

A Refusal to Abandon

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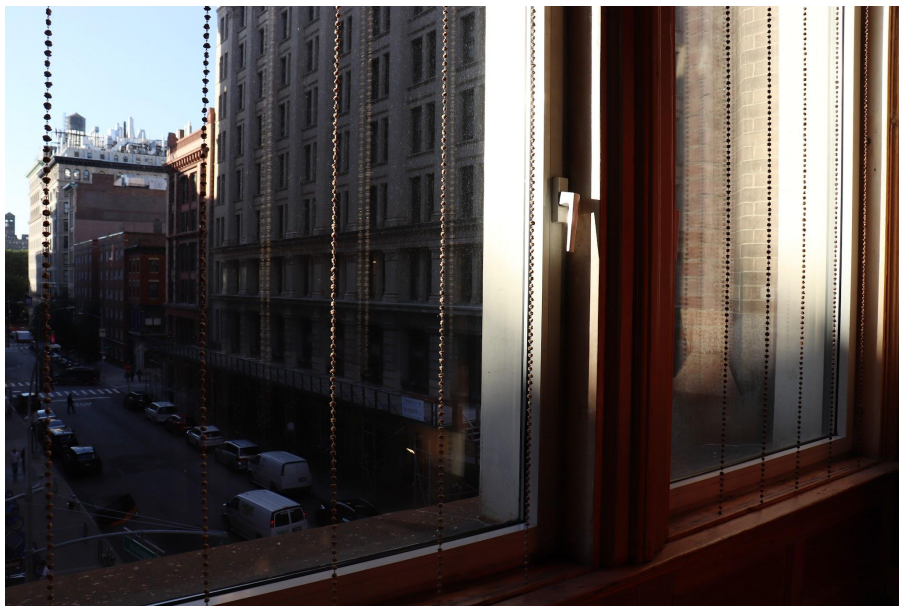
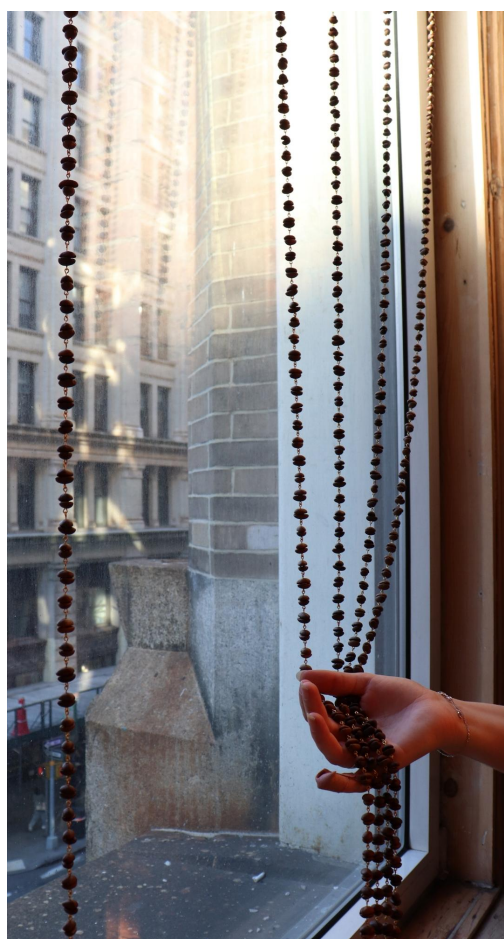


semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions variable. LMCC Workspace Residency studio installation. Image courtesy of the artist.

I'm in Brooklyn getting my haircut at the queer salon that is still masks-required in 2026, a blessing. Afterward I stop by a coffee shop down the street as a treat. I decide to get an iced coffee and am intrigued by the sign that says they only serve it black. They are right, it's a honey-processed coffee that is already so naturally sweet and fruity. Totally impressed, I arrive home and search for the roaster online. Not seeing anything about the sustainability or growing conditions of the coffee, I decide to reach out to the roaster to see if they have any information. They don't, but they generously offer to send my questions to their supplier, whose website has plenty of information about their sourcing, how they work with the producers, and how the coffee is processed, but not about the sustainability of the farms or agricultural practices. Listing some of my concerns, I essentially ask, *what can you tell me about this coffee that would allow me to drink it with confidence?* They respond quickly, telling me that their focus is supporting and building relationships with farmers and that the various certifications that I had mentioned, such as organic or fair trade, can be expensive to obtain and not having them does not necessarily mean that farmers are not farming responsibly. I am disappointed but not surprised by the roundabout response. Hearing about companies that build direct relationships that center farmers' livelihoods is of course reassuring, however I'm still left wondering what ecological practices are in place.

