

PHRAGMI TRIPUDIUM

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LEARNING TO OBSERVE...

by Marcelo Guajardo

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Experimental Design, Fall 2024
Learning Diary

INTRODUCTION

As part of the experimental design course, I seek to explore novel ways to tap into creativity. My goal is to rethink my approach to design and break free from the typical constraints I was raised with, especially the industrial and product design mindset, which tends to be very linear. The course focuses on feral ways of designing with nature, not just designing for nature or drawing inspiration from it. The aim is to truly incorporate nature into design, this will be interpreted in my own way through the exercises.

At first, we were introduced to several projects, all quite different in focus. Some projects felt a bit too artistic for my taste. While I see myself more as a designer than an artist, there's still a desire to explore more artistic approaches. Using creative tools to express myself more freely would help grow as a designer. Initially, it was confusing, as the projects I expected to see were more object-focused, but I realized that a shift in thinking is necessary. The intention is to become more artistic in this project, yet still create something physical. This balance is crucial for growth as a designer—a designer with a strong artistic mindset, which could create a great balance for my practice.

Even though design and art are very “visual” fields, we don't truly observe what's around us, we simply acknowledge it. This is something that needs to change. I want to at least try to foster a sense of awareness or deeper connection to what is around us. Engaging more intentionally with my surroundings will provide inspiration for design and unlock new ways to fuel creativity. It's essential to avoid falling into linear thinking and typical constraints. Creativity doesn't follow a straight path; there are various ways to reach a solution. If a rigid approach is adhered to, creativity becomes limited. The goal now is to better understand myself and my surroundings and discover what this journey really means.



THE CREATURE

For the first activity we had to choose a living creature from the Otaniemi campus which we had to describe in a sense that related to us somehow. For my creature, I chose a wooden hook I carved from a branch. My inspiration came during a recent outing with a friend. He introduced me to whittling, a type of wood carving, and we spent time together selecting branches with interesting shapes to turn into hangers for walls. While working on this, I found myself drawn to branches with pronounced, curvy shapes—curves that felt more dynamic than those typically found in nature.

Later, I showed my friend the piece I had created—a wavy, organic form. He responded thoughtfully, questioning whether it was truly “organic.” He pointed out that, in the strictest sense, something organic is simply anything that originates from nature. While my piece technically came from a tree, he argued that my redesign had stripped it of its true organic essence. This sparked a discussion between us: did the shape I crafted still count as organic, or had I transformed it into something artificial by following certain design ideals?

This conversation led us to reflect on how we often associate “organic” forms with shapes that are smooth, soft, and visually pleasing, avoiding anything that might seem aggressive or unrefined. In reality, many natural forms—such as branches with splinters, thorns, or signs of animal habitation—aren’t necessarily friendly or comfortable to our senses. However, in the design world, when we talk about “organic forms,” we often imagine soft, rounded shapes that feel safe and inviting.

In my attempt to create something organic-looking, I had stripped the wood of its original qualities without truly observing it first. I had taken it and reshaped it based on my own preconceptions of what “organic” should look like, rather than what it inherently was. Moving forward, I want to slow down and truly observe nature before altering it—to immerse myself more deeply in what nature is communicating, rather than imposing my own ideas of what I think natural shapes should be.



THE SPOT: “A CHAIR ABOVE THE REEDS”

The spot I found was in a beautiful area at the tip of the autonomous campus. What I really liked about this place was that you could actually see the water above the reeds, which usually block the view. This spot offered a great vantage point, and there was also a random chair, with remnants of burnt wood and some rocks nearby. It seemed like people used to make fires and cook there, but what I really enjoyed about this place was the sound of the wind. I could hear it very clearly and loudly, and it seemed to cancel out every other sound. Any noise I did hear was directly related to the wind, which was calming and quieting. It felt like the perfect place to sit and observe.

