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Lacey Minor

*James Madison University*

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*Icarus Rooted*

Lacey Minor

A thesis monograph submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design, and Art History

May 2021

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Lisa Tubach

Committee Members/ Readers:

Sukjin Choi

Dr. Laura Katzman

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This one is for Alec, and everyone else that has flown too close to the sun.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis conceptually frames and accompanies the MFA body of work *Icarus Rooted* by Lacey Minor. This work grapples with the acceptance of impermanence and illustrates her personal narrative about grieving family lost to addiction — juxtaposed with societal reflections on the opioid epidemic in America — using the potato as a symbol for the addicted body.

*The underground:*

*Anything beneath us, we look down upon.*

*It gets stifling sometimes. Everything does. Anxiety crashes in, caving in the walls around me, holding me underground, and all I can do is start to dig. I sometimes can't tell if I'm heading to the surface or burying myself deeper still.*

*Unearthing the underground,*

*Digging up the past to put on display.*

## **Alec**

My cousin passed away in the summer of 2019. He was only 28 years old. His passing did not surprise me. I had mourned his loss years before his death: It was a heroin overdose, an addiction he had been suffering through for years. He is the fourth in my family to die from a heroin related death. A study of my ever-shrinking family illustrates the severity of the opioid crisis we are facing globally.

Our lives mirrored each other's until the accident. He suffered a car accident for which he was prescribed opiates to kill the pain. He tragically developed an addiction which eventually led him to heroin. He suffered this addiction for five years, and then I got the call telling me his body had been found in a motel just outside of our hometown

of St. Louis, MO. My last memory of him is when he came by my house that last time. He had called, telling me he had cleaned up, again, and needed a couch to crash on. When he showed up, it was clear he wasn't clean. He confessed to me that he did not believe he could quit. I begged him to try rehab again. He looked at me and said, "You don't understand, Lace, and you can't. It's like I've found heaven. You could feel it too, if you wanted, endless summer." I'll never forget those words, or his eyes staring into mine, a shade darker brown than my own. Eyes that had seen the sun and could not look away. Eyes that could have just as easily been mine. And I told him to leave.

*Endless summer.*

My fondest memories of my cousin are from our childhood summers spent at our great-grandmother's. She lived on 168-acres in rural Pearl, Illinois that she had managed with my great-grandfather and their four daughters. When her daughters moved away and her husband died, she managed the entire property by herself. If a stronger person ever walked the earth, I never met them.

She'd send us out to dig up her potatoes, and we'd bring wheelbarrows full to the cellar. It was here on her farm that she instilled in us a connection with the land, and an idea of equal exchange with the earth. Roots link us to our pasts, to new growth, and dead ends. We've been severed from our instinctual connection to the natural world. Do we really even remember how to nurture a relationship with nature?



## Potatoes

The potato – a humble creature hiding many complexities. Who knows death better than the potato? The potato who has ended and caused famines. The potato who is so prone to disease and demise, who feeds the multitudes with its tubers, but could kill you with a taste of its greenery. Green is a symbol of prosperity and growth, but not necessarily for the potato. Green in a potato reveals that solanine is developing, a consequence of light exposure. A potato cannot live in the light, although it tries. Like Icarus, too close to the sun and the potato falls. To live, a potato must be buried.

In my work, I am using the potato as a symbol for the addicted body, specifically those addicted to heroin.

The potato, for me, has also served as representation of the vicious cycle of grief. I have continued growing potatoes above ground until they are taken by the development of solanine and begin to rot, then I replace them and start again knowing I will get the same result. On a personal level this cycle mimics the grief I have endured with those in my family I have lost to heroin. I cared for them the best way I knew how, but in the end their exposure was too much. Through caring for these potatoes, I reenact past guilts of enabling and abandoning.

I aspire to balance the global with the personal in the way Kiki Smith does. All of her work is so rich with allegory, but specifically her tapestry series “Woodland” has been an inspiration behind this body of work. Using whimsical creatures, Smith tackles topics like women’s rights, identity, morality, and environmental decline. This work

depicts a world in which humankind has lost the trust of nature. This idea of losing our connection to the natural world is an underlying theme I explore in my work.

