

## Transcript

Ricketts:

I was thinking about it this morning and I was like, Oh yeah, there's actually a lot like some interesting. Just personal history with persimmons.

Cissell

Yeah, if you're comfortable sharing. OK, so I've started the recording. I'm Madison Cissell. Today is October 12th, 2023, and I'm here with Roland Richards and.

Ricketts:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cissell

Yeah. Would you first like to start out with maybe you know where you're from and growing up?

Ricketts:

Yeah. So I'm, I'm Roland Ricketts. I'm an artist and a faculty member in the Eskenazi School at IU Bloomington. And I grew up in Vermont through 5th grade and then in suburban Saint Louis from through junior high school high school. And then I went to the school in Connecticut. I lived in Japan for about 10 years and then moved back to the states to pursue art.

Cissell

So did you move to Connecticut? Was that for undergrad?

Speaker

So I was.

Ricketts:

I was, yeah. I was actually born in Connecticut, but I don't really start there cause my parents, I lived there for four weeks. My parents were.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

Waiting for me to be born before they move. So and I went to undergrad in Connecticut. Yeah, and did a BA in East Asian studies.

Cissell

OK. So how does the? Yeah, the, like textile artistry come in and.

Ricketts:

Yeah. So for me, I had been. When I was. So that's a really good question. It's kind of like where to start. So I was really, I was interested in art and making things, but when I graduated from undergrad, I moved to Japan on the the jet program, the Japan Exchange Teaching Program, which is a program through the the government there that places native speakers in, you know, high schools, junior high schools. Elementary schools whatnot to teach English and. And so I. I moved to Japan to do the to do the jet program and I had been doing a lot of photography and the high school I was teaching at there. I was in a very rural community in southern Nara Prefecture. And the UM. And I I was at this large public high school and had a lot of free time. And so I started a photography club with. This was a dark room at the school and we were printing black and white photographs and. And, you know, I taught them how to develop. Almond print and so on and. And I was doing a lot of that myself and at the same time I had been living in this, really. Just like a a concrete bunker of an apartment that my school had assigned me to that they owned and it was really all around me where all these beautiful old homes that were and a number of them were empty. And so I started asking around and. Through local connections able to to get connected with and and abandon farmhouse and fix it up and move in and when. I did the sink. You're like, where's he? Going with it, the. Sink had the sink. It was just the drain. For the sink was. Just daylight.

Speaker

Oh yeah.

Ricketts:

And this is like a whole one. You could see daylight through. So I turned on the. I turned on the water and let the water run and, like, went outside to see where the water went. And and just followed it. And it went literally like from my sink right into the stream by the house. And so I started asking around. And as it turns out, at that time, this has all changed. But this was in the in the mid 90s there was number like primary water treatment. All. So all, not not. Sewage, sewage was collected separately, but all. All Gray water. Was just going right into the stream, so the dark room that. I was. All the chemicals we were putting down the drain and the dark room were just going right into the stream and this really. Open my eyes to this connection between the environment and our making. In a way that was extremely direct. And it can be extrapolated out to the. To the larger. To the larger. World, right, like in the United States and an advanced economy like ours, we don't make a lot of things here. We make things really far away where we can't see how they're made and we can't see the, the, you know, environmental devastation that's ingrained in the way they're made because it's just so far away.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

And so that that experience with like just the directness of what I was doing and its impact on the environment. Got me thinking like I stopped doing photography. This was all pre digital right? So I stopped doing photography and got. And just started and felt like there has to be a better way of making things. Well, obviously there are, you know, histories and traditions of making things that people use materials from their immediate environment. To make the things that they needed for their daily lives and so. And in you know, living in rural Japan, I was surrounded by a lot of that knowledge. And so I I

met some folks who were working with natural dyes, they. Lived atop a sort of mountain of terraced rice fields. Their house was the the highest one up and all the water in their community came from was drawn from a a stream up higher up in the mountains. And it was, it was like, piped to their house. And then it. Down to everyone, everyone else's houses from there and they were working with they were, you know, going out and gathering plants and dying with them. They were very conscious of of the the mordants they were using because literally all of their wastewater would just go right into their rice fields and then trickle down in all their neighbors. Rice fields, all the way down the. The mountainside, so they were very, very conscious of what they were doing and it was really fantastic to get connected with them just because of how they were already, you know, like. Many, many steps ahead of me because they were already very aware of these problems and and and had thought through them and were addressing them. So I started working with them and learning about natural dyes and through them I learned they were not doing indigo dying at the time, but I learned about Indigo as a. As a as a thing in Japan and sort of they, they told me, well, there is this eye indigo and and that's sort of how I got interested in that and ended up going down that path. But at the same time the community that I was living in there was. Is famous throughout Japan for its persimmons.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

OK and. So I was living in this place, I was teaching. In a city. Called Gojo in GOJO in southern our prefecture, and I was living in A at the time, it was a a village called Nishi Yoshino. Village and everybody there grew persimmons. And so I had. I had friends in this little village I was living in, and they say, oh, you know, the first time this happened to me, I was so naive. You know, they said, oh, do you want some persimmons? I really didn't even know what persimmons were. And I was like, well, sure, I'll try a person, man, and thinking that they're going to bring me, like, a few percent. And they showed up with a truck. With with essentially like these. These are actually from my friends who do you?

Cissell

OK. Just like big crepe bin.

Ricketts:

And and and they're like. How many do you want? And I was thinking like, oh, I'll try. It I'll have. One for something and like, Oh no you. Need more than that? And they gave me like. Five or six crates per sevens and. I'm like, what do I do with them? And. Honestly, they were kind of an acquired taste. I did not like them at first, but then I had so many of them and I was, and I just started eating them and they start to rot and they get all. Soft and they're like so. Sweet and delicious, they slowly over time living there. I kind. Of learned to love persimmons. And in then have and then also working with these folks who were teaching me about natural dyes. They were like, well, you. Know you can use persimmons as dye. And and they kind of opened up that that world for me as well.

Cissell

What does the dying process look like?

