

*at arm's length*

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Sculpture

in

The School of Fine and Performing Art

State University of New York at New Paltz, New York 12561

August 2024

***at arm's length***

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
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## ***Epigraph***

*My tongue will tell the anger of my heart, or else my heart concealing it will break.*

This line is spoken by Katherina (Kate) in Act IV, Scene 3, of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Katherina asserts the essence of her freedom: Regardless of what men do or how much they oppress her, she will always be free to speak her mind.

Considering the subject of my research, I would add:

*Those who doth receive my words shall find themselves afflicted with naught but a rash.*

Anger has been deemed unacceptable for women since the beginning of time.

But that wise emotion that keeps screaming "Something is wrong!" is what drives my work.

## ***at arm's length***

*At arm's length* speaks to societal and bodily responses to unwanted but essential elements of our environment. Specifically, my research links societal attitudes toward poison ivy to those toward migrants and other marginalized groups. As with the plant, socially excluded people are shunned, unless they disrupt the lives of those they touch. The response is often to eliminate or control them because many in mainstream society perceive migrants and other marginalized groups as invasive and harmful or disruptive to their ways of life.

But *at arm's length* dares to make the ostracized precious.

My two years of research have proved that the oily resin that causes poison ivy rash can also produce high-quality, Japanese-style lacquer. Two delicate works I exhibited attest to that: *mano de obra (labor)*, which I carved from a poison ivy vine and then lacquered with its sap, and *preciosa (precious)*, a faceted gem made from hardened poison ivy sap and mounted in a sterling silver prong setting. A third, *sudario (shroud)*, features more than 600 carefully harvested and preserved “leaves of three” woven into a garment.

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The U.S. social revolution of the 1970s coined the word *marginalized* to describe the experiences of those who live on the fringe of mainstream America. Such people are systematically excluded from full societal participation. Immigrant workers, despite the essential work entrusted to them, are prominent among the marginalized. There is no question about their economic value: Foreign-born people account for 1 in 6 civilian workers in the United States, U.S. Census Bureau figures indicate, and they generate about 10 percent of the U.S.

gross domestic product—more than \$1 trillion a year—the nonprofit Center for Immigration Studies in Washington estimates.

Despite their economic value, “these are people we’re not interested in,” says Manuel Carballo, PhD, executive director of the International Center for Migration, Health, and Development and a former professor of clinical public health at Columbia University. “They have become, in a sense, labor units—not human resources but labor units—and we tend to deny their humanity because it’s too inconvenient to recognize their humanity,” Carballo says in a United Press International interview (Harrington).

Immigrants “don’t feel wanted—they know they’re needed, but they don’t feel wanted,” Carballo adds. “And they are abused in many ways.” As someone who has immigrated twice myself, from Venezuela to Spain and then to the United States, I know this for a fact.

Similar to their relationship with immigrants, societies have harbored a love–hate (mostly hate) relationship with poison ivy for centuries (Senchina). Once showcased by emperors and kings, poison ivy is now one of the most hated plants on Earth (DEC) and even illegal to grow in many places (NYC Health). Despite its infamous reputation, poison ivy possesses remarkable ecological value as well as potential commercial benefits (Senchina). Through my research, I discovered that our evolving views on this plant mirror our changing attitudes toward individuals who are both essential but *untouchable*<sup>1</sup>. Poison ivy appears in disturbed areas, and we vilify it because it disturbs our lives. The same can be said about people from elsewhere who appear in our midst, often after being forcibly displaced.

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<sup>1</sup> *Untouchable* refers to any member of a social group that is historically marginalized, if not ostracized, in South Asian caste societies.

For this research, I agree with author and former New York state Department of Environmental Conservation Environmental Director Anita Sanchez, who says she sees “poison ivy as a lens through which to take a broader look at the world” (Sanchez).

## **I. Research & Methodology**

My research centers on the notions of labor and exchange; how social relations are established and negotiated; and how we understand hierarchies, values, and what or who we consider “wanted” and “unwanted.” My work also follows a desire to advocate for sustainability and locality by exploring a U.S.-native plant and discovering ways of creating art with it.

In my practice, I examine the role of art in social change. My process begins with observing the world around me. I then read extensively about the topics of interest. I engage with peers, advisors, and strangers for diverse perspectives. I conduct experiments, trying various materials and approaches. Additionally, I seek analogies, metaphors, and symbols, often drawing inspiration from nature to articulate my views.