And so, with these memories in mind, this body of work started off with potato stamps as an ode to my cousin and the better times of our childhood. Due to unfortunate circumstances, I was unable to make it home for the funeral. I found myself visiting local cemeteries and wandering, stopping at headstones with a similar name, and soaking in the solitude only a graveyard can offer. I was taking note of the weaving paths I took through these cemeteries and would come back to the studio to enlarge and mark the path with potato stamps. I was documenting a journey with no clear finish line. The more I made this work, the less interested I became in the cemeteries, but my interest in the potato grew.

From here I began growing potatoes in hopes of finding a better understanding of how they functioned. As I learned about solanine, witnessed its effects, and observed these complex creatures, the more I found they paralleled the life of my cousin. Their desire for what ultimately would result in their death mirrored in my eyes the addicted body, an Icarus effect<sup>1</sup>.

I started exploring them as an artistic medium: From growing potatoes, making stamps from potatoes, creating photograms with potatoes, casting potatoes, and molding them in clay.

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<sup>1</sup> Rojcewicz, Stephen. "Ovid: Daedalus and Icarus." *Delos: A Journal of Translation and World Literature*, vol. 32, 2017, p. 62.

The unassuming potato is quite versatile. Potatoes are a staple of so many culture's diets across the globe, making them the 5th most important crop in the world. Part of the nightshade family, the potato has a sordid history in relation to exploitation of indigenous Andeans and later the Irish<sup>2</sup>. The potato has on numerous occasions been a cheap, hardy food used in conjunction with the oppression of others. Here too lies another parallel, as the opioid crisis illustrates the racial disparities in drug policies and health care practices in America.

Solanine is a dormant toxin in domesticated potatoes. This toxin is there to ward off pests and prevent disease. Exposure to light triggers potatoes to produce solanine. If exposed to too much light, the potato will produce enough solanine to ultimately kill itself. When propagating potatoes above soil, the plant can root, sprout, and even flower, but it cannot grow to fruition to produce more potatoes unless it is buried.<sup>3</sup> Like Icarus, too close to the sun, and the potato will die prematurely.

What a shame, though, to deny those eyes from seeking the sun. How do you convince someone that an experience they equate with heaven will be their downfall?

Over the last year I have grown over 200 potatoes above the soil (Figure 2-4). All of which I have watched die. Through the process of growing these potatoes, I am reenacting my time with my cousin: enabling the potatoes that begin to grow towards the light by moving them to the window so they don't have to stretch; smothering the

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<sup>2</sup> Reader, John. *Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Print. 14, 26-27, 133.

<sup>3</sup> Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. New York: Random House, 2001. Print. 190-197.

potatoes that I worry might be showing some green by locking them away in hopes of reversing the damage, dismissing the potatoes when they begin to overwhelm me, and all of this over and over again to represent the cyclical nature of loving and losing someone to addiction.

Some of these potatoes I left on their own to die, but most I kept in my home. I cared for them closely every day knowing they could not go on as they were. Each morning I wake to find if they all made it through the night. Each day I find them greener than the last, signaling the ever-growing presence of solanine.

*And when his veins ran green, I knew.*

## Material Exploration

I work with materials like a pawnbroker. Lending to materials here and there, dipping my toes in many avenues. I seek out materials that connect with the content of my work, and from there I begin to deliberate on what the work will look like. The appearance of the work matters as much as the materiality and research behind it.

I begin with by investigating the content of interest and start mapping out general concepts I want to tackle. From there I begin collecting morsels of information that connect to something tangible. Whatever these physical materials might be, I start pondering what can be done with them. *Icarus Rooted* utilizes many mediums including lumen prints, potatoes, clay, dyes, and stamps.

