

While in *Scratchcards for the Apocalypse* Jennifer Lee Wiebe translates Donald Trump's tweets as a way of chronicling the path of dissolution, in *Elysium*, Janice Wright Cheney proposes that nature will provide the true path forward, restoring balance and order to a ruined civilization.

Janice Wright Cheney's work has centred around observations of nature since its early beginnings. Translated through textile-based media, early on, she was one of a number of female artists reclaiming traditional women's work. Embroidery became a trope with which to understand the place of women in society, her domestic situation and the value of her creative output. Janice Wright Cheney's early work in collage and quilt-making crystallized in a series of antique handkerchiefs beautifully embroidered, not with initials or roses, but with the eggs and larva of insects. Set in drawers and wooden frames, they were reminders of dusty collections, petticoats and bygone days.

Janice Wright Cheney brings a scientific scrutiny to the species she studies. Intensely researched and carefully observed, each body of work is meticulously crafted. Traditional techniques of needlework, felting, dying and crocheting are employed to create exacting replicas of jellyfish, mushrooms and silkworms. Her works are labour intensive— requiring many hours dedicated to experimentation and to the manufacture of felted roses, furry rats, and crocheted snowflakes and mycelia.



Janice Wright Cheney
Elysium, 2018, detail.

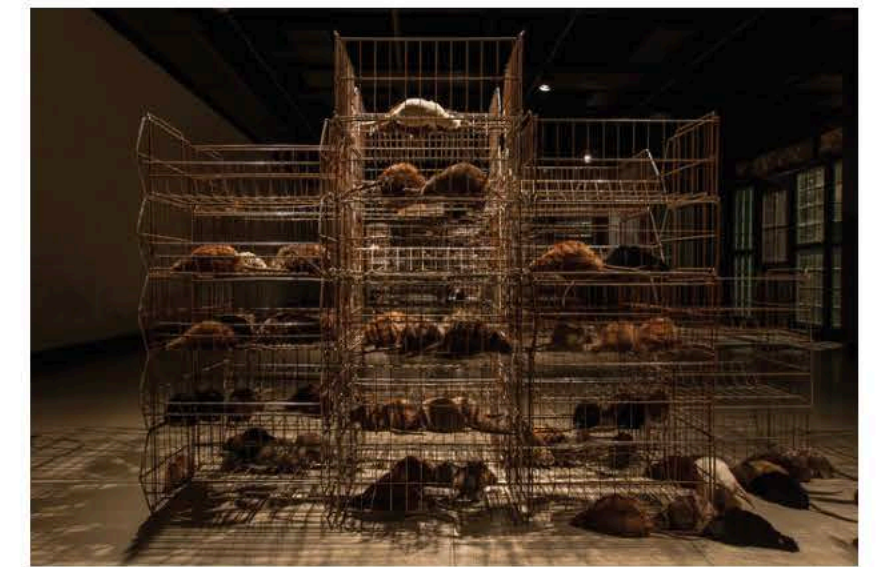
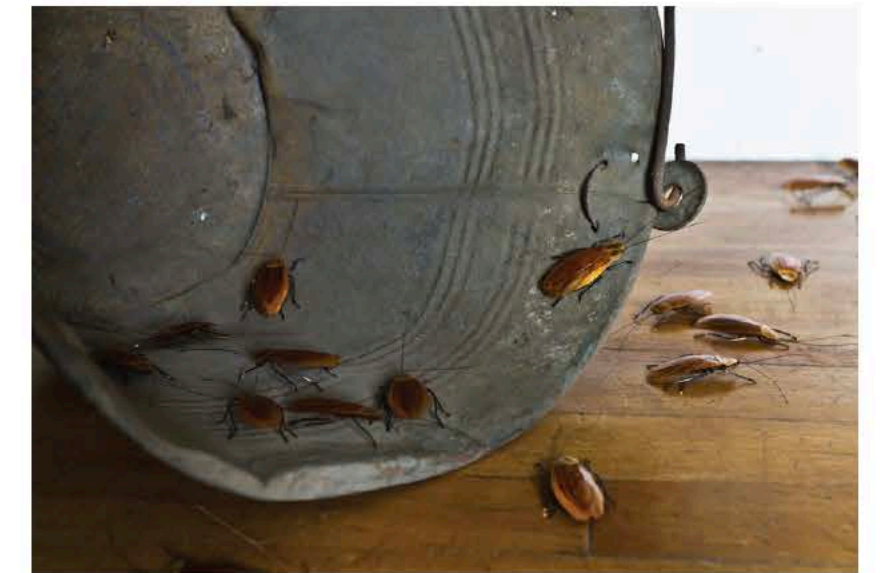
“ A curiosity about mushrooms — sparked by foraging and considerable reading — led me to a new understanding of the significance of fungi to, well, everything. ^{xii} ”