I love trying new materials and new ways of making art to elicit a response, cause a reaction, and create a resilient and transformative narrative about self, place, and race while embracing joy and hope. Paraphrasing Sister Corita Kent’s genius, I look at things in an unhabitual way, working in areas where I am unsure, in places I’ve not been before.

I often view nature as a profound mirror of human behavior, revealing parallels and insights into our actions and emotions. Natural ecosystems display an orderly structure, with species occupying distinct niches of the larger whole. Similarly, human societies consist of organizations of diverse individuals with varying roles, skills, and contributions, collectively shaping society’s overall fabric.

My creative space is not just an *atelier*; it is a laboratory for research, experiments, and measurement. For this study, I viewed my poison ivy approach as being closer to that of a scientist, with test tubes, clippings, curing chambers, trunks, and notes everywhere. I carefully observed, applied rigorous skepticism about what I saw, formulated hypotheses, and tested them. I then refined or eliminated hypotheses, if needed, based on the experimental findings. I understand my praxis as multi- and interdisciplinary, and so is my research.

## II. Meeting Poison Ivy

I started my poison ivy research in the fall of 2022, during a yearlong experimental show I assembled with Michael Asbill and others. *An/aesthetics* was an evolving exhibition of installations, actions, entanglements, performances, and public events on the grounds of the 60-acre Rosekill Art Farm, in Rosendale, New York. Its aim was to present interactive projects that reimagined collective assumptions about what was aesthetically acceptable. One of the installments provided an opportunity to engage, for a class I was taking, with the site's connotative elements. Poison ivy was widespread there.

What most attracted me to poison ivy was the sweeping disdain society has for the plant, which, in the words of Jungian analyst Ann Ulanov, PhD, "blooms in neglect . . . [and] is never cared for except to exterminate it."

Ulanov's book, *Attacked by Poison Ivy*, is a call to enter conversation with the deeper parts of ourselves, "the mute parts, the left-out parts," the parts which, like poison ivy, are often unintended if not rejected.



I focused on poison ivy as my raw material because I empathized with it and instantly recognized its metaphorical connection with the socially excluded. The plant's abundance—not just at Rosekill but also throughout the Hudson Valley—stood out to me as well. I thought, “If nature produces such a great and plentiful amount of poison ivy, it must have a good reason.” So I decided to explore the plant botanically and see if I could also find a reason that made sense to me, my experience, and my art.

I learned, in part, that poison ivy is a “seral,” or “successional,” plant and a “pioneer” species. In plant communities, succession begins when an area becomes partially or completely devoid of vegetation due to a disturbance. As time passes, different plant communities replace one another. This natural progression creates conditions that allow various plant species to thrive. Pioneer species such as poison ivy can flourish even in barren areas with minimal viable soil. They play a crucial role by initiating new life cycles, paving the way for subsequent species and communities (Senchina). It should be noted that human disturbance of the environment stimulates poison ivy and makes it even more abundant.

The analogy to underpaid and undervalued workers was unmistakable to me. Like poison ivy, which, with minimal support, creates conditions for other plants to flourish, low-wage workers live with meager resources on society's margins, yet repeatedly prove how essential they are for the rest of us to thrive.

I also learned that the inconspicuous little three-leaf plant contains one of the most potent toxins on Earth, *urushiol*. Urushiol owes its name to *urushi*, one of Japan's oldest and most precious art forms. It is widely believed that the Japanese word is derived from *uruwashi* (nice, pleasant) and *uruosu* (wet and luxurious). Urushi is the lacquer commonly appreciated



since antiquity for the durable brilliance, elegance, and luster it gives to objects it covers and preserves. The urushi tree in Japan (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), from which the urushi lacquer is extracted, belongs to the same family as poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), and the sap of both plants contains urushiol, a type of alkyl catechol, an organic compound with an ability to polymerize into a hard glossy coating. Urushiol, the chemical in poison ivy that causes allergic skin rashes, is also used as the basis for traditional lacquerware in Asia. This led me to wonder during my research if I myself could create lacquer from poison ivy.