I wanted to work with tangible materials that could be found in heroin. There are many surprising household materials that have been found in heroin with the intent of increasing the size of the batch. I experimented with materials like plaster, clay, shoe polish, and coffee to create dyes and paint with. This chain of experiments led to the large fabric works of the installation. I chose muslin as the base of this fibers work because it is a no-frills fabric, often used to create material blueprints. This material is also often used for shrouds<sup>4</sup>. I “inject” threads that have been dyed with substances used to cut heroin through the muslin with felting needles, leaving tracks of the threads on the other side

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Prangnell, & Glenys McGowan. (2013). Economy and Respectability: Textiles from the North Brisbane Burial Ground. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 17(3), 491.

(Figure 6). This process of injecting and leaving marks is relevant to the content of heroin addiction. These material pieces also served as place to collect potato stamps (Figure 9).

Installed, these pieces on muslin (Figure 5-9) wing either side of the potato installation and create a passage. Suspended in the air, the fabric catches some movement as the viewer moves through the piece. This whispered movement gives the piece life, and its perception is transformed from cloth to skin. Artist Ann Hamilton, in reference to her 2012 installation “The Event of a Thread” states, “The crossings of thread make a cloth. Cloth is the body’s first architecture; it protects, conceals and reveals; it carries our weight, swaddles us at birth and covers us in sleep and in death... Like skin, its membrane is responsive to contact, to the movement of air, to gravity’s pull.”

I was drawn to stamps as an act and as a process. Printmaking is also strangely linked to heroin culture. Stamp bags, small glassine envelopes intended to store collectable stamps and coins, are often used to sell single units of heroin. There is this bizarre subculture of printmaking labels for these bags. Different distributors stamp logos on stamp bags to identify their “product.” Often these logos are rip-offs of other brands (Arm & Hammer, Nike, McDonald’s, etc.) or just simple clip art (coffins, skulls, rats, etc.)<sup>5</sup> When researching into the distribution of heroin through stamp bags, I got caught up on stamps in general. Stamping logos. Stamping out. Potato Stamps. Stamps serve as a proof of existence in a particular place at a particular time: the stamps on envelopes, stamps on passports, stamps on hands at the bar, stamps on medical paperwork. As the

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<sup>5</sup> Filan, Kenaz. *The Power of the Opium Poppy: Harnessing Nature’s Most Dangerous Plant Ally*. Rochester: Park Street Press, 2011. Print. 59-63.

potatoes I have cultivated die, I use them as stamps. This process became a way to create proof that these potatoes existed, and a metaphor for impermanence.

Further documentation of their existence extended into lumen prints (Figure 10). Selecting potatoes that revealed signs of solanine development, I would capture their image with lumen prints, a photographic process that uses sunlight to develop and capture a picture. The full circle of documenting the potatoes with what was essentially the cause of their impending demise was the key to illustrating my useless attempts of stopping the inevitable.

I fix these photograms in rock salt. I do not wash it away. I let the salt cake and crystalize on the surface (Figure 11-18). This fix is not permanent. These images will eventually fade away over time, leaving no mark left of the potatoes that rotted on their surface. Salt can preserve, but not indefinitely. Salt, the most common preservative, has played a major role in the development of civilization and in determining the power and location of major cities through history.<sup>6</sup> Like the potato, salt has caused as many problems as it has solved; it is another product used in the exploitation of people, just as opioids have been weaponized by big pharma.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kurlansky, Mark. *Salt: A World History*. New York: Walker and Co, 2002. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Filan, Kenaz. *The Power of the Opium Poppy: Harnessing Nature's Most Dangerous Plant Ally*. Rochester: Park Street Press, 2011. Print. 120-123.

## Clay

*I swear he grew wings like Icarus,*

*And I don't know that his feet ever touched the ground again.*

Clay has been the backbone of my practice. No matter which direction I go, I always find myself back at home with clay. This connection to clay links back to my great-grandmother. The matriarch of my family, she instilled in us a respect for the earth. She believed we live in equal exchange with the dirt beneath our feet. The earth would yield us its harvests, and in return it would take back our earthly bodies when our time came. She believed that no matter how far we might drift away, all it took was our bare feet on the soil to connect us back to home. And she'd scoop some of that clay right out of the Illinois riverbed to smear across my skin to keep me from burning in the sun, and over cuts to make me tougher. It is from these roots that I learned to view clay as a creator, a guardian, and devourer. That nutrient-rich Illinois clay is what cradled and raised the potatoes she grew on her farm.

