

AMANDA COUCH

Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others)

Together these items form part of a wider, ongoing body of work and activity by the artist. With the support of a group of 'Becoming With Wheat' volunteers, Amanda has been growing wheat in the garden of The MERL and this forms part of her communal approach to producing this response.

Ongoing Performances of the World 2018-2019 / 2021

In 2018/2019, Amanda cultivated a small lozenge-shaped wheat patch in her garden in Surrey. In autumn 2018, she sowed a triangle of Spelt, and in spring, a triangle of Emmer and a border of Einkorn wheat around the outside of the rhomb. In April 2021, she sowed Emmer and YQ populations in the specially designed lozenge-shaped raised beds in The MERL garden which is currently growing. Throughout the growing periods, she took



numerous photographs and films to document the sowing, weeding, caring for, and just 'being' of the plants in various weather and light conditions as they responded to and entangled with the elements as they grew and produced fruit. Some footage of the wheat growing in The MERL has also been recorded by Museum staff who have been observing the wheat's everyday performances more regularly on site. Such activities are influenced by queer physicist, Karen Barad's ideas that the world is an ongoing performance that is happening universally, all the time. The resulting durational films which last for over an hour are examples of two performances: one occurring in the world with everyone and everything, which also involves plants, and as artist-researcher Annette Arlander observes, a particular performance isolated from the everyday performance compositionally and temporally framed by the camera, which is subsequently edited by Amanda into the sequences.

Media: Digital video and sound

(Sowing Mask), 2021

This helmet mask was worn to sow the wheat that was growing in The MERL garden in April 2021. Emmer and YQ wheat varieties were transported in and tipped from the grain measure in to the prepare soil of the raised beds. The 'face' of the mask is reminiscent of the shape of a germinating grain. Wearing this mask during the sowing ritual attempts to evoke the grain spirits that were once believed to live within cereal crops to bring about an abundant harvest.

Media: woven Maris Widgeon wheat.



Anthotype Process Display

Anthotypes are a Victorian photographic process whereby photographic emulsions are made from extracting pigments from a whole host of plants, their leaves, roots, and petals. Images are made by laying photographic positives or stencils against paper coated with the light sensitive pigment, pressing them tightly together in a frame. The frames are then placed in sunlight often for long periods, whilst the images develop or emerge. The resulting images must then be shielded from UV light, otherwise they will eventually fade. In this display, prepared papers and images are made from dandelion, catsear, and poppy leaves for green emulsions, blackberry makes pink, and red cabbage which results in purple.



Media: Anthotypes, transparent positives, frame, paint brush and sponge, glass rod, pestle and mortar, blender vessel, prepared papers, pressed plants, dandelion leaf emulsion.

(Sowing Mask), 2020

The wheat woven masks, informed by The MERL's collection of corn dollies, collide human, plant, and myth. This helmet mask has its own grain measure from which the wheat grain was distributed. Some supposed that the spirit of the field was driven into the final sheaf during reaping. The stalks were then woven into vessels, or corn dollies where the spirit would take refuge over the winter. Donna Haraway's ideas of companion species are central to the *Becoming with Wheat...* project: The root of the word 'companion' being derived from the Latin *cum panis* meaning, 'with bread' reminding us of our commoning with others (human and non-human) through food, especially wheat, our eating together, and being eaten.

Media: woven Maris Widgeon wheat



Grain Spirit, 2021

The 1880s saw the joining of reaper and threshing machines into the combine harvester and with it the decline of traditional harvesting practices. In the same decade, there was also a boom in spirit photography where there were attempts to visualise supernatural entities in the medium. During Amanda's wheat cultivating rituals, she has been attempting to capture in photographic grain, the manifestation of grain spirits and arrest what the eye cannot see. Mirroring the effects of light on plant growth, the resulting photographic phantasmagorias have been printed as anthotypes, a Victorian non-toxic photographic process which uses plant pigment as the photographic medium and sunlight to process the images. Different images will be processed over the course of the project, which will be exposed in



contact frames in windows of the Museum buildings, and the resulting anothotypes presented in the Forces for Change gallery will change.

Media: Anothotype with dandelion leaf emulsion on Somerset Satin 410gsm paper, with wooden support

(Harvesting Mask), 2019

This mask, shaped like an ear of corn, was worn during the reaping of Amanda's first foray into cultivating wheat in August 2019, where she grew a variety of ancient varieties, emmer, spelt and einkorn in my suburban garden. The mask is displayed amid images and examples of equipment that replaced the sickle and scythe, which over time curtailed the last sheaf customs that accompanied manual harvesting. The grain spirit masks blend the supposed dichotomy of nature and culture through our interconnected relationship with plants: Here, the Maris Widgeon wheat that represents nature is intertwined through the cultural practice of strawcraft or wheat weaving.

Media: woven Maris Widgeon wheat



Ritual Apron, 2020

As well as ritualistic and ceremonial, aprons are also practical pieces of clothing worn, especially by women, and often feature in Amanda's work. The printed design on this apron is inspired by ceremonial designs from Friendly or mutual aid societies, where people collectively organise for a common financial or social goals, as well as European traditional costume, in particular marital aprons with the lozenge motif. The raised beds in The MERL gardens, and focaccia-style bread that Amanda has been baking, depicted in the design, are also shaped in this lozenge form, which can be traced back to Neolithic times and are believed to represent the female vulva. A variant of the rhombus contains dots representing sown grains was named as the 'fertile field' identified by twentieth-century Russian ethnographer, B. A. Rybakov. Through this motif, connections are made between nineteenth-century folk customs and forms depicted on Neolithic fertility figures.

Media: Digital print on cotton-linen