Ricketts:

The dining process is actually really boring. Because literally it's extremely slow. UM. You you basically, so you don't you don't use the sweet persimmons, you use the what they call bitter persimmons that are very astringent. And they're harvested when they're green and they're they're crushed and pressed, and you use that, that liquid is fermented. And then when it comes to dying, you just take that liquid and you either you can directly apply it with a brush if you want, you can. You can water. It down and immerse things in it. And then basically you sun them. And it can be a very, very slow process. There are you can add things. But you can treat the cloth to. Kind of speed it. Up, but typically like this cloth. Here is something that the yarn was dyed and then Chinami wove it, and you can feel it. It's like a little, it's a little stiff. the IT it doesn't feel like soft. It would get much softer if worn, but that's from the Persimmon itself. It's kind of a stiff a.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

It has like a A. It's very. High in canons and they like coat and. Can almost make things like leather like, right? Yeah. And so you just like, for example, the yarn for that was probably dyed maybe 10 times. Just put in to the liquid rung out and then hung out to air for a number of days until it dries. And then you do it again.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

And then you do it again. It's not a lot of time each day, but it takes, you know, it's like a month or so to kind of build up some color.

Cissell

Like this is a relatively light color compared to the other things. So did those require even more treatment?

Ricketts:

Yeah. Or for example like these these papers. This is the stencil paper and this stencil paper you can see the brush marks from putting it on there it's it's put on there really very very concentrated and and then dried and then more as applied. It's it has to do with how concentrated it is and then this is also smoked afterwards, which.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

Helps darken the color and. So the concentration the number of times it's applied, and then how it's treated afterwards time also just makes it darker.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

It's kind of interesting because it does darken.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

It does darken overtime. But then for example, like this is a great example because this is like half of a raincoat that's going to be hard to open, but you can see how this inner part is lighter. This would be like 1.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

One or two coatings of the paper and then this. Is just a lot more.

Cissell

Yeah, it almost looks black.

Ricketts:

Yeah. And you can and and it's really just the tannins in it. But this is all paper and it's a lean coat and you can. See how like this. This was probably, you know, the same color as this you can see. How that's so much. More orange, but it just it was.

Speaker

Right.

Ricketts:

It's been folded forever and so this was exposed to more air and it's slowly gotten darker, yeah.

Cissell

Is there a reason why you use the unripe ones?

Ricketts:

They're much more they're much more stringent.

Cissell

OK, so you want the astringent.

Ricketts:

Yeah, you want them on their? Yeah, that's it's that. Have you ever? Yeah. You know, I'm talking, you know, the flavor. Yeah. So that's what you're after.

Speaker

OK. OK.

Cissell

And sorry, I guess is that. Some kind of chemicals are better to die with that.

Speaker

Yeah, this is.

Ricketts:

A good question. You know, I don't really know. I don't know. What it is the?

Cissell

Or maybe just you're not wasting.

Ricketts:

So that flavor in Japanese is called Shibu like. And it's like astringent. It's bitter. And that and the Persimmon die itself is called Kaki Persimmon Shibu. So there's this in in the in the thinking about it, there's a strong connection between the amount. Of that flavor. And it I mean. That flavor is the dye, right? That's what they're literally calling it.

Cissell

Yeah, yeah.

Ricketts:

And so the. They say, like once the persimmons get sweet, they're they're not going to. They don't make a good die. And and then this is also used for a lot of other things, right? Like it's not just a dye, but but it's used in like lacquer wear as an undercoating people use it. As a water. Well used it and I don't think I don't know how much this is done anymore. But historically it was used on as like a waterproofing on on porches and decks. But it just because it really coats and things can get wet and dry and not fall apart.

Cissell

Is that, had you seen raincoats being made from like Persimmon die before? Was that your idea? Since you knew about?

Ricketts:

The well, no, I've never seen it. And this I found it in antique store in Kyoto. This woman who just like, has really kind of odd and amazing things. And I was talking with her. I asked her if she had anything with pursuit. And she's like, oh, yeah, you won't believe this. I. Have this like she's like the other half was messed up so the got cut in half and the other part thrown away. But she's like I have this like, it almost looks like bat wings raincoat. Yeah, and these were, and they're apparently they were like, these are like the equivalent of, like, the plastic ponchos you buy now, right? Like they were just meant to be disposable. Yeah, they were. You'd wear them for a little bit.

Cissell

Yeah, yeah. One and done.

Ricketts:

That they were not meant to be. You know, if you're caught in a rainstorm. You buy one of these.

Cissell

So you started dying with the persimmons, and your friends were giving you a ton of persimmons, and you had to get used to the flavor. But I guess at one point, at what point does it become like? It it seems like it almost becomes a passion of sorts. So you know, then you go to a shop in Kyoto and you like, do you have anything with persimmons? So I guess where does? That well, it's.

Ricketts:

Just you know it. It was like so many, I don't know. It was. It's just really kind of amazing to me. Right. Like growing up in suburban America like. We just drive past past plants on the road. You know, you mow the grass, right? Like you you. That's how you deal with plants and realizing that like. All of these. Both have a history and and A and a potential. I don't know. It's one of the things that you realize, like there's. Just so much you don't know. About the world and so and then, having lived in this community, I I guess I just there's sort of a now I have like a nostalgia for them as well for lack of a better word. And just really, I don't know, I think it's kind of amazing, right? Like, here's this plant that you. Can with very little effort, you just mash up the the green fruit and you can make this thing that's so. Useful and it's used in like sake brewing, right? Like it's still. In Japan, it's really easy cause you don't even need to make it yourself. There's there's.

Speaker

You can.

Ricketts:

Just call someone up and have it shipped. To you. Because there's there's. People that you know professionally make the the person and the Kakashi boot because it's used in. It's used in sake brewing. It's used in stencil making. It's it's used in lacquer production and it's used in dying, so there's still people making it right.

Cissell

And so. I think these will bleed into each other. Moving back to the states. And then now you're in, I think it's really cool. You know, you're in the pocket of like, person and country. It feels like you're so like. That I don't know if that was a coincidence. Or not. Just like, yeah.

