

***From Earth to Art: Craft, Clay, and Cultural Continuity Across Ethiopia and Indigenous
Manitoba***

By

Netsanet Shawl

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of

Master of Fine Art

School of Art

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Copyright © 2025 by Netsanet Shawl

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	p. 3
Acknowledgments	p. 4
Chapter 1 – Introduction	p. 6
Chapter 2 – Craft Traditions and Continuities	p.7
Chapter 3 – Women’s Knowledge and Survival	p. 8
Chapter 4 – Studio Practice with Clay and Grass	p. 9
Chapter 5 – Basketry and Vessels Across Cultures	p. 10
Chapter 6 – Exhibition as Research	p. 11
Chapter 7 – Theoretical Frameworks	p. 13
Chapter 8 – Belonging and Migration	p. 14
Chapter 9 – Conclusion	p. 34
Thesis Exhibition Overview	p. 35
Bibliography	p. 36

Abstract

This thesis, *From Earth to Art: Craft, Clay, and Cultural Continuity Across Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba*, explores the power of craft as a living archive of cultural memory, resilience, and survival. By working with clay and cattail grass gathered from Winnipeg, and by drawing on the basketry traditions of Ethiopia and the vessel-making practices of Indigenous communities in Manitoba, I argue that craft is not a decorative art but a powerful tool for knowledge-making and cultural continuity. My research is practice-based, integrating studio work and exhibition as methods of inquiry. In my final MFA installation, I included a woven basket, a bundle of grass, clay vessels, large ceramic beads, ceramic tiles, and a photograph. These materials created a multi-sensory environment that invited viewers to experience the connections between land, memory, and belonging. The act of making, processing clay, weaving grass, and shaping vessels functioned as a form of research, allowing me to learn from the materials themselves while tracing links between Ethiopian and Indigenous traditions. The thesis is grounded in feminist and decolonize theories, drawing on the work of bell hooks, María Lugones, Jane Bennett, Tim Ingold, and others. These perspectives reveal craft as political, embodied, and resistant to erasure. Through this lens, I position baskets, vessels, and woven forms as carriers of women's knowledge across generations, capable of transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. This thesis affirms that craft sustains cultural continuity across borders and histories. Moving from earth to art, clay and grass become vessels of memory and care, bridging Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba while affirming women's knowledge as central to art, identity, and survival.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the University of Manitoba for the scholarships it provided towards my research and the School of Art for the many opportunities it has provided along my journey in the Master of Fine Art program. I would like to thank to my advisor, Lori, for her guidance and mentorship throughout this project. I am also grateful to my external advisor, KC Adams, and my committee member, Alana and Holger, for their insights and encouragement, which helped me refine and strengthen my work. In the studios, I would like to thank Candice for her technical support, helping me with firing. I am also thankful to the student monitor, Abtahi, for help in the studio and for making the space welcoming. I would like to thank my professors: Grace Nickel, who first introduced me to wild clay and ceramic printmaking in her classroom, which expanded my understanding of clay's possibilities; and Grace Han, who taught me mold making, which I later applied in creating my ceramic beads. Their generosity and ability shaped my practice in essential ways.

I extend my gratitude to the Manitoba Museum, where my journey in Canada began, and to the Indigenous peoples of Manitoba, whose traditions, vessels, and baskets deeply inspired and informed this research.

Thanks to my family. I dedicate this thesis with deep love to my mother, Etu (Getenesh), my guardian and my everything. She has cared for me with devotion and stood beside me as a source of strength. She made the dress I wore for my defence, a gesture that carries her love, craft, and presence into this work. Her hands remind me that women's making is never separate from care, memory, and survival.

I also dedicate this work to my biological mother, who passed away three years ago. She taught me how to make baskets and introduced me to her palette of colours, which continues to guide my weaving today. Her knowledge lives in every vessel I create, and her spirit is present in the hues and patterns that shape my practice.

To my father, Solomon, who recently passed away, I offer this work in gratitude for his strength and love, which continue to guide me even in his absence.

To my husband, Dawit, thank you for your unwavering love, patience, and encouragement. To my children, Mabel and Amaziah, you are my joy, my grounding, and my daily inspiration.

