

THESIS

SYNTHETIC INQUIRY OF FOUR-LETTER WORDS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

SYNTHETIC INQUIRY OF FOUR-LETTER WORDS

Four-letter words bear a few of the more intense emotional descriptors in the English language: love, hate, lust, and envy. My thesis series focuses on love but explores each of these four-letter words to display the complexity of human emotion. Each artwork in the series can be thematically categorized using love in relation to the dynamics of friendships, family, romance, or self. My thesis works reinterpret my experiences with themes of love and other four-letter words as an adolescent. The weavings depict and challenge rites of passage in American traditions and practices. Through weaving and reconstruction of items acquired in second-hand stores, I investigate human development and my own identity. The synthetic items found in thrift stores are manipulated to create factitious representations of my experiences and fantasies. In the safety of my studio and at the comfort of the loom, I inquire how these four-letter words shape and impact the recollection of my life up to this point.

In this paper, my practice is detailed in two segments: Form and Themes. Form illustrates the physical labor of my studio practice which involves second-hand shopping, collage, weaving, and material-based processes. The theme segment relays the conceptual research that supports the artworks. Youth, love, and diversity are analyzed as linked themes through the lens of academia and cinema. *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words* exhibits structures of interwoven thread, material, experiential information and investigation of identity.

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A massive thank you to everyone who has helped me in the process of achieving and narrowing my art practice in writing format. There are so many of you that I will miss a few here, but I will do my best. Thank you to every individual on my committee. Thank you to Cye Tornatzky for pushing me to lead with the personal; Del Harrow for connecting the floating ideas together; Julie Taylor-Massey for their extensive knowledge on adolescent development; Kristen Bukowski for being a constant support in my day-to-day thesis struggles; and Thomas Lundberg for his borderline ethereal ability to edit writing and ideas. I also want to thank my family back in Oklahoma. The driving force is always to make them (especially Mom) proud. Lastly, thanks to my best friend and partner, Josh, for digging up our roots and replanting in Colorado. I owe you immensely for everything.

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INTRODUCTION

Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words is the culmination of the research I have done at Colorado State University in my graduate studies. This series is a collection of six weavings followed by this written document detailing the conceptual connections and processes leading up to the physical works. Each weaving has a specific theme within rites of passage regarding love in all its complexities. This paper is separated into two sections: Form and Themes. The forms segment covers my process of sourcing materials, weaving, and collaging. The themes section delves into my research on the topic of adolescent development and how youth relate to love and diversity. Form and themes are written about separately, but the two are quite intertwined and often play on one another in the weavings. This often comes across in the writing when form will be used to show evidence of themes and vise-versa.

Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words is heavily saturated with ties between research, material, personal history and memory. Through hindsight, I find the process of reminiscing as a conscious practice helps me understand more about myself and human emotion. In my thesis series, my studio process allows me to re-enact and reimagine experiences from my adolescence. The finished series is a result of contemplation about time, as I examine how a younger version of myself navigated the obstacles of youth. The practice of weaving materials allows me to pull and reshape the threads of my experience truthful to my recollection and sometimes with fantastical cathartic intentions.

PART I: FORMS: Material as Meaning

Material exploration is the starting point for the visual aspects of each work in *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words*. Through a process of elimination, materials are chosen based on what is best suited for the initial concept, compositional and aesthetic boundaries, and ability to be woven on a floor loom. This elimination process has a direct relationship with assemblage and the ready-made, as it is grounded in the duality of moments chosen and moments discarded.¹ Elements of collage and assemblage are apparent in the act of product consumption. The materials used are not consistent with materials found in the typical studio environment. Most of the materials used throughout the series are bought in thrift stores and second-hand shops. The artwork reflects my aspirations for the outcome of the piece as much as it reflects the consumer environment of the nearby thrift stores.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many retailers and thrift stores were closed from March 2020 through May 2020. Some materials were bought new with thrift shops being closed, and what I came to realize is repurposing used items is an essential aspect of my current art practice. For example, in *America's Favorite Pastime* (Fig. 1), the baseball gloves were originally bought from Amazon at the cheapest price available. The newness of the glove along with its obviously cheap quality would not fit the aesthetic purposes desired for the work. In thrifting after stores reopened, baseball gloves were found that were better quality, had a used and worn charm, and were cheaper than the original newer gloves. It is not fiscally feasible in most of the work to buy brand new materials, nor is it environmentally responsible. *Dream Story* (Fig. 2), made with several wedding dresses, could have cost upwards of 5,000 USD in weft materials had the

¹ Claire Fontaine, "Ready-Made Artist: The Genealogy of a Concept," *Qui Parle* 22, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2014): 57.

dresses utilized not been second-hand. At the start of my art practice, thrifting was a necessity based on price range, but because of the pandemic, I realized that reused items provide something that the new materials do not. Thrifted materials provide chance, character, and sometimes better quality.

