

# Zoë Eshan: Exploring Emotional Attachment Through Materiality

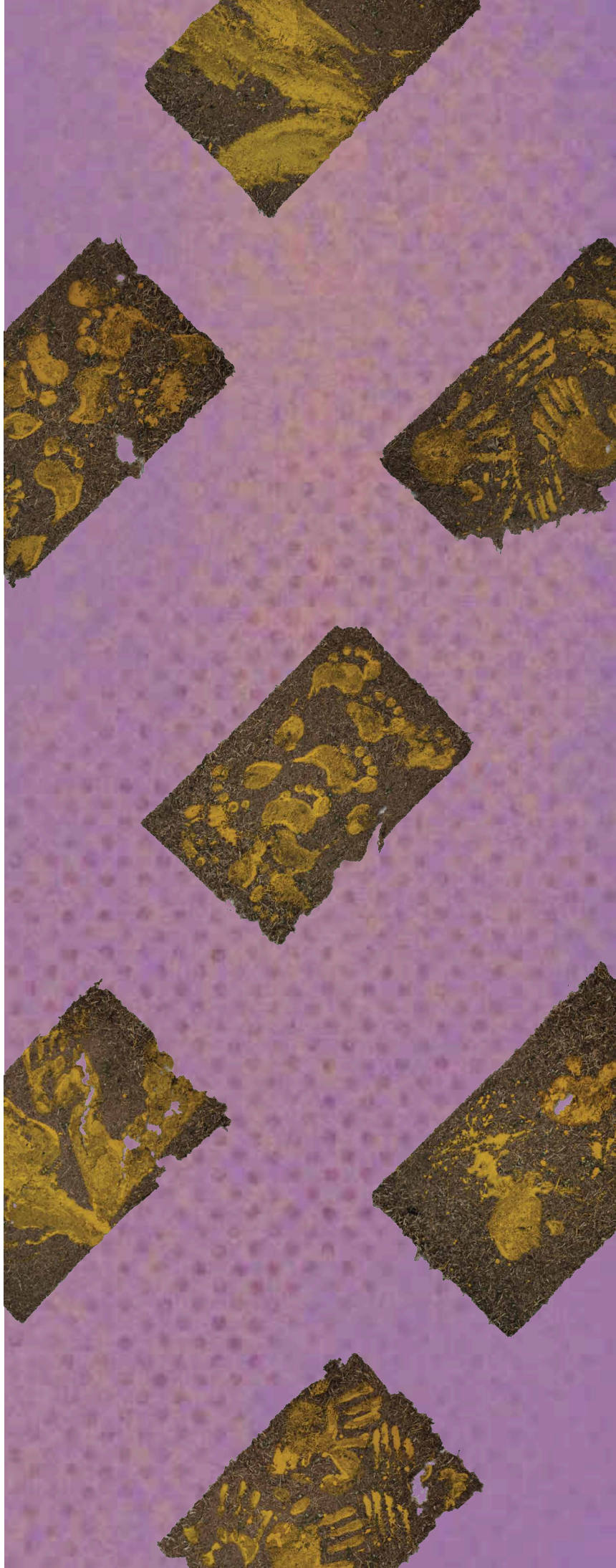
Artworks by Zoë Eshan

Profile by Syed Apanuba Puhama



*Reverse  
Readymade:  
Landscapes, water  
and honeybee  
pollen on leaves,  
grass, and reeds,  
2021.*

My conversation with Zoë Eshan about her art, interestingly, begins with astrophysics. Hailing from North Carolina, she informs me that her journey at UBC began with the subject. While she has always had an intimate relationship with art, it wasn't until after a year of studying astrophysics that she finally decided to explore the field. "Maybe I'll be ready to go back when I'm forty, but not right now," says the artist, who is currently in her third year pursuing a visual art major with a minor in mathematics. Eshan's decision stems from the freedom and vulnerability that art and creativity bring about—something that is immediately apparent when taking in her artwork. Her process of incorporating



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temperament and intimacy into her art often emerges from her innermost sentiments. Viewing art as “a way of processing and coping with life,” she always finds herself circling back to it as something familiar and personal. Exploring themes of attachment, grief, and gratitude, often coupled with the use of materials and forms that challenge the familiar interpretations associated with these emotions, her pieces frequently embrace the freedom that comes with imagination and creativity in the field of art. Eshan’s early work focused on drawing, watercolours, and photography, as seen in her *Modern Portraits* (2021), *Physical Attempt to Process Grief* (2021), and *Mama’s Ghost* (2003; 2021) series. Recently, however, in *Reverse Readymade: Landscapes* (2021) series, she has slowly shifted towards process-based sculptures and more unconventional mediums as a way of exploring attachment through materiality. When it comes to the process of creation, the final product is not the only thing Eshan values. “Devoting a lot of focus and energy into something and then having something to hold at the end is very meditative for me,” she states. Immersing herself in each aspect of the creative process and enhancing the sense of vulnerability through tender sentiments, Eshan offers up a piece of herself with each artwork.

