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Spring 2023

## Continuing


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# **CONTINUING**

**Shauna Le Ann Smith**

Springfield Art Museum,  
Springfield, Missouri  
May 5, 2023

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# CONTINUING

Art and Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Fine Arts

Shauna Le Ann Smith

**ABSTRACT**

Taking something whole, breaking it apart, and making it into another form of wholeness is the essence of both papermaking and grief. The papermaking process involves separation, maceration, and forming of new life; the grieving process involves a similar evolution. Creating this body of work has been a pursuit of continuation—a part of me forming new life. Using papermaking processes, I create work that is visually quiet. The details are only noticeable through sustained attention and close proximity. The quiet visual qualities are intended to create a viewing experience that is meditative and slow. The lack of details of the material world is meant to encourage viewers to look within rather than focus on what is on the surface, just as I do when creating them. As viewers linger with my work they are basked with a warm, gentle glow that illuminates through the paper. I use light to symbolize hope and offer a form of reciprocation for those who choose to slow down with the work. The quiet qualities stand as antithetical to the contemporary visual culture and consumption habits.

**KEYWORDS:** papermaking, grief, continuation, healing, natural fibers, meditation, light, quiet visuals

**CONTINUING**

By

Shauna Le Ann Smith

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.



Creating my artwork is a pursuit of continuation. Filled with grief, I have learned papermaking. Creating handmade paper is a generative process where many things can go wrong, yet there is always an instant recovery; everything can be turned back into pulp to make something new. As I grieve the loss of a loved one, I find comfort in the forgiving means of papermaking. There is a poetic connection between working with pulp and water and the cyclical patterns of nature—a place in which even endings have potential.

When someone you love is no longer alive, your yearning and grief for that person becomes all-consuming. Everything else in life must respond to that level of heartbreak, including how one chooses to keep going. From the first choices a griever must make—what to do after hearing the news, whether to get out of bed the following day, and when to return to work or school—the griever decides to remain a part of what life is, choice by choice. Over time, the biggest choice comes: the choice to feel alive again. To remember who oneself is. To let the old self and the self-fluent in grief meet, or, as Pema Chodron puts it, to make more life.<sup>1</sup> When I lost my brother, I had to decide how to continue. How do I stay with it? Stay with this life? Stay in practice, in program, in belief? In the beginning days of deep grief, I couldn't do much, but I did show up to the paper studio to see what would happen. Finding this practice of making restored a sense of curiosity and excitement that helped me engage in living. Driven by a process I fell in love with instantly, working with pulp and water proceeded to become a life-giving source of hope that remains with me to this day. Piece by piece I continue. For two years now, creating this work has been my companion on this healing journey.

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1. Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 101.





*Papermaker's Tears*

Taking something whole, breaking it apart, and making it into another form of wholeness is the essence of papermaking. The sheet of paper that holds these words was once a living organism. For these fibers to carry these words, they had to be separated from the parts of its plant body deemed undesirable for future use and go through a process of beating and maceration. After all that irritation, the fibers found each other and physically interlocked, as if holding on to one another for dear life. Their interlocking is what forms this sheet. In a way, the making of paper is a process of death. The plant fibers are no longer what they were. As in all things related to death, it is also a process of life. Plants are often collected in their dead or dried stage by papermakers. The dead plant material takes on the new life form of a sheet of paper; the plant fibers make more life through the stories that they hold. You can read these words because of the resilient strength and bonded interconnection of plant fibers, broken down and brought together by papermaking. If anything, the fiber's process is one of interconnection and resilience. Replace the word "papermaking" with "grief" and the words "fiber" and "sheet" with "griever" and this paragraph works, mostly, all the same.

By definition, the function of paper is to hold something—a handwritten or printed message, a drawing, a gift. Paper is most often seen by artists as the substrate on which art happens. This is the same as seeing the paper as secondary to the artist's hand. The artist's marks are what distinguish a piece of paper from a piece of paper that needs to be protected, framed, removed from the vulnerability of being bent or torn. The human marks transform how we label and value the sheet of paper, now identified as art. The day I was taught the sheet-forming process, I sensed the power of interconnected paper fibers immediately. Since then, I've continued to work with paper fibers as the process and material of the art, not merely the substrate.



