine

touching an object is to investigate its full textural possibilities. I came to see the stipple patterns of her work as emblematic of the importance of repetition in the abstract, conceptual valuation of craft process, and was led to reflect upon the gap between the exploratory touch of the imagination and the sensory experience of touch. My thesis project, *Always Petal by Petal*, is an investigation of the visual abstraction of touch, the ephemeral impact of an accretion of simple repetitive gestures, and a reconciliation of conceptual abstraction with tactile desire and material exploration.

The following paper is organized somewhat chronologically. The first chapter, “Shadow,” highlights the historical research, conceptual resonances that resulted from this research, and the craft processes that contributed to the manifestation of *Always Petal by Petal* in its final form. The second chapter, “Translucence,” addresses the installation itself, including the *hows* and *whys* of the materials used, and the ways in which the visual qualities of the piece came to augment the tactile qualities that I was so invested in. The third chapter, “Reflection,” is just that—a reflection on the surprising autobiographical components and personal history which came to be central to the generation of this installation- values and connections which were not considered or acknowledged until after the exhibition. In the conclusion, “Finishing Touch,” I offer possibilities for the next steps in the development of my work by examining the work of two very different contemporary ceramic artists whose conceptual underpinnings offer unique possibilities for the connections between conceptual abstraction and physical touch.



Figure 11. *Dot Dot Dash Tapered Tumblers*, Meredith Host, 2012.

## Shadow

Modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and James Joyce inspired and galvanized my undergraduate career, but I could find no affinity to Modernism as it applied to visual art, and certainly found no linkages as it applied to my own work. I felt especially alienated by Clement Greenberg, the seminal Modernist art critic whose definition of Modernism included endorsement of a cerebral, implicitly masculine art (Hopkins, 25); “bland, balanced” art “in which an intense detachment informs all” (Hopkins, 28). As a woman with a deep interest in intimacy and intimate contact with material, these words were deflating to me, and though the Modernist imperative no longer needed to apply to the work I made, the shadows cast by this critical theory, as well as those of the conceptual underpinnings that Modernism touted, were long and unavoidable. I labored to bridge the academic world of conceptualism with the intimacy of focused haptic exploration which had been the guiding principle of my artistic practice.

Where previously I had participated in a mode of making that was personally and often emotionally derived, in the graduate-level academic environment I struggled to make work that was conceptually sound as well as emotionally accessible, and which could speak to the universal experience of anyone who might walk through the gallery doors. I found myself re-reading *A Room of One's Own*, and was particularly drawn to Virginia Woolf's call for women to not only create, but to create differently than men did: “Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities?” (88). I longed to make work that was rooted in emotional depth, but intellectually unsentimental, aligned with Woolf's description of fiction

as “a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (41).

Inspired by Annette Messager’s *The Boarders* (Fig. 2), I began to make memorials for dead pigeons I saw by the side of the road. *The Boarders* is a sculptural installation which neatly lays out a field of dead birds, each wearing a tiny crocheted sweater. The birds are displayed in a grid, as though they might be pinned into place for scientific inspection and labeled with Latin names. The rigid, taxonomical placement for each bird provided sharp contrast to their handcrafted sweaters, which add an element of warmth and pathos to their deaths. In contemplating these gestures of care, I began to explore the physical impact of emotional loss. In *Pigeon Memorial 2* (Figs. 3 and 4), an unfired clay bird was covered in fired ceramic feathers and left to disintegrate in the rain. As the rain washed away the raw clay, the fired ceramic feathers were left behind in a pile. These feathers, which were equal parts memorial and fossil, were designed to exist beyond the lifespan of a single dead bird, while simultaneously serving as evidence of and a remembrance to that same body. Further versions of the series developed into more refined versions of the feathers—they became thinner, more delicate, and made of porcelain. The specific gesture of pressing a small amount of porcelain in the left palm with the right thumb became the final version, as the finger- and palm prints left on the surface of the porcelain further called to mind the absent body. This same movement, which had begun as a way to refine the bird feathers I made, grew to become an emotional gesture of soothing self-iteration as I replicated my palm- and fingerprints over and over again, calming my own insecurities while giving physical form to an invisible touch.

Woolf wrote *A Room of One’s Own* during a time when women’s artistic skills, along with the value of their contributions to the public domain, were under a great deal of scrutiny.

The Victorian era was a time of rapid industrial expansion and strict morality, which developed into a “no-touch society” that “resulted in homes filled with tasty visuals: things—and lots of them” (Fariello, 29). The middle class home was filled with embroidery, along with a variety of “fancywork,” decorative objects of nominal function which were not only sewn and stitched, but also included materials such as shells, wax, molded leather, pine cones, and fish scales (Motz and Browne, 48), themselves the physical remains of absent bodies. Presiding over “drawing-room society,” the well appointed home served as a marker of status, and a woman’s tasteful adornment of the parlor became a way to serve as “guardian of the sphere that was now endowed with critical social significance” (Parker, 151). Furthermore, a woman’s decorative contributions to the home were carefully examined by all guests and visitors who looked to fancywork as markers of class standing, and it is reasonable to expect that fancywork was crafted with some level of apprehension stemming from imagining how it would be received.

My aggressive research into the lives of Victorian women served as a means to soothe my own insecurities and find strategies for coping with the expectations of graduate school, where it seemed my value was determined by my ability to express the conceptual side of my output. My ceramic education had been largely cobbled together after I took two undergraduate ceramics courses, and I continually defined my skill set according to what it lacked. There also existed a new and unique sort of loneliness in being the only female member of my cohort during my second year, and researching the history of women in the arts as they entered the public sphere was a way of looking for peers who might have also experienced this same kind of emotional toll, as well as a way to understand how I might surrender my work to the public gaze. Looking to the women of the Victorian era was comforting, as they too struggled to express the validity of their intellectual contributions in the public sphere.