I am deeply grateful to my sister Betelehem and my cousin Bethlehem, who helped me gather clay with care and patience, shaping the very foundation of my studio practice. I thank my brother Abel and my brother-in-law Melkam for helping me transport my artworks, handling them with love and responsibility. Without this family support, much of this work would not have been possible. I also thank my sister Eyerusalem for her constant encouragement, which reminded me that I was never alone in this journey. Each member of my family has carried me in their own way, and this thesis belongs as much to them as it does to me.

Finally, I thank the communities of Winnipeg and Ethiopia whose traditions and knowledge nourish my practice. This thesis is dedicated to the women past and present who carry culture through clay, grass, and craft

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The title of this thesis, *From Earth to Art: Craft, Clay, and Cultural Continuity Across Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba*, summarizes the heart of my research. “From Earth to Art” reflects the transformation of raw materials clay dug from riverbanks, construction sites, grasses gathered from wetlands into vessels and woven works that embody memory and identity. By emphasizing craft and clay, I challenge the notion that such practices are merely decorative, insisting instead that they are powerful tools for knowledge, resilience, and storytelling. The phrase cultural continuity points to the intergenerational knowledge of women, whose hands have sustained traditions across time and place. Finally, situating this research across Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba acknowledges the dialogue between the heritage I carry and the traditions I experience, both of which root art in land, community, and survival. My thesis also unfolds through exhibition as research. In my final MFA installation, I included a bundle of grass, a woven basket, a photograph, hanging ceramic tiles, clay vessels, large ceramic beads, and even dry clay placed in the gallery space. Together, these works created an environment of material connections, where clay and grass could speak across cultures and invite viewers to experience continuity as both memory and presence. The exhibition was not only a display but a lived argument: that craft carries knowledge, emotion, and belonging across land and generations. In this way, the title *From Earth to Art* reflects the core of my thesis. Clay and grass are not merely materials but living archives, transformed through craft into vessels of cultural continuity that connect Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba across land, memory, and generations.

Chapter 2 – Craft Traditions and Continuities

Migration has shaped how I see craft and identity. When I came to Canada from Ethiopia, I carried with me the memory of my mother's baskets, such as Agelgil woven with care and inherited skill.

¹ These baskets held more than food or objects they carried maternal knowledge and cultural continuity.

On my first day in Winnipeg, the Manitoba Museum introduced me to Indigenous vessels made from clay and baskets made with birch bark and grasses. Though from a different land, they spoke to me through form, texture, and purpose. I realized that cultural memory could travel, transform, and survive across oceans. As Stuart Hall reminds us, identity is not fixed; it is shaped by memory, history, and place. ² I see this in both Ethiopian and Indigenous women's craft traditions. Their work whether in clay, grass, or bark is not static but dynamic, always being reinterpreted across generations.

¹ The *agelgil*, a traditional Ethiopian basket sometimes covered with cowhide, is used to carry food and associated with hospitality and care. See Solomon Gebreyesus, *Ethiopian Basketry: Tradition and Innovation* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2015).

² Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2021).

Chapter 3 – Women’s Knowledge and Survival

My practice is guided by stories of women mothers, grandmothers, and ancestors whose craft was both necessity and art. In Ethiopia, the Agelgil, a traditional basket. It is not just a container but a symbol of hospitality and care. In Manitoba, I saw echoes of this in Anishinaabe birch bark containers and ash baskets. Each culture creates vessels that preserve food and memory, embodying resiliences and continuity. In both traditions, women pass down skills not only as techniques but as forms of survival. These objects are never neutral: they hold language, community, and the intimate labor of women’s hands. bell hooks remind us that art is always political, always entangled with power and identity.³ In weaving, pottery, and vessel-making, I see a shared strength that transcends borders while remaining deeply rooted in land. Craft, therefore, is not separate from life but deeply woven into survival. For women, baskets and vessels are not only tools but acts of resistance evidence that traditions endure despite displacement, colonization, and change.

³ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995)

Chapter 4 – Studio Practice with Clay and Grass

Craft, for me, is both a language and a memory. When I work with clay gathered from Winnipeg's riverbanks and construction sites, I feel its weight and history in my hands. Crushing, filtering, and shaping this material is laborious, but it connects me to the land in a way commercial clay never could. ⁴ The act of processing clay becomes a form of storytelling: each vessel carries within it the texture of the soil, the seasons, and the landscape. In Ethiopian basketry, cattail grass and other natural fibers are transformed into objects that carry social and symbolic meaning. In Manitoba, I found a similar practice: Indigenous communities weaving ash, birch bark, and grasses into baskets that embody stories and survival. These connections reveal how women's knowledge transcends geography, carried by hands that weave, mold, and shape what the land provides in my studio practice, I move between clay and grass, weaving one into vessels and shaping the other into forms that echo the landscapes of Ethiopia and Manitoba. When I created a sculptural ceramic work inspired by the Harana Forest of Ethiopia, (see figure 14) I was thinking of women's bodies, motherhood, and nature. ⁵ The Harana Forest, dense and sacred, became a metaphor for shelter and continuity, a reminder of the interdependence between people and land. I also created a portrait of my daughter, dressed in handmade attire inspired by the Hamar community of Ethiopia. (See figure 10) ⁶ This was not just an act of representation but a way

⁴ Local clay from Winnipeg often requires crushing and filtering to remove impurities. While challenging, this process strengthens the connection between artist and land.

⁵ The Harana Forest in Ethiopia is known for its biodiversity and cultural significance, often seen as a space of refuge and sacred continuity.

⁶ The Hamar community of Ethiopia is recognized for its distinctive dress and adornment, which often signify cultural belonging and identity.

of situating her within a lineage of women and craft. Through her image, I weave together memory, migration, and belonging, grounding my family in both Ethiopian heritage and our new life in Manitoba.

Chapter 5 – Basketry and Vessels Across Cultures

Working with cattail grass gathered from Winnipeg wetlands, I wove vessels coloured with yarn inspired by my mother's baskets in Ethiopia. (See figure 15) The hues recalled the sunset, carrying both memory and migration in their strands.⁷ This practice became a dialogue between two lands, two lineages of women, and two traditions of making. Storytelling is embedded in these objects. Ruth Finnegan reminds us of that oral traditions in Africa extend beyond spoken words into gestures, performances, and crafted forms.⁸ A basket or a vessel is not silent it speaks through its design, its use, and the memory it carries. In this sense, my vessels and woven works are part of an extended oral tradition, one that bridges Ethiopia and Manitoba. I also think about how these objects circulate. Ruth Phillips has shown how Indigenous art in North America became entangled in trade and colonial economies, transforming souvenirs into symbols of both survival and resistance.⁹ Similarly, Richard Pankhurst writes about Ethiopian baskets as part of trade and economic exchange, moving across

⁷ Cattail grass (*Typha*) has been traditionally harvested in both Indigenous and Ethiopian weaving practices, valued for its strength and adaptability.

⁸ Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁹ Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

borders while preserving cultural identity.¹⁰ Craft, then, is never static it moves, adapts, and speaks across contexts. Decolonial feminism also guides my thinking. María Lugones argues that colonialism imposed rigid hierarchies of gender and race, fragmenting ways of knowing that once centred community and reciprocity.¹¹ By turning to craft, I see a way of resisting these structures. Basket weaving and pottery are not only techniques; they are practices of survival, joy, and love across generations. In my studio, I travel between worlds the Ethiopia of my memory, the Manitoba of my present, and the imagined space where both traditions meet. Lugones describes this as “world-traveling,” moving playfully and lovingly across perspectives.¹² Through clay and grass, I create vessels that hold these crossings, reminding me that belonging can exist in more than one place at a time.

Chapter 6 – Exhibition as Research

Exhibiting my work is also part of the research. In my thesis exhibition, I chose to include a bundle of grass, a woven basket, photographs, hanging ceramic tiles, clay vessels, and dry clay. Large ceramic beads were also suspended in the space, recalling both adornment and ancestral connections.¹³ Together, these materials created an environment rather than a display, inviting viewers to experience the textures and relationships that shape my practice. I wanted the installation to be multi-sensory. The smell of grass, the roughness of clay, and the weight of ceramic beads all reminded viewers that craft is not

¹⁰ Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia* (London: Lalibela House, 1961).

