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Sweet Fruit

By
Dãa Guy -Vasson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of Master
of Fine Art in Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth
University

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Massa Lemu

May 2021

Thank you to my committee members, Julian Kevon Glover, Kendall Buster & Massa Lemu, for generous guidance, support, and faith. I am a more thoughtful person because of the time I have spent with all of you.

To my community:

your love has reconciled me so long to live

living has given me more chances to love you

Thank You

Cathelina Vasson

Lily Cox-Richard

Amber Esseiva

Corin Hewit

Guadalupe Maravilla

Michael Jones McKean

Juliana Bustillo

Cielo Felix-Hernandez

Larissa García

Alex Goss

Kelly-Ann Lindo

Abed Shalabi

Alx Velozo

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Abstract

The writing and images in Sweet Fruit are an exploration of my creative works. In the first section, memory, making, and poetics come together to help the reader feel the nuances of my experience. In the exhibition works section, images allow an extended look at the work. Accompanying text describes the relevance of my childhood and my parent's Caribbean upbringing to my creative practice.

“St. Julien Lastchild does not seek to become civilized through adopting slavery. He does not seek a coherent cartography of the human. Instead, he marries a Black woman and becomes part of the Black community of the walking dead. St. Julien Lastchild, in a sense, becomes Black. Wilderson contends, ‘In allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one’s Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die.’”

Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals*

“...Our whole family was mortified to the lowest degree. I had always aimed to do my work with dispatch and skill, my blacksmith’s pride and taste was one thing that reconciled me so long to remain a slave. I sought to distinguish myself in the finer branches of the business by invention and finish...”

James W.C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*

life, death & precious things

I was born in Newark, New Jersey, and moved around Essex County until I was 18. Both of my parents were born on islands in the Caribbean and raised in lush rural parishes. When I listened to their stories I would try to follow along but unlike my brothers, most of my Caribbean memories were inherited. Making sense of inherited memories taught me to keep a capacious imagination, the edges of which now become manifest in my practice. I work with memories, steel, and my body to grow assemblage sculptures, time-based work, and performances that exist in the space between my lush visions of life and environments designed by people who see us as dead.

As a child, I could not have described how I felt about steel. I wouldn't have been able to say what made steel or cast iron different from other metals. But I understood it in my body. Steel was in the architecture that policed me. Steel gates carved my neighborhoods and steel shutters lined the front of every shop. If you ran far enough in the right direction, they disappeared. In their absence, sprawling open lawns and inviting facades spoke of a completely different imaginary. Steel doesn't have to police, it is full of possibilities and I seek to distinguish my use of it through “invention and finish.”¹

In my family, it is customary for children to be given gold jewelry by elders to keep with them for life. I had a ring and a bracelet that came from my godmother who I called aunty Denise. Aunty Denise's house was one of my favorite childhood places. Every time I visited she would greet me with different imported candies. I remember sitting and staring at the textiles and gilded figurines around the house as I listened to her beautiful stories of Trinidad.

¹ Pennington, James W. *The Fugitive Blacksmith: Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church*, Charles Gilpin London, New York, 1850



Peeling palm bark, Vieux Fort St. Lucia 2017



Bloom detail shots 2021



stills from *Spider's Foot* 2020

I adorn my sculptures with brass because to me they are precious and giving jewelry is a way I was taught to show love. The time spent weaving between the steel spines is time spent listening to books or speaking with my mother. The time spent weaving is relaxed in the morning and labored just before bed. I get to feel the nuances of my sculptures as I weave them and learn to hone and recreate patterns in the brass. The texture of the weave and the finish of the brass hold the intricacies of touch that help to subvert the steel's utilitarian associations. I am interested in subverting these associations because steel is a utilitarian metal in the way that a slave is intended to be a utilitarian person. If you remove fungibility and the demand for labor they are both so much more.

In 2017 I visited the Dorée sugar mill ruins in St. Lucia. The tour guide talked about how the arms of slaves would often become lodged in the iron of the mills. In 2017, the only thing caught in the mills were vines and roots. The river shifted and the plantocrats left long ago. The steel has grown thick brown rust and yams sprout down below it. No one has asked the mill to turn in years and the mill has not forced anyone to work it. The government stopped the people of Dorée from using stones from the mills to build homes. They said it was for historical preservation. In practice, it is a thinly veiled tourist fetish industry that sees imperial ruins as monuments to imperial conquest. "Tourism replaces sugar."² I wonder if we would find more joy in seeing the architecture that policed our ancestors ornamenting the homes of Dorée.