From the decorative objects of the domestic, I moved along chronologically in my research to the female artists of the 20th century. The boldness of feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman both excited and unnerved me, but their work felt incompatible with my interests. Kruger and Sherman, among others, took their circumstances as the subject matter of their work, and I was interested less in the female condition and more in Woolf's edict to make differently. The real seduction occurred when I discovered Eva Hesse.

My introduction to Hesse's work overwhelmed me. The physicality of her work was palpable, and its sensual tactility made me dizzy. Luckily I was seated in a classroom, lights dimmed for the critical theory lecture. In conversation with Cindy Nemser, Hesse spoke of an interest in "solving an unknown factor of art" and described feeling "emotionally connected" to Carl Andre's work because "it does something to my insides" (Corby, 111-112). This sensation of having something done to my insides was a primal tug that gnawed at me whenever I viewed her work. I could only imagine what it would be like to step under the ropey suspensions of *Right After* (Fig. 5), or walk around the sagging, stretched edges of *Contingent* (Fig. 6). I could attribute the directness of my response in part to her choice of materials, which she presented bluntly, without any artifice or attempts at illusion—fiberglass was clearly fiberglass, and rope was clearly rope. The honesty in presentation of the materials in her work made them powerful in their vulnerability, and also forced the viewer's attention to the present moment of aesthetic experience; for even as latex stretches, it will also eventually decay. This maxim rang especially true for me when researching a piece of her *Accession* series (Fig. 7), which at first appeared to be a cube filled with metal spikes. When I learned that the "spikes" were in fact lengths of rubber and vinyl tubing, my tactile imagination began to pet the cube's soft, droopy interior. Hesse's work exemplified the affective relationship between sight and touch, a contrast of the

formal, conceptual austerity of viewing from a distance, and the physical, tactile desire method that can be described as “feeling through the eye” (Petzinger and Sussman, 163). The curator Renate Petzinger described Hesse’s work as “an encounter with a body of work that offers unique tactile temptations,” and the act of viewing as “wandering with your eye instead of wandering with your finger” along any given piece (163).

Fascinated by the abstracted, conceptual notion of touch, I began to explore the qualities of an aesthetic experience that was tactile, yet fleeting. In *The Sound of 1000 Hands* (Fig. 8), the porcelain feathers from the *Pigeon Memorial* series were further abstracted as physical remains of the absent body. While the dyed monofilament served as a direct reference to hair, the porcelain pieces, made by pressing a small amount of porcelain into the left palm using the right thumb, had evolved from feathers to represent direct extensions of the hand. The physical components of the performance installation consisted of exactly 1000 strands of hand-dyed monofilament, and 1000 porcelain handprints. The number of 1000 was a direct reference to the physical attributes of the Thousand-Hand Kuanyin, a Buddhist bodhisattva whose metaphysical “touch” and impact is multiplied a thousandfold. The dyed monofilaments, each ending with a single porcelain handprint, were bundled and hung in eight ropes in a gallery space, and members of the audience were invited to hold one rope apiece. As a group they were guided through a maypole dance, marching in circles around the room, which twisted the ropes into a single thick braid. The volunteers giggled and bumped into each other, sometimes missing a turn or walking the wrong way. As the dance continued, their movements became more fluid and confident. Their ropes, entwining together into a thick, single coil, grew shorter as they walked. They came into closer and closer contact, all while the porcelain at the end of each monofilament bundle tinkled against each other in their hands. This specific permutation of simple elements—

monofilament, porcelain, and dance steps—allowed for a visual complexity and a shared aesthetic experience that was felt by the participants, rather than seen.

My art historical research and art-making practice had developed into a search for strategies for emotionally connecting with the conceptual abstraction that I experienced in graduate school. Through researching the labor-intensive craft processes of the Victorian housewife, I saw the visual accretion of simple, repetitious acts as a foundational element of conceptual complexity. In *Pigeon Memorial*, I focused on the mundane event of encountering dead pigeons in an urban environment, using it as a means to address the lasting impact of small gestures, the act of creating porcelain feathers were simultaneously an abstraction of physical touch, and a memorial to the absent body. My interests in the abstraction of touch were further reiterated in *The Sound of 1000 Hands*, which had a thematic focus of simple, physical gestures, repeated and compounded into something larger and ephemeral. Through audience interaction, hands and hair became sound and dance, with the resulting braid representing a larger whole than a simple compilation of its base components.

Humble, physical processes of repetitious acts formed a bridge between my intellectual understanding of the detached abstraction of Modernism and Postmodernism and the intimate, emotional connections I sought to engage in my practice. Like a wide pool made of individual water droplets, I was certain that the accumulation of gentle touches could have lasting emotional, physical, and conceptual impact. I was, however, anxious that my interest in small gestures would not amply fill the gallery space.



Figure 12. *The Boarders*, Annette Messager. Centre Pompidou, 1971-1972.



Figure 13. *Pigeon Memorial 2* (before), Jennifer Chua, 2013.



Figure 14. *Pigeon Memorial 2 (after)*, Jennifer Chua, 2013.