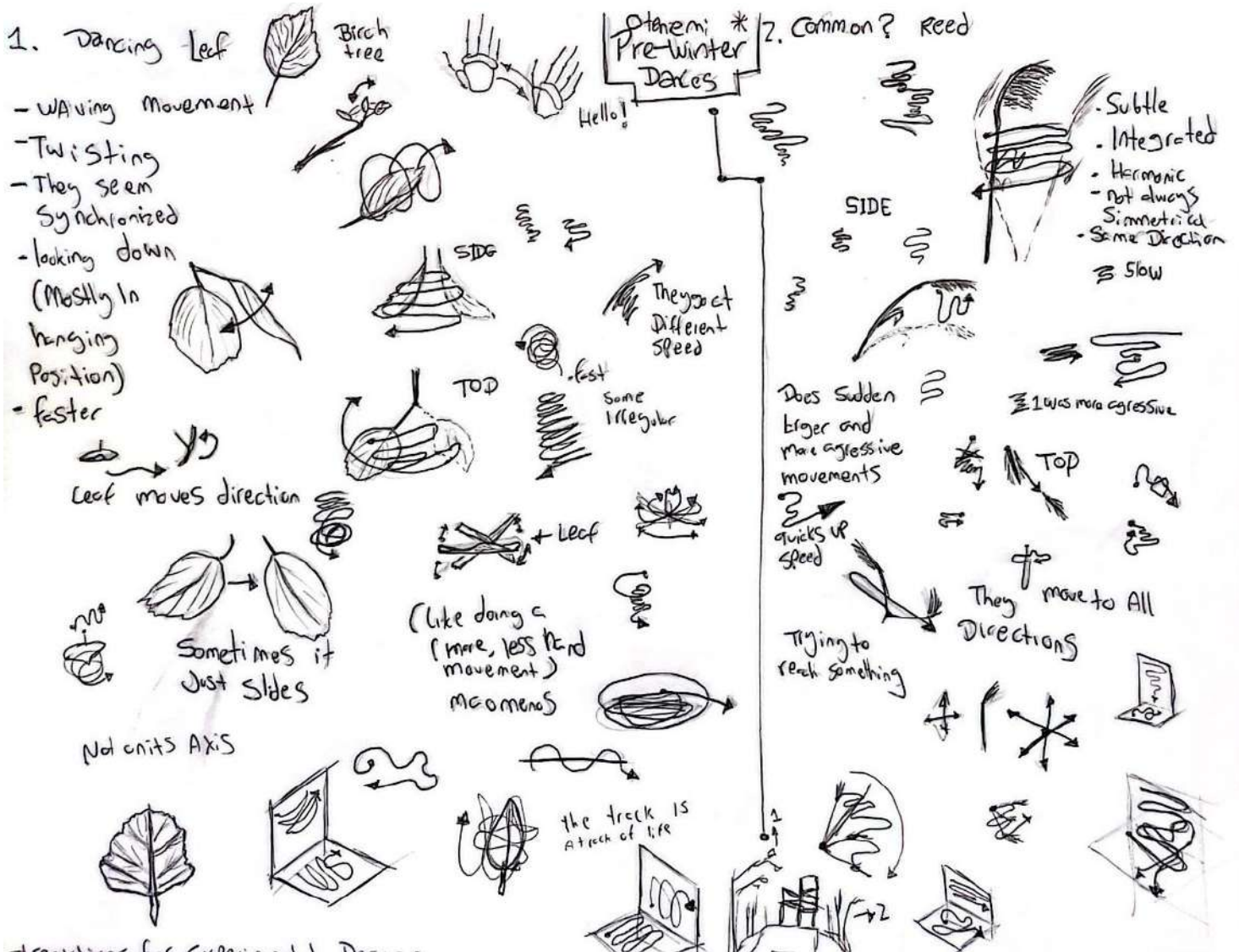
And that’s exactly what I did: I went to this place several times to observe. What really caught my attention were the almost harmonious movements of the living things around me, especially the reeds and the birch leaves. The reeds swayed in smooth, regular curves, while the birch leaves spun gently on their own axis, almost as if they were waving. This movement fascinated me, so I decided to focus on the choreography of the plants and their motions. I wanted my project to be centered around the idea that the plants themselves were the designers, expressing their own movements and beautiful choreography.