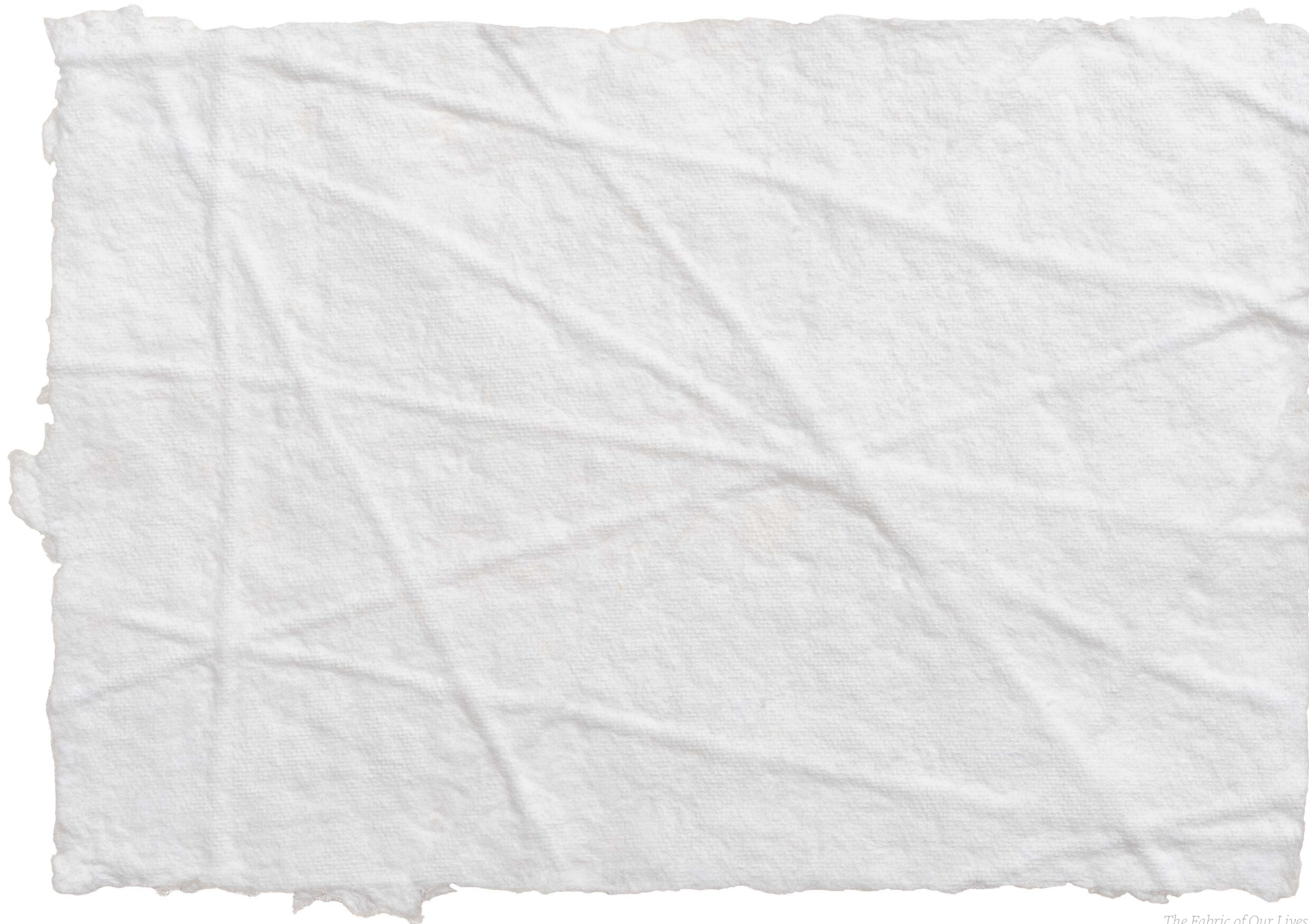
*Papermaker's Tears (detail)*

Embedded into these plant fibers are images of my healing, including my longing for and celebrations of wholeness, connection, hope, slowness, and the comfort of the natural world.

Circles echo through these works. I am comforted by the linear softness of circles. For me they speak of wholeness and cyclical movement wordlessly and implicitly. The circle represents the shape of our earthly home, the star it is warmed by, and the satellite that orchestrates the rhythm of the tides and our rest. It is self-referential at every point—always mirroring and completing itself. It is what I see and feel when I envision what my spirit looks like. When facilitating artistic social experiences as part of my practice, I always use circle or half-circle seating, as it unifies without hierarchical arrangement. Circles symbolizes continuation, as they have no end or beginning. In this journey, I repeatedly use circles to depict what I search for (wholeness), what I trust (the natural world), and the brutal but beautiful truth (that the world continues even after death). I fear calling death what it is comes across harshly—as if I am emotionally detached. My use of the term “death” is a process of acceptance. Every day I must accept the reality that my loved ones are no longer here. This form of acceptance is a practice of continuation in itself.