Ricketts:

Oh, it was totally. Coincidental. And we, we we didn't. We had really no idea. Right. And then when? We moved here. Early, early on in our time here. In the fall, we saw what they call in Japan, Sadeghi, Monkey, persimmons, the wild persimmons, which are just the, you know, the little ones that we have here. We're like those look like persimmons. And sure enough, they were, and and so we. And then you know, you start looking once you know that they're out there, you start looking for them and you can spot them, you know. With a lot of they're they're everywhere here and. And so we've had years like we had a friend who on his property had a couple Persimmon trees that one year produced so heavily that they snapped. They had so much fruit on them that they like, snapped in half. And they were pretty big trees. So we went over and collected thousands of persimmons. Off those trees and and made our own person and die. And we have. We're trying to grow. The large. Bitter persimmons. Although we had a couple of trees and we're down to one right now, so we need to order more. And then we have one or two wild Persimmon trees that we're growing or what are considered sort of the native or wild Persimmon trees here.

Cissell

I was going to ask if you were growing trees or what that looked like and if you were still dying here.

Ricketts:

Yeah, we do a little bit you. Know me really. Likes this cloth, this the color of this. And so that largely that's what we've done with it. And then we'll take that and put like over diet with indigo, but leave it mostly. Undyed so a pattern that just has little bits of and to go on it, so you can really see that the sort of irrigation of those beautiful red Browns from the Persimmon.

Cissell

Yeah. Do you want to talk about Indigo? I guess to context.

Ricketts:

Yeah. So I think one of the you know, so. I'll go back to living in southern Nara and working with these folks with natural dyes. And like I said at the time they weren't, they weren't working with them to go at the time and but they kind of opened my eyes to the history and tradition of Indigo and Japan. And I I felt like, you know, I was surrounded by all this sort of amazing knowledge there. That was so different from my own experience and in suburban America. And so I I. Wanted to. I didn't want to just like. Come back. You know, to the states, having taught English for three years in Japan, I thought, like, I want to bring something back with me. And so I and I was very like. I got very interested in. Working with plants and then in indigo, sort of all these worlds collided for me right. There was like I liked working with my hands. I had been started gardening and really like growing things. I loved the dying process and the way that it was. You know, very sustainable. And could be done in a very like you know, sort of ecologically, sound way. And so when my when my teaching contract was up, I I was able to set up an apprenticeship in Tokushima, Japan, to go study. I spent a year working with a farmer, learning to grow and process the



indigo. And then I spent a year with a family of dyers learning to. Make the traditional fermentation bat and then learned a number of different resist techniques to pattern cloth with with indigo. And and that and I. Yeah. Then I did that. I did an apprenticeship for two years, and then my wife, Chinami, got very interested in we we met. We were both on premises with the same Dyer. And she realized that more than the dying, she was very interested in learning how to weave. And so she went and did an apprenticeship with the Weaver in Shimane Prefecture. And. I tagged along and we set up a small farm in studio there for three years and before moving back to the states. And so I think one of the things from the you know, I don't do a lot with Persimmon. Mainly like I said, this dying yarn for this cloth for that Chinami likes to weave to then over die. But it is like I encountered a lot because I use a lot of stencil paper like this and it's all. And then. More so, more than died like Persimmon treated. It's died. I mean, it makes it that color. But the purpose of it is the waterproofing. So that you can get the stencils wet and use. You're using a water based paste with them and. And so it's historically how the material that people use to make stencils.

Cissell

So yeah, you're giving it like its historical purpose.

Ricketts:

Yeah, yeah.

Cissell

Using it, that's really interesting.

Ricketts:

And it's it's really been the past year, I've had numerous people in the states who have like. Lived in Japan at some point and are connected to textiles who had bought. Stencil paper. They're getting older and they're like, I've realized, like, it's too precious for me. I've had it in my studio all these years. Can I just give you this? And so I now have, like, stacks. Of stencil paper. Wow. Like it's so I have, like a life more than a lifetime supply of stencil paper. Which is kind of it's wonderful and setting. It's hard to get now most of the stencil paper has been replaced with a synthetic paper because it's easier it. It is much easier to use. It's like a mix of plastic and and paper pulp. And oddly enough, they still they still like smoke.

Cissell

OK.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

So it has that smell of the traditional paper, but it doesn't. The smoking in that case doesn't really serve any function and. And so I have that as well, but I I really like the. And this something very beautiful about the. Traditional paper.

Cissell

And so you move back here and.

Ricketts:

Then yeah. So we moved back. So, you know, I, I, I had studied this traditional craft in Japan and one of the and was getting a lot of sort of publicity for it and.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

You know we we. And it was it was. Uncomfortable on some level in that. There were a lot of people around me who had been doing this their entire life and and I was getting coverage because I was kind of like a freak show. I was like the White Westerner doing a traditional craft. And isn't that amazing? It somehow lent more value to it than if a if a Japanese person had been doing it. And so I I felt like, you know, like, I'm not Japanese, I'm not. I'm not doing this to, like, perpetuate A tradition or anything like that. I'm interested in it because. It's really incredible. It's it's this, the knowledge that's embodied in it is really incredible and. So sort of a combination of that, that a little bit of that discomfort. And then at the same time I went and visited a friend who had taught me about about past resist and stencil dying and and he had just built a new studio. And I was like, oh, this is so amazing like. You know, how did. How did you, how did you? To do this, because we, you know, it's it's a struggle to survive financially when you're when you're just, you know when you're making handmade textiles. Which is a whole other conversation about textiles and global market and what things are worth and and fair trade and. Cheap goods and from. The global South in you know, over developed countries, blah blah blah. But anyway, this friend of mine was like Ohh I built this studio on handkerchiefs. He's like I die handkerchiefs. I die. X number of handkerchiefs a day and I've been doing that for decades and I sell them to the tourist market. They come to this area because it's famous for. Time to go and I was just like, I don't want to be 60 and have spent my lifetime handkerchiefs. I was just like there's like I was saying there's all these other things about this process. That are really profound and amazing to me, and I felt like I wanted to to. Examine that in more depth and then add something that's from like of my own culture. To it and and so I felt like or I I decided to come back and. Study art. And sort of combine art with with these things that I had with these skills that I had learned there. And so that's what brought us back to the states. And so then I was in grad school for two years in Michigan, and then I did a one year residency down at Ermont School in Tennessee. And then we ended up here because of the teaching position at IU.

Cissell

And you said, you know, you were trying to take these, like, traditional ways or just what you had learned, but then kind of bring your culture into it. Or maybe I'm splicing it. What did that end up?