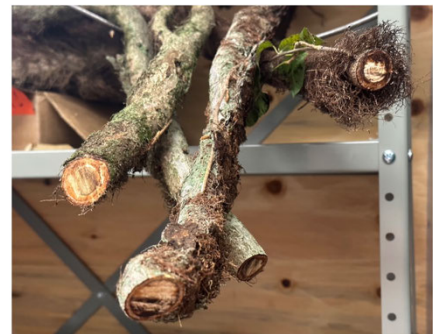
My plan with this project was to challenge viewers' preconceptions not only of vilified poison ivy but also of society's marginalized people. I would also explore the potential for economic activities aligned with the global movement for solidarity economies, which emphasizes social benefits over mere financial gains and relies on labor to thrive. Based on those principles, I even considered the possibility of collaborating on a speculative fiction mockumentary about a thriving poison ivy industry. I am still considering the idea and will revisit my thoughts when I can dedicate time to working on such a project.

### III. Making the Ostracized Precious

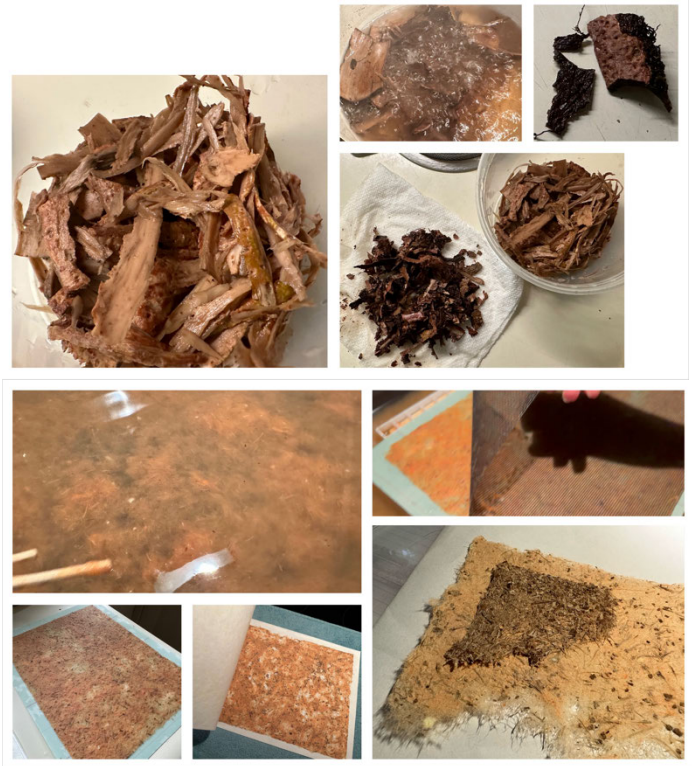
I found right away that I could indeed make lustrous lacquer from poison ivy sap. But since collecting the sap proved to be extremely labor-intensive and limited to harvesting in the late summer and early fall, I explored other parts of the plant for potential uses. In doing this, I discovered I could also make ink, paper, charcoal, and bioplastic.

Week 16 – Third week of classes - September 10 to 16

Collecting sap and inner bark for papermaking.



Following *joomchi*, a traditional Korean paper-manipulation process used for felting, and *momigami*, a Japanese technique for kneading paper, I made an apron sculpture that combined mulberry, kitakata, and poison ivy papers. Aprons serve multiple purposes, primarily to protect wearers and their clothing. It occurred to me to use poison ivy in a protective way like an apron, shielding our bodies rather than



Processing poison ivy for papermaking.

shielding ourselves from it. I found the idea of using poison ivy for protection, rather than avoiding it altogether, both intriguing and innovative.



Making of *Apron*, 2023, Joomchi sculpture, mulberry, kitakata and poison ivy papers, leaves.

But it was Doris Salcedo's *A Flor de Piel*, that inspired me to work directly with the natural leaves. Following Salcedo's processes and the guidance of an archaeologist, I learned museum techniques to preserve biological material to keep poison ivy leaves green and flexible for months. I needed them this way to weave *sudario*. I wanted the garment to look as fresh and flexible as possible to convey the meaning of a shroud, a veil, or a "healing blanket," in reference to poison ivy's crucial role in restoring damaged land by covering it with its growth. It acts like a protective cloth or bandage tending to the wounded environment. This concept struck me when I made poison ivy paper.



Doris Salcedo, *A Flor de Piel*, rose petals and thread, 2013. Copyright Doris Salcedo.

For the thesis show, I rested the more than 600 poison ivy leaves that formed *sudario* on a stainless-steel table as a subtle statement about the labor in meat-packing houses, places in which most, if not all, members of the workforce are immigrants.

