

## ***Invasive Species / Endemic Breeds – A Sensorial Mapping of the Channel Islands***

*Invasive Species / Endemic Breeds* is a process based collaborative art project. Over the course of the next four years I will be guiding a group of local artists and craftspeople in the process of dyeing Santa Cruz Island Sheep wool with dye from invasive and non-native plants growing on the Channel Islands. The public will be invited to participate in the process through workshops in museums, our studios, and cafés. The wool will be crafted into blankets, toys and other objects to be exhibited at the new Channel Islands Center that will open next to the Ventura County Museum in 2021. After the exhibition these objects will be donated to local charities, women's shelters and homeless shelters.

*Invasive Species / Endemic Breeds* is combining traditional techniques such as spinning and weaving with 'Performative Science'<sup>1</sup> and 'Relational Aesthetics'<sup>2</sup> strategies. It's an attempt to devise an original artistic methodology pushing the limits of how art functions. The process, the work with the wool and the plants and the interactions and discussions, is the project.

### **Process**

A group of Santa Barbara artists and craftspeople with a wide array of fiber crafts experiences and skill levels will skirt, clean, pick, tease, dye, card and spin wool from Santa Cruz Island sheep. The breed developed from sheep brought to Santa Cruz Island in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century for wool and meat farming. Over the years, the sheep increased in numbers and became feral. In concordance with restoration efforts on the island, the sheep, then in the tens of thousands, were eradicated in the nineties. Due to the way the eradication took place – very few sheep were brought to the mainland, most were shot on the island – the breed is now one of the most rare livestock breeds in the United States. The wool speaks about the landscape and conditions where the individual sheep lead their lives and the breed emerged. The staple length and crimp, the soil and vegetable matter collected in the fleeces of these sheep is revealing something about the individual sheep, the breed and their environment (craftspeople now speak of wool's 'terroir'.)

We will dye the wool using dyestuff extracted from plants that are invasive (or non-native) on the Channel Islands. The list of such plants is long, and many of the species contain very good pigments. Initial tests on Santa Cruz Island with eucalyptus, fennel, prickly pear and cochénille<sup>3</sup> gave beautiful results. We will travel to the islands to collect the invasive plants. We will consult with the research units on each of the islands (including the UC natural reserve system, the Catalina Island conservancy, Cal State Channel Islands Santa Rosa Research Station and others) to determine what plants to work with. When possible we will dye our wool on the islands. Being in the location where the dyestuff is collected will inform our dyeing process and it will also generate discussions with other visitors on the islands. I realized during my test trip to Santa Cruz Island last fall that the engagement with the community of researchers and visitors at the field station was an integral part of the project.

The wool will be spun into yarn, then crocheted, woven and knitted into blankets, toys and other objects. Each member of the collaboration will determine what the wool they work with "wants to become." Each object will be a mapping of the island the plants came from as well as the process that birthed the object. The woolen objects are also links connecting the people who hold them, get warmed by them or play with them to the islands.

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<sup>1</sup> An approach to research that focus on process and participation, see Hans Diebner, [Performative Science and Beyond: Involving the Process in Research](#), Springer Vienna, 2009

<sup>2</sup> "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." Nicolas Bourriaud in [Relational Aesthetics](#), Les Presses Du Reel, 1998

<sup>3</sup> Cochénille, which is not a plant but an insect, has an interesting history on the Santa Cruz Island. It was brought there in the sixties to help eradicate the prickly pear. Both the prickly pear and the cochénille are still there.

## Community engagement

The audience experiences and participates in the project in several ways:

### 1, Workshops

We are organizing workshops in studios and museums open to the public where the participants learn how to prepare wool and spin wool using a wheel and a spindle. The first will take place in the fall of 2017 at the Art Design and Architecture Museum here at UCSB. While working with the wool, we will present and discuss different topics such as the history of wool production on the Channel Islands, conservation, and any other topics that become relevant. The participants will be helping us clean wool as well as making yarn from dyed wool.

### 2, Pop-up Café Workshops

The group will have impromptu gatherings at local cafés to work on wool preparation and spinning, inviting people to participate, while presenting the project concept and discussing any topics that emerge.

The work we do at the islands research stations and other places can also be seen as pop-up workshops. We will invite anyone interested at those locations to participate in working with the wool and the plants.

### 3, Exhibitions

The project will be exhibited at the Channel Islands Center when it opens next to the Ventura County Museum in 2021. Marla Daily, the president of The Santa Cruz Island Foundation<sup>4</sup>, invited the project to be part of the inaugural exhibition.

The central part of the exhibition will be the objects the collaborators produce. The audience will be asked to touch and hold objects. The exhibition will also include descriptions of the process, photographs and documents, drawings, plant samples etc. from the different islands. Scientists doing research relevant to the project will be invited to speak in conjunction with the exhibition.

### 4, Recipient

After the exhibition the crafted wool objects will be donated to local charities, women's shelters and homeless shelters. The hope is that these objects, while being warm, comforting, beautiful and fun will harbor a sense of connection to this place.

