



FRYE
ART MUSEUM

Rebecca Brewer *Natural Horror*

January 25–April 19, 2020

Rebecca Brewer's work straddles abstraction and representation to evoke fragmented memories and flowing organic forms. *Natural Horror*, the artist's first solo museum presentation, features two recent bodies of work that reference expressionistic painting but employ craft materials and techniques. The exhibition title—drawn from a subgenre of horror films in which a natural force or creature poses a threat to humans—alludes both to the artist's interest in the relationship between aesthetics and psychological affects and to the disintegrated botanical and bodily forms that appear in her works.

With meandering lines and acidic pops of color, Brewer's large felted wool scrims are made using a labor-intensive wet-felting method in which masses of wool fibers are embedded in the gridded threads of silk gauze. The artist develops her compositions through an intuitive, improvisational process that is—by necessity of her felting method—slower and less immediate than painting, the medium in which she was trained. She is guided by research into the possibility of achieving “direct” or uncoded expression of inner states, including explorations of art therapy, somatization, psychoanalysis, and other avenues by which humans externalize their mental and emotional experiences.

Brewer has variously compared her scrims to debris-filled fishing nets and organs joined by connective tissue, conflating the grid's art historical associations—as a formal device and means of structuring information—with its messier manifestations in the physical world. Play with analogies between the artificial and the organic also characterizes the artist's *Live Resin* works, in which stamped and embossed monoprints are framed in cast-resin trays. The drips and imperfections of the casting process give the frames a distressed, time-worn appearance, as if they were encrusted ocean flotsam. Further confounding material expectations, Brewer creates the “painterly” marks on the prints inside by sprinkling colored embossing powder on the surface and heating it to a hardened state.

Hovering at the threshold of recognition, Brewer's work teases the mind's impulse to identify recognizable shapes and discern hierarchies of information. Her vision of a disarticulated natural order mirrors a broader conceptual shift: a movement away from the human-centric perspective that places us outside or above nature and toward one in which we are enmeshed in a delicate web of matter, energies, and beings.



Rebecca Brewer. *Live Resin: Garbage Wave*, 2019. Urethane resin, pigment, Plexiglas, embossing powder on vellum. 41 x 29 in. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

Rebecca Brewer (Canadian, b. 1983, Tokyo, Japan) lives and works in Vancouver, Canada. She has had solo and two-person exhibitions at Oakville Galleries, Ontario; Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver; and Exercise, Vancouver. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery; Simon Fraser University Galleries, Vancouver; Marcelle Alix, Paris; and Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff. Brewer received a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design and an MFA from Bard College.

On Scrims and Live Resin

Hannah Acton

I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb: if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you.

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3:1

We have on record that the anatomical term CONNECTIVE TISSUE (*Bindegewebe*; roughly “binding web/mesh” in German) was coined in 1830 by physiologist Johannes Peter Müller. Born in 1801 in Koblenz, Germany, Müller first studied for the Catholic priesthood, during which time he learned the classics and completed his own translations of Aristotle. Encouraged to enroll in medicine at the University of Bonn, Müller obtained his doctor of medicine degree in 1822 with a doctoral thesis describing the patterns of movement in animals and insects. Shifting his interest from comparative anatomy to microscopic studies, he began studying the chemical composition of lymph and blood and the processes of coagulation in body fluids. In his comparative research on the development of the reproductive systems of various species, he described the female reproductive tract in humans, which became known as the Müllerian duct.¹

Müller also took an interest in the directional activity of the nervous system and the mechanisms of the senses, including the propagation of sound in the middle ear. In 1826, he published his seminal papers, “On Visual Hallucination” and “On the Comparative Physiology of the Visual Sense in Man and Animals, and a Study on the Movements of the Eyes.” The former was an empirical response to figures Müller would “see” before falling asleep; through self-experiment he addressed the eye’s responsiveness not only to external but also to internal stimuli. This research would culminate as *The Law of Specific Nerve Energies* that he proposed in 1835.

In 1837, Müller published a collection of his work that would become the leading textbook in physiology for much of the nineteenth century. In it he differentiates between living and nonliving matter, expresses his dedication to rigorous scientific observation, and asserts that living organisms possess a life energy for which physical laws can never fully account. In 1839, he published “On the Compensation of Physical Forces in the Human Voice Box,” in which he explored the production of specific tones by the human voice in an experiment that involved a severed head and his wife’s piano.

