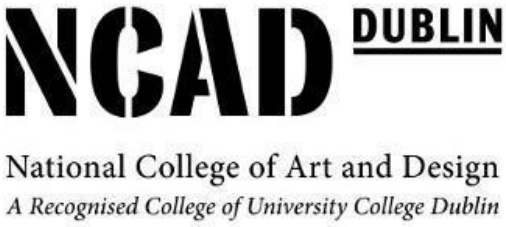

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Name of Student: Holly Brigid Phelan

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NCAD DUBLIN

National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Holly Brigid Phelan
Programme / department: Sculpture and Expanded Practices.
Date: 30.01.2023

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Introduction

The aim of this research project is to explore the use of willow in contemporary visual practice. Throughout this project, I will highlight various craftspeople who work with willow in their visual practice, and the intriguing and divergent ways in which this is done.
In exploring the intellectual framework surrounding contemporary craft, I will refer to the works of Tim Ingold and Glenn Adamson, both of whom deal with philosophical implications of material culture and the role of the craftsperson in a society driven by mass production.

Ireland has a strong tradition of using willow in basketry. There are a great many vernacular expressions of willow work common throughout the island. Some of the best known examples are traditional baskets like the 'scib' which is used to teem and serve potatoes, the 'hen basket' which is used to transport broody hens, lobster pots, and the 'creel' which is a sort of "burden basket" used by man and donkey alike to transport turf (Hogan, J. 2011 p.34).
In these expressions of tangible heritage, we can see the functional importance of basketry and woven objects. These items were essential in the completion of everyday tasks and the maintenance of the household. While there has been a significant decline in the practical importance of these objects within contemporary Irish society, they are still widely celebrated as expressions of material culture, adorning kitchen dresser and museum cabinet alike.
Furthermore, stripped of their 'functional' importance, the decorative and intricate artistry of these objects bear greater significance than ever. The practice of weaving, just as its product, has outgrown its traditional function, pushing both the weaver and the weft into new and exciting territories. It is the relationship between these contemporary modes of expression and the more traditional vernacular styles which will be explored throughout this present paper.

Fig 1.0
(Ó Danachair, C. 1945, *Panniers, Lisdoonvarna.)*

Fig 1.1 (National Museum of Ireland (1972) *Basketmaking: a sheep crib made by William Egan.)*

In preparation for this project, I began with a trip to the National Folklore Collection (NFC) in UCD, to investigate the historical perception of the role of willow as seen through the historical journals and collections. Following this trip, the archivist there sent me some images from the NFC's website Dúchas.ie.

To conduct my research, I used several channels of investigation. My primary research consisted of fieldwork, including carrying out an interview with prominent Artist Laura Ellen Bacon. Bacon is one of the leading names in contemporary willow sculpture. I have been in correspondence with two noted Irish weavers, Joe Hogan and Beth Murphy, both of whom were very kind and sent me many resources that aided me in my research. Visits to Heike Kahle in her studio in Kilkenny allowed me to see a professional weaver at work, and provided the impetus for the creation of my own sally garden as part of an ecological art project, in conjunction with landscape architect Sophie von Maltzan. I will go into further detail about these projects later in the essay. My secondary research looked at material such as archival videos, journals, interviews and podcasts with craft writers like Grant Gibson.

To understand how willow is used in contemporary visual practice, my objectives are to focus on three aspects; Materials, Making and Form. I plan to use these three chapters to help unpack how willow can be used in visual practice, with the help of artists, makers and great thinkers. I will additionally include some important images to visually guide the chapters.

Chapter One

The purpose of my first chapter is to focus on willow as a material, and its relevance to contemporary visual practice. This chapter will also examine ‘saliculture', *i.e.* the growing and maintenance of willow, with reference to my own engagement with the practice as part of a project in a derelict site in Dublin. Furthermore, we shall examine the role of community and sustainability in saliculture and those engaging in it.
I have researched various makers and their relationship with willow, such as renowned contemporary and traditional basketmaker, Joe Hogan. Additionally I will explore sculptor Laura Ellen Bacon, and the wildly differing relationships both artists share with their common medium. Anthropologist Tim Ingold's insights on materials have been important for me when researching relationships that we may have with materials, and I will talk about this in relation to Willow. Glenn Adamson’s appreciation for ‘material intelligence’ will be discussed with a respect for makers and their curiosities for materials.

My interest in willow as a material has heightened over the last three years. I have always been fond of basketry and weaving. Last year I did a month-long artist residency in Kilkenny. The residency was situated down the road from ‘Baurnafea’ the studio of artists Heike Kahle and Klaus Hartmann, renowned craftspeople. (Kahle, H. 2020)
In exchange for helping Heike in harvesting material from her sally garden (a traditional site of willow cultivation), I was given 10 different species of willow cuttings, in order to develop a garden of my own. Reference was taken from the work of renowned Kildare woman and sculptress Beth Murphy when planning and developing the sally garden. Her guidelines recommended using a willow cutting, “pencil thickness or thicker” with a length of 10 inches, and driving it into some mulched soil, spacing the cuttings at 30cm apart.
(Willow through the seasons, planting and harvesting willow. (2021)
The site of this new sally garden was in the ‘FIELD’, a space behind the National College of Art and Design. I undertook work here as part of a college module, primarily taking place in this small, derelict, urban patch, with a long history. Here we engaged with the natural world and its continuously changing relationship with humankind.

I used these 10 diverse willow varieties to set up a willow coppice in the space. Firstly, as a discursive ‘commoning’ of knowledge I used the willow for a ‘ceremony’ where I stood on the site for the Sally garden and discussed willow as a species and my engagement with the basket makers. Afterwards my group and I took a spontaneous action, holding the sally rods and whipping them in the air. The inspiration behind introducing willow into the FIELD was to introduce diversity encouraging multispecies relationships. I hope to supply material for crafts such as weaving, charcoal-making and aspects that can aid other students in their visual practice. Within another year I will get to see the willow fully grown, and harvest it for the students, hopefully adding and maintaining it along the way.

It is valuable to directly engage with the cultivation of our materials, deepening our connection with them, providing a symbiotic nature-material-culture relationship.