- Janice Wright Cheney

Small-scale works like those of *Disorderly Creatures*, 2001, *Labouratoire*, 2007, and *Encroach*, 2011 provide the platform for an increasingly complex vocabulary of skills and ideas developed over more than 20 years of artistic output. The progression to large three-dimensional sculptures like *Widow*, 2012 earned her a place in *Oh Canada*.⁹ From stand-alone sculptural pieces, Janice Wright Cheney moved to the development of experiential spaces with the site-specific installations *Cellar*, 2012 and *Sardinia*, 2016. The latter, a collaborative project, was her first multi-media enterprise using film and sound.¹⁰ More recently, she has developed a number of public interventions like *Rewild*, 2019 and *Fera Moira*, 2018. Her intense focus is trained on relational dynamics. From insect infestations, schools of fish, to a plague of rats, she explores the uneasy edge between humans and animals.

The idea of rewilding has become an increasingly important concept in this artist's most recent works. It derives from an approach to conservation which allows nature to take care of itself without the intervention of humans. Habitats are left to return to their wild state, increasing biodiversity and symbiosis, mitigating erosion, floods and climate change.

Already preoccupied with the idea of rewilding, Janice Wright Cheney was an artist-in-residence at the Tides Institute in Eastport, Maine in 2016. There to complete and install *Sardinia* in the North Church project space, she was captivated by the tale told of the building prior to its renovation in 2002. Originally built in 1819, the building had gradually fallen into ruin, and when it was taken over by the Tides Institute, the team discovered hundreds of mushrooms growing around the spiral staircase. For Janice Wright Cheney, already experimenting with felting mushrooms, this image kindled a whole series of works into being. *Fera Moira* was completed and exhibited in 2018.



Janice Wright Cheney
Top: *Encroach*, 2011
Felted wool, copper wire, onionskins, shellac and horsehair, found bucket