The artistic labour, often tedious, that goes into her work is emphasized in *Modern Portraits 1–4*. Originally a way of navigating through hard times during the pandemic, the drawings are done using graphite and watercolour on paper and depict the few people she was living and engaging with daily before she began losing track of the faces. “It was just like not seeing anyone except for these blobs going by the screen every day,” says Eshan. Taking comfort in drawing the repetitive lines that make up the background of the portraits, the series became a “meditative and comforting process” for her. Each stroke of the pencil required deliberation, while enhancing the therapeutic aspect of the process. It was this derivation of meaning from the formal and physical elements of her artistic process that ignited her interest in materiality within art, prominent in her later work *Reverse Readymade: Landscapes 1–7*.

Upon embracing the elements of intimacy, tenderness, and vulnerability in artistry, Eshan turned towards unconventional mediums for this work. When she started the piece, it was merely “an attempt to experience something entirely.” She used materials found and grown within proximity of her North Carolina home, such as water and pollen, which she pressed on leaves, reeds, and

grasses to make up different prints and bring out contours. She expands on the gratitude she felt for the land she was on: “I was thinking a lot about the land I was on while I was working on that piece. My mother was a beekeeper, so we always had a bit of land to keep these on. I take care of this land and this land takes care of me. This is what I was thinking. It was just a sense of gratitude for being in one place and being able to personally relate to each part of the process and having it come from my own experiences.” Eshan’s use of hands, feet, and body prints in *Reverse Readymade* leave a strong impression through the establishment of a connection between ourselves and the land that surrounds us. As she affirms, “by working through each piece of the work, you embed a part of yourself into the material.”

Eshan’s decision to use entirely natural materials in *Reverse Readymade* comes from the attempt to “reject the modern privilege of ignoring the making process.” As we are collectively accustomed to finding material comforts readily available for us, it can be easy to distance ourselves from the processes involved in that production and availability. With this work, Eshan acknowledges that even the natural elements she picked up had to complete journeys she had no way to be involved in. “You can’t help but

feel so much gratitude for your surroundings,” she asserts. “I haven’t finished exploring what this means yet, I think,” as she hopes to delve into this feeling of gratitude and privilege further in the future. When asked specifically about the fascinating use of pollen, Eshan attributes this to her desire for experimenting with different materials and the Ziploc bags full of pollen always present in the family freezer thanks to her mother’s beekeeping.

Most of Eshan’s recent pieces, particularly *Mama’s Ghost* and *Physical Attempt to Process Grief: 1–4*, were influenced by the recent unexpected death of her mother. The *Mama’s Ghost* series consists of a collection of self-portrait photographs accidentally double-exposed over childhood pictures of her with her mother. “In opposition to most of my other work, this was completed almost before I even started it. I didn’t even mean to make it—it just sort of happened,” she recalls. The original rolls of film consisted of cherished childhood pictures of Eshan, her mother, and her brother from the early 2000s. In the process of cleaning out her house she found the rolls and believed they were unused, which prompted her to later use them for self-portrait photo shoots documenting her shift towards a state outside the bounds of grief. It wasn’t until she was sitting in

a parking lot after having the photographs developed that she found out what had transpired. Calling it “the closest thing to magic,” she has ever experienced, she reveals her initial reception of this accidental art to be chilling, yet delightful.

Eshan’s process of coping with this grief is further illustrated in the *Physical Attempt to Process Grief: 1–4* series. Completed in a very dark time in her life, the colourful depictions of her state of mind using watercolour, graphite, pen, and coloured pencils, directly contradict the dark and gritty emotions we often associate with grief and loss. “I wanted to depict almost childlike emotions, where you don’t always know what is going on but you’re just sitting in that feeling and going along with it,” she states, “because sadness is not necessarily a bad thing, but more of a neutral state of being where going out in the sun and finding pretty colours to stare at was keeping me going.” The softness of the pieces is deliberate, as the artist emphasizes—“her way of mourning.” She elaborates: “I am not done, but I am closer. I want to give you the space to mourn by looking and offer what little I have learned in the process. I want you to know that it took me twelve new pencils, now stubs, to make these marks and I thought of her the whole way.”