## Discourse

By smelling and touching the wool, inspecting the insects and vegetable matter stuck to it, getting dazzled by rich and subtle colors given to us by the plants and sensing the warmth from the finished objects, the audience inadvertently explores a wide array of topics. They might gain insights into issues ranging from aspects of the natural and cultural history of the Channel Islands and conservation to the Anthropocene and chemistry. While these issues will be discussed in the workshops and exhibitions, this is an art project relying on the visual, tactile, and olfactory, performance and participation. As such the most important questions will be asked, and maybe answered, in the direct experiences of hands, noses, and eyes and in the relationships created between people and between people, processes and materials.

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Santa Cruz Island Foundation is a non-profit public benefit corporation established in 1985 by the late Carey Stanton to collect, maintain, and catalog items of real and personal property or interests regarding Santa Cruz Island and the other California Channel Islands, unique island environments off the coast of Southern California.' [www.scifoundation.org](http://www.scifoundation.org)

Humans' influence on our ecosystems is complex and intertwined. The project gives its audience a direct visual and tactile experience with animals and plants that have been introduced to the Channel Islands. Some of these, such as the sheep, caused severe harm to the islands' ecosystems. Since being removed from the island, The Santa Cruz Island breed has ironically become one of the five most critically endangered breeds on the Livestock Conservancy's conservation priority list. Some of the questions this project evokes are: What animals 'deserve' our protection? What is the goal with conservation? What does it mean to conserve a breed created by humans? Does it make sense to conserve a breed just so that we can continue to exploit it (by eating it, shearing it and so on)? How do we define what a 'wild' species is? How do we decide where species belong? Recent DNA research indicates that the Chumash people might have brought the Island foxes to the islands 7000-9000 years ago<sup>5</sup>, should the foxes be eradicated from the islands (just after they were successfully reintroduced)? When was 'wild'? How do we eradicate human influence from an island when humans are responsible for changes to the environment at large, such as the introduction of pollutants into the ecosystems and climate change? And how about the native humans, the island Chumash, who were forcefully removed from the islands, what responsibility does various conservation efforts have towards them? Art has no problem dealing with contradictions. It does not have to find solutions. While art will not answer these and other pertinent question, it will highlight them and give the audience a chance to ponder them in an open ended non-judgmental way.

The project is also a starting point for a wide array of tangential discussions such as women's labor, the history of the California wool textile industry, and the chemical properties, and the historical use, of the dyestuff we explore<sup>6</sup>. The proposed workshops are forums for discussing these and a plethora of other topics that emerge, and some of that content could make it into the exhibitions by influencing the wool work, the choice of shapes, animals etc. we create, as well as in the form of drawings, photographs, visualizations etc.

In light of the current political situation we urgently need to create ways for the public to participate in dialogues about the effects of human activities on our environment. I believe this project has an important role to play.

### The collaborators

*Invasive Species / Endemic Breeds* is deeply rooted in my earlier practice – network and 'big data' visualization and citizen science workshops as art. I see the project as data 'visualization'. It is mapping data stored in the wool, its 'terroir', the colors stored in the plants, as well as the process of creating the objects. It also functions as a citizen science project in how it creates forums for making around issues of conservation and human influence on nature. The project simultaneously marks an exciting step in a new direction for my practice. The projects I have worked on before have not been concerned with the local. This project, its process and the discourse around it, centers on this specific community and the idea of locality, connecting to place, in general. I have also just recently started to involve craft in my work after primarily writing software for most of my art carrier.

The project has attracted a very interesting and skilled group of craftspeople and artists, most of them connected to UCSB in one way or another.

Collaborators (all living in the Santa Barbara area unless otherwise stated):

Jennifer Deslippe, knitter, dancer

Julia Ford, fiber artist, weaving instructor in the department of recreation at UCSB

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<sup>5</sup> Hofman CA, Rick TC, Hawkins MTR, Funk WC, Ralls K, Boser CL, et al. (2015) Mitochondrial Genomes Suggest Rapid Evolution of Dwarf California Channel Islands Foxes (*Urocyon littoralis*). PLoS ONE 10(2)

<sup>6</sup> The pigments found in plants sometimes provide important functionality to the plants themselves and to animals. For example chlorophyll is a green pigment, arguably one of the most important substances on earth.

**Jevbratt, *Invasive Species / Endemic Breeds* – A Sensorial Mapping of the Channel Islands**

Emily Maynard, spinner and knitter, post-doctoral fellow in The Gevirtz School of Graduate Education at UCSB

Ava Morten, knitter, UCSB Art alumni, graduate student California College of the Arts

Devon Nelson, knitter, music teacher in the Santa Barbara school district

Stephanie Smagala, dyer, spinner and knitter, senate analyst at UCSB

Helén Svensson, artist, Stockholm, Sweden

Jennifer Vanderpool, artist, lecturer in the Department of Art at UCSB

**Affiliates:**

Lynn Moody, Santa Cruz Island Sheep breeder, Blue Oak Canyon Ranch, Paso Robles and professor in Earth Sciences at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