In my desire for transparency, I do not imply that roasters and suppliers from coffee-importing countries should dictate the practices of small-scale and microlot farms in producing countries in ways that replicate colonial structures of control, or that we should abandon farms with ecological practices that fall short. Rather, I want to consider how we navigate nuance, and how we have these conversations should reflect the future we aim to bring about. It is true that many coffee farmers will not be able to become certified due to the barriers and costs. Personally, I would be glad to know that I'm purchasing coffee from farms who may not have certifications or anywhere near ideal growing practices, but may be in the process of becoming organic, are planting shade trees, cultivating other crops alongside coffee, have other methods of regenerating the soil, or in some way are caring for the health of the land they steward. As a consumer, the utmost transparency around how coffee is processed after it's harvested does not alleviate my concerns around how it is grown, and these concerns are not disconnected from my chronically ill life or my transness. My bodymind is nature itself, as is yours.





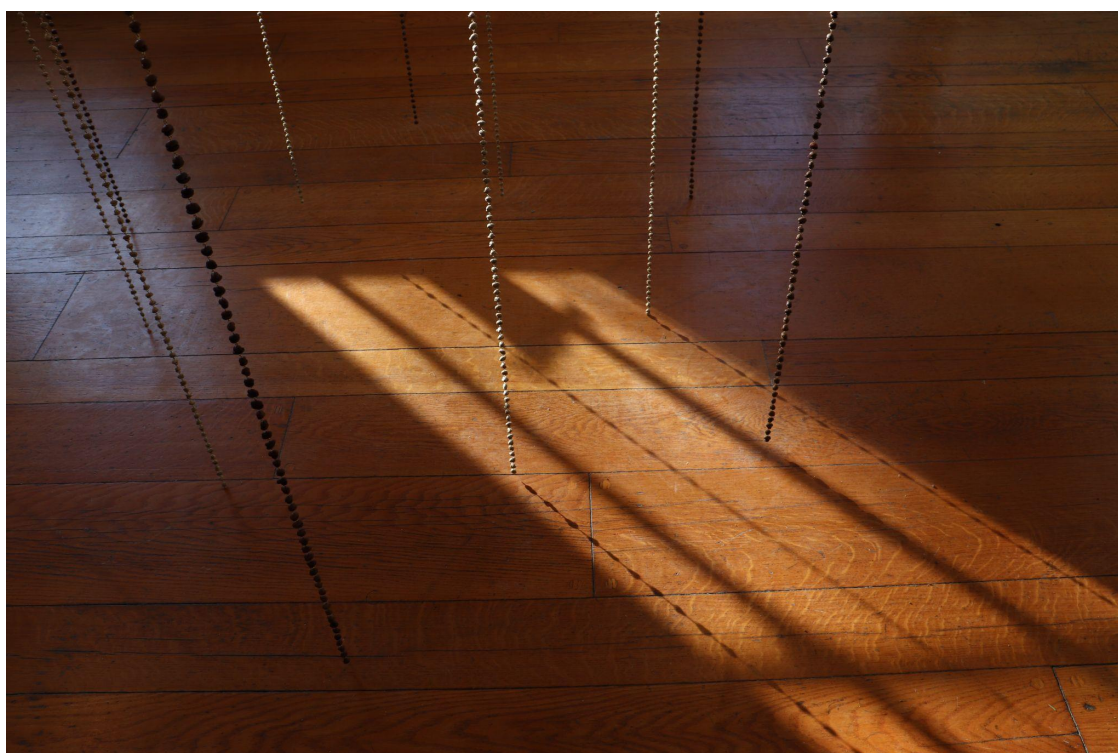
semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions variable. 2025 Installation in *Syncretism*, curated by Romilly Rinck and Jasmin Risk, Lacy Rd Collective, New York City. Image courtesy of the artist.

