

All That You Touch / ROBIN HILL





All that you touch  
You Change.

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
Is Change.

God  
Is Change.

— OCTAVIA E. BUTLER  
*Earthseed: Books of the Living*  
*Parable of the Sower*, 1993

*The Thingness of the Thing*, 2023, detail  
found 35mm slide storage frames, plaster gauze, tumbleweed,  
beeswax, glass, 50" x 38" x 30"

FRONT COVER:  
*Invasive Drifter Two*, 2023, detail  
tumbleweed, cyanotype on Aqaba paper, glue, 50" x 48" x 61"

# All That You Touch / ROBIN HILL

by IRIS CUSHING

*“The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.”*

– WILLIAM BLAKE, *PROVERBS OF HELL*

THE NEST IS SHAPED like a cup, a deep ladle with a stem extending up from one of its steep sides. Standing in Robin Hill’s Woodland, California studio and holding the nest in my palm, I see that it’s an interwoven shape made of materials light enough to blow on the wind, and the nest itself weighs almost nothing.

It’s impossible not to look into the nest and attempt to read its fibers: dark, dense horse hairs, orange shreds of frayed rope, grass, cottonwood fluff, one blue crimped filament of tarp. This nest was found beside a cypress tree in the Capay Valley to the west of Woodland. Its builder-inhabitant, a Bullock’s oriole, was finished with it, and so it blew out of the tree, as these nests do, and was discovered by Hill on one of her many object-gleaning walks. This nest became the original figure for the work in Hill’s exhibition, *All That You Touch*. As the Bullock’s oriole weaves together threads she finds floating in her environment, Robin Hill is an artist who skillfully finds, collects, arranges, adds, composes and constructs, building worlds that transmit the aliveness of “inanimate” objects. The act of finding things is such a primary element of Hill’s practice that it can’t be separated from the work itself. The moments in which Hill finds objects in their precise locations and carries them home are essential to the entire trajectory; as invisible initiations for the physical pieces that appear here, the artist’s body and consciousness in these instances of discovery demand consideration.

The pieces that make up *All That You Touch* are dazzling in their range, and occupy a particular liminal category between performance, sculpture, installation and found object. The vocabulary of Hill’s found objects seems, at first, to be simply quotidian, workaday. Galvanized washtubs, buckets, washers, pieces of industrial janitorial equipment, mirrors, cans, envelopes—Hill’s eyes and hands persistently find and re-present these objects, pieces of “vibrant matter.” These re-presentations are intertwined with “softer,” more fluid materials—wax, wool, paper, cotton, lint, doilies, string—and offered up in precise configuration. It’s within Hill’s configurations that the quotidian meaning of these objects shifts significantly, away from their rote purpose and toward something much more uncanny and tender. The appearance of standalone structures from the non-human world—nests, for instance, or tumbleweeds—further the sense of tenderness in these pieces, which I liken to a re-awakening, a radical reinstatement of presence.

Springing from the soft cup of the oriole nest, I turn to *Lint-lined Washtub (for Meret Oppenheim and Mierle Laderman Ukeles)* (2020), one of the pieces in *All That You Touch* that offers up the delicate aliveness of something that usually escapes notice. A much-used galvanized steel washtub is lined with dozens of layers of lint from a home dryer, which are precisely cut and configured to line the inside surface of the tub. Upon looking at these lint layers, the viewer sees that they’ve been sliced in cross-sections—as one would slice lasagne, or sandwiches—and gathered into neat stacks. The way in which Hill has configured the lint to fit into the tub calls to mind crafts like tiling a wall or putting together a parquet floor—there is a purpose-driven exactitude to the fitting of soft material to curved, grainy metal. The visual references to domestic tasks (washing, cooking, stacking, homemaking) evoke the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the marvelous conceptual artist of feminized labor. The act of lining a vessel and calling attention to its inner contours calls to mind the surrealism of Meret Oppenheim, whose *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)* is, among many other things, a soft nest for the eyes to rest in.

In *Lint-lined Washtub*, it’s in the close examination of the lint itself—as with the study of the oriole’s nesting materials—that the expressiveness of the piece



*Lint-lined Washtub (for Meret Oppenheim and Mierle Laderman Ukeles)*, 2020, detail  
found galvanized wash tub and dryer lint, 12" x 30" x 25"

issues forth. Lint is commonly thought of as a gray, fuzzy substance, something to peel away from a small piece of screen, ball up, and toss into the garbage. Such a volume of lint as is found in *Lint-lined Washtub*, however, invites an immediate wake-up call to what lint is actually made of: fibers from our clothing, strands of our hair, bits of grass and paper, the invisible cumulus of our material lives. The lint appears as a kind of painstaking accrual, a geological layering of time and gesture.