Fig 2.0 (Willow ceremony. 2022)

Fig 2.1 (My willow cuttings, growing. 2022).

The weaving community, although not large, is very sturdy and plays a huge role on how these makers practise. They share and pool knowledge along with skill communally. The inheritance of these skills and techniques is the heart of the weaving community. The passing down orally is also a way of connection with the people and their material, in Ireland this has been crucial in keeping tradition alive, This tangible heritage needs to be passed on through generations or it is in danger of being lost. It's interesting to see how these skills live on but on another level how they have become part of contemporary practice, and developed in other ways/elsewhere. To quote the great Gareth Kennedy “Tradition has to change to stay the same”.

Not only do people in the weaving community share knowledge but they also share willow cuttings with each other. There are hundreds of varieties of willow that grow in various different colours and thickness. Established weavers provide the incoming craftspeople with material, namely, cuttings, in order to grow for their own sally gardens. Thereby they explicitly secure a future for the craft, by enriching the land with these valuable and sundry materials.

Willow is wonderfully sustainable. A resilient tree, the genus, *salix*, is native to all of Eurasia. It can be grown quickly throughout Ireland, often planted as “biomass”, an alternative resource to fossil fuels, which is something we desperately need in today's society. In Ireland we import “a little over 70% of the energy we use” (Lee, G. 2022), so any endogenous source of fuels should be encouraged. Willow is sustainable in many senses, due to the longevity of the natural material, and that it does not decay easily. That is to say, “The very usefulness of these objects depends on their being relatively resistant to deformation”(Ingold, T. 2021 p.339).

Maker Joe Hogan was interviewed by the Irish Examiner and comments on this sustainability in comparison to today's objects made with synthetic materials “Today we’re seeing mass-produced imports. Indigenous baskets are beautiful.....a well-made log basket should last 20 years. It’s very sustainable.” (O’Callaghan, C. 2020). It's also noteworthy that the toolkit required to make using willow is very minimal, requiring only one or two metal hand tools that do not need to be replaced often “But once it has been cut and prepared for weaving, the basket-maker does nothing to the surface of her fibrous material” (Ingold, T. 2021 p.341). It is renewable and worthwhile to use willow in visual practice. Ideally ‘sustainable’ art and materials should not be something for which we would have to advocate. Contemporary practice needs to strive to produce art forms situated in locally produced materials.

Renowned basketmaker Joe Hogan has been an outstanding teacher to many great weavers in Ireland. Hogan has also passed the skill and craft onto his son Ciaran. The generational passing down of knowledge is fundamental to traditional craft, and willow work is no different. On one level through sharing knowledge, but also as a system of exchange, through sharing cuttings of willow, to plant, grow and develop sally gardens. I will discuss Joe’s personal relationship with Willow more in depth in the chapter.

Intuitive making is at the core of visual art practice. The skill of Willow weaving as such depends on the relationship that a maker has with their materials. It's interesting to understand why a maker is attracted to a certain material or skill. Glenn Adamson talks in regards to the term “Material intelligence” in his book “Fewer Better Things”, and also reiterated these findings in an interview with Grant Gibson. In the interview Adamson expresses the point that he

is “trying to stimulate craft, not so much in a context of traditional fidelity to skills" but “to see craft as part of a broader picture.” (Gibson, G. 2019) Adamson’s point is that we can change our idea around craft methods and utilise them in other ways. With regards to willow in respect to contemporary practice, it is important to engage with this mindset.
(Adamson, G. 2018)

Material intelligence is a mind-body symbiosis with material, our ability to engage it both philosophically and in a tactile manner. This is where skill comes into play.
Adamson describes it as a “human facility” (Gibson, G. 2019) something that everyone has in their make-up but the introduction and volume of technology and machinery has decreased the extent to which we can connect with this. Gibson, in reference to Adamson’s book “Fewer Better Things” , talks about “the empathy that is bound up in tangible things” and how as humans, we are connected to objects. Unfortunately most of us are disconnected from this awareness that was much greater in the past, and mindlessly interacting with objects has become a theme of contemporary, capitalist societies.. (Gibson, G. 2019)
Furthermore, Adamson claims that if we cannot grasp how items are developed, there is little hope in understanding by whom they are developed. Through engaging with material culture, we gleam traces of a people, or artist. Vestiges of the artist appear in their works. (Gibson, G. 2019)

When we look at skilled artists and craftspeople, in this instance willow workers, one of our primary concerns is the nature of the relationship they have with their materials. The limited nature of working with willow is where we can see the beauty of the skill, with practically nothing but the body and the willow. It's clear to see that material intelligence is alive and thriving in the community of people who work with this material. The term “Material Knowledge”, recalls the lyrics of Ewan McColl’s ballad, “The Thirty Foot Trailer”.
The song tells of traditional objects, the creel and the basket, and how they have been traded in for their synthetic competitors.

“Farewell to the besoms of heather and broom,
Farewell to the creel and the basket,
For the folks of today they would far sooner pay
For a thing that's been made out of plastic.”

(MacColl, Ewan. 1964)

These traditional objects really highlight the relationship that weavers had with the material in the past. Joe Hogan is someone who I have studied who makes all of these objects. The vast and varied corpus of his work is truly inspirational, not just in the fact he is a basketmaker, but rather his dedication and relationship with the trade and materials. Hogan is a great example of a craftsman who shows great care with the materials. Beginning his practice and planting his first sally garden in 1978, first drawn to the material for how easily it can be grown, becoming the reason Joe wanted to become a basketmaker. (Hogan, J. 2011, p.12-13)

In this time he has made traditional and native baskets but alongside this, Hogan has made many poetic contemporary style pieces in willow and willow bark in his work (Hogan, J. 2011, P. 14-15) alongside various other natural materials inspired by the Irish natural landscape. His work is poetic, and lots of his pieces are directly based on poems, from writers and poets around the world such as Mary Oliver and Rainer Maria Rilke and Irish names such as Seamus Heany and Cathall Ó Searcaigh. (Hogan, J. 2011 p.22-27)

He divides his baskets into labels, “functional” and “non-functional” baskets.

Fig.2.2 (Artistic baskets Hogan. J.)