Speaker

Yeah, yeah.

Cissell

Looking like well.

Ricketts:

So I I now I've done for the past, I don't know, 15 years or so. I've done. A. A lot of sort of large scale immersive installations. Of dyed cloth or yarn. That sometimes incorporates the drive like plants, fresh plants, dried plants, the indigo plants, and. One of the. Things that you know with hindsight, I think one of the things I've always kind of felt an awe or or was or wonder or. Kind of a. You know, like I was in in excitement. I don't. Know. Yeah, like in in working in like learning these techniques and realizing like like wow, you can take color. There's like the that plant has color in it and you can transfer that color and see it. And and. And you can do it in a way that is. In a way, that's like not not destructive. Right that. It's kind of it's. It's still like magical to me, right? It's it's mysterious on some level. Like I don't understand. I don't understand. And I have no desire to understand like, the the chemistry of it.

Cissell

Yeah, OK. Yeah, it's just.

Ricketts:

Right, like the the teacher I worked with. The farmer that I worked with, we he he's very well known and he would have people come from all over. You know, and one time this American woman came and she kept asking him, what's the name of the bacteria that causes the fermion? What's the name of the bacteria that causes the fermentation? And he he finally was like, here's the name of the bacteria that causes the fermentation. And then she left. And he was like, I just want to say that I really appreciate that you've ever. Never. Ask me the name of the bacteria that causes fermentation and I'm like, well, I never really thought about it. I'm like, I felt kind of dumb, you know, like, I never even thought that's something I should ask. And he's like, because it doesn't matter. He's like my family has done this for generations. No one had any idea what the name of the knowing the name of the bacteria tells you. Nothing. So. So she she knows the name of the bacteria. She's gonna write it down on paper and do what with it. Right. Like it doesn't. You know nothing about this process by knowing like that's not. That's not it's. That's a different type of knowledge, right? And I think one of the things that I really like or that that resonates with me as. Wonder or awe is this other type of knowledge that exists, right? That's a it's a tacit knowledge. It's it's a knowledge of of action and doing not of. Not of words. UM. It's a it's a knowledge that I feel like in our in our system that we that we live and function in, whether that's at higher Ed or kind of society at large is really undervalued. It's really devalued. And yet it's so beautiful, right? And it's so kind of amazing. So the goal of a lot of the work I've done is just to kind of create an environment that put that, that gets, that immerses people in the color. And then. In some small way makes them aware that that color comes from plants. And gets them thinking about, well, like, how did it get? How did how? Like how, how did that happen to kind of open up that world or open up that conversation?

Cissell

How how are these things that I can find? You know, maybe in my backyard, able to produce? This color.

Ricketts:

Yeah. Yeah, like. Or to just. You know, I think just like like I said. You know like. Growing up in, like when in junior high school and high school living in suburban Saint Louis like plants. Were things you? Drove by on the roadside. They get mowed. Right? They're, they're. We like I I guess I should say, was. Of the fact this very basic fact that like as humans we have evolved in and because of the world around us and that involves. Plants. And there was there was a lot of knowledge in working with plants that I was unaware of. Now there's tons of people here who are very aware of this, right. But I wasn't. In you know. In suburban Saint Louis, it wasn't. Part of my day-to-day life in high school, right? It's not just that one. It's not for like, I work specifically with one plant with indigo and 1 persicaria tinctoria 1 type of indigo bearing plant. There's lots of them, right? There's lots of other plants that produce indigo. But if this. One plant can produce this color. What about all the other plants around us? Right and I think. Hopefully it gets. Hopefully it just kind of like opens peoples eyes to what they're missing in the world around them. And of course, not everybody is missing that there's people who are very aware of that knowledge. But I wasn't and. For me, learning about learning. About and learning from indigo and from that process. On some level it it has, it's connecting me to something that's much bigger than myself, and I think that's is an is an artist. I think that this. Having a sense of awe and wonder and a feeling of of connection to something that is bigger than ourselves is so is is essential. Right. I mean when it when to to to kind of loop it back to the earlier part of our conversation, this is we are so focused on ourselves. That that, that's why we're able to. Like destroy. The very planet we live on, through our consumption, because it's not. It's not about that thing. It's about what's what's in it for me, like, what am I getting like? Ohh. I get this nice new thing. Doesn't matter that. It's created, you know, social problems, environmental problems, all sorts of things elsewhere. It doesn't matter because it's about, it's about me in the sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves. You know, hope. Hopefully, hopefully. Through through for me, I found that through working with indigo and hopefully I can through the work I do can kind of. I don't know. I don't want to say I don't recreate that for other people or hopefully get them thinking about it.

Cissell

Yeah, yeah.

Ricketts:

You know.

Cissell

I I just think that's great. I want to say that, but I guess this whole time I've been thinking, you know, because you're in the academic setting and you said that this like embodied knowledge or I just think like the wonder that you describe is like, so beaten out of me at least or, you know, or is discouraged by academia. So how are you able to like thrive in that setting, I guess and?

Speaker

UM.

Cissell

Create these experiences for your students and the way you pursue your work.

Speaker

Right. Well, I mean, I.

Ricketts:

Think I mean, this gets into other stuff, but like I'm I'm very like first of all, I work in a field that is an other already like in, within, within the world of art.

Cissell

OK. Yeah.

Ricketts:

You could say that I work in craft and craft is in other right and then even within craft like it's all about the the hard things, it's about, you know, clay, ceramic and metal and glass, right. And these things that transform materials into something that's going to last thousands or 10s of thousands of years, right. Like Clay is taking. There's a ceramic is taking dirt and turning it into stone, basically right? And and I work with something that's impermanent. It wears out very quickly. It doesn't stand the test of time. Right. And it's. And then in the West in in the US in particular, it's considered women's work, right. So it's other in. All these different ways so already like. I I work in a field that is so disregarded by everything around me that I can do whatever I want, right, like it doesn't really matter.

Speaker

OK.

Cissell

OK. Yeah.

Speaker

OK. Right.

Ricketts:

UM and then and. But I do think one of the things I really struggle with is the are like to to teach the things that I'd really like to teach. And and and I have a wonderful colleague and we really do our best and we have this big dive garden on campus and we get classes out there and students out there and but but. The academic calendar works entirely against us, right? And.