Middle: *Cellar*, 2012
Recycled fur, felted wool, wood and found materials

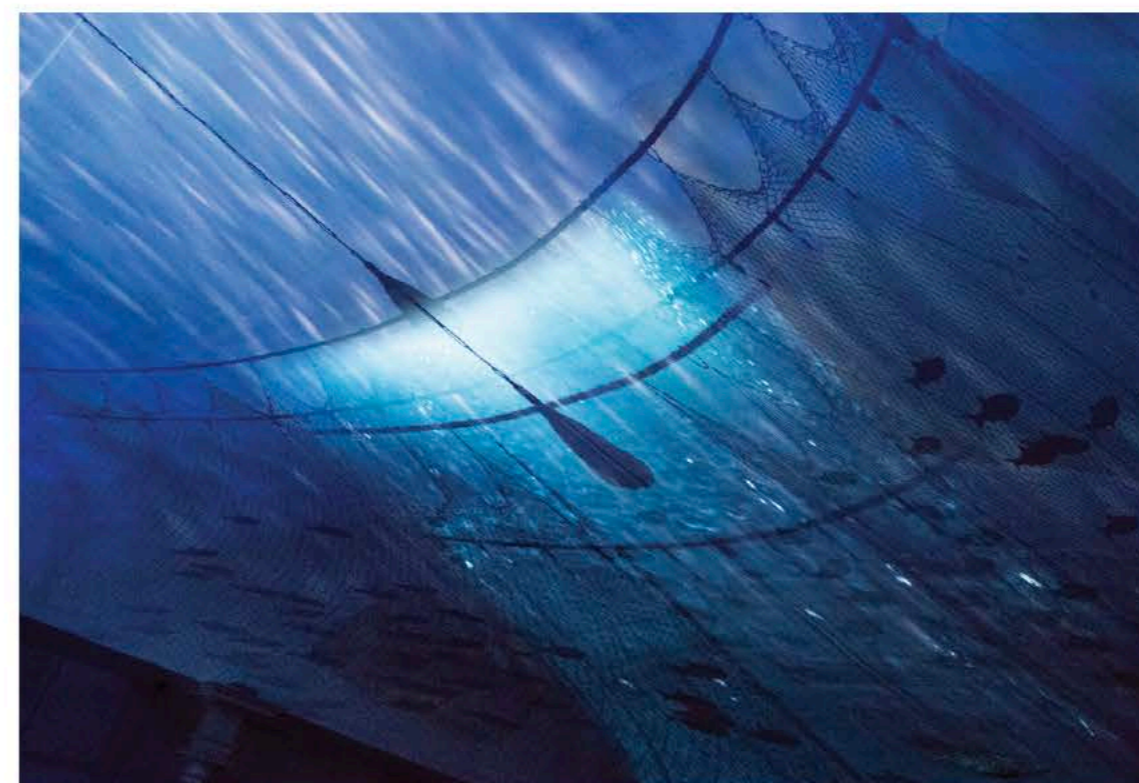
Bottom: *Cellar*, 2012, detail



Janice Wright Cheney
 Top: *Infestations: Devour*, 2003, detail
 Silk embroidery on silk organza,
 5 panels, wooden armature

Bottom left: *Tapestry Moths*, 1999
 Embroidery on cotton, beeswax,
 found materials
 35 x 40 cm

Bottom right: *Entomic Diary*, 1999
 Embroidery on cotton and linen,
 beeswax, found materials



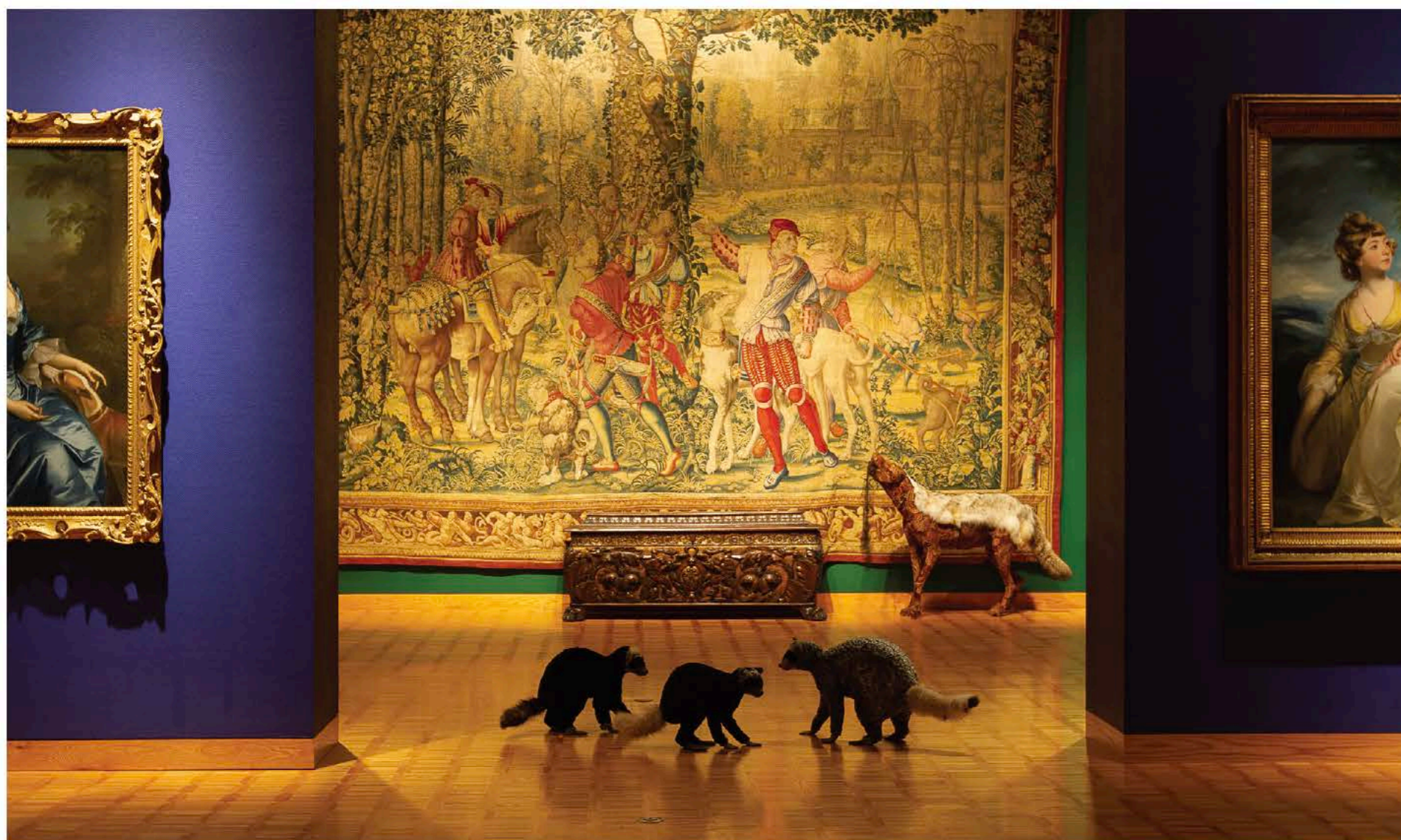
Janice Wright Cheney
 Top left: *Labouratoire*, 2007
 Indigo tie-dye and cotton embroidery on
 cotton and linen, glass Petri dishes, table