The red flooring beneath the table adds to the packing house feel. Since red is the color of blood, the flooring conceals livestock drippings and splatters. Blood is also historically associated with sacrifice, danger, and courage. Red pigment made from ochre was one of the first colors used in



*sudario*, 2024 (detail).

prehistoric art. In addition, red is the color of poison ivy shoots when they first come out and of the final leaves poison ivy shows before they fall in autumn.

I initially planned to incorporate performance art into my work. The performance was to show me, as an immigrant laborer, standing behind the table, in darkness, quietly stitching and weaving more leaves into the shroud. The concept was inspired by Ann Hamilton's work, in which performers famously engage in repetitive tasks to create a contemplative, meditative atmosphere that deepens the sensory and emotional impact of her installations. My performance was to focus on the simple, manual act of weaving the poison ivy leaves, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between labor and material. I would be standing, rather

than sitting, because immigrant laborers invariably have no time to sit. I was excited about having the performance element. However, I ended up having a timing problem. My thesis show opened on the same day as the SUNY New Paltz Master of Fine Arts commencement, which I participated in. The commencement ceremony ran longer than anticipated. This caused me to arrive late to my own opening and to be unable to stage the performance. I plan to present it the next time I install *at arm's length*.

My motivation for doing the repetitive work specifically in the dark also had an inspiration, although from four centuries earlier. It was influenced by the work of Johannes Vermeer. Like the 17th century Dutch painter, I had light in my installation illuminate *mano de obra, preciosa, and sudario* in the foreground, as well as the wall behind the figures but pass over everything else, including me, if I had done my leaf weaving. Vermeer is famous for having light shine on inanimate objects and adjacent surfaces, rather than directly illuminate people. My use of chiaroscuro was less subtle than his, but it likewise added dimensionality and contributed to the overall mood of the installation.

That the person doing the repetitive work in my performance was an immigrant was also a tribute to Vermeer. The genre painter is celebrated for his portrayal of everyday life, often focusing on scenes of common people engaged in ordinary tasks. His approach was a significant departure from the art of his time, which often glorified the grandeur and elegance of the wealthy and powerful. To me, his depiction of ordinary moments elevates simple acts of daily life to something almost sacred, which I sought to do too. I wanted to show a female immigrant worker, wearing or surrounded by personal protective equipment, stitching with a simple

needle and thread, the tools of her trade. I intended for this to reinforce the idea that beauty, dignity, grace, and significance can be found in even the most mundane aspects of life.

Workers in packing houses wear personal protective equipment from head to toe not to protect themselves but to protect the meat they pack. The installation I presented included a pair of gloves on the table, with the rest of the PPE on the floor. The viewer was left to figure out if someone had been there, wearing it or not.

All my poison ivy experiments concluded in late January 2024. But at that time, the poison ivy plants in the Hudson Valley had lost all their leaves, and I needed hundreds of leaves for my thesis show in May 2024. My research indicated that poison ivy in the Hudson Valley would not bloom and be fully leafed until the very month of the show. It would therefore be impossible for me to harvest, treat, and weave the leaves to create *sudario* in time. Could I find it earlier anywhere else? I wondered.

Poison ivy is native to North America, parts of Central America, and the Bahamas, although it has been introduced to Europe, where it is considered invasive in the Netherlands and Italy. As a deciduous plant, it sheds all its leaves for part of the year in a process known as *abscission*. This leaf drop typically coincides with winter in the U.S. Northeast. But, curiously, some residents of South Florida report that poison ivy retains its leaves year-round. This observation is not supported by existing research, leading me to question whether poison ivy in South Florida actually loses its leaves briefly before quickly regrowing them or perhaps even to wonder if it adapted to the Florida weather to retain its leaves. A separate investigation is warranted to further address these questions.

After advancing my research, I confirmed in February 2024 that Palm Beach and Collier counties in South Florida had fully leafed green poison ivy at that time of year. I decided to drive to those counties in March and collect more than 700 leaflets of three leaves each. I harvested the leaves from three sites.



Huge leaves from Palm Beach, the best location to harvest poison ivy.



1'

After harvesting the leaflets, I immediately submerged them in a solution of water and glycerol and kept them there for more than a week. The water facilitated the absorption of glycerol, needed to keep the leaves flexible. Back in New York, I drained the leaves and placed them flat, one by one, in a bath of only glycerol for three more weeks. I then drained the leaves again, softly wiped them, and then stitched and weaved them with cotton thread.



