



# FIGURING

A Publication of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program

The Ford Family Foundation, University of Oregon, Portland State University, Reed College, and the Pacific Northwest College of Art are located on the traditional homelands of Indigenous people. Since the arrival of European explorers, the Indigenous people of Oregon have repeatedly been dispossessed of their land by settler colonialism, including the United States government and their policies to forcibly remove the Indigenous populations to reservations in Oregon and around the country. Today, the descendants of Oregon's first people continue to make important contributions to communities, institutions, the state of Oregon, the United States, and to the world.

In acknowledging the original people of the land we occupy, we extend our respect to the Indigenous people of Oregon and all other displaced Indigenous people who call Oregon home. With this publication and our collective activity, Critical Conversations recognizes Oregon's first people as the past, present, and future stewards of this land, and we pledge our commitment to make ongoing efforts to center Indigenous existence and related knowledge, creativity, resilience, and resistance in the work we do.

A Publication of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program

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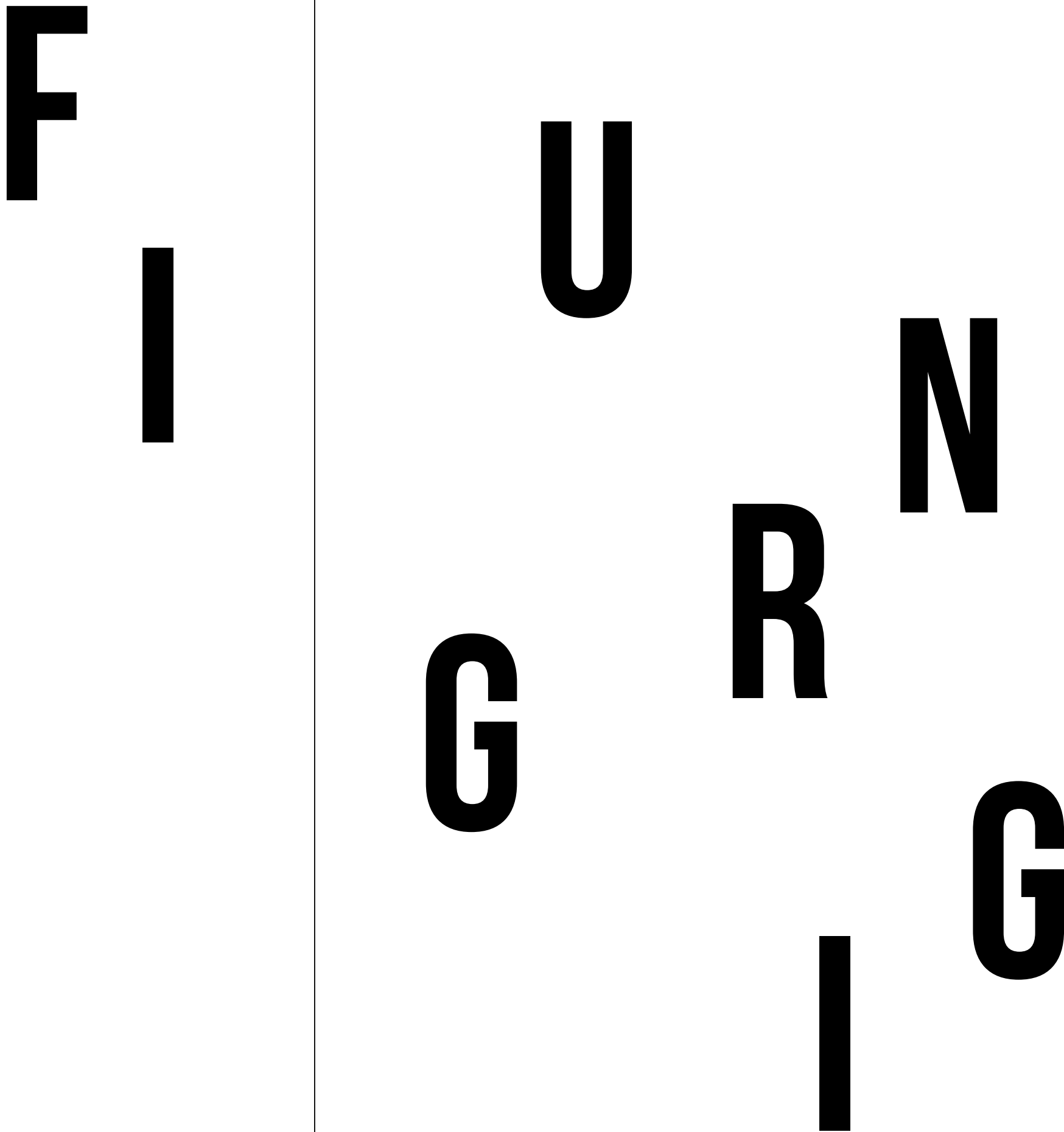
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# Editorial Statement

The Ford Family Foundation's Visual Arts Program honors the Foundation's late co-founder Hallie Ford and her lifelong interest in the arts by helping Oregon's most promising established visual artists actively pursue their work. One element of the program is Critical Conversations, a collaboration between the Foundation and the University of Oregon, in partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland State University, and Reed College.

Critical Conversations provides a space for artists and cultural producers that is rooted in exchange and inquiry. Organizing partners facilitate a year-round calendar of studio visits for Oregon artists by prominent visiting curators and arts writers, who also offer public lectures and other forms of engagement to our community. Recognizing the nexus between artists and those who reflect upon and present their work, Critical Conversations also sponsors a series of convenings that specifically engage Oregon's curators and arts writers around currents in society and the field.

Most critical to the publication you are now reading, we commission essays, reviews, interviews, and ekphrastic poems from Oregon writers, who select their own topics relative to art in our state. Their contributions are published online by the Visual Arts Ecology Project, in cooperation with the Oregon Arts Commission. For the past three years, these commissions have been overseen by Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director of The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, and Sue Taylor, Professor Emerita of Art History and former Associate Dean in the College of the Arts at Portland State University. Now for the first time, we have gathered a selection of this writing, alongside evidence of our other activity, into print. This inaugural publication is dedicated to notions of "figuring," that is, the processing of a moment to inform a position from which to act, the presentation of a form, or expression of a body. A representative assortment of commissions appears in this volume and reflects the creative richness, breadth of inquiry, and social vigilance of the state's visual arts ecology.

As a parallel to Oregon's fraught history and rogue social compasses, visiting curator for spring 2021, Peter Eleey, meditates in this volume on how visualizations of various kinds—diagrams, memes, exhibitions, memorials—figure evidence and absence in times, like our own, of crisis. His essay complements his many one-on-one discussions with Oregon artists under the aegis of the Critical Conversations program. Two convenings are also documented in the pages that follow: Bean Gilsdorf reports on her reading group's analyses of notions of artistic success in a market-driven economy, while Sharita Towne inserts an unbound, limited-edition folio inspired by her group's conversations about how Oregon institutions can better support BIPOC creatives and audiences.

By holding space for both indeterminacy and latent form, *Figuring* conjures histories and possible futures, lived experiences, and propositions for ways that ethereal matter might exist concretely or be allowed to endure as defined by its own logic. An essay by Prudence Roberts on the serendipitous creation of an iconic Oregon image opens

the volume. In *Ocean X* (1978), the late photographer Terry Toedtemeier captured a mysterious figure momentarily inscribed on the beach, a figure formed by two solitary waves crossing in the shallows. It is a beautiful emblem for this collection. Abigail Susik's moving tribute to the late Salem artist D. E. May testifies to the ineffable impact artworks may have on a critic, as on any thoughtful viewer, creating an impersonal kind of intimacy. Her loving encomium to the friend she barely knew reveals the visual arts ecology as above all an interpersonal, social space.

Figurative drawing features in these pages as well in Samantha Wall's sensitive graphite portraits of women of color. We also see inside the practices of Wall and Stephen Slappe as they discuss the creative process. Patrick Collier celebrates the imaginative creature-drawings of autodidact Kurt Fisk, while Richard Speer describes how Felicity Fenton, who parodies social media influencers in her internet art, foregrounds the sensuous physical body in her often intimate live performances. And the body, albeit not represented per se, remains implicit in sculpture and performance by Jess Perlitz, in the soft sculptures and paintings of Kristan Kennedy, or in sculptural assemblages by Natalie Ball, which often include elements of Native American regalia and clothing. Ball's interview by gallerist Jeanine Jablonski ranges over related issues of identity, Indigeneity, and motherhood. A different kind of garment, the handsewn Buddhist *rakusu*, becomes the focus in Jovencio de la Paz's essay on the sacred role of craft in daily life in an Oregon monastery where the labor of stitching constitutes a form of spiritual practice.

Other institutions and traditions come under consideration in *Figuring* from critical perspectives, as Libby Werbel rethinks the museum as an inclusive, non-hierarchical space, and Sarah Sentilles recounts how artist Julie Green celebrates the liberation of wrongfully imprisoned individuals with her "First Meals" paintings. An excerpt from Demian DinéYazhi's travelogue conflates time, space, and mixed realities in an intimate reckoning with violence, grief, radioactivity, anger, identity, insecurity, and love as a body moves across the U.S. landscape. And in another personal memoir, written expressly for this collection, bart fitzgerald conveys the sensuous experience and solidarity of social gatherings—an "evening caper" and an organized brunch—during the Black Lives Matter movement in Portland.

A healthy visual arts ecology is only possible because of a certain level of porosity, criticality, and symbiosis. The production of *Figuring* has brought together writers, artists, editors, curators, and educators as colleagues and collaborators invested in Oregon's art community. We thank The Ford Family Foundation for recognizing the critical role that arts writing plays in elevating artistic viewership, patronage, and practice in our state, and for helping us disseminate this writing to local, national, and international audiences.

*Critical Conversations Editorial Board*

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# Ocean X

Prudence Roberts

Figuring

This is the story of one of Terry Toedtemeier's most distinctive photographs, its place in his career, and how the image made it out into the world.<sup>1</sup> The print, and the many books and periodicals in which it has been reproduced, are testament to the way in which so many of Terry's images can be viewed, with equal appreciation by art audiences and hard-core scientists.

It is also a story of serendipity and coincidence. Terry was no stranger to these. As his wife, I saw many astonishing and wonderful things in my travels with him, including a fully preserved cougar skeleton deep in a lava tube cave; an eagle that rose from the road in front of us with a squirming rattler in its talons; a seemingly bottomless rift in the Idaho Badlands; and an ancient and famed cactus crashing to the ground in front of him in the Huntington Gardens when no one else was

around. Throughout such adventures, in his art and in his life, Terry had the good fortune to be guided by both intuition and intellect. From his childhood, exploring the rocks and creeks in his own Portland neighborhood, he knew that the most meaningful forms of beauty and mystery were to be found in the natural world. He majored in geology at Oregon State University, but was never interested in a career in extractive industries. He studied drawing in college, but he had already found photography while still in high school. His cameras, and he had many, were really the expressive tools he needed. He loved both the technical and aesthetic aspects of camera bodies and lenses—the more specialized, the better—and the alchemy of the dark room. I suspect his red-green colorblindness was responsible for his acute perceptions of form, texture, and contrast. In his printing, he favored

subtlety and quietude over drama. Similarly, he was not drawn to the grand vista or the expected “best general view.”

Terry created *Ocean X* (fig. 1) in 1978, at a turning point in his career. He was moving away from his handheld 35mm Leica to larger format cameras and was concluding his foray into infrared photography. Since he had graduated from college in 1969, he had been making quirky images of Portland, of family and friends, and of landscapes quickly glimpsed from a moving car. These photographs placed him firmly within the prevailing aesthetic of such artists as Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, among others. But his own collecting and his teaching of photo history at Pacific Northwest College of Art had put him in touch with earlier visions of what a photograph could be. By this time, too, he had begun his departure from

Blue Sky, the cooperative, non-profit photography gallery he cofounded in 1975. His growing awareness of nineteenth-century Western landscape photographers—in particular, Carleton Watkins, William Henry Jackson, and Timothy O'Sullivan—was leading him back to the landscape, to geology, and to a more studied sort of imagery.

In the early 1980s, Terry embarked on the massive project that would engross him for the rest of his life—a project that combined art and science in pretty much equal measure. His goal was to create a photographic record documenting the history of basalt formations in a geologic territory defined by the Basin and Range country of the Pacific Northwest. Whenever he set out for the Owyhee Canyon Lands, the lava fields and Pleistocene lakebeds of eastern Oregon, the Columbia River Gorge, or the sea caves and headlands along the Oregon coast, he had spent many hours studying his topographical maps, whose twists and turns he read the way others might read a thrilling mystery. By the time he packed his car with ice chests for food and film, camera equipment, and maps, he was in search of a specific form of basalt

outcropping or a particular landscape he suspected he would find. As long as the weather and the light cooperated, he was rarely disappointed.

*Ocean X* is a prelude to this later, more heavily researched work. But it is not about rock at all, and it is not an image he anticipated finding. Instead, it is a simple composition depicting two waves crossing at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, one of four exposures Terry quickly made as he stood atop a driftwood log, camera and shutter release in hand. Over the years, the photograph has acquired various titles: *Ocean X*; *Waves in Shallow Water, Manzanita, Oregon*; *Oblique Interaction of Two Shallow Solitary Waterwaves*; and finally, *Soliton in Shallow Water and Soliton, Oregon Coast*. Judging from his correspondence and my conversations with him, it was a difficult print to make, and he struggled to find a proper balance between the sheen of the lead-gray water, the highlights on the wave's crests, and the nuances of the cloudy horizon. Of all his many hundreds of prints, it is probably his best known. The reasons have less to do with the spare and elegant composition and the moodiness of its stormy light than with the phenomenon Terry had captured, whose scientific name

I suspect he didn't know at the time, but whose beauty he immediately apprehended. As he later wrote, “Though I am fond of the water most of my photographs are of rock. I love the beauty of nature and am pleased that one of my photographs can be useful in illustrating a story of one of the great many phenomena we have been privileged to observe.”<sup>2</sup>

As far as I can tell, *Ocean X* first appeared, without a credit line, in a calendar published in 1979 by the Trojan Decommissioning Alliance, a group of activists opposing nuclear power plants in Oregon. Mathematician Patrick Weidman saw the calendar, which happened to be turned to the month featuring Terry's image, on a kitchen wall in Los Angeles. He realized its significance, and contacted his friend Harvey Segur, who was elated to find an illustration of the very mathematical model he was working on. Segur identified in the image a spectacular example of a soliton, a nonlinear wave. Not only had Terry captured this marvelous occurrence, he had done it at a perfect moment in the history of science.

Now a professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Segur recently summarized soliton

6

Prudence Roberts

Figure 1. Terry Toedtemeier (1947–2008), *Ocean X*, 1978. Platinum-developed gelatin silver print, gold and selenium toned,  $5\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{3}{4}$  in. Estate of Terry Toedtemeier, Collection of Prudence Roberts. Courtesy PDX CONTEMPORARY ART, Portland, OR



research for me and noted how Terry's photograph "magically" fits into its history. This discussion recalled to me Terry's own way of talking about his photographs, which usually tended to make more sense to geologists than to art audiences. Segur explained:

In the mid 1890s, Dutch mathematicians Diederik Korteweg and Gustav de Vries worked out a new theory for how waves of large amplitude behave in shallow water, where the water's depth is much less than the distance between successive wave crests. The waves in Terry's photo are examples of such waves, and their amplitudes are large enough that a nonlinear theory is needed to predict them accurately. The mathematical model that Korteweg and De Vries developed, the eponymous KdV equation, is a nonlinear model. Although their theory was known to some coastal engineers and oceanographers, it was for a long time mostly ignored because it was too hard to solve.

In the mid 1960s, two American mathematicians/physicists, Martin Kruskal

and Norman Zabusky, were working on a different problem with no obvious connection to water waves. But their problem had nonlinear waves, and after a lot of hard work, they were able to write down a nonlinear mathematical model to describe them. They did not realize it at the time, but the model that they constructed is the model of Korteweg and De Vries. In fact, they had never heard of the KdV equation but had stumbled onto it.

Because their model was nonlinear, Kruskal and Zabusky had little hope of solving it exactly, but these two and their collaborators were very capable mathematicians, and they were able to establish several properties that automatically went with any solution of their model. One of these important properties was the admission into the model of solitary waves. Usually one thinks of waves in terms of a "wavetrain," a long chain of crests and troughs that is uniform in space as it travels along. A solitary wave is different, consisting of a single crest riding on an otherwise flat background. Zabusky and Kruskal

showed that two of these solitary waves can interact with each other in a remarkable way: they simply move *through* each other and come out on the other side. The amplitude of the wave on each side of the interaction remains the same; the direction of each wave is unchanged; and its speed of propagation is unchanged. The only long-term effect is that the waves' positions have shifted somewhat because of their interaction. The phenomenon made Kruskal and Zabusky think of the behavior of elementary particles in quantum physics—electrons, phonons, Fermions, Bosons—so they called their solitary waves "solitons."