One of my first connections with coffee was through the intervention of my parents and school. As a teenager I could not stay awake in school, and I was made to start drinking coffee every morning. While it did not work to keep me from falling asleep in class, I continued to be a coffee drinker since then. Now I consider coffee to be my greatest plant ally. I feel blessed to be able to interact with my family's coffee plants in Loja, Ecuador. When I pick the coffee cherries, I think about how it is an enormous privilege to harvest with leisure rather than through slavery, force, or a lack of options. As I pick the coffee, I listen to the birds in the trees and, while it is not a forest or the most ideal conditions for the coffee, I am glad to see it growing alongside a variety of other trees, giving the coffee a little protection from the sun and creating a habitat for the birds.

I have begun to see myself like the birds when I fly back and forth between countries. Our lives are intertwined with the health of the land, just like the lives of the migratory birds that split their time between North, Central, and South America. These birds that depend on coffee-growing landscapes are increasingly threatened by habitat loss. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in Washington D.C. has created a new certification called "Bird Friendly" for both coffee and cocoa. This certification ensures agroforestry or forest conservation practices and aims to conserve habitat for threatened migratory birds. This is done by taking "shade-grown" coffee a step further through criteria for the height and diversity of the trees that grow alongside the coffee plants. There have even been studies done that showed a significant decrease in the coffee berry borer (*gorgojo del café*), the most harmful pest of coffee worldwide that devastates harvests, thanks to the birds on shaded coffee farms who eat the beetle (Karp et al. 1339–47; Moreno-Ramírez et al.).

In addition to "Bird Friendly," "Regenerative Organic Certified" is another new certification that, while it does not focus on the trees that provide shade for coffee, it ensures that the health of the soil and microorganisms within the soil are being regenerated through a variety of approaches (*Regenerative Organic Alliance*). While I do try to buy "Bird Friendly" or "Regenerative Organic" or "shade-grown coffee" so that I can ensure the traceability and impact of my daily ritual, it feels misguided and colonial to believe that we need United States-based Smithsonian scientists or other certifications from abroad to direct conservation efforts when these practices have long been a part of Indigenous agroforestry practices. *Chakra* farming, for example, is a polyculture system and agricultural practice rooted in the traditions of Indigenous communities in the Andes and the Amazon. Chakras are living spaces and are not only beneficial for agriculture but also for biodiversity conservation ("The Amazonian Chakra").





semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions Variable. 2026 Wave Hill Winter Workspace Residency open studios. Image courtesy of the artist.

As Coffee Watch states in their recent report *Poison in Your Coffee*,

As traditional shade-grown agroforestry coffee systems have been replaced by full sun monocultures, pest pressure has intensified, soils have degraded, and the world's 25 million [primarily small holder] coffee farmers have become increasingly reliant on chemical inputs simply to maintain yields. ("Poison in Your Coffee")

These concerns implicate and connect us globally. Worldwide, 2.2 billion cups of coffee are consumed each day ("Poison in Your Coffee"), amounting to roughly 500 billion cups a year ("Global Crisis is Coming"). With the amount of coffee flowing through Western coffee-importing countries, keeping us running, one could say, it might be surprising to learn that *Coffea arabica*, the species that makes up the majority of coffee production (followed by *Robusta*) and most commonly associated with high-quality coffee, is endangered due to the threats it faces.