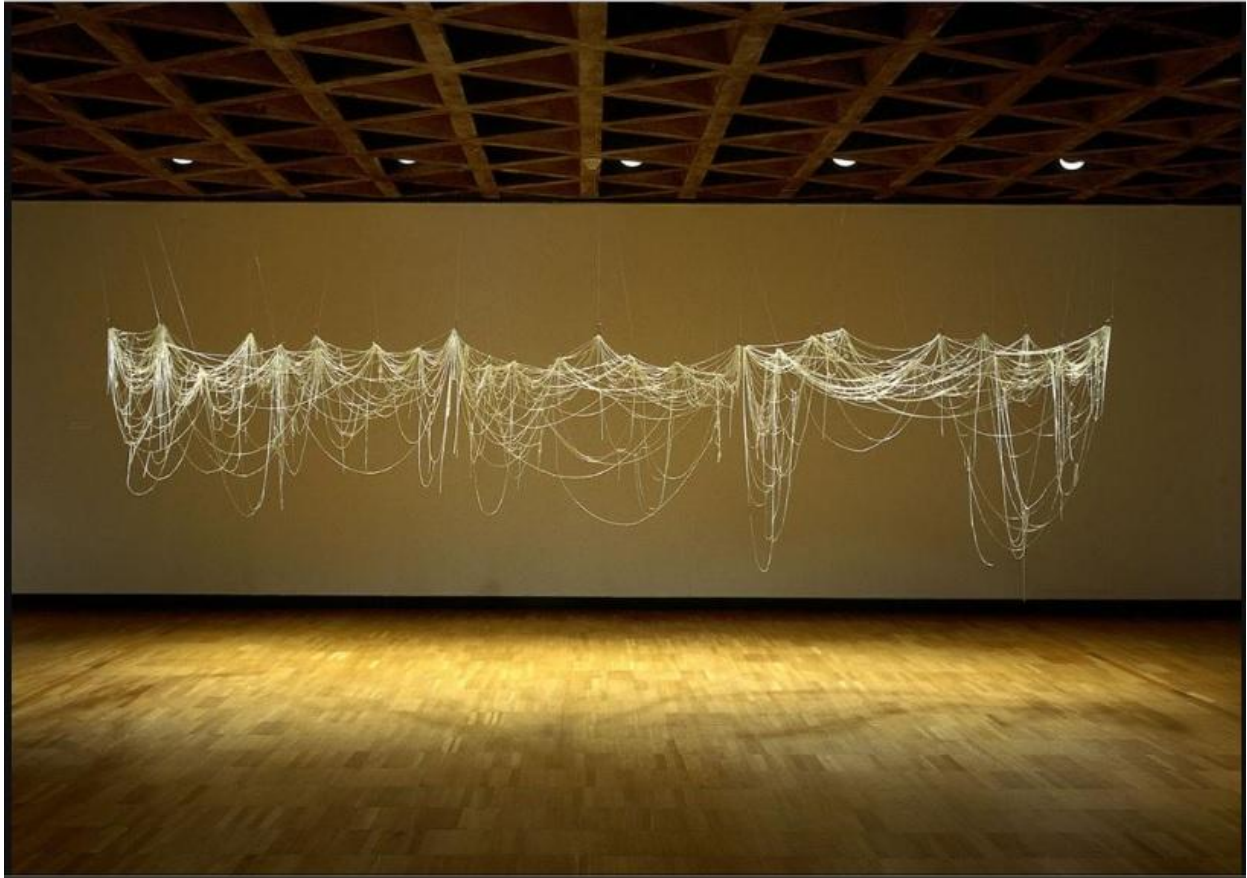


Figure 15. *Right After*, Eva Hesse. Milwaukee Art Museum, 1969.



Figure 16. *Contingent*, Eva Hesse. National Gallery of Australia, 1969.



Figure 17. *Accession II*, Eva Hesse. Detroit Institute of Arts, 1968(1969).



Figure 18. *The Sound of 1000 Hands*, Jennifer Chua, 2014.

## Translucence

In *Always Petal by Petal* (Figs. 9 and 10), I sought to highlight the combined impact of small gestures and create a visual feast that was ripe for imaginary tactile exploration. This sculptural installation was composed of thousands of porcelain impressions resting on a large glass disc. The disc was six feet in diameter, suspended forty inches from the ground by four wires, which met at a central suspension point on the ceiling. The wires were anchored to the glass disc by steel clips. Each of the wires aligned with one of the four columns inside the gallery space, allowing the suspended porcelain impressions to be “attached ever so lightly . . . to life at all four corners” (Woolf, 41). Porcelain impressions were piled in a ring atop the disc, so that the center of the glass remained bare and reflected a mirror image of the porcelain pile (Fig. 11). Spotlighting from the ceiling cast dark shadows onto a low, round pedestal beneath the disc (Fig. 12). The pedestal was overlaid with a crocheted doily that matched it in diameter. The doily itself was blanketed in tiny glass beads, which served as a field of sand. The glass beads preserved but softened the outlines of the crochet stitches, maintaining an intricate but subtly textured surface for the shadows.

In many ways, I viewed the gallery space as some women of the Victorian era must have felt about their parlors. I had been given free reign over the gallery, and I was allowed to fill it however I wished. Yet instead of a sense of freedom, the thought of having the fruits of my labor on display, closely examined and discussed by people who might be important to my career, left me with a mild sense of anxiety akin to claustrophobia. I felt trapped by public exposure. When choosing forming methods, I again looked to the women of the Victorian era, who worked in art forms that were labor intensive and repetitive. The repetitious nature of their use of material, a

warm, and comforting knowledge of every next step in the process, was a way for me to approach the coldness of the gallery space.