Here is where Terry's photo fits into this story, with almost magical accuracy. Look at his photo, and you see a giant X pattern, with some other kinds of waves further out at sea, and with some much smaller waves in the region of the X. Ignore the other waves, and concentrate on the X. The X has four arms, each of which can be viewed as a solitary wave: it's a single wave crest, with no visible trough; each arm

But despite the promises he sometimes made himself to “fire up that negative,” he never did. Like most artists I’ve known, he was caught up in new projects and rarely revisited earlier ones.

is remarkably straight. The X pattern is actually two solitary waves, moving in two different directions, and they are interacting with each other in the middle of the X.

Take a ruler; lay it down on the picture so that it lines up next to one of the arms. As you go across the region of interaction, observe that the ruler is lying next to the arm on one side of the interaction region, but it is separated from the arm on the other side. The ruler is parallel to the arms on each side, but while touching the arm on one side it is separated by a small fixed distance from the arm on the other side. This is *the shift in position of each wave from where it would have been*

*without the interaction*, as predicted by the KdV theory. Terry’s photograph shows that this unusual equation describes a naturally occurring physical process. So it’s not just mathematics, it’s also physics that can exhibit the magical properties of the KdV equation.<sup>3</sup>

Segur was the first mathematician to find Terry and ask if he could reproduce the image in a forthcoming book. One request led to another and another. Over the next three decades, as Terry’s work became better known and as his reputation as an artist grew, he sold some prints of the photograph. It also acquired a scientific history, showing up alongside

page-long equations and graphs and text written in French, Danish, Japanese, German, and English. Most of the authors contacted Terry for permission to use *Ocean X*; he granted this free of charge in exchange for a copy of the publication. For reasons known only to Terry, he filed these materials, along with the related letters, faxes, and printed e-mails, next to his books on Indian cookery.

He always intended to go back to the darkroom and make another pass at printing the image, to extract more information from the sky and from what one of his correspondents termed the “saddle wave region.” But despite the promises he sometimes made himself to “fire up that negative,” he never did. Like most artists I’ve known, he was caught up in new projects and rarely revisited earlier ones.

His curatorial work and his research into photographic history were taking up more of his time; he was especially engrossed in *Wild Beauty*, his masterly photographic history of the Columbia River Gorge. (The exhibition at the Portland Art Museum would open in 2008, accompanied by a book of the same name.) Further, the world of photography had changed.

His favorite paper, Agfa Portriga, was no longer available. By 2004, however, Terry had seen good, high-quality archival pigment prints made from digital files and understood the powerful capabilities of digital editing software. That year, he started to work with Phil Bard, a photographer and Photoshop wizard, who ran Cirrus Digital Imaging, a world-renowned atelier. Phil scanned Terry’s negatives and, working with him, was able to match the tonalities and range of his gelatin silver prints exactly. *Ocean X* was the first image they tackled. When a successful print appeared, according to Phil, Terry lay on his back, laughing with joy and kicking his legs in the air. He never went back to the darkroom, and *Ocean X* entered its second life.

Prudence Roberts is an art historian and writer. She retired from Portland Community College, where she taught art history and was the Director of the Helzer Art Gallery from 2001–2018. Roberts previously was Curator of American Art at the Portland Art Museum, where she focused on the museum’s American and regional collections and on early American museology. She serves as Secretary of the board of Crow’s Shadow Institute of the Arts, Pendleton, and is also on the board of the Multnomah County Cultural Coalition. Her most recent essays have looked at the work of Ryan Burkhardt, Amy Bay and at the founding and 25-year history of Crow’s Shadow.

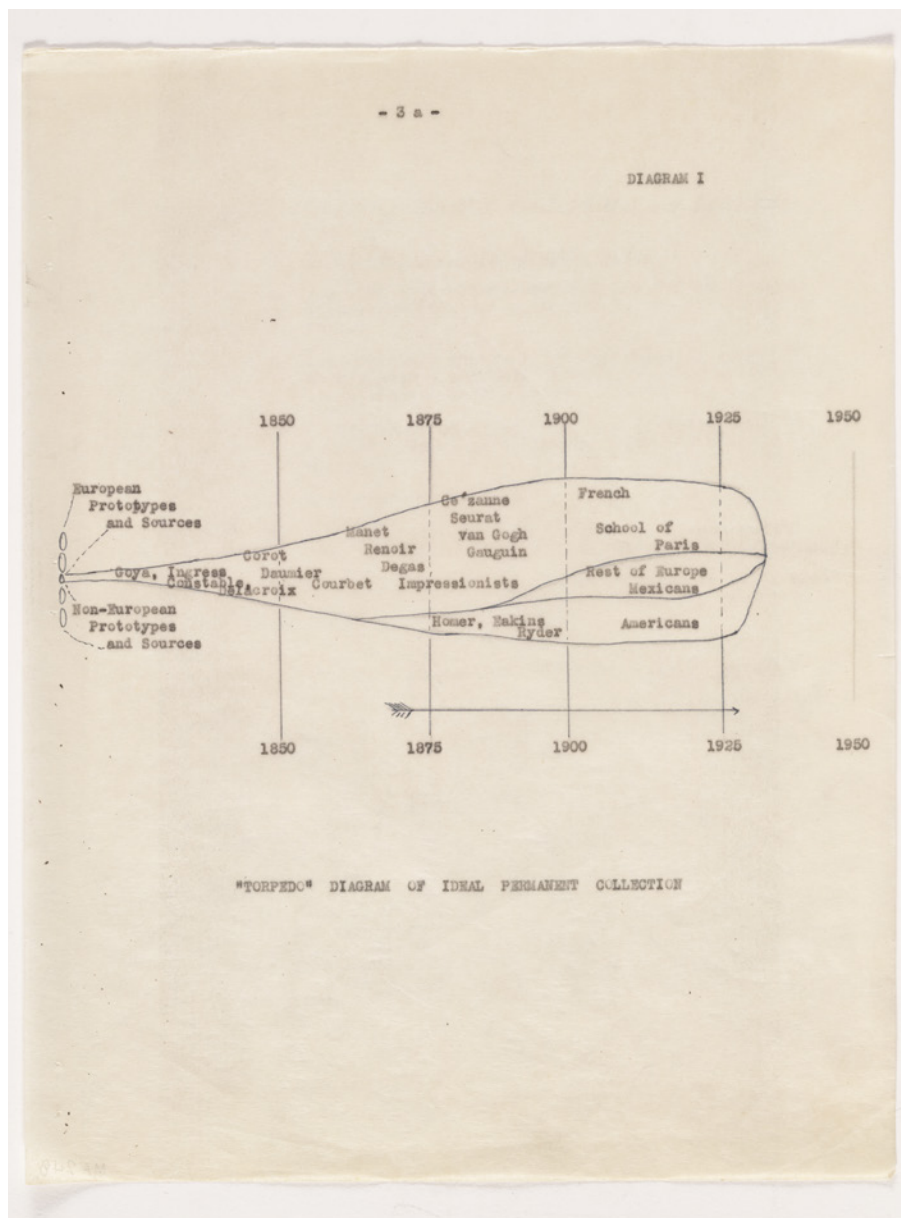
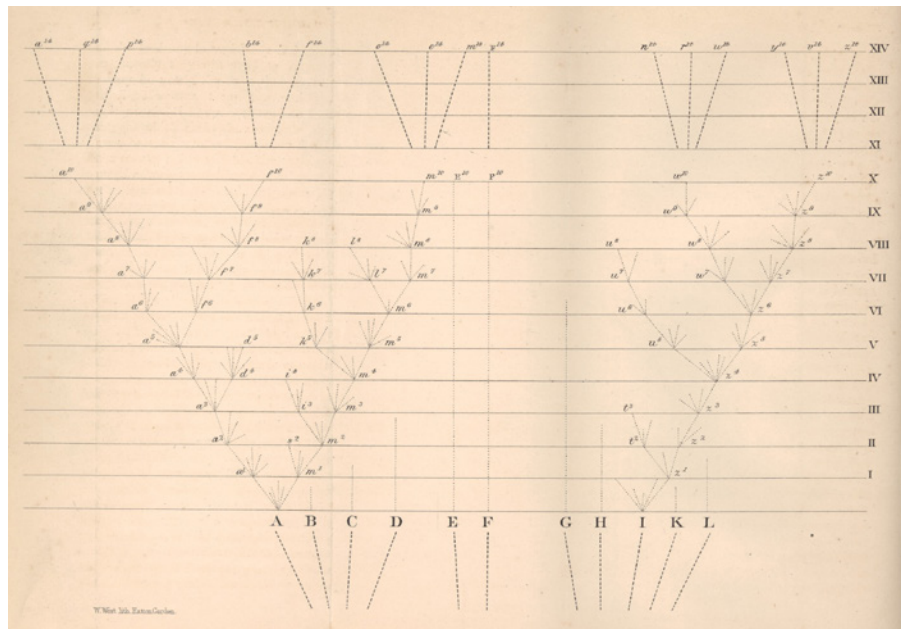
<sup>1</sup> This essay is a slightly abridged version of Prudence Roberts’ contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Sun, Shadows, Stone: The Photography of Terry Toedtemeier* (Tacoma, Wash.: Tacoma Art Museum, 2018), which also includes an annotated bibliography of the many publications in which the photograph *Ocean X* is reproduced. Our thanks to both Prudence Roberts and the Tacoma Art Museum for permission to reproduce the essay here. —Ed.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Toedtemeier to A. Sizmann, 16 October 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey Segur, personal email to the author, 29 December 2017.







enterprising data scientists may be able to map its transmission in time and space. Notably, this sickness is marked by an obsession with transmission itself, a theory that spins inventive causal fictions which purport to diagram global child-trafficking systems of staggering complexity. To believers, these and other nefarious networks are controlled by the “deep state,” global cabals of corporations, the Illuminati, and various other conjured powers who marshal vast, if concealed, authority. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, an important part of the conspiracy is its visual culture. Much of its evidence arrives out of a hyperactive analysis that ascribes all sorts of meaning to a rampant symbology, linking ancient signs and texts to contemporary politics, and pop and consumer culture (fig. 2).

Remarkable and banal at the same time, these representations (both those circulated among believers, and those created by critics attempting to understand them) testify to something about this sickeningly networked period in history. Documenting little more than mere association or visual similes, these paranoid diagrams proffer byzantine flowcharts in which nothing flows. People and entities float around like bubbles in some cosmic miasma, or like electrons loosely circling a nebulous nucleus. (Adopting scientific images of cellular biophysics, these schematics assume a vague and ersatz eminence.) They attempt to model our moment, fixing it as an unstable crystalline condition rather than as a system moving and changing over time. Bludgeoned by the complexity of the globalized world, it seems, “deep state” believers have turned, feverishly, to constructing pictures of what they think it is, because they can’t figure out how it works. Having lost a grip on the way things happen, they consequently seem to be losing any sense of how to make things better without recourse to apocalyptic fantasies.

At its core, we might consider this an affliction of history—and one that afflicts history. Trying to determine who got what from whom is the practice of epidemiologists, but it also describes some aspect of the work of historians. What does it mean when the stories that ground us are overtaken by clouded networks, when narrative affect dissipates into mere aggregations of subjects? When Charles Darwin drew his explanation of evolution in the mid-19th century, he charted a series of bettering inheritances over time, which helped the West to visualize progressive knowledge (fig. 3). Natural selection takes place at an invisibly slow pace, but art is much faster, and the concurrent development of the avant-garde offered people a visual index to cultural progress. Registering and modeling the anxieties and hopes that attended quickening technological change, modern art blazed a path towards better things to come. It attempted to do so by drawing everything—or at least what then passed for “everything”—into a common genealogy, which MoMA’s founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. famously represented as a torpedo moving forward through time (fig. 4). Barr’s conceptualization, however, pathologizes the prior century’s notion of art as collective social experience, perhaps best advocated by John Dewey. Somehow this art historical war machine of the 1930s was supposed to bear us into a great future.

What the missile left behind in its oceanic wake took decades to acknowledge, and we still find it hard to do what Christina Sharpe calls the “wake work” of looking to the black depths of the sea and contending

Figure 3. Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* phylogenetic diagram, 1859

Figure 4. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., diagram (1933) from the “Advisory Committee Report on Museum Collections,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, 1941. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

with the unrecoverable, sundered Black lives that haunt the diaspora and histories of modernity.<sup>1</sup> See, for example, another charting of Modern Art that Barr created back then, which posed “Negro Sculpture” as some floating (African) antecedent; the museum figured African art as a dark and undifferentiated mass of aesthetic objects outside of the modern teleology (fig. 5).<sup>2</sup> A similarly racist construct can be seen in the “tree of modern art” that *Vanity Fair* published in 1933, its branches replete with the names of artists and movements. Here we find a nameless African sculpture marginalized onto the grass beside it, wholly outside the protection of its roots and influence, and alienated from the “natural” superiority of the featured (white, male) artists (fig. 6).<sup>3</sup> Both examples prefigure the catastrophic conflation of eugenics and war that was just around the corner (a history denied by many who stormed the Capitol, such as the man photographed in a Camp Auschwitz shirt).

Recent decades have been marked by historiographic reckonings the many figures left strewn about on the grass around Barr’s modern tree. Efforts to remediate absences in traditional art historical narratives—whether occasioned by race, gender, sexual identity, nationality, disability, artistic medium or discipline—have accelerated more recently with changes to the course offerings of major university departments and the exhibition and collection displays of some museums.<sup>4</sup> But we struggle to understand what this does to our models of history. How, for example, do we account for the wakes that trail such absences?

This problem is beautifully modeled in a 2009 work by Luis Camnitzer, a German-born Uruguayan artist based in New York. Responding to the disappearances of hundreds of people that occurred under Uruguay’s dictatorship (1973–84), Camnitzer inserted the names of the missing into a present-day edition of the Montevideo phonebook, which is displayed as 195 individually framed pages (figs. 7–8). He used the phonebook’s font and style for their names, and the missing are hard to find. As Camnitzer explained, they become legible only because they lack addresses and phone numbers. Literally, this means “that you cannot call them anymore,” but as he notes, “somehow they keep calling us... and we cannot really answer.”<sup>5</sup>

Camnitzer’s *Memorial* provides a way to remember the absent by reinscribing them among us, which is, at base, how all memorials effect their work. By instantiating loss into the community of the present, the work also highlights the obvious difficulty of registering the more complex, unnamable loss that haunts the future as brutally as it does our present: how can we understand the impact those vanished lives would have had, had they never disappeared? Similarly, how can we begin to chart the imaginary influences of artists who didn’t exist in the histories of their own times? We are called to picture the unfollowed paths, the messy and contested routes of reception and influence that would have bequeathed to us a different culture of the present.

Describing the impact of conceptual art, Robert Barry said that “modern art was going out on a limb and then cutting off the limb to see what would happen,” and his formulation might allow us to envision progressive genealogies of art history littered with phantom limbs of all sorts, haunting the present with all that was amputated and never allowed to grow.<sup>6</sup> Quantum physics has tried to resolve a temporal exercise called the “grandfather paradox,” which grapples with the question of what would happen if you could travel back in time and murder your ancestors, chopping down your own family tree. But we might also conceptualize

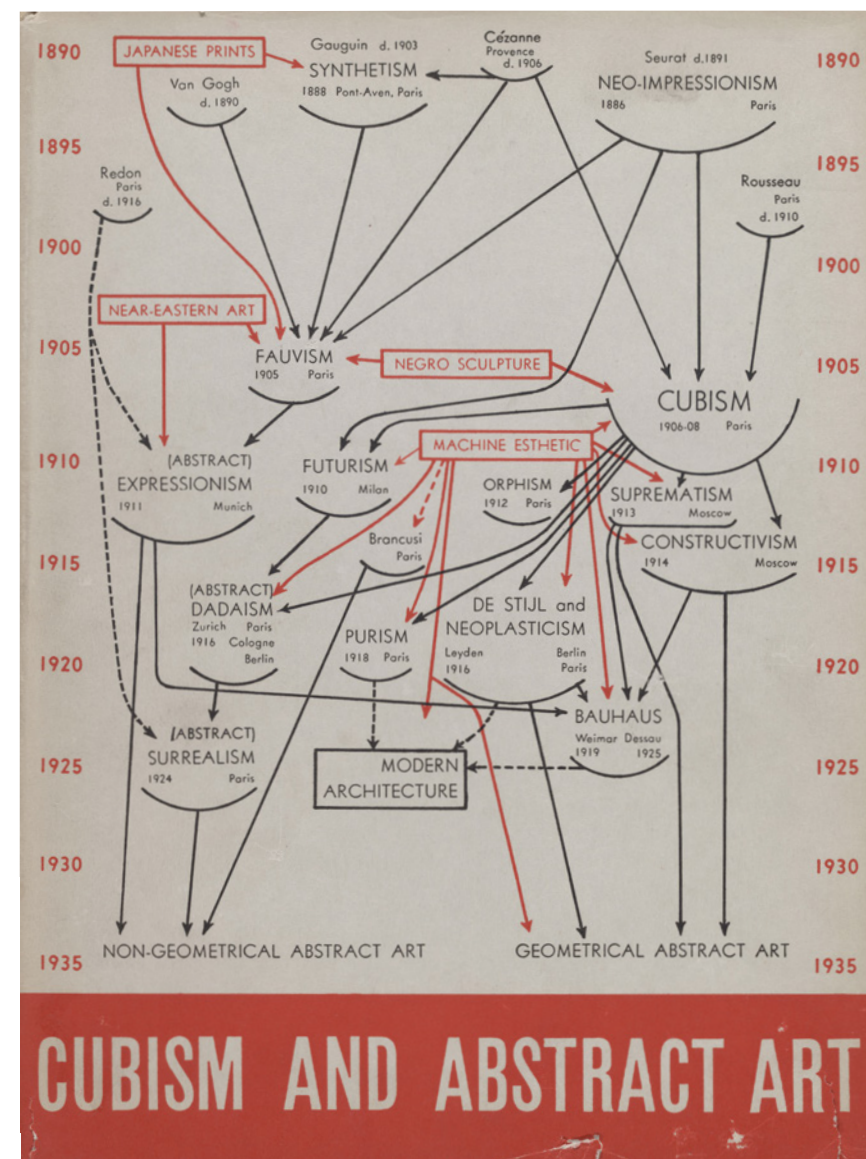


Figure 5. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., diagram on the cover of the exhibition catalog for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

Figure 6. Miguel Covarrubias, *The Tree of Modern Art*, *Vanity Fair* 40 no. 3 (May 1933). *Vanity Fair* © Condé Nast





and hope, we cannot ignore the pandemic's gross evidence of inequitable accumulation. Even without a detailed understanding of the virus's course, the disproportionate impact it has had on some communities is clear and devastating. That these communities—Black and brown, indigenous, immigrant—include those who have insufficiently figured in the story this country tells itself should give us pause.

