

Anna Dunnill: *Dense Matter*

21 November – 13 December 2025

Essay by Josephine Mead

*“Our materials come to us already ground and chipped and crushed and powdered and mixed and sliced, so that only the finale in the long sequence of operations from matter to product is left to us: we merely toast the bread. No need to get our hands into the dough.”*

– Anni Albers, “Tactile Sensibility”, 1965

In our busy, consumer-driven world we are disconnected from our surroundings and the processes that produce things. Writing in 1965, artist Anni Albers understood the need to rectify this. She could see the value in meeting hand with material, making from scratch, and connecting with matter.<sup>1</sup> Sixty years later, Anna Dunnill has this same understanding—an embodied intuition that recognises the power of craft and is harnessed through the ways she works.

For *Dense Matter*, Dunnill has created a series of small tapestries, woven on a hand-loom. They speak to the histories of her practice—woven drawings that call upon past creations, while telling new stories of recent comings and goings. They are predominately woven in undyed cream hemp, with highlights of woven cream silk sketched in as if they were pen-markings. She has incorporated scraps of coloured thread from the studio floor and added loops have been stitched on edges to expand and soften the frames of the works. Objects have been sewn into the constructed cloth—mostly small pieces of detritus found on daily walks—discarded objects, seen as disposable to many, and precious in the hands of a maker. This sense of marking and combining and the deeply personal nature of Dunnill’s mark-making leads me to wonder—how do we piece ourselves together? How do we draw or mark ourselves into being? Dunnill reflects on the “anxious nature of the works—a product of the condition of their making. They are very tight

and held-together tapestries.” The act of working out what additions to make, and combining disparate material to create a cohesive whole, can be seen as allegory for the complexities of working out the self and one’s need to continually self-define.

The drawings within the tapestries are bound within the constraints of their form. Counteractively, Dunnill presents *Line work* (2024), a long string sculpture that pushes away from this sense of constraint. Stretched across the wall, it becomes a landscape, to be walked beside. Meticulously twined from silk sewing thread, the fine string is interwoven with bits of studio detritus. It speaks of the processes of the studio. It speaks of metaphorical and psychological walks, informed by meditative acts of making and the realisations this can bring.

The genesis of this body of work is related to histories of gleaning. Traditionally, after an agricultural harvest, poor people would go through the fields and collect what had been missed. This was part of the agricultural cycle and was expected. There were particular gleaning rights that protected this process—as long as the harvest was over and they were only collecting what was missed. There were unwritten rules between farmer and gleaner that encouraged this mutually beneficial arrangement. This began to change in England in 1788 when a farmer sued a gleaner, heralding private property rights to be changed and the act of gleaning to become criminalised.<sup>2</sup> Dunnill’s practice recalls the joy and possibility that can come through acts of shared care, for land and person. The tenderness taken to collect detritus—otherwise forgotten—and fashion it into works of art, suggests a “connecting with place and mapping of where the work is [physically and psychologically] being made.” Dunnill explains that from this starting point, “the focus shifted and became more about the material itself and about transforming it into different things.” The making processes activate the materials, imbuing them with history and care. Even the smallest reclaimed scrap is filled with a kind of potency.

The studio is home for Dunnill. Much of her practice comes from deep intuition, rather than calculated choice. She explains, “it’s hard to quantify the decision-making process regarding what I choose to pick up. I’m drawn to things that feel they could be a bead, or that have a sense of life in them. I want to add movement to things that may have already been somewhat transformed by the world.”

Dunnill noted that there is a certain anxiety apparent in these works created alone in the studio, in comparison to the openness of the sculpture made in collaboration with her close friend and fellow artist Isabelle Rudolph. There is something in working together that can bring ease (when the partnership is right).

Anni Albers noted that the “we” of 1965 had grown “increasingly insensitive in our perception of touch, the tactile sense.”<sup>3</sup> She explained, “we touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love.”<sup>4</sup> The “we” of Dunnill and Rudolph has found this assurance through collaborative making. Rudolph has a background in sculpture and textiles, and is skilled at beadwork. She threads beads with a netting stitch to form flat planes and sculptural shapes. Dunnill and Rudolph have been able to explore new ways of working through their shared love of found materials.

