



INTERVIEW WITH CYRAH DARDAS

# *Collaborating with Nature & Creating Community*

BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

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In their practice, Cyrah Dardas engages with their community as a learner, a friend, an educator, a cultural organizer, a curator and, of course, as an artist. Their approach to art making is woven into their dedication to connection and care, using their art as a vehicle for creating meaningful and powerful collaborations with not only the people around them, but also the environment. With interdependency being an aim in Cyrah's practice, they see their art as a collaboration between themselves and the earth, as they carefully and mindfully source and create natural materials like botanical inks and earth pigments for use in their work.

In Cyrah's fiber art, they address the "ecofeminist parallels in the treatment of femmes and gender-expansive folks, and the mistreatment of the earth by toxic hierarchical systems like the patriarchy." Influenced by their family and personal heritage, their textile works are ripe with intricate pattern and earthy hues. They feel geometric and organic, creating a spiritual balance that is healing and tranquil. For the artist, the process is just as important as the finished product, as their work is never finished, with each step naturally taking them into the next phase, feeding into one another.

In this interview, the artist and I discuss the community engagement aspect of their practice, how their art intertwines with their patterns of being and the dinners they host for Queer and BIPOC art educators.



**What led you to creating art? Was there a moment in your life when you made a conscious decision to devote your time and energy to your practice?**

My creative practice feels deeply connected to my being human and my being human feels very connected to 1) being a learner, and 2) the desire to experience love. A lot of my art practice intertwines with my patterns of being—my rhythms, the way I am with others, my form, color and movement. I observe myself and my environment and find my place. I think about modes of care and reciprocity that I see modeled in the world and I attempt to understand and embody those things as best I can through different mediums.

I never really made a conscious decision to begin an art practice; it was just a way for me to connect to myself and those around me. I've phased in and out of different formats and mediums throughout my life depending on my access to things and interests. I've always related better nonverbally, so these modes of creative and embodied exchange allowed for an externalization of myself in a way that I couldn't otherwise access. I am mixed racially and I have always expressed queerness, multiplicity, high sensitivity, moodiness and curiosity. These things are reflected back to me in nature and that helped me understand, develop and love myself, even when so much of my familial/societal surroundings attempted to fracture them from me. In this way, art making is a processing tool for me to understand and engage

with living and hopefully come to a deeper and more authentic understanding. It is my pathway of liberation from systemic and socialized oppressive norms.

As a young educator in my early 20s, I began to understand the beneficial effects of a creative practice on human/child development from a more objective perspective. I began to understand how empowering and radical it was to develop a strong sense of self and cultivate one's imagination through creative practice. Through this understanding, I grew in my dedication to a social/liberation-centered practice utilizing arts programming in classrooms. At that point I also began to connect to other people who were similarly dedicated to social practice through art that inspired me, and I began taking my art practice more seriously and dedicating time and energy to it more intentionally.

**I understand you make textile work as well as performance/installation-based work, which on the surface may seem very different. How do these modes of making feed into one another?**

Fiber arts is definitely my earliest practice. I was taught to sew clothing by my grandmother, and I was really introduced to art through the story of my grandfather's immigration to the U.S. He told me that when he first came to this country, he had a suitcase that only held toiletries, one change of clothing and a Persian rug.

In his mind, this grounded him to his homeland and introduced his culture to this new land. In Persian/Kurdish and many of the cultures from that region of the world, tapestry and kilims hold importance not only because they are known as valuable but also because they are made utilizing ancient technologies and relationships to land. Their patterns are composed of symbols that tell stories that hold embedded wisdom and offer protection to those who wield them. Because of this familial history, fiber arts have always felt to me like the root of our relationship to each other and to land. Textiles are a practice of care and divine intertwining with the beings around us.

These tapestries and rugs I am referencing are typically composed of materials that make up the natural world of the region—camel, goat and plant fibers—and they are colored with natural dyes, like matter, root, indigo and many other botanical and earth-derived pigments. In my own practice, I attempt to continue this process as a way to maintain an orientation to care and to place. I make, grow and forage many of the materials I use to make my work. I use American cotton in fabric and handmade paper.