Figure 9.  
Victor Bobritsky,  
*Everybody's  
Washington*,  
cover of *Vanity  
Fair*, May 1, 1933.  
©Condé Nast

Contemporary curators may be disturbed to recognize something familiar in the wild imaginaries of Q-Anon and its dispersed, malignant logics of association. I, for one, know the desire to excavate meaning from a picture and to follow it towards something bigger, to use it to craft a scaffolding on which to hang a larger story that

helps others to make sense of things. But ours is a historical project. Their teleology is one of aftermath, a model for an age after the end of history. Finding themselves having fallen from the tree, the faithful instead join a vast conglomeration of pedestrian facts to a grandiose latticework of explanation that is big enough to include them.

Yet we should be able to relate—particularly as we seek to construct more inclusive edifices and arrangements of history in search of a truly common culture. These epistemic networks—the poisonous, stultified webs of conspiracy, but also the expanding filigrees of cultural history—are documents of our digital age. More practically, we might consider them as symptoms of life under the many strains of crises—ecological, economic, political and social—that are quietly changing the structures of our thought. What happens to the promise of culture when lineages of influence and innovation are overwhelmed by the sheer volume and richness of that which demands acknowledgment? What will be transmitted and what shall we receive? As the winnowed boughs of history are replaced by a metastatic florescence, confusion, curiously, might feel just right.

- 1 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 2 See the diagram that Barr created for the cover of *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). The year before this landmark show, MoMA presented another major show called *African Negro Art* (1935), with more than 600 objects. For a critical history, see Charlotte Barat and Darby English, "Blackness at MoMA: A History of Deficit," in English and Barat, eds., *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 19–21.
- 3 For this and many other diagrammatic models of history, see Manuel Fontán del Junco, José Lebrero Stals, and María Zozaya Álvarez, eds., *Genealogies of Art or the History of Art as Visual Art*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2019), which treats Barr's diagrams extensively. In the *Vanity Fair* tree, a white head—perhaps meant to suggest classical Greek or Roman sculpture—appears in the magazine, but was not included in the original sketch. See *Genealogies*, 122.
- 4 Among numerous examples, see Yale University's restructuring of its survey courses, <https://www.collegeart.org/news/2020/02/03/tim-barringer-yale-art-history-letter/>, Museu de Arte de São Paulo's *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (2018), and the opening collection installations of MoMA's expanded building in 2019, which inaugurated a new rotating approach to unsettle and expand the canon it had helped create.
- 5 Luis Camnitzer interview: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/141548>
- 6 Robert Barry, "Statement," *Flash Art* 143 (November–December 1988): 115.

Peter Eeley is an independent curator. He was previously Chief Curator of MoMA PS1, where he organized more than forty exhibitions between 2010 and 2020, including premier presentations of Ed Atkins, Darren Bader, Sascha Braunig, Ian Cheng, Devin Kenny, and Zheng Guogu, as well as surveys of Huma Bhabha, James Lee Byars (with Magali Arriola), Sue Coe, Simon Denny, Lara Favaretto, Maureen Gallace, George Kuchar, Maria Lassnig, Mark Leckey (with Stuart Comer), Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Henry Taylor (with Laura Hoptman), and Cathy Wilkes. *Sturtevant: Double Trouble*, which he organized at The Museum of Modern Art, traveled to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Eeley has curated a number of major group exhibitions, including *September 11*, organized on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks, and the last edition of *Greater New York*, in 2015, for which he led the curatorial team of Douglas Crimp, Thomas J. Lax, and Mia Locks. Eeley most recently co-organized *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* with Ruba Katrib. He is the coordinating curator for MoMA PS1's upcoming presentation of *Gregg Bordowitz: I Wanna Be Well*, originated by Stephanie Snyder at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, and is preparing exhibitions with Barbara Kruger and Deana Lawson (with Eva Respini). Before joining MoMA PS1, Eeley served as Visual Arts Curator at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and as a curator at Creative Time in New York.

# Radical Indigenous Artist Natalie Ball Is Unapologetically Moving Forward— as Mother and Artist

# 24

~~~~~ *Jeanine Jablonski*

When I first came across images of Natalie Ball's work, I was floored. Who was this amazing indigenous artist living in Oregon, and why had I not seen her work before? I was mad at myself for not having been aware of it earlier. Ball's work immediately brought to mind the early sculptures of indigenous Canadian artist Brian Jungen, his assemblages of Nike footwear and human hair, ca. 1999. Ball's works are full of heart, they're unwavering and fierce. In Ball's sculptures, I also see a mixture of equal parts Louise Bourgeois and Ree Morton—I feel the mother in the work. I connected with Natalie to talk about artmaking, motherhood, and the seduction of the abject.

NATALIE BALL: I'm ready when you are.

JEANNINE JABLONSKI: Great, I'm here with a sleeping baby!

NB: Ha! one of mine is home sick but the movie is on...

JJ: Oh god, why are they always sick?!

NB: The flu is coming back around so the slightest sign I keep them home!

Figuring



**JJ: While majoring in ethnic studies at the University of Oregon, you took a painting class and began moving in the direction of studio art. What was it, do you think, that shifted your trajectory toward making?**

NB: I eventually earned a double major in Art and Ethnic Studies from the University of Oregon. I was in ethnic studies for a couple years, then in a class we watched Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Couple in the Cage* and it shook me up. So I wanted to couple ethnic studies with art. Even when I was only painting, I wanted to push past the language of ethnic studies and all the writing, and figure out how to "make" things that were visceral.

**JJ: That was my next question. Was it the physicality of expression involved in making, versus all the theory in the ethnic studies program that catalyzed the shift? I mean, the *Couple in the Cage*, that is seminal, and visceral as hell.**

NB: Yesss! and I wasn't exposed to art then. I was a new mom—a solo mom. I worked fulltime for PGE, then stumbled on college because they gave me a full ride, and I wanted to be around my daughter more. Fusco's piece blew any language or written form away; I didn't need an art education (the grooming) to make art. It was full of gesture, materiality, and like you said, physicality of expression. Ethnic studies gave me a language for how I was feeling, my experiences as an indigenous woman and mother. Ethnic studies empowered me in that way.

*Figure 1.*  
Coco Fusco, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992–94. Performance, Edge Biennial, Madrid. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. ©Coco Fusco/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**JJ: What is the place of performance in your own work? Like your performance piece *Pussy Hat* from grad school at Yale. When I see images of some works, and many of your installations, they read as being connected to performance, and I don't think it is simply their relationship to the body. Are you aware of performing the works while you're creating in the studio?**

NB: I am now. I was made aware of that part of my work at Yale. Performance is in the making of the work, in the studio. (I thought about recording that, but haven't yet.) The end result, the installation, is the residue of the performance or a happening. I was asked to perform my work in front of the viewer at Yale, and I wanted to refuse that. So this is how the residue happened.

**JJ: You were asked to perform? As in, an advisor or peer suggested this? And you negated that by placing yourself, as artwork, within an audience in *Pussy Hat*?**

NB: Yes, it was suggested in critique and studio visits. So I explored the spectacle of my assemblages, alongside historical settler-colonial spectacles like public hangings. During the Modoc War of 1872–73 my ancestor was hung. The head of my ancestor and three others were later spiked on poles and displayed in public. Thinking about ideas of power through the display of the “criminalized” body was critical. *Pussy Hat* made it current for me. I should say I have started my own research on “gibbeting,” and will use my Pollock Krasner funding to continue it. It's tracing the act of propping and displaying the criminalized body, from here back across the United States to Europe.

Figuring



*Figure 2.*  
Natalie Ball, *Nate the Skate*, 2019.  
Leather, hair, wood, coyote teeth, beads, 20 × 20 × 10 in.

*Figure 3.*  
Natalie Ball, *Pussy Hat*, 2018.  
Installation in the Pit, Yale University School of Art. Braiding hair, sinew, cowry shell, dentalium, balaclava, patent leather, mirror, tule cordage, resin, 72 × 9 × 7 in.

**JJ: Can you talk me through a few works, and share your thinking behind their making? Let's start with *Nate the Skate* from 2019.**

NB: *Nate the Skate* is a name (one of two) I got when I was growing up in North Portland. It's a self-portrait: how do I create a body when it's no longer whole. That piece was in the *Bad Lucky Indian* exhibition at Half Gallery in New York.

**JJ: Where do your materials come from? I read that when you were at Yale, you went home to the reservation for a lot of your materials?**

NB: Yeah, but not so much now since materials from home take a while to gather. I trade a lot, I find it, I borrow it, eBay, etc. In *Nate the Skate* that's a lace front wig with real hair, my texture! A cowboy boot, the bottom of a rocking chair I found, and an old beaded belt I had from my powwow outfit when I was Powwow Princess of the Delta Park Powwow in Portland.

**JJ: The piece *When Harry met Sally*. I mean, when my Mom met my Dad. I mean, when my Ancestors met my Ancestors. I mean, when a Lace Front met Smoked Skin. This piece is so great and so is that title! Can you walk me through it?**

NB: I'm always trying to expand an understanding of what "Indian" is, and looks like, and the experiences of being an Indian/Native American. I believe that thinking about Native identity as governed by blood law is problematic and genocidal. In *When Harry met Sally*, I am thinking about how this makes our work, identity, and experiences static in a sense. Through words and materiality I want to talk about the intersections of Indian, how we have always been intersecting, and how I am Black and Indian which will never compromise my indigeneity. Also thinking about when people and materials join, and how they join. This is also a self-portrait!

**JJ: *Lace Front met Smoked Skin*?**

NB: Lace front wig, and smoked, elk hide moccasin.

**JJ: I've been thinking about your work so much—not only in the past year, since we connected, but very recently since having my second child. I've been thinking of you and your practice, about how the fuck you do it all. I sense that you are extremely present for your children, but also manage to handle the demands of your current schedule. Personally, I think a lot about how women with children are not well represented in the art world. So, could you share *how the fuck do you do it all*?**

NB: Girl yes! And right now I am gearing up to give my middle child my kidney—that's why I am behind on email. I knew I only had a couple of years before the transplant, and I was done breastfeeding my third kid, so I made the move to get my MFA from Yale. I knew that pedigree would help me navigate the art world as a mom who has a lot on her plate! Women and children aren't represented well in the art world even though it's a huge part of our practice.

Figure 4.  
Natalie Ball, *Pussy Hat* (detail), 2018



**JJ: It's so intense. I try to represent where I can, and encourage artists to talk about it, to ask questions. But I feel like those who do have kids often hide it, rather than integrate their children into their lives outside of the home. Kids love art, and parties, and all of it.**

NB: We have to be unapologetic about it. And so does our work.

**JJ: I agree! I try to bring my youngest to work now, to openings, showing that I can do both. People doubt you can manage with more than one child. That's what I've felt. I've been super inspired by the Australian parliamentarian Larissa Waters breastfeeding while at work. Your kidney, wow mama, that's huge and incredible. When is that surgery? Between which shows?**

NB: Soon. I will only be out two weeks then back to regular life. I have what she needs, I would give her my brain if I had to! And we only need one kidney, so we're good!

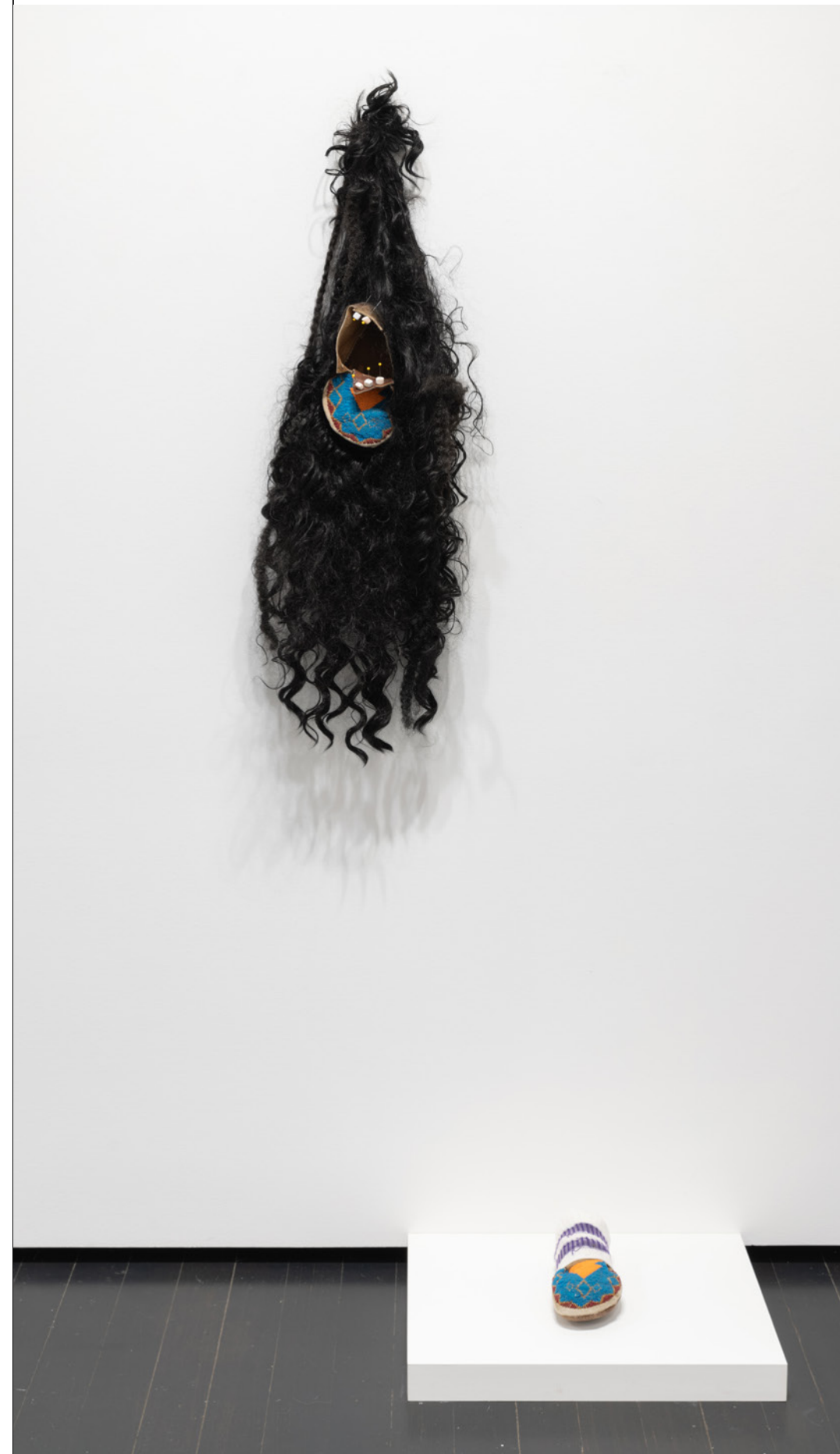
**JJ: When first coming across your work, I was instantly reminded of the work of indigenous Canadian artist Brian Jungen. More recently your work has me thinking of the late Ree Morton. Morton's work embraced the complexities of her life as a woman through a material lexicon both austere and playful. Your work is so confident in its aesthetic cohesiveness, especially the myriad of mediums you use, from animal artifacts or totems (like coyote teeth and elk hide), to different clothing (handmade traditional, to contemporary rez style), to acrylic nails, to beaded purses...in your words, the "intersections of Indian" that circulate throughout your life. Many of your materials are embedded with their own histories, either personal or otherwise, even before you incorporate them into your work. Can you speak to this? Is it important that they have a history?**

NB: It means a lot to me to have materials that have lived a while; it also creates a canvas for me to work with—what I can respond to. I am trying to give you another narrative to add to what you might think is "Indian." Hopefully my materials disrupt that idea and expand it. Materials express my resourcefulness too—using what's around the house, the community, in grandma's closet. They come with a huge set of stories and experiences, rich with possibilities.

**JJ: That makes sense. Does it make things difficult when you have a number of projects happening at once? Or do you have a load of things around, like a secret hoarder?**

NB: I am def a hoarder, I have my family keep objects for me too! My dad is bringing me my grocery cart from Portland! I discovered assemblage at Yale, and I was so excited. It validated what I was doing, and it gave me a history to pull from.

**JJ: Oh that's amazing, you have your own histories, and the histories of those around you—your community is imbedded. You won't run out of materials. And I bet your kids find things for you, and will continue to forever.**



*Figure 5. Natalie Ball, When Harry met Sally. I mean, when my Mom met my Dad. I mean, when my Ancestors met my Ancestors. I mean, when a Lace Front met Smoked Skin, 2018. Beads, elk hide, synthetic hair, shells, sinew waxed thread, cotton, metal, vintage Skookum dolls, 35½ × 10½ × ¾ in. Courtesy of PDX Contemporary Art (Photo: Mario Gallucci)*

NB: And I'm so familiar with all these materials, but I'm going to challenge my practice by working with glass this summer at the Pilchuck Glass School. I haven't worked with glass before.

**JJ: Oh, you'll love it there. I'm excited for you! Let's talk about growing up in Portland. What was that like for you? What high school did you go to? Do you have favorite places you visit every time you come home?**

NB: My Portland neighborhood is no longer there. I wouldn't even know where to look! I grew up in North Portland in a historically Black neighborhood. My dad's mom and dad moved from the rez after our tribe was terminated by the U.S. government. My mom's family moved to Portland from Arkansas. I loved my childhood in Portland, there was an active urban Indian community there too.

I went to Applegate Elementary School, and for high school I went from Benson, to Roosevelt, where I was eventually expelled. I graduated from Open Meadow (an alternative school). One of the best things we used to do when I was a kid, was go to American Wrestling matches, live, in St. Johns. My dad's friend was big and bulky like a wrestler and my dad would say he was wrestling that night, and we would get in for free! I have to say that the communities I was raised in were very violent and riddled with the residue of settler violence and continued violence. That is also in my work.

**JJ: Where did you feel the violence the most—was it in your everyday life?**

NB: I think so, we fought a lot, and there was gang violence, and on the rez it's violent like that. Police violence for sure. Institutional violence. But I also felt love and community in these spaces, so as violent as they were, they were beautiful and loving as well. All of the above.

**JJ: Maybe this is part of the struggle we feel in your work.**

NB: Resiliency is what I learned. Contradiction. The seduction of the object.

*This interview was conducted in 2019.*

Jeanine Jablonski is an internationally recognized gallery owner, artist advocate, and cultural producer. In 2008, Jablonski founded Fourteen30 Contemporary, an experimental gallery that produces a diverse array of exhibitions, events, artist editions, and publications, often in collaboration with institutions including: the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA); the Cooley Gallery, Reed College; and Ditch Projects. Jablonski has been an arts professional for over eighteen years, in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors. From 2011 to 2018, she was the Managing Director of the lumber room: a private home, artist residency site, and exhibition space founded by collector Sarah Miller Meigs. Jablonski has served on the boards of: the Portland Art Center; the Oregon College of Art and Craft; and Ditch Projects. She is the co-founder of PICA's Visual Art Circle, as well as the founder of the publication Portland Conversation in Culture. She has taught and mentored students from colleges and universities including: Memphis State University; Portland State University; Pacific Northwest College of Art; the Oregon College of Art and Craft; Reed College; and Memphis College of Art. Jablonski lives in Portland, Oregon with her two children, Roe and August, and husband, artist Evan La Londe.



Figure 6. Natalie Ball, *Bunny*, 2019. Deer rawhide, feathers, pine, chair, elk hide, 59 × 22 × 16 in.

# Ludd or Lucifer: Felicity Fenton Considers Whether to Abandon the World Wide Web or Strike a Deal with the Devil and Use the Internet to Critique the Internet

# 34