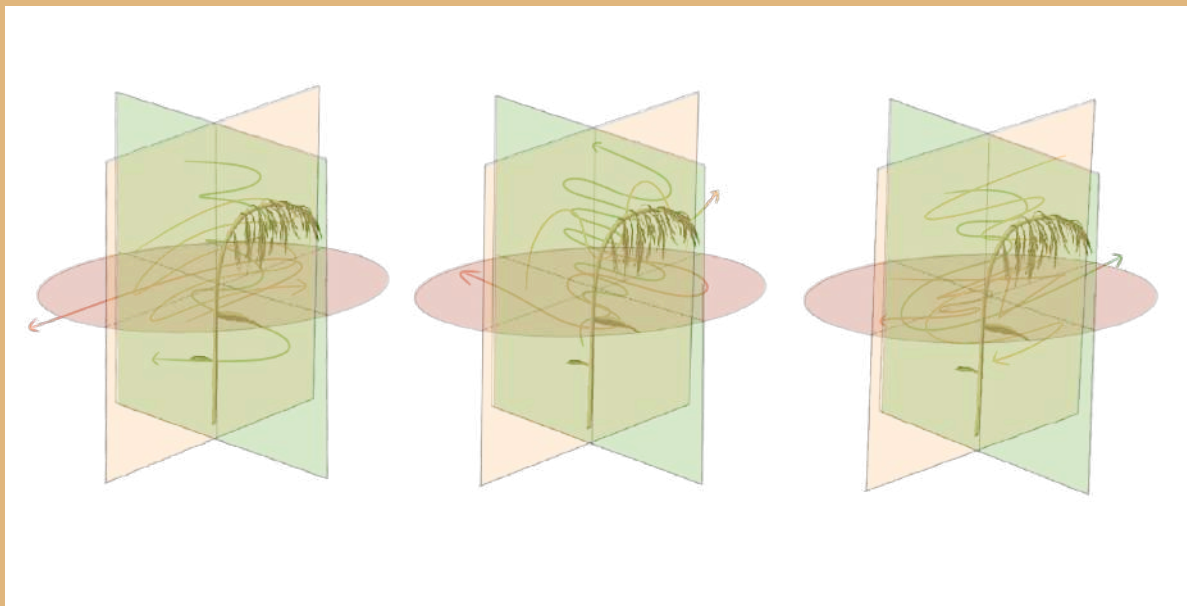
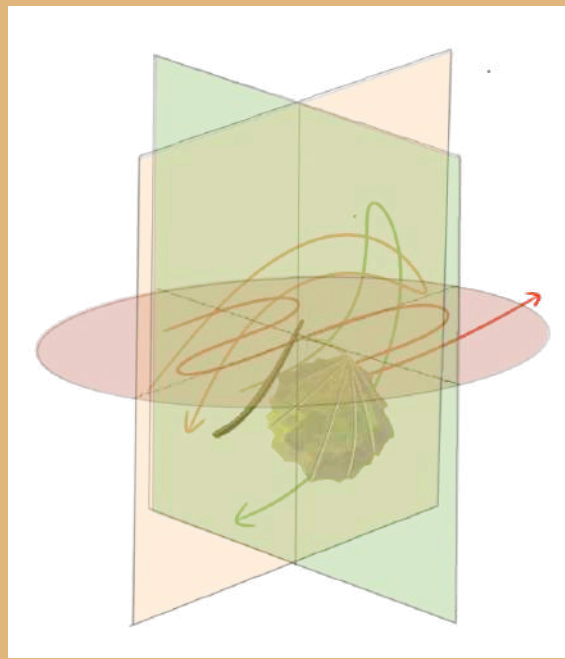
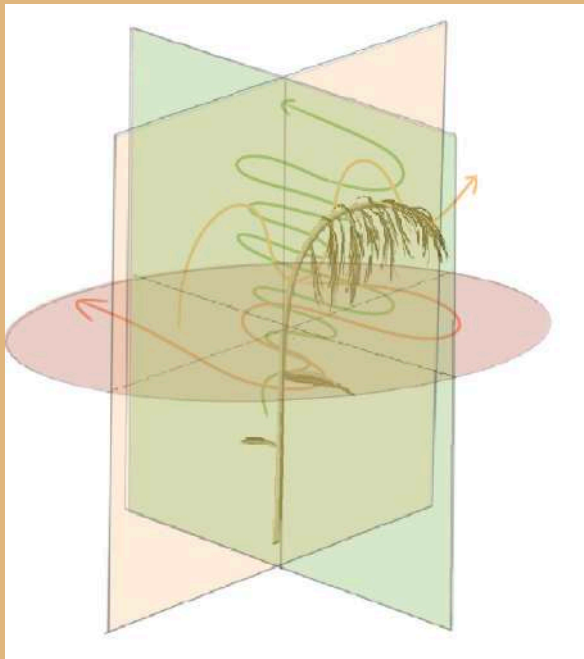
THE INTERPRETATION

For this process, I started visiting the spot in the mornings. One particular morning, I witnessed the sunrise there and decided to grab a notebook and begin sketching the traces I saw, without even looking at the notebook itself. It was interesting because I started to realize how some of the movements worked and how there were certain regularities. Even though these movements could be mistaken as symmetrical, they were actually quite unique. This fascinated me, so I began to interpret these movements, trying to create diagrams and delve deeper into their patterns.



THE INTERPRETATION

Most of these movements were in my head as the ideation started, nonetheless I felt that nature needed to play a more direct and specific role in the project. I decided that the plants themselves should also contribute, so I had them “paint” as well. That’s exactly what I did...