I began my creative process with the crocheted lace doily, using it to both conceptually and physically ground the installation. Submerging my conscious mind in the ease and repetitive simplicity of the crochet process, I could quiet the ego and soothe my anxieties about how to fill the space. Like a monk spinning a prayer wheel, I was certain that the process of crochet would eventually yield a complex surface that I could only have built incrementally. Focusing on the installation as an accumulation of small gestures, rather than a complex whole, allowed me to address formal abstraction without being overwhelmed. Consequently, obscuring the crocheted doily under the glass beads became a necessity (Figs. 13 and 14), guiding the viewer's focus away from the physicality of the completed, whole of the doily to the intimate topography of the individual gestures which comprised the small hills and valleys of the visual landscape across the base pedestal.

Porcelain feathers from the *Pigeon Memorial* series here developed into small, simple gestures which covered the serene flat surface of the glass disc, echoing the obscured crocheted surface of the pedestal. As physical manifestations of a repeated act, the process developed from an earlier piece became emblematic of an iterative process, individual abstractions of touch (Fig. 15). Though the making process was a systematic, almost obsessively mechanical process of pressing the right thumb into the left palm with a small bit of porcelain, each small slip of porcelain that resulted from this process was utterly unique. Porcelain is known for its memory, and these small gestures were encouraged to curl and warp in the kiln in a totally individual phenomenon that contributed to the sense of unity they invoked when viewed as a group. Resting on the glass disc, the porcelain gestures could be viewed from all sides, including above

and below (Fig. 16). The construction of the pile was, for me, central to maintaining the directness of the installation as one of material integrity. None of the porcelain pieces were fixed or glued into place. They were held together through friction and gravity alone, without any armatures, so as to focus the attention on the suspended pile as an accretion of individual gestures, rather than an illusion of mass.

Playing with the translucence of the glass disc, the installation was designed to showcase the shadows and reflections of these small porcelain gestures. The reflections were carefully held within the center of the glass disc, and the shadows were similarly captured on the pedestal. The abstracted presence of the small gesture, and the impact of each light touch of porcelain, were reinforced by the physical, yet untouchable, presence of both the reflection and the shadow. They were real but insubstantial; they existed but were entirely intangible. I found their contradictions an apt metaphor for the elusive conceptual frameworks of critical theory that I understood only intellectually, the same conceptual abstractions that I sought to reconcile with the intimate, visceral use of materials that I hoped to engage in my own practice.

The full aesthetic experience of *Always Petal by Petal* was an encounter with a sculptural installation that was an accretion of small, abstracted gestures, memorialized in porcelain, whose shadows and reflections indicated the far-reaching, ephemeral effects of each movement that had gone into their creation. The visual impact of the piece was a total topography of intimate contact on multiple levels, a miniature enclosed landscape generated by the sensitivity of material to touch. Tenuously piled petals, with nothing but gravity and friction to hold their combined shape, and the juxtaposition of mounds of porcelain next to an open, reflective interior invited the viewer to experience at once smallness and largeness. These same tenuously piled slips of porcelain was a fragile accumulation that yielded a heavily textured surface that could

only be experienced through visual imagination of touch. The reflection of porcelain upon glass was only visible from across the expanse of the disc and gave the sense of a landscape seen at a distance, a tiny version of a mountain range reflected in a lake, or the crater walls of an atoll. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard described the experience of a landscape in miniature as one that “allows us to be world conscious at slight risk” (197). Within *Always Petal by Petal*, it was the juxtaposition of contrasting elements that allowed the viewer safe exploration of enormity within the miniature, the subtle yet lasting influence of a single small gesture. The enclosed interior space within the ring of petals allowed for a reflection of the surrounding gallery space, and more specifically, the intimacy of the inner ring allowed for a contemplative reflection on the accumulation of gesture on a larger scale as it cast an articulated shadow over a miniature set of sand dunes.

The title, *Always Petal by Petal*, stemmed from a literary connection that also addressed a paradoxical contrast, that of fragility as strength. It came from a line of an e. e. cummings poem, entitled *somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond*. In this romantic poem, the narrator’s devotion is a celebration of the subject’s gentleness. The narrator acknowledges the subject’s soft and delicate nature as a powerful force, with lines such as “in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me” and “nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals / the power of your intense fragility” (367). In the sculptural installation, porcelain petals were amassed to form a more powerful whole, and the vulnerability of the narrator was, quite literally, reflected within the introspective center of the installation, which could not be physically be touched, but had a strong, palpable presence.

The title itself came from the full line: “you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose.”<sup>1</sup> Spring is described as an entity that gently awakens roses “always petal by petal,” suggesting that winter petals, an entire season generates momentum through a slow but steady process of delicate touches. Just as the miniature of a single rose creates an invitation to explore the full revelation of springtime occurring one petal at a time, individual porcelain impressions invite an exploration of what an immense accumulation of individual, unseen touch can accomplish.

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<sup>1</sup> All discrepancies in syntax and grammar are designated by the poetic license of the author, who played with punctuation and word spacing as much as with word choice in his poetry.



Figure 19. *Always Petal by Petal*, Jennifer Chua, 2015.



Figure 20. *Always Petal by Petal* (aerial detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.



Figure 11. *Always Petal by Petal* (reflection detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.