~~~~~ *Richard Speer*



Richard Speer

To post or not to post? In light of the “delete-Facebook” and anti-social-media movements, an increasingly vocal contingent of visual artists is wrestling with that very question. Is it worth engaging a digital matrix one finds insidious in order to promote one’s creative output? The question hits close to home for Colorado-born, Portland-based artist Felicity Fenton (b. 1977, fig. 1). Deeply inquisitive, ambitious, and imaginative, Fenton is an interdisciplinary virtuoso who floats freely across drawing, painting, photography, new media, social practice, writing, and conceptual art, juggling her artistic life with hosting a radio show (“Bachelard’s Panty Drawer” on Freeform Radio 90.3 FM), co-parenting a seven-year old daughter, and, significantly, working a full-time job as creative director at a Portland-based tech firm. This day job, more than any other she’s held in the past (sign painter, massage therapist, Arby’s cook, personal assistant to Paul Simon and Lou Reed), informs her art practice today. While she has tackled an array of ideas throughout her artistic life (food and consumption culture, domesticity, ritual, sexual response) and exhibited at a plethora of local venues (among them Milepost 5, p:ear, Anka Gallery, Launch Pad Gallery, the Portland Building, and Performance Works Northwest), it is her current focus on social-media addiction and new-media platforms that most clearly crystallizes her dilemma. Swimming by day in the digital ocean, she returns evenings to her home studio and stares down the impulse to eschew completely the digital realm. Does she engage social media despite its draconian undercurrents in a Faustian bargain to disseminate her ideas; or, in a bid for greater personal authenticity and aesthetic integrity, does she put down the phone, turn off the Wi-Fi, and try to recapture the less contrived, less “connected” ethos of the pre-digital era?

In ironic and double-coded fashion, Fenton’s most recent work employs humor and parody to defang social media’s grip on our psyches, even as she engages the very platforms she is critiquing. Simultaneously she encourages viewers to reenter the worlds of nature, primary experience, and unmediated human interaction. In short, she is inviting us out of the chatroom and back into the agora. The seeds of her current practice took root in her 2013 exhibition “Internal Server Error” at Place White Gallery in Portland. For this show, Fenton kept a meticulous longhand time-log of every Web site she visited over a thirty-day period, no matter how fleetingly or frivolously. The result was a grid of 38 wall-mounted clipboards (some days required multiple clipboards) displaying the logs and the glut of information and ephemera they represented (fig. 2). Paces away from the wall she installed a bank of objects that physically represented the subjects she’d browsed online: dictionaries, cassette tapes, letters from friends, takeout menus, junk mail, and appliance user manuals. This counterpositioning of recorded digital consumption with a much more voluminous assortment of real-world referents set up a spatial dialectic between the frothy, often time-killing habit of Web-browsing (the postmodern equivalent of TV channel-surfing) and the palpability, the literal gravitas, of ancien-régime media that used to be our stock and store, which is to say, physical objects with dimension and heft.

The disparities between cyber and IRL (commonly used acronym for “in real life”) concerns has increasingly become the focus of Fenton’s more recent efforts, among them her Web projects *My Googled Dreams* and *Self-Portrait According to Google* (both 2015–present). In the former, Fenton writes down her dreams, inputs

*Figure 1.*  
Felicity Fenton,  
*Self-Portrait*,  
November 20,  
2017. Digital  
photograph



keywords from those summaries into Google image search, then displays the returns as scrolling slide shows on her Web site. In the latter project, she inputs written descriptions of her physical appearance into Google image search, then organizes the image returns into grids, creating digital composites of her face and features. In what might seem to be a foregone conclusion, the digital collages do little to capture the nuances of her dreams or physique. The artist's IRL self remains uniquely cyber-resistant even as social-media behemoths buy and sell, gather and dissect, reams of information about our shopping and entertainment preferences, our political affiliations and other private demographics. A few months ago, G-mail began inserting suggested replies at the bottom of each incoming email. It's startling how spot-on these replies can be: "Sure thing — thanks for the heads-up!" "That's great. See you soon!" The algorithm seems to intuit how we would respond even to our dearest relatives. If our correspondence is intelligible to a supercomputer, can our dreams be far behind? If a data aggregator can divine which dating service we might prefer, how long before it can compose a virtual picture of our bodies' every bone and bulge without ever having laid "eyes" upon us? Hearteningly, Fenton's projects demonstrate that at least for now, technology cannot infiltrate and monetize our deepest interior sanctums, nor can it yet perfectly reconstruct our identities from decontextualized data.

Figure 2. Installation view, Felicity Fenton, "Internal Server Error," at Place White Gallery, Portland, OR, June 15–August 3, 2013 (Photo: Felicity Fenton)

In *Copy Catz Club* (2018–present), Fenton's photographic collaboration with new-media artist Scott Wayne Indiana (auteur of the well known *Portland Horse Project*), the two artists establish a virtual call-and-response, staging themselves in private and public contexts in activities alternately mundane, absurd,

or ecstatic. One of them will strike a pose, Fenton from Portland and Indiana from New York City, whereupon the other mimics the same pose in his or her own setting, changing details for parodic impact (fig. 3). In recent iterations, Fenton posted a self-portrait playing guitar while standing in the Columbia River, and Indiana responded by playing guitar in his shower. Fenton photographed herself with fortune cookies over her eyes, as if receiving some bizarre facial; Indiana responded with a sugar-cookie eye treatment. All of this may seem in good fun, or perhaps just plain sophomoric, but between the pixels something deeper is at work. A proliferation of so-called "social-media influencers" on Instagram is currently redefining the advertising industry. These mostly fresh-faced pitch-people indirectly advertise goods and services by photographing themselves with various products, calculatedly integrating them into the branded lifestyles they have concocted for their online personae. Their posts aim to inspire admiration, envy, and, most of all, clicks that lure social-media users to pull out their credit cards. In this call-and-response, the call is the influencer's post; the response is the viewer's cash. Enter Fenton and Indiana, whose *Copy Catz* shenanigans satirize the influencers. These artists are influencing one another directly; when one initiates a pose, the other must respond with a parroting maneuver. There is no option not to respond. In one another they have found the pluperfect solicitors and consumers. Across the 2,900 miles separating them, they react like entangled quantum particles across space, no matter how ludicrous the action—stuffing Q-tips up their noses, wearing three pairs of sunglasses at once, holding a clothes iron up to an ear as if it were a telephone. It is an unsettlingly undignified exchange, a dark allegory cloaked in whimsy for the manipulations we absorb and fall for without noticing,



Figure 3. Felicity Fenton and Scott Wayne Indiana, *Copy Catz Club*, 2018–2019. Digital photographs, images archived on Instagram: @copycatzclub

often without asking or caring what unseen corporate hands are pulling our marionette strings and making us dance.

This profound uneasiness with social media's hidden mediators—and the ways in which they affect our private, public, and economic behavior—is at the heart of Fenton's practice, distilled in her new book, *User Not Found*.<sup>1</sup> As she related during an interview last fall, the book's genesis came in December 2017, when Fenton, feeling increasingly leached of personal authenticity, took a two-month cold-turkey break from all social media. This followed a trip to Indonesia and Mexico during which, she says, "I realized we have this global monoculture with Facebook and Instagram. Wherever you go, you're constantly seeing the blue-and-white screen. I was disturbed by this not only anthropologically, not only with ideas of narcissism and identity, but it also made me question my own attachment to these devices."<sup>2</sup> Leaving the Internet entirely was arguably a disastrous move for an artist who enjoyed a substantial online presence, and indeed, during those two months her Web site traffic declined by fifty percent. Friends cautioned her that she was shooting herself in the foot. As she writes in the book: "If there were ever a time to post something, it would be now, friends say. You have things going on; how will anyone know about them?... Friends and family ask me to come back. They say they like to see what I've been up to."<sup>3</sup>

Conflicted, in March 2018 she began inching back onto the Internet, but with certain rules: no mindless scrolling, just directed searching, and only five minutes a day total. As if to atone for this resumption, she rededicated herself to ongoing and new projects that seek to reconnect people to their pre-digital selves. In her *Sniff* happenings (2007–present) she engages gallery-goers and event attendees in a game of smell-and-tell. She and each participant inhale selected parts of one another's bodies, then record their impressions in a log, which then becomes part of Fenton's Web site. The impressions, she has noticed, read like prose poems. For example: "Jessica on Felicity—Elbows: faint musk laced with candy; a fancy candle with black glass container and pale pink wax.... Felicity on Jessica—Armpits: black pepper, purple, toasted sesame seeds, a Mexican restaurant with a fountain and hydrangeas...." This intimate and often uncomfortable-making project aims to wrest participants out of the hermetic virtual world and back into the mammalian, sensate relations we are increasingly leaving behind. Similar motivations underlie another social-practice project, *The Dreaming Dirt* (2015–present), a series of free-form happenings in which attendees recite poetry, sing, teach, perform healing rituals, and so on. It is the artist's attempt to resuscitate the spirit of the old-school talent show and church social, the barn-raising and hootenanny, the parlor salon and *soirée musicale*. She is on an E. M. Forster-approved mission to encourage us to only connect outside the fiefdom of 1's and 0's. Even her Web site admonishes: "When you are done perusing this site, go outside. Good things happen outside."<sup>4</sup>

The publication in December 2018 of *User Not Found* underlined a dilemma for Fenton: whether to use the Internet to get the word out about an anti-Internet epistle. "I've struggled with how to publicize the essay," she acknowledges, "because it feels wrong posting about a project that's all about trying to remove myself from that world. Kevin [Sampsell], my publisher and friend, is so good at the publicity side of things, I haven't had to do much at all."<sup>5</sup> Lest this seem like passing the buck, she added: "I do get random Twitter texts on my phone, so when someone mentions the book on Twitter, I can be sure to thank them, click

a heart, or retweet." She has mused over other, non-digital ways of getting attention for the book: "I like the idea of going door to door. Or putting up flyers. Or hiring one of those banner planes. Or sticking status updates in fortune cookies."

"I've struggled with how to publicize the essay," she acknowledges, "because it feels wrong posting about a project that's all about trying to remove myself from that world."

As cute or glib as that may sound, the conundrum remains. If you shake hands with the devil, will he singe your fingers, or worse? If you advocate for a Net-limited life, do you risk obsolescence and ossification? And is it really that cut and dried—are we either constantly checking status updates or off in the woods as neo-Luddites kindling fires with flint and steel? These are murky-bottomed eddies, and Fenton is to be commended for wading into them. Her work is thoughtful, challenging, sometimes transgressive, yet consistently tempered by humor and a commitment to accessibility. She deserves a wider audience, which fortune cookies will not win her. The modern world stops for no one, and Fenton may soon have to decide on which side of the digital divide she will declare herself. If her aim is to critique the digital kingdom, her best bet may be to do so as a Trojan Horse. To the phrase "If you can't beat them, join them," we might tack on the addendum: "then attempt sabotage." If new media are this talented artist's chosen tools, she is likely to discover there is no way to sharpen them except by using them.

1 Felicity Fenton, *User Not Found* (Portland, OR: Future Tense Books, 2018).

2 Felicity Fenton, interviewed by the author, September 15, 2018, Portland, OR.

3 Fenton, *User Not Found*, 13, 27.

4 See <https://felicityfenton.com>. For further projects, see also <https://futuretensebooks.com/product/user-not-found-felicity-fenton/>, <https://www.portlandmercury.com/books/2018/12/06/25046842/in-the-new-chapbook-from-future-tense-felicity-fenton-dives-in-to-social-media-addiction>, [https://www.freeformportland.org/program/?show\\_name=bachelards-panty-drawer](https://www.freeformportland.org/program/?show_name=bachelards-panty-drawer), and <https://www.mixcloud.com/felicity-fenton/>, and <https://www.instagram.com/copycatzclub>

5 Fenton, personal email communication, Jan. 8, 2019. Subsequent quotes in this paragraph are from *ibid.*

Richard Speer is a Portland-based author, critic, and curator whose essays and reviews have appeared in *ARTnews*, *Art Ltd.*, *Artpulse*, *Art Papers*, *Visual Art Source*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Oregonian*, *Willamette Week*, *Salon*, and *Newsweek*. He is the author of *Matt Lamb: The Art of Success* (Wiley, 2005), *Halley/Mendini* (Mary Boone Gallery, 2013), *Peter Halley: Before the Fall* (Karma, 2017), *Eric Wert: Still Life* (Pomegranate, 2018), *George Dunbar* (Callan Contemporary, 2018), and *The Space of Effusion: Sam Francis in Japan* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2020). For more information, see [www.richardspeer.com](http://www.richardspeer.com).