“PAINTING WITH THE REEDS”

Nature should be part of the design process, not just design for it. I wanted nature to directly contribute to the project, rather than just imposing my own. So, I grabbed some paint, brushes, and a sketchbook, and went to my spot. I took a few reeds, taped them together, and attached a brush to the tip of each. With the movement of the wind, the reeds began to sway and “paint” on the small canvas. I wanted this to be part of the ideation process, a way of letting the reeds themselves contribute to the creation.

The experience was interesting, though not as easy as I expected. There were a few unexpected challenges. At first, the brush got stuck and didn’t move as fluidly as I thought it would. I expected the paintings to be more like smooth traces, but the brush strokes were thicker, and the paint was hard to control. It was also difficult to keep the canvas in one place, causing the reeds to get stuck on the paper. As a result, the paintings turned out more like dotted lines than continuous traces.

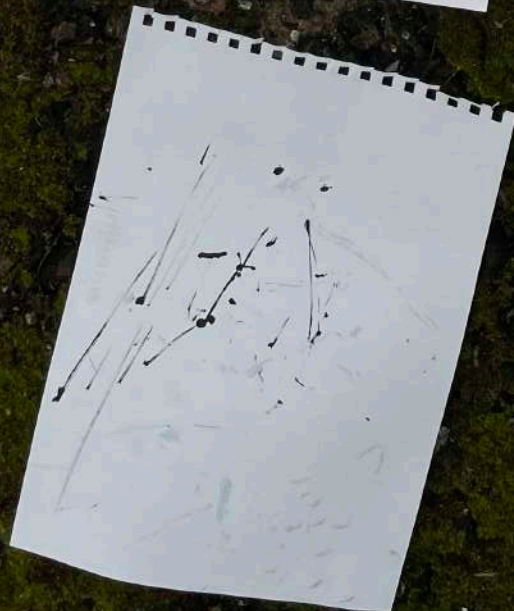
An interesting thing happened with one of the paintings: after it was finished, it started to rain lightly. At first, I thought I should protect the painting, but then I felt it was important to leave it as it was. The painting was made by nature, and rain is a part of nature too. So, I let it get wet, as it was meant to. It rained only for a few seconds, so only one painting got wet, but the effect was beautiful. The rain gave it a unique, interesting texture. After that, the other paintings went much smoother. The experience was a bit harder and less fluid than I imagined, but in the end, it worked quite well.





“PAINTING WITH THE REEDS”





A NICE DETOUR

After this exercise, I decided to go out for lunch. I was feeling a bit stressed, wondering what to do next—how to turn this idea into a tangible product. But then, I decided to visit the ceramics workshop to check on how other pieces were coming along. I had planned just to observe, but a couple of friends convinced me to try wheel throwing for a bit. I thought it could be a nice way to relax, almost like a form of therapy for myself. It wasn't for any course, so I just started throwing because I love it, but I hadn't been there in a month, so I was eager to get back into it.

To my surprise, it turned out to be one of my most productive days as a wheel thrower since I started a month ago. It felt really good. I also noticed that many of the bowls I made had a lot of movement in them. Even though each had its own shape, there were small twists and curves—subtle details that reminded me of the movements I had observed in the reeds. Without even realizing it, my mind had already been influenced by those curvy shapes, and I translated them into the ceramics pieces. It was a nice, unexpected connection, I decided to include these pieces from the ceramics exercise as part of my ideation and exploration.



CATCH THE SOUND

One day, I was playing the tongue drum from Aalto Space 21. It's the closest thing I've found here to a drum set, and since I love music and used to play the drums, I really missed making music. When I play, I feel like I enter a different space—I disconnect and focus solely on the music, which is something I truly enjoy.

So, I decided to create the ambient music for my video for the experimental course using the tongue drum. I set up the microphone, sat down, and began playing. This happened right after spending some time with the reeds and reflecting on my spot in nature. I played what I felt my body wanted to express after that experience, and this is the music I'll use for the video. It turned out to be very relaxing, and I hope it helps bring a deeper sense to the video. It was a great experience, and I loved it.

After this I decided to also include sound as an equally important part of the project, not just the movement. The designed object from now on should be multi-sensorial. I rented a directional microphone from the Aalto takeout and used it to record background music and noises from both the drum and the sounds from the reeds and ambience in my spot.



A CRUCIAL MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Today, I was reflecting with a couple of friends about my project and its purpose. If the goal is to create with nature and form a deeper connection with it, then what exactly am I trying to achieve? I've been interpreting what I feel nature might be trying to tell me, but I'm still seeing it through human eyes. It made me question if this approach might seem hypocritical, as if I'm speaking on behalf of nature. How can I know what nature wants to say or show us? It's really just me interpreting it as a human, from my perspective.