Cissell

So yeah.

Ricketts:

The fact that. Like, you know, like as an apprentice. I. That's what I did all day. Every day. And you learn through doing right, but in the classroom, there's sort of this. There's sort of the economics of time and you have students for a couple hours, 2 \* a week. You know, our classes are longer, so our classes are two hours and 45 minutes twice a week. But they're but. But you just have them for this limited time.

And they're also doing all these other things at once, right? So there there's all these other things competing for their time and. Their focus and. It can be very challenging, so there's that sort of the the academic calendar on that level. There's the academic calendar on the level of like I plant seeds. I transplant outside on graduation weekend. And then all of that work happens in the summer of of growing and harvesting and and and then we're pretty much done and harvesting sometime in August, right about when students all come back to campus, right? So so sort of getting students involved or engaged in that part of it is really hard. It's very hard. But we we find other ways of doing that. Right. We find other ways of connecting students with plants in the environment and we do a lot of that through the dye garden that we run up at Hilltop.

Cissell

What? What would you say? I guess that's like a struggle. But what? What do you think? Are some of like, the the beauties or like strengths that come out of this?

Ricketts:

Thing. Well, I think one of the things that. So my colleague, Carissa Carmen and I, a number of years ago, we put together a proposal for from funding for the dye garden. And I mean. Sometimes you know, like your writing grants, and you're like. Ohh this is like a Grand Slam like like it. It was like a soft pitch and we were just. Like you know. Knocking out of the park and and. It helped like in writing it, we were just forming our thinking around like what do we want this thing to be? And we're like, this is just so good. Like, even if we don't get funding like we've, we now know what this this garden is, right. But our thinking was like. Up here, like we had these sort of systems about getting students involved in community involving and again connecting students with something bigger than themselves, right. And we had sort of all these ideas of the ways that that was going to work, which it does. But kind of the most profound thing is. Like we have students who have never planted a seed, we have students who have never touched soil. Right. And so taking those those students out there is really amazing and it could be funny like, you know, we early on we you know, we just had a thing on the assignment. That's like, you know, we're going out to the dye garden, it's called color field going out to color field at hilltop and we're going to so dress appropriately. And I had a student show. Up in high heels. She thought dressed appropriately, meant dressed really nicely. And we were like, no, we're gardening. We're gardening, so. Part of it has been sort of meeting students at the level that they're at, not like we were. We were thinking like way up here and we realized pretty quickly that like our students are down here and we can, but there's still so much, there's almost more opportunity. Because of of where there's there's like they have no, they've never thought about any of this stuff. So it's really exciting to kind of open their eyes to these other worlds, and we've built in systems where like. We're trying to teach them about being again, being part of a community and being part of something that's bigger than just them. So very rarely do they like every every semester, students are involved in some aspect of the garden. But they don't. Like for example, the fall students are all the students and classes right now are all like daily going up and harvesting flowers. And we have a big solar dryer and they put them in the solar dryer and they get them dry and they bring them back to the classroom and they. But, and they may use some of those in class, but usually it's the spring students that really benefit from those. The ones the fall students are using or things that the previous fall students had harvested. And so we ingrained this in them. The ones you're using. Were harvested, just like you're harvesting now. The other students in the spring are going to use this, and the students in the spring we explained like those were harvested. And

you're going to plant. For this next cycle, and it's all it all like lives in the studio, but we're just trying to make. Then aware that you know, and then there's all these other things that you don't need to go buy materials for. Everything you can grow things very easily. You can you can grow your own colors. You can and work with them in a way that's you know not that's very sustainable so.

Cissell

Well, I I want to shift a little bit you mentioned is your colleague, Carissa Carmen just said and I was wanting to know like who else would you consider to be in like your community or like network of natural dying? And maybe the Persimmon world as well.

Ricketts:

Yeah. So definitely like here. Karissa is definitely one. And there's a number of other, you know, we use the dye garden for a lot of different things. And we've had a lot of grad students work. Pretty extensively with it. Uh. I don't know. Like are you thinking locally? Are you thinking like?

Cissell

I'm thinking like whoever had an impact or you have a lasting relationship with I, I'm wanting to eventually maybe map out all of these networks and see how they're like connected. To each other.

Ricketts:

Ah, yeah. I mean, so it's interesting. There's, there's different, there's different. There's definitely different things, right, like something I'm really. I guess I could say I'm I'm. Proud of, like I've spread a lot of indigo seeds around the US and I've spread a lot of I've I've helped a lot of people. So there's a group out in California through fiber shed who I helped start growing and composting indigo the way that I. Do there's a group? There's an organization called Praxis in Cleveland who I helped get started and helped them make a composting floor as well for composting and to go the way that I do. Which is just what I learned. In Japan, right? It's not like it's not something I developed I. Want to be clear about that? Like the the the. So there's sort of those networks and like I I started out years ago like just having like, oh, you know, I meet people and they say, oh, can you send me seeds? And I send them seeds. But that got way out of hand. So now I sell seeds and I send seeds to hundreds.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

And hundreds of people each year. So like that. Network is is huge, right? There's a. I was doing a an exhibition in Portland years ago and we wanted to. I wanted to have indigo for it, indigo plants and so we worked with a farm out there on Saudi island to to grow and to go vibrant valley farms and they've like started doing tons with them to go now from that first like someone at the museum had a connection with them and said, oh, I know these folks from CSA. Or whatever. And maybe they'll grow in to go for us. And now they've, like, taken it and run with it. So kind of seeing those things happen here and there is really exciting and seeing other people get. Excited about it in in a similar way as I am is really wonderful. So there's a lot of those connections. I think there's a number of other like Abu Bakar Fofana, A/B, OUBAKAR. FUFANA. He's Malian and French. He's Malian. He lives in between France and

Mali, and he's someone who's you know. He's working with the with. Traditional Malian indigo, but there's a lot of parallels. We've become friends. We're actually gonna have work together in a show at Purdue, and actually they just picked up all the work yesterday, I think. It opens later this month. And hopefully we're going to be able to bring him to. I think he's coming to Purdue and I want to try and bring him. Down here, if I. Can, but the timing is like right at the end of the semester. So I don't know if it's going. To happen or. Not, but he's he's. Super amazing and uhm, it is just a great artist and a wonderful person. And there's there's so many people in Japan working within indigo. Hiro Hito Yuki. HIROYUKI Hito Yuki. Shindo SHINDOUM is someone who's always he's a a wonderful friend, but is also have been a huge inspiration for my own work. Yeah. I mean there's like. Certainly my teachers like 1, Osama me. He doesn't. I mean, he's just he farms into go and and processes. He doesn't do any dying. But his thinking about what it means to make a material for other people to use is really. Has been very influential as well.

