

# Meliors Simms | *DISPERSANT*

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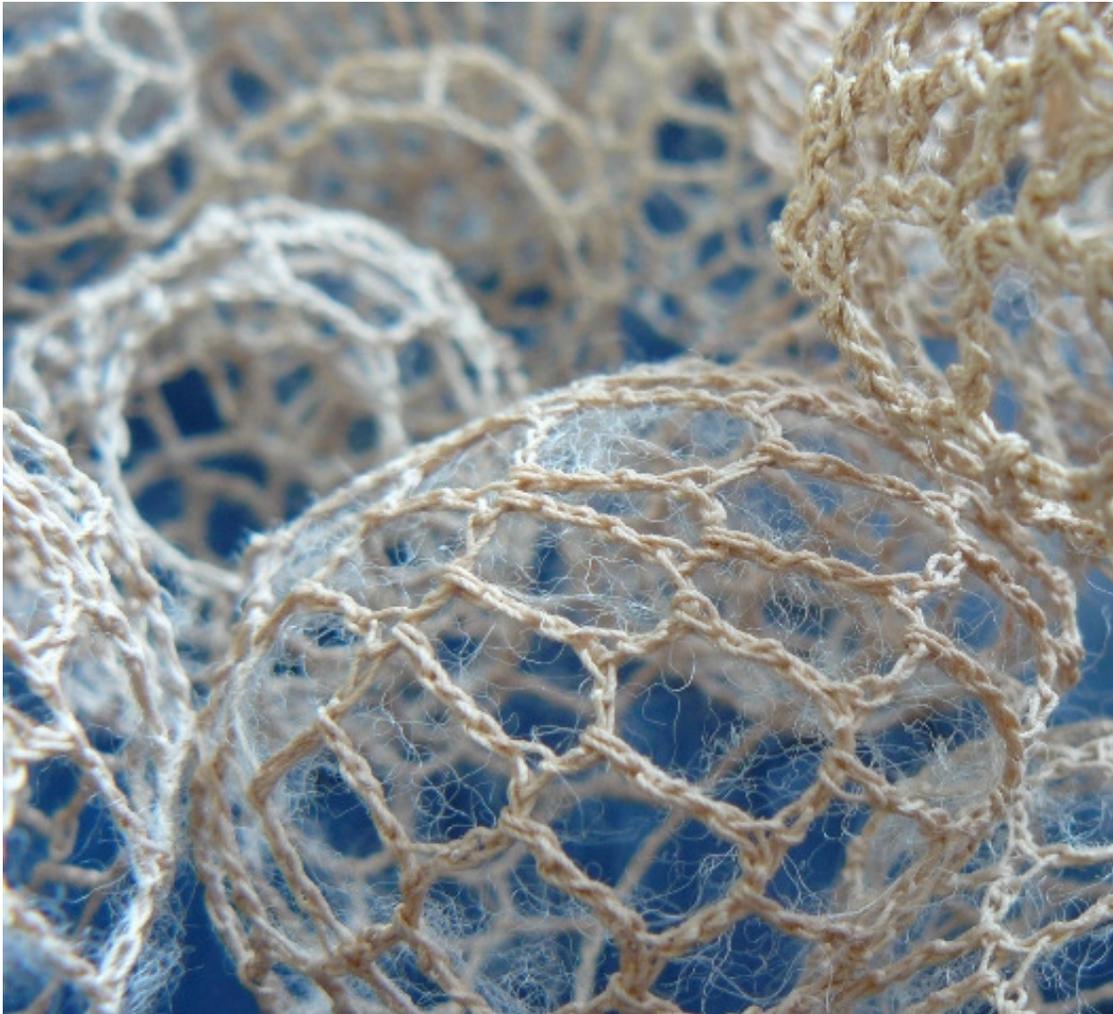
Meliors Simms, *Dispersant*, 2012

Crocheted recycled thread, tea, wheat starch, recycled wool, fishing line

Full installation: 2890mm x 2450mm x 450mm

Individual strands: dimensions variable

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CONTEMPORARY ART

Meliors Simms | *DISPERSANT*  
**The Outer Edge Project**

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251 Parnell Road, Auckland | Ph: 09 374-4476 | [www.sanderson.co.nz](http://www.sanderson.co.nz)

## YOU SHOULD SEE THIS!

I'd been thinking about oil spills for quite some time but last October, when *MV Rena* wrecked off the coast of Tauranga, I was prompted to start crocheting the elements of *Dispersant*. In the first week of the disaster, chemical dispersants were applied to try and break up the oil in the Bay of Plenty, and I imagined our close-by and beloved undersea environment saturated with toxins.