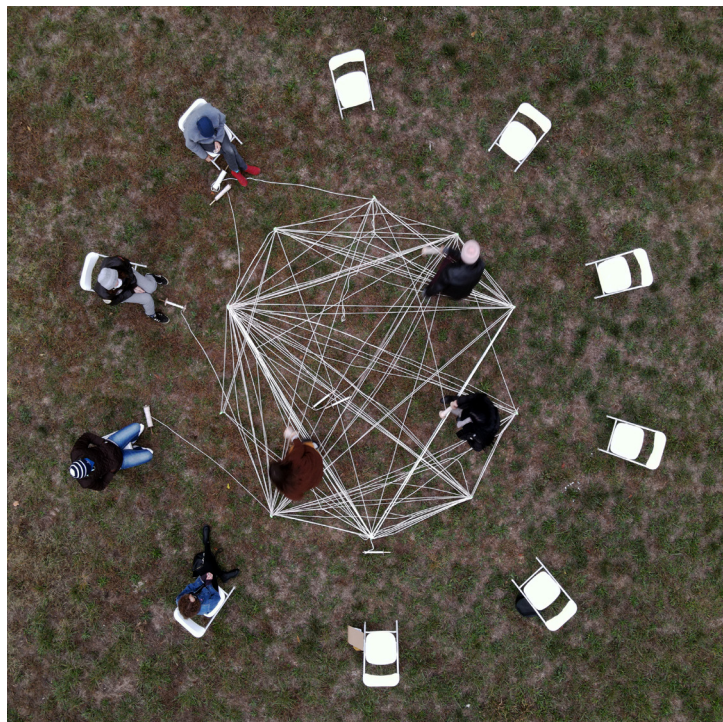




Another image I work with repeatedly is networks of overlapping lines and circles. These webs symbolize the interconnection between all things. As I grieve and heal, my connections to others and the world around me have become more vital and visible than ever before. These connections keep me alive. I have been truly astonished by those who have held me as I grieve, sat with me through the tears, called me even though they didn't know what to say, and allowed their love to outweigh their discomfort of discomfort. Over and over, my connections have acted as a net that catches me when I fall. They have not been too fast to spring me back up; instead, their net has held me safely as I grieve. "Grief, even for an individual's loss, is a thing for which a lot of people are necessary. A tribe is necessary even if it's just to be a kind of resilient nonjudgmental human basket, against which the griever is able to thrash."<sup>1</sup> I learned papermaking from a friend who answered my call of needing to find a way to continue creating. My connection to her and her connection to the knowledge of papermaking offered me a way forward. From the mycelium networks that span across the globe, to the way death feeds life through the digestive systems of carrion eaters, interconnection and interdependence are the fabric of this world at every scale. I am devoted to making these connections visible by bringing formal significance to the places where we overlap, circle by circle and line by line.

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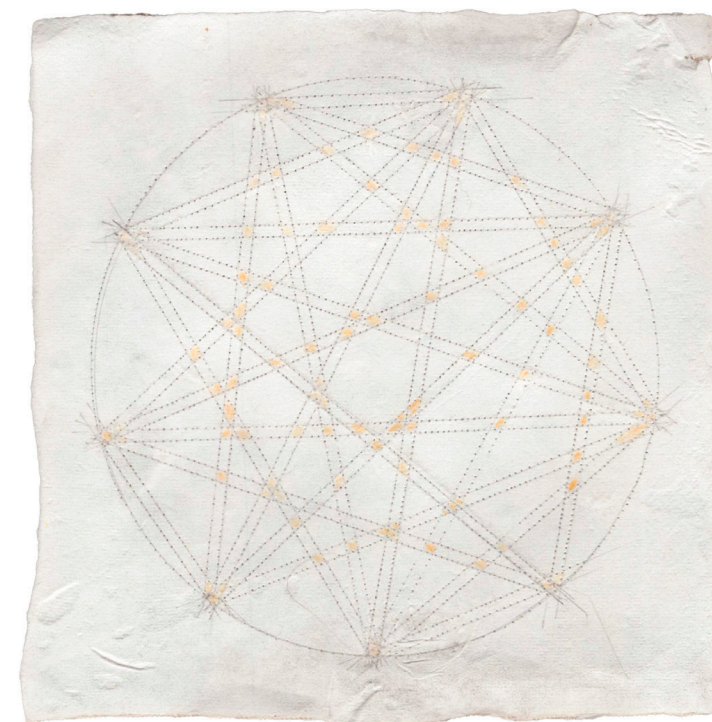
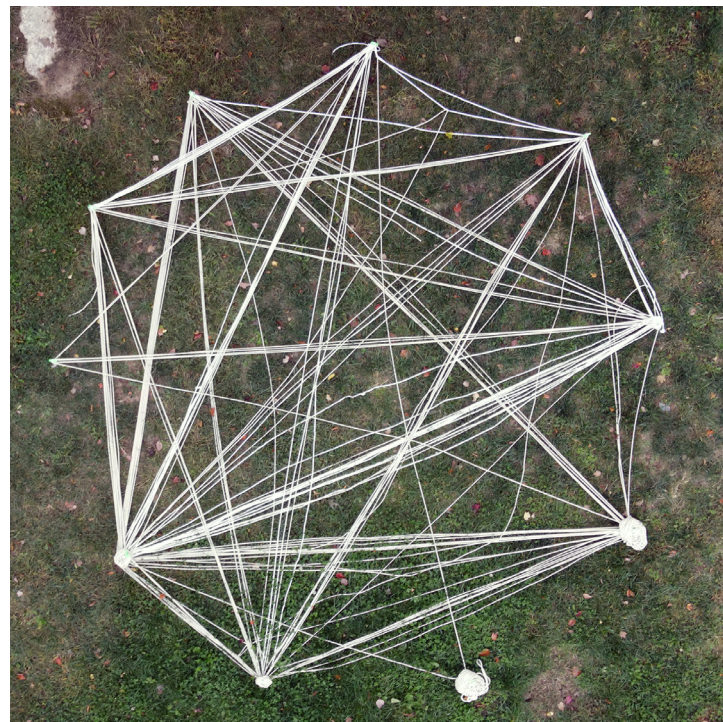
<sup>1</sup> Martin Prechtel, *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 37.