So, I became more honest with myself and realized that the point of this project isn't to claim that I'm speaking for nature. Instead, it's an exercise for me to find new ways to observe and immerse myself in my surroundings—to see the details and be amazed by them. It's about becoming more contemplative toward nature and experimenting with methodologies for design. I think this is a much more genuine approach. This project is not about me speaking for nature but rather about personal growth in how I observe and design. It's a way for me to improve how I connect with the world and find inspiration for design.

I also realized that it would be ironic to use a personal connection to nature as the core message of my project because that would not be truthful. I am experimenting with new ways to rethink my approach as a designer and my creative processes, aiming to design better by observing more deeply. I'm not trying to fix anything or speak for anyone because I can't. It's crucial to emphasize that I cannot speak for nature—I'm simply interpreting it and using it as inspiration.

Another day, someone asked me why I believe I can speak for nature or why I'm using nature in my project. It made me reflect even more. What is true is that through this project, I hope to inspire a broader sense of empathy or awareness for nature. Maybe, instead of walking by it without noticing, people will pause and take a moment to observe. While I can't change everyone's mindset, I hope to inspire a little more contemplation. The purpose of this project, then, is not to be a driving force for speaking on behalf of nature, but to show the power of observation. We can use nature to fuel creativity and inspiration without harming our resources. That's what I want to communicate.

And why is this important? Research has shown that when people spend more time in nature or engage with it more deeply, they may develop a greater sense of connection to it. This can lead to small, but meaningful changes in behavior. For example, they might decide not to throw trash in a forest or stop to appreciate the environment around them. They might even take a moment to pause and observe nature more attentively.

With this project, I hope to inspire people to be more mindful of their surroundings. The next time they pass through a forest or a natural space, I hope they will be more observant and conscious of the little details. Ideally, this might help them develop a deeper appreciation for nature and integrate that sense of meaning into their daily lives..