I derive my colors from botanical and earth-derived pigments local to this region to create my paintings and tapestry works. In doing so I feel like I am reconnecting and re-belonging to this place. I often think about the role of art and the artist within community. In my experience, I have been able to engage with community as a learner, a friend, educator, cultural organizer and curator through my art practice. I offer my process to others through public engagement, zines and performance in the interest of sharing a practice I find to be generative and fulfilling.

**It seems like “ritual” is an important element in your practice. Can you talk about its presence in your work?**

Ritual is a large part of my practice because I recognize iteration as a fundamental principle of life. We originate from, and organize ourselves in, various forms of iteration. Literally all that creates and sustains us—from the duplication of our cells to the beating of our hearts to the synapses in our nervous systems—is iteration. Our internal cycles and patterns match the external seasons and orbits, which are all iterations. The ritual in my practice is simply attempting to align myself to the ritual that surrounds me, in other forms of life other than myself, as well as the forms of life that are myself.

**I love that you use natural materials in your work, like earth pigments and botanical inks. What drives you to use these natural materials and what is your process like sourcing them?**

Yes, thank you. I have been really enchanted by learning how to make dyes and paint. I think of this integration of natural materials into my work as a sort of interspecies collaboration. I am interested in the ways that folks integrate elements of the landscape and ecosystem into their art-making practice, and how those artifacts become a reflection of the biosphere they are made from. I really wanted to learn those processes and pull from histories of people making in this way, so I began researching ancient paint- and dye-making techniques and just immersing myself in the practice. In connection to this, I cultivated a growing practice that included some dye plants as well as many edible and pollinator plants. Gardening, foraging and exploring in this way has taught me so much about play, interdependency and reciprocity. Some of the earth pigments I use are still sourced from other folks who harvest ochres from different parts of the country, but I do try to source them myself as much as possible.



*Image courtesy of Cyrah Dardas.*

My favorite pigment to make is still the first one I ever made which is from carbonized willow reeds. In this process, I harvest dried willow branches from Belle Isle in small batches. I build a large fire, generally in my backyard, and pack the willow into small tin cans. I bury the willow in the coals of the fire and let the fire burn hot for a few hours. After everything has cooled, I dig out the cans and open them up to reveal this intense black powder. I then mix that down into a paste with gum arabic until it's a consistency that I like. Recently I had the opportunity to travel to North Carolina and harvest some gorgeous red and orangey ochres from rock faces in the Blue Ridge Mountains to make paint with. Wow, that was incredible.

**Congratulations on your current artist-in-residence at BULK Space in Detroit! Can you tell me a little about your experience so far and what you have been working on?**

Thank you. Yes, I love love love BULK Space. I am really enjoying the opportunity to deepen my relationships with the members of BULK through this residency. In my studio I have been working on my paint-making techniques and creating a body of work called "in my hands are galaxies," which will be shown at PLAYGROUND Detroit this summer in my first solo exhibit. The title is in reference to a poem by Benjamín Naka-Hasebe Kingsley. A not-so-well-known truth: Much of my life is in reference to poetry. The show consists of collage work on paper with naturally sourced and handmade watercolors and inks, large-scale tapestries made with natural dyes and a multimedia video piece. All of them I consider maps articulating imagined space-scapes and landscapes. Aside from the work I am making in my studio, my studio mate, Maya Davis, and I have been hosting a dinner party series we call Community as Medicine, which is intended for young teaching artists from Detroit to foster a network that uplifts the wellness of educators, particularly Queer and/or Black and/or Indigenous and/or educators of color and supports their personal growth through cultivating a culture of connection and care. Each meal is held in the warmth of the BULK Space home, decorated to commemorate the time of year with flowers, hand-dyed linens and artful table setting. Dinner is catered by a rotating BIPOC chef whose cooking practice intertwines with food sovereignty.

**What is your personal connection and/or relationship to nature/earth?**

The fallacy of separation as humans from nature is something I aim to shed. I like to think of myself as

soil. Literally, we share form and materiality. I like to think that as I process life and experience, I create fertile ground from which life will emerge over and over and thrive. As I continue to orient myself towards liberation, and creating visionary fiction through art, I am interested in conjuring a future of reciprocity among human and nonhuman kin. As we continue to exist within the climate crisis, we will witness the collapse of the social infrastructure disconnected from the purpose of cherishing and maintaining life on this planet. As a result, I find it is essential that we shift towards being of nature and of life and thus must work to prioritizing and cherishing it/us/we/I in place of having a relationship to it. I am inspired by the possibility of turning towards the regenerative technologies found in the nature that is external from us, and the nature within us. For me, I do so through my imagination and creative practice and it looks like spending a lot of time realigning to my curiosity and my intuition, through wandering and through exploratory learning.