¹¹ María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.

¹² María Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19

¹³ Installation notes from my MFA exhibition (Winnipeg, 2025).

only visual but embodied. This echoes Robin Wall Kimmerer's teaching that plants, land, and materials hold knowledge if we learn to listen.¹⁴ KC Adams's work in Winnipeg also inspires me. In her Perception series, Adams challenges stereotypes of Indigenous identity by pairing portraits with the harmful words often directed at Indigenous peoples.¹⁵ Her art insists on seeing beyond prejudice, affirming dignity and humanity. I see this as connected to my own work, where I look to challenge simplified views of women's craft as merely decorative or domestic. Like KC, I use my practice to shift feeling. A woven basket is not just a vessel but a carrier of memory; a clay bead is not only an ornament but a marker of lineage. These objects insist on complexity, demanding that viewers see craft as a site of politics, history, and belonging.

Olga de Amaral's woven works also resonate deeply with me. Her textiles, shimmering with gold leaf and natural fibres, transform weaving into monumental, spiritual forms.¹⁶ In her practice, fiber is not merely material but a language of light, landscape, and memory. My work with clay and grass, where humble materials carry both intimacy and transcendence. I see weaving and vessel-making as elemental. They hold memory, history, and the sacred. In both Ethiopian and Indigenous traditions, ordinary objects can become extraordinary through care, repetition, and ritual. This is the power of craft: it turns the everyday into a vessel of meaning.

¹⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

¹⁵ Aria Dean Mattes, *KC Adams: Perception* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2016).

¹⁶ . Susan L. Aberth, *Olga de Amaral: The Elemental Thread* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2022)

Chapter 7 – Theoretical Frameworks

My practice exists in conversation with theorists and artists who have explored the meaning of craft and materiality. Their work strengthens my argument that clay, grass, and woven vessels are not decorative but central to knowledge-making. Magdalene Odundo reimagines ceramic traditions into powerful contemporary forms that reference both African and global aesthetics. Her vessels, with their elegance and bodily resonance, remind me that clay can speak across histories.¹⁷ I see my own practice in dialogue with hers, rooted in cultural memory yet open to new interpretations. I want my vessels to carry both intimacy and monumentality. They are personal drawn from my mother's baskets and my daughter's portrait, but they also reach outward, connecting Ethiopia and Manitoba, tradition, and innovation. Tim Ingold argues that making is a form of thinking.¹⁸ in my studio, I experience this every time I process clay or weave cattail grass. The material itself becomes a teacher: clay cracks, fibres bend, and the work appears through dialogue rather than control. Making is not secondary to knowledge but a way of producing knowledge. Jane Bennett reminds us that matter is vibrant, alive, and full of agency.¹⁹ When I work with clay or grass, I feel their resistance and voice. The materials push back, guiding the work in unexpected directions. To see them as inert is to miss their vitality. Craft, then, is a relationship between maker and matter, grounded in care and responsiveness. Finally, Rozsika Parker shows us how

¹⁷ Marla C. Berns, *The Essential Magdalene Odundo* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1996).

¹⁸ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

embroidery and so-called “feminine” crafts have been dismissed in art history, yet they carry subversive power.²⁰ Her work reminds me that baskets, vessels, and weaving must be revalued not as minor arts but as central practices of survival and cultural resistance. Through these frameworks, I position my thesis in dialogue with both feminist and materialist thought. Each perspective affirms that craft is not decoration, but knowledge, survival, and memory made material.

Chapter 8 – Belonging and Migration

My work is also a meditation on belonging. bell hooks writes that belonging is not only about geography but about finding home in culture, memory, and community.²¹ For me, baskets and vessels are homes containers of stories, carriers of care. They remind me that home can be made across distances, woven from both memory and present experience. Migration reshapes identity. By creating vessels with local Winnipeg clay and weaving cattail grass, I root myself in this new land while carrying Ethiopia with me. My art becomes a bridge, allowing two places to speak to each other. This echoes Indigenous teachings that land and memory are inseparable. To belong in Manitoba does not erase Ethiopia it expands it. Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions are cultural and political, shaping how bodies move through the world.²² Craft carries emotion too the patience of weaving, the weight of clay, the care

²⁰ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1984).