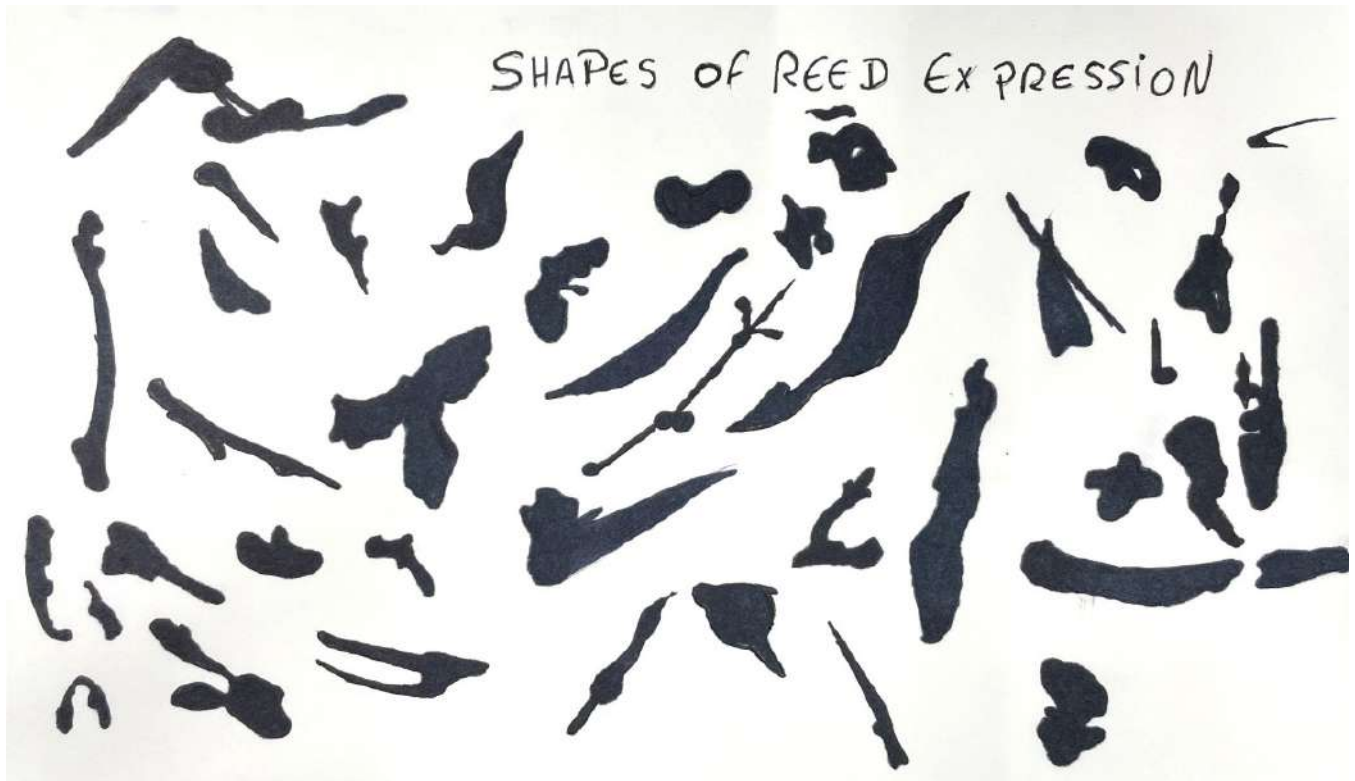
THE MAKING

After all my reflections, I decided that the focus of my project would be on what I mentioned earlier: a collaboration with nature to achieve creativity by becoming more observant of my surroundings. I chose to interpret the drawings created by the plants and reeds and began looking for interesting shapes and patterns, which I could incorporate into my final design. I wanted my design to feature several pieces—one designed primarily by me and one directly inspired by the designs made by the reeds. In this case, I found the most captivating figures in the paintings and created a drawing that united them, which I titled “Shapes of Reed Expression.” I then digitalized this drawing for later graphic use.

After a session of tutoring and advisory with Márketa and Zöe, I realized that the piece I was working on should also capture the movements and sounds, and be a part of that experience. I wanted to find a way to integrate these aspects into a product that would blend seamlessly into its environment, using natural materials that complement the setting. After further reflection—and perhaps influenced by the sounds of the tongue drum and the wind chimes—I recalled the soothing beauty of wind chimes, which add to a natural setting without disrupting it. I decided to adopt a similar style to Japanese wind chimes, but with a slight twist.

I also felt a strong desire to explore the materiality of glass, as I was captivated by its fluidity and beauty. So, I decided to focus my project on the elegant materiality of glass, complemented by small, carefully chosen pieces.

