[Chatter]

[00:00:16.15]

Jenn: Before we, like, begin begin.

Alexandra: Mhm.

Jenn: So that we're like really beginning. I'm really glad to be interviewing you, Alexandra.

Alexandra: Thank you. I'm really glad that you are, too.

Jenn: Mm. Yeah. I feel kinship-- I know we like feel it, so we don't need to say it maybe, but I do just want to say it.

Alexandra: I'm glad you said it, cause I feel like you created like a pause for it to be felt in a different way.

Jenn: Mm. Okay. [Laughs]. Good. So, would you like to introduce yourself?

[00:00:59.14]

Alexandra: Not really. But I will anyway. [Laughs]. Um... I always find it hard to introduce myself, but I think that's a common feeling because what do you say, right. What do you leave out. So my name is Alexandra. Um, I... I've worked as a performer for a large portion of my life. And at one point in the work, I realized that I wanted to isolate myself a little bit from the collaborative effort, which I had been accustomed to. And wanted to find refuge in a solo performer-driven endeavour. And I started doing that by removing language completely. And working with the body and working with light. And working with durational light. And then incorporating some narration in my mother tongue of Romanian. And in English. And moving to the words, as opposed to having to say them myself. Um but moving to my own voice. Sometimes my own voice manipulated into the voice of an older version of myself. An ancestor. So I realized that I was trying to find something out through these performative manifestations. And in recent years, those impulses to figure things out have been about, have been about, land. So I'm standing from that place now.

Jenn: Mm.

[00:03:16.01]

Jenn: Amazing. I have a lot I want to say in response, but I'm- it's your moment, so.

Alexandra: Aw. It's nice to have a moment.

Jenn: [Laughs]

Alexandra: It really is.

Jenn: Would you like to tell us a bit about the memory work that you do? Um and talk maybe a little bit about what makes what you do, memory work?

Alexandra: Okay. Um, yeah. So my memory work... Or, I've been working on a couple of projects, but they all have the umbilicus sort of connecting them to each other. And because the impetus is similar for each one and it's about coming to terms with the past. And when I say, "coming to terms," I mean literally and figuratively coming to terms, coming to terms in the sense of mediating the experience of the past, of a past that was imposed and not chosen. Um, mediating that in myself and then mediating that through language, and then mediating that through film, and then mediating that... and then continuing to mediate it through mediums. And these mediums, I don't see the mediation happening in each medium individually, but, like a lot of artists who enjoy patchworks, I like to collect these mediums and these mediations within them, to then create an environment with them. And also edit some out, that I don't want to create an environment with, which is okay. But, when I say "coming to terms," so the project that started all this is "Salt," and that was me coming to terms with a... you know, a migration journey. My own in my family, from communist Romania in the '80s, to Austria and then finally to Toronto. And I see it as a way of re-tracing that story. By being deliberate and by choosing to have it again. The first time it happened, the first time we migrated, it was imposed. And this way, I can kind of um, I think what- part of what I'm trying to mediate is being a child and those memories of that experience being buried in places in me, that I can't quite... I can't be precise about or identify, so- as an adult, I go back, and do the journey again. Something will reveal, I'll have a revelation about it- I shouldn't speak about it in the past because it's happened and I have had revelations about what that has done to me. What person that has made me, somehow. And also the people around me that I love. So I used salt as a way to, uh, trace this journey, um. I used salt as a medium as a material that could carry the burden of the journey, and then dissolve. Um... salt for its symbolic resonance and also its practical resonance, as a preservative. Even though it dissolves, it still also preserves. And dissolving and preserving kind of work together to create something that's a unity between both of them that I can't quite understand.

[00:07:58.11]

And that tension. But I used, I walked with salt in my hands and I created trails of salt outside and inside a um, a place of healing in Romania called Borsec.