What makes second-hand shops unique is the thrill of chance when finding a quality vintage item, a true one-of-a-kind find, the item would have cost triple the amount at a retailer, or the item you searched for on the internet far and wide, but then find at the bottom of a Goodwill sales bin. This is the feeling of striking gold in a consumer wasteland and is called “hedonic thrifting.”² Hedonic thrifting can be compared to the act of fishing or hunting. Hunters and fisherman enjoy the fruits (or meats) of their labor, but they could go to a grocery store and buy meat and poultry. It is the practice of stringing the bow, aiming the gun, reeling in the fish and succeeding that keeps hunters and fishermen laboring for the catch as much as it is the food. There is nothing like the act of searching, failing, searching again, finding, then bargaining for my art materials. They bring their own history, stories of my hunt, and the character of uniqueness to the artwork, and those experiences cannot be replaced with an Amazon Prime membership.

We live in a material world and by using material as a source of reference, a topic is made evident prior to manipulating or weaving it. Materials are the fulcrum of my studio practice. The materials are what set the context and topic of each weaving. In *Dream Story*, there is little visual information anchoring the viewer to the topic of marriage outside of the wedding

² Lisa Hochtritt, “The Path to Hedonic Thrift Inquiry,” *Visual Arts Research* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 69.

dresses and surface treatment of them. The material choice is the set-up; the assemblage and collage are the punchline.

The floor loom limits some material choices and restricts the size of finished works. This is often why certain materials are attached to the weavings as not all materials can be woven with stability. This can be seen in *America's Favorite Pastime* and *Gone Fishing* (Fig. 3-4), where materials are attached after the base is woven. The series stays roughly consistent in dimensions of each piece due to the size and capabilities of certain looms. Weavings could potentially be sewn together to create larger works, but the current size choice is desired for the ability to mimic the human body. The series is an exploration of weaving's capability to create structured forms with unconventional objects.

Fiber treatment processes also have connections to some concepts throughout *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words*. For example, in *So, What Are We?* (Fig. 5), the process of dyeing snow-dyed yarn relates to nostalgic ties of my home and childhood. To snow-dye yarn, yarn must be placed into a container with snow layered on top. Powdered dye is then dusted on top of the snow. As the snow begins to melt, dye slowly activates and flows through the snow to create interesting dye effects on fiber. I learned this technique in my time at Colorado State University during my graduate studies. Being isolated and home sick for my mothering state of Oklahoma, the melting of dye-covered snow reminds me of snow-cones. There are snow-cone stands every few miles in Oklahoma, and there is an unspoken seasonal tradition of snow-cone stands opening every Spring which I had not considered to be exclusive to that regional space until moving elsewhere. There are interesting connections between the emotive qualities of snow-dye processes and the sweet confection of my native state in the candy-coated color shifting and seasonal exclusivity. The color shifting of the snow-dyed yarn in *So, What Are We?* evokes the

overwhelming vulnerability of emotions exclusive to first crushes and dates. It was also quite common in Oklahoma for first dates to be at snow-cone stands. The snow-dyed yarn is a nod to these nostalgic sweet treats and the emotional rollercoaster of desire.

In *Gone Fishing* and *Frenemy Bracelet* (Fig. 6), textural qualities create a sense of dimensionality in wall-hanging forms. In *Gone Fishing*, the tactility and smell of fishing lures becomes an object of familiarity and is bizarre in this context. Writer Jonathan Lethem states, “when damn near everything presents itself as familiar – it's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious art is going about trying to make the familiar strange.”³ Weaving is often associated with cloth and therefore comfort or coverage. Here, the oily fishing lures, sharp hook structure of can tabs, and metal weights attract the opposite sensation. These textures are associated with physical discomfort and for some nostalgic comfort. There is a distinctive difference in hard and softer materials in both *Frenemy Bracelet* and *Gone Fishing*. In *Frenemy Bracelet*, the porcelain beads are a metaphor for the duality of fragility and strength in friendships. Porcelain as a material can withstand weather and age arguably as long as the synthetic materials of the vinyl plastic in the weaving. The porcelain is quite fragile in that if dropped or hit, the beads could easily shatter. Friendships function quite similarly as they need to be handled with care or they can fall apart. When choosing materials, I consider how these materials appear through texture and how this could change the perception of the work.