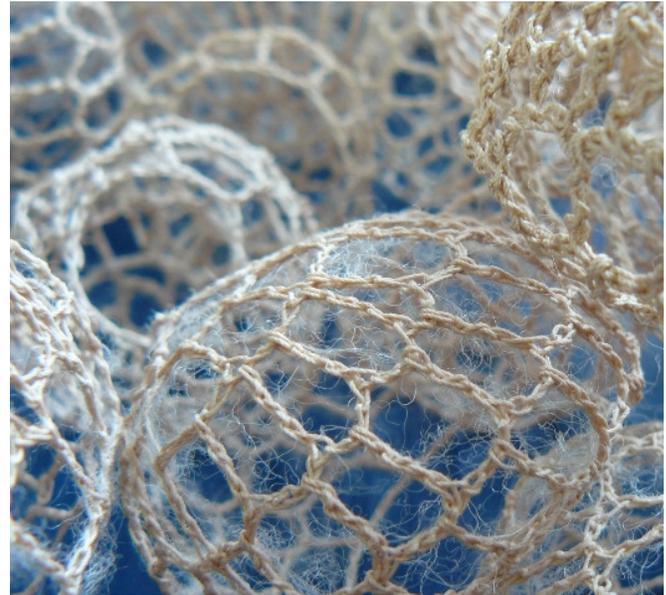
As my collection of crocheted pieces grew I came to see that we got off lightly in the Bay of Plenty. Not only was our local oil spill relatively tiny compared to the *Deepwater Horizon* spill 18 months earlier in the Gulf of Mexico, but the use of chemical dispersants was abandoned early in the Bay of Plenty clean up. Because this installation is my response to what remains after chemical dispersants are used it is actually more of a representation of the Gulf of Mexico than the Bay of Plenty.

### Chemical dispersants

Chemical dispersants such as Corexit are favoured by authorities to break up spills into plankton-sized globules and disperse the oil through the water column. Once this happens, the combination of oil and chemicals remains toxic for much longer and with greater effects upon undersea life. Corexit, once mixed with oil and floating in the water, is colloquially called snot<sup>1</sup> and nearly two years after *Deepwater Horizon* was capped, 'snot' continues to poison the Gulf waters and wash ashore in a highly toxic sludge.

In Tauranga, oil left floating on the top of the sea could mostly be scooped up from both the water and the shore. "Petroleum oil will naturally break down – but this takes time and oxygenation. So, the longer the oil remains floating at sea – the safer it becomes."<sup>2</sup> This approach, however, means that the oil remains highly photogenic on the sea's surface and on wildlife until it is removed.

Chemical dispersants are widely used because they reduce the media impact of an oil spill (while increasing long term environmental damage). In a mass-produced consumerist economy which requires increasingly risky oil extraction and shipping practices to maximise shareholder profits, it is more important to minimise the public relations disaster than the environmental disaster.



*Dispersant* (detail), 2012, crocheted recycled thread, tea, wheat starch, wool

Dispersants are great for dodging fines based on the amount of oil recovered, but not so great for ecosystems, human health and local economies.

### Crocheting *Dispersant*

I spent over 300 hours crocheting up shop threads into 400 globules, then dyeing them in tea and starching them into three dimensions with home-made wheat starch and wool stuffing so that each lumpy, wispy piece is unique. I intend their inconsistencies and imperfections to make visible my time consuming, labourious, hand crafting practice. Their snotty qualities represent the horrors of dispersant's devastation upon ecosystems and human health.