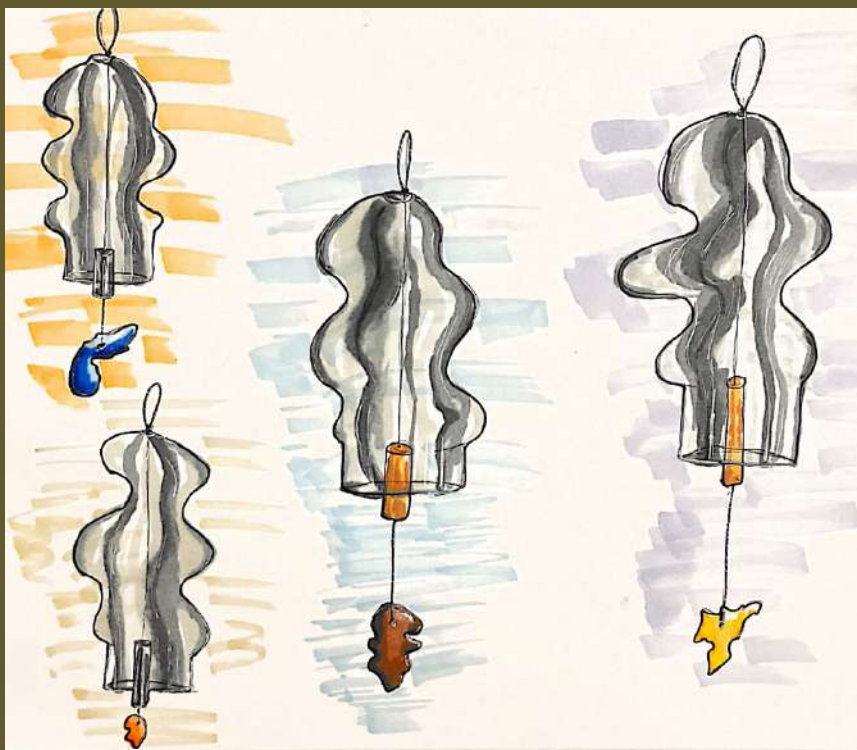


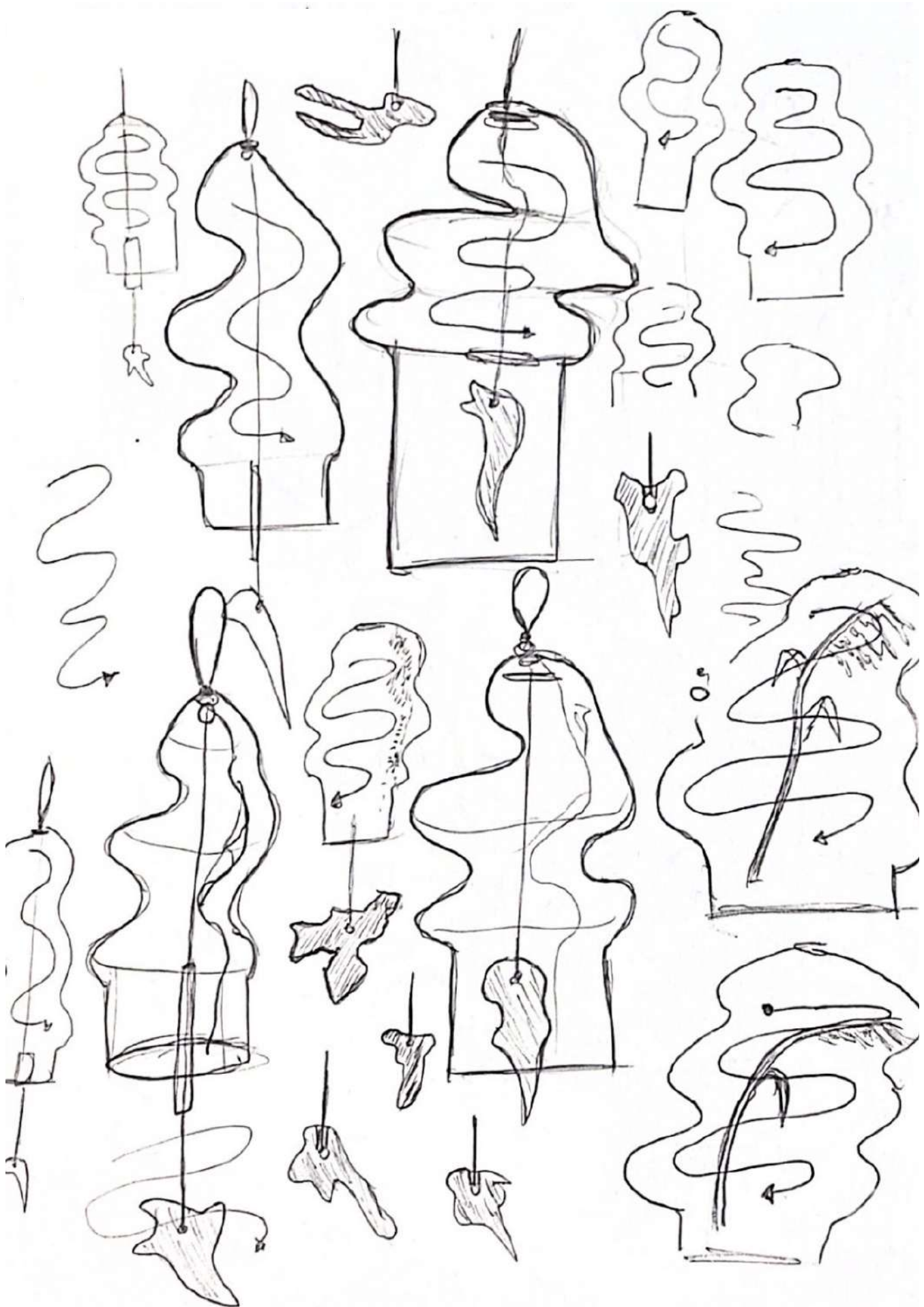


THE MAKING

I began a deep sketching phase, where I tried to incorporate everything I had observed, documented, and learned, all while listening to the sounds and ambient background recordings from my spot. As I sketched, I started drawing traces that resembled those made by the reeds. The result was an irregularly shaped blown glass bell for the wind chime, which used the same tracings I had seen in the reeds. This would be the main piece—designed by me, based on my observations. The second piece would be a pendant, shaped like one of the forms interpreted from the reeds' paintings. For the sound and acoustics, I chose birchwood, the same type of wood as the trees surrounding my spot. The wood would be hollowed out to enhance the acoustics.