³ Jonathan Lethem, “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism Mosaic,” in *Sound Unbound*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008), 32.

PART II: THEMES: Youth, Love, and Diversity

Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words is focused on my personal experience as a youth. My experiences and my reactions were largely impacted by pop-culture media and films from the 1970s through the 2010s. As an adolescent, I watched John Hughes films and teen dramas, holding what was depicted to be the standard for what it meant to be a teenager in American society. This can be problematic for many reasons, including the lack of representation of bodies and personas outside of a white-heterosexual-middle-class.⁴ Hughes inspired an entire genre and generation in making films about misunderstood individuals in the limbo between childhood and adulthood. Unfortunately, he faltered by representing less than half of America's population in the white, hetero-, class-washing of his entire filmography. I take inspiration from Hughes work, but attempt to separate myself by making work that is more inclusive to BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and lower-income communities.⁵ We are starting to see more of these types of films and televisual representations, but there are still not enough depictions of the communities listed above, especially during adolescence. By reexamining my experiences as an adolescent in my art practice, going through the thresholds of youth, I represent communities that were not valued in mainstream films or pop culture for much of my upbringing. This is evident in *America's Favorite Pastime*, in the examples of homosexuality and the darker skin tone of the baseball diamond.

⁴ Scott Long, "Nightmare in the Mirror: Adolescence and the Death of Difference," *Social Text*, (1990): 160.

⁵ BIPOC can be defined here as black, Indigenous and people of color. Sandra E. Garcia, "Where did BIPOC come from?," New York Times, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-bipoc.html>; LGBTQIA is an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. Bill Daley, "As the abbreviation grows, what does LGBTQIA stand for?," Chicago Tribune, accessed March 12, 2021, https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct_lgbtqia_letters_defined-htmstory.html.

The erasure of BIPOC adolescence in pop culture is also mirrored in the lived experiences of these individuals. These communities are not granted the same safety nets of growth as their white counterparts. Writer Susan L. Groenke details, “youth of color don’t truly get to be adolescents. Instead, if and when they enact the discursive roles available to (some) youth, they are viewed as deviant and abnormal, as sub-human.”⁶ This not only leads to trauma in these communities, but at its worst leads to murder such as in the cases of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice and countless other adolescents. BIPOC and more specifically black individuals are stripped by society of their right to grow at a healthy pace. From the moment these individuals are perceived as no longer being children (even toddlers), they are pressured to be, act, and govern themselves to the expectations of an adult in our society or be faced with the unjust punishment of murder.

Writers, scholars, and artists alike have tackled the systemic issue of black erasure in very direct ways. Malawian/ South African artist, Billie Zangewa, has approached the subject in an unobtrusive way with wall hangings depicting herself doing mundane and everyday tasks. To the outsider these appear to be scenes of modernity – showering, walking a child to school, reading (Fig. 7). Zangewa’s work flies under the radar as being political because of these mundane depictions. Her work can best be described as the personal made political. In an interview with Allie Biswas, Zangewa affirms, “My intentions are to spread love and slowly eliminate fear and hatred through the shared experience.” She continues, “The demystifying is really to humanize, because I feel that the mystifying is dehumanizing.”⁷ By depicting herself doing what are

⁶ Susan L. Groenke et al., “Disrupting and Dismantling the Dominant Vision of Youth of Color,” *The English Journal* 104, no. 3 (January 2015): 36.

⁷ Allie Biswas, “Billie Zangewa – interview: ‘I realized that I had chosen to embody the most disempowered human form’,” Studio International, last modified October 27, 2020,

considered universal experiences, Zangewa creates more positive depictions of black female bodies and therefore pushes this imagery into the ethos and consciousness.

Throughout the series, by relaying my experiences, I show that adolescence is a shared emotional experience and that this time of development effects everyone in similar ways. How my work differs drastically from Zangewa's, is the near absolute absence of the body in *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words*. The body is visible in *America's Favorite Pastime* in the baseball diamond/vagina/pelvic region that bears my own skin tone. Outside of this example, the body is often referenced through clothing or wearable objects but invisible in flesh. In *So, What Are We?* and *Frenemy Bracelet* enlarged beads replicate the wearable texts of friendship bracelets however they are not intended to be worn. In *Dream Story*, dresses display forms that are created for the female figure yet left vacant. In *Gone Fishing*, the body is present in the use of bra pads, but again lacks any depiction of a specific person or flesh. Like fingerprints, there is evidence of the visceral, but the body is not present.