At this point, I wondered the direction her art and passion would take in the coming years. The gradual shift from drawing to sculpture leaves one curious—what more could be in store? With Eshan’s background and experience with mathematics, being frustrating and rewarding at the same time, she has realized that the two fields have more in common than most people realize. Aspiring to incorporate math in art and art in math while further exploring grief and materiality, she has been looking into textiles for her upcoming projects. She discusses the association and integration of the two fields, “there is a lot of science and chemistry that is applicable in textiles that could be used to traverse into an art field. The science of textiles could be an interesting place for me to sit in between the two fields.” With the hope of attaining a greater understanding of people with diverse interests and what unites them, she aspires to integrate different worlds in her art to further explore how materiality shapes and plays into our innermost emotions. The power of the connections we form in the process of expressing ourselves and creating art, going beyond what results we uncover, becomes more and more apparent upon experiencing Eshan’s artistry.

ARTIST PROFILE

*Reverse Readymade: Landscapes, water and honeybee pollen on leaves, grass, and reeds, 2021.*

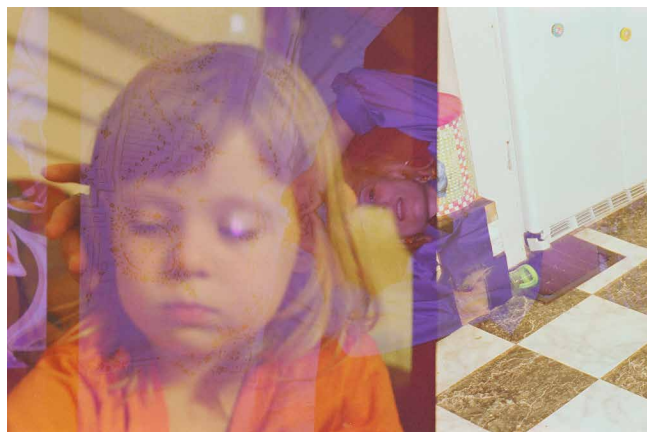


*Reverse Readymade: Landscapes, water and honeybee pollen on leaves, grass, and reeds, 2021.*



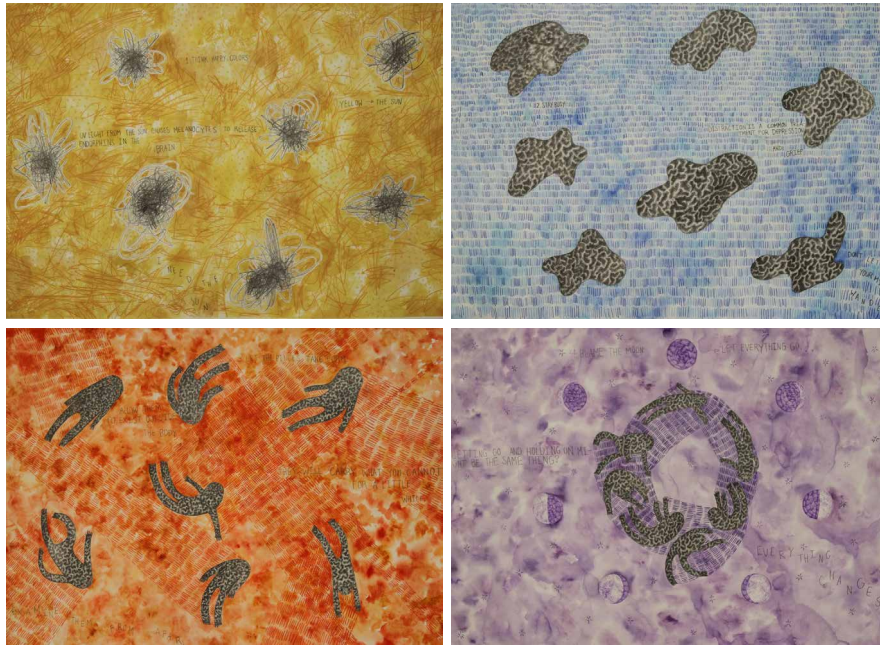
ARTIST PROFILE

*Mama's Ghost*, 35mm colour film, first exposure circa 2003, then accidentally double exposed March 2021.





*Physical Attempt to Process Grief, watercolor, graphite, pen, and coloured pencil on paper, 2021.*



*Modern Portraits, Graphite and watercolor pencil on paper, 2021.*