Top right: *Labouratoire*, 2007, detail

Bottom left: *Sardinia*, 2016
 Recycled plastic, wood, found materials,
 video projection and sound, site specific
 installation at North Church, Eastport Maine
 original sound piece by David Cheney/
 Charles Harding, video editing Ryan O'Toole

“ As a contemp-
 orary artist I am creating a
 context, asking the viewer
 to consider how nature is
 made knowable. ^{xiii} ”

- Janice Wright Cheney



Janice Wright Cheney
Rewild, 2019
 Velvet, wool, found fur, taxidermy
 forms. Site-specific installation at the
 Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton NB

“ The positioning of “wild animals” into the curated space of the European collection invites dialogue about representation, conservation, nature and culture. Lurking among the tapestries, furniture and oil paintings these creatures test the expectations and complacency of visitors to the art gallery. ^{xiv} ”

- Janice Wright Cheney



Janice Wright Cheney
Widow, Walking, 2012
 Wool, cochineal dye, velvet, taxidermy form, pins and wood
 collection of Telus Canada at Telus Garden, Vancouver, BC

Janice Wright Cheney often uses found objects to enhance the associative power of her works. The cabinets, drawers, buckets and bins in the earlier pieces lend the works authenticity. They aren't manufactured for an art piece but are actual objects with a past life. For *Fera Moira* she began to salvage columns, pillars and posts found in old houses to which she attached felted shelf fungus. Anyone who has walked in a forest and seen these poly-pores attached to trees knows that it signals the inevitable ruin of that tree, for once infected, there is no recovery.

These deceptively simple sculptures play with complex ideas and associations. Architectural elements like columns form part of the classical canon of architecture. According to Vitruvius, who lived in the first century B.C., a building must be designed according to the principles of symmetry, proportion, and harmony. Buildings like the Parthenon were studied for their exemplary design and have become synonymous with an ideal of civilization. The design is thought to come from early constructions using trees to support beams and roofs. Translated into marble, the posts and lintels become columns and architraves, majestic and enduring. This architectural design has been appropriated and used all over the world to construct churches, banks and government buildings. These temples of money and power are an homage to our origins and our progress— our permanence.