Highlighting connections between people is a substantial aspect to my socially engaged artwork *How We Are Feeling*, which has significantly influenced the direction I have taken in papermaking. In this 2020 project, I invited the public to gather as a collective to speak about what was going on in the world and how they were carrying the weight of it through a series of outdoor group conversations. I invited participants to make their felt connections visible by using rope to draw lines between themselves and each other each time they felt a connection with what another said. Each line drawn bridged the social distance everyone had been experiencing due to Covid 19 and offered participants a reminder that they were not alone. At the end of each conversation, a dense web of connection stood as evidence of our time together, caring for one another.

Above Left: *How We Are Feeling* (Participation Image)

Above Right: *How We Are Feeling* (Web of Connection Image)



Prior to the loss of my brother, a considerable portion of my artistic practice included creating socially engaged work. This form of work requires significant planning, facilitation, and collaboration with others. For me, it is an artistic practice that is directed outward, where in many ways I prioritize creating for others. When grief and other related feelings brought on by loss filled my days, I was no longer able to produce such outward, orchestrated projects. To continue making, I had to find a new way to create. I found my way to continue in the solace of papermaking. When first learning papermaking, I worked with the formal elements of *How We Are Feeling*, intrigued by how the formal elements could function outside of their original social context.

Above Left: First Web of Connections sketch

Above Right: *Web of Connections: Line Tracings I*



Above: Pile of *Request for Slowness and Patience* pieces



Significantly, working with images I already knew was a way for me to get started when it felt like all hope was lost. My use of overlapping lines and circles trace back to this earlier project. This shift toward inward creating was rehabilitating. It helped me learn the invaluable lesson that the act of creating can serve myself and that the purpose of my work does not have to be in the service of others. Creating handmade paper pieces also reminds me how incredible it feels to create something with my hands. I find hope in these new possibilities—in the ability to create more life.

Above: *8 People*



I use light in this body of work to emphasize connections and to symbolize hope and healing. Historically, light has been used to emphasize what is most important in a work of art. The use of light to direct attention is expertly exemplified in the work of Caravaggio, who tells viewers where to look through his use of intense light and contrast. I use the same framework of emphasizing importance through light, except what I illuminate is the viewer. My use of small-scale and quiet visuals encourages viewers to approach closely in order to see the work in-depth, which brings them closer to the light. As viewers meet an illuminated piece, they are basked in a warm, gentle glow. This light functions as a form of reciprocation for those who choose to slow down with the work. As the viewer attends to the work, the light attends to the viewer, and a mutual exchange of attention happens—a standing still together. The light transmitting through artworks that correspond so closely to the scale of the human body amplifies the connection of the light and the viewer and creates sites for intimate viewing. For me, the illuminated pieces function as personal charging stations for hope, similar to standing outside to be energetically recharged by the sun.

Left: *Where We Meet*  
Above: Light casting on a viewer's face from illuminated paper piece



Nature is the main material of my work; the paper is created by plant fibers and the colorants are foraged and hand processed earth pigments. More distinguishable fragments of nature show up in several pieces—decaying leaves or seed encasings poke through the paper surface, seed pods are memorialized through embossing, and stems of local flora appear and disappear behind illuminated paper. The significance of these

natural elements partially comes from the process of collecting them. Spending time outdoors deeply observing my natural environment is a mindfulness practice that allows me to connect with my center. As I collect minute details from my environment, I practice opening my senses to the small-scale. Being able to notice these small beauties requires me to slow down, and be present and intimate with the world around me.

Above: *Noticings I* (detail)

When in deep grief, I experienced a detachment from being able to feel the beauty of the natural world. On May 31st, 2021, a few months after my brother passed, I journaled:

The garden is a prayer.

All day the word “hope,” the feeling of hope, has been on my mind as I place seed into earth. This small plot of land I am fortunate enough to collaborate with. I have not felt hope since my brother passed.

All around me I see beautiful things: yellow fluted flowers, baby pea pods forming, and red, warm, sweet strawberries. I see them, but/and I do not feel them as I use to. But today I felt the seeds. I imagined with wonder what this plot of land will look like in coming weeks/months (and I wonder the same about myself).

I think it is all a belief in time, a hope of time, which is a hope of life.

I am once again awake to the beauty of the world and life. I can *feel* it. I celebrate my ability to once again notice the world around me as I work with natural materials.



When using plants as a legible element in a piece, I am interested in blurring the visibility of their presence. When visual elements teeter between lost and found—visible and hidden—they exist in the in-between of being sensed. I connect this visual experience to the sensation of feeling as if someone is there when they physically are not—a familiar sensation that accompanies grief.