Which was more active in the '90s, or the '80s, and before then. And I created trails of salt in this healing place and added photographs of my family inside. And I placed my grandfather's hat um in between the lines and the trails and these different belongings of my family and then saw the salt, you know, dissolve, and let the elements sort of carry it away. As a sort of ritual to, you know, also mourn the deaths of the people who I wasn't able to be with when they died. So that's, that's kind of I guess part of the mediation of this experience, through the element of salt. Which is also like salty tears and mourning and... as I have mentioned before, the way in which Romania also paid- it paid other countries to have refugees sent back. Because you couldn't leave Romania during communism. So yeah, I used salt for what it represents in that mix to, to retrace the journey and make contact.

[00:09:55.22]

But also, to get me back to Canada. To get me back to Canada in a different way. To land here having had the experience of choosing to retrace the memory and, or the lost memory, or the confusing memory. Of that past, and landing in Canada and saying, "Well how the heck am I gonna be here now?" And... I continue to work in the landscape in Canada and what's interesting is being an artist that works through exile and finds herself, like so many of us, immigrants, refugees, settlers-- who find ourselves in Canada, on land that Indigenous people have been exiled from. So, there's this resonance of exile that goes down to being on this land. And so I'm still in exile because they're in exile. [Silence]. So, it's not just an ontological question [voice shaking.] It's specific to being here. I can ask how to be in Romania, and it's different. It's my ancestral land that I've been detached from. But asking how to be here, specifically doing work in a very strange site in Caledon... treaty, treaty land. Land of the Mississaugas... And I'm there doing all this work. I just need to take a second to regroup.

[00:12:14.09]

[Silence. Footsteps.]

[00:13:00.26]

Alexandra: Okay. Can we maybe come back to that? If we need to. I just can't find the words right now. I just can't seem to find the words yet. I will. I just don't know what they are yet.

Jenn: Yeah. I think that you've actually expressed a lot.

Alexandra: Okay.

Audience member: Yeah, you have.

Alexandra: Okay. Okay. Thank you. It's hard to know when you're up here, isn't it. Okay.

Jenn: Would you like me to move us? A little? Like in... I hear and feel all of these people in your work.

Alexandra: Mm.

Jenn: And in you. Um, it's so... I hear relationships to relatives. I hear relationships to people who lived here for tens of thousands of years. I hear um, I even feel the people kind of- I don't know if you traveled by airplane?

[Alexandra laughing]

Jenn: Like people who were, like, part of your travel and transit who had no idea what, what was going to transpire-

Alexandra: Yeah-

Jenn: -What was transpiring. And so I just wonder-

Alexandra: -That's amazing-

Jenn: -You... Want to talk at all about relationships. That have maybe informed your work. Or that cross your work.

[00:14:58.26]

Alexandra: Yeah. Well, there's been so many relationships. And there's new relationships, too. Which are still informing the work. It seems never-ending. Um... My grandparents died and I wasn't there. [Silence.] And they stayed alive to me [crying] until I was... you know. In their empty house. So... it was important for me to tell them I was sorry somehow. That I wasn't there and I let them live in my imagination after they had passed. So um... the other person who's important to mention, who I didn't expect to connect to as much, and who I didn't expect to really drive this project- I landed in Romania thinking that I was gonna make a, you know, a project, and it was gonna go pretty smoothly, and I was very rational and I was... had my wits about me, I just finished an MA, I knew what I was doing. And then there was a terrible event where my family home, through the ill-will of my cousin, who felt he should have the home, whom my father entrusted, almost got the house re-possessed. So if I didn't go to Romania to do my little artistic project, that house would have been out of our hands. And he was entrusted to look after my Great-Grandmother, who was a hundred and four. While also managing some of the affairs of this house, while she was living there. And she suffered under his abuse, which I witnessed. And it's this feeling that you can't protect these people, and that you've left them, you've abandoned them [crying]. And you don't know what to do because you don't even feel you have ownership of a house that belongs to you [crying]. So... spending that time with her and hearing her stories and asking her questions and piecing the family story together in that fragmented way that different impressions and different stories from various people allows, you know I was able to feel rooted in her. I was able to feel like she was a really beautiful soul.