# Jess Perlitz's Tragicomic Practice 40

~~~~~ *Bean Gilsdorf*



Bean Gilsdorf

A dejected cloth rainbow, an animate boulder guiding a smaller rock through a city, a series of clownish but eerie masks—what do these have in common? If you're artist Jess Perlitz, they are devices that might engage viewers on topics as varied as the landscape, the body, and power with wry, deadpan humor. Though she employs a variety of artistic strategies that include (and frequently combine) performance, interactivity, and sound, Perlitz's foundational relationship to physical materiality remains central to her practice. Originally from Canada, Perlitz moved to Portland about seven years ago to teach at Lewis & Clark College, where she is currently an associate professor of art and the head of the sculpture department. Before arriving in Oregon, her education included a BA from Bard College and an MFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia. Her work has been exhibited in notable venues such as CUE Art Foundation and Socrates Sculpture Park in New York, and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. In 2018, the Oregon Arts Commission awarded Perlitz the Joan Shipley Fellowship, and in 2019 she received a prestigious Hallie Ford Fellowship from The Ford Family Foundation.

Perlitz's hybrid projects inspire multiple, sometimes conflicting, interpretations. For her 2009 sculpture/performance *A Rainbow Every Other Day* (fig. 1), Perlitz carried a rainbow-striped tube of fabric in a five-gallon bucket to locations around Temple University. Climbing onto the overturned bucket, she pulled the tube down over herself and the bucket and leaned her forehead against the adjacent wall, thus creating a temporary "rainbow" between wall and ground. As a connector of heaven and earth, the rainbow is symbolically potent; in our contemporary moment, its associations range from childlike awe for nature to LGBTQ pride. Perlitz's materially dynamic work contrasted soft, colorful fabric against solid brick and concrete, while positioning a yielding, semi-human form against the hard right angles of the constructed urban landscape. Each performance of *A Rainbow Every Other Day* lasted 25 minutes, with the artist remaining so immobile and silent that passersby would sometimes poke the fabric and exclaim in wonder to find a person inside.

There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, and Perlitz's work calls to mind age-old strategies in which sobering subjects are given a comic treatment. One of these is incongruity, or the disruption of established expectations,<sup>1</sup> and in the creation of comedic artworks the pattern is often established by the world itself. In *Rainbow*, Perlitz set the initial emotional trajectory via the pleasure of glimpsing a rainbow situated within the hard, unyielding angles of the architectural environment. However, the unexpected discovery of the human inside the rainbow derailed the viewer's initial perception, and set interpretation on a different path. The revelation that a real human being occupies an emblem of a social movement for freedom seems an apt metaphor for the then-expanding rights won by gay people, such as the marriage equality bills that were passed in Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, and New York that same spring. Simultaneously operating counter to the work's playful, potentially celebratory feel was the tension between its cheerful colors and the artist's forlorn pose; though the rainbow is an emblem of hope, to lean with one's forehead against a wall is a demonstration of despondency.

When I spoke to Perlitz about this work, she told me that when she pulled the cloth over her head she was also thinking about body bags.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the work has another potential significance, one that reckons with the contemporary history of gay death, from the U.S. government's

Figure 1.  
Jess Perlitz,  
*A Rainbow Every  
Other Day*,  
2009. Fabric,  
bucket, body,  
84 × 24 × 36 in.



disastrously negligent handling of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s to the current-day hate crimes that continue to be perpetrated against the queer community.

Though Perlitz frequently relies on the suggestive properties of her materials and forms, she also probes the extent to which symbols can be employed to engage with the most troubling aspects of society. She describes how her nascent practice was formed within the traditions of institutional critique and social practice, with an aim to explore art's use as a tool for social change. Yet, like many artists, she ran afoul of the paradox inherent to both of these modes: because art's operations are primarily symbolic, it functions poorly as a weapon for direct action — especially when it must rely on the very structures it claims to critique. In response, Perlitz adopted a view of art as autonomous, in which its practical limitations become strengths. Art may have little capacity to change laws, feed people, or spark revolution, but it can delineate moments and spaces of respite in which such possibilities can be cultivated and fostered. And when art is wholly or partially unburdened from direct confrontations with reality, she realized, it creates room for multiple resonances and interpretations.

Perlitz's unadorned materials, straightforward titles, and uncomplicated descriptions imply sincerity, and yet I often find myself responding to her artwork with a rueful laugh. When asked about the function of humor in her work, Perlitz observes that “when a work feels right, it's dumb in the most beautiful and tragic of ways. I'm hesitant to talk about it because I am not in control of it. It's not really a tactic I use, but when a work is right it can seem humorous and it's borderline miserable.” This tension lends much of Perlitz's art an aura similar to “straight-man” comedy, which employs an affect of (deceptive) simplicity in order to evoke more complicated realities. In particular, the sculptures in “People Making People Sounds” (fig. 2), Perlitz's 2019 solo exhibition at Holding Contemporary in Portland, were strongly connected to her post-MFA training in the Pochinko method of clowning, which she studied at the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance in Ontario, Canada. The artist describes this as an education in service of the physical world: “It really helped me rethink sculpture — how the work is activated, what my role can be in it, and how to rethink scale. Clowning embraces

the absurd, but it is inspired by the world as we know it. It materializes social relations and structures of power.”<sup>3</sup> In the same way that art operates in a space set aside from “real” life, clowns, jesters, and fools perform narratives that mimic day-to-day human interactions — often involving subtle, everyday hierarchies — and amplify them to the point of silliness. Historical examples abound, from the tradition of court jesters in China and Europe, whose job was to mock royal authority and pomposity; to Shakespeare's fools (like Feste in *Twelfth Night*), whose role was to speak the truth to other characters or to the audience; to the Lakota *heyoka*, who performs a backwards version of normal behavior; to the exaggerated efforts of a contemporary circus clown “policeman,” whose actions point to the institution's bloated sense of control. Under the guise of gags and laughter, clowns burlesque scenes of desire, transgression, and even violence that are then negotiated to a resolution.<sup>4</sup> And like artists, clowns occupy

Figure 2. Installation view, Jess Perlitz, “People Making People Sounds,” at Holding Contemporary, Portland, OR, November 7–December 14, 2019, showing *Bones*, left, and *Crotch Pipe*, right (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

Figure 3. Jess Perlitz, *Body without body masks*, 2019. Abaca pulp, dimensions variable (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

Perlitz's unadorned materials, straightforward titles, and uncomplicated descriptions imply sincerity, and yet I often find myself responding to her artwork with a rueful laugh.







a social space seen by mainstream society as marginal—yet from this distant vantage they gain insights into human nature.

All cultures have tricksters that play with the sacred and the profane, and for her “People Making People Sounds” exhibition Perlitz took the body itself as the clown. The goofy, illogical works on view (all 2019) included the silent “wind-chime” titled *Bones* (fig. 2, left), made of plaster bones hung in a weighty tangle from the ceiling by a dirty rope. Like most of Perlitz’s work, this sculpture appears multivalent: on one hand, it reads as a guileless misinterpretation, like a child’s innocent reinvention of an instrument as one that neither moves nor makes sound; on the other, in scale and form, it is also reminiscent of a carcass in an abattoir. It references the final, inert state of the body, which when alive is mobile and clamorous with creaks, pops, and groans. *Bones* takes the miraculous, noisy human body and reduces it to its vulgar animal framework, forever silenced. Equally quiet was the wall-mounted *Crotch Pipe* (fig. 2, right), a ninety-inch-tall steel megaphone with its mouthpiece set a few feet above the floor as though to broadcast what genitals might say if they could speak. Its scale and sparseness impart the aura of a utilitarian implement, and yet the directness of its deadpan title reveals the surreal irrationality of its function. At the back of the gallery, in *Body without body masks* (fig. 3), four abject face masks leered from the wall at eye level. Constructed at roughly life size from abaca pulp (which is derived from banana leaves), three of these masks sport exaggeratedly bulbous noses while one simply has a large round hole where the nose would be (see figs. 4 and 5). Together they formed the most direct visual and conceptual reference in the exhibition to the stereotypical masked, red-nosed clowns who slip on banana peels. But any evocation of cheerful whimsy is undermined by the masks’ grotesque aspect—their dun flimsiness gives them the look of peeled flesh. One can easily imagine the wet pulp drying and shrinking, forming the slightly puckered grimaces that appear on all four faces. Here the pathos of the tragicomic is in full display: The mortal body will shrivel, and fall silent.

Other works by Perlitz are more enigmatic. The absurd *Rocks Moving Rocks* (2015, fig. 6), a day-long performance along the Willamette River, is announced on the artist’s Web site with the statement: “The artist will be a rock and will move other rocks.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, documentation of the work shows the artist in a rock costume, pulling another ersatz rock behind her on a small wheeled platform. These two rocks often stopped to regard other rocks along the way, and eventually concluded their journey at the Portland Art Museum, where both entered without paying (because rocks don’t pay admission fees). Photos of the artist in costume bring to mind Louise Bourgeois’s *Avenza* (1968–69), a sculpture suggestively collapsing body and landscape forms, or her 1978 *Fashion Show of Body Parts*, which included a costume studded with breastlike lumps. All three projects share references to physical exposure and vulnerability. As a mobile performance, *Rocks Moving Rocks* encountered other rocks in the landscape, and thus became associated with them, if only briefly: the rocks in corporate flowerbeds, boulders used to prevent homeless people from sleeping on public and private property, rocks that delineate boundaries. In effect, the array of possible interpretations, both painful and droll, varied with the landscapes that Perlitz traveled through, placing herself

Figure 4. Jess Perlitz, *Body without body masks* (detail), 2019. Abaca pulp, 9 × 7 × 3½ in. (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

Figure 5. Jess Perlitz, *Body without body masks* (detail), 2019. Abaca pulp, 9 × 7 × 8 in. (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

among embellishments and deterrents. Perhaps the fake rock made passersby see the real rocks anew, and think about how and why we use them. That the performance finally came to rest that day at the museum among other artworks emphasizes Perlitz's contention that art exists alongside reality, and can help us think through the world we've made. By its very separation from the everyday, it creates a space for contemplation and inquiry.

Perlitz's grounding in sculpture underscores the spirit of these practices, explicating the real and symbolic power of objects and their potential to redeem anguish. What does comedy rely on, if not symbolism? Who is more canonically funny than a fallible mortal teetering in a pratfall and landing with a thud? What is more laughably sad than the useful rendered inoperative? As a follow-up to *Rocks Moving Rocks*, Perlitz produced a book titled *Rock Will Move Rocks* (2018, edition of 100), with an essay, sketches, and project documentation. The launch of the book was accompanied by the production of a series of fist-sized rocks containing music boxes; wind the brass knob on the side of the rock, and the tinny notes of "Amazing Grace" leak out like an invocation. As I held one of these rocks in my hand, I thought of rocks in the landscape, of rocks thrown in riots, of the famous protest slogan of May 1968, *Sous les pavés, la plage!* (Under the cobblestones, the beach). Amidst these associations, I see an artist coming to terms with the difficult operations of living, finding comedy under the hardness of stones and the abjection of masks, and through comedy, finding grace.

- 1 This is illustrated by the structure of a joke that relies on the power of threes, where the first two instances are used to construct a pattern, and the third interrupts it, as in the classic, "A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar..."
- 2 Conversation with the artist, Portland, OR, 17 May 2020. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent artist observations all derive from this interview.
- 3 Personal email communication, 26 May 2020.
- 4 Sometimes artists turn even this paradigm on its head. In *Clown Torture* (1987), a four-channel video with sound, Bruce Nauman notably did *not* let the travails of his clowns come to an end; the one-hour loop is infinite, which only increases the work's sense of hysteria.
- 5 See <http://www.jessperlitz.com/#/rockmovingrocks/>.

Bean Gilsdorf is an artist and writer. Her projects have been exhibited at MCA Santa Barbara, the Wattis Institute, and the American Textile History Museum, as well as venues in Poland, England, Italy, China, and South Africa. Her critical writing and essays have been included in publications such as *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She is a 2020 Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grantee.

Figure 6.  
Jess Perlitz, *Rocks Moving Rocks*, performance at various locations in Portland, OR, October 24, 2015



# Julie Green: Flown

~~~~ Sarah Sentilles

# 50

Figuring

How do you represent absence? How do you depict loss? For two decades, Julie Green has been painting the final meals of people on death row. Green's ongoing series "The Last Supper" (2000–) includes 850 (and counting) paintings on ceramic plates, almost every one painted blue. Green looks directly at hard topics, and the artist keeps looking, keeps painting, for years. Yet there is delight in the work, playfulness, humor, a clear love of paint and pattern, of material and experimentation. For *Wallpaper* (2015), two hundred sheets of mulberry paper, hand-painted in sumi ink with thousands of seashells, covered the gallery walls in Portland and served as backdrop for "My New Blue Friends" (2015), blue airbrushed egg tempera paintings, abstractions of food (Figs. 1, 2). In *2-pack Trauma* (2017), 34 flattened cardboard vinegar boxes are the artist's canvas, and on each box Green has painted in acrylic and

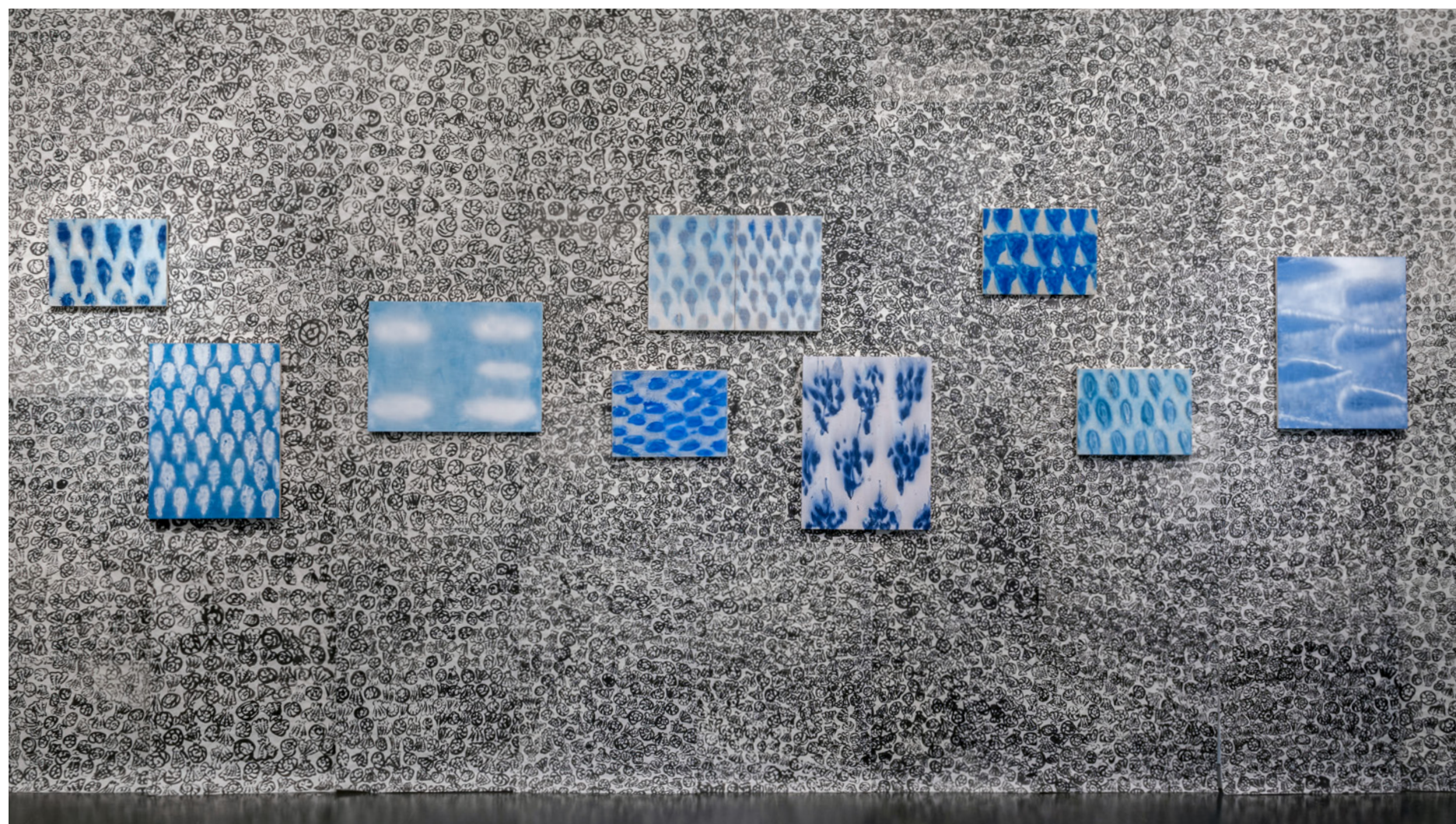
Day-Glo a small oval scene depicting a personal traumatic event (fig. 3). The work plays with the idea of confession—the brand is Four Monks, vinegar can be used to clean and disinfect, and the date stamps suggest repetition, ritual. What does forgiveness look like? And who can grant it?