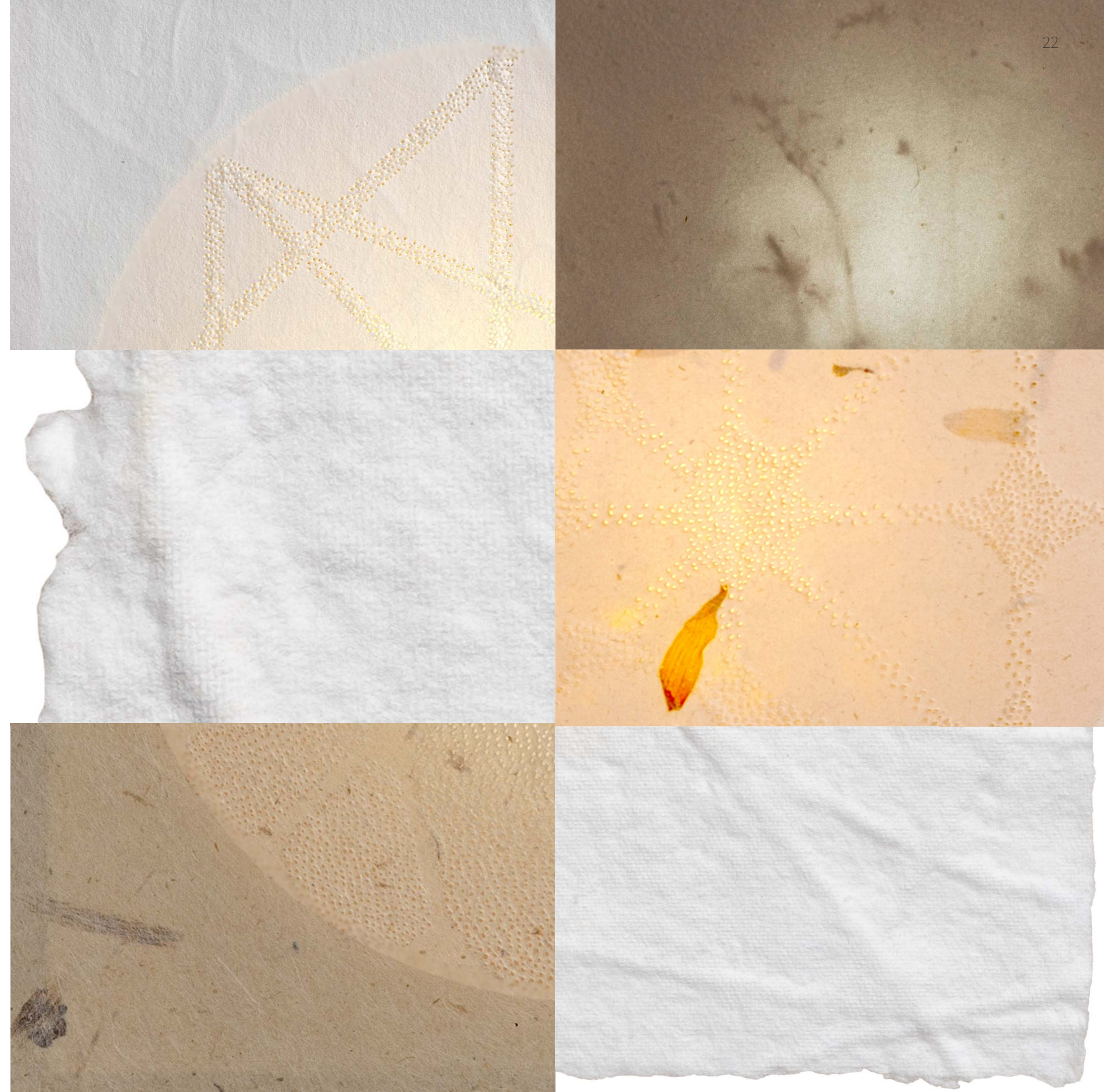
The way my mom frequently states and powerfully feels that Bub is with her on any given day. The way I felt him at the end of my bed one night as I broke down. The way I still talk aloud to him. The way I heard him from the seat next to me say, “This is so cool, Sis,” repeatedly, as I sewed Christmas ornaments for everyone out of his residual button-down shirts.