*mano de obra* had been carved six months earlier. My original idea was to carve a spoon—everyone in the SUNY New Paltz sculpture program was carving spoons! But as I carved, I saw that the wood started to resemble a hand more than a spoon, which in many ways made more sense to me. Since labor is an important part of my work, I found that an active hand was a highly appropriate allegory.

**Week 9 - July 23 to 29**



The sap is coagulating inside the tubes and feels very viscose. It also became very dark, almost black.



Once the carving was complete, and before I started painting with my poison ivy lacquer, I primed the piece with ten layers of sap mixed with fine clay, following the traditional methods of urushi artists. This process made the piece highly resistant, waterproof, insect-proof, and mold-proof. It also prevented the wood from cracking, bending, or warping due to temperature or humidity fluctuations, at least in the lacquered areas. The process of priming is long and arduous but essential in urushi to ensure long-term durability. Each coat needs to cure



completely for at least 12 hours and then be sanded by hand before the next one is applied. After completing the priming, I applied twenty-five coats of lacquer alone. I followed the same method: Apply evenly, cure for at least 12 hours in a controlled temperature and humidity chamber, sand carefully, and then apply the next coat.

The process of making of the lacquer beforehand started with harvesting sap from poison ivy trunks that were at least 3 inches in diameter. This is widely considered thick for poison ivy. I had learned that the best months for sap tapping are August and September, and preferably the day after a good rain. Plants that are older than 25 years are also the best producers but almost impossible to find. And I was working in March and April.

After some rain and an overnight thunderstorm, the sap flowed whiter and waterier on site. But I barely collected sap from the new piece I brought to the studio. This is the same plant I severed 13 days ago.

Poison ivy seems to be following the Japanese schedule for sap tapping, getting better as summer progresses.



From all the trunks, I collected about 5 milliliters of sap in total. This amount, equivalent to one teaspoon, was insufficient to process the sap in the traditional Japanese manner. In Japan, the sap is boiled and skimmed after it is tapped and then filtered through a hempen cloth to remove impurities. It is then stored in wooden barrels for several weeks and graded

based on the age of the tree, the season of collection, and other factors.



Color and thickness variations of the sap samples. The darker and thicker were collected at the end of a very dry spring. The whiter and more fluid at the beginning of summer and after an overnight rainfall.

In my process, instead of boiling the sap, I allowed the water to evaporate slowly through cork stoppers of test tubes I used to store the sap. I checked the tubes and stirred the sap daily for weeks until it reached the appropriate viscosity. I began using the unfiltered lacquer for the priming layers and filtered the remainder to obtain the refined lacquer that provided the glossy finish to *mano de obra* and *preciosa*.

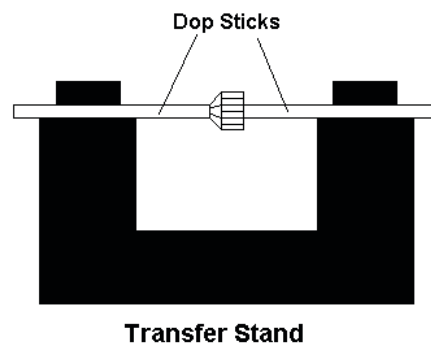
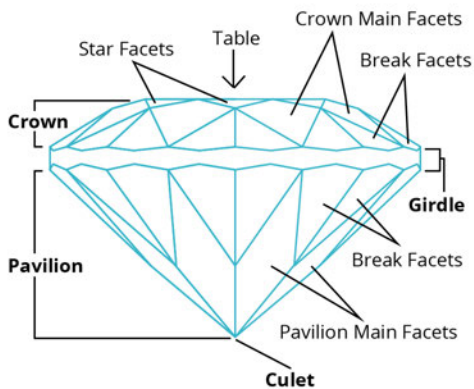
The remaining sap that polymerized, or solidified, inside of the test tube was the “diamond in the rough” that I used to complete the project and “rest my case” that I could make the ostracized precious.

I bought a gem-faceting machine and learned how to use it. I had only one opportunity to make the gem from the solidified poison ivy sap and needed to get it right. It took me a few weeks to understand faceting diagrams and to translate them into the real object, but I jumped headfirst into the lapidary arts.

I made a mistake in following the recommendation to start cutting the pavilion first rather than the crown. The pavilion, which forms the bottom part of a gem, terminates in a point known as the “culet.” When moving the gem to a new dop stick, which I used to securely hold it in place, I found it impossible to keep the precise, required angle using the culet without a special tool to help with the transfer. It would have been simpler to have aligned the flat top of the crown, called the “table,” with the flat end of a different dop stick.