In his later work, Müller studied the marine life of the Baltic and North Seas, the Adriatic Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea, focusing on challenging creatures that occupied the margins of contemporary classification systems. He published on the compound eyes of crustaceans and described several new species of snakes. He also improved existing classification systems for fish and singing birds through an analysis of their vocal organs.

According to Encyclopædia Britannica, Müller suffered from episodes of debilitating depression in 1827, 1840, and 1848. The entry states that, when measured next to his extreme productivity, these episodes could be attributed to a manic-depressive disposition. His biography cites a near-fatal shipwreck while he was conducting research on the Baltic Sea in 1855 as the cause of his final, immovable depression. Müller survived the wreckage by holding on to a piece of debris from the steamship until rescue came, while a young research student who was accompanying him died. Considering himself responsible for the death, he took opium to combat abdominal pain and sleeplessness after the incident. The cause of his death on April 28, 1858, remains uncertain; it was recorded by a colleague at the time as “the rupture of a great vessel.”²

The organizing principle, which according to an eternal law creates the different essential organs of the body, and animates them, is not itself seated in one particular organ.

Johannes Peter Müller, *Elements of Physiology*

May we take pause and attend to the subtext of *disposition* as a continuous and viscous narrative that pushes through Müller's lattice of public achievements? Could we say that it appears Müller was a thinker who not only officially described "connective tissue," but also seemed to think *from* the bodily interstitium? In his course of study—one of continually moving between discrete subjects along the intersecting and reorganizing pathways that bind them—is Müller expressing the sensibility of his own connective tissue, so to speak?

Let us open toward another question here, one of *vulnerability*—the vulnerability of Müller and the vulnerability of this subtext of disposition. For all of his remarkable and socially foregrounded achievements, to what extent is the public character of Müller dissected by the biographical value of only one of his exceptional polarities (at active and depressive terminals)? What does this obscured, emerging narrative tell us about Müller's quality of awareness and the conditions of his responsiveness? Perhaps what is cited as the cause of Müller's periodic and eventually total departure from his work was indivisible from the factors motivating that work—not necessarily motivating his capacity for work, but *how* he worked.

These questions of disposition open up space around the interplay of symbolic and biologic survival. In this space we can keep in mind that CONNECTIVE TISSUE *at once* binds and separates. Through an engagement with the materiality of the natural world and the mechanism of the senses that both meet it and comprise it, we are well suited to consider Rebecca Brewer's exhibition *Natural Horror*. In it, SCRIMS and LIVE RESINS present modes of adhesion—coagulative and enmeshed processes—that enable the suspension and observation of emergent forms.



Rebecca Brewer. *Live Resin: Salt Burn* (detail), 2019. Urethane resin, aluminum mesh, pigment, Plexiglas, embossing powder on vellum. 41 x 29 in. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

A SCRIM: theater cloth. A suspended piece of gauze that appears opaque until lit from behind; a semitranslucent plane that both demarcates and allows passage through; a light-dependent membrane separating adjacent zones of incommensurable order.

In *Scrims* we observe the independent determinacy of dyed wool: wool that comes to its own fibrous coagulation in relation to moisture, friction, and the silk strands that support it. In falling across gauze it appears to recall its own wetness—we are invited to consider the vitality of the material independent of the way we may wish to enlist it.

Scrims, inflected with light-responsive filaments and reminiscent of a spider web's airy and no less resolute appearance, shift their own perceived opacity as they are viewed from different angles. The invitation to see through them is unstable.

Historically, spider silk has been applied to the surface of wounds due both to its tensile strength and to the observation that the human body does not reject the spidroin protein.

Synthetic spider silk, initially trademarked as "BioSteel," is a protein expressed in the milk of transgenic goats. When the goats lactate, the milk is harvested and subjected to chromatographic techniques that yield the spider-silk protein, called "spidroin." The Canadian company Nexia Biotechnologies went bankrupt in 2018 and sold two of its spider-goats to the Canadian Agriculture Museum.

From this strange reality, a conversation ensues:

"What is it like when this milk comes out, rich with fresh webbing, opaque, and spilling at the temperature of the goat's body?"

"All I can think about are the delicate, milky-white lines."

"To think, even as these fibers are submerged in their warm, chimerical amniotic, they are ten times stronger than steel, even as they stretch twenty times beyond their resting size."

