



**Living Fabric.  
Threads of the Unseen.  
The Silent Architects.**

By

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MA Contemporary Dialogues: Illustration

Confirmative Praxis (ADAA7002)

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***For Liz, Chris and Ewan***

I would like to thank my amazing parents Liz and Chris for their support, guidance and for being my role models. I'd like to extend my thanks to my fellow artist and brother Ewan, for his infectious creativity, advice and humour. And to my fur babies, Fred, Milly, and Barney who follow me out to the garden for microscopic adventures.

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## Prologue- My Roots



Figure 1. *Picture of my mother, brother and myself in Trecastle in Brecon, Isabella Coombs, 2005.*

Growing up amidst the forestry of the Welsh Valleys shaped my perspective, this connection and respect for nature was instilled by my parents. Childhood memories of muddy walks up the Black Mountain, counting the rings of felled trees to calculate their age, these were foundational experiences. These moments planted the seeds of curiosity and reverence for the natural world that continue to shape my identity. My practice over the course of the MA has focused on the unseen systems and networks within nature, and in particular, the vital role of fungi and its impact on ecosystems.



## Introduction: Foundations of Practice and Exploration



Figure 2. *Up-close of amber polypore mushroom*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

*“Fungi are everywhere but they are easy to miss. They are inside you and around you. They sustain you and all that you depend on. As you read these words, fungi are changing the way your life happens, as they have done for more than a billion years”*

(Sheldrake, 2023a, p.9)

My praxis explores the symbiotic relationship within the mycorrhizal network in forest landscapes and plant communities, created by the hyphae of the mycorrhizal fungi joining with plant roots. This report aims to disseminate my praxis, supporting it with contemporary references to artists and

thinkers. Through a blend of scientific and artistic methodologies, my praxis is positioned within the “sci-art” realm, I gather imagery via microscopy, translating the microcosm into the macro through sculptural textiles and illustration to underscore the complexity and importance of nature’s interconnected systems. I will further discuss the how this project culminated its presentation as part of our group MA exhibition titled *‘Look What you Did.*

Grounded in post-humanist and new materialist perspectives, this work adopts an autoethnographic lens, visualising research inspired by leading figures in ecology and mycology, including Merlin Sheldrake, Robert Macfarlane and Anna Tsing. Additionally, the work engages with contemporary philosophical concepts such as mosaic assemblages, Entanglement, and Umwelt which positions it within the broader dialogue on ecology and our relationship with the non-human world. Engaging with the work of philosophers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Deleuze and Guattari. The first chapter of the report critically reviews my preliminary research into the microscopic, with references to my primary imagery and how I interpret it through illustration. This is supported by post-humanist perspectives and scientific research, and substantiated by artist research into Heather Barnett.

The second chapter delves into my material explorations, with a focus on how I reinterpret illustration through textiles, viewing my sewing needle as an extension of my drawing practice. I examine the influence of artists and designers Alexander McQueen and Iris van Herpen on my work, reflecting on how their practices have shaped my approach. To provide context to this discussion, I draw upon theoretical frameworks of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Tim Ingold, to support my reflections.

The third chapter reflects on my collaboration with photographer Sarah Grounds to capture images of my sculpture. I draw connections to the work of installation artist Clare Celeste, whose practice

explores themes of entanglement. Additionally, I discuss the workshops I have facilitated, directly influenced by my creative practice, emphasising the significance of environmental science within the arts.

**Chapter 1- Roots of Inquiry: Post-humanism, Fungal Forms & Microscopic Worlds**

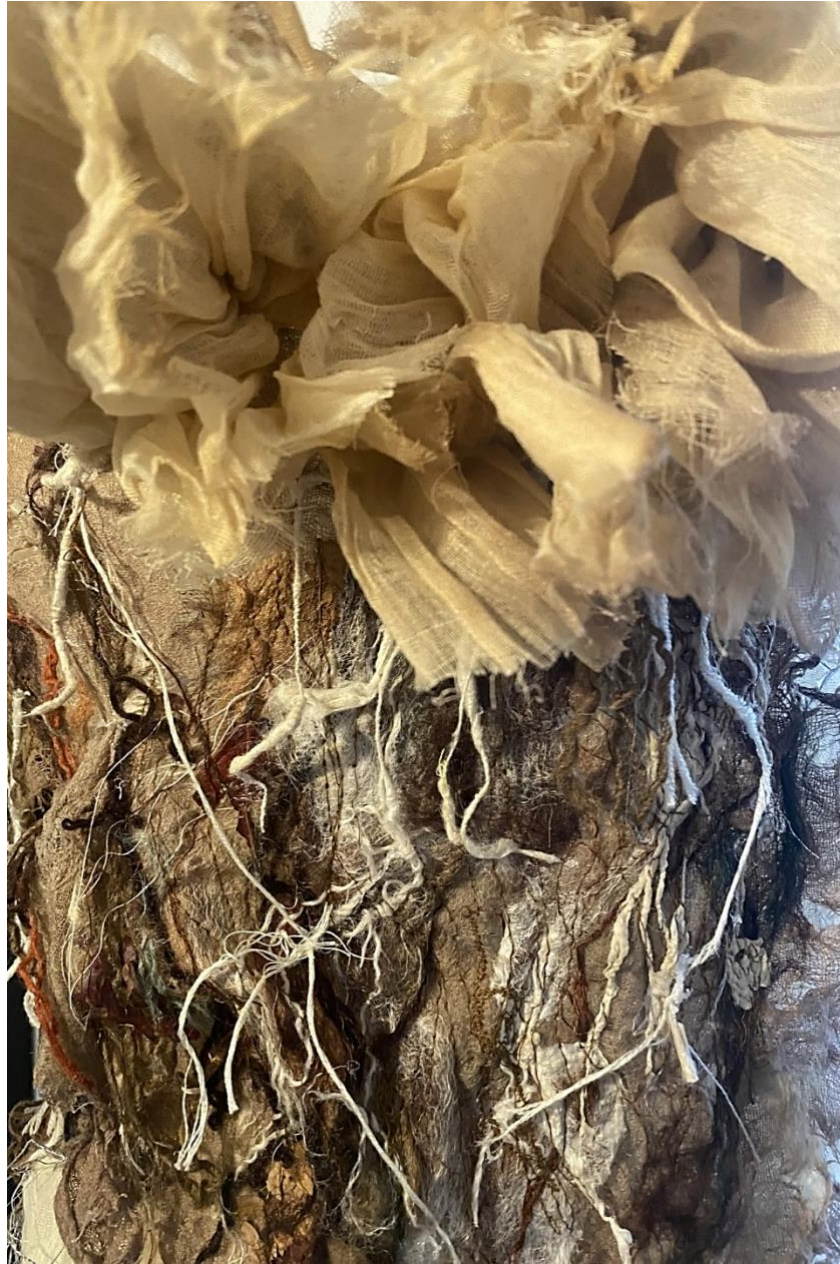


Figure 3. *'Up-close of Living Fabric'*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

*“Mushrooms pull me back to my senses, not just like flowers- through their riotous colours and smells but because they pop up unexpectedly, reminding me of the good fortune of just happening to be there”*

Posthumanism in contemporary art, particularly in relation to fungi, investigates the complex interplay between human and non-human entities and highlights the ecological and cultural significance of fungi. Humans have been at the centre of existence, Braidotti offers an insight into the posthuman condition, “posthuman theory is a generative tool to help us re think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as the ‘Anthropocene’” (2013, p.6), the historical era in which humanity has emerged as a geological force with the capacity to impact all life on Earth. Positioned as essential agents of decomposition and transformation, fungi challenge conventional understandings of life, death, and existence. By disrupting binary oppositions and established perceptions, fungi serve as a critical lens for rethinking relationships within the broader ecological web (Pusa, 2023, p.32-34).