In 2011 My father and I went to visit his home Parish of Trelawny in Jamaica. I remember my uncle driving us out of Trelawny, parking along the side of the road, and pulling out a Machete. The blade sang as it sliced the bush. Thick green vines engulfed us and the steady rhythm of the chop inched us forward until it finally stopped. My uncle brushed his foot around in the dirt and tapped on a split in a slab of concrete. He looked at me and uttered his first words since leaving the car. "This is your grandfather." I looked around through deep bush and the trees were full of sweet fruits.

² Cornwell, Grant H., and Eve W. Stoddard. "Reading Sugar Mill Ruins: 'The Island Nobody Spoiled' and Other Fantasies of Colonial Desire." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2001, pp. 133–157. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3201872. Accessed 4 April 2021.



stills from *Ponm Kannèl* 2018

Speak of Love

Where are you sugarapple?

Are the people there kind?

Do they know love?

Have you heard them speak of it?

Does love bring them the same joy love brought us?

Does the land love you?

Can the people love themselves with their own voices?

Can you love yourself with their voice?

Is the love sweeter?

Safer?

Sweet Fruit

Thesis Exhibition Works

Anderson Gallery
Virginia Commonwealth University
April 9 -23, 2021

Speak of Love

A meditation on community and the importance of self love. As a text, it is a series of questions intended to assess the capacity of one's community to foster collective emotional growth. In writing these questions I imagined how I would want my mother to react if I was more open with her about my queerness. I imagined how I would mother.