In “Bare branches blue black sky” Hogan includes an interview (Hogan, J. 2011 p.68-71) with French journalist Christopher Salet. Here the maker remarks about the new types of “non-functional” baskets which he started to make just over 20 years ago, “My concern is to reawaken a sense of wonder.” (Hogan, J. 2011 pg.9) Hogan makes these baskets using alternative materials like lichens, moss and wood such as holly and ‘bog Pine’ alongside the willow. Hogan wanted to change the light in which he sees the world “to look at it with more wonder” how it “began to feel natural to express some of these feelings with the material I best understand, (willow).” (Hogan, J. 2011. p.68)

It is gripping to see the sheer contrast and variety in Hogan’s work. Among other things, he has collaborated with Irish designer Joanne Hynes to make willow headwear for London Fashion Week.

Fig2.3 (Joanne Hynes Hat collaboration. 2011)

Laura Ellen Bacon has been using willow in her practice for over 20 years. Despite this long, enduring relationship, she claims that she is “not actually a willow enthusiast” (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L.2022). Her decision to use the material is a more utilitarian one, its pliable nature allowing her to demonstrate fluid, insinuating shapes and woven atmospheres. Bacon speaks about having a “language with materials”, and displays fluency in interweaving words of willow (Laura Ellen Bacon - In the Thick of it: A Woven Space. 2012).

Bacon, who first started using the material when she attended the University Of Derby, remarked about the feeling and “thrill” she had when she got her first delivery of willow rods (Gibson, G.2019). The artist has a very practical relationship with willow, and willow being her main material she says “But the willow doesn't come first, the willow isn't the starting point at all.” (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L.2022) For Bacon, the attributes to using willow are the immediacy, texture and length, also that once she has soaked it and bent it, the willow will stay in the shape she wants, because her work has a great amount of lines, willow can be accumulated to build this level of organised “chaos” (Gibson, G.2019). The fact that Laura did not have any formal background in basketry at all, meant she developed a unique technical style (Gibson, G.2019). “I just wanted to make forms with a particular kind of smoothness” “To be able to build them with curves and edges and make those things pronounced.” (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L.2022)

This chapter has focused on willow as a material, I have discussed an important segment of the engaging reasons why it is used in visual practice, such as the strength in the weaving community, sustainability both of growing willow and making with it. Using it in my own visual practice and growing it was the best way for me to understand the material. It's clear to see the various reasons why makers want to use it, and their relationship to/with the material. I proposed two different makers who both engage with willow in their visual practices. Joe Hogan and Laura Ellen Bacon both have a long lasting successful relationship with willow, although maybe personally their relationships with the material differ. It is also notable that the two artists both have very different styles, Hogan with his background and deep knowledge of willow and basketry and Bacon, with her unique self taught, large scale, style. The two artists clearly show they have taken great care in their work. “In workmanship the care counts for more than the

judgement and dexterity; though care may well become habitual and unconscious" (Pye, D. 1978. p.343)

Chapter 2

My second chapter will explore the ‘making’ aspect, how willow is used, focusing on the weaving process. With respect to this, Tim Ingold and Glenn Adamson’s writings are particularly fascinating, in particular the fromer’s essay “On Weaving a Basket” and the latter’s book “Fewer Better Things”.
Although willow is used differently and more rigidly in craft, lots of the terminology that these writers talk about are still relevant to weaving in contemporary practice. I will respond to some of their ideas in relation to making, specifically with reference to the willow weaving process.
I will explore how the process and the qualities of willow and weaving relate to music, how it can be defined as a melodic or lyrical action. When talking about the musical qualities of willow I will once again refer to the renowned contemporary sculptor Laura Ellen Bacon, and the musical quality inherent in her work.

Sharing and communal knowledge is critical in basket making and weaving traditions. What Adamson describes in the craft world as this “connective tissue”, mirrors how musicians in Ireland pass down and adapt songs. (Gibson.G, 2019) (Adamson.G, pg.32)
In his book “The Craftsman”, Richard Sennet also draws our attention to the link between craft and music.

I have always considered the link between musicians and music with basketry and weaving with willow. Willow as a material in particular, is musical, the pliable nature of it, allowing one to bend it easily, using it like a pencil mark to make flowing lines and forms. I find this link with willow to music particularly strong in the case of Irish traditional music. The rhythm of interviewing rods, stately and self-assured, like the fiddlers’ bow raising and falling, weaving in the vertical lines of the strings, a resolute jig. Glenn Adamson, in “Fewer, Better, Things”, clearly shines light upon this comparison, exploring the common ground between Irish traditional music and craft. These similarities revolve the passing on of knowledge and collaboration from the community. Aspects to a musician or craftsperson's style rely critically upon instinct and in Adamsons words, from things “picked up along the way”. (Adamson, G 2018 p.32)

and He talks about how Richard Sennett also has made this connection in his book ‘the Craftsman’, likewise being a musician. The writer himself plays the ‘uilleann’ pipes and he links their playing with the world of traditional craft. He likens the subtle intricate physicality repeated by both musician and craftsperson, as well as the importance the two held in traditional society. Furthermore, the musician and craftsperson engage in their respective tasks with a spirit of innovation. Embellishing long established tunes, they share, watch and learn from one another, slightly altering the music each time. The so-called “tricks of the trade” in craft, like music, are “ideas gleaned”.(Adamson, G 2018 p.33)

Weaving and basketry share a certain lyrical quality. It is musical in both instances, for the maker, the physical practice of weaving is underpinned by an internal rhythm, a voice in their head saying; ‘in, out..under, over’. Like a steady beating drum. This becomes second nature to a maker. For the instance of the person receiving this message, observing a piece of woven artwork and understanding of the labour process involved, how each piece of willow overlaps and tucks into the spaces. The weaving process when making sculpture with willow, although different, has been translated from this traditional and historical place, it's so interesting to see where these techniques have evolved from and seeing its place in a contemporary light.