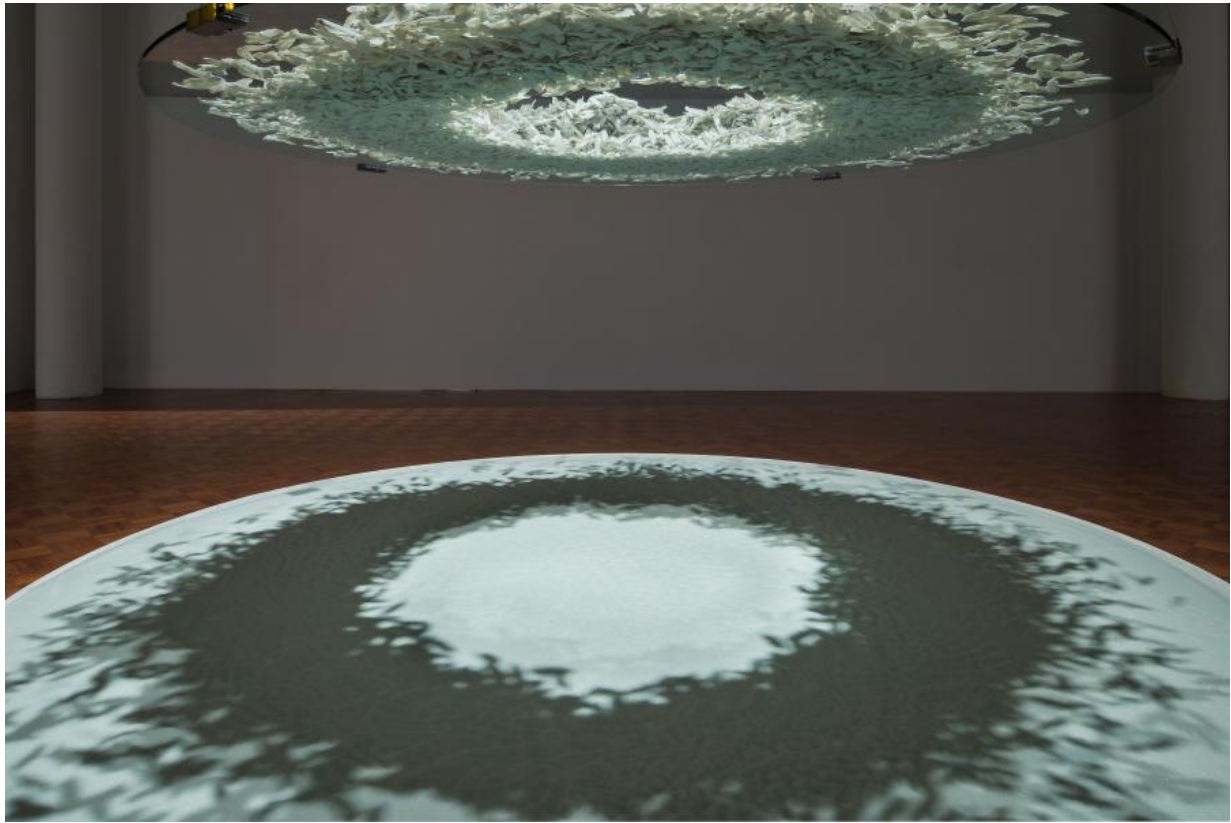


Figure 12. *Always Petal by Petal* (center space detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.

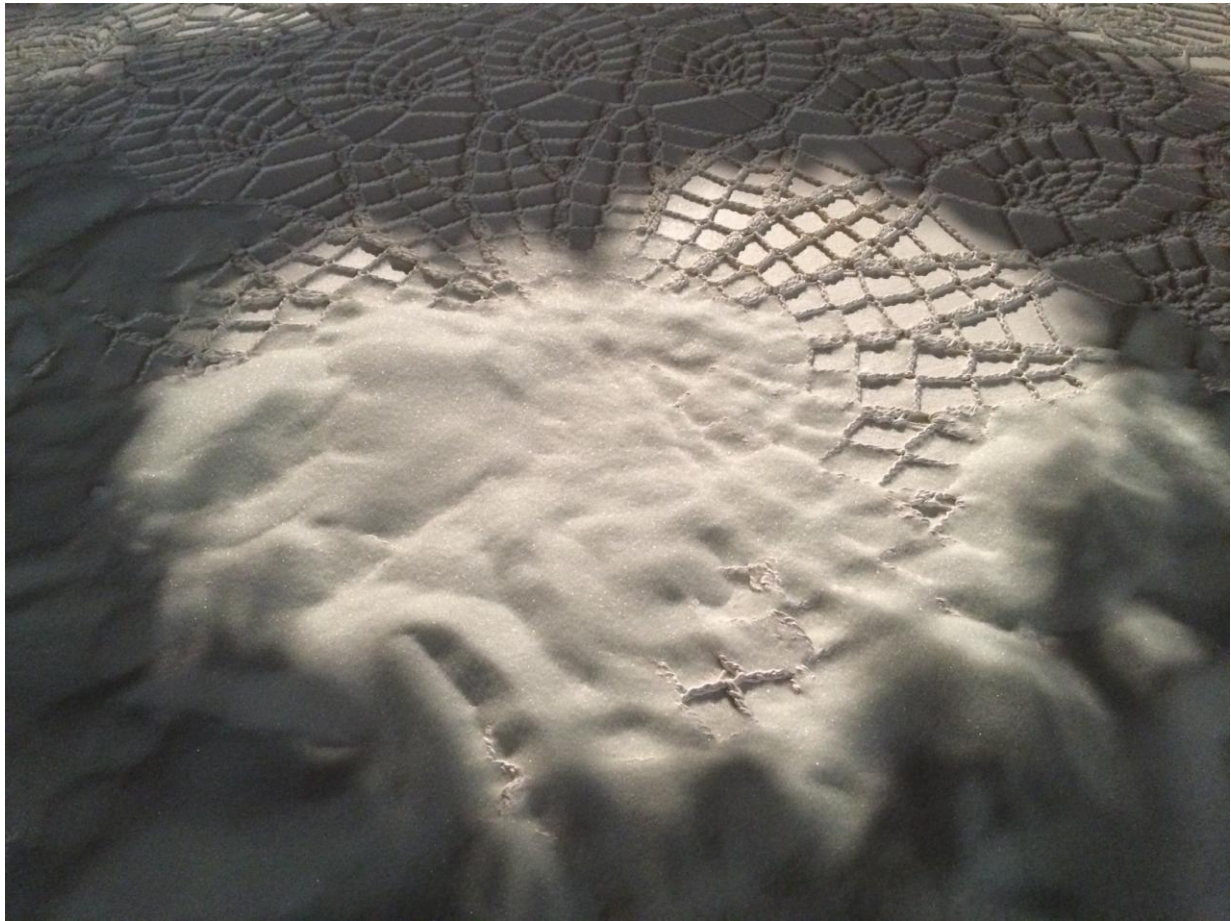


Figure 13. *Always Petal by Petal* (installation of pedestal, detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.