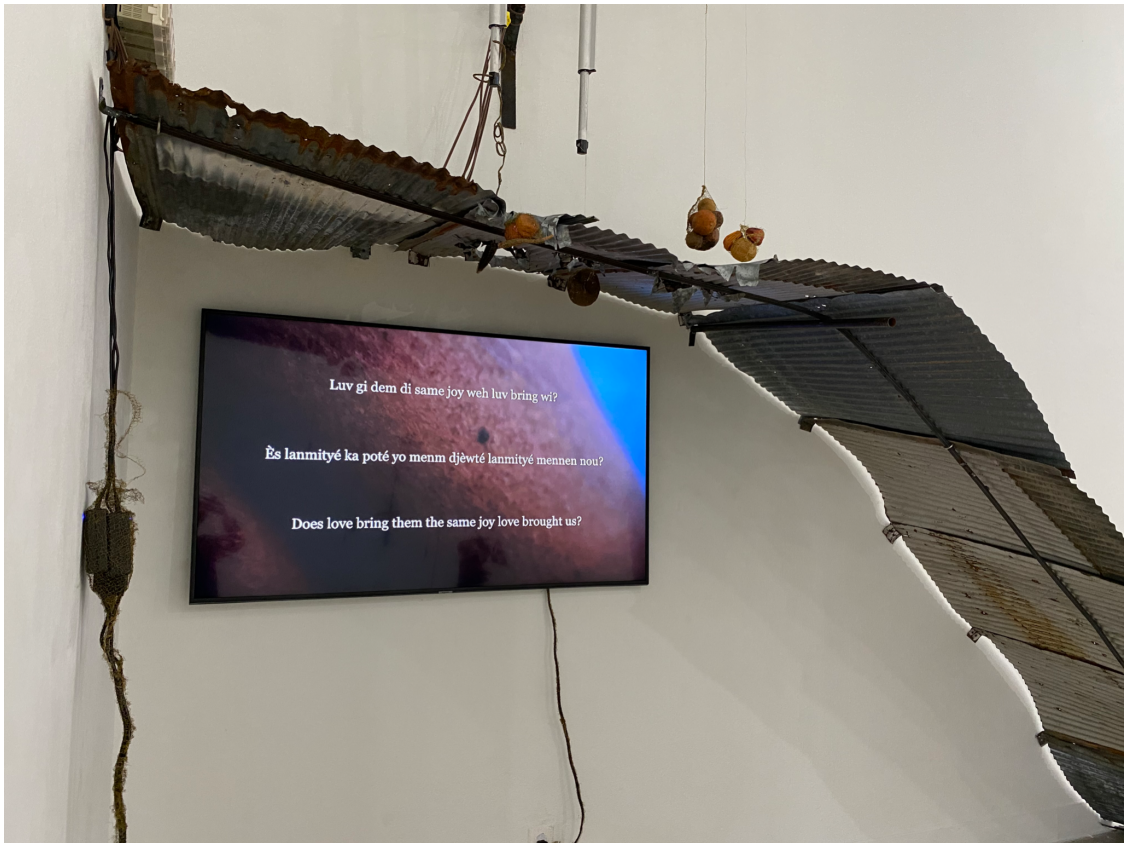
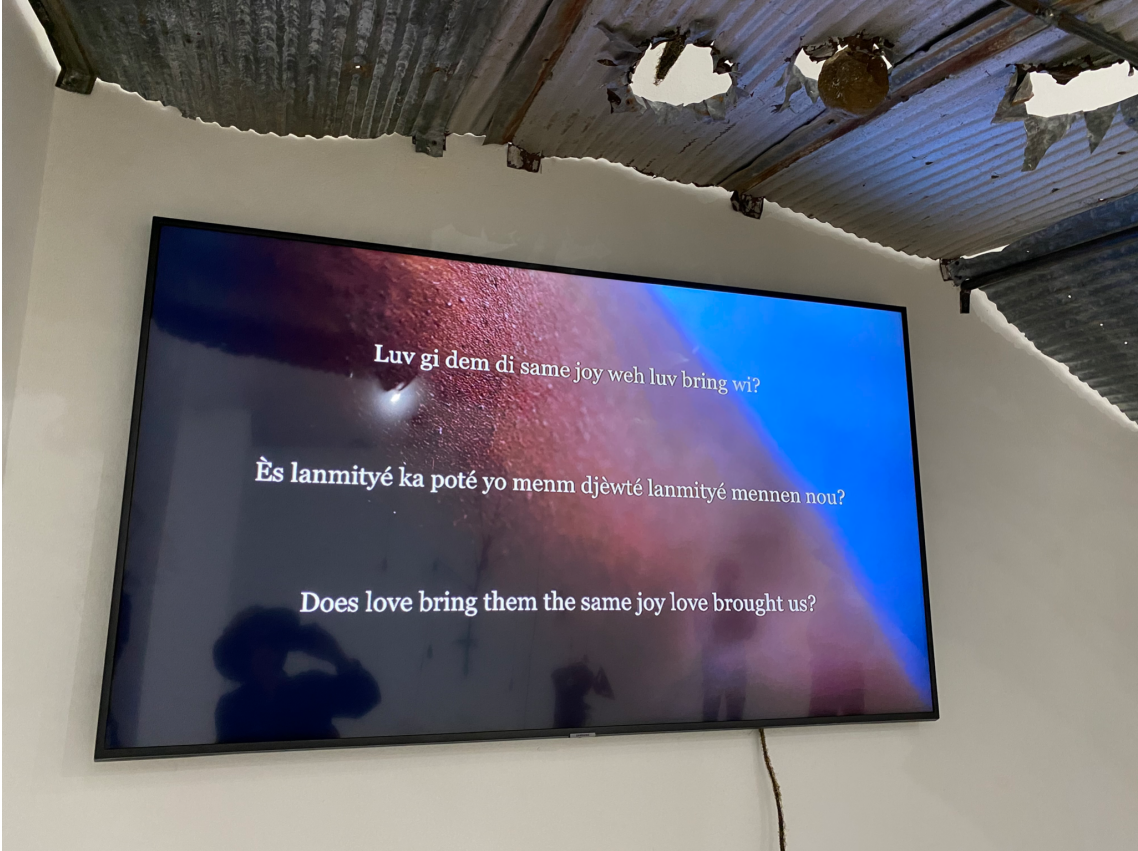
Once I wrote the questions, I translated them into both of my parents' native languages. I got on the phone with my mother and opened the St. Lucian Kwéyòl dictionary. I don't speak Kwéyòl but I can understand fragments, common phrases told to children. With my mother, I translated the text and sent it to a cousin with more practice in Kwéyòl writing.