Cissell

As far as the Persimmon side goes, would you say that's mainly the the IT was a family on top of the mountain that introduced you?

Ricketts:

So persimmons, persimmons were just like in my community, like everybody grew persimmons. Right. And. And so percent like knowledge of of working with persimmons is something that I've never like formally studied, right? Like, I've never worked with someone who is like a Persimmon dier, for example. It's things that I've picked up.

Cissell

OK.

Ricketts:

By working with people, one person in particular was a woman named Saiko SEIK. Akiyama, AKIY AMA Seiko akiyama. And she's she's written. She's she's someone she's like a teacher. She says I'm a teacher and she teaches people about natural dyes. And I met her through the the family of farmers that I worked with and because she maintained indigo baths at his place. She she would like test. To go for him each year and and she taught me sort of the basics of working with Persimmon as a dye. UM. Yeah. And then I'm trying to think other like. I just kind of picked it up through other like friends who are indigo dyers, who are like, oh, you can do this with Persimmon. You can do that with Persona. It's not. There was never anything. Like I said that I studied formally.

Cissell

UM and I I realized I forgot. Like are there any like not like folk tales but like folk knowledge that you heard in Japan or since you've been here about persimmons that you didn't? Mention other than I. Feel like the most common things you know if you bite. And turn unripe one. You know your mouth.

Ricketts:

Boy, I'm sure there are.



Speaker

It's OK. And I think.

Ricketts:

One of them in Japan that they talk about, it's very I mean it's and this is just basic like human observation and knowledge, right? Like once you get a frost on the bitter persimmons then you can eat them.

Cissell

Yeah, yeah. OK.

Ricketts:

Right. Like that's a very common one. You don't want to eat them before that. Wow, I feel like you know this is. I'm probably going to come up with an answer to this question like tonight or tomorrow morning. I'm going to fall on that one for a while. Nothing jumps off off the. Top of my head, sort of other, you know, other than like these weird uses, right? Like the use in sake brewing was always really weird to me, but they just had a tiny amount to.

Speaker

That's OK.

Ricketts:

To this flocculation right, it pulls out sediment, OK. So it doesn't like add any. Flavor or anything to it. Ohh, you know one that I actually so one of the other things in the community that I lived in and this isn't really like a folk tale or anything but the famous it was that that region is famous for what's called Persimmon leaf sushi and they take the leaves and they take mackerel traditionally mackerel. Now they do mackerel and salmon. As well, and they. Somehow they like they. They preserve it because it's an inland region, right? They're not getting fresh fish there. So the fish fish, historically would have been preserved and. And then they they put it on like a on rice and they wrap it in a Persimmon leaf and it, like, preserves it. And so there's something in there, like acting as a preservative as well. And it's still super common. Like, it's the it's the famous food of the area. Yeah. So I've always wondered about that. Like, what is it? About the Persimmon leaf, that is. That helps preserve it.

Cissell

But you don't want to know the specific bacteria, that's.

Ricketts:

But and it's never never interested me.

Cissell

I guess we talked a lot about embodied knowledge, but something I was wanting to do with this project too was to just like, get a lot of sources or like material that people had read or, you know, encountered that they enjoyed or feel like it. Had an impact in some way. But I guess would you say there are like

texts that you could point me to or do you feel like it is this process of like doing and growing that was the biggest like?

Ricketts:

Well, it depends on like for persimmons. There's. So most of this sort of traditional knowledge in Japan is. Not written down. Right. That's one of the challenges of it for Indigo there are. You know there. There's so like it depends what you're after, right? But sort of anthropologically, there's a book simply called Indigo by Jenny Balfour Paul, that was published probably in the 90s. That is, is still like a very good. You know, she was trained as an. Anthropologist. So it's it's a, it's. A good it's not a like. Over romanticized book and some of that exists. One of the problems is that a lot of these. Things get. Very romanticized. A lot of these traditions get romanticized in weird ways, especially with like the the Western gays. But that that's a pretty good book to look at, like Indigo. I feel like my I wish Chinami were here because she's kind of. I feel like there's a Japanese book that's all that she has. It's like about. Persimmon and the sort of the history of persimmons. Most of the most of the books that I can think of are things that are like about like die recipes for persimmons like dying with persimmons. Sachio Yoshioka was it was a Dyer in Kyoto area who published quite a bit of things with dye recipes and so on and he's written a bit about person and like dying with fresh persimmons. Just literally. Taking the wild persons and grinding them up. And simple things you can do with them. Yeah. One of the challenges with. A lot of the books is that they're. They're books, right? And they reference other books and they so a lot of times there's like, is someone who has knowledge as a practitioner. When I read a lot of books about indigo, I'm like, oh, this person that didn't know, they're like researching it, but they didn't know what they were doing. So this isn't right like. They don't really understand it. Which is one of the again sort of one of those shortfalls of of these two different types of knowledge. Yeah. So I don't really have great suggestions.

Cissell

No, I think. That in itself is eye opening. You know that because I think, well, I I've spoken to some other folks so far and it is more of the like embodied or just like I've messed around with them and that's how I know these.

Speaker

Well, you learn, I mean.

Ricketts:

You know it. Sounds silly, but like you learn. So much, this is something my teacher. Always said, he's like. You're like, if you're. If you're looking like, for example with the indigo VAT, he's like the indigo, VAT will tell you what it needs. You just have to know how to look at it. Your plants in the field will tell you what they need. You just need to know how to look at them. You don't need to go outside the VAT for information on what? The vats. And the need. You have to learn how to read the VAT. Right. And and so a lot of it is about learning from the thing itself. Right, like paying attention to that, not some external thing, right? Cause like the name of the bacteria that's causing fermentation is external. Right. Like it doesn't matter that like the knowing the name doesn't help you help it survive.