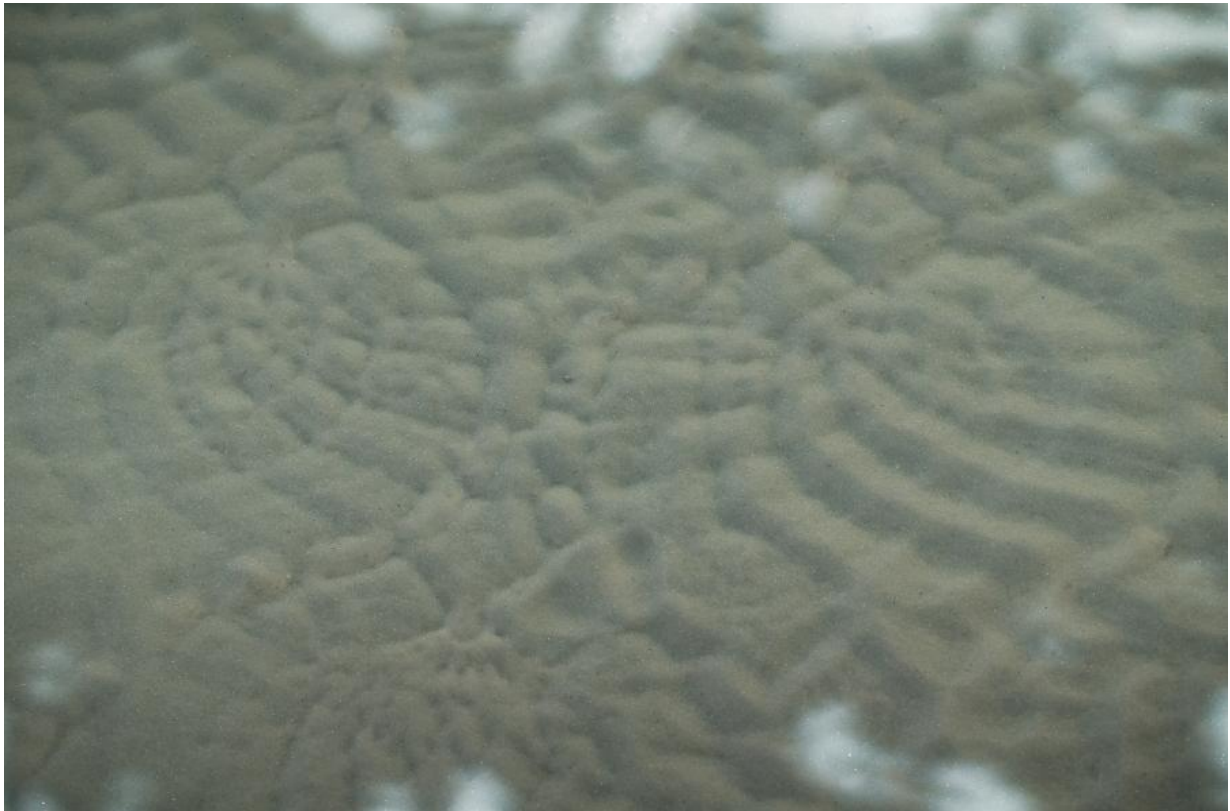


Figure 14. *Always Petal by Petal* (pedestal detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.



Figure 15. *Always Petal by Petal* (porcelain detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.



Figure 16. *Always Petal by Petal* (glass detail), Jennifer Chua, 2015.

## Reflection

Only after the installation had been dismantled did I realize that the intimate, labor-intensive making process for the porcelain gestures was inherently self-referential, and as a result, unavoidably autobiographical. I realized that the process of building incrementally, in a repetitive, industrial, method, had long been a part of the way I made sense of the world. When I was a child, my parents ran a small factory that manufactured belts, purses, and other fashion accessories, and growing up in the family business, I learned from a young age to assess an object according to the processes that contributed to its production. For maximum efficiency on the assembly line, there was always a test phase, wherein a given project was analyzed according to the time, type of labor, and number of steps required in its construction. This phase was crucial, as production costs increased with each unnecessary step. Standing on the factory floor, I watched leather stamped and cut into strips, fitted with buckles to form belts, then wrapped into neat bundles of twelve. These bundles were placed in cartons, which were placed on pallets, which in turn were forklifted into trailer trucks and driven off. Sometimes, work was contracted out, and large laundry bags stuffed with fabric and other materials were delivered to the homes of women who owned their own sewing machines. Unlike the regular factory workers, who were paid by the hour, these women were paid by the number of objects they completed, and as such, their contributions were known as “piecework.”