Finished cutting the pavilion. But fixing the pavilion to the base gets complicated —my equipment is not that accurate. So, I brought the whole thing to a jeweler in Kingston to do so and I will cut the crown after that.



I ended up seeking the help of a local jeweler before releasing the gem from the dop stick. The jeweler promised to do the transfer “when we have time, don’t worry. We will call you.” With only a few weeks before my show, I felt I had no other option. With apprehension, I left my precious gem with the jeweler and prayed it would be fine. I agonized for a month. The jeweler eventually called and I went to pick it up, still not knowing if I would be able to finish it in time for the show. To my delight, the gem was more than fine; it was wonderful. The good jeweler knew that the machine I had bought was cheap and inaccurate. Properly cutting my half-inch polymerized piece of sap required utmost precision. Even the tiniest error could mar the entire piece. The jeweler knew this. He also knew I was not even an amateur lapidarist and understood how crucial it was for me to get the

gem done right, with only one chance to succeed.

The man working behind the elegant showcases took it upon himself to finish cutting the gem during his personal time, after completing his regular work.

The result was perfect!



The jeweler’s work superbly validated my thesis, but he confided that he did not fully understand why I was so deeply invested in something as vilified as poison ivy. When I explained my reasoning—how poison ivy thrives despite adversity, that I saw it as a metaphor for marginalized people, and why I thought it mirrored the struggle, resilience, and quiet pride of the immigrant experience—his eyes lit up. He understood and told me how honored he was to have played a part in my work. Then, almost as if the significance of the moment had come full circle, he added in a soft voice. “It’s fitting,” he said. “I, too, am an immigrant.”

This was a poignant and powerful realization—one that underscored the very essence of my project.

#### **IV. Next Steps**

This study offers valuable insights into the many benefits of poison ivy, including its use in art. Specifically, it highlights new areas of interest: creating lacquer from poison ivy and linking societal attitudes toward poison ivy to those toward migrants and other marginalized groups.

Two organizations have already expressed their interest in my research and my art: the international Athena Network and ArtsWestchester.

I have accepted an invitation to present my research at the 14th annual international Congress on Migration and Mental Health in Mexico City on October 24 and 25, 2024. The congress is to be held at the National School of Social Work, part of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, a public research university. The event will be put on by the Athena Network, a worldwide association of academics, clinicians, artists, health policy advocates, immigrant services providers, community-based organizations, students, and others focused on providing psychological and psychosocial support for immigrants, especially those living in extreme situations.

While I present my research to the congress, *mano de obra* will simultaneously be exhibited in White Plains, New York, at the ArtsWestchester's *FUTURES* exhibition. The exhibit exploring concepts of historic land ownership, building inclusive communities, creative placemaking, and sustainable development, is to run from October 2024 through January 2025.

I separately intend to set *preciosa* on a ring or other piece of fine jewelry. Setting it in jewelry will emphasize its color, clarity, and brilliance. The mounting will also frame the gem in a way that highlights its best features. The process will transform the gem into a piece of wearable art.

At the same time, further research is needed to validate and refine the techniques I used in making poison ivy lacquer. I suggest in this study that the implications of my research extend to lacquerware and, more broadly, to the commercial application of poison ivy in art and commerce, leveraging the plant's properties for creative and economic benefits. My research also offers a novel approach for exploring immigrant studies, marginalized communities, and systemic inequalities affecting these groups.

While I believe the research I conducted is insightful, this is just the beginning.