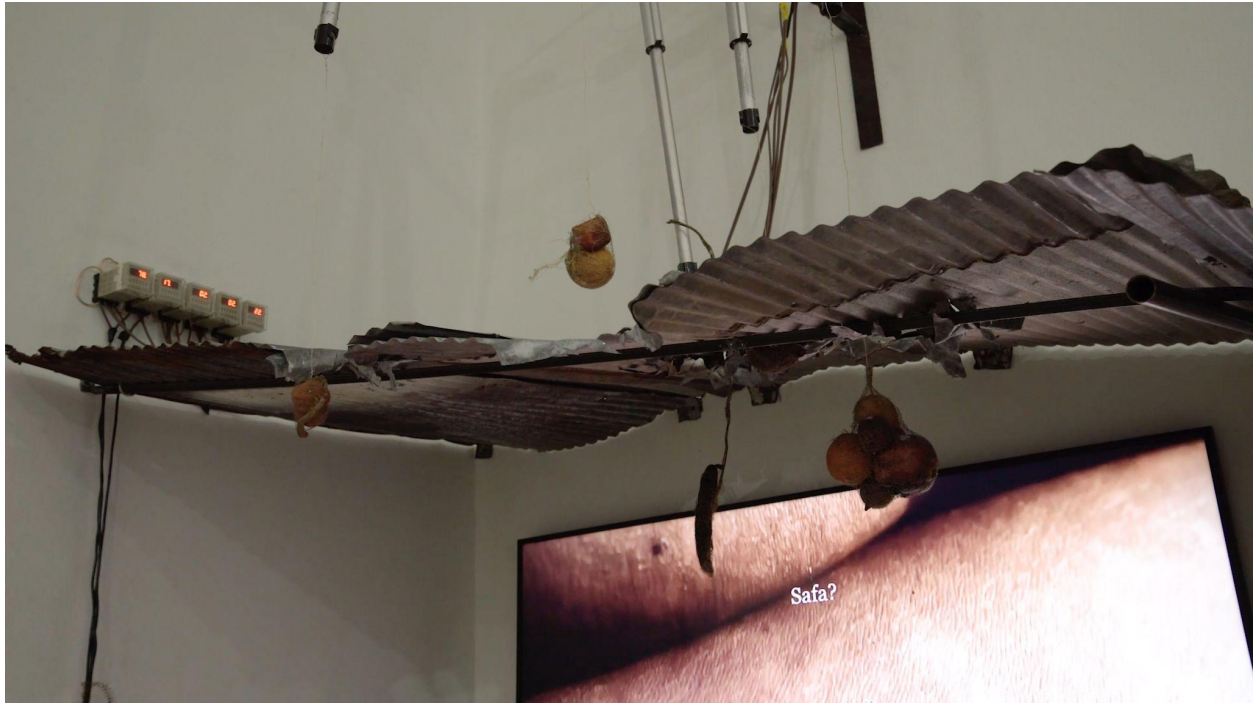
The video consists of macro footage that pans over my skin. Overlaid on the footage are the three translations of the questions. Patois is positioned at the top of the screen, Kwéyòl in the center, and Standard American English (U.S.) at the bottom. The duration each question remains on the screen varies, getting longer as the video goes on. At certain points, it can become hard to see the text against reflections on the skin and the viewer may have to wait for the text to become legible again.













Weh yuh deh Sweetsop?

Koté ou ye Ponm-Kannèl?

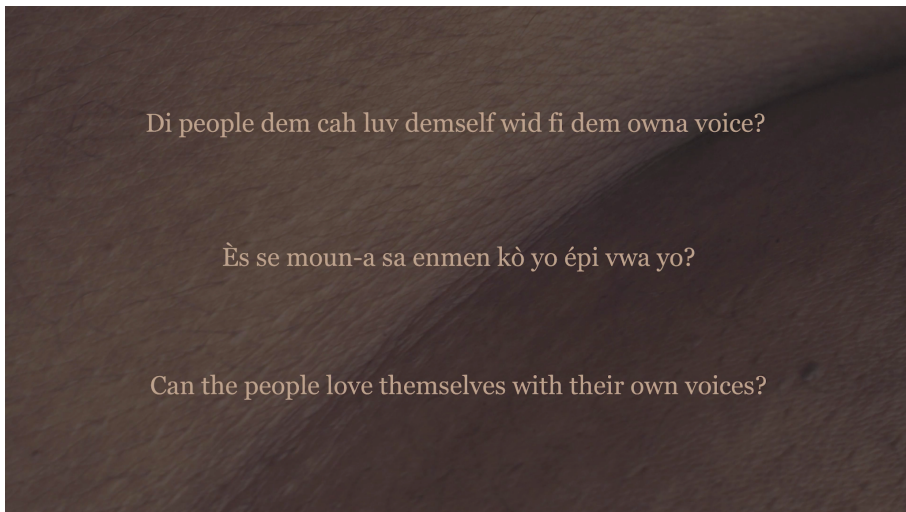
Where are you Sugar-Apple?



