

CHENTA T. LAURY

Negotiating the Ecology of Place

Abstract

I find several compelling parallels between the human and plant realms, particularly in relation to place and identity. Refreshing insights, questions, and perspectives have arisen for me in my reflections on the history and ecosystems of Hawai‘i, my own identity, and my work. I am interested in how we construct and deconstruct individual identities within the context of a larger society. As human beings, we shift, adapt, resist, or embrace the various influences within the social, cultural and natural ecosystems in which we live. We invent and reorganize ourselves continuously as we move through time and space. I associate this journey of finding and fitting the pieces of ourselves together with patchwork — articulating and finding meaning in the patterns, textures, and salvageable pieces of our identities. Like plants, we live in transformation.

I use a variety of natural fibers in my work, including wool, silk, and wauke (Broussonetia papyrifera). While I honor traditions from the past (harvesting and beating bark and hand-felting wool are among the oldest of fiber craft forms), I also experiment with new methods as a way of expressing my own, authentic voice. My current work straddles the lines between craft and fine art, representation and abstraction, and conceptual vocabularies that merge artistic traditions related to my biological origins: African American patchwork quilting and Finnish felting with tapa (bark cloth) and artistic traditions from Hawai‘i.

Keywords: *fiber art, diaspora, patchwork, natural fibers, identity, Hawai‘i*

My recent work concerns itself with reconciliation. As an African American woman who grew up in the occupied territory of Hawai‘i, the concept of “diaspora” came as a welcome model through which I could orient myself. This framework allowed me to reconcile the fact that I was part of a larger cultural community through my African American heritage, while at the same time enabling me to be true to my unique lived experience, which was largely geographically and culturally separate from that community.

In recent years, conversations about the Black Diasporic experience have become more common and have served to expand notions of what it means to be Black. I was recently introduced to discussions and scholarship that address Black visibility in Oceania: the experience of dark-skinned folks who, strictly speaking, are apart from the African diaspora. While these dialogues are critically important to how I consider my identity, the natural world, in particular the plant world, is equally central to my internal conception of self and to my artistic expression.

I see several compelling parallels between the human and plant realms, particularly in relation to geographic place and identity. The English language, when it refers to humans, borrows numerous concepts and vocabulary used in reference to plants: diaspora (from the Greek “to scatter, as in to sow”), germinate, invasive, transplant, uproot, seed, blossom, and many others. Craig Holdrege’s book *Thinking Like a Plant* has further inspired my thoughts on the subject:

Through the way they live, plants provide a model for context-sensitive thinking. Instead of using the world as a proving ground for already-set agendas, instead of formulating hypotheses based on all-too-limited perspectives, instead of implementing programs to “fix” problems, we can gain the ability to enter into an open-ended, dynamic dialogue with the world in our thoughts and actions, so that increasingly they can reveal and enhance the living qualities of the world we inhabit.¹

Given the inherently apolitical nature of the natural world, refreshing insights, questions, and perspectives have arisen in my reflections on the history and ecosystem of life in Hawai‘i and, in particular, on the concept of adaptive radiation. I have come to see the diasporic experience of people through the lens of adaptive radiation. These insights and questions, in turn, inform my work. Using a variety of natural fibers, including wool, silk, and wauke (paper mulberry bark), my work explores how one adapts to changing cultural, geographic, and environmental realities, which I believe are the pivotal issues of our time.

My current work straddles the lines between craft and fine art, representation and abstraction, and conceptual vocabularies that merge artistic traditions related to my biological origins: African American patchwork quilting and Finnish felting with tapa (bark cloth) and artistic traditions from Hawai‘i. While I have deep respect for the traditions and processing methods I have learned from my teachers (e.g., my approach to harvesting materials, beating bark, and hand-felting, which is among the oldest of fiber craft forms), I also experiment with non-traditional methods of processing these materials as a way of adapting their expression to my authentic voice.

I am interested in the relationship between identity and place, and how we construct and deconstruct individual identities within the context of a larger society. As human beings we shift, adapt, resist, or embrace the various influences within the social, cultural, and natural ecosystems in which we live. We find existing patterns, invent new ones, and reorganize ourselves continuously as we move chronologically through time and geographically through space. In the most abstract terms, I see this as a relationship between individual “parts” and a larger “whole.” I associate this journey of finding and fitting the various pieces of ourselves

together with the process of patchwork; we are articulating and finding meaning in the patterns, textures, and salvageable pieces of our identities. This act of journeying and growth affirms that, like plants, we live in a constant state of transformation.