²¹ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

²² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 2

embedded in a mother's basket. These emotions are not private but shared, part of collective memory and cultural survival. In my work, I see craft as an emotional archive. Each vessel holds more than form; it holds longing, resilience, and joy. By shaping clay or weaving grass, I connect with women before me who also infused their labor with emotion. Migration, then, is not only about displacement or loss. It is also about continuity and renewal. Craft becomes a way to belong in two worlds at once: Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba, memory and present, past, and future.



Figure 1. Netsanet Shawl Installation view of *"From Earth to Art"* (2025). Ceramic vessels crushed local clay, and handmade beads. School Of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, winnipeg.

My final installation, (Figure1) *From Earth to Art*, brings together ceramic forms, handmade beads, and raw materials such as crushed local clay, arranged on the gallery floor. These elements embody the layered processes of gathering, shaping, and storytelling rooted in my Ethiopian heritage and the landscapes of Winnipeg. Each form was shaped with intention, carrying traces of maternal knowledge, land-based techniques, and cultural continuity.



Figure 2. Netsanet Shawl Exhibition view of *"From Earth to Art"* (2025). Mixed media installation with ceramics, local clay, woven basket, cotton, grass, textiles, and a portrait of my daughter. School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

(Figure2) The full exhibition installation includes handmade grass bundles, fiber sculptures, portraits, and vessels displayed alongside cotton, basketry, and soil. These materials reflect both traditional Ethiopian craft practices and the land-based knowledge of Indigenous communities in

Manitoba. The inclusion of a photographic portrait of my daughter wearing traditional attire reminds continuity across generations.



Figure 3. Netsanet Shawl, Detail of ceramic vessel with green smoke-fired surface and handmade beads, part of the *"From Earth to Art"* installation (2025). School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

(Figure3.) This vessel was shaped using a hollowed form reminiscent of the human torso and then smoke-fired to achieve a marbled surface. The green pigment and circular beads surrounding and passing

through the form evoke both fertility and cyclical continuity. The beads hand-shaped and carefully arranged represent seeds, stories, and connections rooted in land and feminine heredity.



Figure 4. Netsanet, Shawl. Hanging bundle of cattail grass harvested from Winnipeg, part of the *“From Earth to Art”* installation (2025). School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

(Figure 4.) The hanging bundle of cattail grass serves as both material archive and sculptural gesture. Harvested from the banks of Winnipeg's waterways, the bundle honors the Indigenous practice of land-based gathering and echoes the traditions of Ethiopian women who also work with natural grasses.



Figure 5. Netsanet, Shawl. Hanging fiber sculpture Untitled (2024-2025), made with yarn and grass. Part of the *"From Earth to Art"* installation. School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

As shown in (Figure 5), this suspended woven form combines yarn and grass, extending downward into long strands that resemble both roots and braids. The work reflects connections between mother and child, land and body, containment, and release. The cast shadow becomes part of the piece itself, doubling the form and suggesting presence beyond the material object. The shadow evokes memory and absence what is carried but not always seen. linking to my exploration of migration and the

unseen emotional threads of belonging. By merging natural and synthetic fibres, the work inhabits both tradition and adaptation, grounding Ethiopian weaving practices in a contemporary installation context in Manitoba.



Figure 6. Netsanet, Shawl. Ceramic portrait tiles of my daughter (2025), photo-transfer and beadwork on intentionally cracked clay. Part of the *"From Earth to Art"* installation. Photo by Netsanet. School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

(Figure6) These ceramic portrait tiles depict my daughter in traditional attire inspired by the Hamar community of Ethiopia. Each slab is shaped to resemble animal hide or birch bark, reminding

ancestral materials. The surface was cracked during firing and covered intentionally with beads a deliberate gesture that echoes the fragility of memory and migration. I covered over these cracks with delicate beadwork, drawing from both Ethiopian and Indigenous traditions.