Safa?

Pli senesòf?

Safer?



Di people dem cah luv demself wid fi dem owna voice?

Ès se moun-a sa enmen kò yo épi vwa yo?

Can the people love themselves with their own voices?

Speak of Love is shown on a flat-screen that is wall mounted under a shelter made from anodized steel roofing. Above the shelter, a steel tree sculpture suspends petrified fruit over the viewer. The petrified fruit is lowered and raised slowly by linear actuators. As they move up and down, they pass through the shelter and obstruct the screen. On the wall next to the screen is a knitted sack that holds the power supplies for the linear actuators and the timers that control them.



Ripe

A tree sculpture with outstretched steel branches reaches over the head of gallery viewers. Petrified fruits hang from the tree and will continue to give off a faint aroma until they are fully dry in several more months. I love fruit, but because of a combination of anaphylaxis and oral allergy syndrome, I can't eat them raw without having a reaction. As a consequence, sometimes fruit destined for tea and reductions sit out too long. If wrapped in cloth and left in the right conditions, the fruit doesn't rot. The fruit slowly dehydrates, is slightly deformed, and becomes brittle. Petrified apples, breadfruit, mango, bananas, pomegranate, lemon, ginger, oranges, and tangerines all hang from the steel tree.







Hanging from the tree along with the fruit are two electric hair clippers that play a recording of my mother speaking about foods from her childhood in Kwéyòl. At the end of the audio, she reminisces about making bread baskets from downed power wires when she was a child and then repeats the story in English. The razors are suspended by their original cables that now function as their speaker wires. Her story speaks to the importance of fiber crafts in her childhood and resonates with their importance in my own work. Though the baskets are utilitarian, my mother doesn't speak of their use in this telling of the story. Instead, she remarks about their different colors and how "beautiful" they were.

The trunk of the sculpture is rebar, sawed in half lengthwise, and wrapped in knitted brass wire. The knitted brass fabric is sewn with a seam along its front and flares out like shedding bark. The sculpture is secured to the wall at its base with three bolts and again higher up with a chain. The chain is welded into the rebar trunk and hooks into a small receiver that is bolted to the wall.





Bloom

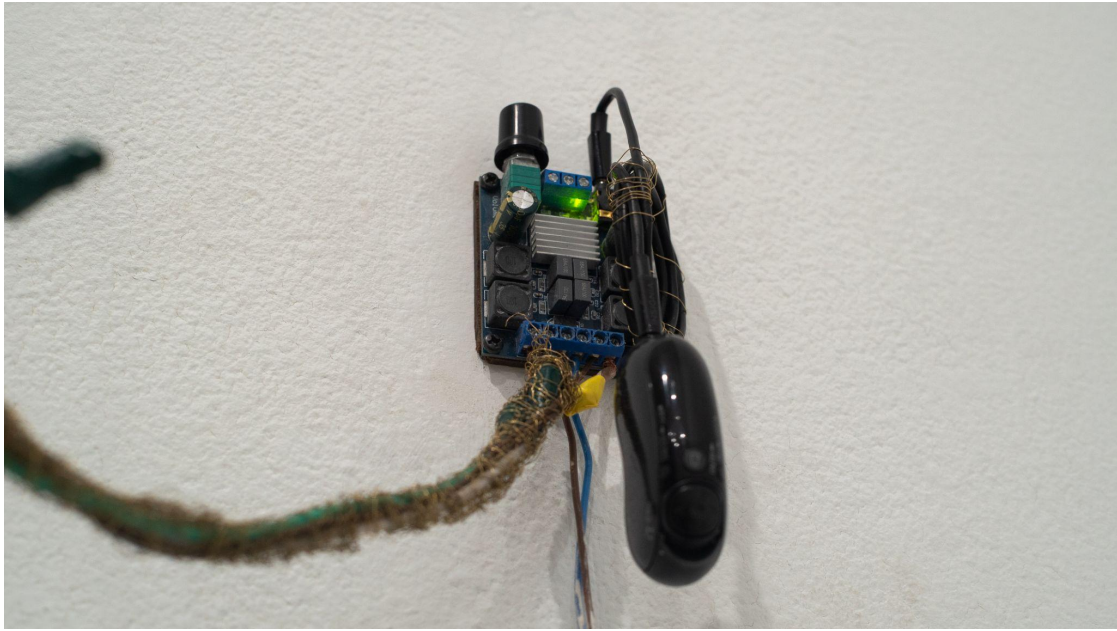
A tree sculpture mounted 5ft off the ground, raises a single trunk over the head of the viewer. Hanging down from the trunk are two subwoofers that are powered through the same cables they hang from. The cables have been basket-woven together along their length with steel binding wire giving them memory and a vine-like quality. The continuity of the weave is interrupted by occasional buds of electrical tape where wires are soldered together.