Contemporary art be a vehicle for transcending classical semiotic boundaries of post-anthropocentric perspectives, by engaging with and responding to imposed binaries such as human and non-human, heterogenous and homogenous. This chapter will explore the ways in which my praxis responds to binaries and explore the interconnectedness of all species and how fungi can help us reimagine our relationship with the natural world.

To give context on the importance of fungi and its role, one must explain the basics. Firstly, mushrooms, the fruiting bodies of fungi, are often misunderstood, yet deeply adored by some (Stamets, 2005, p.9). However, they hold a crucial role to planetary health; fungi exist largely underground, unseen, through complex mycelial networks, that entangle all life on Earth. In the book *Underland* by Macfarlane, he asserts:

Only in the last twenty years have ecologists succeeded in tracing the fungal networks that lace woodland soil, joining individual trees into the intercommunicating forests- as fungi have been doing for hundreds of millions of years

(2019a, p.9)

“Fungi are metabolic wizards and can explore, scavenge and salvage ingeniously” (Sheldrake, 2023b, p.6), fungi are geared to breaking down complex matter, such as dead wood and fallen leaves, into essential nutrients, ensuring the continuation of life by enriching the soil and facilitating growth. Beyond nutrient recycling, mushrooms form symbiotic relationships with plants through mycorrhizal associations. Additionally, Macfarlane provides insight into why this intricate network has largely gone unnoticed, “the soil is fantastically impenetrable to experiments, and the fungal hyphae on the whole are too thin to see with the naked eye” (Macfarlane, 2019b, p.100).

This ancient partnership is indicative of the ultimate mutualism of entanglement, fungi provide plants with water and minerals, while plants offer the fungi carbohydrates produced through photosynthesis. “Plants only made it out of the water around 500 million years ago because of their collaboration with fungi, which served as their root system” (Sheldrake, 2023c, p.21). Researching into underground networks inspired an interest in the microscopic and the unseen. This prompted an exploration into the microcosm in my own environment. As a response, I purchased my own portable microscope and desktop light microscope to collect my own imagery. This enabled me to experience nature at a microscopic level, observing vivid entanglements and encountering the unseen. The mediation between art, philosophy and science has pivoted the way in which I view the world and relationships between the human and non-human. Through these disciplines, I believe artistic expression can illuminate the seemingly less accessible side of science and philosophy, bringing it into

the public realm which initiates an open dialogue surrounding larger topics such as climate change and deforestation.

Mycologist Maria Alice Neves asserts that the goal of fungi is to teach and educate us, she notes that “in the history of art fungi are wildly underrepresented” (quoted in Ostendorf-Rodríguez, 2023a, p.151). Neves highlights the prevalence of still life paintings historically, that were full of vegetables and fruit, and seldom included mushrooms. To address this, Neves emphasises the need for a more deliberate inclusion of fungi in contemporary art.

Reflecting upon how I interact with my environment, I realised that my perspective was too distant to grasp its complexities. Investing into a microscope to support my transition into becoming a mycophile, which is a term in the fungi community for amateur fungi enthusiasts. My portable microscope has been perfect for in-situ use, allowing me to capture multiple live entanglements. Its convenience and portability makes it a frequent companion on my walks. To find the branching structures of the mycorrhizal fungi, my entrance point was the fungi that we can see, mushrooms. Going on ‘fungi walks’ has become a large part of my artistic routine for inspiration. I found that although observing these thread like structures are difficult, by closely observing mushrooms, you can see whispers of mycelium on the mushrooms as seen in figures 4, 5, 6 and 7. The pictures I was able to capture were thrilling, observing these intimate worlds that only I could see was truly mind-blowing, especially as these details were not initially visible to the naked eye. Quickly, I discovered I could spend an hour on one decaying tree, observing these covert microcosms. Each scene is rife with life.



Figure 4. *Up-close of mycena mushrooms, Isabella Coombs, 2024*



Figure 5. *Gills of mycena mushrooms, Isabella Coombs, 2024*





Figure 6. *Mycelium web*, Isabella Coombs, 2024



Figure 7. *Fungi bloom*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

Figure 8 presents my initial sketches of mycena mushrooms, observed growing on a tree in my garden in abundance. Over the past year, I've created a fungi area in the boggy, shaded part of my garden, filling it with dead wood, wood chippings and decaying plant matter. The close-up photographs I took using my microscope, inspired me to replicate the gill patterns through illustration. Observing the intricate details closely rendering them through a mix of charcoal, watercolour and pencil my illustration using my handheld microscope. Figure 9 is a reversed, digitally manipulated version of figure 8, which highlights the textures created by my painting and mark-making techniques.