Tim Ingold, similarly to Adamson, writes in depth in his essay “On weaving a basket”, about various objects and the importance they hold. He discusses the intricacies around things that are made and that which grows, alongside the natural and artificial distinctions. How in both cases there is some sort of predisposed idea of what the item will look like. Ingold believes In the case of basketmaking, although there is intention behind the design of the basket, the relationship of the material and the maker gives result to the final form. He remarks on the creation of a basket and how it is not specifically ‘made’ regarding ‘making’ as an action of altering the surface of a material. (Ingold, T. 2021)

> “Thus the basket is not ‘made’ in the sense in which we normally under-stand the term. Nor, evidently, has it grown of its own accord…..It does not fit our stereotype of artefact, and it is not a life-form.” (Ingold, T. 2021 p.341)

Tim Ingold talks beautifully in the chapter about how the purpose of weaving is not to simply give an object but rather how the process and maker express their ideas through an object. (Ingold, T. 2021)

> "To emphasise weaving is to regard it as the embodiment of a rhythmic movement."
>
> (Ingold, T. 2021 p.346)

I can find no more suitable a description of weaving than a "rhythmic movement", in consideration of the material's ability to create spectacular bends and flowing structures.

> "Effectively, the form of the basket emerges through a pattern of skilled movement, and it is the rhythmic repetition of that movement that gives rise to the regularity of form. This point was made long ago by Franz Boas, in his classic work on Primitive Art."
>
> (Ingold, T. 2021 p.342)

In relation to my topic, Ingold's insights are valuable, analysing the process of a basketmaker. The same techniques are relevant when looking at contemporary visual practices. The movement, in this case the making/weaving, is intrinsic to the practice of the maker. When we label the practice as 'movement' it becomes much more of a poetic and expressive thing. The movement gives rise to the work, the movement is the work and creates the form. All of these ideas embody the work of visual artists, such as Laura Ellen Bacon, who I will discuss below.

The unique practice of willow weaving is special when looking at contemporary art practice, there are steps and so called 'rules' that one may follow when making vernacular objects such as baskets. However, Willow as a material and process of weaving is not limited to those rules. The exceptional thing about making with willow is that one can make up their own ways of working and using it. I highlight this above and how it can be compared to the community of traditional musicians in Ireland.

Looking at contemporary artists and their practice, the sculptor Laura Ellen Bacon stands out as a wonderful example of this. Bacon has a very unique, diverse way of working with willow. I was lucky enough to speak with Laura, talking with her about the way she works, and some of the ins and outs of her practice. Her rather emotive work reiterates this lyrical quality of weaving. The pieces she makes which are usually immersive forms and shapes, could be described as flowing or songlike.

The piece Laura made titled “Woven Space” inspired the composer, Helen Grime to write a symphony about the sculpture, commissioned by the Barbican. This piece of music is other-worldly and curious, reflecting the often surprising spaces of Bacon’s work.
Bacon’s breathtaking sculpture is full of movement and mass. “ I certainly like to think about movement anyway, in the work, even if it just appears really slow, progressive, or, like, slowly progressive.” (Woven Space: II. Woven Space · 2019) The piece of music that Grime composed is an encapsulation of that sentence. Laura described to me how that was a pivotal point in her career, that Helen Grimes' ideas for the composition led her to find Laura's work which was very fitting.“That's just the biggest, most amazing thing that's ever happened to me.” “to hear that in musical form, it's just phenomenal.” (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022) It's interesting to look at Laura Ellen Bacon, as a contemporary artist and how her willow sculptures are culturally influential.

Fig.3.0 (Laura Ellen Bacon, Woven space. 2012)

I asked Laura if she thought Willow has a lyrical quality or if she had ever considered her sculptures as musical, “I think that there is possibly a lyrical quality in the material itself.” She commented on its connection with traditional aspects of culture, “folklore, songs and things.”(Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022)

Bacon also explained that she has received some poems that people have written about her work, which she keeps. In an interview with Grant Gibson, he says to Laura “architecture is frozen

music, your work is quite architectural" quoting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe "Music is liquid architecture; architecture is frozen music." (Mageras, K. 2019.) (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022)

As mentioned earlier, Laura does not come from a basketry background. Although she expressed admiration for traditional basketry, she told me "that's not where I want to put my energy". (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022) Bacon sometimes begins with concept drawings but after being an artist for the past 20 years, her process changes varying from project to project. Her process is equally based on where she is working. The nature of most of her work being site specific, meaning there are lots of "complexities of a site" working with her body to the limitations of the space, letting "the work evolve a little bit on site". (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022)

While at university Bacon started with materials like "sticks" and "dogwood", (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022) the intentions of her sculpture needed material that she could mass, and willow was suitable to create her vision.
"there is a lightness of touch that allows those long fibres and those long pieces to be calmly turned into a form, or folded into a form."
(Chandler, K. and Knott, S. 2017)

Laura uses the material in bulk, and she explained to me how her methods are one of a kind, she works on her willow pieces solo. Bacon described that her process is not something she can pass on, the sculptor's aesthetic requires a specific sleekness built up with curves in willow "I just found my own ways of doing it.". (Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022)
Her technique with the willow is using voluminous loads of the material, eagerly analysing the form to make it work, starting at the beginning again if need be, it is clear looking at Laura's pieces that she is a perfectionist, which is also another factor in why she is dedicated to working alone. Bacon commented "If I ever had to give someone the job of building one of my pieces, it would just be a nightmare." "It's not like building a basket in a way where you say you start at the bottom, you follow this weave, you know, you go eight inches high, then you do a rim."(Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022)

In conclusion, when we are looking at the processes and making aspects with willow, there are many similarities to music. It is also clear from reading Tim Ingold and Glenn Adamson, how the beauty in the process of weaving is sometimes overlooked and not given due credit. The artist or maker can source information from timeless weaving practices, taking what may be relevant to them, or altering it to fit a contemporary and personal style, looking at Laura Ellen Bacon as an example of this. Laura's style is decisive and personal and she is an amazing example of a contemporary artist with a diverse way of using willow. Expression of form in her work is emphasised using willow, as a multifaceted and diverse tool. "You just have to believe in what you're doing at that point. And then great, but it's not easy."(Phelan, H. and Ellen Bacon, L. 2022)

Chapter 3

In my final chapter I will discuss how willow is used in contemporary visual practice in relation to form. When I talk about form here, I refer to the last two chapters on ‘materials’ and ‘making’, the result of the two aspects give light to ‘form’.
The creation of immersive experiences and sculptural basketry forms will be discussed with a particular spotlight on two artists, Mary Butcher and Patrick Dougherty. Both of these artists show great care in the interesting formations of their work.
Oliver Kellhammer is an artist and ecologist, who frequently uses willow in his diverse eco-art projects, a part of this chapter will engage with his projects where willow was used as a pioneering species. To conclude the chapter on form, a community engaged willow project that I was involved in will be considered, and how the forms in this project were created to encourage public interaction and play.