The base of *Bloom* is woven steel and brass wire lined with machine knitted brass that has been colored with heat. Stray strands of brass wire stick out from crevices and layers of the machine knitted brass peel back around the mounting point. The central trunk is curved like the street lights of my childhood and forged flat at the top where the bundle of wires transitions from a basket weave to a knitted brass casing.





Wrapped in the knitted casing the wires arch from the trunk to the wall where it connects to an amplifier that powers the subwoofers. The amplifier's DC power supply sits in a brass wire bag. A Sony Walkman Bean functions as the media source and plays insect recordings low enough that a viewer has to approach and put their ear near the piece to hear it over the other sounds in the gallery.



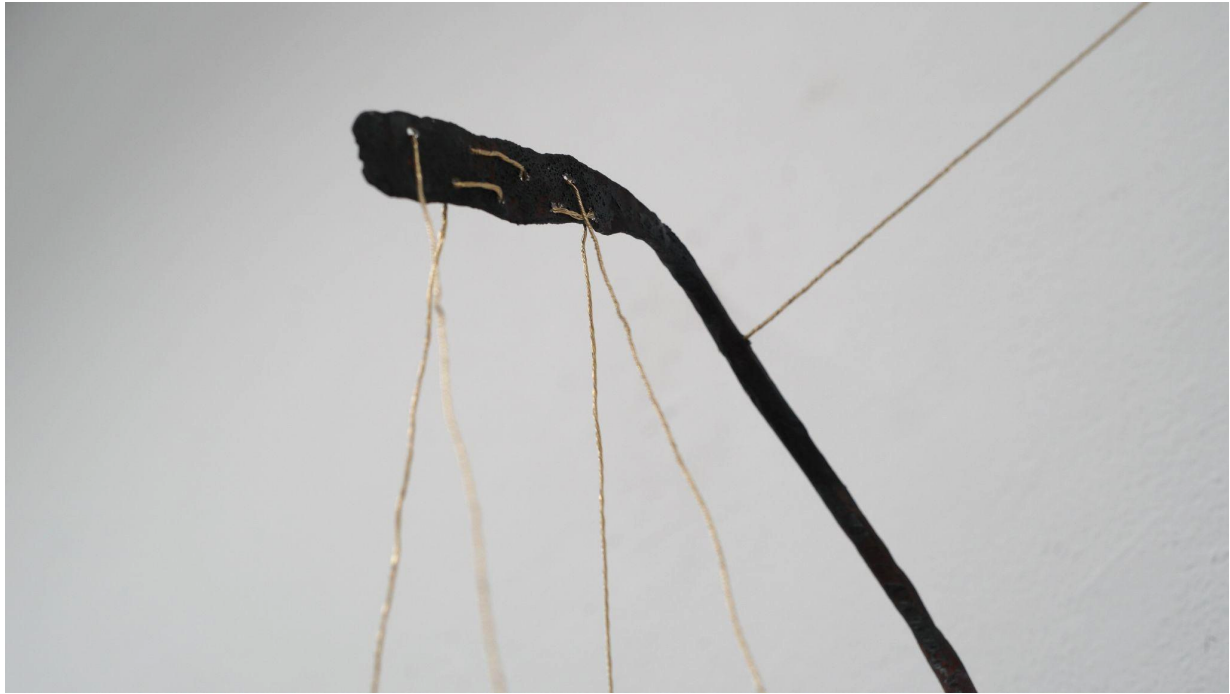
10.10

A tree sculpture with two arms forged from rebar and supporting a salvaged log. The wood is hollowed completely on the inside due to an infestation that caused the city of Richmond to cut the tree down. Several spiders live in the hole on the left side. A large spider died, leaving its body caught in the webs of the others. On the right side of the log, a brass wire bag holds several sliced and petrified fruits.