[00:18:52.25]

And she died shortly after I left. [Silence.] That's all.

[Silence]

[00:19:18.26]

Jenn: Do you want to talk about the archive?

Alexandra: What's an archive anyhow?

Jenn: Yeah.

[Laughter]

[00:19:22.29]

Alexandra: I don't know. I played with the archive so much. I read so much stuff on the archive. And I don't know. Sometimes I think it's an album. Sometimes I think it's... I've all this material. And I keep it in my car. In a black box. I keep some of it on my computer. I keep some of it um on my head, this hat, it's my grandfathers, I'm not some hip kid from Toronto wearing a hat I found in a thrift store. Even though it might look that way. Um... I don't know what the archive is yet. And I don't know if it is an archive that I'm working with. I think it might be more of a library where things can come in and out. Somehow the archive feels like it, it can be re-shaped and re-worked and, you know, pull the forgotten right out of the ground and let it surface and grow. But... It still seems towering and like a house that's towering. And I, I don't know. Maybe it's just got vines around it that ruin the brick and make it crumble and then something else comes out of it. Maybe that's the archive. A falling tower or something, I don't know. But like...

[00:21:00.14]

I do want to culminate this material work and the performance and culminate it into a space where I can share it. So I feel like that's, like I said before, all of these, all of these mediations become materialized. And I want to bring these materials together to let them resonate in a space and share it. So, you know. Maybe that's the archive.

Jenn: Hm. I love that idea of the archive, first of all, as a crumbling building, and second of all, um, as um, like a working resonance. Mhm.

Alexandra: Mhm. Yeah. I think that's all I have to say about the archive for now.

Jenn: Okay. Also, on the list. We're to talk about "activism" and "resistance," in quotation marks and with question marks.

[00:22:17.29]

Jenn: [Laughing] And ellipses. Do you consider the work you're doing "activism" or "resistance"?

Alexandra: I don't know. Activism feels like a word that, if I use, I'm gonna feel like a phony. So I can't really call myself an activist without feeling a little bit phony. Like I don't know what that means yet and maybe I just need to do a bunch more research on what it does mean to me before I can make a- my research- make a comment about it. But um I know that there's things that are important to me. Like for example being a part of the Women's March or resisting the fear of being raped in the landscape by being in the landscape alone. So I feel like a lot of my work has to do with resisting a lot of fears that are colonial and patriarchal fears. Of being stateless, of doing something wrong in a landscape where somebody might kick me out. Or, but still deciding to be there. Which has happened. I have been kicked out by a [laughs] by the heritage trust when I was working in the Badlands. They came to close the site off to the public and I was there hanging out when the last fence went up, and I was like, "Okay. Guess I'm going behind the frame again." And um... Yeah I think I'm resisting not being in the land. I mean, yeah, not being in the land, when, you know, I belong to a climate where, you know, we belong in digital spaces. And so I, I'm trying to be on the land by not cultivating any food or anything, I'm just trying to figure out what it means to be there, and to move around it, and to have a relationship and um, I think that's resisting the fear, also the fear of... yeah. Just being there. I don't know. I think that's all I can put into words today about that. But I'll- I have a lot more to say, I think. Yeah.

Jenn: Yeah. We can always pick it up again, too.

Alexandra: Okay. Yeah that one wasn't one that I had thought about in- I mean I've written about it but I haven't been able to say it out loud yet.

Jenn: Yeah. What about aging?

Alexandra: Oh yeah.

[00:25:16.00]

Jenn: Does aging influence the way that you do the work that you do?