One of the artists that came to mind when thinking about form when using willow is contemporary maker, willow specialist and educator Mary Butcher. Mary’s work spans from traditional basketry, to contemporary pieces and also installation. Butcher has travelled through different parts of the United Kingdom alongside travelling abroad to places like Japan, Poland and France to learn weaving techniques from different cultures. Mary uses willow in a riveting way, and her residencies and travels abroad give her a unique angle in contemporary basketry. (Butcher, M. 2014)

Left. Fig: 4.0 (Lynch. J, Bark Weaving: The Light 2012)
Right. Fig: 4.1 (Natural Line: The Light 2008)

The forms of Mary's pieces are varied, some of her baskets are solely made with willow bark while others are a mixture of leather and willow. Butcher has many pieces that can sit on a wall like a textured - woven painting. Lots of Mary's pieces are in stark contrast to each other, some packed tightly together and others that are almost see-through and linear, with a lightness about them using lightly coloured and stripped willows with a feather-like curve. These pieces have a distinct attention to line, transparency and one can see each individual strand of willow, where it starts and where it finishes in the weave. The forms which she mimics in her work are often that of animals.

Patrick Dougherty produces sculptural work in willow, taking on interesting building-like forms, encapsulating the observer inside in an interactive experience. His pieces also have a meditative

presence and one of his pieces made in 2017, takes the form of an “ancient observatory” (Pierre , C. (2017) Fancy's Bower.)

Fig:4.2 (Pierre , C. (2017) Fancy's Bower.)

Patrick’s son Sam in recent years has assisted the sculptor in making these thick, willow-dense walls and curvy formations. His work has a similar effect to Laura Ellen bacon, in which he strives to make interactive living structures; additionally some of his forms cling to buildings and architecture as Laura’s work does. These works create an illusion of engrossing a building with natural form. There is an enchanting and fairytale-esque presence to Dougherty’s pieces and the forms he creates emotive responses. The body of work that the artist builds tends to work well as sight specific pieces in nature, fitting with the natural, growing theme of the sculptures. It is

interesting to note that the sculpture creates building-like sculptures but using willow as a material, something the artist calls “stickwork” he juxtaposes the nature of a building or castle with the use of natural material, he says “Building a sculpture is building an illusion.” (Patrick Dougherty at Tippet Rise. 2017)
The use of willow in his work appears in a wrapping style with lots of rods of willow facing the same direction, this brings a sense of flow and awe to the pieces.

Oliver Kellhammer has many titles, Artist, educator, permaculturist, activist, writer, the list goes on! Kellhammer engages in public and community based art projects, using nature as a tool and demonstrating ways of “environmental regeneration”.His visual practice involves improving spaces that humans have neglected - “Improve the relationships between people and nature” the spaces in which he chooses to work are areas where he sees these “constant breakdowns” in those relationships using “botanical interventions” . It's interesting to look at Kellhammers ecological art practice where he continues to evolve and has taken various forms such as small-scale urban eco-forestry, inner city community agriculture and the restoration of eroded railway ravines.

Oliver uses his title of an ‘Artist’ , something he says is a “strategy for survival” , a way in which he can get things such as funds and implement his ideas and his “Long term experiments” (Skulski, M. and Huggins, A. 2020) more easily as an artist. He has used willow in various projects such as “Means of production” in Vancouver where Oliver transformed and designed a space using willow coppice, that people in the community engaged with by harvesting the material, they also added to the space planting their own natural materials. and “Healing the Cut - Bridging the Gap” where Kellhammer planted willows to aid the serious erosion following long histories of construction on a bridge in East Vancouver.

Fig: 4.3 (Planting willows (1997)

The forms of these projects are not one physical form as you would say a basket or sculpture is, rather, Kellhammers projects create a collective, regenerative form. In the case of "means of production" people gave growth to growth, expanding and diversifying the space as a form and using the willow to create various things such as musical instruments, which can be heard in the Future ecologies podcast with Oliver (Skulski, M. and Huggins, A. 2020). More than 20 years after this project was started by Kellhammer, it is still thriving now with people contributing to the forms here and being the "stewards" there. (Means of Production Garden Tour Part 2. 2022)

Landscape architect, Artist and educator Sophie Graefin von Maltzan

At the end of 2022, Sophie invited me to join her for a willow project in the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin (IMMA). The project took part at IMMA's 'Earth Rising festival' which is

an Eco Art festival on the space. The landscape architect titled as “Weaving a communal narrative at IMMA” (von Maltzan, S. 2022).

This was a community engaged art project where we were using willow to create spatial and social integration. Some NCAD sculpture students and I worked on the grounds of IMMA for a week to create interactive willow sculptures, collaborating with the UCD landscape architect students. Together we planned, designed and built willow installations, the other sculpture students an I all made our own designs and sculptures, additionally we held workshops with a local Educate Together School “Canal Way", the school children along with passers by in the community, were guided and encouraged to take some willow and help to build tunnels and structures. von Maltzan, S. (2022)

Fig: 4.4 (Weaving at IMMA)

This project was a great way of sustainably engaging with the public through environmental art, while exploring and having conversations about the ecologies and the climate crisis. Sophie called it “Community agency through spatial activation” (Von Maltzan.S, 2022). Through materials and making we used willow to create forms with, to play to “disrupt the outdated

normative aesthetics and usage of our civic spaces." (von Maltzan, S. 2022) These ephemeral sculptures were all planted in the ground as if they had been there a while, with some willow leaves clinging onto the roads as if they were growing. The amazing thing about willow is that you can create natural forms almost immediately, which made this project successful. The disappointing thing about the project is that the structures didn't stay in the site. They were supposed to stay in the ground to be 'living willow structures' and would grow in the direction we shaped them in. As I mentioned before, willows grow quite easily, and it's amazing to see the willow growing when it already has a sculptural form. Unfortunately the sculptures had to be removed after 4 weeks, as they were "too interactive" and the museum said they were "being played with too much".