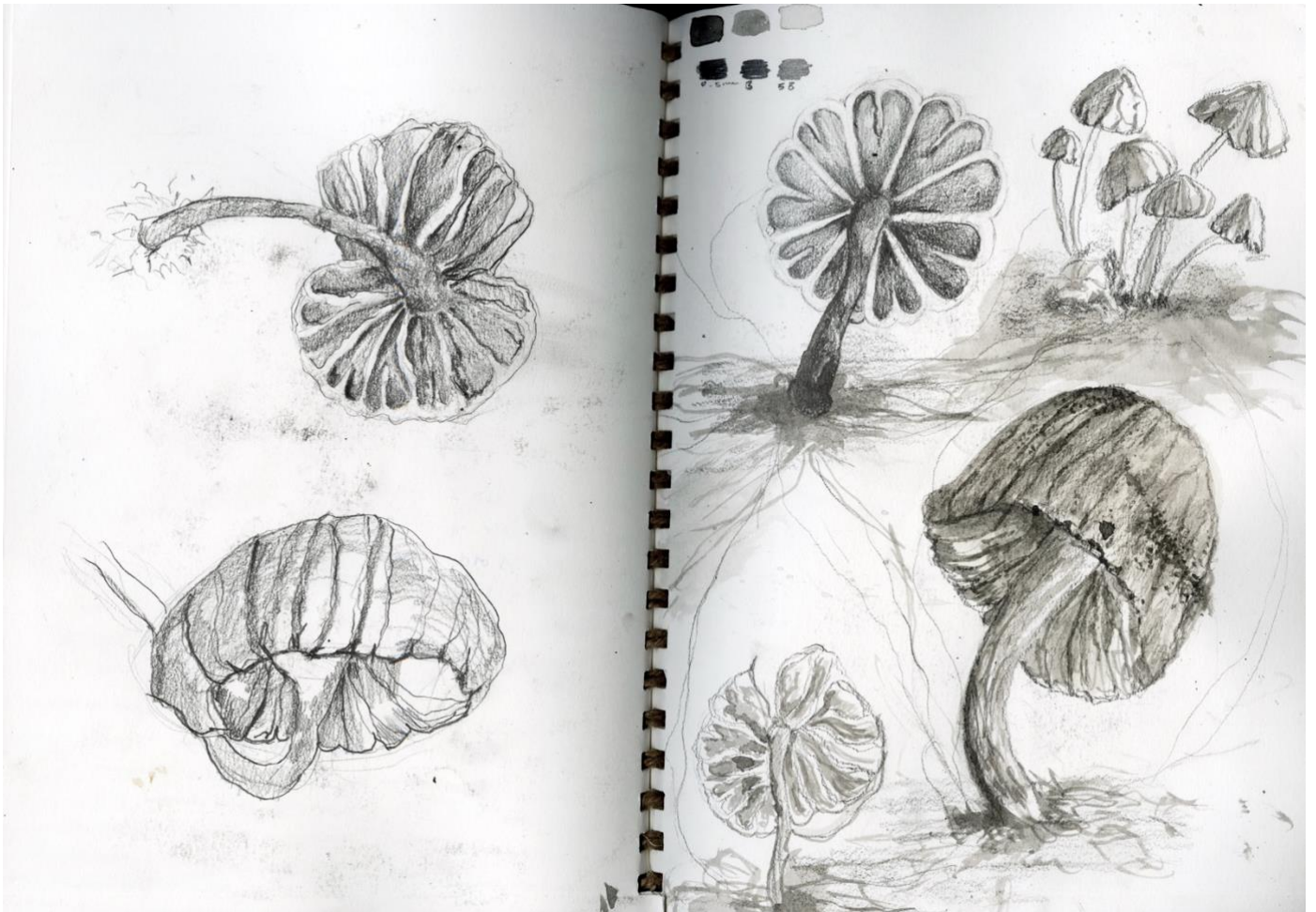


Figure 8. *A study of mycena mushrooms*, Isabella Coombs, 2025

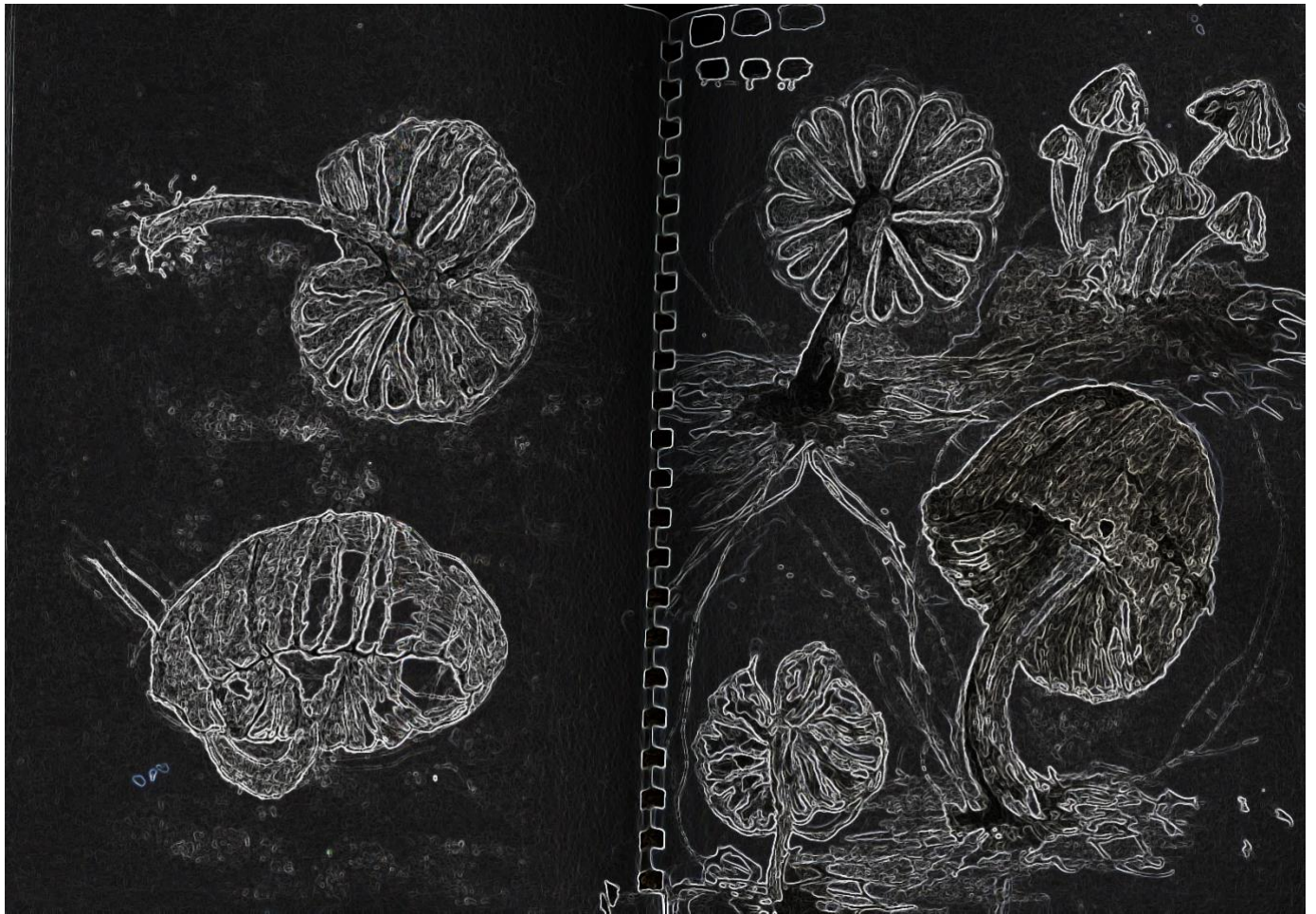


Figure 9. *A study of mycena mushrooms- digitally edited, Isabella Coombs, 2024*

Figure 10 presents a repeat pattern of a black-and-white ink illustration, inspired by the layered multiplicities observed within the entangled forms revealed under the microscope. This composition draws from the delicate structures of polypore mushrooms, the intricate gills of a *Mycena* mushroom, and the interwoven patterns of webbed branches. This notion of layers of multiplicities is a common thread throughout my work, Deleuze and Guattari discuss this idea of multiplicities as dynamic, relational systems rather than static collection of parts, they state, “a multiplicity is not something made up of elements, but something which exists only by the virtue of the relation that holds the elements together” (2013a, p.8).