To see this substance rendered as subject matter—in all of its nuanced purples, grays, blacks and reds—is to have an arresting experience of the personality, or personhood, of something almost always overlooked. Like a person, the lint in its washtub is something that time has acted upon. Our own bodies, hearts,

minds and spirits are acted-upon by time, accordingly. Transformed. Hill, in her presentation of these objects acted upon by time, lets us glimpse the beauty of that process in our own lives.

Lint accumulates, pervades. Dryer lint is also present in *Artifact 1*, the first in a series of thirteen of Hill's works that center single objects upon a page-sized background of cream-colored needle-felted wool. In *Artifact 1*, the lint appears as twin green ellipses, facing one another, evoking a split rock, two halves of something once whole. Within the scope of *All That You Touch*, the *Artifact* series operates in a notebook-like capacity, taking the metaphor of the book/page and transforming it into a series of nests for objects to dwell within.

The small items that are nested into these soft wool-pages proffer biographical details about the artist's life. *Artifact 2* presents a browned piece of a cloth fisherman's net, tangled with a wisp of seaweed, while *Artifact 3* nests a shred of black plastic fishnet, bound with a rusted metal closure. Both of these *Artifacts* tell of Hill's time spent on coasts—the coast of California and the coast of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, where she's spent summers for the last 30 years. The pieces of net were once beach detritus, found and carried by Hill to her studio. Other *Artifacts* tell of moments of finding in other places. *Artifact 13* is a flattened tin can, likely many decades old; *Artifacts* emerge as fragments of frayed cloth or plastic rope, a peach pit, a bottle cap. *Artifact 7* is a bird's nest ringed with dry leaf-fragments. Encoded in the intimate, almost diaristic presence of these objects is evidence of the artist's attention, of her commitment to the phenomenal world on the largest and smallest scales.

Just as these objects tell intimate stories of the artist's coming-and-going, walking and finding, they also tell a surprising story of endurance: although we see these things in their process of unraveling, we also see what of them has remained. To enter the quiet presence of something like a piece of cloth rope is to wonder where the rope came from, how it came to be broken, whose hands held it, and where those hands are now. The act of making individual nests—soft, warm wool homes—for these found pieces is one way that Hill practices a sort of homemade feminist ecology, working with what's on hand; the product



*Artifact 2, 2023*

cloth fish net, seaweed, needle felted wool on paper, 9" x 11"

of this making is care itself, rather than any particular physical thing. Hill takes the world of ordinary objects and holds it up, revealing that its tenderness is, in fact, our own tenderness.

One remarkable thread within Hill's art practice is her work with metaphor. The dance between objects and their attendant metaphors has been alive in Hill's work for decades, but it comes into a certain elemental focus in *All That You Touch*, by way of the insistent presence of commonplace objects. By allowing viewers to become present with these objects and consider the networked affinities that surround them, Hill invites us to consider a whole host of metaphors for caretaking, endurance, and the singularity of the self. The self expands beyond the individual, becoming a figure for humankind: what do we give, what do we take? These questions unfold

into a limitless inquiry of our role in the universe. The show takes its title from Octavia Butler's 1993 science fiction novel *The Parable of the Sower*:

*All that you touch / You Change. // All that you change / Changes You. //  
The only lasting truth / Is Change. // God / Is Change.*<sup>1</sup>

Butler's Earthseed parable articulates the stakes of Hill's work perfectly. The stakes are social, ecological, spiritual, and personal: each thing, in its thingness, carries a meaning that changes everything around it.

<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000), p. 3.

At the same time, the work in *All That You Touch* is composed of practical objects that seem to insist on their own autonomy from human meaning—the opposite of metaphor. This straddling of practical and figurative-metaphorical worlds is especially vivid with the two largest and seemingly most-unwieldy pieces in the show, *Invasive Drifter One* and *Invasive Drifter Two*. For these pieces, Hill papier-mâché'd boulder-sized tumbleweeds with Aqaba paper and glue (white paper for *One*, cyanotype on Aqaba paper for *Two*). These pieces are imposing in the space they take up, but they're also light enough to carry in one hand: to encounter them is to encounter something obstinate, an irreconcilable meeting of defiance and fragility.