Figure 7. Netsanet, Shawl. Basket filled with raw cotton and ceramic textile form, adorned with Ethiopian pattern. Part of the *"From Earth to Art"* installation (2025). School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

(Figure 7.) This work brings together two elements of ancestral material culture: a woven basket filled with raw cotton and a ceramic textile folded to resemble a traditional fabric wrap. The textile's form and pattern draw directly from Ethiopian garments, while the cotton references both agricultural heritage and women's labor.



Figure 8. Netsanet, Shawl. Terracotta vessels made from locally harvested Winnipeg clay, with added fiber weaving and natural finishes. Referencing Ethiopian and Indigenous pot-making traditions. Part of *“From Earth to Art”* (2025). School Of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

(Finger 8) The terracotta vessels were hand-formed using clay I collected and processed from the banks and fields of Winnipeg. These vessels carry the literal earth of this place and are shaped through memory, tradition, and experimentation.



Figure 9. Netsanet, Shawl. Detail of large green ceramic beads arranged on local clay. Part of
“From Earth to Art” (2025). School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

(Figure 9) The large green beads are slip-painted and smoke-fired ceramic forms, loosely inspired by seeds and beads. Their color references fertility and life, while their arrangement in the installation gestures toward ritual, offering, and gathering.



Figure 10. Netsanet, Shawl. *Beaded with memory* (Portrait of My Daughter I), 2025. Part of “*From Earth to Art*” (2025). Digital photograph, 24 x 36in on MDF School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

A key part of the installation is a photograph of my daughter, dressed in a hand-stitched costume inspired by traditional Hamar community attire from southern Ethiopia. This image is both an homage and a bridge between generations. Her body becomes a canvas for cultural expression, layered in history and intention. The portrait also resonates with Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," where the

materials we wear and surround ourselves with are active agents in shaping who we become. The outfit, which I created using Faux leather, cowrie shells, and beads, is not only an homage to ancestral practices but also an intimate gesture of cultural transmission. The process of making this attire was a solid act of memory and care, reconnecting me to craft traditions passed through generations of women in my family. In the first image, titled *Beaded with memory* (Portrait of My Daughter I) (Figure 10), my daughter stands tall and confident, her hands on her hips and her gaze directed forward. Her posture conveys a sense of pride and self-possession, which, combined with the detailed regalia she wears, speaks to a powerful embodiment of heritage. The cowrie shells, once used as currency and symbolic of fertility and protection, are sewn into the garment to invoke traditional meaning while asserting a contemporary reclamation of cultural identity.

Beaded with memory (Portrait of My Daughter II) (Figure 11), is a black and white photograph in which she sits cross-legged, calm, and grounded. The monochrome palette emphasizes the timeless quality of the portrait and removes the distractions of color, drawing attention to the form, texture, and emotion conveyed. In this image, she becomes a vessel of memory and continuity, representing the past, present, and future of Ethiopian womanhood.



Figure 11. Netsanet, Shawl. *Beaded with memory* (Portrait of My Daughter II), 2025. Digital photograph (black and white), 24 x 36in School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.



Figure 12. Netsanet, Shawl *Mother Vessel*, 2025. Part of “From Earth to Art” Hand-built clay, smoke-fired, with cotton yarn, and beads; approximately 40 x 25 x 25 cm. School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

These photographs are presented in dialogue with a hand-built ceramic sculpture titled “Mother Vessel” (Figure 12). The vessel’s form is reminiscent of the human body, with bulging curves suggesting the nurturing shape of the maternal figure. It is adorned with large, round ceramic beads and features a circular woven motif made from yarn at the center of its body. The embedded textile element symbolizes the interconnectedness of ceramic and fiber practices, both of which are rooted in the labor of women. The vessel is smoke-fired, grounding it in earthy tones and referencing the land-based processes that inform much of my material practice. Together, these works explore the relationship between mother and child, object and body, tradition and adaptation. By placing my daughter at the center of these visual narratives, I am not only honoring her presence but also reflecting on my own role as a cultural

transmitter. This body of work becomes both a personal archive and a collective story rooted in craft, shaped by migration, and guided by care.

Titled *"From Earth to Art,"* the installation invites viewers into a sensory encounter with the land, body, and memory. Bundles of raw clay and grass are placed at the center of the space, anchoring the materials in their rawest form. Around them, the vessels, beads, and portraits encircle a quiet, sacred space. Audience members have described the installation as "tactile," "ceremonial," and "maternal." Many noted the emotional resonance of the clay's color, the grass's scent, and the portrait's intimacy. This response emphasizes the significance of collaborating with materials that carry personal and cultural significance.