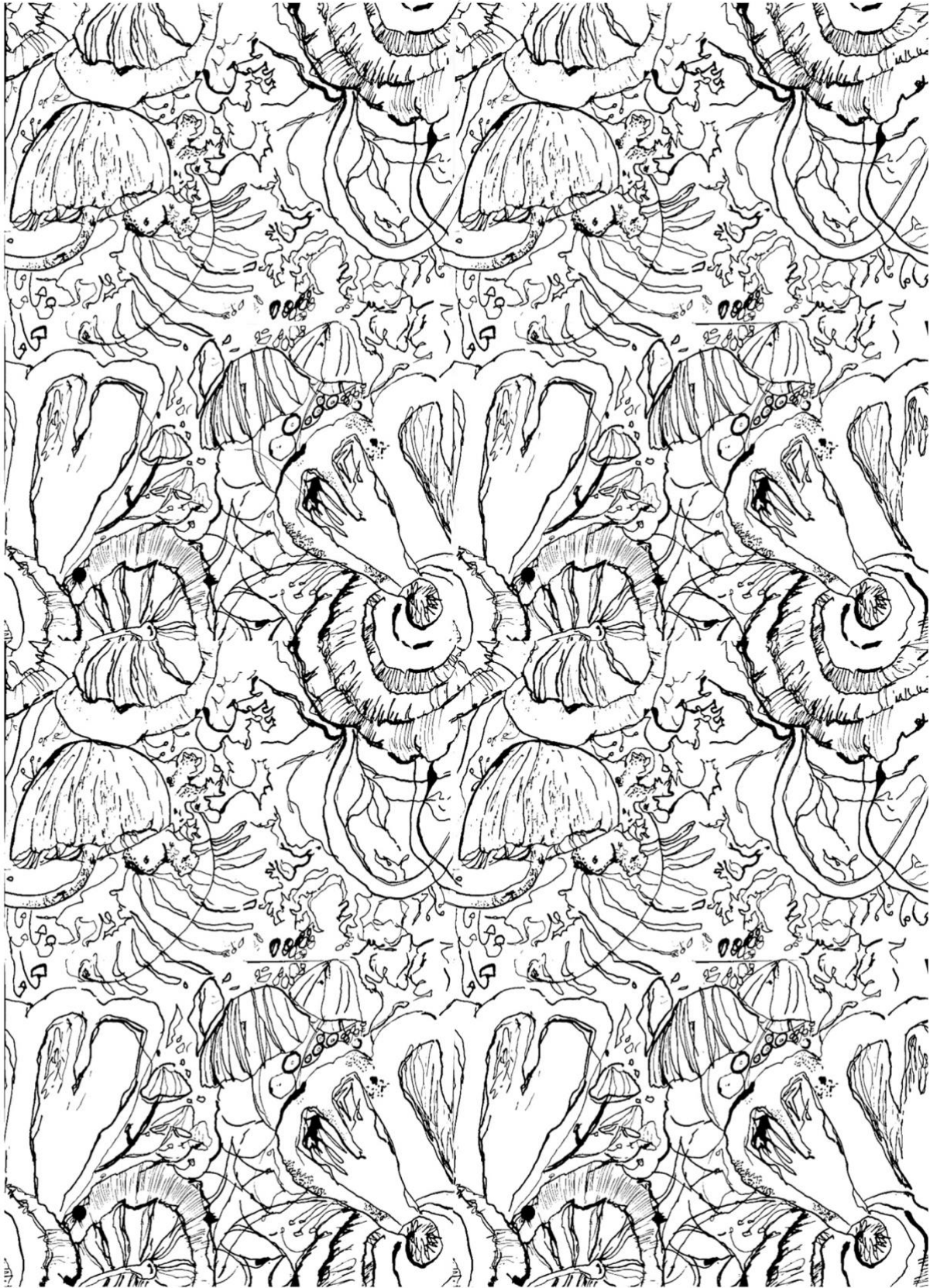


Figure 10. Repeat pattern illustration of fungi, Isabella Coombs, 2024

Exploring and understanding these other worlds provides perspective on the scale of our existence in relation to other organisms, shedding light on how they perceive the world. This sense of subjective scale when observing microscopic images, entering these microcosms and illustrating their complexities, draws parallels to the concept 'umwelt'. Introduced by Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll, 'umwelt' refers to the self-centred, unique world each organism perceives, and experiences based on its sensory capabilities and interactions with its environment. Uexküll sees, "organisms' perceptions, communications, and purposeful behaviours as part of the purpose and sensations of a nature that is not limited to human beings" (2010, p.3). His ideas were inspired by phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger and later thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who were interested in the relationship between perception and existence.

Looking to artists who use microscopy to challenge uniform ways of thinking, I discovered the work of Heather Barnett. Barnett is an artist that engages with biological systems and scientific processes, her work compels viewers to observe closely and then reconsider, prompting moments of reflection in unexpected contexts as they navigate the intricate trajectories of her inquiries. *Interior Narcissus (2006)* depicts Barnett's micro designs and textiles that are derived from the hidden microscopic world around us (Barnett, 2006). Barnett's work scales up such these unknown worlds such as nano scale proteins, the wings of a fruit fly and our own bodily cells creating macro lens series of wallpapers. The convergence between her work as an artist and collaboration with scientists and researchers, positions Barnett's practice within the 'sci-art' realm, "the main objective of this genre has been to locate connections between the sciences and arts through borrowed methods and collaboration" (Guy, 2009a, p.8). As she created this series in collaboration with the Pathology department of Poole General Hospital, this is the kind of collaboration I would love to pursue in the future.

Figure 11, titled *Yuletide*, showcases a repeating pattern derived from microscopic imagery of Barnett's cheek swab. This piece reflects her profound curiosity about the hidden realms beneath the surface, seamlessly intertwined with a rigorous exploration of visual technologies and their capacity to extend human perception. This interplay serves as a central driving force within her practice.