The steel arm on the right also supports a 2000 Honda Civic car radio. Instead of powering cones, the radio's amp powers tactile transducers that vibrate the hollowed log to produce sound. An extension cable is attached to the left arm to supplement antenna functions. The excess cables are taped together and hang behind the radio. Two main cables extend to the ground where they meet the 12-volt battery that powers the apparatus.

The radio is set to scan frequencies continuously and plays short bursts at different stations. The scanning results in a mix of popular songs, news, or the local Christian station. It speaks to a technology that is hard to service or find now and carries with it a nostalgia for the hardware of my youth. In the vein of that nostalgia, I entitled the piece 10.10 after the New York tri-state area news station that my father listened to religiously, 10.10 WINS.













Delectability

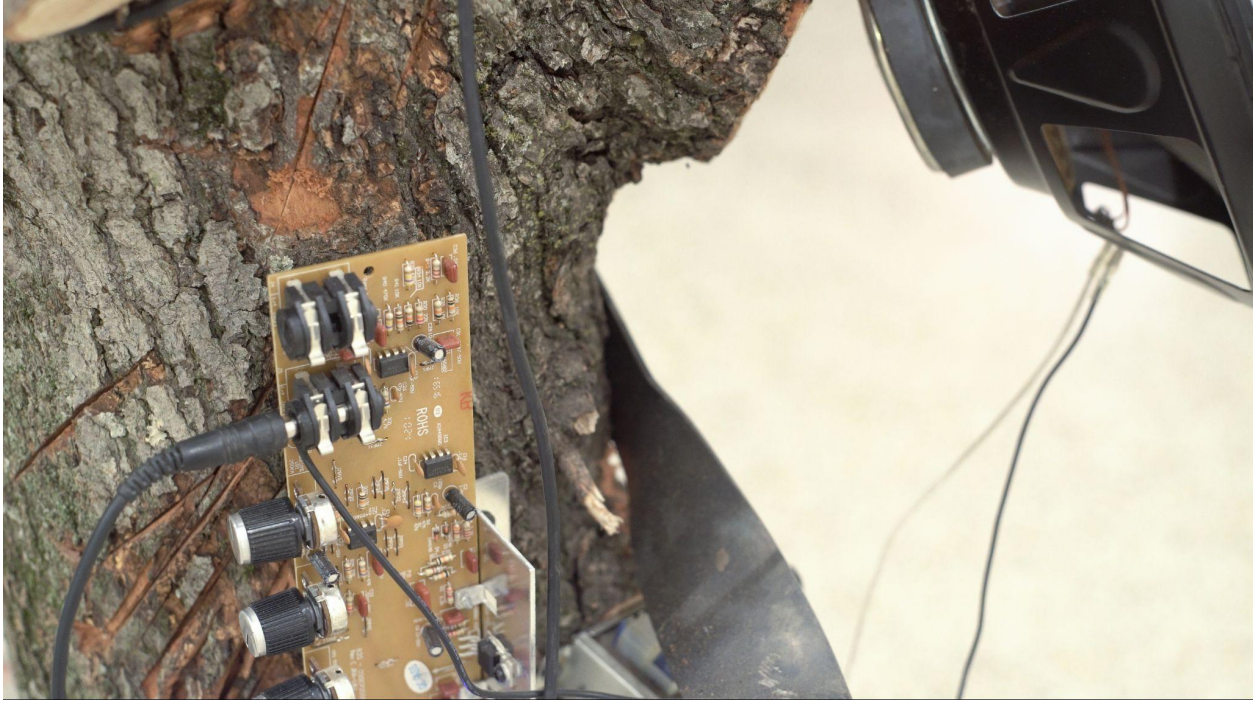
A free-standing sculpture constructed from a bass amplifier and a salvaged log. It stands on three legs driven into the log with hand-forged spikes. The electronics on *Delectability* are screwed to the wood. A piece of steel acts as ground and the large cone from the bass amplifier is attached via a metal tab on its housing. *Delectability's* power cable hangs down from the ceiling and pools on the ground.