Though not used for most of "The Last Supper" series, flow blue (also called flown blue) is Green's favorite historical ceramic technique—blue glaze painted or transferred onto white ceramic that smears during firing. "What likely began as an accident becomes a goal," Green said.<sup>1</sup> Accidents, mistakes, misunderstandings. To be human is to be fallible; our beliefs are infected with our biases. "The most ethical thing we can say is 'I might be wrong,'" my mentor, the late theologian Gordon Kaufman, used to tell me. That doesn't mean we can't stake our lives on our beliefs. But it does mean

we can't kill someone else over them. Like me, Green was Christian, and like me, the artist isn't anymore, but Green's work offers a version of compassionate transcendence that troubles certainty. To know what someone ate before being executed—shrimp, French fries, garlic bread, ice cream, and strawberries with whipped cream—humanizes. Green's work reminds viewers there is a part of every person that is uncapturable, resistant, free—even if they have been locked away for years.

Theodor Adorno describes that uncapturable part of every being as an "elusive force," as "a presence that acts upon us." People, places, objects, and animals exceed our representations of them. In *Vibrant Matter*, philosopher Jane Bennett puts Adorno's idea this way: "We knowers are haunted...by a painful, nagging feeling that something's being forgotten or left

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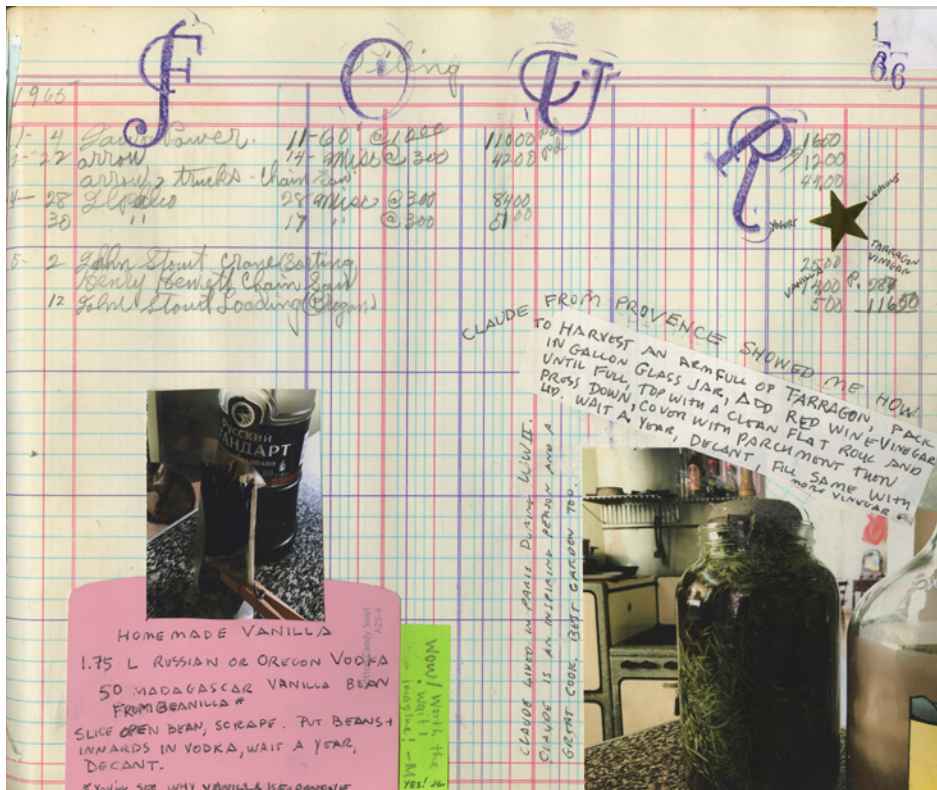
Sarah Sentilles

Pages 51 and opposite:

Figures 1, 2. Installation view, Julie Green, "My New Blue Friends," 2015, at Upfor Gallery, Portland, OR, November 5–December 19, 2015 (Photos: Mario Gallucci for Upfor Gallery)

Figure 3. Julie Green, 2-pack Trauma (detail), 2017. One of 34 cardboard boxes, acrylic, Day-Glo paint, 15 x 13 in. (Photo: Julie Green)

Figure 4. Julie Green, Picnic Brownies Make Life Easy (detail), 2018. Limited-edition facsimile of artist's ledger cookbook, publication supported by the Oregon Arts Commission and The Ford Family Foundation (Photo: Julie Green)





Figures 5, 6.  
Julie Green, *An Embarrassment of Dishes* (detail), 2015. Cobalt blue pigment, 7-Up and simple syrup, painted and kiln-fired on a set of 1961 Noritake dinner ware, dimensions variable (Photos: Julie Green)



out.”<sup>2</sup> And the ethical challenge is to learn to live with this haunting, to accentuate it, remember it, protect it. Green’s art helps viewers learn to do just that. The paintings suggest there is *more* than whatever it is we think we know—about an apple, an orange, a prisoner, a plate.

Growing up, Green never ate alone; eating was a shared activity, led by the artist’s mother, who taught home economics. Most people on death row eat their last meal alone or with a guard. Green thinks about that when painting. The artist tends a garden and sent me home from a studio visit with a suitcase filled with tarragon and instructions for how to make tarragon-infused vinegar, a recipe included in Green’s limited-edition artist’s book, *Picnic Brownies Make Life Easy* (2018, fig. 4). At home, I rinsed Green’s tarragon, packed it in a glass jar, added red wine vinegar, and topped the mixture with a clean flat rock. In some communities, family is formed not only by blood or marriage or adoption, but by eating food grown on the same land. You bury your ancestors; their bodies nurture the plants; the plants nurture the people and animals who eat those plants.<sup>3</sup> “Take, eat,” the story tells us Jesus said. “This

is my body.” Then he hands his friends pieces of bread.

For *An Embarrassment of Dishes* (2015), Green painted over the original pattern of a Noritake dinner service for twelve, inherited from the artist’s grandmother. On the back of each dish, Green painted words, inscribing moments of discomfort, using a mixture of blue pigment, 7-Up, and simple syrup (figs. 5, 6). Confessions, injury, humiliation, and secrets exposed. “We can learn from the objects in our homes,” Green said. “Especially from objects we didn’t choose.” Green shared that their grandmother had two sets of china—Japanese china designed to look British, and British china designed to look Japanese. Like Green’s childhood pink sponge curlers meant to make straight hair curly, these household objects “reveal something about the human longing to be other than we are,” Green said.

Green’s art also reveals the human longing to make others *other than they are*—to mis-see and to misunderstand. The effects of misapprehension are at the heart of Green’s new series, “First Meals” (2018), paintings of what the exonerated eat when they are

released after years, even decades, of being wrongly imprisoned (figs. 7–9). Green expected creating this work to feel hopeful but found it crushing. “All that lost time,” Green said. The work is a three-way collaboration among the exonerees, the Center on Wrongful Convictions, and the artist. The paintings are made on Tyvek, a synthetic material used to protect buildings during construction, to protect homes. Green calls the paintings “pennants of loss,” and they are flag-like, from a country most of us pretend doesn’t exist.

In *Blueberries Handfed to Julie Rea* (2018), the third in an ongoing series of fifteen paintings to date, one woman feeds another blueberries, the pair in the foreground of a landscape that feels as if it is from another time (fig. 7). Rea spent six years in prison wrongly convicted for the murder of her ten-year old son, and her first meal was a potluck at a friend’s house, with lots of fresh fruit. Looking at the blueberry-blue painting, I thought of Ariella Azoulay’s “Potential History” and her argument about how photographs work.<sup>4</sup> Green placed figures from different eras in the same scene—Rea and her friend alongside a group with a person wearing

a top hat—collapsing time, or at least bending it. Azoulay, too, asks viewers to bend time by projecting themselves into the scenes of photographs and viewing their outcomes not as inevitable but as one possibility among many. Looking this way, Azoulay asserts, can help us remember that history didn't have to proceed the way it did. Things could have been different. Viewing becomes a kind of reanimation: what was still begins to move, what was intractable becomes malleable. And that, ultimately, is what exoneration is, though Green's paintings remind us that release is only the first step. What has been done cannot be undone; something new must be fashioned—a painting, a plate, a meal, a world, reparations. Green comes from a family of repairers, people who knew how to mend and heal, how to transform broken objects into something useful again. The artist continues that family work.

*This essay is a slightly abridged version of Sarah Sentilles, "Flown," in Julie Green (Roseburg, OR: The Ford Family Foundation), 2020. Our thanks to the author and publisher for permission to reproduce the essay here. —Ed.*

- 1 I visited Julie Green at their home and studio in Corvallis, OR in October 2018. Green gave me a studio tour and prepared a delicious lunch for us. The artist quotes in this essay are from that conversation or from a conversation we had by phone on March 9, 2020.
- 2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 14. Bennett engages Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 189, 364, 385, 378. A long endnote about Adorno in *Vibrant Matter* appears on p. 127.
- 3 Marshall Sahlins, "What Kinship Is (Part One)," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17:1 (February 2011), 4.
- 4 For a discussion of Azoulay's concept of photography as a "civil contract," see Sarah Sentilles, "How Should We Respond to Photographs of Suffering," *New Yorker*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-we-should-respond-to-photographs-of-suffering>.

Sarah Sentilles is a writer, teacher, critical theorist, scholar of religion, and author of many books, including *Draw Your Weapons*, which won the 2018 PEN Award for Creative Nonfiction. Her next book, *Stranger Care: A Memoir of Loving What Isn't Ours*, will be published by Random House in 2021. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Oprah Magazine*, *Ms.*, *Religion Dispatches*, *Oregon ArtsWatch*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, among other publications. She's had residencies at Hedgebrook and Yaddo. She earned a bachelor's degree at Yale and master's and doctoral degree at Harvard. She is the director of the Alliance of Idaho, which works to protect the basic human rights of immigrants by engaging in education, outreach, and advocacy at local, state, and national levels. She lives in Idaho's Wood River Valley.

Figure 7.  
Julie Green,  
*Blueberries  
Handfed to  
Julie Rea*, 2018.  
Acrylic on Tyvek,  
35 × 47 in., from  
the series  
"First Meals,"  
made possible  
thanks to the  
assistance of  
exonerees and  
Julie Green's  
collaborators  
at the Center  
on Wrongful  
Convictions,  
Bluhm  
Legal Clinic,  
Northwestern  
University (Photo:  
Mario Gallucci for  
Upfor Gallery)



Figure 8.  
Julie Green, *Huwe  
Burton Said Truth  
Freed Me, Music  
Kept Me Sane  
While I Waited*,  
2019. Acrylic and  
glow-in-the-dark  
paint on Tyvek  
(sewn together)  
40 x 47½ in.  
(Photo: Mario  
Gallucci  
for Upfor)

Age 16 forced  
confession for  
rape and murder  
of own mother.

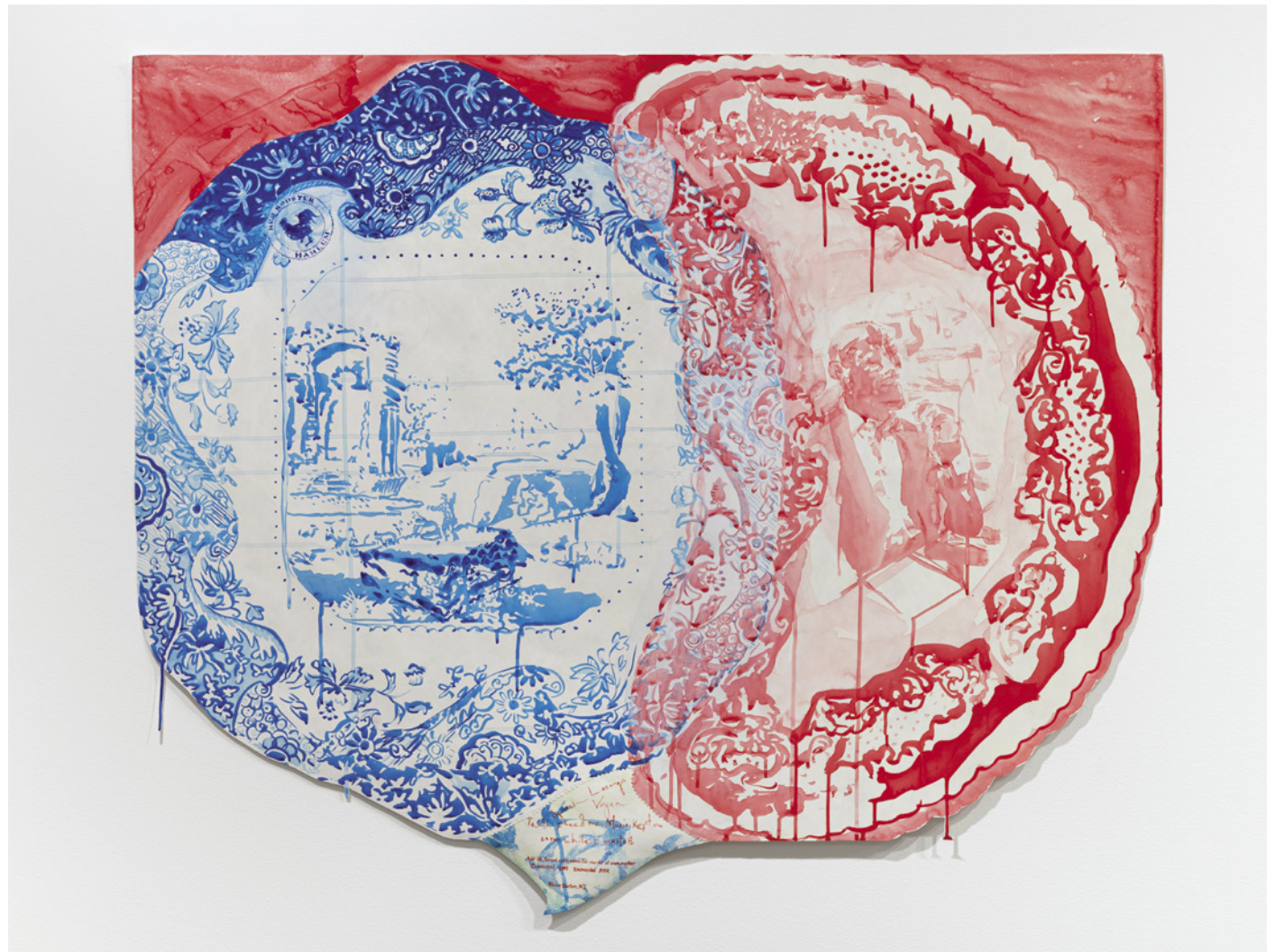


Figure 9.  
Julie Green,  
*Pepsi-Cola  
Monticello for  
Horace Roberts*,  
2019. Acrylic  
and glow-in-the-dark  
logo on Tyvek, 38 x 47 in.  
(Photo:  
Mario Gallucci  
for Upfor)

On release,  
Roberts enjoyed  
a big Pepsi first  
thing, then Chick-  
fil-A at the  
airport on the  
way home.  
Horace Roberts  
served more  
than 20 years  
behind bars for  
a murder he  
didn't commit.  
The two true  
perpetrators  
were arrested in  
October of 2018,  
the same month  
that Roberts  
was exonerated  
and freed.