Unlike the domesticated potatoes we know, the native potatoes of the Andes are still toxic because the solanine has not been bred into dormancy. However, the people of the Andes still eat these toxic potatoes, by coating the potatoes in clay before



consumption. The clay absorbs the toxin and keeps it from being absorbed into the blood stream as it is digested.<sup>8</sup>

I have used clay to capture the impression of the potatoes I've been growing. Creating hollow shells of their existence. These clay shells serve as a reminder of what should have been, an empty shroud marking the absence of the potato from the ground where it belongs (Figure 21-22).

Clay is a material that has been found as a common cut of heroin. To stretch a batch of heroin, cuts are mixed in to create larger profit margins. In this body of work, clay serves as a protector and deliverer. Used to cut. Used to absorb. Used to bury.

*I wish I could have covered him in clay to keep him safe.*

*Now he rests under clay, and it's too late.*

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<sup>8</sup> Reader, John. *Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Print. 38-39.

## **Repetition and Impermanence**

Repeating repetitions. This is where comfort is found, in the compulsion to repeat. Practice becomes ritual. Dancing the line between intense fixation and mind-numbing tedium, creating the same thing over and over again is where I find solace. I am constantly chasing the thought that if I make it just one more time then I'll be convinced, convinced that the work means something, convinced that the work matters. It is an attempt to fight against the intrusive thought that what I make is not strong enough to elevate a narrative that reflects on the magnitude of the opioid epidemic. And so, I make and remake and remake and remake.

Multiples are powerful. I find a mass of similar objects more engaging than a singular object. At a point, multiples become part of a whole. Multiples are overwhelming. If you put enough of one thing together, it can become something else entirely. Multiples also can become a marking of passing time, a calendar of sorts. The process of making multiples can be both obsessive and deadening, and it is between these that I find where truth lies.

Contemporary neo-realist artist Chen Wenling is one of my artistic influences. He uses multiples for social satire. His 2009 work "God of Materialism" is a favorite of mine. In the work he has hundreds of humanoid pigs gathered around to worship a central, larger, and more grotesque pig. The work is commenting on the corruption of consumerism, and the greed of materialism. He focuses on the dark side of human nature. His use of multiples paired with his depictions of human nature resonate with me.

Repetition also attempts to achieve permanence, even if it is artificial. This is at the core of my work: useless attempts of holding on to something that has already left, trying to overcome impermanence. This idea is illustrated most clearly in my lumen prints (Figure 10). By capturing the potatoes' existence on photographic paper and fixing with salt, I'm doing little more than replacing one shelf life for another.

Jennifer Scanlan describes the grid at first glance as a depiction of the tedium and banality of the day-to-day, but under the surface the grid represents “a vision of the world that is idealized through prescribed systems that impose structure and order.”<sup>9</sup> The heroin epidemic is like an underground system branching off across the country, deeply rooted and rhizomatic in nature. By presenting the lumens as a grid I am implementing structure to the chaos that is addiction. It also is a commentary on the way we, as a society, tend to brush the opioid epidemic under the rug: 81,000 Americans died from an overdose in 2021.<sup>10</sup> Making the work this way supplies order to the chaos, a false harmony. It makes the work easier to digest at first. However, each potato represents a life lost each and every day in America. The four clay potato shrouds in this exhibition serve as a dedication to the four lives the opioid epidemic has stolen from my family.

By attempting to grow potatoes above ground repeatedly, knowing it is not possible, I am illustrating my cycle of grief losing loved ones to addiction. I take care of these potatoes to the best of my abilities. I just will not take them out of the sunlight to

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<sup>9</sup> Scanlan, Jennifer. “Crafting With and Against the Grid.” *The Journal of Modern Craft*, vol. 8, May 2015, pp. 220.

<sup>10</sup> “Illicit Opioid Graphics.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 Mar. 2021.

bury them, which is the only way they have a chance to grow to fruition. In this replayed scenario, burying the potato symbolizes salvation or a release from addiction. While an addict must want help to be helped, those who have addicts in their lives know that it always feels like there was more you could have done to save them from themselves. It can get to a point where you either try to take care of them, which can wind up enabling the habit, or turn them away and feel like you are abandoning them.