My willingness to undertake long, slow, hand crafted responses to environmental issues implicitly critiques the economic, as well as environmental consequences of industrialised consumerist culture. The consequences of our consumption extend far, and sustain long, beyond our individual use. Whether careless or deliberate in our choices, whether in denial or awareness, there is a complicated story underlying each thing we buy and all that we discard. By looking below the surface we can contemplate the dispersed responsibilities and consequences of any oil spill.

## MATERIALISING THE UNSEEN

Essay by Fiona P. McDonald

*“My installation will be a reminder that although the surface may appear resolved, oil is still present in the water. I want my work to remind viewers that the toxic environmental hazards from oil spills last longer than what [are] visible and deemed newsworthy. I want people to remember this truth [...]”*

Meliors Simms, 2011

The sensory and haptic threads of art, craft, and science are made manifest by Meliors Simms through her installation entitled, *Dispersant*. Four hundred meticulously crafted, three dimensional sculptural objects combine together to make visible the mostly invisible (yet tangible) long-term consequences of oil spill recovery strategies often deployed upon delicate ecosystems.

This installation draws attention to the micro-level of unseen marine environments. By using her art to question the affects of the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil disaster that devastated shorelines, marine life, and tourism in the Gulf of Mexico, Simms’ installation resonates on a regional and global scale in the aftermath of other disasters such as: the *MV Rena* spill in 2011 in the Bay of Plenty, the *Exxon Valdez* disaster of 1989 off the coast of Alaska, and numerous other inland and coastal oil spill disasters.

Simms’ meticulous aesthetic translation of fused dispersant and oil within the gallery window space creates an alternative experience of the unseen. According to Simms, the main function of a chemical dispersant in a marine environment is to disperse the oil into infinitesimally small, or as Simms calls them, “plankton-sized” globules.<sup>3</sup> To the naked eye, the chemical reaction and function of dispersant is mostly invisible, and so rarely does one get to gaze through the lens of a microscope to bear witness to these globule like structures. By strategically using the window of the gallery as a microscopic lens or magnifying glass, Simms dramatically magnifies these imagined structures into delicate hand-

crafted objects, that, for some observers, the technique of making is as complex as the chemical makeup of dispersants.

Simms captures the complexity of the chemically treated underwater environments that she translates with an aesthetic appeal towards beauty. Craft Historian Glenn Adamson once wrote that “crocheting [is] a serial craft procedure par excellence [...]”<sup>4</sup> Through the methodical and exhaustive artistic process of Meliors Simms, the delicacy and craft of crochet makes visible a form that inhabits marine ecosystems in the wake of many oil spills. By looking strictly at an alternative materiality for the micro-level, Simms uses the tactility and fragility of finely crocheted threads to make visible the macro-level of social, economic, and environmental connections to our current historical moment.

*Dispersant* is a reflective example from Meliors Simms’ larger body of work, *Living in the Anthropocene*, where her art epitomizes a “thoughtful materialization” of our current geological age (or epoch) through social issues concerning the environment.<sup>5</sup> Experiencing *Dispersant* through the gallery window as though through the optic lens of a microscope highlights the need for focused—rather than dispersed—accountability and an understanding the interconnectedness with unseen environments. This installation offers a new visualization and experience from which to negotiate alternative cosmologies in the aftermath of manmade environmental disasters.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://openchannel.msnbc.msn.com/\\_news/2011/01/03/5759270-gulf-residents-track-washed-up-gunk](http://openchannel.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/01/03/5759270-gulf-residents-track-washed-up-gunk) (29 December 2011).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sciencemediacentre.co.nz/2011/10/12/rena-spill-oil-on-coastal-ecosystems-experts-respond/> (13 October 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Meliors Simms, *Artist Statement for Dispersant*, Sanderson Contemporary Art (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Glenn Adamson, “Analogue Practice” in *The Studio Reader*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 254.

<sup>5</sup> Lacy Jane Roberts, “Put Your Thing Down, Flip It, and Reverse It” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Duke University Press, 2011), 254.