On top of the log, a machete has been swung into the wood. A Sony Walkman hangs from the hook on the back of the machete's blade and acts as the audio source. The sound it plays is an overlay of 40 and 45 hertz sine waves. They create a syncopation that is visible in the cone and felt when standing in front of it. When stepping behind the piece the sound dims. The blade sways with the oscillation of the sound and the speaker cables that power the cone rattle.

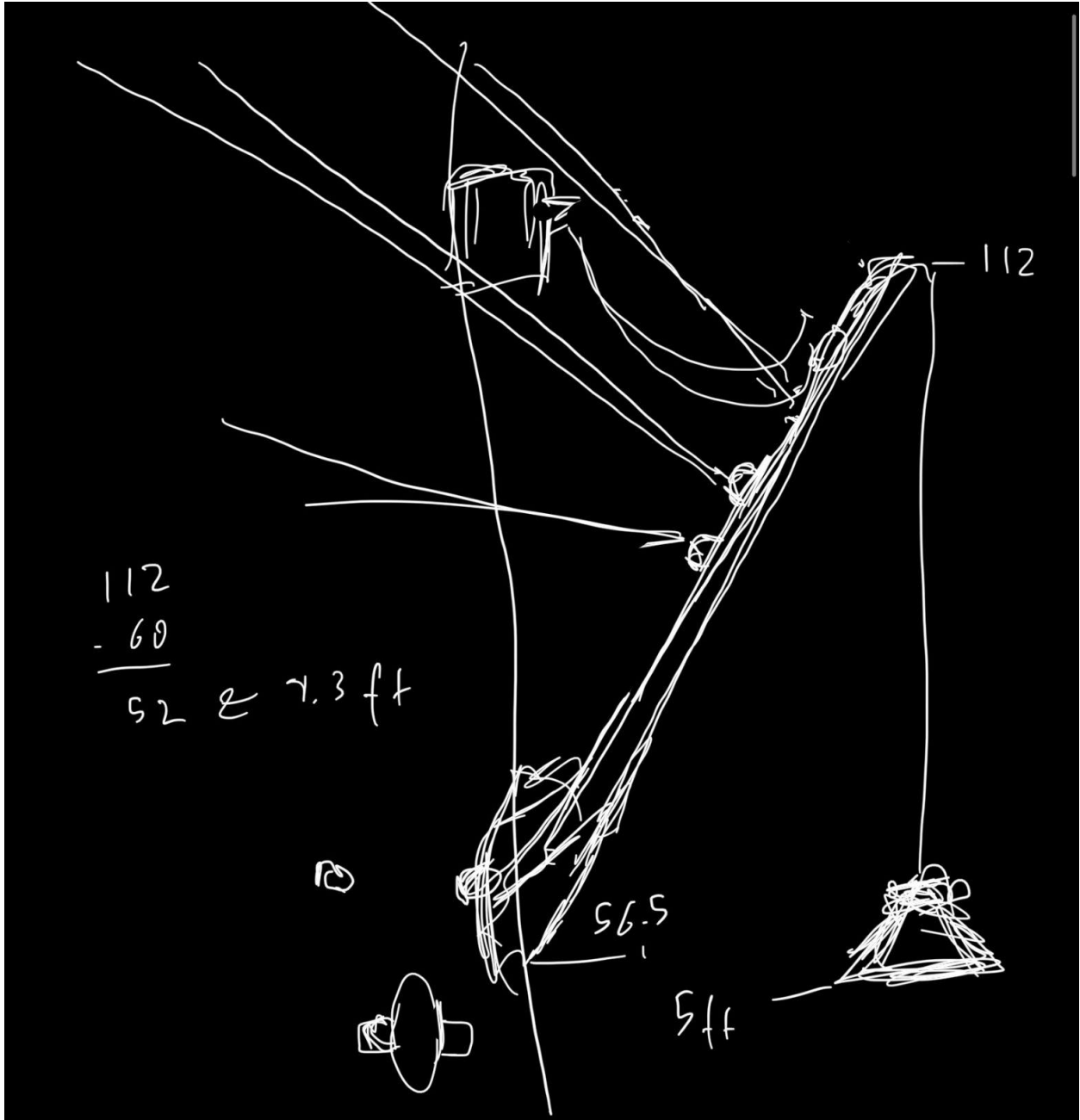








Sketches



Today has felt really good. I am really glad about how the laundry and my own work are looking these days.