Figure 13. Netsanet, Shawl. Final installation view of "From Earth to Art" (2025), showing full arrangement of clay vessels, portrait tiles, woven fiber works, and natural materials. School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

Figure 13) The full installation presents a constellation of interconnected works ceramic vessels, woven fibers, photographic portraiture, and raw materials such as grass and cotton. These elements speak across cultures and generations, forming a tactile archive of memory, labor, and care. grasses are grounded in local ecosystems and carry cultural significance. The coiling method in basketry, the shaping of clay by hand, and the reliance on oral and tactile transmission are techniques that convey a sense of belonging and survival. These methods reflect a craft and a philosophy of making that resists dispossession and celebrates continuity.



Figure 14. Netsanet Shawl, untitled, ceramic, underglaze, 2024

(Figure 14) Creating this sculptural ceramic work was a deeply personal and transformative process. As I shaped the clay, I felt an intimate connection to the Harana Forest, a place that stands for both the resilience of nature and the nurturing essence of motherhood. My hands moulded forms that reflect the female body's curves, strength, and fluidity, embodying life-giving energy. The work explored my cultural identity, memories of Ethiopian landscapes, and the ancestral wisdom embedded in traditional

pottery-making. Through this piece, I aimed to capture the interdependence of land, body, and heritage. The organic, root-like structures reflect how nature and culture interweave like the stories passed down through generations of women artisans. The open spaces in the sculpture symbolize transition and transformation, as well as how traditions evolve and adapt while maintaining their essence. This work also pushed me to think about materiality in a new way. Although I used commercial clay, I remained mindful of the process of working with locally sourced materials, something I continue to explore in my research. I wondered how the touch of the hand, the shaping of form, and the interaction with raw materials hold stories of survival, adaptation, and creativity. As I analyze this piece within my research, I realize that it is not just a sculptural object but a reflection of my journey of reconnecting with the land, reinterpreting tradition, and honoring the creative power of women. It is a metaphor for how women shape and sustain culture, just as nature regenerates itself. Through this work, I aim to bridge my personal experiences with broader cultural narratives, fostering a dialogue between past and present, tradition and innovation, and body and landscape.



Figure 15 Netsanet Shawl, untitled, weaving, yarn, and cattail grass, 2024

(Figure15) Creating this woven vessel was a deeply personal and reflective journey, one that merged tradition, memory, and my relationship with the land. The cattail grass, gathered from Winnipeg, became more than just a material; it was a direct connection to the environment I inhabit, linking my artistic practice to the natural cycles of the place I call home. The colors I chose were not arbitrary. They hold sentimental value and mirror the hues my mother used in her basket weaving. Incorporating her color choices into my work honored maternal knowledge, continuity, and the intergenerational transmission of craft. The reds, yellows, and blacks symbolize the sunset, a daily moment of transition, closure, and renewal. In many ways, weaving this piece felt like weaving together past and present my mother's hands and mine, Ethiopian traditions and my experiences in Winnipeg, natural fibers, and contemporary artistic exploration.

The contrast between the structured woven patterns and the raw, exposed fibers represents the delicate balance between refinement and nature, tradition and evolution. By incorporating the cattail grass in its natural state alongside the woven sections, I sought to highlight the coexistence of organic growth and human craftsmanship. This balance reflects the way cultural practices adapt over time while maintaining their essence. Through this work, I have come to see basketry as an artistic medium and a powerful metaphor for storytelling, resilience, and identity. Every strand is woven in, every color choice and every texture are intentional, carrying memories, landscapes, and traditions within it. This vessel is not just a container of materials but also of history - my own, my mother's, and the generations before us. Including this work in my research allows me to explore further how craft serves as personal expression and cultural preservation, reinforcing the role of women as keepers of tradition and innovation.



