Thinking in Nature:
Brece Honeycutt’s Art As Domestic Archive

by Anne Swartz

bewilder is both a state and place of interest for Brece Honeycutt. She walks in hopes of losing her way. Wandering off allows her to make discoveries. History, nature, the home and garden, the handmade, and memory intertwine in her artistic method. A peaceful, pensive person—he seems to live at odds with current styles and lifestyles. There is a warmth and grace at the center of her work. Patience seems the dominant presumption in her art. In order to discuss recent work by Honeycutt, it is helpful to see how her life experiences inform her art.

There is a ruggedness and rigor to Honeycutt’s art. Some of the ruggedness originates in her oft-idyllic childhood where she could run freely through the woods. Born in 1960, Honeycutt lived for four years in Hickory, North Carolina. It also bespeaks affection for her Nannie (her grandmother Josie Dean Kenworthy Honeycutt) who lived “an easy walk away through the woods” from the artist’s childhood home. Summers were spent with Nannie—in her garden, gathering her figs, following her canning rituals, helping with her laundry chores.
One of Honeycutt’s most evocative series are loosely rendered drawings of scenes of her grandmother’s kitchen, made from her mind’s eye. Honeycutt tessellates linear sketches into a kitchen interior. These drawings titled kitchen installation, are gorgeous—almost abstracted treatments—of domestic objects and spaces. Their robust, voluptuous forms and assured lines recall Henry Moore’s Shelter Drawings (1940-41), inspired by bodies clustered together, as people sought shelter from wartime bombings in the England underground.

The family’s relocation to Alexandria, Virginia in 1964 put Honeycutt in proximity to Mount Vernon. The family visited there, as well as other nearby Washington historic sites, often. Another move to a small rural area of Delaplane in western Virginia, coincided with her adolescence. The fall of her senior year in England was an important turning point as she began to study more about art and literature, expanding her awareness of cultural history. Skidmore College was a place for Honeycutt to delve into visual art and practice. She took weaving classes with Eunice Pardon, learned about Anni Albers, studied art history. Her mother’s unexpected death soon after graduation prompted her to move away from home. Over the next six years she worked in various artworld or office jobs, as well as attending Columbia University and earning a M.F.A. in Sculpture.

*Right: black walnut summer book, 2014, ecoprint on paper, waxed thread, 26 x 7 x 4”*
In 1989 Honeycutt married and moved to London for the first five years of her marriage. While living there, she had a warehouse studio. She studied historical women’s undergarments and women’s history, among other topics. When she returned to the United States to live in Washington, D.C. in 1994, she created work devoted to important historical figures such as Clara Barton or practices such as food preparation from the 17th century. She actively exhibited, worked for artists such as Anne Truitt, and she held residencies. She spent time in Vietnam making art. She explored, read, researched, learned techniques like spinning.

Honeycutt’s move to Sheffield, Massachusetts, in the Taconic Mountains, took her to a colonial farm situated in the shadow of the Appalachian Trail. The move intensified her imagination about temporality and the land as a positive space and an active continuance integrated into her daily experience. She began using weeds and plants for her health and her art. A residency in 2008 at Pocket Utopia in Bushwick connected her with a vital community of artists offering dialogue and a shared DIY approach to making and exhibiting.

Honeycutt returns to: the simple, the undeniable, the enduring, and the aphoristic. Although she is a transplant to the Berkshires, she has grown into a romanticized version of Yankee ways, such as respect for and cultivation of nature, thrift, and quiet. She transitions between her rural life in the mountains and urban life in the city. This fluctuation between country and city allows her the contact with nature in which she flourishes in contemplating her process and the connection with the artworld to see art.

The artist sees history as formative and generative; a living resource upon which to grow. Remembrances of her grandmother stimulated her mending practice series. This on-going multi-media series, begun in 2006, originated from a box of one-inch square swatches of fabric she found at an auction, such as her grandmother had done. She added the quilt squares to paper made from old shredded rags and then used the fabric patterns as the kernel of a design for a composition. In this ongoing series the colors are lush and vibrant with shapes and compositions ranging from geometric to floral.
Right: bewildered: land lines, 2017, eco-dyed damask textile, eco-dyed thread, 14 1/2 x 27"
Sometimes the artist accomplishes this artistic engagement in divergent ways. It can be through the combination of text and image, prompting the viewer to experience her work visually and aurally. Occasionally, she inserts written text in her art and chronicles her ideas and thoughts in her blog “On A Colonial Farm.” At other times her art can be in the form of shared production, as it was with poet Dara Mandle in 2012. This collaboration, produced by Norte Maar, became the artist’s book Tobacco Hour, in which the artist created elaborately delicate and refined eco-dyed books from handmade paper with no glue bindings. The colors, shadings, and patterns of the natural dyes creating diaphanous surges interlaced with drizzled lines and dots. #CorrespondenceCourse with artist Abigail Doan is a rich pen-pal collage series they began in 2015. In it, the two artists cull from their precious hoards of talismans, treasures, and ephemera to produce a visually responsive dialogue in a scrapbook-like, Exquisite Cadavre format (one artist begins and the other finishes an image or composition).