Cissell

Right, yeah.

Ricketts:

It it doesn't, it doesn't. Yeah, do anything in that way. So there is something to that. Like it's about looking, it's about looking, looking closely at something to learn from it and not, you know, it's like reading the the VAT. As a text, right? Right. Not or or you know. And and the way you read is through taste and touch and smell and and and you accumulate knowledge that way, yeah.

Cissell

Yeah, I I think that's really that that's really great for me and eye opening for me and I'm going to be thinking about that because I think that kind of opens me to a different way of approaching. These things that I can. Because I think as a librarian, I. Was like I want to build. Geography and all these things you know and it's yeah. There's a bit of a.

Ricketts:

Right. I mean, it's fascinating. I don't know if you've ever looked at the a great example of this. This is like a great illustration of it is the ethnobotany database. I don't know if you spent any time with it. It was like, I forget it was a university up in Michigan.

Speaker

OK, no.

Ricketts:

Whether it was. Eastern Michigan State or? This is called the ethnobotany database. And it is so fantastic to examine. It is just like a perfect examination of this whole problem, because what it is it's a site it lists, it's a list of citations of. Native American uses of plants as cited in books by generally white men in the 1800s and early 1900s, and they have no \*\*\*\*\* idea, sorry. Being recorded, they have no idea what they're talking about, and some of them you read them and you're. Like, Oh yeah, they're just so clueless. Like, that plant doesn't produce those colors or, you know, cuz you can look up dyes, you can sort. It's really a fascinating thing to search and to kind of start looking at something. But it's not. If you take it as fact, you're just like it's. Going to be so off the. Mark. So it kind of is a thing that, like, encapsulates that entire problem.

Cissell

OK. Yeah, I'll I'll look into it.

Ricketts:

Right. So the question is like, how do you? Footnote of that, yeah, yeah. Right, like, how do you footnote a plant and what you've learned from it? That's kind of the big challenge, yeah. I kind of like that. It's a good question.

Cissell

Yeah, it is. Well, I guess that kind of wraps up my more formal questions. And now I just would like you to talk about the things that are in front of us or maybe if you want to describe the.

Speaker

It's an interesting question.

Ricketts:

Space. We're into. Yeah. Yeah. So we're in. We're in my studio at home, which. Was years of dreaming decades of dreaming and planning for like, oh, and I build the studio so we're we're actually sitting around the four, four indigo baths that are set in the ground. What's exposed here is about maybe half or a third of the vat. So they kind of sit down in the ground. And they're surrounded by concrete that's got. Radiant floor heat. It built into it. So to kind of keep the vats warm in the winter. But they don't need to be hot like they need to be around 65 to 68 degrees OK for fermentation, not they don't need. To be hot. And then we have the studio has. It's got a big. Huge slanted roof and we collect rainwater off of it and do a cistern. A buried cistern outside and then that gets pumped in and we use all the rain water for for dying and rinsing and starting to. That that rinse water gets. Captured into another cistern, and then we use it for watering the garden and the indigo. Fields here at. So we kind of have this sort of closed loop system, my ideal. Was to have a studio where the only thing that left the the property was the color. And so, like the vats themselves, are just composted plant leaves and wood ash and lime and wheat bran. And so when they're done, those also get spread back on the indigo fields to as fertilizer for future crops. So none of that gets thrown away or wasted or anything. So it's kind of a closed loop. Studio that we built, you know.

Cissell

Yeah, that's right.

Ricketts:

Which was which was the, which was the goal. And so that's the that's the space we're in. And then I pulled out some things that are just other, you know, Persimmon related things. So there's this cloth that I dyed the yarn and and then tsunami woven like I said. Earlier on so. So then like put some. Pattern on this? That mostly preserves the Persimmon color, so just little bits of blue on this ground of the Persimmon color, and then this is the first stencil I ever cut when I was learning about stencil dying, and it's done on again, that traditional Persimmon paper. This is a basket called the Yanagi Gordy. In Japanese that were used for storage and I it was falling apart. So I like essentially paper mache it with with.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

Paper and then Persimmon dye. This is a. 19th century raincoat. It's made of paper and it's Japanese and it's a paper and. Because Simon. Percent coded or percent in dyed paper.

Speaker

And then this is just a.

Ricketts:

Huge sheet of stencil paper. I think I may have a stencil of mine in here as well. And that always. I can pull that guy out.

Cissell

And this is going to sound really ignorant, but this stencil paper that's laid on top of.

Speaker

Yeah. So the way that how does?

Cissell

Yeah, yeah.

Ricketts:

It work is your question right? So yeah, what you do with this is you make a a resist that's made out of rice, glutinous rice and rice bran and a little bit of salt and. And so it's it's like a paste, it's like a sticky paste and you. Stretch out your cloth and then you put your. You put this on top of it and you use a you use like a little. Squeegee. Kind of. Thing to apply the the paste to the cloth through the stencil and then once you've applied it, you just lift up. Stencil and then you can put it down again.

Cissell

OK. Yeah.

Ricketts:

And do it again. You can. You can do that working down your cloth and put a repeat pattern in. Across the whole. Thing, but you just, yeah, you just put. This on top of. The cloth and then it dries, the paste dries and then once it's dry then you can. You can die with it.

Speaker

OK.

Cissell

And so I guess another aspect of the person and or maybe this is what you're getting at with like it's kind of water resistant is that's not going to die the cloth only like.

Ricketts:

Right, right. Right. What it does is it really, so this stencil paper is actually you can kind of see here through the sunlight. I don't know if you can see that, but see how this is thin and then this is thick this, this paper is made-up of multiple, the stencils are made-up. Multiple layers of paper and when they make the paper, they can in the in the paper making process how they move the the mold when they're making it, they can align the fibers vertically or horizontally. They can go this way or this way. And so

they'll make a sheet with the fibers going one way and then they'll make another sheet with it. Going 90 degrees. The other the other way, and then that they need thicker paper, they'll go back again the opposite way. On top of that, and they'll glue them together with this. With the. Persona. OK. And that and that it's that coating that makes it, you know if you were to take that paper and just put it in water, it would just. Fall apart, right? But because the the Persimmon is like a water waterproofing, it doesn't entirely make it waterproof, but it turns it into like a material. You can, you know, this has been so thin water. For weeks, you know, over its lifetime and the paste is water based and so it's it's on there, but it does. The paper doesn't fall apart and you can see it's cut very cleanly. It's not framed like paper wood. It's not, you know, imagine you put a sheet of paper.