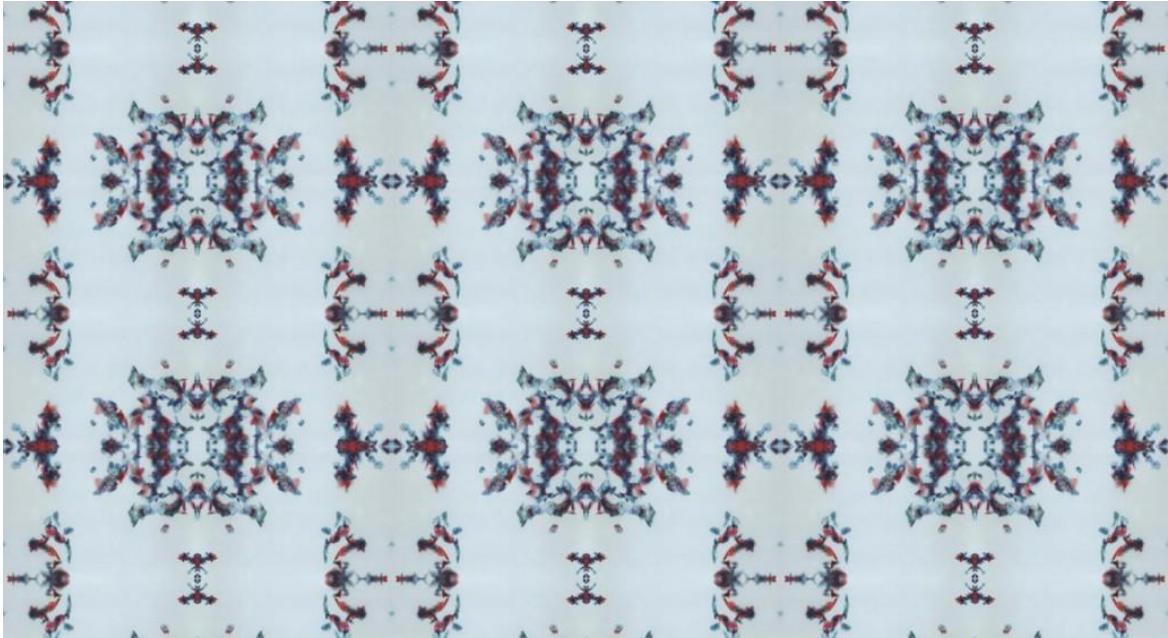


Figure 11. Cellular Wallpaper: *Yuletide* (cheek swab), Heather Barnett, 2006



Figure 12- Cellular Wallpaper: *Cracked Lace* (urine), Heather Barnett, 2006

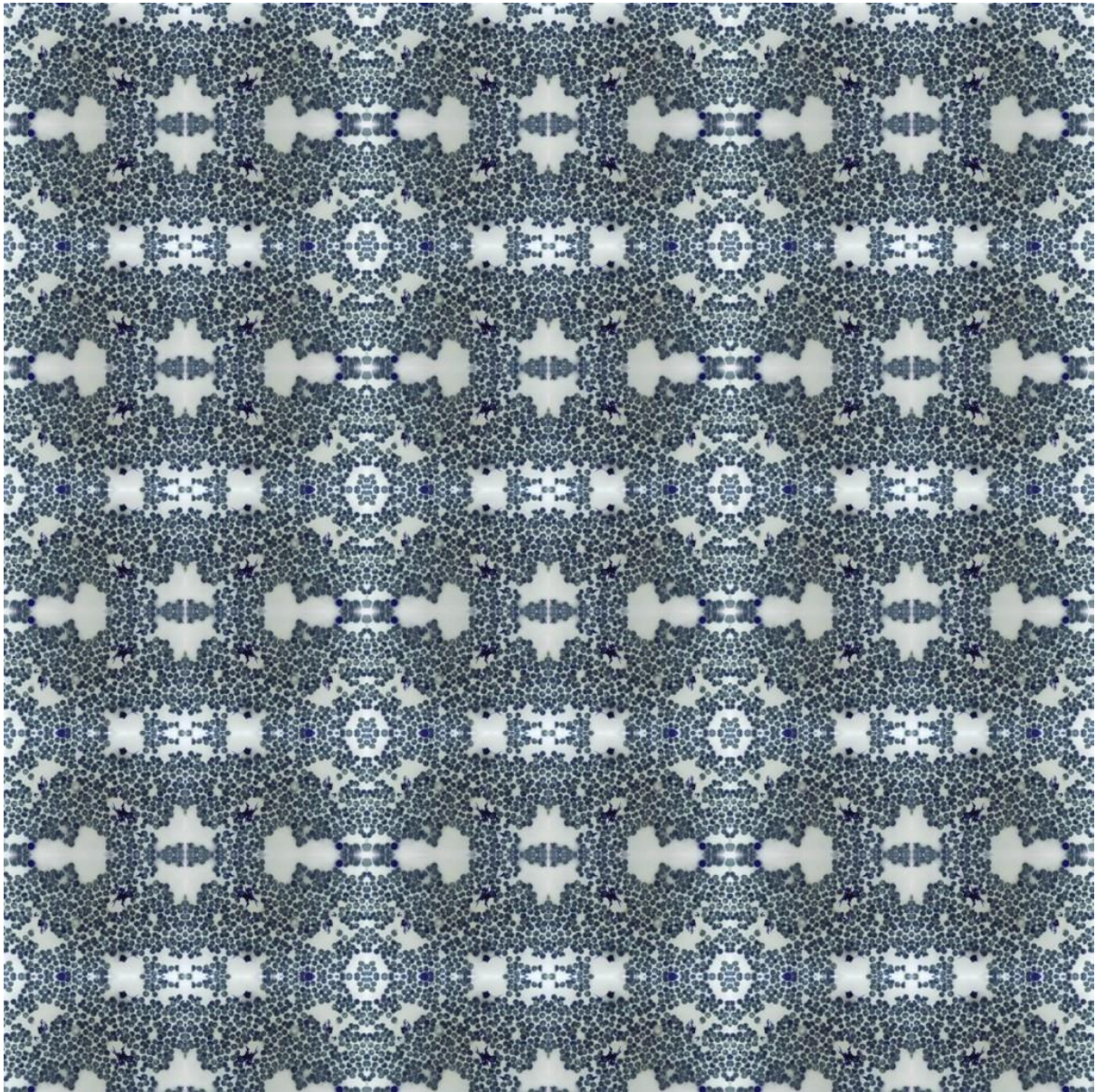


Figure 13. *Cellular Waller: Kaleidoscope (blood film- reticulate stain)*, Heather Barnett, 2006

Figure 12 and 13, shows micro photos of a blood stain and a urine swab, representing the most intimate of bodily flora and fauna. The collaboration between microscopic images and design, makes it apparent that things are too often overlooked, whether in the context of the museum or within our daily lives. For Barnett, this interdisciplinary dialogue, whether a collision of cultures or a convergence of perspectives serves as a dynamic and indispensable element in the creative and conceptual evolution of her work. It remains a cornerstone of her practice, continually shaping her artistic vision as new collections and designs emerge through ongoing and innovative collaborations. Barnett's work

brings to light the profound entanglement of these elements within the human body. Guy states in

*Domestic Science:*

She reproduces and enlarges these images, manipulating them into repeat patterns. The results are a kaleidoscopic array of animal, vegetable and mineral in their most detailed representations. In close-up Barnett expands upon a world unknowable to the humans without the aid of a microscope, manipulating into designs.

(Guy, 2009b, p.10)

Researching into the impact of fungi on the environment, enabled me to develop a deeper appreciation for the complexities of fungal networks. The exploration expanded my understanding of fungi's vital ecological role, this led me to discover the work of artist Heather Barnett. The next chapter will discuss my material developments referencing the work of Alexander McQueen and Iris van Herpen.





Figure 14. *Moss and lichen under sewing needle*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

*“I think artists have a responsibility there because part of the role of the arts is capturing what is not always visible. Making you feel what is not always there to be sensed. And there aren’t many things that are ephemeral than mushrooms”*

(Guiliana cited by Ostendorf-Rodriguez, 2023b, p.151)

This chapter will explore the transition from drawing to translating it into the three-dimensional realm, as well as an insight into my material processes and experiments that culminated in my final exhibition installation: *'Living Fabric: Threads of the Unseen, The Hidden Architects'*. This installation is comprised of an illustrated sculpture as seen in figure 15, created using naturally dyed fabric, stitch, felt, wool, watercolour, rice paper and wire. It measures approximately 80" x 60" x 25".

Drawing serves as a fundamental aspect of my artistic practice, providing a foundation for both creative exploration and problem solving. As an illustrator, I employ drawing not only as a means of expression but also a tool to refine composition, form and shape. Beginning with a sketch, I develop my ideas further, integrating texture and colour to inform the progression of my work, as seen in figures 15 and 16, where I have developed sketch to material experiments and mocked-up different compositions.



Figure 15. *Sketch of sculpture concepts*, Isabella Coombs, 2024



Figure 16. *Material & form experiments*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

Digital drawing also serves as a preliminary tool in my practice, facilitating the exploration into form, composition and colour. It allows me to transform initial sketches into fully developed concepts through techniques such as collaging and digital painting to refine and quickly communicate my ideas. At the beginning of my project, I created a series of digital drawings inspired by mushroom forms that I had seen. For instance, in figure 17 depicts a digital painting inspired by the crumpled edges and monochromatic ombré colouration of the inky cap mushroom, as illustrated in in figure 18.



Figure 17. *Digital painting of sculpture inspired by inky cap mushroom, Isabella Coombs, 2024*



Figure 18- *Inky cap mushrooms, Isabella Coombs, 2024*

My approach to translating illustration through stitch mirrors the process employed by Alexander McQueen in developing his ideas and concepts. In an essay by Abraham Thomas 'Drawing a Line' he discusses McQueen's process of sketch to fabric, Thomas says "McQueen's drawings provide an important opportunity to understand how ideas were expressed at a stage prior to any cutting or tailoring", he goes onto say "in many design disciplines, sketch drawings often acquire a quasi-sacred status due to their representations of their initial moments of conception" (Wilcox, 2015, p.61). As seen in figure 19 and 20, McQueen used sketching to express concepts quickly with evocative silhouettes and mark making. At the outset of this project, studying McQueen's diverse and imaginative approaches was profoundly inspiring, drawn to how he conveyed texture and form in the early stages of his creative process. His approach to sketching served not merely as a preparatory step but as an integral part of his creative dialogue, where concepts of texture, structure and movement began to materialise.



Figure 19. Sketch by Alexander McQueen, in the book Alexander McQueen by Wilcox, C (2015), p.63.



Figure 20- Sketch by Alexander McQueen, in the book Alexander McQueen by Wilcox, C (2015), p.66.

From the inception of my project, I was drawn to create a sculptural piece that not only possessed a narrative quality but also the capacity to become wearable. This notion of a wearable sculpture emerged organically, informed by a previous work in which I transformed an existing sculpture into a headpiece, which granted it a dual function, to stand out as an independent artwork yet also engage directly with the human form. The connection to the body is an important aspect to me, as the work I produce feels like an extension of my own body. As a result, I have drawn inspiration from the works of Alexander McQueen and Iris van Herpen to investigate their means of communicating ideas through three-dimensional practices.