The resulting suspended sculpture, *Petals, stalks, algae* (2025), uses hundreds of beads made from flower petals. Dunnill discovered the bead-making process by chance, while experimenting with using petals to make watercolour paint. She began absent-mindedly rolling the leftover pulp into beads, and discovered they dried hard and were durable. Different flowers picked from the garden and the neighbourhood – camellia, oxalis, rose, calendula – produced an array of subtly different colours and textures.

Camellia season has just passed, and Dunnill and Rudolph spent hours collecting the petals as they fell in big piles. They sorted, simmered and blitzed them, then rolled the strained pulp into beads. One whole day was spent collecting yellow oxalis flowers – enough to make just sixty small yellow beads. Needing around a thousand beads for the sculpture, Dunnill did a call out for collective help. Ten people gathered at her kitchen table to help fashion petals into beads.

It is this collecting of what nature is dispelling—fallen petals—and the community effort to add to the harvest, that speaks to Dunnill's practice at large. She works to reclaim that which is discarded, finding new forms of beauty. The cyclic nature of this work speaks to the cyclic nature of life's rhythms. We naturally fall in and out of time with loved ones and with our surroundings. Often, as artists, we have to make in order to find our way back to ourselves.

Bead making is an ancient and universal act, crossing oceans and borders. Formal connections can be found across different cultural practices and beads have been a major source of trade for millennia. As I rolled her beads between my fingers, Dunnill explained how they “were one of the first portable decorations or ornaments. Their function is less practical and more spiritual or personal.”

There is a comforting sense of portability through moving on, away and through; and there is comfort to be found rolling a bead between your fingers—a feeling embodied through prayer beads. As well as conjuring faith for some, the reverence bound within a bead is perhaps also a product of the stories that this simple object contains. Dunnill is acutely aware of the complex cultural histories that beads carry. Through care and reverence, she pays homage to the “cultural touchstones” which these methods derive from—acknowledging roots, while staying aware that these practices are part of global histories.

Working together, Dunnill and Rudolph have created an elongated free hanging sculpture that can be seen as a form of expanded weaving, made from hand-made beads and stalks of fennel, and influenced by architecture and object design. Contrasting sections of translucency are made using seaweed ‘beads’ – technically pneumatocysts, hollow bubbles that help seaweed strands maintain buoyancy. This material came from Rudolph’s research into the potentials of seaweed as a textile. The fennel was sourced from an abundant yield from Dunnill’s backyard. She showed me large stems of fennel drying, standing strong against the corrugated iron fence. There is something extremely fragile and simultaneously strong about the structure of fennel. It forms a natural tube, easy to pierce and reclaim as a bead. The artists have created designs that use variations of a netting stitch, drawing on techniques that are found (in various forms) in cultures from Europe to Africa to the Americas. The piece’s netted structure reflects the back-and-forth rhythm of weaving. Yet these processes have been expanded: created freehand rather than held on a loom, and rippling from a flat plane to a rope, to a string and back again.

While the woven works rely on utilitarian structures, these objects are all non-functional. This conjures Albers’ ideas of *matière*: the way that the nature of a material is imbued with subjective meaning. Albers explains, “structure, as related to function, needs our intellect to construct it or, analytically, to decipher it. *Matière*, on the other hand, is mainly nonfunctional, non-utilitarian, and in that respect, like color, it cannot be experienced intellectually [...] it takes sensibility to respond to *matière*, as it does to respond to color.”<sup>5</sup> These works enter realms far beyond function.

As we ended our studio visit in Dunnill's garden, she noted that it was "feeling wild at the moment"—a product of life taking over from the making, and then making taking over from the gardening. While life can be messy, this work is a testament to feelings of renewal and is sure to continue to yield bountiful harvests of form, collaboration and new beginnings, long after this exhibition ends.

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<sup>1</sup> Albers, Anni. "Tactile Sensibility". *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, edited by Brenda Danilowitz, Wesleyan University Press, 2000, p.69

<sup>2</sup> *Steel v Houghton* (1788) 1 H Bl 51; 126 ER 32, also known as the Great Gleaning Case.

<sup>3</sup> Albers, Anni. "Tactile Sensibility", p. 69

<sup>4</sup> As above.

<sup>5</sup> Albers, Anni. "Tactile Sensibility", p. 70

*Josephine Mead is a visual artist, writer and curator based on Wurundjeri woi wurrung Country (Australia). She works through photography, sculpture, installation and writing to explore personal notions of support.*

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CAVES

The Nicholas Building  
Room 5, Level 8  
37 Swanston St, Naarm (Melbourne)

cavesgallery.com  
@caves.naarm