Speaker

Right.

Ricketts:

And water and it's going to melt. But it doesn't.

Cissell

And I feel like you spoke a little bit to the, you know, this was your first Persimmon stencil that you need or your first unsolved. But is there like a significance or emotional tie to these other things you brought?

Ricketts:

Yeah, yeah.

Cissell

Or what do you feel?

Ricketts:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, like. So you know, some of them are just like this. This stencil paper came out of an indigo dyers studio, and Shimane that was being torn down for.

Speaker

A Rd.

Ricketts:

And it's a very crazy connection. I have a friend who's. Photographer a Japanese fellow who? Who lived in? New York for years I met him through friends in New York and. One day I get a call from him in New York when I'm living in Japan and he said my mom's best friend. And their and their ancestors were indigo dyers. In this town, near where you're living now, and their house is going to get torn down. And if you want anything from it, call the call the city. Here's the people you need to talk to at the city there. And if you want anything from it, call them and go, go get it. So we called up and we went and we got indigo baths. We have these beautiful ceramic indigo vats from the 1800s that are at. My wife's family's place in Japan, but we got all this stencil paper and tons of other tools that I still use in my own work. Like I use them all the time. And so this is stencil paper. From there it was wrapped up. It was in

newspaper dated from like the 1950s. Like I don't think you can. I don't think you can buy stencil paper of this size anymore.

Speaker

OK.

Ricketts:

And I really. Have I? I don't think I'll use it. It's too. Big for me to use, but it's it's.

Speaker

OK. Yeah.

Ricketts:

You know, it has that sort of bittersweet memory of this place just getting bulldozed for our Rd. that was. You know the the city had been there, the city History Museum had taken a whole bunch of things out and we kind of went in after them and they said anything you. Want we've taken what we want? Like, for example, those bowls up there, all the bowls up there from them and they're from that place and they're all rice, rice paste, mixing bowls for doing this type of work, right? So and then I use them. I use them when I'm making rice paste, you know? So there's there's kind of this again, this connection across time. Something that's bigger than me, right? Like this isn't a like. Yeah, I have a lot of thoughts about like art and originality and this idea that this sort of Western idea that you have to do something that no one has seen before whereas. Originality is really kind of this. What's the point of origin for you? Like my. You know, what's what's your own point of origin? And I think again, you know like using these tools using this stencil paper, this is also special paper from that from that studio. Right like. It connects me to those things, right? It's something that's bigger than me. It's people have been doing this a long time. I didn't invent any of this. And so I'm working within this, this sort of creative framework that's the same that those people worked with him and they were making things relevant to their time. And hopefully I'm making things that are relevant to my time. And so using these things like using this stencil paper. For me it doesn't show up in the work that I'm doing, right? Like someone sees something that's. They have no idea, but I. But for me, there's this. There's that connection there, right. Like I'm. I know that through through using these materials. So that connection to something that's bigger across time, you know like this, like I said, this was wrapped up in newspaper from like the 1950s, you know, like they've just been even even for the dire like they had, they hadn't used it. It sat there forever. Why they had it, who knows.

Cissell

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think the like durability and test of time is fascinating for me. Looking at these and those holes, you know, you're saying that?

Ricketts:

Yeah, like those bowls could. Be, you know, they're really beautifully made. The other thing, when you look at a lot of these traditions, there's tools there was, you know, at one point along this Little River in Eskimo where this. Where this tired workshop had been, there was over 100 of these dye shops, right? It was just one. Of at least 100, and so you can imagine they're using these bowls or producing a lot of

stuff. They break them. They need new ones. So there were there were, you know, pottery shops. That would that were specifically making these bowls, and they're designed for mixing paste. They like curve up perfectly. They don't they and they curve back in just so that as you're mixing the paste, it just folds back in on itself like it's just so they're so perfect. And you can't. You know, that's it. No. There's no one. There's no dye shops, there's. Maybe one or one. Dye shop still there and so there's no, you know, that whole ecosystem of like the Potters making the bowls for the mixing the paste like all that stuff's gone right. But it's kind of that again sort of that knowledge, right, like yeah, you can mix it up in any bowl, but this is the perfect bowl for this home over time for doing it right. Yeah. So I. Don't know. I like that connection.

Cissell

And I feel like you talked a little bit about the raincoat earlier. You feel free to speak more about that and then, you know, you spoke about the cloth too. And I like that, you know, that's kind of, you know, the work between you and your spouse has come together in this.

Ricketts:

Yeah, yeah. And then and then, you know. Dying in a way that that really shows off. The the Persimmon, yes. Is and and and then part of it as well is like. You know this was. This was died with the persimmons from this friend of ours tree and these two trees that he had that just like collapsed under the weight of their persimmons and and he's since passed, right? So then you have these other memories that become attached to things and associated with things that. But again, you know someone will buy something that's died with this, they'll have no idea. But for us, there's when you work this way. Your life becomes entwined in the materials that you're working with, right? Like there's sort of the vintage of the the composted in to go, for example, and each of those years has. Your life in them. Right. You're growing it and processing it over a year, there's. The people who joined you and people who helped out other things happening in your life at the time, it's all kind of embodied in there. In a way that. It embodies a certain. Experience right. And I would argue that everything that we make does the exact same thing. They can embody certain things, right? So but it, but it may be, and it it, they embody certain types of knowledge, right. Like certainly it is kind of miraculous. That we can. Extract petroleum from the earth and turn it into any color we want, right? But also embodied in that is all these other problems, right? So I like that sort of the human scale of of production and what it embodies.

Cissell

Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you'd like to share or things that came up? Not really. OK. Well, thank you so much for having me here and. Showing me. Thank you. I'll. I'll stop the recording now, but OK.

Ricketts:

Yeah, good luck with your work.