**What has been an especially memorable and meaningful project of yours?**

Last summer I began a project while in residency in a rural part of Michigan that I am really interested in returning to this summer. "Conversations with the Wind" is a public sculpture project and social practice that explores harvesting electrical power through mimicking the technology seen in seedpods that use wind to support their distribution. Each sculpture is a free-standing kinetic sculpture made of wood and installed on public land in Detroit/Waawiyaatanong, Anishinaabe territory. The location of the sculptures is in response to sites experiencing high winds due to housing demolition and deforestation. I archived my process of observation and interaction with seedpods that guide the sculptures' design through sketches and film photography to illuminate the process of abstracting their form. With the ephemera collected from this research and the development of this technology, I plan to create an instructional guide to share with the public to encourage curiosity and offer a playful alternative form of harvesting electricity.

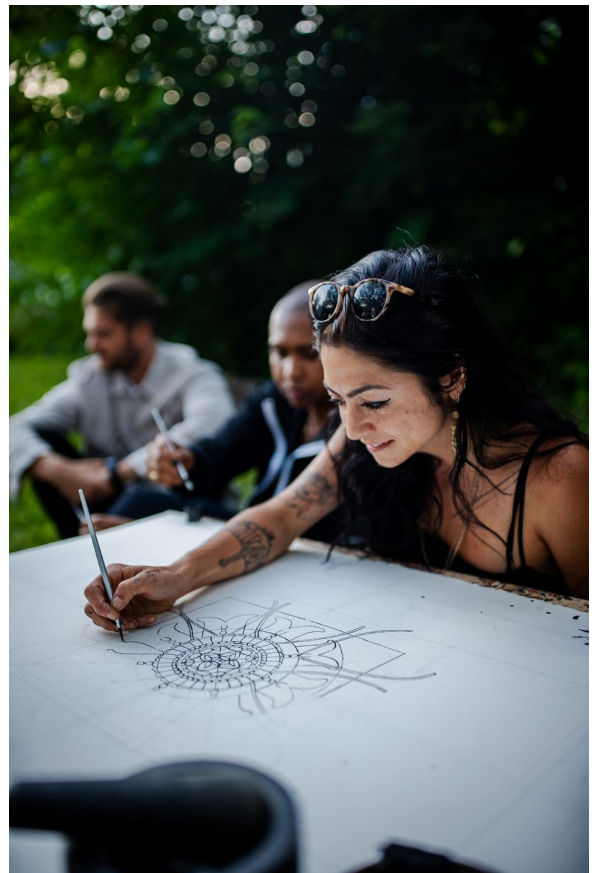
This body of work intends to offer an imaginative approach to public sculpture as a means to disseminate ideas and strategies for climate resiliency through multispecies alliance. In Michigan we are experiencing the consequences of deforestation, cash crop farming and housing and industry collapse, which has led to properties being neglected and torn down. Each of these individual transgressions against our communities and ecologies has led to a vulnerability

to high winds that cause havoc on our current electrical infrastructure and emphasize the damaging effects of storms. Those living in the systematically targeted urban and/or disenfranchised rural communities are neglected by oligarchic power providers. This creates a situation in which massive amounts of people go without access to power, heat and electricity in their homes for dangerous amounts of time.

Inspired by the possibilities of turning towards regenerative design and technology found in nature, I began researching ways to learn from seedpods to engage with high winds to propel themselves into the future and ensure their species sustainability. This project is a response to increasingly inequitable access to emergency and public services. The project feels especially memorable for me because it was my first time as an artist in residence outside of Detroit. I felt so good to have the opportunity to be completely present with my art-making practice, outside of the bounds of having to go to work and dedicate a month to a specific place and project. I got to spend a lot of time in the woods and along waterways and beaches just experiencing the gorgeousness of this region. That time was deeply transformative for me.

### What are three words that describe your practice?

Soil, Water, Fiber. ♦



See more additional work and learn more from the artist:  
[www.cyrah.art](http://www.cyrah.art)

Image courtesy of Cyrah Dardas.