The current global refugee crisis forces people to adapt and reorient themselves outside of their familiar geographical, cultural, and ideological conventions. Just as a migrant's "place" is in limbo, so too are their individual and collective cultural identities in flux. Anyone who moves to a different location faces the existential challenge of reconciling and navigating a social ecology that is new to them. How one enters a new cultural and environmental ecosystem or responds to the changing ecosystem in which they already exist determines how they will "grow" and if they will thrive. How these themes play out in Hawai'i is also of interest to me. Here, as with all colonized places, adaptation is forced upon not only the migrant, but also upon those already inhabiting a place. Today's native inhabitants of Hawai'i (including people, animals, and plants) are forced to adapt to, negotiate life with, and maintain their survival among arriving foreigners, as they have for hundreds of years. Imperialists arrive with a very different impulse than migrants, and Hawai'i's history continues to include both. The question of how new arrivals meet an existing ecosystem is vital to the health and survival of both.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association defines the term "invasive species" as

an organism that causes ecological or economic harm in a new environment where it is not native....Invasive species are capable of causing extinctions of native plants and animals, reducing biodiversity, competing with native organisms for limited resources, and altering habitats.²

By this definition, a species' *behavior* is what defines it as invasive or not. I believe that if mutual survival and health are to be achieved, the introduced population and the preexisting one(s) must negotiate and reconcile belonging to a shared space in such a way that honors the integrity of both. There is no formula for this. One imagines that embracing a mode of context sensitivity—not just upon introduction, but as an ongoing state of being—will be key. This mindset is a necessary part of my artistic process, which often combines traditional processes of creating bark cloth with felting wool and needle stitching to generate my contemporary artistic vision. Context sensitivity requires recognizing the inherent qualities of the natural materials I use as a starting point—exploring, experimenting, and playing with them—and then combining multiple materials into an inherently unique, synthesized whole. This, too, is a form of reconciliation across time—between this place, this history, and me.

Originally from O‘ahu, Chenta T. Laury is a Maui-based artist and educator. She has exhibited in shows throughout the U.S., including in the 2019 Honolulu Biennial. Her work is held in numerous private collections, as well as in the Hawai‘i State Art Museum in Honolulu. Chenta received an undergraduate degree in studio art and art history from Oberlin College, an M.Ed. from Harvard University, and a Certificate in Applied Arts from the Fiber Crafts Studio in Chestnut Ridge, NY. Chenta has also studied extensively with a variety of fiber arts and cultural practitioners including Renata Hiller in New York and Dalani Tanahy in Hawai‘i.

Notes

¹ Craig Holdrege, *Thinking Like a Plant: A Living Science for Life* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2013), 9.

² “What is an Invasive Species?” National Ocean Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, U.S. Department of Commerce, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/invasive.html>.



Fig. 1. Chenta T. Laury, *Patchwork #1*, 2019. `Alaea (clay), hili kukui (dark brown dye), silk, and thread on tapa (bark cloth), 35.5 x 29 inches. Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Patchwork #1 (Fig. 1) is made from the inner bark of wauke (paper mulberry tree, *Broussonetia papyrifera*), which has been processed throughout the world in a variety of ways. In Hawai'i, it is made into kapa (bark cloth) by Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians), whereas in Japan this same plant is processed into washi paper.

Patchwork #1 reflects aesthetic choices that differ from Kanaka Maoli traditions and demonstrates a range of ways that wauke can be processed. In some sections, silk fibers have been beaten into the cloth to create a range of colors, thicknesses, and textures. I then hand-stitched these contrasting and irregular pieces together into a cohesive whole that reflects the conceptual meaning of the work's title. *Patchwork #1* is a metaphor for how I continue to construct my identity.

The pigments used in this piece come from the earth and from plants that were traditionally used in making Hawaiian and Polynesian tapa. Hawai'i's iron-rich 'alaea (clay) exists in a multitude of colors, which I gathered, ground, and mixed into a pigment. I also used hili kukui (a dark brown dye), made by boiling down the root bark of the kukui (candlenut) tree (*Aleurites moluccana*). I am indebted to the rich traditions of Hawai'i that have been preserved and passed down through generations of kūpuna (ancestors) over the centuries. I am profoundly grateful to this place and its people for instilling in me a deep and spiritual reverence for the natural world and inspiring artistic ingenuity, ecological responsibility, and an implicit curiosity about the world.



Figure 2. Chenta T. Laury, *Patchwork: Holding Dichotomies*, 2020. Tapa (bark cloth), silk, embroidery thread, 51.5 x 63.73 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist

This iteration of *Patchwork* is a meditation on my experience in bringing cohesion to the disparate emotions, thoughts, and feelings I faced in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a concrete exploration of my attempt to hold the scale and plight of those suffering physically and economically with the health and beauty found in my immediate surroundings. Here, I explore the simultaneity of fragility and strength, the translucent and the opaque, the individual and the collective, as well as the numerous invisible stitches required to hold together a much larger, diverse, and yet connected, whole.