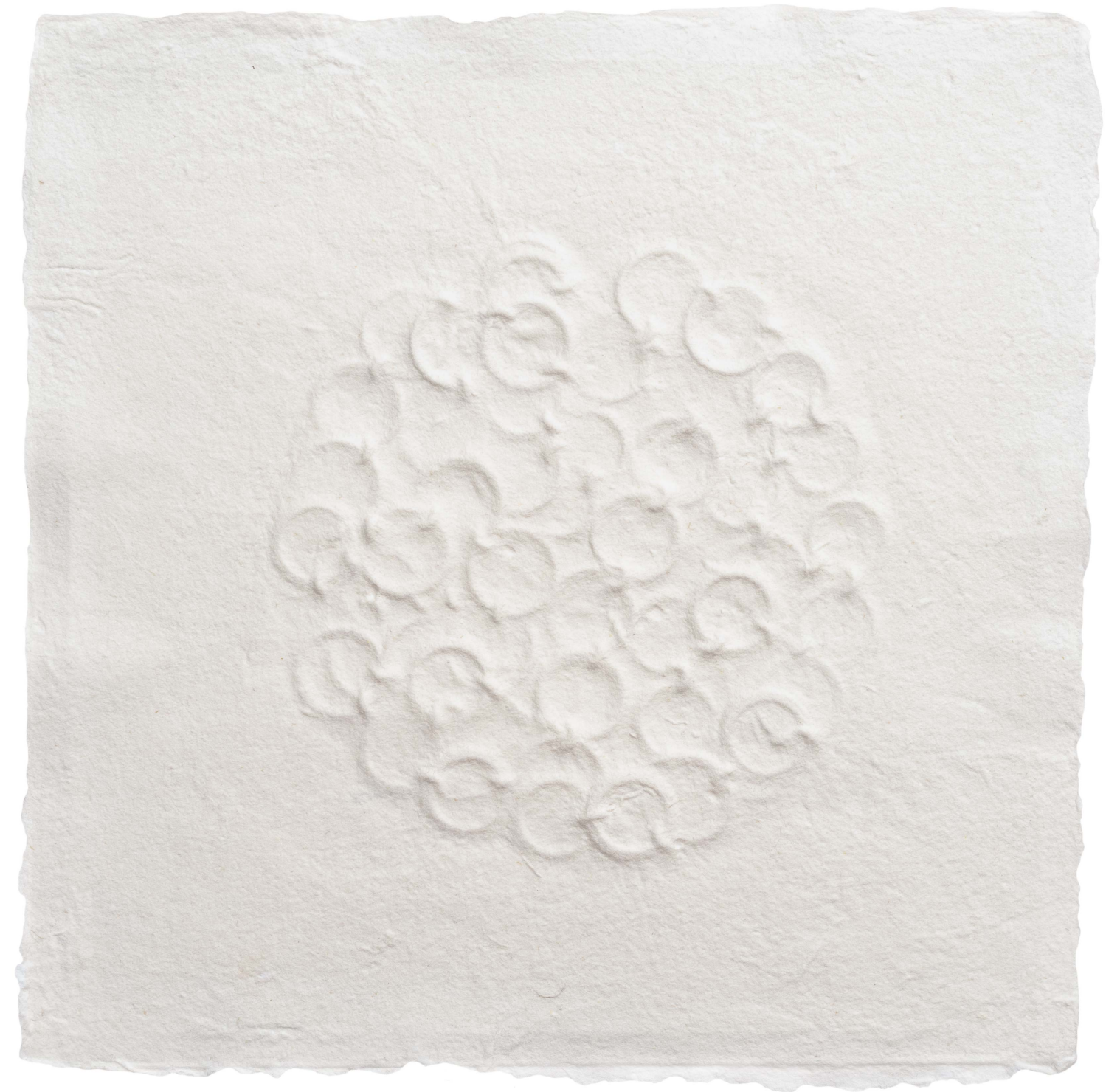
The strongest aesthetic relationship between all these pieces is their visual quietness. From across the room, the work appears as blank pieces of paper. Their details, which exist in the fiber qualities of the paper and in the subtle imagery that is embossed or poked into the sheet, are only noticeable through sustained attention and close proximity. Perception of the minutia relies on in-person viewing, as the details often disappear in photographs.

The work requires a level of patience and care in both its making and viewing.

Above: *Papermaker's Tears* photographed from afar  
 Left: Various details from paper pieces