Alexandra: Yeah. It was really weird. When I was in the Badlands. Okay this is so strange. I don't know what it is about being uh a person who's out in the landscape, either painting or moving or, you know, kind of under the guise of an artist in a way, that people you know, feel the ability to come to you and speak to you about very personal things. And I was in the landscape and in a landscape that geologists or at least the Heritage Trust had framed as an "infertile site." It being "bad land." And, you know, eroded. Either through agriculture or potentially, they say, a riverbed, could have been a riverbed. Anyway. Still. I've heard, you know, the word "infertile" be used. And I kept meeting these men who would come up to me and talk to me about not being able to have sex with their wives. I know this seems like they were coming onto me but they weren't. They were genuinely upset about not being able to- I know. It's... It was so strange. And they were saying you know, "My wife is going through menopause. I don't know what's going on. I feel really needy. I feel really upset. I feel really tempted." And it was just really strange to be on this land and you know, this historic way in which women have been, uh, synonymous to land in so many traditions. That I thought to myself, "What landscape is this?" And I was thinking a lot about menopause. And I, you know, being a woman who's in her thirties and, you know, watching my mother go through menopause and uh, I was thinking... you know, "What is this strange resonance that's going on here?" So it did cause me to think about the trajectory of a woman's life in a different way and my own. And really gave me a sense of wanting to know more about what women experience during that time. Um and why they're sort of kicked off the shelf, you know... Where's the aisle in the store that says "products for menopause"? It's just like, after that, there's nothing- what else is there- it's so weird. And it made me think, you know, "What happens during that time?" Do women disappear? It reminded me of my friend who's in her 80s, a dancer, she was saying, you know, "In certain countries I still have a vagina. And in other countries I just fade." So I was thinking a lot about that.

[00:28:30.29]

Jenn: Is there anything else you want to share? About your work, did you forget anything.

Alexandra: Um, there's a lot. But I don't know, I think maybe I've shared enough and there's material there to work with.

May in background: Yeah! [Laughs]

Alexandra: Yeah. Okay.

May: But it's not really actually about the material, it's actually about, if there's anything else you want to share-

Alexandra: -I'd like to share. Um... I think there's just so much more to say I just don't know how to say it to you yet without taking up hours of your time. And that's okay. We've, you know. Um, I can take a second to really think about that and formulate an answer.

[00:29:31.25]

[Silence]

[00:30:04.19]

Alexandra: No. That's it. I think that's it. Thank you.

Audience members: Thank you.

Alexandra: Thank you.

Monique: Can I ask you to say salt in Romanian?

Alexandra: Sare... Sare. Mm.

[00:30:41.17]

[Pause]

[00:30:46.16]

May: So how did that feel?

Alexandra: It felt really, really... warm. And safe. In this space I felt really supported by everyone and that was really necessary for me. And I felt like I came to some new understanding about what I'm doing, which was cool.

May: Yeah! I'm actually watching your like-

Alexandra: -transformation!

[Laughter]

May: Yeah! Cause you're also like, Alexandra is in my class right now.

Alexandra: Which has been very-

May: It's a real privilege to have this space with you.

Alexandra: Yeah. Ditto. I feel that, too. Yeah.

Jo: It's noticeable. I feel like, there were moments when I think maybe, at the beginning it felt like you needed to start maybe with some notes-

Alexandra: Yeah-

Jo: And then like, there was a moment where I feel like you sort of like let go and sort of like just meandered to wherever it took you for a bit?

Alexandra: Yeah.

Jo: In a good way. Like...

Alexandra: Yeah. Well it's like crying, right. I don't like to cry in front of people. Unless I'm performing, which is fine, cause it's not really my tears. [Laughs]. But um, so yeah, like, bringing the emotion and exposing the emotion has been something that I've suffered for. By doing that and being told, you know, "Get out. This is not where you can do this." And now it's like, "Oh, but do it." And so it's like, "Oh no, I've just spent time like deciding that I wouldn't." And so, yeah, it's hard for me to expose myself in that way. But it had to be done [laughs]. It had to be done.

May: Thank you.

Alexandra: Thank you.

May: Do you want to turn that off?

Jenn: I did turn it off.

[00:33:20.17]