Figure 3. Chenta T. Laury, *Patchwork: Holding Dichotomies* (detail), 2020. Tapa (bark cloth), silk, embroidery thread, 51.5 x 63.73 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Chenta T. Laury, *Patchwork: Yet Apart*, 2020. Wool, tapa (bark cloth), cotton string, 18 x 18 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Patchwork: Yet Apart explores how we are bound to a common foundation and are in dialogue with one another, yet separated by the space that remains between our “edges”—our more superficial external characteristics, such as race. Each stitch is a step toward unification and finding common ground.

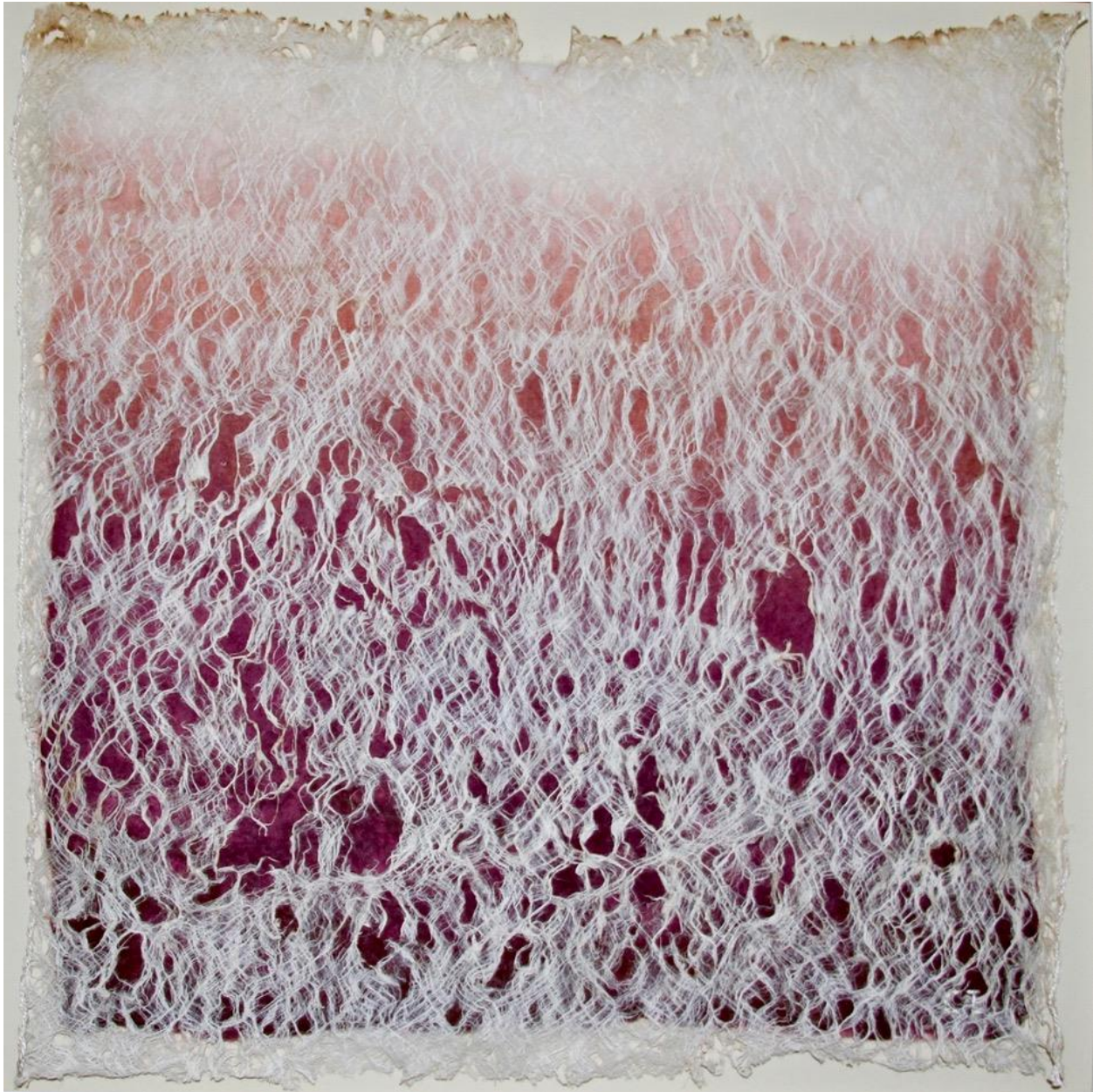


Figure 5. Chenta T. Laury, *Veiled: Kilihune I (fine, light rain)*, 2020. Wool, tapa (bark cloth), embroidery thread, 18 x 18 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Many of my works use a formal vocabulary of line, shape, color, and texture to investigate the concept of finding concordance or dissonance between distinct entities. I am interested in the incremental shifts we make to connect or distance ourselves from “the other.” I find value in examining how this process looks beyond the human realm: in nature, or even in the meeting of different mediums. I’m also interested in the layered complexity of how distinct entities might occupy the same area, and the depth that comes with this coexistence.