The examples I have used above personally show the diversified forms we can see through the use of willow in contemporary practice. Artistically, Mary Butcher and Patrick Dougherty show us forms through basketry fusion, and installation. Butcher's pieces are effective because of her traditional skills, background and worldly experience. Dougherty on the other hand is from a carpentry background and the forms he creates are the polar opposite.

Moving to the ecological side of form. We looked at Oliver Kellhammer, where from the outset you may not expect him to identify as an artist, but we can see how successful and forward-thinking his practice is.

Sophie Graefin von Maltzan also veers into the crossover between art and ecology, and with a background in activism and landscape architecture, her goal for the participatory project was to use willow forms for social interaction.

To review my research on the uses of willow in contemporary visual practice, the response can be found in the following.
With reference to the writings of Tim Ingold, We have explored the use of willow work in traditional and contemporary practices. The medium weaves strands between past and present with the medium's 'traditional' roots informing all present modes of expression.
The weaving installations of Laura Ellen Bacon and Patrick Dougherty confound traditional woven forms, and push the medium into large scale site specific works, outside the constraints of the stereotypical white-cube gallery space. These artists best exemplify the lyrical modes of expression to which willow weaving can lend itself. The material, itself organic, imparts this physical quality into the work, giving rise to a dramatic, living presence in their pieces.
It was critical to include an examination of Joe Hogan's work, a living legend in Ireland and the willow community, whose body of work has moved into the contemporary in the last years.

I felt it was crucial to also focus on my own connection to willow too, and as an artist, these projects have helped me to engage and develop my visual practice. The reason I chose this topic was because my connection with the material had grown in the last year. Other relevant subtitles such as the sharing in the willow community and sustainability, allowed me to paint an informative background for my topic.

Willow is remarkable in allowing the artist to be wholly self-sufficient, growing the raw materials needed, processing them and finally working with them. In an age of ecological uncertainty and the breakdown of once interdependent global supply systems, what can be a more radical and empowering approach to "making" than the use of organic, self-produced materials? By looking back into our recent past and examining our ancestral relationships with the land, we can identify modes of production which, out of necessity, draw on these same principles. Willow weaving can, therefore, be a way for us to construct a positive vision of the future, by engaging with traditional practices of the past.

Appendix

Transcript of interview

Holly Phelan - Interview with Sculptor Laura Ellen Bacon.

H:

What would your influences be? Do you have any artists in particular that you're influenced by? I'm doing my thesis on Willow and I feel like there's some newer works that are more similar to your style. Do you think a lot of people have been more influenced by the way you work? Other than you being influenced by them?

L: I suppose that's possible. I don't know if I know that, for sure. But yeah, sometimes I see work and I think, I wonder if they've ever seen mine. But, I don't know that people's work does crossover.
With other artists, I don't have any bond that directly influences my work.

You know, I sort of actively follow what loads of people are doing, just for the enjoyment of it. But often it might be oil painting, or something, you know, I just love seeing what people
Achieve. I haven't really got artists that are influential. In my work really. I've actually been asked that question before, I tend to sort of think that the real things that stay with me are actually films and music. Because sometimes I wish I'd been a musician actually, growing up, I'm no good, no good at things like that. But music makes me feel, you know, the most the most of all of the arts actually, I think.

What people achieve and the way, you know, certain certain films, I just watch, watch them over and over and over again and get really obsessive about the thing.
And the way people do things or the way people decide to convey an idea within a film, you know, that will kind of in some weird abstract way will stay with me actually.

H: That kind of actually ties into one of my other questions. It was Helen grime that wrote the symphony about your piece Woven Space?

L: Yes, she did. Yes. She was commissioned I think by, I hope I'm correct in saying this. She was commissioned by the Barbican to compose a piece of new work. And then I think in the
In her generation of ideas, she discovered my work and then it fed into her work.
It just blew my mind that, I've got to be honest. That's just such a pivotal thing for me. Now, if anybody mentions you know, if anybody says have you made any achievements in your work.

That's it! Like, wow, that's just the biggest, most amazing thing that's ever happened to me.
It's sort of not even in the, in the periphery of the background of her work, it's actually, you know, it's right out there in the programme. There's images of my work and, and it was in the reviews, I was just amazed.
That was so wonderful to hear. Because I am interested in how people interact with my work, you know, because some of my pieces, you can get inside. And to hear that in musical form, it's just phenomenal.

H: Have you ever considered your sculptures as musical? Or did you think Willow has a musical quality or a lyrical quality? Or have people ever told you that before?

L: Yep, possibly, I mean, sometimes when I do projects people have, I've got a little file somewhere of poems that people have written. And I'm not got many of them, but I have got a few.

And, and I think that Willow, I think Willow in itself is the subject of a few sort of folklore, songs and things, isn't it as well? So I think that there is possibly a lyrical quality in the material itself.
I mean, I certainly like to think about movement anyway, in the work, even if it just appears really slow, progressive, or, like slowly progressive, you know, movement? Or if it's sort of moving around an object or visually. So yeah, that's that aspect to it.

H: Would you always begin your sculptures with a drawing, or is it an idea? I know you say a lot how you want people to feel immersed in your sculptures, or to be able to go inside of them? I know, you say you're influenced by the movements, But would there be conceptual parts to it? Or just this kind of like feeling?

L: I do a bit of both sometimes, it's changed a little bit, because I've been doing this for 20 years now. And I've always tried to do you know, I've always always always focused on doing the best work I can. So I've tried to be really disciplined and always do a drawing. And obviously, if you're working to commission or if you're in a location where logistics and all sorts of things have got to be considered you obviously have to submit a design.