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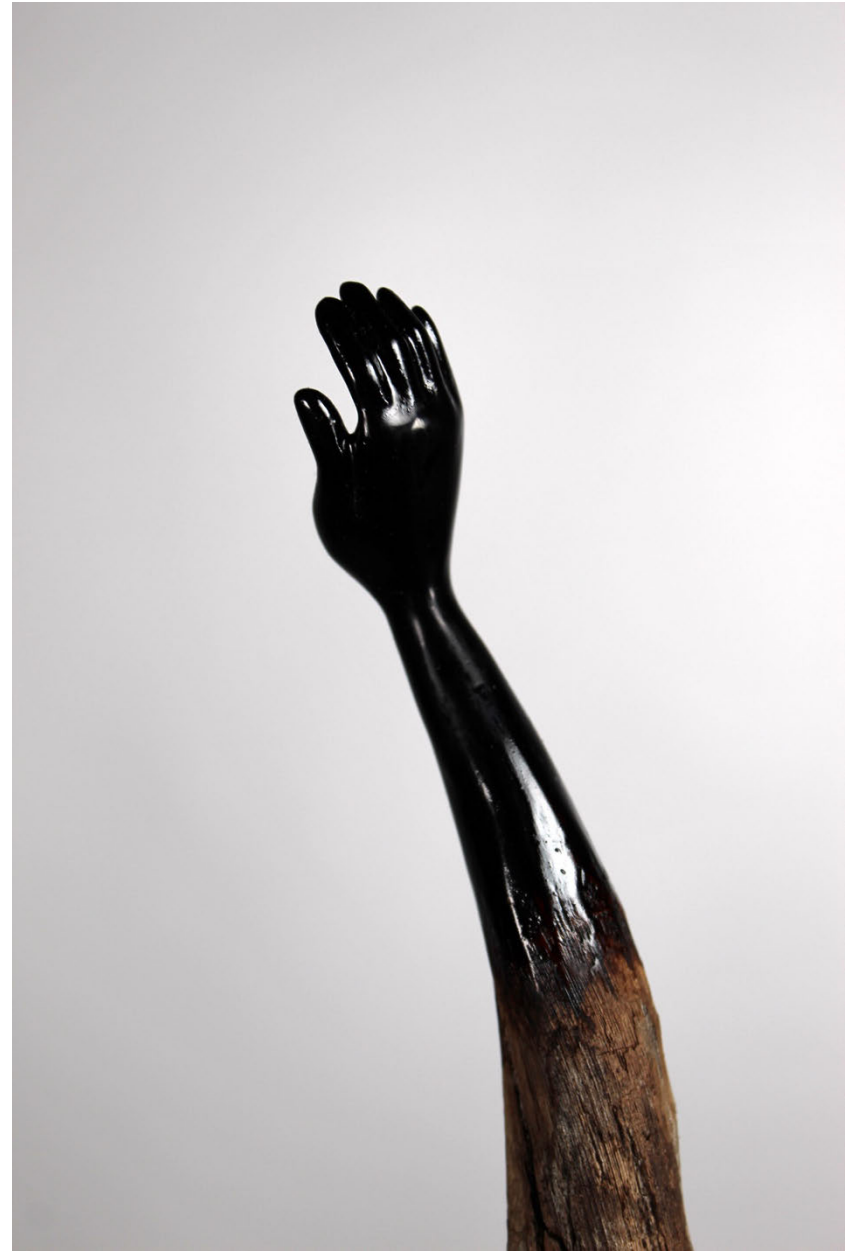


*at arm's length, 2024, installation*



*mano de obra*, 2024, poison ivy vine and sap.

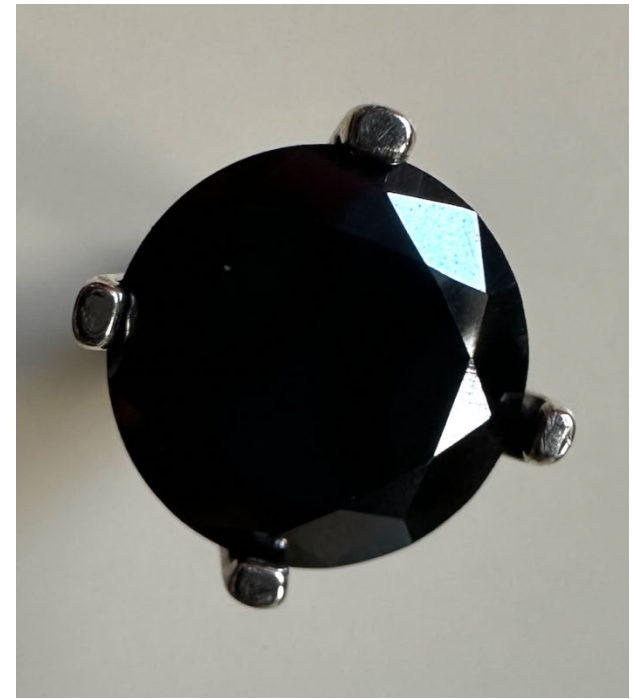






*preciosa, 2024, poison ivy sap.*







*sudario*, 2024, poison ivy leaves.