Müller's biography notes a relevant moment of biologic horror:

He suffered a serious depressive episode in 1852 when he discovered what appeared to be slugs developing in the gut cavities of sea cucumbers, since the classificatory system he had been developing could not account for the appearance of one organism inside of another.³

A horror (literally, "trembling" of comprehension) at "one organism inside of another" signals the possible limits of the interstitium: limits that do not depend on a binary between strength and weakness, but rather appear as a restriction of mobility. With what motion do we conjure *web-milk*?

Iridescence occurs when the wavelength of a substance is so similar to the wavelength of the light coming at it that, on the surface where they interact, chromatic instability occurs. It is an ocular effect common to organic materials that have lived submerged in water. Thus, iridescence seems to appear in minerals like a memory of the water that formed them (as though every fleck of glitter draws a vector toward its own primordial bath).

LIVE RESIN: in which we find particulates fixed, held, embedded—wet-seeming. Hard and flat, and yet by name and play of light it reminds us to observe its livingness.

Resin seems to fill the word “transfixing”—perhaps “captivating” also, depending on what it holds out toward daylight’s attention. A tree-outpouring that, when exposed to light and oxygen, performs “inanimate,” as though on a stage. We observe this sap, hardened into feigned mineral, succeeding in obscuring its dynamic origin. *Resin is fluid performing as mineral*. Is this not the opposite theater to that of iridescence, in which a mineral harnesses light in order to deny the perception of its own fixity?

In an experience of fluidity we can observe insoluble particles that *wash up*, suspended in what is otherwise continuous. In both *Scrims* and *Live Resins*, we are met by an apparatus suspended in the apparatus of another substance, so that we are looking at something both emergent and insoluble—like a plastic bag, like a symbol, or like an idea. How then are these particulates of what was submerged caught and held by a surface? Of what discrete order are they made? How are they simultaneously acknowledged? And by what mechanism does the foregrounding of one in relation to the other refuse stasis?

Moving through the space of this exhibition we apprehend a multiplying of screens, shadows, and surfaces. As we pass between their orders, *along the intersecting and reorganizing pathways that bind them*, what side of *Scrims* do we tend toward? And do we notice passage *through* differently than passage *around*?

Humans have long relied on spiders in order to observe the effects of psychoactive drugs by examining the impact a substance has on a spider’s ability and approach to building its own web. In the context of Brewer’s work, we must consider not only the iridescence of a spider’s web, but also the eight separate eyes it has with which to behold its labor.

Is an iridescent surface apt metaphorical ground for the ideal encounter between the outer world and the inner world, where they are enmeshed, equaled, and continually co-created in their exchange? If we hold our attention on this ontic instability, may we observe also, in the same dynamic bind, the symbolic and the biologic?

We can say that we are repeatedly troubled here with ascribing fixity in our environment to that which may be fluent.

Hannah Acton is a writer, researcher, and movement analyst based on the unceded, ancestral, and occupied lands of the x̣ṃəθḳʷəỵəm (Musqueam), Səl̓ílwətaʔ (Tsleil-Watuth), and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nations of the Coast Salish peoples also known as Vancouver, Canada. Her practice explores embodied processes by which a shared vocabulary for lived experience is generated. This work operates at the intersection of poetic, pedagogical and therapeutic modalities to promote literacy for the gestural expression of human and non-human subjects.

Endnotes: 1. These paragraphs on Johannes Peter Müller are collected from encyclopedic entries and maintain some of their vocabulary and tone as *found*. 2. Lohff, Brigitte, “Müller, Johannes Peter (1801–1858),” in *eLS* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), doi:10.1002/9780470015902.a0002428. 3. Lohff, Brigitte, “Müller, Johannes Peter (1801–1858),” in *eLS* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), doi:10.1002/9780470015902.a0002428.



Images: Cover: Rebecca Brewer. *Scrim: Dagger* (detail), 2019. Silk gauze, wool, ball chain, alligator clips. 132 x 44 ½ in. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. **Poster:** Rebecca Brewer. *Surplus World*, 2019. Silk, wool, steel hooks. 90 x 63 in. Installation view from Rebecca Brewer & Rochelle Goldberg: *Waves and Waves* at Oakville Galleries, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Oakville Galleries. Photo: Laura Findlay.

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