When it came time to capture the intimate sense of touch with porcelain on a large scale, I called upon the skills of production line efficiency that I had learned in my childhood, perhaps out of nostalgia. I was reminded of the assembly lines I used to observe, which organized complex objects into simple steps, completed simultaneously, and the piecework which allowed

women to work in their own homes, during their spare time. I followed this industrial path, moving from daytime bustling in the studio to piecework production at home in the evenings. I built trays for the porcelain, and kept them on a wheeled cart, to which my friends eventually attached signage (Fig.17): the trays allowed for efficient firing of the porcelain gestures and minimal wasted time, so that I could always be working while the kiln was firing, and I could be both physically and socially mobile as I worked. The trays allowed me to make work wherever was most convenient for the life I was living, and some nights I would invite friends over to watch a movie and join me in adding to the porcelain pile. These porcelain gestures became an emblem of my physical touch as well as my social connections, as my closest friends offered to help me make feathers not for pay but for “friendship points.”

I came to deeply enjoy making the porcelain impressions because they allowed me to sink into contemplative states while keeping my hands busy. As Bachelard wrote, “the marvelous thing about easy actions is that they do, in fact, place us at the origin of action” (107). Like touching prayer beads, the making of porcelain petals allowed me to become fully engrossed in the repetitive qualities of a simple act. I was deeply pleased with the efficiency of the motion of making a porcelain impression, a simple act creating something intricate and wild within a defined set of parameters, and I allowed myself to be seduced by the simplicity and the ease of production. This rigorous, prescriptive forming process allowed me to engage with the physicality of the porcelain in all its plasticity while still allowing for chance and surprise when confronted with the final result of the impression itself. That moment of surprise became the most satisfying part of the process, and I made tray after tray of instant gratification. The simplicity of repetition allowed for a contemplation of the very act of making, and slowly,

steadily, there came to be an accumulation, which amplified the feeling of serenity found in the creation.

While this piece was entirely, for me, about the small repetitive action of touch, I do not imagine that a viewer will necessarily draw the same conclusion. While the act of touching each piece of porcelain was an integral part of the process, viewers are not invited to touch, and the process might not be transparent to those who have no experience with porcelain. Furthermore, the lack of color in the piece was a decision made to simplify the visual elements, to eliminate clutter and highlight the reflections and the shadows that the porcelain cast. The ephemeral aspects of invisible gesture, and the shadow and reflection of the physical porcelain itself constituted the primary conceptual underpinnings of the whole undertaking. The result gave a sense of coolness and austerity in the installation, which one viewer described to me as “funerary.” The use of light, too, defined the central elements of the installation as removed from public space, and might have derailed viewers from the intimacy of touch that I explored. The funerary qualities of the piece are certainly observable, and can be felt in the calm and contemplative nature of the reflections, the quiet of the ghostly white-on-white color palette to the wreath-like shadows cast on the pedestal. These implications were unintentional, but not accidental, as the driving momentum of the installation came from a calm, intellectual reflection on the need to reconcile the conceptual abstraction of an authoritative gallery space with the small and intimate gestures I wished to elevate.

Perhaps most surprisingly, my anxiety turned out to be a strategy, a tool for developing the physicality of the work that reaffirmed my connection to material exploration. As I continued to make more and more porcelain impressions, the constant loop of criticism in my interior monologue developed into realistic self-appraisal. The litany of doubts became a fairly

specific list of my capabilities, and the contemplative physical act of self iteration (and re-iteration) created a shift in perspective: instead of imagining that I was lacking, the anxious gesture paved the way towards accepting that my abilities were as Virginia Woolf described: entirely separate, entirely different, and entirely valid.



Figure 17. Trays filled with porcelain on a wheeled cart.

## Conclusion: Finishing Touch

*Always Petal by Petal* was, in many ways, a self-portrait, highlighting a particular confluence of values, practices, and conceptual questions that I sought to resolve. It served as the bridge between two seemingly divergent approaches to material, and became a surprising reconciliation between the conceptual abstractions of the canonical art of the 20th century during my academic experience, and the intimate, repetitive nature of my material explorations. Sifting through historical research to learn about female artists and their production methods, from the Victorians to Eva Hesse and Annette Messager, allowed me to explore my circumstances as a female maker in the academic studio tradition. Virginia Woolf's texts allowed me to surround and bolster myself with reminders of the gentle gestures I loved, while also barricading myself from the intellectual remove of contemporary critical theory. *Always Petal by Petal* was a landscape that I came to understand through the physical act of intimate touch, as well as through the imagined sensation of trailing my fingers in, under, and through the shadows to calm reflective center. Inspired by the artistic practices of middle-class Victorian women whose handiwork created the comfort of the homes their families inhabited, I came to value my own labor and the modes of production from my industrial background, the piecework of my childhood practices, and the strength that can come from an incremental accretion of small gestures, tangible and intangible.

Through a pairing of conceptual rigor and emotional investment, *Always Petal by Petal* allowed me to develop an intellectual focus on the lasting, accumulated impact of the abstracted touch. The process of conceiving, creating, and exhibiting this piece has quelled my anxious need to make work that is purely conceptual, abstract, and formal. While *Always Petal by Petal*

had visual elements of the austere sobriety of conceptualism, the core of the installation was rooted in personal narrative and emotional introspection. Focusing the viewer's attention on small constituent parts, rather than physical wholeness, directed the attention onto the small touches that contributed to the larger installation, which in turn created a calming, contemplative experience, rather than a formal intellectual detachment.

The contemporary artists I admire make work that is also deeply attuned to intimacy and emotional connection. Their pieces are either fully responsive to touch or produce visceral, bodily reactions; viewing their pieces, I feel a sensory compulsion to touch. Moving forward in my artistic career, it is this more direct relationship to the audience and to sensation that I would like to explore, and Jeanne Quinn and Gwendolyn Yoppolo offer exciting and varied possibilities for how intimate, bodily engagement may be achieved.