But what I found now is that sometimes the work is better if it absolutely looks like the design.
But equally, this really annoying, sometimes a work is definitely better if it veers from the design haha. There's a lot of consolation in you know, when you've done the design - because that design, that means that I've really really thought about it and I know that that is going to work the best. So sometimes that's a pencil sketch or like you know, endless pencil sketches, but basically roaring.
Or sometimes I do 3D versions of it, in clay or paper. It doesn't really matter to me actually what the material is because it's usually just about seeing the outline, so I'm not worried about demonstrating what the willow looks like, because I really need to just focus on the outline of it, or you know, the form of it.

But, sometimes honestly the work is much better if you have the basic principle, because you need it you've got to know (you got to know how much willow you're going to use for start,) you know, or with all sorts of basic things.
But sometimes it is definitely better to let the work evolve a little bit on site. And it's sometimes just a bit unnerving because you don't quite know, you know. I've worked really really hard on every piece. So sometimes I start off and I think yeah, I'm really convinced in the design, and then great.

What I mean is, it's sometimes difficult to step away a little bit from that design, which you are completely certain about, and then ,sometimes you just need to approach it and just think, okay, look, that's just a design on paper. And this is the real thing. You just have to believe in what you're doing at that point. And then great, but it's not easy.
What I'm trying to say is that, even though you can work it out really, at the beginning and know what and how long, it's going to take and understand the complexities of a site, because you've got to know that, once you've built a certain area, let's say you're in a listed building, or high up in a ceiling or something,

you've got to know that at a certain point, you've got to move the scaffolding. And when you move that scaffolding, a certain area has got to be finished, or there's a curve that you know you've got to complete. Otherwise, if you do a lower bit first, your feet are gonna be in the way and you won't be able to reach it. All the time, everything is just about where you can reach, so it only extends to the reach of my arms. The work can be as big as you like, but you've got to consider, literally where your hands can get to and to reach.
H: Generally would you usually get much freedom, let's say with curators, and commissions? Is it mostly up to yourself, or do people approach you with something in mind for site specific work?

L:Most of the time or probably almost all of the time, actually. People are just, you know, maybe they want something in a particular place. But beyond that, they're just like, just do what you want, which is great. I think that's the case. I might have to consider, there's probably all sorts of subtle things that they do want the work to do, but nobody ever tells me what they want work to look like. They might say we want it to be on that particular wall, or we want people to be able to get in it or see inside of at least part of it. There might be a little bit of a brief, or there's always brief, but there might be a little bit of stipulation about how something is interacted with.
But nobody ever. No one ever dictates the creative side of it, thankfully, so that's really good.

H: Because a lot of your work is specific to the sites like do you find the communities reacting to it, because it's so out in the open? Or, does that come back to you much? Or do you ever get negative things, I love your site specific work, but I feel as artists working in the public and outdoors, it might be a lot.

L: Yeah, I mean I'm 40..How old am I.. I think I'm 46, and I've got two small children. The last five years, I've been working all of the time. I mean, when I was expecting my two year old, you know, I was eight months pregnant and making an enormous dry stone wall piece.
Which is not to be recommended. Really, I'm not proud of that. But you know, things just move at a pace where….where was I going with that? Oh, yeah, so I was gonna say COVID has been for sort of two years. So the long and the short of it is I've not actually done much work in the public eye actually. So I've I've slightly forgotten and I don't think I've ever had anything particularly negative but, Well, I actually did once but it's more of a sort of bitchiness actually, from a member of the public.
But yes, things, I do find it a little bit unnerving actually in the public eye, because most people are just really interested. And that's really nice. And even if it's not to people's tastes, and you can sort of tell really, when they are too polite to say that they don't really like it, but they are interested in where you get your willow from. But the only downside to that, if I'm honest, is just that it takes a lot of energy to constantly talk to people.
And I know it sounds really mean, I actually do like talking to people, but it can sort of take up about, easily, just eat up a third of your time. And if you've got a very tight schedule, you've got to complete it while you're there on site, it's quite time consuming, really. So it's always a pleasure. But it does take up a lot of time. Because people's fascination with Willow is.. people, do seem really interested.
And so really, most people when they talk to you, they don't really want to know about the work, they just, you know, 70% of the comments are just all the questions will be how long do you have to soak it? And where do you get it from?

But, you know, it's, it's nice.

H: I remember hearing you say that, you started using dogwood and beach, that it was the form you liked .Well, you probably now love using Willow, but at the start, did you use it just to get the forms or were you as fascinated about Willow, or just what it could do?

Well, there's sometimes it's why I, quite, quite rightly, I'm termed as a willow, either a willow sculptor, or a willow Weaver. I don't like either of those terms, because it suggests that you are a person with knowledge and enthusiasm for Willow.
And, you know, you are keen to find ways to use it. And both of those things are true, but only to a limited point. I'm not, I'm not committed to Willow or anything. Do you know what I mean, I'm not actually a willow enthusiast, and I'm therefore trying to show what I can do with it at all, at all, it's never been like that, its completely the other way around. I just wanted to make forms with a particular kind of smoothness, I wanted to be able to build them with curves and edges and make those things pronounced. I just found my own ways of doing it.

I mean my method is, I can't really teach my method, for example, because it's not really a sort of method. If I ever had to give someone the job of building one of my pieces, it would just be a nightmare. It's not like building a basket in a way where you say you start at the bottom, you follow this weave, you know, you go eight inches high, then you do a rim. It just would just be outrageous, just trying to explain how. I mean that just might not be the right way. I might be doing it, you know, in an inefficient way or whatever but I have to do it, I really want to do it in a particular way. And that's how I get the forms that I want to make. But the willow doesn't come first, the willow isn't the starting point at all. So when I was using things like dogwood and and sticks, just you know
sticks really. Then I was thinking about amassing them and you know, making something where all those things would just be massed together.

And I still do that actually, in the garden, I've got loads of stuff in the garden that the children go through. I've made sort of pathways and valleys in the garden, just using up sticks that we've cut down from trees and stuff, but there's so much of it.
And that's still appealing but Willow, Willow just you know, it was just great. I can get hundreds of sticks this way. So I'll just buy them in.

H:I loved your dry stone wall piece. I was interested, because I can't remember how many stone wall makers you said you worked with? I was really interested to hear about how you worked in a group, was it easy to work with these professional stone wallers?