Tumbleweeds have always personally struck me as completely singular in their ontological stubbornness. They are structured for transience, growing into a shape designed to be carried on the wind, bouncing along the ground and dropping seeds that will yield the next generation of tumbleweeds. The tumbleweed is, essentially, an empty nest—not a nest voided of its previous contents, but one built around emptiness. They signal not only emptiness in and of themselves, but also desolation, drifting through the mythologies of abandoned, hardscrabble landscapes—the forsaken frontiers of the American West.

One of the primary acts that defines *All That You Touch* is that of wrapping objects up. This act is a departure from Hill's previous practices, but also creates a continuity with bodies of work built around the layering, folding and cushioning of objects. Many of the objects in the exhibition are wrapped up in some kind of malleable material, whether wool, cotton, paper or wax. In conversation, Hill has likened this act to a "covering in care." To wrap an object is to attend to its every curve and angle, to apprehend it fully, from all sides, and this attention is a very particular form of caregiving.

In the case of the *Invasive Drifters*, Hill's covering the tumbleweeds in paper reveals the limits of an otherwise-undefined entity. The size and shape of the newly-defined object, covered in paper, corresponds to the size and shape of the artist's care. *The Thingness of the Thing* appears as a counterpoint to the *Invasive Drifters*: a smaller tumbleweed is fully coated in natural beeswax and



*Nest 2, 2023*

found galvanized bucket, found oriole nest, beeswax  
20" x 12" x 12"

placed on a round glass tabletop, set upon a support built of slide storage frames and plaster gauze. Where some tumbleweeds are covered in a way that contains and obscures, this tumbleweed is covered such that its every barb and curve is emphasized, protected. Wax becomes another form for love and attention to take.

Underlying these and so many other material elements in *All That You Touch* is the invisible question of the artist's will. I see Hill as an artist who, in the lineage of artists working with non-intentional or aleatory means of making, approaches objects not as vehicles of self-expression, but in a way that reveals what's most expressive about the objects themselves. "Trees, stones, water, everything is expressive," John Cage wrote in a letter to musicologist Paul Henry Lang. "I see this situation in which we live as a complex interpenetration of centers moving out in all directions without impasse."<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing the world as a "complex

interpenetration of centers," Hill is an artist working in service of the expressiveness of the things she touches. Her work allows for the fullness of that expression, whether what's expressed is endurance, tenderness, or sorrow (as in *Wildfire Remnant*, a piece of a tree blackened in California's recent wildfires). A recuperation of care for what is overlooked is Hill's special purview, and these pieces are homes—nests—for that care.

I return to the small oriole nest with its woven fibers. While Bullock's orioles inhabit the western half of the US, Baltimore orioles migrate throughout the eastern half; I see their brilliant streaks of orange occasionally in the birch trees where I live in upstate New York. They rarely intermingle with each other, but both species of bird fashion these cup-shaped nests from bits of found material. It so happens I grew up in Woodland, home of Hill's studio (and house, family)—considering the Bullock's oriole nest, the small piece of space it delineates, I perceive it as a site for my own personal sense of home. Even as it acts as a symbol for home, rest, care, it is vividly itself. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes of nests:

*A nest, like any other image of rest and quiet, is immediately associated with the image of a simple house. When we pass from the image of a nest to the image of a house, and vice versa, it can only be in an atmosphere of simplicity...For the painter, it is probably twice as interesting if, while painting a nest, he dreams of a cottage and, while painting a cottage, he dreams of a nest. It is as though one dreamed twice, in two registers, when one dreams of an image cluster such as this. For the simplest image is doubled; it is itself and something else than itself.<sup>3</sup>*

As an artist at work, Hill certainly dreams in the multiple registers Bachelard describes. Beginning with the activity of finding, she transforms the pieces seen in this exhibition through phenomenological significance and, ultimately, back into themselves. The self-nature expressed through each work is entirely its own; the artist's revelation of each thing's integrity becomes her integrity, too.

<sup>2</sup> John Cage to Paul Henry Lang, 1956, in *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 117-118.

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, Maria Jolas (trans.) *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 98.