Arabica is a fickle sensitive tree, and the conditions it requires to thrive need to be just right: temperatures between 18–21 °C / 64.4–69.8 °F, a specific amount of rainfall and warm days followed by cool nights ("Global Crisis is Coming"). It's estimated that by 2050, about 50% of the area currently suitable for coffee cultivation globally will no longer be suitable as climate crisis worsens and temperatures rise (Bunn et al. 89–101). What could happen is quite easy to predict. As land and growing conditions become unsuitable, farmers will be forced into new areas and higher altitudes, leading to continued deforestation and/or an even greater reliance on pesticides. As consumers we must reckon with the fact that our daily ritual has become "one of the most pesticide-intensive crops on earth" ("Poison in Your Coffee"). Coffee Watch's report

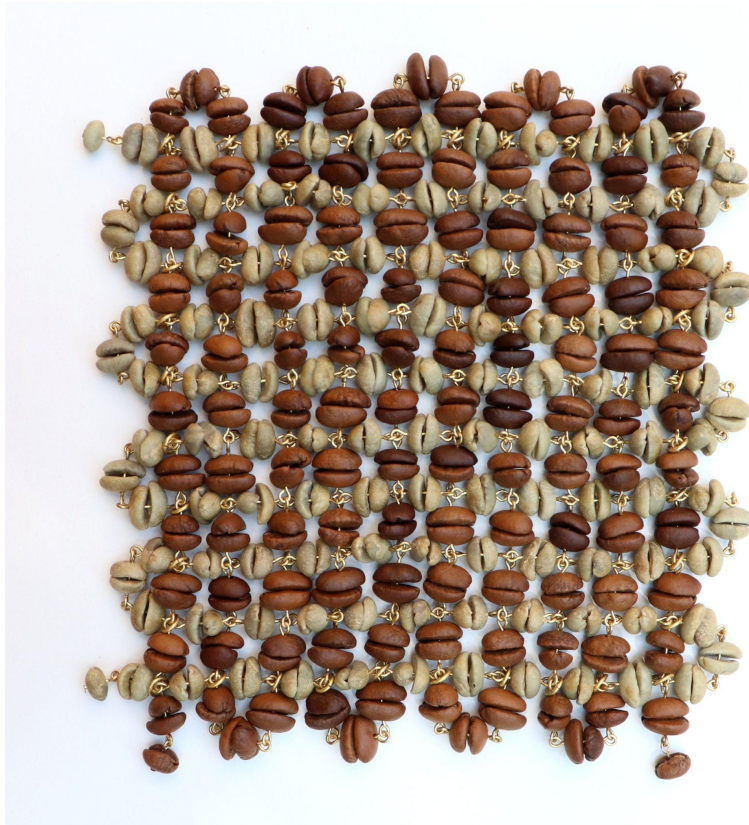
exposes a stark regulatory hypocrisy: pesticides banned in consuming countries are still exported to coffee-producing countries, where regulation and enforcement is weaker. A chemical banned for use becomes a residue that is tolerated for coffee imports. This double standard, where substances that are too dangerous for domestic use are sold abroad and re-enter consumer markets as residues, shifts health and environmental risks onto producing countries while playing Russian roulette with consumers' health. ("Poison in Your Coffee")

This lack of care, to say the least, for the health of farmers in coffee-producing countries, as well as for the health of coffee consumers globally, exemplifies the ableist ecologies that Sunaura Taylor discusses in her book *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*. Through the term "environmentalism of the injured," Taylor shares, "three key ethical attunements that I came to associate with injury environmentalism. The first is centering of the relational networks enmeshing bodies and environments. The second is a refusal to abandon those people and landscapes that have been harmed. The third is a commitment to challenging the social and economic inequities that are the root causes of the damage while still valuing ill and

disabled lives” (25). Taylor synthesizes that, “in ableist ecologies, abandonment is the commonsense response to ecological disablement [...] Injury environmentalism shows that it is possible to refuse abandonment—to insist that we create ecological futures where the sacrificial have survived, and where they can show others how to as well” (26–28).

From this framework I ask us to consider what a refusal to abandon looks like when it comes to the future of coffee landscapes and farmers, and the lands and relationships that our rituals tie us to as consumers. Looking at the past 150+ years and prior centuries we can understand the rise of coffee in the West as an aid to the rise of capitalism. By 1876 the United States was importing one third of the world’s coffee supply (Meister 19). As of 2025, two thirds of Americans drink coffee, and the average American coffee drinker consumes 3 cups per day (“More Americans Drink Coffee Each Day Than Any Other Beverage”). More broadly speaking, the West runs on coffee yet there is often little to no relationship to the plant itself, its origins or journey. Coffee is a part of office and work culture and is drunk throughout the day as fuel for work, without connection. Far from a moment of rest, the “coffee break” was introduced as an aid to productivity. It is this insidious ubiquity, guise of hospitality, and construction of coffee into a normalized and overlooked symbol of work culture that renders invisible the violence of the coffee trade—its contribution to slavery across the globe and perpetuation of human rights abuses, including child labor and debt-bondage (“Coffee and Human Rights Abuses”), and degradation of land.





semilla santa (tejido), 2025, Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass, 0.5" x 6.5" x 7". Image courtesy of the artist.