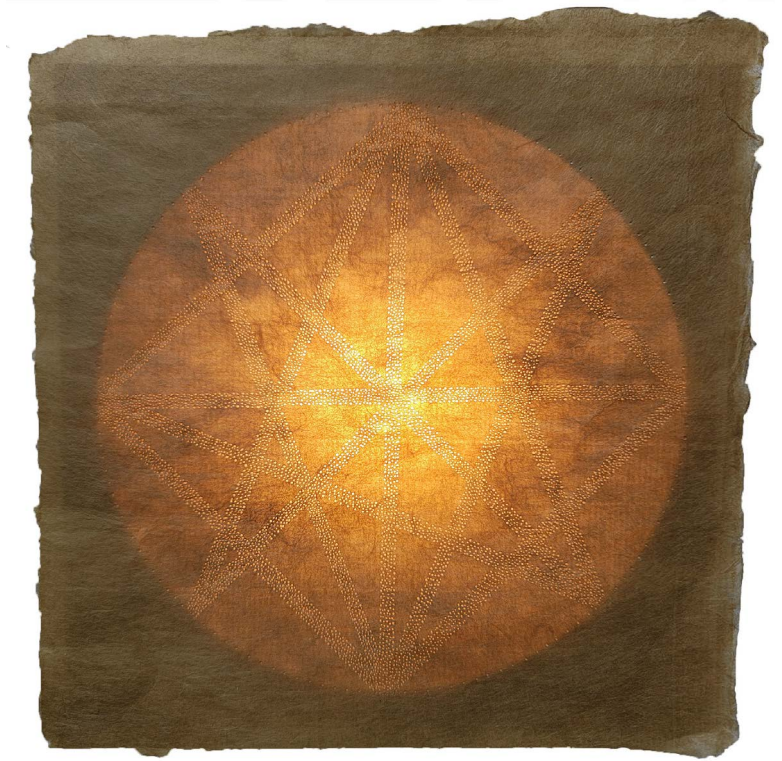


These quiet visual qualities are intended to create a viewing experience that is meditative and ripe for introspection. The lack of details of the material world is meant to encourage viewers to look within rather than focus on what is on the surface, just as I do when creating them. The lack of depiction mimics the meditative process of closing one's eyes to the outside world. I am interested in what comes to viewers when an artwork is not shouting with imagery or narrative and, instead, they are faced with quietness. How might such subtlety challenge the sensitivity of our senses? In a way, I see my work functioning as a mirror. When one looks in a mirror, there is no place to hide; our task is to see what we look like. Mirrors, like meditation, allow us to witness our bare selves.

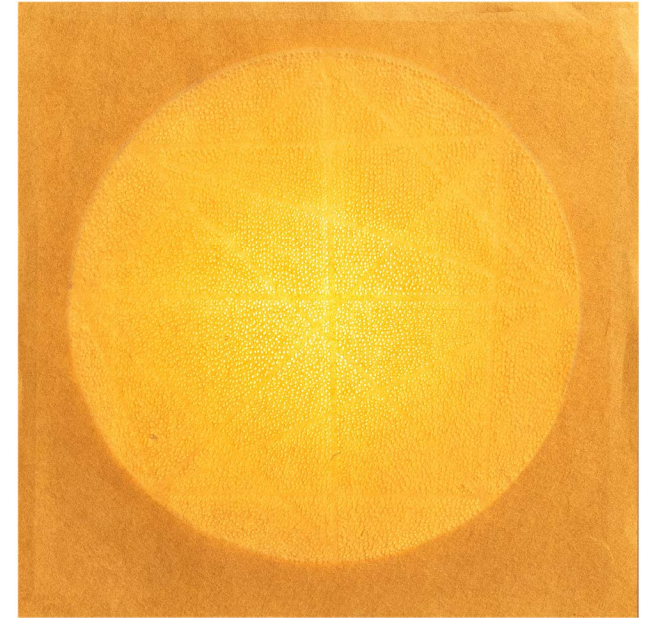




The mirror metaphor describes the process I undertake in making this work. Creating these artworks is a meditative process where I prioritize slowing down and working with intention. When creating, I close myself off from the outside world. In this space, there is a quieting all around but not always within. During these hours of working with my hands, I become present with my thoughts. My art practice simultaneously functions as a mindfulness practice. The process of creating *A Request for Slowness and Patience* pieces is where I most deeply meditate. My method of creating these works is more formulaic and habitual, which allows me to soften my focus. I spend countless hours hand-poking each hole with a sewing needle, a process in which I find absolute tranquility. I come back to this action of hand poking as a form of recovery when life gets too busy. It is my safe place where I spend time slowly.



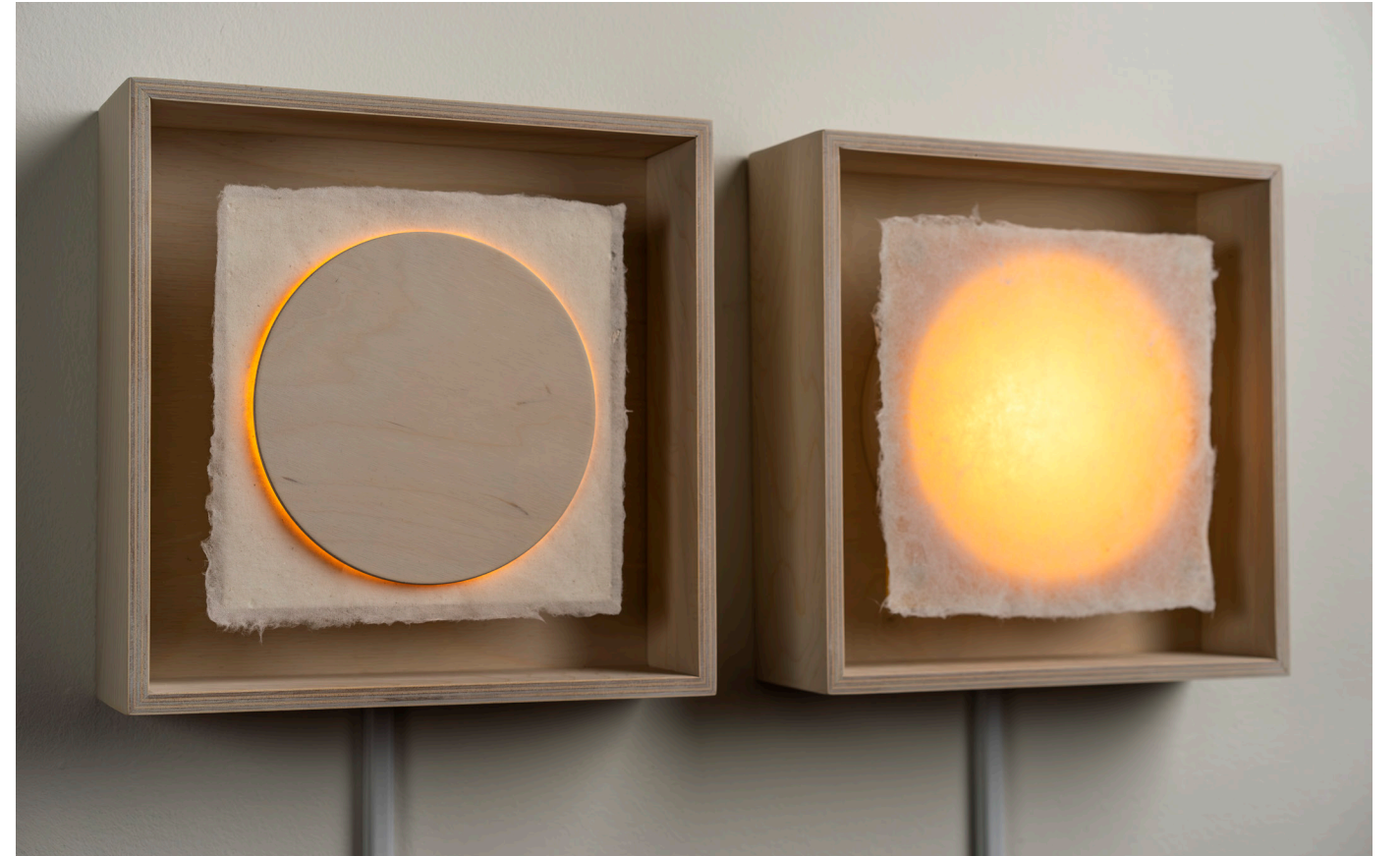
Left: *Amidst Everything Else*  
Right: *Keeping Connections Clear*