In most of the series the human form is absent to allow any individual to envision themselves in the artwork. What is perceived to be happening in any artwork changes when the work is talked about in relation to the makers' identity, especially when that maker's identity is female, non-heterosexual, or BIPOC (such as myself). By making the series about personal experiences as an adolescent, I relay my experiences in my body even if my body is absent in the work. In *Frenemy Bracelet*, the friendship described is one of my own experiences. The body is absent to allow the weavings to function as a conduit to anyone who sees themselves in the scenario and relates to the experience of lost friendships. The weavings are a representation of

<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/billie-zangewa-wings-of-change-lehmann-maupin-new-york-i-had-chosen-to-embodiment-the-most-disempowered-human-form>

my life and my body, but like clothes in a second-hand store, I purge what once fit me for someone else to try on.

The body is referenced yet absent in “*I just want to let them know that they didn’t break me.*” (Fig. 8), where thrifted prom dresses are used to create a wall hanging expressing missed opportunity and redemption. The title is a quote from Molly Ringwald’s character, Samantha, in John Hughes’s 1986 film, *Pretty in Pink*.⁸ In a monologue with her father, Samantha decides to attend prom, even if just for a few moments to prove to herself (and to those that doubt her showing up) that they were unsuccessful in breaking her will to attend. “*I just want to let them know that they didn’t break me.*” functions as a retroactive surrogate for not going to my own high school prom. The weaving is a vessel of fantasy — a fantasy where I had the self-esteem, resources, and unbreakable will to attend prom. Although *Pretty in Pink* positively inspired the title of the piece, Hughes’s films did not age well due to some problematic scenes depicting sexual assault. This points to the deceptive nature of the silver screen as a mirage of truth and displays the importance of healthy sexual education amongst adolescence.

America’s Favorite Pastime is not a stand-in for sexual education but is meant to question the merit of current systems of sexual education for youth. Sexual education in American public schools has long been dubious in its absolute lack of information and favoring of abstinence.⁹ Many public sexual education programs provide information overwhelmingly based in heterosexuality. In *America’s Favorite Pastime* the use of baseball equipment as sexual innuendo references the four sexual “bases” often used in adolescence to describe stages of

⁸ *Pretty in Pink*, directed by John Hughes (Paramount Pictures, 1986).

⁹ David Walsh, “Love, Sex, and Adolescent Brain,” in *Why Do They Act That Way?*, ed. Nat Bennett (New York: Free Press, 2014), 129-130.

sexual exploration. By using baseball equipment ripe with sexual innuendo, the topic of sexual bases can be conveyed to allow for new conversations or reconsideration of modern ideals surrounding sex education of American youth. The binary of sexual education in public schools is challenged with the use of specific visual nods to homosexuality in the styling of the fingernails attached to one of the baseball gloves along with the homoeroticism in the pink latex baseballs held in the opposite glove. The work is inclusive in showing sexuality from many perspectives and not just the heterosexual point of view to which people are predominantly exposed.

Education is power and when adolescents lack the direct resources for sexual education, they tend to look in places that are not reliable sources for safe-sex information such as pornography, pop culture, and through hearsay.¹⁰ Again, *America's Favorite Pastime* is not a stand-in for sex education but is meant to encourage dialogue about sex, especially sex involving under-represented individuals. In my upbringing, I do not recall any sex-education diagram that displayed anyone with a complexion darker than olive, nor anyone participating in sexual acts outside of heterosexuality. *America's Favorite Pastime* displays both attributes through the brown-toned skin of the pelvic region and homoerotic innuendo. *America's Favorite Pastime* being in the series also creates the conversation of sex as rite of passage for women and not exclusively men. Sexual exploration is associated with shame for many women prior to marriage. As the weaving implies, sexual rites of passage are just as pertinent to women and are important to normalize.

¹⁰ David Walsh, "Love, Sex, and Adolescent Brain," in *Why Do They Act That Way?*, ed. Nat Bennett (New York: Free Press, 2014), 130.