As an artist, I have spent years working with materials that more obviously suggest disabled experience, such as beds, bedding, and medication detritus. I increasingly find my materials stemming from concerns around the climate crisis and the inseparability of our bodyminds and the earth, which is still always about disability. I came to work with coffee, a material steeped in climate crisis, with the tenderness of familial connection, and the queer-crip undoing of 24/7 society's demands. The world is only continuing to get more crip, and it's the most marginalized crips who will be and already are among the first to experience the impacts of preventable climate disasters. As Akemi Nishida explains in the Disability Visibility Project,

Human-intensified, natural disasters do not hit everyone equally. Communities of color, disabled and sick, working class and poor, queer and trans, immigrants, older individuals, and in geopolitically disinvested regions are disproportionately impacted harder by disasters. It is often the case that the rich and their corporations hasten environmental deteriorations that lead to the intensification of natural disasters. Thus, on-going interlocking oppressions and (state) violence mean emergencies and disasters become a daily occurrence to many disabled people. Disabled people, and particularly disabled people from multiply marginalized communities, fight to survive ever-intensifying disasters. (Nishida)

At home in New York City, where I've experienced the overflow of coffee for the past ten years, it can be easy to either romanticize the collective daily coffee ritual or treat it as totally banal rather than an ever-intensifying disaster we must collectively survive. Perhaps it's the disabled experience of being left behind (during climate disaster, socially, economically, or otherwise) that primes us for an Eco-Crip revolution, or in other words, the refusal to abandon.

My long-term installation work, *semilla santa* (translating to "holy seed"), has been an instinctive response to our need for a paradigm shift—in connection to my own roots, coffee's historical and ongoing colonial violence, and the desire to create space for critical thinking around our relationships to overconsumption, ritual, land, and labor. The work is made up of chains of coffee beans, roasted and unroasted, that are installed specific to the context and the architecture of the site. I begin with a meticulous process of drilling each bean, selecting pairs that fit together (which mimics how coffee typically grows in pairs in the coffee cherry, although I have also begun to create chains of singularly growing "peaberries"), and then attaching them to wire loops by hand. The chains of coffee beans recall rosaries or prayer beads and remind us that slowness is sacred, rejecting the use of coffee as fuel for capitalist productivity. The process and form are deeply rooted in neurodivergent experience and stimming through its repetition and tactility. The form also holds at once the role Catholicism has played in the colonial project and justification of violence, the syncretism present in Latin American Catholicism, and the power we have to build new personal and spiritual connections with the plants we rely on without uncritical romanticization or cultural appropriation.