Above and right: *Request for Slowness and Patience Series*

When it is first formed in water, a sheet of paper is extremely fragile. As time progresses, the water drains from the sheet, and it becomes much stronger than it was before. I came to making this work extremely fragile, and as time has passed, I too have found strength. In circles I meditate on wholeness and continuation. In overlapping lines I highlight the interconnection that weaves between every aspect of life. In light I bring forth hope. In natural material I channel my deep appreciation and celebration of the world around me. In papermaking I remember. I remember that I am a maker, and in making I find healing. I came to creating this work broken, and through all these remembrances, I stitch myself together.

**From broken to whole. From pulp to sheet. Always in cyclical continuation.**





Above: Installation images of *Continuing* (left wall), on display at the Springfield Art Museum



Above: Installation images of *Continuing* (right wall), on display at the Springfield Art Museum

### Bibliography

Chodron, Pema. *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1997.

Prechtel, Martin. *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise*. California: North Atlantic Books, 2015.

### Image List

- 1 *Persistence II*, 2023, handmade paper, 8" x 8".
- 4 Papermaking. Photograph taken by Jason Rico. 2022, digital image, dimensions vary.
- 5 *Papermaker's Tears*, 2023, handmade cotton paper, 15" x 15".
- 6 *Papermaker's Tears* (detail), 2023, handmade cotton paper, 15" x 15".
- 8 *Wholeness*, 2021, handmade cotton paper, 8" x 8".
- 9-10 *The Fabric of Our Lives*, 2021, handmade cotton paper, 6.75" x 9.75".
- 11 *How We Are Feeling (Participation Image)*, Photograph taken by Rick Briggenhorst. 2020, digital image, dimensions vary.  
*How We Are Feeling (Web of Connection Image)*, Photograph taken by Rick Briggenhorst. 2020, digital image, dimensions vary.
- 12 First Web of Connections sketch, 2021, handmade cotton paper, graphite, colored pencil, 7" x 7".  
*Web of Connections: Line Tracings I*, 2022, paper, 10" x 10".
- 13 Pile of *Request for Slowness and Patience* pieces, 2022, digital image, dimensions vary.
- 14 *8 People*, 2021, handmade cotton paper, 10" x 10".
- 15 *Where We Meet*, 2022, handmade cotton paper, wood, LEDs, 24" x 24".
- 16 Light casting on a viewer's face from illuminated paper piece, 2023, digital image, dimensions vary.

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- 17 *Noticings I* (detail), 2023, handmade cotton paper, acron husk, 8" x 8".
- 19-20 *Softening Presence Series*, 2023, handmade cotton paper, plant material, LEDs, wood, 10.5" x 34.5"
- 21 *Papermaker's Tears* photographed from afar, 2023, handmade cotton paper, 15" x 15".
- 22 Various details from paper pieces, 2023, digital collage, dimesnsions vary.
- 24 *Linked (Embedded)*, 2021, handmade cotton paper, LED, wood, 8" x 8".
- 26 *Amidst Everything Else*, 2021, paper, LEDs, wood, 10" x 10".
- 26 *Keeping Connections Clear*, 2021, paper, LEDs, wood, 10" x 10".
- 27-28 *Request for Slowness and Patience Series*, 2022-2023, paper, LEDs, wood, display dimensions vary.
- 30 *It Will Come Again*, 2023, handmade paper, LEDs, wood, 10" x 23".
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