The appropriation of these classical elements for domestic architecture is a signifier of wealth and status, of safety and security, of home. Even when made of less permanent materials like wood, the association is inherent and compelling. The house is a structure that protects us from nature. It keeps us dry and warm, sheltered from the elements. It is a refuge that keeps us safe, shielded from intruders and the outside world. It gives us the illusion of order and control in a world that is chaotic and disorderly. By attaching fungi to the structural supports of houses, Janice Wright Cheney plays with our notions of comfort and safety. Organisms associated with decay and dilapidation remind us that permanence is an illusion; everything is subject to the laws of nature. Like the trees in the forest, every structure is impermanent. No matter the foundations that support it, the feats of engineering that built it, or the ideals that shape it; it will inevitably crumble and fall.



Janice Wright Cheney
 Left: *Fera Moira*, 2018
 Felted wool, silk and lace
 on found columns
 Right: *Elysium*, 2018
 Site specific installation
 at *Art in the Open*,
 Charlottetown, PEI



Conceived as part of the *Fera Moira* series, *Elysium* was previously installed in *Art in the Open* held in Victoria Park, Charlottetown, PEI, 2018. This intervention, on view for only 24 hours, was itself like a toadstool that has suddenly popped up on the forest floor. Public art interventions are surprising, sudden and out of place. They disrupt our perceptions and preconceptions. They allow the viewer to unexpectedly happen upon some wonderment and experience it three-dimensionally. Interventions are like a jolt that invite the viewer to recontextualize the space around it. This juxtaposition of art and environment can occur outdoors like *Elysium* at *Art in the Open* or indoors like the *Rewild* project at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in 2019.

Shown here at the UNB Art Centre's West Gallery, the work *Elysium* no longer functions as an intervention but becomes a sculptural statement and must be reconsidered in the context of *ATTENDING THE APOCALYPSE*. By placing this work in a gallery, it is isolated, made precious, sterile. It has less to do with confronting the work as part of a natural environment and more about understanding the conceptual underpinnings of the piece itself. It now dominates the space and forces the viewer to confront its meaning intimately.