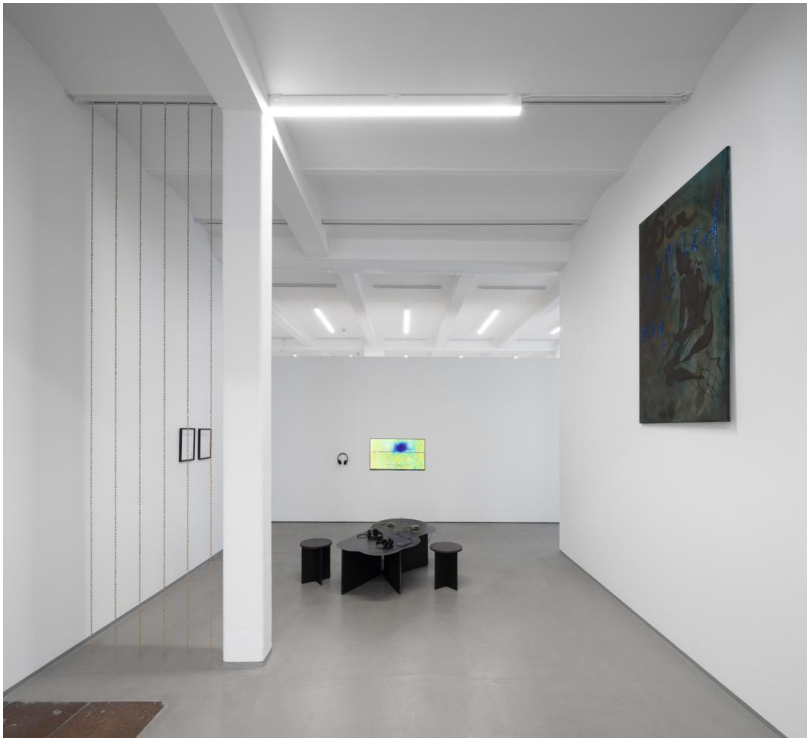
semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and Unroasted Coffee Beans and Brass. Dimensions variable. No Lugar AIR Program open studios. Image courtesy of the artist.

The work was first exhibited beyond my studio in the 2025 group exhibition *Syncretism*, curated at Lacy Rd Collective in New York City where it was installed in front of the towering windows of a Manhattan loft space. Then in early 2026, I took the work to the Winter Workspace Residency at Wave Hill in the Bronx, New York, where I installed the chains to the ceiling, reaching the floor, as an inner circle of unroasted coffee chains and outer circle of roasted coffee chains with space to stand in the center. In April 2026, during a residency at *No Lugar* in Quito, Ecuador, I placed *semilla santa* in the center of a gallery as a single column as if rising up to greet and honor the sun in the equatorial city and resting on my uncle's *Jerga*, a multipurpose woolen textile placed on the backs of horses or other load-bearing animals to protect their skin. Most recently *semilla santa* traveled to Copenhagen for the exhibition *IN PROTEST AND IN CARE* at O-Overgaden. Here I installed the work as two curtains to be traversed. In November 2026 *semilla santa* moves to Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, New York, for the exhibition *There's no me without you*, where the chains of coffee will be displayed to be scooped up in one's hands.

The longer I work with coffee the more aware I become about my impacts as a consumer, which has a ripple effect on all parts of my life. I write this not as an expert or coffee professional, but as a consumer who is learning, imperfectly and ongoingly, and with a sense of responsibility as an artist in making this process of questioning and learning feel accessible. Even having a connection to coffee growing within my family, I didn't have this level of attention to my daily ritual prior to working with coffee bean by bean (or seed by seed). I grow concerned as I watch white coffee bros on YouTube explain the intricacies of their coffee hobby from a place of obsession with their own leisure. I grow concerned when I see specialty coffee roasters stating that taste is their top priority as if the environment is an afterthought or someone else's niche (much like how disabled advocates have endlessly explained that accessibility is not an afterthought). Can you imagine what could change if our perspective and habits around coffee shifted from fuel for productivity to a ritual imbued with a sense of connection and responsibility toward the impacts of this cash crop? This is in part why I install *semilla santa* as a sensorial installation, which works to decenter ocularcentrism that privileges sighted audiences. By passing through, scooping up, or feeling the coffee along one's body, the invisibilized product becomes an embodied encounter that asks for slow, tender, and careful attention, and in this vein, gestures toward reconsideration, criticality, and a desire for change.

We already know what must be done. Our agricultural practices must shift away from monoculture systems on degraded land, which, beyond coffee, bring food insecurity and increasingly less nutritious food. The end of capitalism is an agro-ecological revolution. It is also Land Back, reparations, a refusal to abandon disabled bodies and landscapes, and the cultivation of our attention. If you have been energized or comforted by coffee as I have, let us ask each other—from where and from whom are we receiving our energy from, and what can we give back in return?







semilla santa, 2025–ongoing. Roasted and unroasted coffee beans and brass. Dimensions variable. Installed as two site-specific curtains for *IN PROTEST AND IN CARE* curated by Anne Kølbaek Iversen at O-Overgaden in Copenhagen, Denmark. Photograph by David Stjernholm.

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