# Sacred Threads at Great Vow

~~~~~ Jovencio de la Paz

# 60



Figuring

Jovencio de la Paz

Between Tank Creek and the hills of Clatskanie, Oregon, just south of the Columbia River, a Zen Buddhist Monastery nestles among brambles of blackberry and tall grass. Certainly there are things here one might anticipate, stone Buddhas and bamboo swaying in groves, nuns and monks with shaved heads like celestial bodies, moons held in orbit by the gravity of vow. Still, it is very alien. I am told that Zen is a religion of practicality. One cuts carrots for lunch, one sweeps the steps, one washes dishes, one sits quietly, and one mends a garment. Do these things simply and directly, the yoga of care-taking, and see that cutting a carrot is inexorably linked to the mystery of cosmic events: earth, soil, rain, sun, the hands of the farmer, the politics of the land. This is not metaphor or symbolism, it is embodiment, and it is you.

I am told that since ancient times, when one decided to leave home and family for monastic life, they would shave their head, receive simple bowls for their food, and sew a modest, patched robe. It is striking to see these objects for eating and dressing handled with such reverence. My own cupboards and dressers are crammed with things left largely unconsidered: disregarded mugs, clothing unworn for years. I look into my cupped hands and see that empty space, first shape of the bowl, first shape of longing. The obsession and the disease are not only the results of consumerism and late capitalism, not merely a condition of modernity, though those developments contribute to be sure. It is that human life by its nature is dis-satisfying; the First Noble Truth of the Buddha is, after all, that life is marked by suffering and dissatisfaction.

In a way, it is curious that mundane objects like bowls and cloth reach such sacrosanct heights in the monastery. In another, it is hard to question their essential role in every practice of daily life.

Far beyond memory, these objects have been witness to nearly the entire history of our species. How could they not dwell in the dimension of sacred things? For the monks and nuns, the robe is not a symbol, it does not point to an ideology that is expressed or located elsewhere, nor does it act simply as a sign of their vow. The robe itself is for them Liberation.

As I wander the monastery grounds, I come to a place where people are quietly hand sewing tiny squares of blue and black fabric. They are making *rakusus*, vestlike garments worn around the neck, the smallest type of Buddhist robe popular in Japanese lineages of Zen Buddhism. The *rakusu* signifies that its wearer has received the Buddhist Precepts, dedicating this life to compassion, wisdom, and ethical action. The sewing is done in advance of a ceremony called the *jukai*, a central gateway ritual through which these initiates will pass, making



Figure 1. Anyu Debra Savalle, *Rakusu* (detail), 2001. Cotton, 13 x 9 1/2 in. (Photo: Jovencio de la Paz)

Figure 2. Anyu Debra Savalle, *Rakusu*, 2001. Cotton, 13 x 9 1/2 in. (Photo: Jovencio de la Paz)



their vows public. It is not only monks and nuns who engage this practice, but also lay people from all walks of life.

The *rakusu* patches are measured, cut, and arranged according to an ancient calculus, inscrutable to the uninitiated. The colors are a taxonomy of relation, blue and black for students and novices, brownish gold for teachers, brilliant brocades of prismatic silk for abbots. And yet the most prized fabric for this process, according to the 13th-century Zen master Dogen, is waste material, thrown away, then found serendipitously and repurposed. The Buddha suggested that his followers wear robes of patched cloth, resembling the stepped terraces of rice paddies. Those patches were often made from discarded and soiled cotton used to wrap the dead.

The new initiates tell stories of their own fabrics: given by loved ones, blessed by the Dalai Lama, found at a bus stop, purchased at a store, saved from a wedding. Textile production could be described as the vernacular of bringing disparate things together, and this process of robe sewing is no different. Yet this particular process of sewing also emphasizes an inverse truth: the original interconnectedness of phenomena, each storied piece of cloth caught in a vast web of interrelation—personal, political, and social.

Originating in Northern India, this method of sewing was transmitted, largely by oral tradition, across all corners of Asia and upon the turbulent Pacific to North America, Oregon, and beyond. Each land touched by this process added its own ethnographic textile traditions: dyes and fibers changed with regional availability, size and thickness adjusted to climate. Practical for sure. The process of sewing is itself challenging though, painstaking even. It requires a monumental attention to detail flabbergasting to one who may never have sewn by hand before, and perhaps never will again. Each stitch rises and falls in the tideless sea of cloth, following breath. These sewers are not skilled, but amateurs in a real sense, committed because of love. So their luminous silk stitches are sometimes catawampus, meandering. Step by step. So it is in life. And though not perfect, each robe is alive with idiosyncrasy.

Some sewers mouth these words as they work, *namu kie butsu*...“I take refuge in the Buddha.” A Buddhist scripture is known as a *sutra*, and that word in Sanskrit is the same for “thread.”

Before I leave the monastery, I walk with a young nun through a hillside forest populated with statues of Jizo, a spiritual warrior who protects children and those in transition. The nun wears a *rakusu* around her neck; its cloth is old despite her age, threadbare and marred and faded in places



Figuring

from repeated touching and prostrations on the ground. She walks with the palm of her hand face down, touching the tips of ferns as she passes. She adjusts her *rakusu* often, and at first it seems like a tick, like fidgeting. But watching more closely, I realize that her gestures are acts of continual reorientation, of aligning one’s body to one’s deep intention. It is the dance of paying close attention.

“Is it difficult to give such sincere focus to every little thing you encounter?” I ask.

She laughs musically, “Well, yes. Of course it is. But that is the weight of freedom.”

Jovencio de la Paz is an artist, weaver, and educator. He received an MFA in Fibers from the Cranbrook Academy of Art (2012) and a BFA with an emphasis on Fiber and Material Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2008). His current work explores the intersecting histories of weaving and modern computers. Trained in traditional processes of weaving, dye, and stitch-work, but reveling in the complexities and contradictions of digital culture, de la Paz works to find relationships between concerns of language, embodiment, pattern, and code with broad concerns of ancient technology, speculative futures, and the phenomenon of emergence. He is currently Assistant Professor and Curricular Head of Fibers at the University of Oregon. For more information, see [www.jovenciolapaz.com](http://www.jovenciolapaz.com).



Figure 3.  
Anonymous,  
*Rakusu*  
(*Nyoho-e*)  
(detail) 2015.  
Cotton, silk,  
hemp, 13 x 9 1/2 in.  
(Photo: Jovencio  
de la Paz)

Figure 4.  
Anonymous,  
*Rakusu*  
(*Nyoho-e*), 2015.  
Cotton, silk,  
hemp, 13 x 9 1/2 in.  
(Photo: Jovencio  
de la Paz)

# Through Ancestral Lands, Reading *An Infected Sunset*

# 64

~~~~~ *Demian DinéYazhi'*



*Editor's Note:* The following essay is composed of three excerpts from an audio diary recorded by Portland-based artist and poet Demian DinéYazhi' while driving across the United States in the summer of 2018, reading from his celebrated book of poetry, *An Infected Sunset*, published earlier that year. Each excerpt is complete, and the format (i.e. capitalization and punctuation) has been carefully edited by DinéYazhi. The project was commissioned by The Ford Family Foundation, and edited by Stephanie Snyder. For more information about, and to support DinéYazhi's poetry and artwork, visit: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/DemianDineyazhi>.

*All images:  
sacred, ancestral,  
Indigenous  
Land by Demian  
DinéYazhi'*

Through Ancestral Lands, Reading *An Infected Sunset*

By Demian DinéYazhi'

: walking around tulsa

i'm walking around downtown tulsa just left elisa after having dinner with lucas and his friend i believe the moon is full tonight i was walking down one of the streets and saw it peeking out behind some clouds now it seems to be ducking in and out from behind these dreamy clouds i'm walking back to my hotel room which is in an old official city building that has been converted into a hotel i drove an hour and a half from oklahoma city

i'm walking around downtown tulsa and earlier today I was in oklahoma city nothing in this region seems that interesting except everything

i mean in a lot of ways it reminds me of new mexico or albuquerque the city itself seems to be frozen nothing has changed much from the nineties or the eighties even except the device that i'm holding an iPhone the pedestrian walk signs beep intermittently to guide the blind everyone is still living in a colonized country i don't get why people's responses to living under this republican fuck fest are any different than they were for their parents' generation or their grandparents' generation or their great-grandparents' generation or my ancestors all the fucked-up forms of colonial fuckery and the fact that at the end of the day we still have to go through it and endure it still exists that it's still true it doesn't matter to what extent Indigenous Brown Black Queer Trans people liberate themselves and feel any sense of pride apart from some marketable fuckin' pill that we take to feel completely in control of our lives or our sense of community to whatever extent we have pushed toward celebrating our livelihood and our survival in fact the very colonial state we find ourselves in doesn't want us alive that this is true too

i don't get how people can say anything is better when we are in fact having to go through it all again that we once again have to teach children and teenagers and kids effective forms of resistance but yet all we are doing is just conducting the same subversive tactics that have existed for decades at this point and even the effective forms of protest and civil disruption that were effective in the eighties aren't effective nowadays it seems as though they've learned all of our tricks and we're caught in this repetitive act of opposition that doesn't dismantle this empire any faster than it did back then

tracy says that this type of disruption this type of undoing this type of decolonization won't take place in our lifetime

Figuring



and I agree as hopeful as I was when i was younger i understand that i understand that in order to survive in order to be level-headed and feel as though I am taking care of myself that it also comes with the realization that maybe we just have to slowly burn this thing down this doesn't mean we can't burn it down in giant swaths here and there but it doesn't necessarily mean that capitalism won't be completely dismantled by the time I'm an old person should I or any of us make it that far but driving around this country you come across young white kids smiling happy living their lives care-free and I wonder do they even ask themselves these questions and even if they do they don't understand it the same way my nieces and nephews do

and i hope they understand it and maybe that's all i can do with my life's work is to help them understand it and furthermore help them to understand how to undo it when I've been incapable or failed

: dream before Standing Rock

today i'm driving away from minneapolis headed to fargo bismarck and eventually Standing Rock it's been nearly two years since i began the poem AN INFECTED SUNSET i feel like most of the poem is inspired by all of the events that occurred during the summer of 2016 primarily the Standing Rock occupation but also just how the entire country could just feel something in america breaking or becoming more obvious transparent even in ways that we allowed ourselves to overlook and feel at peace with even though during the entire obama administration there were numerous acts of genocide and violence inflicted against Brown communities

last night i had a dream i was in my old childhood house or what felt like my old childhood house and we had the blinds drawn and suddenly this gust of wind started shaking the house it was continuous and very violent but i also felt secure in the house i felt secure knowing that we would be safe if we just stayed inside and i don't remember who was with me or who i was surrounded by if it was family members or friends or lovers acquaintances but everything felt familiar everyone felt familiar.

and as this gust of wind eventually died down and there was peace for a while we all contemplated whether or not it was done and where was the origin of this sudden environmental disturbance and we must have been in new mexico and I remember thinking in the dream that it could possibly be atomic bomb testing or some sort of nuclear bomb taking place on the reservation and as we peeked through the blinds we could see all of these cars starting to leave trying to get out of the town or just move down the street and actually it just occurred to me that my mother was there with some of my family members and while all of this was happening

Figuring



my father was in town at walmart or some store grabbing things when there was that moment of peace we asked him to come home before it would happen again and as we were looking out the window through the blinds, we noticed a couple flashes coming from the northeastern sky

and before we could feel any sort of environmental resistance or catastrophe or turbulence i think i must have woken up but it was such jarring dream because there was just such a violent presence of nature or to nature a disturbance against nature it didn't feel like a tornado or a hurricane or what i imagine what either of those scenarios would feel like it didn't feel like a natural catastrophe it felt very much imposed by humans some manmade disturbance to the natural working order of the world or what we perceive as nature or even natural i mean who's to say that any of this is safe from any one of us

humans have been violent not just in europe but also in the far east and throughout the americas or the precolonial americas

but i think this is how uranium speaks to me and I don't know what it's saying but i know that it's built into every single one of us and by US i mean Diné i know somewhere inside of us we carry this sacred relationship with a radioactive sacred chemical that was formed within this universe and i don't know what it means the night before driving to a place like Standing Rock that even before the resistance was a sacred site was land that was seen as sacred was Indigenous Land and meanwhile the entire west coast is hazy from forrest fire i'm driving through the midwest and there's blue sky everything is green

last night as i was driving down the freeway i was listening to exit music for a film by radiohead as cicadas chirped along the highway my body doesn't recognize this geography i don't know if my ancestors moved through this land i'm sure some of them must have ancestors of ancestors i miss the desert the smell coming in through the window the land just before it begins to rain hell i even miss portland the columbia river gorge opening up and hot springs and my work i don't know where it's headed i feel scared and exhausted and uncertain of what comes next or what to work on next one part excited but mostly i miss my bed

: hard road montana

the closer i drive toward the pacific northwest back to portland the more the sky becomes hazy from the smoke from forest fires in idaho california even washington and oregon it's such a crazy time to be living right now forest fires are such a common occurrence at this point and have such devastating effects on the landscape that can bear it but the

Figuring



human population cannot so it's strange to be in someplace like montana where there is so much land between people

yesterday i drove into billings and walked into a convenience store gas station to refuel and also get some water and when I was checking out at the cash register, this very quirky, middle-aged, bald white dude who was cracking jokes left and right noticed my t-shirt from nalgona body positivity it's a t-shirt that has five different Indigenous feminists on it matriarchs and the shirt reads: Indigenous women resisting colonialism and patriarchy since 1492 – i noticed him read the shirt look it over and as he was handing me my receipt and change he said to me: well, you be careful out there – it was another constant reminder on this trip of the racism embedded into communities across this country white families who move into the middle of nowhere and lay claim over an entire region that they know i think very deep down in their souls they have no right to inhabit they have no right taking on that type of narcissistic responsibility and ownership

yet as I leave the gas station walk out the door and get into the car i see two native women snagging on their white settler boyfriends [laughs] and I'm no different so i don't know i don't know what to think about that i don't know what to say about that i question their safety more than mine i question their mental spiritual and psychic wellbeing more than mine and it makes me think of being in portland and living there being out here in the middle of white america makes me consider all of the Brown bodies that don't feel safe here that don't have a community here

entire towns have been built and constructed to comfort white privilege and entitlement and i think to myself what if Brown people were to intentionally move into these communities and make themselves a part of the community's history so that white people would be forced to see the humanity of the other

but then i realize that is not our responsibility it is not our job to be doing that work and when i realize that i realize that there is no responsibility for me to be in portland on the one hand i feel so completely held and supported by various spaces and institutions and people who have been so grateful and generous and patient and loving and it's allowed me to grow and make really important work but on the other hand there's an entire body of work that exists in a place like new mexico or st. louis or arizona or california

and i think back to a line in the new poem i'm starting that talks about big cities like new york l.a. and chicago as spaces for Queer refuge for sanctuary: in the new Queer america we don't need these cities – we can build our identities wherever we want we carry them on our backs at all times and hopefully throughout our existence in whatever communities



we find ourselves in we are able to build communities and change the way those communities function and i don't think this is a responsibility that we need to take on i think this is something that just occurs

i think that it's just something that is already prevalent within Queer bodies Brown bodies bodies that have not historically been privileged or entitled or deemed superior i'm reaching the end of this tour in terms of what I set out to do a few weeks ago which was to drive all the way to the east coast and make stops along the way to read the poem i had intended to read in seattle and vancouver but i feel it is fitting for me to take a breath and rest after making the offering at Standing Rock to allow the medicine to generate and for some sort of reckoning and healing and enlightenment to occur mostly for the land and the ancestors and the descendants of that space and also for my community

i'm driving to perform my new poetry that speaks to loss and grief and failure and insecurity and anger and love and connections to people that have been severed in reading the piece it continually blesses those relationships those trials and errors those emotions and moments when i didn't have any clarity moments where i was unable to see beyond my own selfish aims and desires moments where i failed at being a friend lover artist child and human

END



Demian DinéYazhi' (born 1983) is a Portland-based Diné transdisciplinary artist, poet, and curator born to the clans Naasht'ézhí Tábaqahá (Zuni Clan Water's Edge) & Tódich'í'nií (Bitter Water). Their practice is a regurgitation of purported Decolonial praxis informed by the over accumulation and exploitative supremacist nature of hetero-cis-gendered communities post colonization. They are a survivor of attempted european genocide, forced assimilation, manipulation, sexual and gender violence, capitalist sabotage, and hypermarginalization in a colonized country that refuses to center their politics and philosophies around the Indigenous Peoples whose Land they occupy and refuse to give back. They live and work in a post-post-apocalyptic world unafraid to fail.