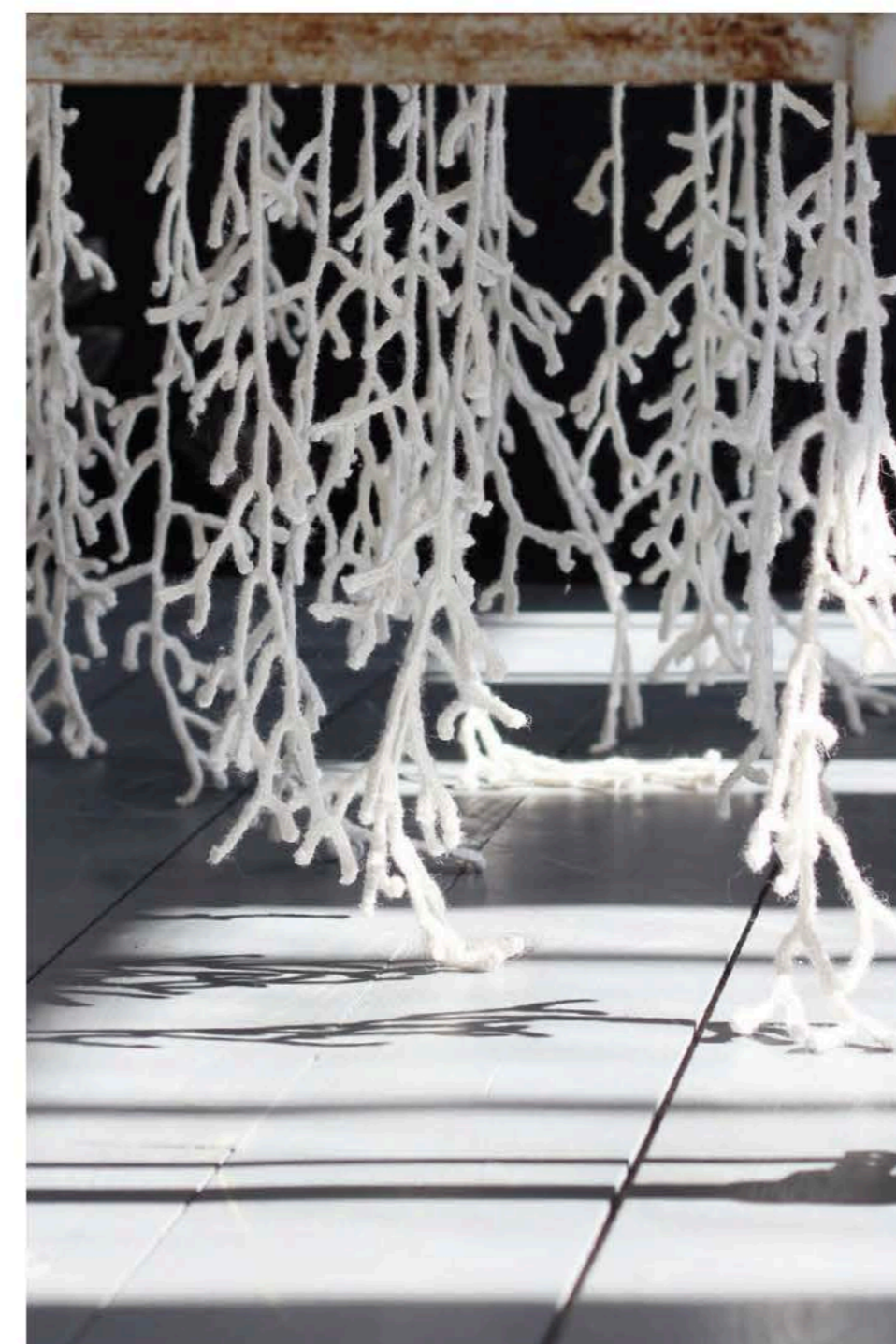


Janice Wright Cheney, *Elysium*, work in progress

“ Elysium- This word came into Latin from the Greek Elysion. In classical mythology, Elysium, or the Elysian Fields, was the home of the blessed after death, the final resting place of the souls of the heroic and the pure.^{xv} ”

- Merriam Webster

Though sculptural, *Elysium* is like a still life. It can be seen as a *memento mori*, a reminder of the fragility of life. It shares commonalities with the vanitas paintings of the Dutch and Flemish painters of the 17th and 18th centuries. This genre portrays the fleeting beauty of this world and holds reminders that our time here is all too brief. Interestingly, mushrooms with their various colours and textures were often included in these paintings of the bountiful feast. The mushrooms are so keenly observed and so exactly rendered they can be accurately classified. They are laid out alongside fruits and nuts, and an assortment of plants and animals hunted, caught and gathered. The finely painted flies and snails, the fruit already turning, the blood on the fur congealing, are like little pricks in the veneer of the scene, signs of the inevitable process of decay. Mushrooms too are an apt garnish for the plate since not only are they part of this process, but they can also hasten it.



Janice Wright Cheney, *Elysium*, work in progress

“ Fungi grow from their tips, and gnaw into the future as they advance. A mycelial network is a map of a fungus’s recent history — a portrait of time — and a helpful reminder that all life forms are in fact processes not things.^{xvi} ”

- Merlin Sheldrake

The crib itself in *Elysium* is a vivid reminder of mortality. It is at the centre of the house, the most vulnerable place. It evokes the double edge of joy and fear—it contains the seed of the future; it also contains the stone of grief. Old fashioned and no longer in use, this crib has been abandoned and left to rust, and is now colonized by mushrooms. These are *Clitocybe* mushrooms, conscientiously examined and recorded, intentionally selected by the artist for their generic and aesthetic qualities. Dyed with mushroom extracts, their fleshy bodies are made from felted wool, their caps covered in delicate silk, snakeskin and lace, their crocheted mycelia trailing and extending outward.

Elysium can be read as a post-apocalyptic statement that exists in the quietude of the aftermath. The mushrooms pushing up through the discarded bedframe are fed by the refuse of a dying civilization. With the passage of time, this relic of humanity will be consumed and returned to its original state. The mycelia spreading along the floor are relentless. They are perfect in their design. Adaptive and responsive, they are the way forward, providing new possibilities and new structures. The process of rewilding removes the artificial barriers separating humans from their environment. It is a transformation, a purification. The persistence of the mushroom and the regenerative power of this new life signals a return to nature— as it was in the beginning.

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