Although it is my hand ultimately that has imprisoned these potatoes in jars to grow above ground, I am referencing the way society is set up to trap people in addiction. Societal stressors drastically increase addiction risk. “It has been shown that as a county’s unemployment rate increases by 1%, the opioid death rate per 100,000 0.19 (3.6%) and the opioid overdose-related emergency department visit rate increases by 0.97 (7%),” and these numbers show why poorer communities are more effected by the reach of opioid addiction.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, the year my cousin died, the CDC annual overdose statistics report stated 99 people in America die each day from an opioid related death.<sup>12</sup> The recently-released 2020 annual overdose statistics report shows that number has risen significantly to 128 deaths per day.<sup>13</sup> While horrifying, this drastic rise is not shocking as the globe was being ravished by the COVID-19 pandemic and all the subsequent effects of lockdowns, quarantines, and business closures. The pain-relieving benefits of opiates

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<sup>11</sup> *The American Opioid Epidemic : From Patient Care to Public Health*, edited by Michael T. Compton, and Marc W. Manseau, American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2019. 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> “Illicit Opioid Graphics.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 Mar. 2021.

<sup>13</sup> “Illicit Opioid Graphics.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 Mar. 2021.

have allowed it to become widely available despite the extremely addictive potential of the drug.<sup>14</sup> America is the front runner in distributing prescription opioids over any other country. The number of prescription opioids in 2015 given in America was enough to medicate every single American for three solid weeks.<sup>15</sup>

In *Icarus Rooted* I represent the number of lives lost each day the year my cousin died with 99 lumen prints and 99 installed potatoes. The potatoes that die during the exhibition are discarded and replaced to continue the cycle (Figure 19). While inside the structure that holds the potatoes, which is built to be the dimensions of the average American gravesite at 3' wide, 8' long, and 6' deep, the viewer is surrounded by 99 potatoes destined to die (Figure 1, 20). This structure also serves to create a pseudo underground for the potatoes to live in. The muslin pieces wing both sides, inviting the viewer to walk through the space (Figure 5).

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<sup>14</sup> *The American Opioid Epidemic : From Patient Care to Public Health*, edited by Michael T. Compton, and Marc W. Manseau, American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2019. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *The American Opioid Epidemic : From Patient Care to Public Health*, edited by Michael T. Compton, and Marc W. Manseau, American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2019. 6-7.

## Conclusion

We are all subject to decline and destruction. This is the first mark of existence, a fact of lasting. Through trauma and grief, we march forward. In this fast-paced world that often forces us to rush through emotion, I wonder, can I capture that emotion of that time and place? Extract the essence from those moments? I will keep futilely grasping at the fog that is memory, but memory always finds a way to escape us in the end. After all, lasting is all anything can do for so long.

This exhibition depicts a darker side of society and human propensity towards addiction. It is an empathetic look at the failings of human nature and a conversation about the magnitude of the opioid epidemic. This issue is deeply rooted in our culture, rhizomatic in its design. The rate of opioid addiction is continually increasing. When prescriptions are handed out like candy, and quality of life diminishes, how can we eliminate this issue?

*Icarus Rooted* is an ode to some kids digging up potatoes, and a memorial to the ones that have flown too close to the sun.

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/out of this stony rubbish?  
Son of man, / you cannot say...I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” -T.S.  
Eliot, *The Wasteland*

**Figures:**

Figure 1: *Icarus Rooted* installation, 2021.



Figure 2: *Icarus Rooted* detail of early installation, 2020.





Figure 3: *Icarus Rooted* detail of early installation, 2020.



Figure 4: *Icarus Rooted* detail of early installation, 2020.



Figure 5: *Wax Wings Like Old Habits* installation, 2021



Figure 6: *Wax Wings Like Old Habits* detail, 2021.



Figure 7: *Wax Wings Like Old Habits* detail, 2021.