Honeycutt has shifted gears in her most recent work producing three series with integral meditative processes: winterfield and bewilder, both of 2017, and grater of 2016. Extended focus on diligence in her process had been a part of Honeycutt’s work in earlier projects, such as the spinning and knitting included in her Pocket Utopia project which involved numerous hand-spun and knitted sculptural ceiling- and wall-related elements. As an outgrowth of her intensive study of the ways women lived historically and managed life using the local herbs and plants, she began these three series from her practice of culling materials from sources and places experienced in the present. They can be in arbitrary states or in disarray—from sources like uncultivated, meandering paths in the woods to rummage sales.

Inspired by a lecture given by the historian/scholar Katherine Grandjean discussing her book, American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England, Honeycutt identified with the Puritan colonists of the early 17th century who had to rely on hired Indian guides to avoid getting lost in the woods and ensure the circulation of their correspondence. These colonists would get lost and literally be wildered, or in a state of bewilderment. Honeycutt remarked on this status: “It is hard to be bewilderled in our world now. I try to reach that on my walks. Furthermore, one could also say that I am bewilderled by the current state of affairs in regards to what might happen to the wilderness. A different type of bewilderment.”
Left: so noted, 2017, monoprint on 8 x 5" notecard, found object, 12 x 5 x 4 3/4"
The rectilinear final form of *bewilder* is the only truly straight line. Every other line is slightly askew—a clue to wander.

The subtitles “yellow haze” and “land lines” have dubious connotations and are not entirely certain. For the works, the artist’s process of construction begins with the dyes made from plants, coreopsis and rhododendron. The procedure for making the work reads like a recipe: *Bring to a boil and simmer for an hour. Leave overnight.* The fabric is dyed along with thread, which is then stitched into it. The stitching is not obvious at a distance, but it is more in evidence up close. For the artist, this acute focus parallels her experience walking in the wilderness. She says: “Seeing something far off and getting up close to examine it fully.” The surface recalls tree bark in parts and marks left behind from leaves or branches on the ground. This chronicling of nature and experience are satisfying. There is a gratification in taking the time to look closely. Bewilderment here gives way to wonder.
Left: nature sketch #1, 2015, handmade flax paper, hand spun wool, found nest, 11 x 8 1/2 x 1"  

Above (l-r):  
nature sketch #2, 2015, handmade flax paper, textile, flax thread, found nest, 11 x 8 1/2 x 1"  
nature sketch with #3, 2015, handmade flax paper, ecodyed textile, textile, paper, 11 x 8 1/2 x 1"
winterfield is a series of found linen or damask textiles Honeycutt reclaimed. She stitches them in their soft state. Then she carefully irons them into a crisp condition. There is a sense of severity and serenity in their monochrome, suggesting cool constancy of a windswept field. The stitching itself forms images of ground plants and tree branches the artist recalled experiencing while walking in the winter. Finally, she carefully irons the delicate surface into a crisp, fresh, flat state. The ironing is a peaceful, orderly, and rhythmic activity.

The grater series are monoprints on 8 x 5” note cards. Honeycutt used the hapa-zome technique in which the artist smashes plants into the surface of paper or cloth to dye or mark it. Then using a collection of kitchen graters, she overlaid the surface and applied various tea and plant dyes with brushes through the holes. She used coreopsis, marigold, morning glory, pokeberry, and goldenrod to make the plant dyes for these pieces. The graters are weighed down with metal objects and left to print. Each print takes days to, as the artist describes it, “cure.” The residue on the surface appears in a grid. Underneath there is an abstract composition, which appears in diaphanous, delicate swirls and patches of color. At the center of the installation of the grid of grater works is pink lace #14, a work from a similar series,
summer sketches #1-3, 2015, ecodyed textile, thread, 6 x 6"

pink lace. It provides a swirling pattern rather than a regularized gridded one as the basis for its compositional structure with the lace.

While Honeycutt's art is often local in reference, it has broad implications. Her contemplative life in the mountains allows her to explore a poetics of restraint and to weave her philosophy of intimacy in her art. She's created a tempo of deceleration in her art. It allows her to immerse herself in the present so intensely that history comes alive through her investigations into mystifying nature and her mining the psychic and material territory of the home.

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1 All quotations from telephone or in-person conversations with the artist or studio visit in Sheffield, Massachusetts on June 25, 2016. Any direct quotations are taken from the artist’s chronology, October 12, 2016 or studio visit document, January 29, 2017. I am grateful to the artist for her generosity in responding to my many questions and inquiries.

2 Katherine Grandjean, American Passage: The Communications Frontier in New England (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Lecture was sponsored by Bidwell House Museum, Monterey, Massachusetts, and held at the Tisbury Union Church, Tisbury, Massachusetts, August 20, 2016.