

Indi-Growing Blue – Art, Public Engagement, and the Cycle of Indigo Farming

I believe that one of art's central functions is to shift our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Through 13 years of working with indigo, from the growing and processing of the plants to the finishing stages of dyeing, indigo has radically changed my own perception of my relationship to the environment as well as our society's modes of production and consumption. My interactions with indigo have caused me to reconsider and change the way I live and create in the world. Instead of simply making art **about** these ideas, this project works to create a first-hand experience similar to my own by directly involving the public in the growing and processing indigo - both on the land and in the gallery.

As an indigo farmer and dyer, my artistic practice is concerned with not only with **what** I make but also **how** I make it. In our global era of mechanized mass production, with an overwhelming multitude of synthetic coloring options available to artists, my choice to plant, transplant, weed, harvest, dry, winnow, compost and ferment indigo entirely by hand is deliberate. Through the cultivation of indigo, I am able to elicit a connection to the plant's historical, cultural, and physical connection to place, as well as draw connections across time to all who have worked in this tradition before me. I believe this investment in the past and the slowness of the process is visible in the very colors of the dyes I produce.

I use simple forms and a minimalist presentation to focus the viewer simply on color. Then, by foregrounding process I move the viewer to a deeper contemplation of what this color involves. The slowness of the indigo process forges a connection to older creative traditions in which objects were crafted from locally gathered or raised materials; traditions which were sustainable in their scope; traditions which when engaged as artistic expression in 21st century America raise questions of who we are, how we live and spend our time, our cultural patterns of production and consumption, and our relationship to the environment.

Indigo has been used by peoples throughout the world since ancient times. A wide variety of plants have been cultivated for their indigo content, with each plant selected for its compatibility with the climate where it is grown. For a long time the transferring of the blue dye from plant to cloth remained a puzzle because of indigo's insolubility in water. By utilizing its local environment, each culture found a solution to this puzzle and developed its own method of processing the plants and vating the dyestuff to color cloth.

In Japan's temperate climate, this solution involved the harvesting, drying, and composting of *Polygonum tinctorium* leaves to make the dyestuff called *sukumo*. The cycle of *sukumo* production begins with seeds that were harvested and dried the previous fall. The seeds are planted in the spring, and the indigo is harvested, dried, and winnowed over the summer. (From the indigo I was able to grow at home this past summer, it is clear that this plant is well suited to the Mid-West.) In the fall the dried leaves are heaped in a large pile, moistened with water, and composted for 100 days. Once each week the pile is turned to ensure the even decomposition necessary to concentrate the indigo in the leaves. When the resultant *sukumo* is fermented in wood-ash lye for dyeing, it produces shades that range from the black of the night sky to the palest blue of a winter's dawn.

For most of my artistic career, the focus of my practice has been on the final object itself, with the belief that my process, thoughts, and experiences working with plants, and indigo more specifically, were inherently - albeit intangibly - evident in the artwork that these led to. Lately, however, the focus of my approach has been shifting. Feeling like something was missing from my plans for a recent installation, I decided to spread dried indigo plants I had grown under part of the installation. The simple act of including the plants from which the color was derived made me aware of the power and explicitness of my raw materials and their ability to reveal the non-material content of my work.

At the same time, another recent experience opened my eyes to the potential of directly involving others in my slow and laborious working process. This past summer I began growing indigo again after a 6-year hiatus prompted by my return to the US in 2003, graduate study, and the birth of our three sons. With three little children underfoot, teaching responsibilities, the rebuilding of the Textiles Area, and exhibit commitments all demanding my attention, I quickly realized that I wouldn't be able to plant, tend, harvest, dry and winnow the indigo all on my own.

Networking through school, friends, former students, and the local permaculture guild, I discovered a diverse group of generous people willing to lend a hand, each drawn to working with indigo for their own reasons. Many of these people were not the typical art audience, yet their gathering and working in front of our house to harvest, dry and winnow the indigo plants became an impromptu performance with each person bringing their own background and experience to the work. This in-turn attracted the attention of many of my neighbors who started casually dropping by to see what we were up to and how things were progressing. What started out as a self-serving, practical solution to my own lack of time quickly revealed itself as a whole new project with the potential to engage a greater audience through hands-on experience as well as teach about the process and history of the color. Working this way breaks down the traditional cult of artist as creative genius and blurs the boundaries between artist, audience and subject matter. The audience becomes equal collaborators in the creative process and the very work they are undertaking becomes the subject matter of the art.

Together, these two experiences have shifted my thinking and caused me to re-focus my creative activity. Instead of spotlighting the final object, I am now drawn to more directly engage my audience with the raw materials and indigo process. I see this engagement being two-fold. First is the public participation in and documentation of the growing and processing of the dye. Second is the direct inclusion of the indigo plants, seeds, and other plant-related materials as well as documentation of the process in my exhibitions and installations. For the first stage of this I will work with Hilltop Garden and Nature Center to grow, harvest, and process indigo in a public setting. The second stage will be carried out through the creation of a new series of work for exhibition both during and after the funding period.

With this new direction in my work I hope to use indigo to engage an ever broadening audience in discussions of the potential for how we as humans live in, engage with, and create within our environment and to create a first-hand experience of this for others – both literally through the growing, harvesting, and processing of indigo, and through ongoing exhibitions and installations.