Recognised as one of the most influential, imaginative, and provocative designers of his generation, Alexander McQueen redefined fashion conventions by addressing complex themes such as race, class,

sexuality, religion, and environmental issues. His work exudes a sense of wildness, with recurring motifs of wings, insects, horns, undergrowth, tree trunks, and bone. McQueen's designs often transcend traditional notions of fashion, resembling surreal and magical extensions of the human body rather than conventional garments. In the book *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, McQueen said "I have always loved the mechanisms of nature and to a greater or lesser extent my work is informed by that" (Bolton et al, 2011, p172). *The Savage Beauty (20003)* collection by McQueen has been highly influential, from his conceptual drawings to his view on the wearable artwork, he bridges the gap between illustration and fashion design by pushing boundaries. Figure 21, titled *Oyster Dress*, features cascading layers of organza, distressed and frayed to mimic the organic, ruffled textures of oyster shells and sea foam. My favourite aspect of this dress lies within its abstraction; rather than mimicking the literal form of an oyster, McQueen masterfully focuses on specific detail, distilling its essence and evoking its organic qualities without direct imitation. Figure 22 showcases another dress from the Savage Beauty collection, inspired by the fluid and organic forms of seaweed. McQueen accentuates the dress's sculptural quality using branching fabric extensions, which evoke a sense of organic movement. This dynamic presentation highlights McQueen's exceptional ability to infuse narrative into his creations, crafting garments that transcend functionality to become immersive works of art.



Figure 21. "Oyster" Dress, Irere, Spring/Summer, Alexander McQueen, 2003



Figure 22. "Dress", Irere, Spring/Summer, Alexander McQueen, 2003



The work of Iris van Herpen has also been highly influential to my practice, her exhibition titled, *Sculpting the Senses*, merges design, contemporary art and science. “Ranging from the micro to macro, the exhibition questions the place of body in space, its relationship to movement, transformation and its environment, and its future in a rapidly changing world” (Iris van Herpen, 2024). Herpen draws influences from different disciplines, which results in a contemporary narrative that addresses themes of ecology, origins of life and the omnipresent.

Iris van Herpen contemplates her designs as an interdisciplinary language and a dynamic entity, the result of cross-pollination of various fields: art, chemistry, dance, physics, architecture, biology, design and technology.

Herpen, I, 2024

Figure 23 features an installation from the exhibition, *Sculpting the Senses*, where a complex root system occupies the central space with two sculptural wearable art pieces are placed at either end. This arrangement suggests a bodily connection to the roots, emphasising the interrelationship between human and natural forms. This concept of ‘cross-pollination’ as described by Herpen, is a key influence in the development of my own artistic practice.



Figure 23. *Sculpting the Senses Exhibition*, Iris van Herpen, 2023-2024

Drawing inspiration from the sculptural qualities exhibited by McQueen and Herpen and how they created their forms using material, I contemplated how to construct a framework capable of supporting a large-scale sculpture that would enable me to sew fabric into it. While I had previously used armature wire for smaller pieces, my experimentations with larger structures revealed that it was too malleable and lacked the necessary stability. Through further explorations, I experimented with various wires, ultimately selecting chicken wire as the base as its versatility allowed me to mould and sculpt different organic shapes. The materiality of the wire further added to the conceptual element of my sculpture, mimicking a network structure as seen in fungi. To approach this, I used my own body as reference for a guide on the size, with the hope of it becoming a wearable piece. I cut large strips of wire and proceeded to cut the edges of the wire a twist them with the adjoining side to make a cylinder, I repeated this process to make the top of the sculpture and to add volume at the base, layering shorter sections of chicken wire to add dimension, as illustrated in figure 24.

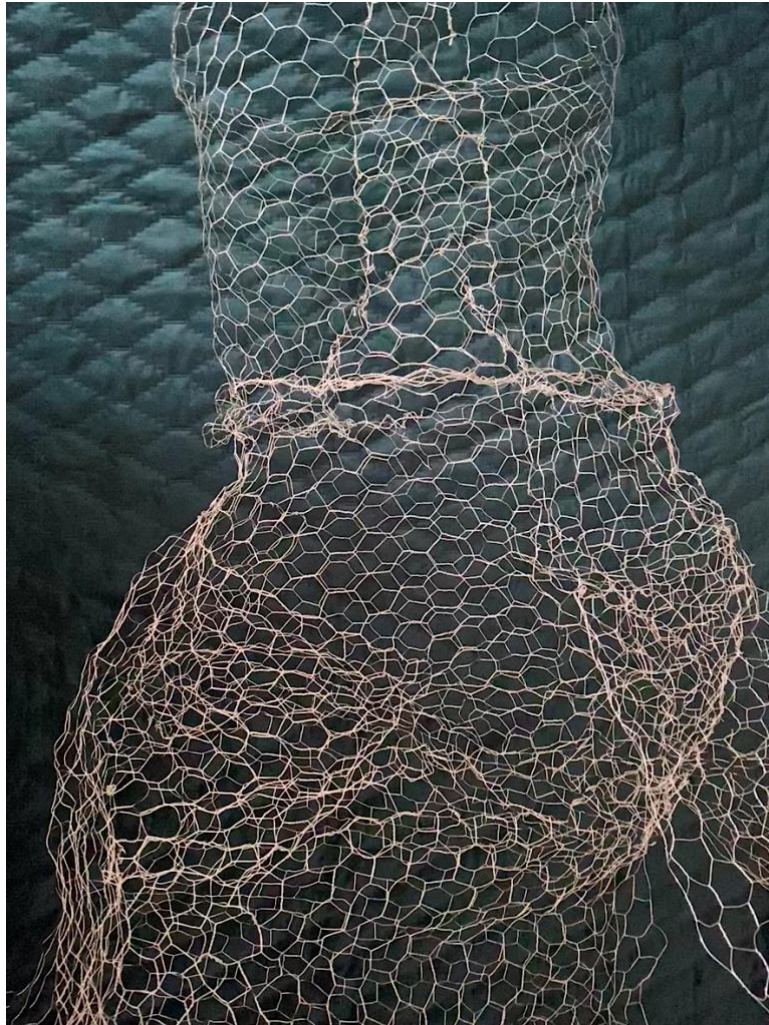


Figure 24. *Wire base for sculpture*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

From the construction of the base of my sculpture, I embarked on a material exploration, transforming my two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional forms through fabric and paper referencing my primary imagery. Stitching has always been an intuitive form of expression for me; I view sewing as an extension of my pen, a way of drawing with a needle. The intricate stitches not only bind fabric together but also embody my ideas, both physically and metaphorically, as a representation of interconnected and rooted networks.

I was drawn to rice paper for its semi-transparency, a quality reminiscent of the translucency observed in mushrooms. The inherent fragility of rice paper proved advantageous in this context, as

each fold and bend left an imprint, mimicking the organic undulations of mushroom gills. To create these gill forms, I cut long layers of rice paper into individual gill shapes, followed by machine stitching them together. I was then able to curl the edges with a pencil and pinch the layers of paper together, as shown in figure 25. Throughout my process, I maintained a strong awareness of my materiality and the sustainability of my practice, as a result, all materials I used are organic, recycled, and sustainable. After experimenting with various techniques to tint the rice paper, I discovered that coffee granules provided the earthy tone I sought. As illustrated in figure 26, the grittier particles of the coffee mimicked the speckled, uneven colouration and texture of gills, inspired by an up-close shot of the gills of a big sheath mushroom (figure 27).