Figure 16 Netsanet Shawl, *The mother*, ceramic, underglaze, 2024

(Figure 16) This ceramic piece emerged from a place of exploration of identity, heritage, and how objects can carry personal and collective histories. The vessel-like form, reminiscent of the human body, reflects traditions in Ethiopian and Indigenous pottery, where ceramics often symbolize life, fertility, and protection. Working with clay felt like shaping a narrative where material and form merge to express movement, transformation, and cultural hybridity. The painted surface was a deliberate departure from conventional ceramic finishes. I wanted the colors to feel alive, shifting, and unpredictable, much like the fluid nature of identity. The layering of bold yellows, deep blues, and warm reds creates a dynamic tension with the matte green of the encircling spheres, evoking the interplay between tradition and contemporary reinvention. Each brushstroke became an act of reclaiming space, resisting the notion that cultural heritage must remain fixed. Instead, this piece embodies the idea that traditions evolve, absorb new meanings, and persist in transformed ways. The green spheres encircling

the form carry multiple layers of meaning. They recall the beaded necklaces worn by Ethiopian women, often passed down through generations as symbols of status, protection, and lineage. In the Indigenous cultures of Manitoba, beadwork is similarly rich in meaning, usually telling stories of resilience, belonging, and ancestral ties. At the same time, these forms resemble seeds, reinforcing ideas of growth, regeneration, and the cyclical nature of cultural transmission. The contrast between the painted form's softness and the spheres' weight suggests a tension between freedom and grounding between movement and rootedness.

This piece is not just an object; it reflects my artistic process as I navigate multiple cultural influences. It speaks to how craft carries memory in its final form and in the process of making itself. As Tim Ingold suggests in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, working with materials is a form of thinking, a way of knowing the world through the hands. In shaping this piece, I engaged in a tactile dialogue with history, land, and identity, allowing the clay to guide me toward new meanings. Furthermore, this work aligns with Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter, in which she argues that materials are not passive but hold agency, shaping human experience and interactions. The clay, the paint, and the beads all carry histories, responding to touch, pressure, and intention. They become active participants in storytelling, much like the oral traditions that inform Ethiopian and Indigenous craft practices. By incorporating this piece into my research, I aim to highlight how contemporary craft can serve as a personal expression and a means of cultural preservation. This vessel is not just a container of material but also of memory, movement, and transformation. It invites the viewer to consider how identity is not fixed but continually shaped by land, labour, and lineage.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis insists that craft is far more than decoration. It is a powerful tool for creating knowledge, sustaining memory, and resisting erasure. Clay and grass, vessels and baskets, carry the weight of women's hands and voices across generations. Through them, we move *from earth to art*, affirming that making is itself an act of survival, belonging, and continuity between Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba. My MFA exhibition embodied this argument in material form. By bringing together a bundle of grass, a woven basket, clay vessels, large ceramic beads, hanging tiles, and a photograph, I created a space where memory and land could speak together. Each object was not a static display but part of a living archive, showing how everyday materials hold resilience, love, and intergenerational care. The installation invited viewers to experience continuity as something tactile, emotional, and shared. This thesis embodies the journey *from earth to art* a movement where clay and grass become vessels of memory, and where craft sustains cultural continuity across Ethiopia and Indigenous Manitoba. In placing women's hands, knowledge, and survival at the centre, I argue that craft transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, carrying histories forward with resilience.

Exhibition Overview



Bibliography

Aberth, Susan L. *Olga de Amaral: The Elemental Thread*. New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2022.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Berns, Marla C. *The Essential Magdalene Odundo*. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1996.

Finnegan, Ruth. *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Gebreyesus, Solomon. *Ethiopian Basketry: Tradition and Innovation*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2015.

Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. London: Routledge, 2021.

hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: The New Press, 1995. hooks,

bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. New York: Routledge, 2009. hooks, bell.

Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000.

Ingold, Tim. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Lugones, María. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19.

Lugones, María. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.

Mattes, Aria Dean. *KC Adams: Perception*. Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2016.

Pankhurst, Richard. *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*. London: Lalibela House, 1961.

Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: Women's Press, 1984.

Phillips, Ruth B. *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Snively, Gloria, and Lorna Williams. *Knowing Home: Braiding Indigenous Science with Western Science, Book 1*. Victoria: University of Victoria, 2016.