In my personal experience, events that acknowledge rites of passage tend to evoke a mixed bag of emotions. Part of me enjoys the grandeur and celebration of events like sweet sixteen, proms, graduations, and weddings because they commemorate steps in human development. Simultaneously, these moments can pressure individuals to share collective experiences that are just not feasible or necessary for everyone, resulting in negative emotions and experiences. I think both responses to rites of passage are present in the work. Weddings and marriage have been a recent hot topic amongst my family and friends. The familial pressures to marry pile up as I grow older and many of my friends start families. As an adolescent, I was a bridesmaid in both of my older sisters' weddings, and during this time I wanted to pursue a career as a wedding planner. In *Dream Story*, the decorative nature of wedding dresses is celebrated in an abundance of beading, bows, buttons, and lace. The act of making the piece is a celebration of love and commitment to relationships, but the rug-woven collage is also a substitute for my own hesitation to participate in formal marriage or a wedding ceremony. At this moment, the act of marriage is not for me, as it breeds legal consequences for the process of falling out of love. This is visually represented in the steady transition of lace and satin unraveling and snagging in *Dream Story*.

The second-hand dresses used in *Dream Story* create suspicion of why a garment often considered a sentimental keepsake, would end up in a sales bin of a thrift store. Are these dresses now a relic of love lost? The material bolsters the theme of uncertainty and melancholia. The history of marriage and weddings is rooted in control of women and exchange of goods through contractual obligation.¹¹ Marriage has evolved to mean something different for many individuals,

¹¹ Summer Brennan, "A Natural History of the Wedding Dress," JSTOR Daily, last modified September 27, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/a-natural-history-of-the-wedding-dress/>.

but it is important to note these origins as so many aspects of marriage are based in tradition and ritual. The act of making *Dream Story* supplements for my desires to have a formal wedding. Finding the dresses, breaking them down into weft strips, then weaving them into a campy representation of a bride fulfills and engages the longing for these experiences, minus the consequences. This is also telling of the series title, *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words*, as the phrase “synthetic inquiry” is a double nod to the synthetic materials used in excess in the series and to the surrogate-like experience achieved through the practice of making these artworks. The series focuses specifically on rites of passage ritualizing love and functions as a safety net to explore these themes with less “real-life” commitment.

Love, including all the complications and consequences of it, is the continuous thread running through *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words*. This series encapsulates the feelings of anxiety, curiosity, and infatuation that come with navigating the chemically induced pressures of love in adolescence. *So, What Are We?* depicts the initial moment in adolescence when a friendship escalates to romantic interest. In adolescence, the process of creating romantic relationships is often molded through friend groups and mutual friendships.¹² The use of the oversized friendship-bracelet beads is a nod to this natural progression. The sense of anxiety and fear that comes with asking someone on a date for the first time is evoked in the surface treatment of the porcelain beads. *So, What Are We?* can also be interpreted as the moment of a breakup as the friendship bracelet beads crumble and become illegible through the repetition of

¹² Wyndol Furman and Amanda J. Rose, “Friendships, Romantic Relationships, and Peer Relationships,” in *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, ed. Richard M. Lerner (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2015), 2.

the phrase. The emotions of obsession and euphoria gradually melt and dissolve into crisis and heartbreak.

CONCLUSION

In the making of *Synthetic Inquiry of Four-Letter Words*, I discovered the extensive abilities of weaving as a structural ground for unconventional material. In researching adolescent development, I began to understand what drew me to the topic in the first place. The ability to process my emotions about yesteryear's experiences became a tool to create works that connect to the emotive ups and downs of adolescence. Through catharsis in the form of an artistic practice, I investigate what it means to identify as biracial and bisexual in a society that has always given less representation to these identities. Most importantly, my practice asks questions of materials about my experience relating to the four-letter word of love. In return, the weavings help me understand why these questions are important to me and so many others.

FIGURES



Figure 1, *America's Favorite Pastime*, 2021, cotton yarn, baseball bats, baseball gloves, baseballs, pink latex, acrylic nails, white pleather, big league chew.



Figure 2, *Dream Story*, thrifted wedding dresses, cotton yarn, 2021.



Figure 3, *Gone Fishing*, 2020, cotton yarn, metallic thread, bra pads, metal sinkers, soft fishing baits, can tabs, fishing pole, spray paint, monofilament.