*Invasive Drifter One, 2023, detail*

*Invasive Drifter One, 2023*

tumbleweed, Aqaba paper, glue, found metal stand  
53" x 37" x 42"



*Ruins 2*, 2023  
dyed mop head, fired ceramic slip, galvanized bucket  
12" x 10" x 10"



*Invasive Drifter Two*, 2023  
tumbleweed, cyanotype on Aqaba paper, glue  
50" x 48" x 61"





*Ruins 1, 2023*

found handmade needle work, fired ceramic slip,  
wood carved by carpenter bees, wooden sawhorses  
8" x 7" x 58"



*Wildfire Remnant 1, 2023*

found burned wood, wooden sawhorses  
8" x 7" x 20"



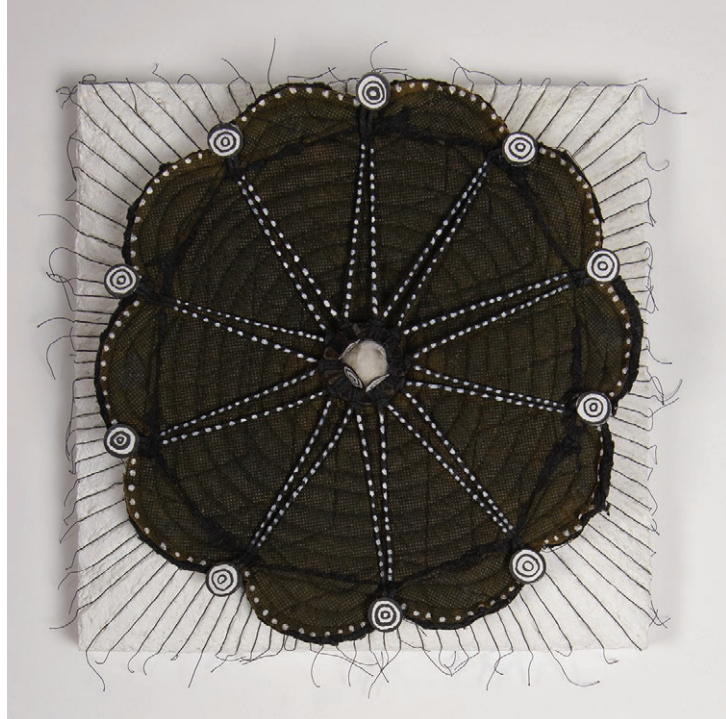
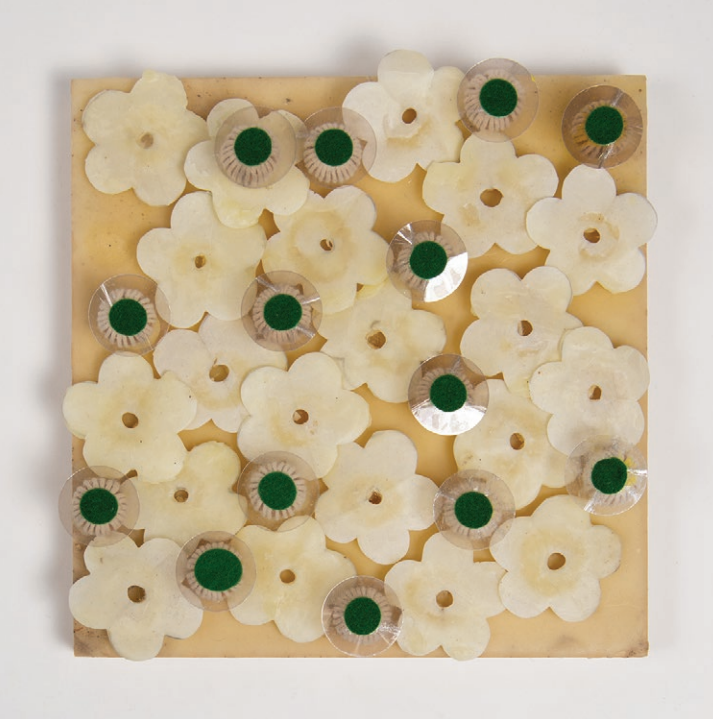
*Artifact 12, 2023*  
found rope, seaweed, needle felted wool on paper  
9" x 11"



*Nest 1, 2023*  
found galvanized bucket, found oriole nest, needle felted wool  
12" x 10" x 10"



*Lint-lined Washtub (for Meret Oppenheim and Mierle Laderman Ukeles), 2020*  
found galvanized wash tub and dryer lint, 12" x 30" x 25"