While I never look at artwork and think, “I wish I had made that,” Jeanne Quinn’s *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* is the closest I have come to that particular sort of covetousness. In this sculptural installation, fired black ceramic vessels are suspended in midair by red, orange, and pink balloons that have been inflated inside of them. These balloons, filled with the breath of the artist, slowly deflated and shrank over the course of the installation. Eventually, the balloon shriveled small enough to allow the ceramic vessel they held to crash to the ground underneath. In French, “the tiny death” is an idiom for orgasm, and the connection to the work can be seen as waiting for the impending release of the artist’s breath as the balloon deflates, or eliciting a gasp from a viewer as the ceramic vessel crashes to the ground. The simplicity of the elements involved in the installation, the implicit dependency of the ceramic vessels upon the red balloons, and the use of time and gravity as primary elements of the installation are inspiring. The simple

combination of ceramic vessels and balloons in this particular configuration provides the viewer with a palpable sensation of weight and fragility that is more than the sum of its parts.

Fragility as a central element in *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* is key to its power. The balloons are ephemeral, as their impressive size and ability to suspend a ceramic vessel diminishes as the balloons lose air, and this simple fact forces the viewer to recognize that ceramic vessels, while able to survive for millenia, are also breakable. The entire installation also calls for the trust of the viewer, whose slightest push could send a ceramic vessel crashing to the ground ahead of schedule. *Always Petal by Petal* calls upon this element of trust from the viewer, whose slightest push could swing the glass disc and collapse the entire porcelain pile. While my installation offered a field of tasty visuals that yielded complexity for the contemplative viewer, *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* offers complexity and a changing landscape through a series of loud, shocking and irreverent payoffs for the patient viewer. Quinn's installation inspires me to make work that is warmer, and more attuned to the presence of the viewer, work that will surprise and offer newness for the return visitor. The sense of whimsy in *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* suggests that a dose of irreverence may have tempered some of the austerity present in *Always Petal by Petal*.

On the other end of the spectrum, so far over as to form a complete circle, is the functional tableware of Gwendolyn Yoppolo. Functional work is meant to be touched, and her cups and saucers are attuned to the lives they will live in the hands of others. Her objects are softly and subtly altered. They consist of sensuous surfaces, which are invitations to contemplate the dining ritual. In *feed/feel*, a dining set for two, participants are asked to sit across from each other and feed each other. Through the simple repetition of bringing food to another person's

lips, the diners are forced to acknowledge their own vulnerability and dependency on each other for nourishment.

Functional work is the most direct request for audience participation, and more importantly, is entirely focused on touch. Cups, bowls, and plates are focused not only on their visual appeal, but also the way they feel in the hand. In my desire to make work that is warmer, more intimate, and more aware of the audience, functional work seems ideal. Yoppolo's functional pieces demonstrate an attention to carefully handled surfaces that feel very aligned with my own interest in intimate tactile experience, and her experimentations with the dining ritual suggest possibilities for direct audience involvement that is visceral, unexpected, and dependent upon trust. Through connecting the conceptual frameworks presented within Modernist theory to material exploration through an exploration of tactile desire, *Always Petal by Petal* also represents a conceptual justification for making functional ceramic work. Perhaps this was a more convoluted path, but through the thinking and making process of creating an installation for exhibition in a formal gallery space, I developed the vocabulary to share my interest in touch and intimate contact with materials as central to an aesthetic experience, and the need for simplicity and understatement to pave the way for deeper engagement.

Though the visual qualities of the work of Quinn and Yoppolo are exceedingly different, the implications of their work resonates deeply with the explorations I wish to pursue moving forward in the ceramic field. Their interest in thematic and material simplicity is particularly appealing, since it allows the viewer to focus on the intentions of the piece rather than the trying to decipher its constituent components. They are both deeply concerned with the experience of intimacy, and have an aesthetic focus on the sensations of the viewer, distilled from spare, simple components. More importantly, they open up to new possibilities for audience engagement,

through sculptural installations that offer the surprise and irreverence of *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*, as well as functional objects that reward tactile desire and develop intimacy between users that *feed/feel* explores.

Moving forward, my work will continue to explore the sense of touch as an ephemeral but powerful gesture. I would like to incorporate the consideration of intimacy that Yoppolo's vessels imply, and pair it with the ephemeral, whimsically grand gestures of Quinn's *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*. The replication of tiny gestures has also deepened my interest in fiber crafts, and I Hesse's work provides a rich resource for understanding how to investigate the pairing of diverse media without creating a hierarchy of one material in service to the exploration of another.

*Always Petal by Petal* was an emotional and physical contemplation of the abstracted notion of touch as a means to reconcile the small, lost, or overlooked with the grandness of critical theory. The luxury of introspection of my insecurities and personal history, paired with a reflective consideration of my relationship to canonical visual art criticism, has yielded a clarity that frees me to explore the linkages between playfulness and simplicity, emotional attachment and intellectual remove. Without equivocation, I am equally drawn to the possibilities of deeper, more focused engagement with tactility in both sculptural installations and functional objects, and I believe in the potential for each to inform the other. As Roberto Lugo, NCECA's 2015 Emerging Artist, stated, "I think eclecticism is underappreciated within the arts[...] I'm into the WuTang Clan, and I'm into Worcester Porcelain. Those are two things that I am absolutely obsessed with, I love those two things, and you know what? That's what makes me unique" (Lugo).



Figure 18. *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*, Jeanne Quinn. Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2009.



Figure 19. *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* (detail), Jeanne Quinn. Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2009.



Figure 20. *feed/feel*, Gwendolyn Yoppolo. Trisolini Gallery, Ohio University, 2009.

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