Yeah, there were four,, sometimes there weren't always four at the same time, actually, just because they were sometimes on other jobs. But overall, there were four individual stone wallers. And actually, it was great, because they had to work to my absolute direction. So that's it, there's no sort of seeing what happens and let someone just crack on for days at a time or anything. So I was there on site, and it sounds really overly precise, but I did literally have to dictate where some of the stones went. At some points, every single stone because there was a tendency for them to build, quite upright, as is normal with a wall and I've not built a wall at all, it's not a wall.

Also, it was incredibly wide. So ,it was about, in some places a metre, some places two metres wide at the base. Maybe it was upright in the middle of the work, but then it really, really graduated on the outside. So when they would want to graduate it quite upright, I'd be going no, no, no, no, no, EACH STONE, it's got to be cambered like that. They would say are you sure? And Yes!

So there's no way they could have built it from a plan for example. Maybe if I do a few more projects with them, maybe in theory, that might be physically possible. But on that, no chance. Not because they're not skilled, at all, but just because the overall shape is only in my head and not theirs, you know.

H:Have you always thought with this sort of architectural outlook? Would you say your mind works more in an architectural way? Because looking at the scale and planning in lots of your work, do you have to think that way?

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L: Yeah, I mean, a little bit. But I'm always really loath to use that word because I haven't obviously got you know? I suppose I have to think in quite a spatial way, I'm quite pragmatic.
I need to know what's possible and what lengths you can take something to and then work within that. You've got to know the limits even if you're absolutely pushing something, you've got to know what that is. And then you can kind of work with it really.

H:Did you ever have a time where you had a lack of creativity or that you were kind of a rut? Because I feel like you've such a large body of work and it's all so creative, I don't know if it's true, if every artist goes through a stage like that?

L: You mean like a sort of writer's block? Not in the course of my 20 years, so not as a sort of block time within my 20 years. But definitely within all sorts of individual projects. Oh, god, it's just awful sometimes you can visit a place or be given a brief and you just think, yeah, actually, I know exactly what I want to do, or exactly what this needs or exactly the feeling that this place needs. I've got it, I've just got to kind of spend time drawing it and thinking about it, but I've definitely, I've got it.

It's great when that happens. And then sometimes it's just horrible. You can't get it, you go through pages and pages of sketchbooks and the sketchbooks drawings are just awful haha. Then you think I could do something like this, I'd probably fulfil the brief but there's no fulfilment in that, that doesn't do anything for me. Then you know, you have to just go through that, and then you can get it. But what always helps me then, I do this actually, every time I start a project I try to have a brand new sketchbook.

I think Marilyn, Marilyn Monroe, apparently coined the phrase thinking in ink, she said “think in ink”. That really works for me.
So I will write it all down. These notes are private, they're just for me. So I am absolutely honest with myself, what is it that I really want to achieve from this? I write down what I don't like about the site, or if something's difficult to get to, or there's sort of difficult because I'm not allowed to put any fixings in this part, or I really would like to do this, but actually it's going to be a bit too fragile for public love, or whatever it is. I sort of get it all out there. write. And write about all the good things and all the things that are niggling me. Once I've done that, I might fill loads of pages.
Suddenly, it's like you give yourself permission, then to embrace and do what you personally can do.

I think sometimes when you get a brief, it's very easy to get a little bit carried away with what the person commissioning it wants. Sometimes you get a sense of what they think they want, And actually, it's not really necessarily what you're thinking. When they come to you, it's your job to do the best for the site. When you're still kind of churning that up, I just sort of write everything down. So most of my sketchbooks have just got loads of waffle.
When you've got when you suddenly figured out what the narrative of the work is really going to be, Then, it might be that the piece that you're proposing is actually dramatically simple or dramatically complicated. You get this fire that is lit in you and then you can go with it. It's great.

H:That's really nice to hear. I feel that's kind of inspiring all of us to get all the thoughts out.

Would you prefer to write for yourself? Or do you ever feel misrepresented when someone else is writing about your work? I suppose you have to clear things right up about your work, would that happen?

L:Yeah, yeah. Most of the time things get yeah, things get like that. It's fine, I don't think people get things too far wrong really, people sometimes assume I'm definitely from a basketry perspective, I love basketry by the way. I've always admired it, but that's not where I want to put my energy.

H:Do you get basket makers commenting on your work often? I'm sure they love it too, because it's the same material but used in such a dynamic way. Do you get people with basketry backgrounds ever trying to hop on your bandwagon at all?

A little, I mean in 20 years, nothing major but sometimes people say, how do you do it? I say well I just sort of draw the shape out three dimensionally, which I do. They say, but how do you *do it?* Well I use material on mass.. I'm not ever going to pass on how I make something, just because it would be so hard, it's not even a case of saying I join certain ends and I use willow of a certain thickness, because it's much more than that. A lot of the time, I make a framework and draw it out and even get so far weaving it out, and at that stage they always look awful, terrible, mid way through, that's their nature. When all the willow is quite evenly distributed, an even quantity, even at that point, if it's not quite right, there's so many reasons why shapes sometimes don't work. That's just awful because you know it's not working but dont know how to change it. So I'll start things again or cut things up, and that's quite horrifying for some people to see, but I can't show people how to do that really.

H:My last question, I'm in my final year doing sculpture and I was wondering if you had any advice for someone going into the sculptural world?

L:Yeah definitely, and it's so boring, but true. It sounds so cringey because it's what everyone says but, be yourself, I think you can tell when someone is not quite authentic. Sometimes it's a bit of a thing that you have to exude confidence, people have said that, that's great and there's definitely a method in that. But whatever the situation, you never pretend to be anyone you're not, you never pretend to know where you are going if you don't. Actually the things you don't know and that you express to people, and you say to people- well actually I'm really interested in this, but i'm not quite resolved yet on how this develops, then people start to listen. Just absolutely have your voice, know your own voice, which is why I love writing

things down a lot, it helps to come back to a project and explain actually how something developed. You can actually then remember your thought processes and even the negative thought processes can actually become very valuable. Just the way to find your own visual language, your inspirations and your cues.

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