Figure 25. *Rice paper sculpture inspired by mushroom gills*, Isabella Coombs, 2024



Figure 26- *Rice paper sculpture inspired by mushroom gills- tainted with coffee grounds, Isabella*

Coombs, 2024



Figure 27. *Gills of big sheath mushroom*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

Figure 28 presents another up-close shot of my illustrated sculpture, it illustrates the layered sections of muslin that have been tainted to make up the main form, overlaying it with stitched wool that creates the texture of lichen and moss, which adorns the sculpture throughout. The off-white lines represent the intricate mycelium network running through the sculpture, with the stitching approach informed by the organisms I studied. This method of intuitive mark-making with stitch, it resonates with the concept of the rhizome as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013b, p.25).



Figure 28. *Sewn material inspired by mycelium network on wire*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

The concept of the rhizome aligns closely with mosaic assemblage theory. Tsing employs assemblage theory to emphasise the significance of multiplicities, highlighting that world-making is not an exclusively human endeavour but rather a collaborative process involving diverse assemblages. Tsing explores the interconnected ecologies that arise in disturbed environments, stating:

Assemblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to open communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making. For my purposes, however, I need something other than organisms as the elements that gather. I need to see lifeways- and non-living ways of being as well- coming together. Nonhuman ways of being, like human ones, shift historically.

(2015b, P.22-23)



My work similarly developed through an interconnected and non-linear process. By integrating a diverse range of organic materials, a mosaic-like composition emerged, with each element intricately joined and anchored by stitch. These individual patches collectively formed an assemblage of cohesive pieces. To reflect the complexity of natural systems, I was compelled to use stitching as a medium to articulate this sense of interconnectedness. A noteworthy linguistic convergence exists between the disciplines of philosophy, nature and textiles. Terms such as 'threads', 'knotting' and 'rooting' function as powerful metaphors, linking the intricate interconnectedness of ecosystems with the physical practice of stitching. This shared lexicon is further elucidated by Tim Ingold, whose insight emphasises the deep interrelations between materiality, craftsmanship and the natural world, he states:

Knotting, then, registers in a number of domains of thought and practice by which patterns of culture are sustained and bound into the interstices of human life. These include: the flows and growth patterns of materials, including air, water, cordage and wood; bodily movement and gesture, as in weaving and sewing, sensory perception, especially touch and hearing, perhaps more than (but certainly not to the exclusion of) vision; human relationships and the sentient that infuses them.

(2015, p.18)

Ingold's emphasis on material and language overlap, engages with themes that overlap the ideas in new materialist thought. Considering the materiality of both my materials and subject matter, it closely aligns with the philosophical framework of new materialism, which like posthumanism, it challenges the centrality of humans in philosophy, science, and culture. Contrastingly, new materialism places an emphasis the interconnectedness between humans, non-humans, and the

environment, focusing on the agency and vitality of matter and the active role of material processes, objects, and substances in shaping the world.



Figure 29. *Self-portrait with 'Living Fabric' Sculpture*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

*“The gallery space, traditionally a sterile environment, becomes a site of ecological intervention, prompting viewers to reconsider their relationship with nature”*

(O’Doherty, B, 1986, p.38)

While working on my sculpture, I began gathering inspiration on how envisioning how I would present it in the university gallery space. To conceptualise this, I drew inspiration from Clare Celeste, an internationally recognised collage and installation artist, she creates immersive exhibitions evocative of our planet's threatened biodiversity. *Under Garden (2022)* (figure 30 and 31), by Celeste, is deeply "inspired by mycelial networks and the vibrancy of the subterranean ecosystems" (2022), it celebrates the interconnectedness and entanglement in both nature and the climate movement. Celeste further says:

In a time of planetary unravelling, the quiet observance of soil ecosystems offers lessons on patience, resilience and community. When the crisis feels insurmountable and the timeline impossibly short, observing how fungi compost decay into new life may guide us towards transformative climate action. Both fungi and climate action must break down the old, even the toxic or degraded, to make way for the new. Nature always upcycles and so too must the climate movement: we work with the materials at hand.

(Celeste, 2022)

Celeste combines traditional illustration and translates it through the three-dimensional installations. She argues that nature's abundance arises from intricate networks, symbioses, and deep entanglements, suggesting that our approach to addressing climate change must similarly involve complex relationships and a sense of community. She states:

A handful of soil contains millions of lifeforms. When it comes to our place within life, we either thrive together or unravel together. Therefore, there can be no "silver bullet" solution to the crisis. Instead, many different solutions come together into something more significant than the sum of its parts. A pluralism is required, an ecosystem, a community.

(Celeste, 2022)



Figure 30. *Under Garden*, Clare Celeste, 2022

Celeste's oeuvre fosters a dialogue that lays the foundation for transformative action and alternative perspectives by bringing nature into the gallery space. In an interview with the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Celeste says "I believe in the power of art and storytelling to reawaken a connection to our planet. By immersing audiences in the splendour of nature's intricate beauty, I hope to inspire a deeper reverence for the Earth and commitment to its preservation" (Celeste, 2024). Through storytelling, narrative is intricately woven throughout her work, which deeply resonates with my own practice, by examining Celeste's installations, I aim to evoke a similar sense of immersive experience.



Figure 31. *Close-up of Under Garden*, Clare Celeste, 2022

Prior to the installation of my sculpture, I collaborated with photographer Sarah Grounds, who photographed my work. These images were then used for promotional material for the exhibition, including postcards for the public. Figure 32 presents four images from the photoshoot, showcasing different angles and figure 33 includes more detailed, up-close shots that reveal the texture and finer details of the work. I decided to incorporate myself into the exhibition, to further hark back to this intimate connection I have with my sculpture, which conveyed well through photographs as illustrated in figure 34. It was interesting to see the different areas Sarah was drawn to capturing, the sculpture no longer existed just for myself.



Figure 32. *Series of photographs of 'Living Fabric' Sculpture, Isabella Coombs, 2024*



Figure 33. Series of up close shots from photographs of 'Living Fabric' Sculpture, Isabella Coombs, 2024



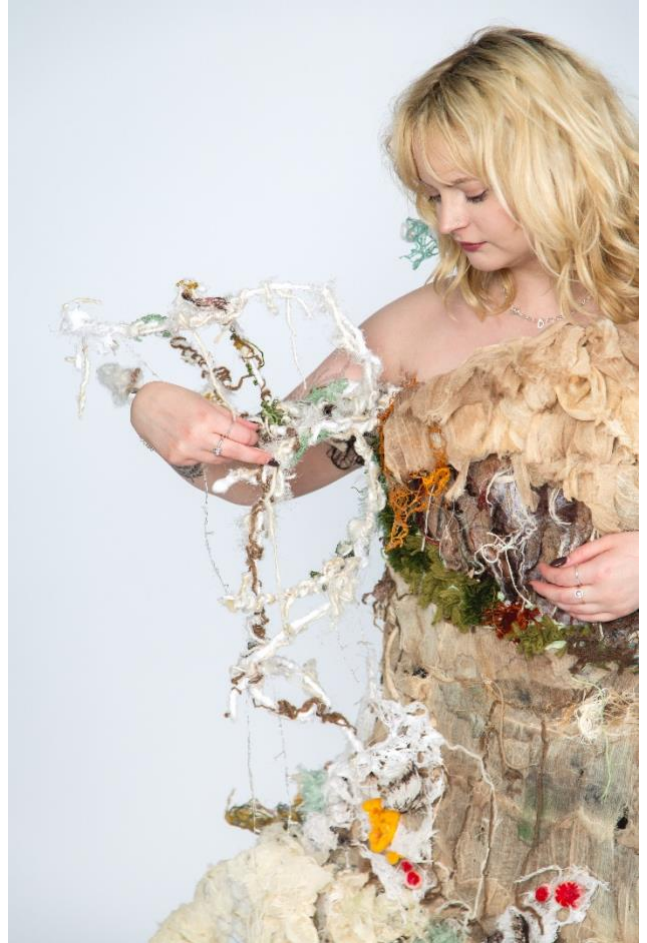


Figure 34. Series of self-portraits with 'Living Fabric' Sculpture, Isabella Coombs, 2024