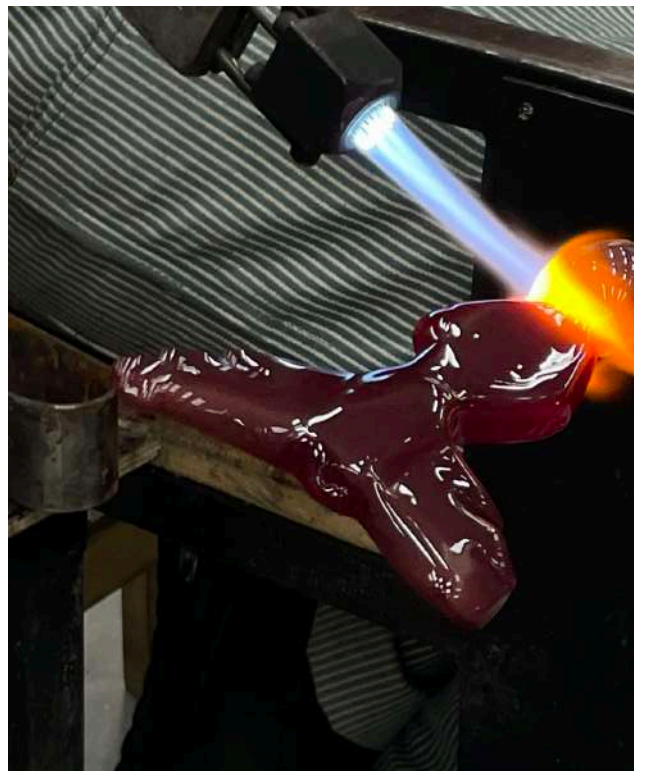
After several days of hands-on work—blowing glass with a master glassblower, polishing the bell, digging a hole in the glass pendant, cutting, finishing, and polishing the wood pieces, and finally assembling everything with strong fishing line—the wind chime was complete. I decided to hang it on one of the birch trees next to my spot. The wind blended beautifully with the chimes, creating a very relaxing sound. I stood there for a while, just listening to it. Finally, the project was complete.





THE MAKING



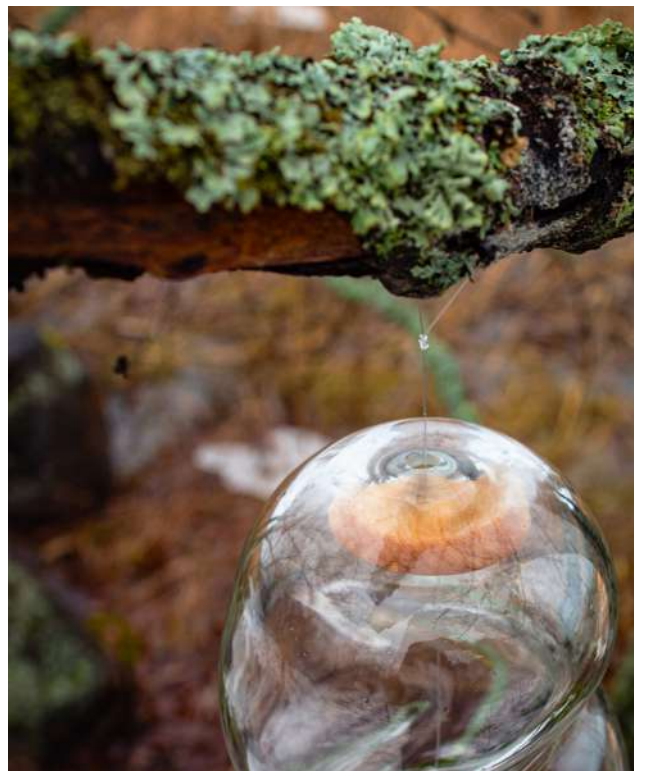


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The name “Phragmi Tripudium” combines both words Phragmites Australis (Scientific name) and Tripudium (ancient Roman word), seamlessly creating a unique, almost mythical title that evokes both natural and ceremonial connotations. Phragmites refers to reed-like plants often found in wetlands, while tripudium is a Roman term related to the “dance of joy” or sacred steps. Together, they suggest a project that might explore the intersection of nature, movement, and ancient rituals or rhythms.

I wanted to join the scientific term for common reed with something of the sorts that means dance or movement in some sorts, since the word phragmites means reed and tripudium means a dance in Latin or antique roman it gives a misterious and playful name to the project which centers in the reeds movements.





PHRAGMI TRIPUDIUM

Phragmi rises as an invitation to a more contemplative mindset towards our surroundings. It is an invitation to not just live with what is around us but actually feel part of it. Seeking to increment empathy towards natural or other than human stimuli by taking inspiration in its subtleties as a means to extending our sensibility to the details that on our daily basis may seem small or insignificant. As an experimental methodology for design process ideation, Phragmi is a personal exercise that invites not just creatives but everyone to break free from linear patterns of thinking and making things. Showing that to achieve creativity one must not enclose to linear ways of thinking but rather stop, take a deep breath and appreciate what is surrounding us.

- Marcelo Guajardo Dávila