Figure 8: *Wax Wings Like Old Habits* installation, 2021.

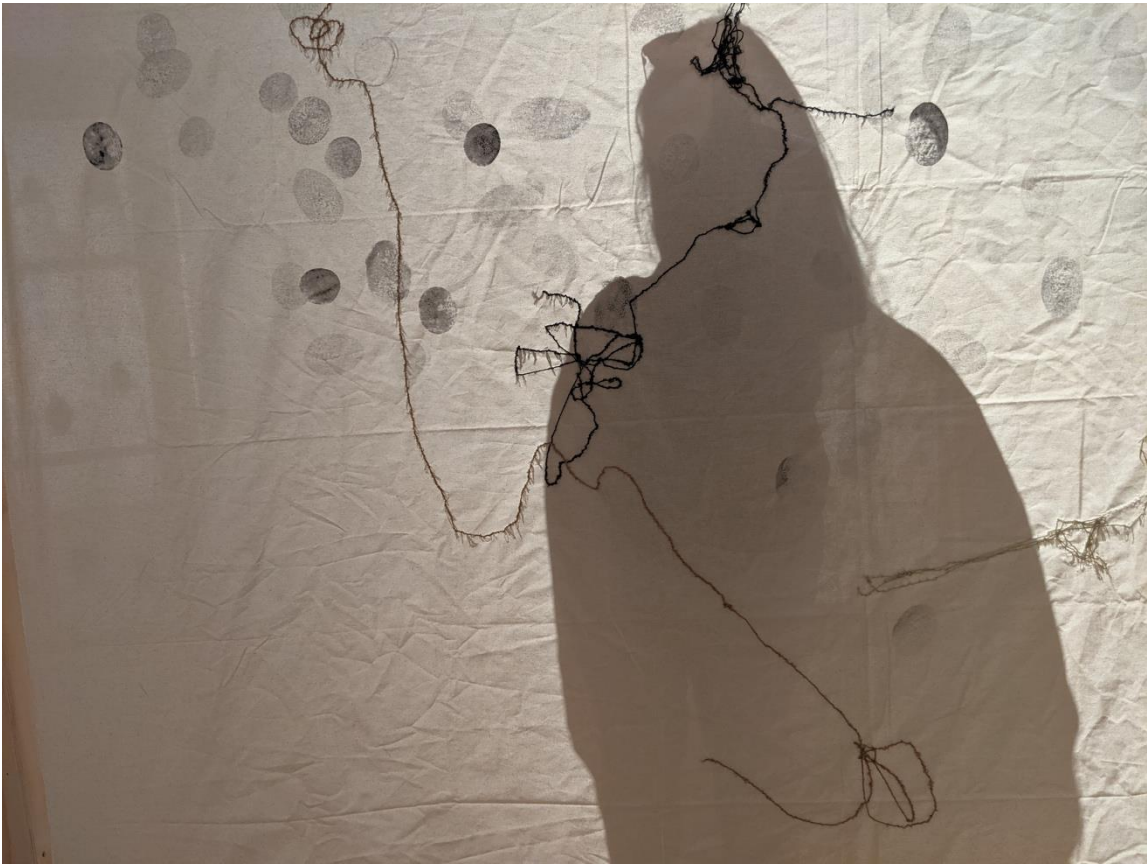


Figure 9: *Wax Wings Like Old Habits* detail, 2021.



Figure 10: *Sun Buried* 1-99, 2020-21.





Figure 11: *Sun Buried* 13, 2020.



Figure 12: *Sun Buried 17*, 2020.



Figure 13: *Sun Buried 19*, 2020.



Figure 14: *Sun Buried 23*, 2020.



Figure 15: *Sun Buried* 48. 2021.



Figure 16: *Sun Buried 79*, 2021.



Figure 17: *Sun Buried 84*, 2021.



Figure 18: *Sun Buried 90*, 2021.





Figure 19: *Icarus Rooted* detail, 2021.



Figure 20: *Icarus Rooted* installation, 2021.



Figure 21: Potato Shrouds, 2020.



Figure 22: Potato Shrouds, 2021.

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