*Three Inversions, 2020*  
beeswax and dried clementine skins, 5" x 5" x 4"



*Flower Power, 2022*  
wax, mica, felt on panel, 12" x 12" x 3"

*Fortune Teller, 2022*  
plaster infused paper pulp, thread, sewn moving blanket, paper, cotton, gouache on panel  
12" x 12" x 3"

*Doily Depression, 2022*  
needle felted wool, found handmade linen doily on panel, 12" x 12" x 2"

*Impression, 2022*  
cast plaster on panel, 12" x 12" x 3"



*At the End of the Tunnel, 2023*  
wood, found security mirror, sheep wool  
52" x 29" x 29"

*Melting Pot, 2023*  
pigmented paraffin wax, found janitorial cart,  
sheep wool, found galvanized bucket  
38" x 32" x 32"





*Green New Deal, 2023, detail*

*Green New Deal, 2023*  
found steel grate, pool flags, wooden log,  
rattan reed, glass pipettes  
49" x 55" x 47"

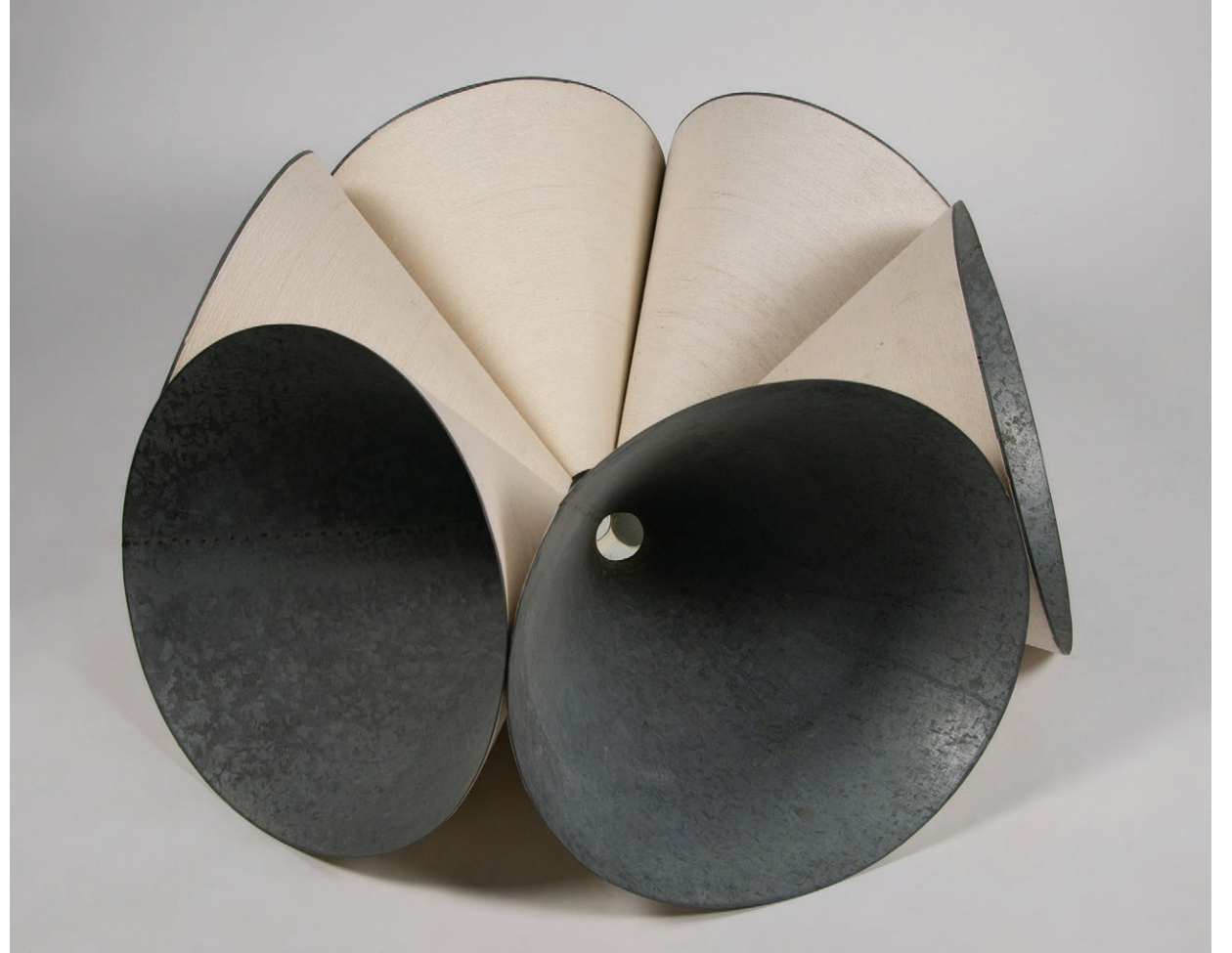
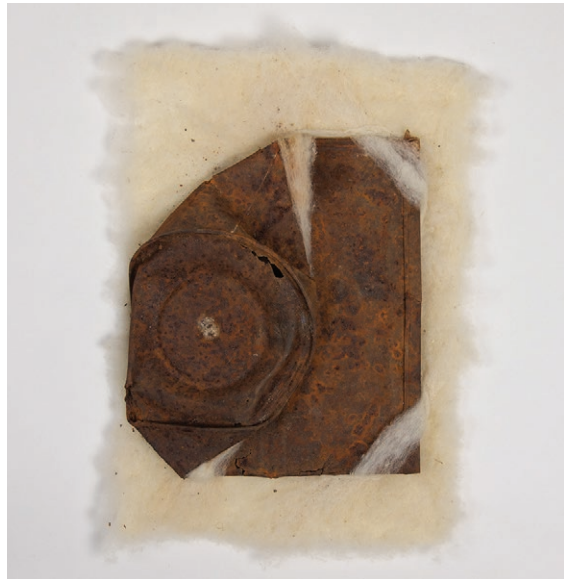