“Get closer and zoom into the enormous diversity in any natural scene; nature keeps giving, with ever-evolving layers of variation and form” (Richardson, 2024, p.82). This idea of zooming in, transforming the micro into the macro, has been a central focus in my goal of public dissemination. To contextualise my work in the exhibition, I produced a statement about my work that was presented alongside my sculpture:

**Living fabric. Threads of the unseen. The Silent Architects.**

‘Beneath the surface lies a hidden world of fungal networks, vital for plant survival and ecosystem health. This installation weaves illustration and sculpture, using stitch and fabric to reveal the beauty and complexity of these unseen systems. Drawing from scientific research and creative practice, the work uncovers the delicate balance fungi maintain within nature. By bringing this concealed world into focus, the work invites viewers to reflect on the interdependence of all living things and the beauty of life’s overlooked foundations.’

For the installation of my sculpture, I requested to have a space with natural light and preferably near a window, so that light could filter through the transparency of the fabric and wire frame. I chose to suspend the sculpture from the ceiling, about three feet off the ground, I believed this elevated position would encourage viewers to engage more closely with the work, inviting them to lean in and explore the intricate layers and multiple layers. Figure 35 shows the sculpture in situ, suspended using magnetic hooks and invisible fishing wire. Overall, I feel that the installation and exhibition were highly successful and effectively conveyed the message I intended.

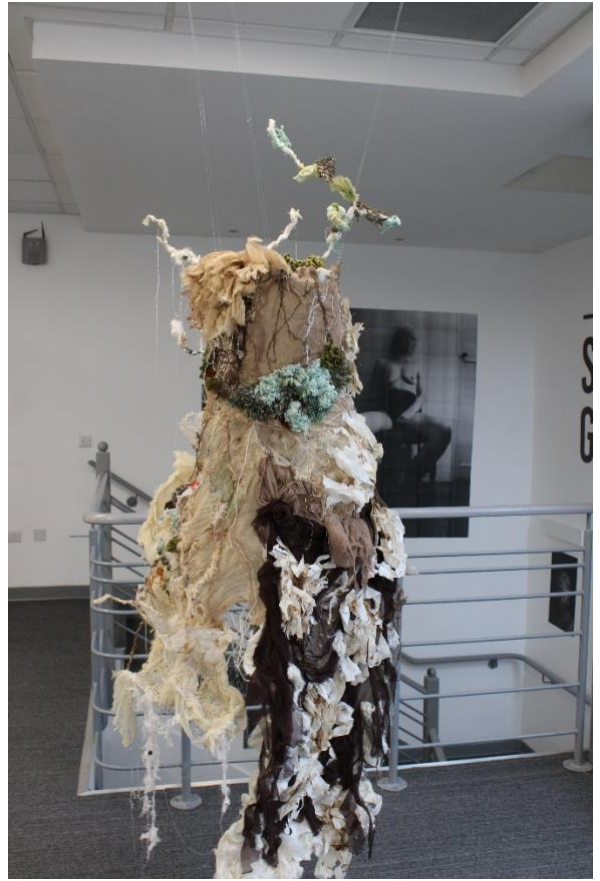


Figure 35. Series of photographs of 'Living Fabric' in 'Look What You Did' exhibition, Isabella Coombs,

Overall, I believe the installation and exhibition were successful in conveying the message I intended. The opening event provided an excellent opportunity for engaging with the public, and I had several insightful conversations about my work. These discussions were not only enlightening but also helped deepen my understanding of how my art is perceived. I took note of these key points from these exchanges, which influenced my reflection and led me to compose a piece that summarised this experience:

The sculpture took a life of its own, it was no longer mine but an extension of my time with it, now it exists in the public realm

Conceived, it felt surreal for people to be looking at it, talking and taking pictures of it when I was right there

At one point, a member of the public came onto me to talk about my sculpture, not realising it was mine; she said it was her favourite piece in the show

Deep sea diving, coral reefs, wooded forests, tangled gardens, "did you see that show on BBC 1 last night about fungi? It reminds me so much of your work!"

"Yes! Fungi is so important for the ecosystem; it makes the forest- without fungi there would be no life" this came from a fellow fungi enthusiast

Crowded by three mature ladies, they gushed over my sculpture, much to my surprise, they all thought the work represented something different, prior to reading my statement. Corals, fungi, trees. In a way they were all right. It took on multiple readings from people, I love that.

Teenagers sat by it taking pictures close-up of my work, "oh my gosh have you seen this part?" said one, "no I'm looking at the moss here! It's like looking at the forest".

I can see the microscopic

The mycelium

Evolved, it now takes on a second life, away from me, but always threaded to me

Figure 36. *Image of reflective notes*, Isabella Coombs, 2024

The exhibition, which ran from December 14, 2024, to January 10, 2025, attracted a large number of visitors, including several school groups who came for tours of the MA exhibition. Additionally, a class from the after-school art club that I teach visited, with feedback from both students and staff overwhelmingly positive. Alongside my studies, I have continued working as an Outreach Workshop Tutor at the university, where I deliver workshops related to my practice. Recently, I conducted several workshops focused on nature. One of these with a group of Year 10 students currently studying for their GCSEs. For this session, I led a workshop on organic forms and illustration, incorporating natural materials I had gathered, such as leaves and seeds and I showed them examples of my own work. The students closely observed these materials through magnifying glasses, emphasising the micro and macro, then they translated their observations using various illustration techniques, including continuous line drawing and abstract shape extraction. Song (2012) states “the practice of integrating such art into schools can radically transform education by helping environmental education be more effective, inspiring and enriching for students”, this further emphasises the need for nature-based art practice in education. Figure 37 showcases a series of drawings produced by students in response to the workshop, these will be a part of their coursework submissions.



Figure 37. Images from workshop with students, Isabella Coombs, 2024

## Conclusion- Reflections and the Future



Figure 38. *Self-portrait with 'Living Fabric' Sculpture, side view, Isabella Coombs, 2024*

In summary, developing a deeper awareness of these complex systems and interpreting them through my practice has been transformative, not only for my artwork but also for my broader perspective on the world. The process of exploring the works of artist that engage with similar themes as well as evaluating their material processes and concepts has been enlightening, it served as a tool not only for inspiration, but also provided professional context. Additionally, grounding my work within philosophical frameworks has strengthened its conceptual foundation, and centred the overall message I am attempting to convey. Evaluating the outcome of my exhibition and reflecting on the work created, has in turn guided my decisions about the direction of my future creations.

Progressing on from my masters I endeavour to complete my PCET as well as continuing my professional practice as an illustrator and Outreach Workshop tutor, to continue educating students about the impact of becoming eco-conscious and integrating it into art. I am eager to continue collaborating with other artists, and in the future, I hope to collaborate with scientists and researchers from the National Botanical Gardens of Wales, and Kew Gardens, this would be a dream opportunity.



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