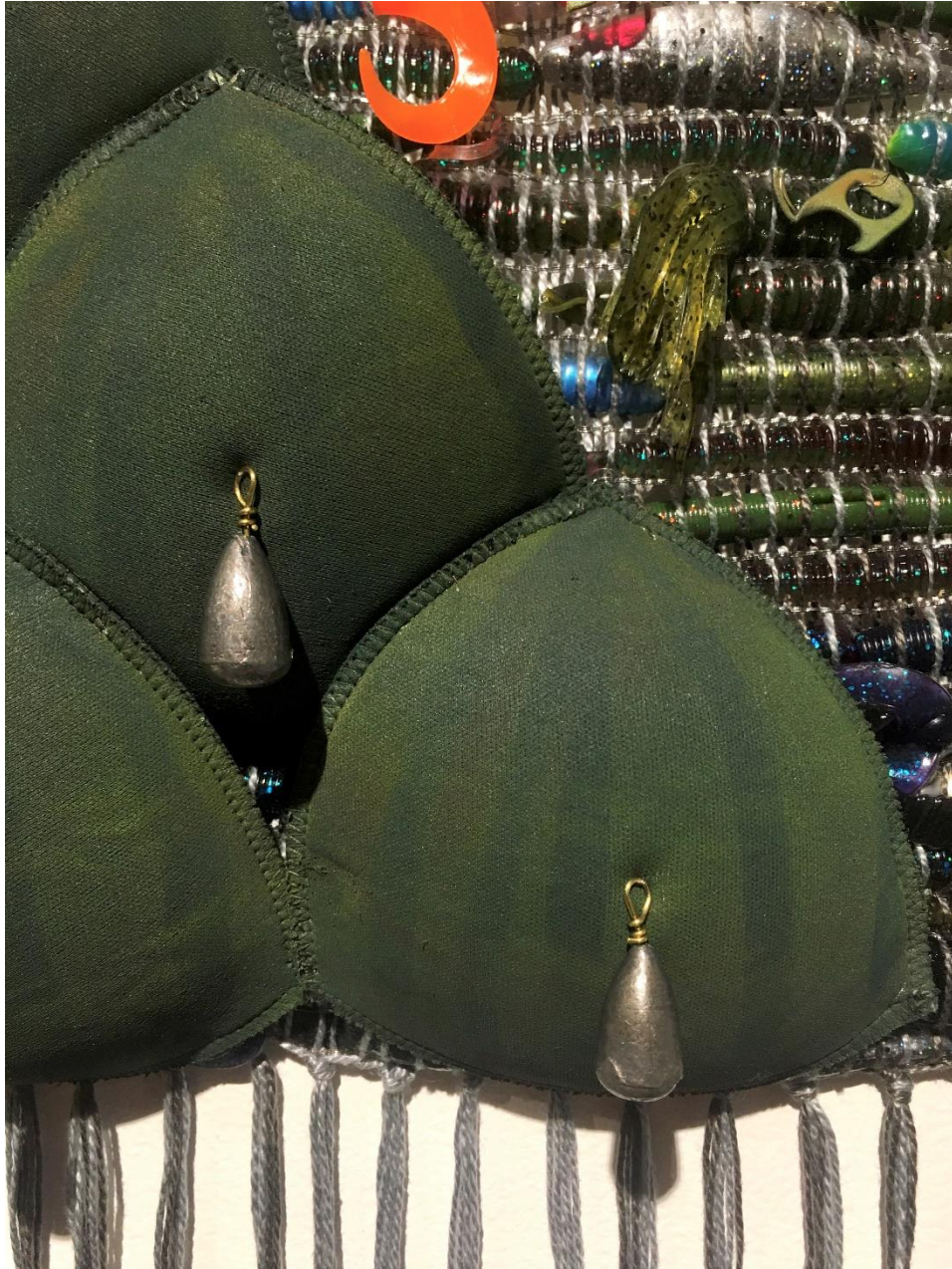


Figure 4, *Gone Fishing* (detail), 2020, cotton yarn, metallic thread, bra pads, metal sinkers, soft fishing baits, can tabs, fishing pole, spray paint, monofilament.



Figure 5, *So, What Are We?*, 2021, snow-dyed cotton, cotton yarn, vinyl, butterfly hair clips, spray paint, porcelain beads.



Figure 6, *Frenemy Bracelet*, 2019, cotton yarn, plastic cord, porcelain beads.



Figure 7, Billie Zangewa, *A Fresh Start*, 2020, hand-stitched silk collage, 53.54 x 27.95in.



Figure 8, *"I just want to let them know that they didn't break me."*, 2019, cotton yarn, thrifted prom dresses, beads.

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