*Eruption, 2022*

found galvanized metal cones,  
cotton twine, mica, found janitorial  
bucket, 47" x 27" x 27"



*Eruption, 2022, details*



*Thinking It Through, 2020*

found galvanized steel cones, cotton twine, found security mirror, 46" x 46" x 46"

*Artifact 1, 2023*

dryer lint, needle felted wool on paper, 9" x 11"

*Artifact 3, 2023*

black fishing net, needle felted wool on paper, 9" x 11"

*Artifact 13, 2023*

rusted can, needle felted wool on paper, 9" x 11"

*Artifact 8, 2023*

blue plastic netting, needle felted wool on paper, 9" x 11"



*Current Conditions, 2023*

found fencing, linen fire hose, dried sunflower

33" x 32" x 24"

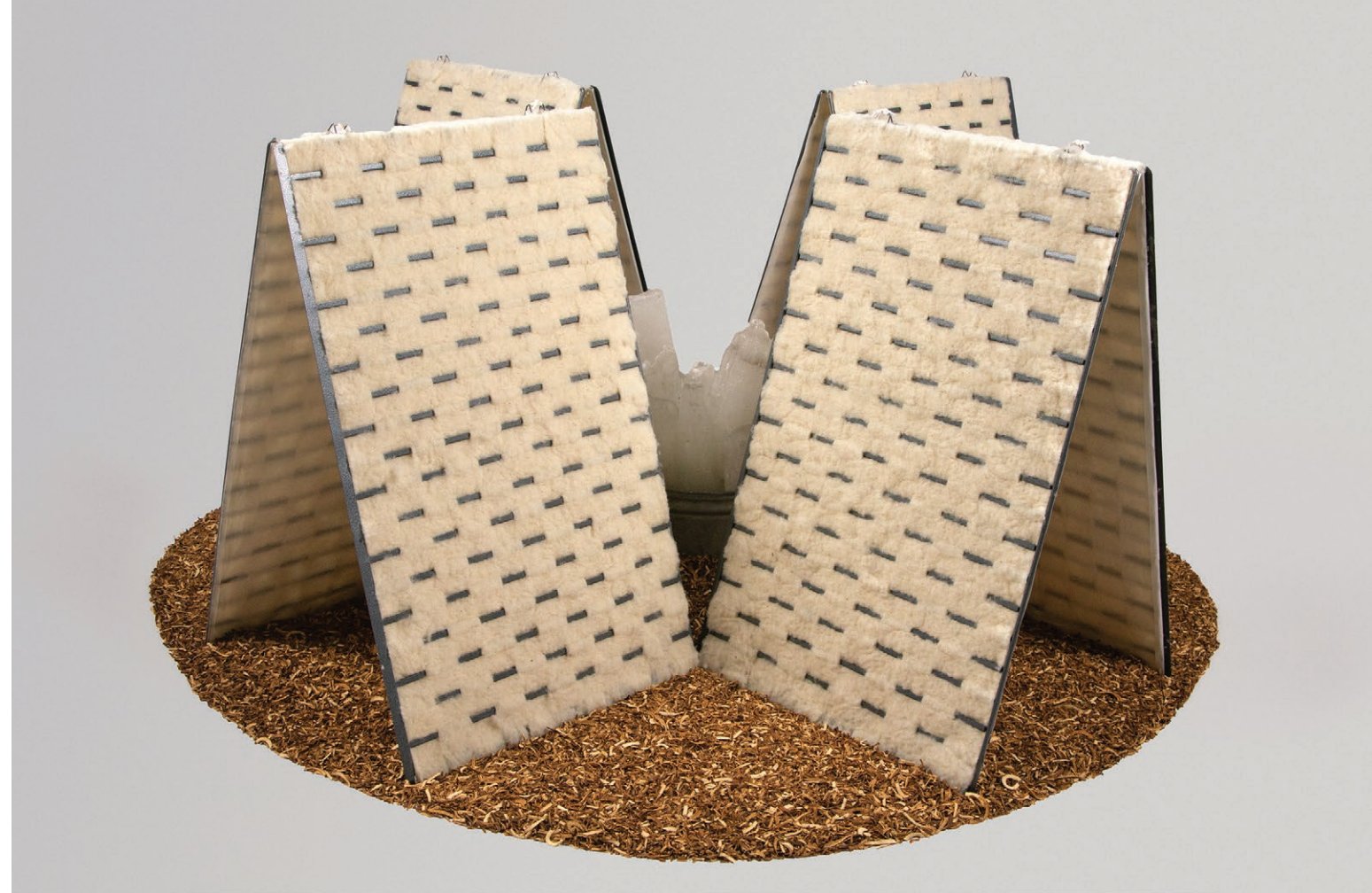
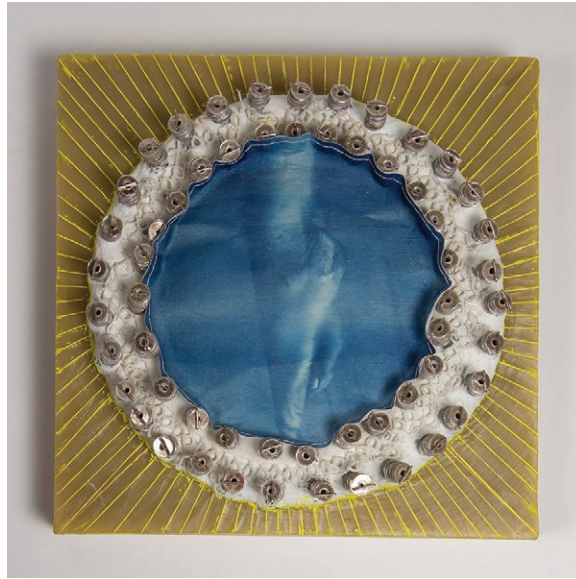
*The Thingness of the Thing, 2023*

found 35mm slide storage frames, plaster gauze, tumbleweed, beeswax, glass

50" x 38" x 30"







*Ice Fire, 2023*

found 35mm slide storage frames, felted sheep wool, dried orange peels,  
found galvanized bucket, paraffin wax, cotton twine, Aqaba paper, 33" x 70" x 70"

*Cultivation, 2022*

mica, cotton twine, linen on panel, 12" x 12" x 2"

*String Theory, 2022*

cotton twine, dyed fabric on panel, 12" x 12" x 2"

*On My Toes, 2022*

cyanotype on Aqaba paper, dress pins, mica, beeswax,  
pigment on panel, 12" x 12" x 3"

*Spoiled and Cinched, 2022*

wooden spool, thread, graphite on panel, 12" x 12" x 2"



## ROBIN HILL: All That You Touch

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### OPPOSITE PAGE:

*Invasive Drifter One*, 2023, detail

tumbleweed, Aqaba paper, glue, found metal stand  
53" x 37" x 42"

### BACK COVER:

*Understory*, 2023, detail

rattan reed, cotton twine, cyanotype on  
Aqaba paper, 108" x 108" x 108"





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