# Kristan Kennedy: A Corporeal Presence

# 78

~~~~~ *Meagan Atiyeh*

Kristan Kennedy's color-field paintings are worked and washed in a repetitive process. A small number of marks, additive or reductive in ink, bleach, or other mediums, often graphically punctuate their foregrounds. Her formats vary from discrete paintings, stretched and framed, to installations in which the raw painted, stained, and dyed canvases fill large walls (figs. 1-2) and drape over substructures. These are not two distinct bodies of work so much as two poles, serving, as in a magnet, to frustrate and energize each other. At one pole, Kennedy emphasizes composition, soliciting from the viewer the conventional act of looking at an art-historical object—the painting itself. At the other, she uses her canvas to infer a bodily form, marking its faint edges and rendering it evocative through obscurity and innuendo.

Her exhibitions betray a desire to animate the material. At times, Kennedy's hangings edge between architectural axes, such as a turn from wall to floor, within a doorway, or at the bend of a stair, where a work in two dimensions might borrow a third. An example was her 2012 placement at a Tokyo gallery of *R.B.E.S.*, a small, darkly stained piece of linen with two horizontal slits resembling a *niqāb* or face veil of the *hijab* (fig. 3). "It is a little scrap of a thing," the artist later explained, and "when...the curator of that show asked me where I would like it, I could not stop thinking of it sliding down one of their concrete stairs. And that is where it lived, or where it came alive."<sup>1</sup> Draped as it was here, in the middle of the stairs, the piece could be seen from the front, providing viewers a direct confrontation with its eyelike slits. Yet from above, with this side no longer visible, *R.B.E.S.* slid back into its materiality, a limp linen nearly indistinguishable from the gray concrete. For NADA



Figure 1.  
Installation view,  
"Kristan Kennedy  
Meets a Clock,"  
at SOLOWAY,  
New York, NY,  
April 27–June 22,  
2014. Courtesy  
SOLOWAY



Figure 2. Kristan Kennedy, untitled arrangement for "Tomorrow Tomorrow," curated by Stephanie Snyder and Wallace Whitney at CANADA, New York, June 15–July 21, 2017. Courtesy Reed College Art Collection, purchased with the assistance of The Ford Family Foundation through a special grant program managed by the Oregon Arts Commission.

Hudson 2012 in upstate New York, Kennedy was given a small corner of a raw nineteenth-century factory and labored to find the right installation. In her home studio, works in progress had recently draped over chairs to dry, becoming fortlike, and Kennedy knew she wanted to pursue that effect. The final presentation included two unmatched, draped armchairs (fig. 4), situated next to one another and angled just slightly inward into conversation. Each linen covering, stained and heavily washed in peach, violets, and grays, was punctuated by circular shapes made with stain, gesso, and linen additions. As Kennedy remembers, “The chairs were the most curious as they instantly became bodies, a couple, and gendered... The slump suggested something more than the paintings themselves. A sort of king and queen.”<sup>2</sup>

When hung in groupings on a wall, Kennedy’s fabric panels regularly take on such familiarity. They are joined in places with knots and pull apart in others, with gestures that just hint at hand-holding, coupling, and other choreography. Arrangements feel spontaneous but are always considered and precise. While draping these works, the artist uses her body, as a tailor or fabric-seller might judge a yard by an arm’s length, in a movement at once mindful and automatic. Informing every work is a preoccupation with corporeal presence: Kennedy notes her enthrallment with Greek and Roman sculpture, “the undulating cloth, the body stopped at the arm that is no longer there,” and in her art makes the classical draped figure modern—even autobiographical. Two wall-hung works from 2017 evoke the strong attitude of an American teen of the 1980s, her tied up T-shirt, the cocky tilt of her flared hip (figs. 5 and 6). *P.T.R.N.L.S.P.T.N.* is a bright, rust-colored square of linen marked with a few spare lines and puddles of bleach and fashionably knotted on one side. *T.A.S.O.J.J.J.* is a taller form, a girlish-pink stretch of canvas that hints at bodily proportions, with a knot at an imagined waist and thin, torn, self-fabric strips dangling on each side like an untied belt. Liquid bleach creates a Pollock-like pattern of scribbled lines and splashes across the “garment’s” bodice.

*Figure 3.*  
Kristan Kennedy,  
*R.B.E.S.*, 2012.  
Gesso, sumi  
and acrylic  
ink on linen,  
16 × 12 in. installed  
at Misako &  
Rosen, Tokyo,  
December 12,  
2012–January 20,  
2013. Courtesy  
Misako & Rosen  
(Photo:  
Kei Okano)

*Figure 4.*  
Installation view,  
Kristan Kennedy  
for NADA Hudson  
2012, Hudson,  
NY (Photo:  
Elk Studios)





Figure 5.  
Kristan Kennedy,  
*P.T.R.N.L.S.P.T.N.*,  
2017. Ink, dye,  
bleach on  
linen, 57 x 52 in.

Figure 6.  
Kristan Kennedy,  
*T.A.S.O.J.J.J.*, 2017.  
Bleach and  
dye on linen,  
85½ x 41 in.  
Courtesy the  
Miller Meigs  
Collection





Figure 7.  
Raphaelle Peale,  
*Venus Rising from  
the Sea—  
a Deception*, ca.  
1822. Oil on can-  
vas, 29 × 24 in.,  
Nelson-Atkins  
Museum of Art,  
Kansas City,  
William Rockhill  
Nelson Trust  
purchase,  
34-147 (Photo:  
Jamison Miller)

A text announcing the 2014 exhibition “Kristan Kennedy meets a clock” at Soloway Gallery in Brooklyn is a kind of poetic keystone to the artist’s entire practice, a free-associative web of similes and cultural allusions both historical and contemporary:

All of the paintings have been made, even the embarrassing ones. Exhibiting soft time. “How soon will you forget it?” Finding the figures in O’Hara’s poem, “Vincent,” written for his lover, and also for Nakian and his *Rape of Lucrece*. Steel sheets, real sheets and ghostly hair.

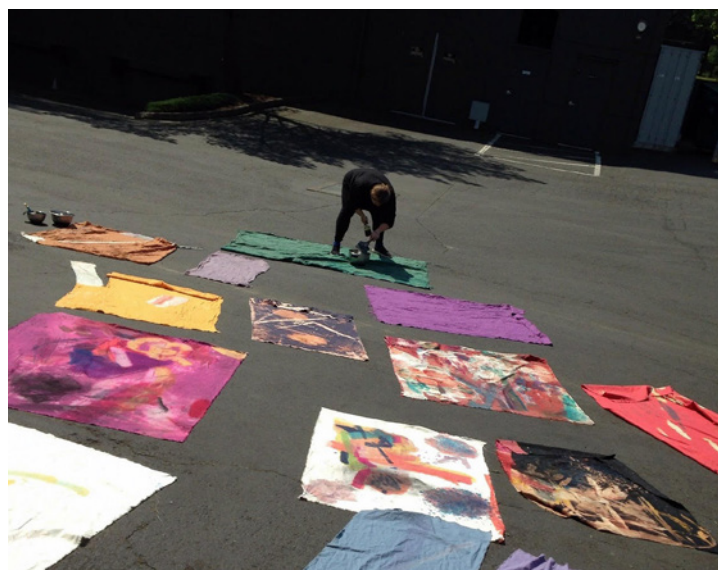
A ghost with his sheet on, a ghost with a sheet off. A dual purpose, a double portrait, two coasts ticking, a doubling back. A muse with a muse with a muse. An evisceration with black steel rods. A foot poking from behind Peale’s napkin. A napkin over Nakian. A napkin over all of the paintings that have ever been made. “It’s just a fricking Band-Aid. I tell you what, I’ll just take it off.” Venus rising from the sea or a bath. A towel or a deception. The Shroud of Turin, a medieval masquerade or magic or both? Yes, both. In the nature of things, “on this strange warm morning,” Kristan Kennedy meets a clock. That crook!<sup>3</sup>

As an artist, curator, and teacher, Kennedy grounds her thinking in art history; “a muse with a muse with a muse” is a metaphor for the many referential layers it gives us. She cites poet and curator Frank O’Hara’s odes to his lover Vincent Warren and also his essay on sculptor Reuben Nakian whose 1966 retrospective O’Hara organized at the Museum of Modern Art. In this show was Nakian’s *Rape of Lucrece*, made of steel sheets and rods, itself a work inspired by Shakespeare’s narrative poem. “No longer merely armature,” O’Hara wrote of Nakian’s welded construction, “these rods are as intrinsic to *The Rape of Lucrece* as are the chamber, the bedposts, and the drapes in Shakespeare’s poem.”<sup>4</sup> O’Hara’s interplay between the sheets of the sculpture and the sheets shared with a lover parallels Kennedy’s particular interest in the canvas and the cloaked figure. A ghost’s sheet, a napkin, a Band-Aid, a towel, the Shroud of Turin... Kennedy includes here a montage of bodily coverings. The objects enjoy “inside” meanings shared by the artist with her friends. The “napkin,” for instance, is that trompe l’oeil curtain Raphaelle Peale painted in 1822 before a female nude in his *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* (fig. 6), masking from the viewer and making modest the naked subject he lifted from James Barry’s *Birth of Venus* (1771). Peale’s painting was later, with age and conservation technology, suspected to have been painted on top of a copy of yet another work, a portrait of Peale by his artist father.<sup>5</sup> Of course, a stated deception on top of a primary deception, in which the objects obscured are the body and then the self, would resonate with Kennedy’s penchant for obfuscation, for teetering on the edges of corporeal animation.

Ultimately, and maybe unavoidably, her urge might be to bring the idealized and romanticized classical figure into a postmodern discourse. The Band-Aid reference serves this goal, pointing to a curious and unexplained act of protest by the singer Nelly who, according to an online post, “used to wear a plaster on his cheek.”<sup>6</sup> The Band-Aid or “plaster” in this pop-culture mystery was initially worn by the rapper to attend to a sports injury, then continued as a sign of solidarity to a wrongfully incarcerated friend. In this way, Kennedy’s bundle of associations mash academic arcana and pop-culture gossip with Nabokovian zeal. She

employs the same alchemy in titling her works with unmemorable, unknowable, and unpronounceable titles, strings of letters seemingly built on a phrase yet so near to phonetically speakable words that it is tempting to voice them. The strategy coaxes the viewer into adding another layer of approximated meaning by trying to name, for example, “the pink one.” Kennedy does this herself; when describing a particular painting to me she confessed, “I can’t remember the name, another thing I’ve come to rely on not remembering.”

A candid snapshot from 2017 documents Kennedy, in a Portland parking lot (fig. 8), preparing artworks for an exhibition co-curated by Stephanie Snyder and Wallace Whitney for the latter’s New York gallery that summer. In the photo, the artist stoops over stained linen panels splayed on the pavement. The image conjures well known visions of Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Lynda Benglis, each of whose bodily exchange with their work has persistently identified this crouch—for *Life* and *Artforum* readers alike—as the posture of an iconoclast. These are charged and viable influences for Kennedy, the physicality with which she approaches her fabric, the broad gestures and color fields she employs. So too, and perhaps more so, Sam Gilliam, who in the mid 1960s would introduce unstretched and draped paintings to the world, often on a monumental scale—his *Baroque Cascade*, shown at the Venice Biennial in 1972, spanned seventy-five feet. But Kennedy is hesitant to speak at length of direct influences. She is at work with tactics and movements informed by others but uses these to explore content related to specific characters and things. Untangling a personal knot in the chain of creative practice, she remains steadfastly a painter, despite the challenge Gilliam himself articulated: “Now that artists are multimedia and art is so simultaneous,” he acknowledged in 1973, “it’s hard to stay on a problem.”<sup>7</sup> His solution, like Kennedy’s own: “to form one’s own problem and have tenacity.”



Figuring

## Name

*This piece was originally published in March 2020 by the Visual Arts Ecology Project.*

- 1 Kristan Kennedy, quoted in Julie Dickover, “Breaking the System: An Interview with Kristan Kennedy,” *At Length*, 2016, <http://atlengthmag.com/art/breaking-the-system-kristan-kennedy/>.
- 2 Kristan Kennedy, personal email communication with the author, January 24, 2019. Future quotes and references are drawn from this same source.
- 3 Soloway, “Kristan Kennedy meets a clock,” news release, April 2014, [http://soloway.info/Shows/31KristanKennedy/Kennedy\\_PressRelease.html](http://soloway.info/Shows/31KristanKennedy/Kennedy_PressRelease.html), accessed January 15, 2019.
- 4 Frank O’Hara, *Nakian* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 16.
- 5 Lauren K. Lessing and Mary Schafer, “Unveiling Raphaelle Peale’s *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 43:2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2009): 235.
- 6 Josh Teal, “Some Guy Explained Why Nelly Used to Wear a Plaster on His Cheek,” *LADbible*, November 2, 2016, <http://www.ladbible.com/more/inspirational-some-guy-explained-why-nelly-used-to-wear-a-plaster-on-his-cheek-20161102>, accessed February 09, 2019.
- 7 Sam Gilliam, quoted in Donald Miller, “Hanging Loose: An Interview with Sam Gilliam,” *Artnews* 72 (January 1973): 43, and in the next sentence, *ibid*.

Meagan Atiyeh is a Portland arts consultant and writer. She is the senior advisor to The Ford Family Foundation’s Visual Arts Program, having recently left the post of Visual Arts Coordinator for the Oregon Arts Commission, where she oversaw the public collection of the State of Oregon. Atiyeh holds a Bachelor of Arts in Writing, Literature and the Arts from Eugene Lang College of The New School in New York. Her writing has appeared in numerous exhibition catalogues as well as *The Oregon Review of Arts* and *Deviant Fictions: An Anthology of Northwest Experimental Writing*. Atiyeh has also served on the boards of the University of Oregon School of Architecture and Allied Arts and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center.

Figure 8.  
Kristan Kennedy,  
Portland, OR,  
2017 (Photo:  
Ryan Noon)

# The Image Collectors

# 90

~~~~~ *Samantha Wall and Stephen Slappe*

Figuring

In the midst of the vast, world-changing events of the past year, we have been reflecting on the nature of seeing, witnessing, and being seen—depths of transparency that are disappearing into maximum visibility, radically, right before our eyes. As artists invested in the aesthetic and philosophical texture of what is unseen, yet felt, and emergent, this troubling time has heightened our awareness and appreciation of presence. We know one another through and through.

Closeness now, means wild shifts of scale. During these long, strange months we have been experiencing the world through the dimensions of our computers and mobile devices. And just out our door, a map pin away, our bodies have adapted to new spatial patterns of relating to others. Experiencing life as a continuum of aspect ratios is second nature

to us as artists; but we never expected they would become parameters of life and death.

The amplification of the world's mediasphere has led us to deeper discussions about images, especially photographs, and how we use them. For both of us, the camera is a revelatory tool: stopping, slowing, and accelerating time, like a divining rod, extending our limited perception to reveal the elusive in plain sight. We have discovered rich interconnections and unexpected differences in how each of us collects images, experiences visual data, and translates that data into new images. For over twenty years we have studied the visible, and the invisible, together. We are image collectors—of the world, and one another.

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*Figure 1.*  
Samantha Wall  
and Stephen  
Slappe (Photo:  
Sarah Meadows)

Samantha Wall and Stephen Slappe

Figure 2.  
Samantha  
(*Indivisible*  
series), 2013.  
Graphite on  
paper, 22 × 30 in.



*Samantha Wall:*

Each of my drawings begins as a collection of digital photographs. I often rely on luck and quantity to amass a sizable pool of images, then carefully edit the collection down to a handful. I take hundreds of photographs in order to contend with the “flattening” that often occurs in portraiture. In many of my photographs, a subject that I *feel as a body*, might appear static and aware of the camera. In these instances, only likeness is communicated, transforming the photos into evidence. I’ve learned to quickly scan through my photos, touching each one with my eyes, until one returns my gaze. This reciprocity creates an affective bridge spanning time and space; it is a tenuous and arresting experience that tugs at my eyes. Roland Barthes called this invisible place photography’s “subtle beyond.” I experience it as a tension between the stillness

of the image and the vitality of the person represented. It is an ineffable quality that is immediately graspable and recognizable. I collect these photographs like talismans, siphoning their power and transmuting their “subtle beyond” within my drawings.

It was over thirteen years ago when I first experienced the full power of an embodied portrait, in the *Rembrandt and the Golden Age of Dutch Art* exhibition at the Portland Art Museum. I remember feeling ambivalent about Rembrandt before seeing the show; he was one of the “great men” whose work I had been educated to revere. In fact, the exhibition showcased some of the very paintings and drawings that were part of my indoctrination. What I wasn’t taught, of course, is that the art world is a hegemonic patriarchy, steeped in misogyny and racism. But in spite of this, I was eager to

experience the radiant magic of Rembrandt’s skill and knowledge.

I was approaching the entrance of the exhibition, when I caught a distant glimpse of one of Rembrandt’s famous self-portraits. I began to inch forward, reading, with my nose in the exhibition brochure. When I sensed I was nearing the entrance, I raised my eyes, and was immediately transfixed by the painting—it was gazing at me. I’d seen this work countless times in reproduction; it was Rembrandt’s 1661 *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul*. But experiencing the painting in person, through my entire body, arrested me completely; it was as if time had been frozen by a spell, and I had fallen under its influence. For what felt like hours, the painting and I communed. It was a transformative experience that I could not explain at the time; but I measure all of my portraits against it to this day.

Five years later, I drew my first true portrait of a multiracial woman, for what would become the ongoing series *Indivisible*. I felt a profound urgency to make drawings of women whose experiences I could relate to: portraits that confirmed my social existence. For too long, I had been caught in a deep ontological chasm,

For too long, I had been caught in a deep ontological chasm, struggling with the invisibility of my transcultural identity.



Figure 3.  
Sigourney  
(Indivisible  
series), 2013.  
Graphite on  
paper, 30 x 22 in.



Figure 4.  
Chrissi (Indivisible  
series), 2013.  
Graphite on  
paper, 30 x 22 in.



Figure 5.  
Amelia IV, 2016.  
Graphite on acetate, 29 x 21 in.



99 struggling with the invisibility of my transcultural identity. The feelings of fragmentation that I had ignored for years, left me with a body I couldn't see or reconcile. Drawing, and engaging in conversations with other multiracial, multiethnic individuals, offered me a path toward integration and self-acceptance. The portraits in *Indivisible* depict women determined to protect their identities from being disassembled and compartmentalized by cultural bias and racism. Developing *Indivisible* evolved a new branch of my practice; and during this time, I had a strange and critical revelation—there was a stark difference in the portraits I drew of people I was close to, or loved.

There was genuine fullness and subtlety in my portraits of friends and family that was absent in my other drawings. As I probed the intuitive aspects of my practice for answers, I discovered that my work had been influenced by a desire and need for presence and true connection, long before I began making portraits. Whether this was the result of innate or learned behaviors, still remains unclear to me; however, my obsession to see and be seen by others, closely, tactilely, through touch, has never waned. I study faces: the shapes of a person's eyes; the

structure of their cheekbones; the length and fullness of their lips; the width of their noses; and the many spaces in-between. I feel myself falling into each face, and recording its affect in turn.

We don't spend time gazing into the faces of others, unless they are our intimates. Even during close conversations, we make some initial eye contact, and then divert our gaze—rarely do we study one another. Is it out of fear we turn away? That we may reveal our unbridled desires? We share our true selves in slivers of seconds, unconsciously, through all the senses. This closeness summons sacred forms of interiority. I seek these places and moments, discreetly, in the faces of strangers. I linger like a lover over the subjects of my photographs. The loyalty I feel is not to likeness, but to the freedom and intensity of embodiment.

*Stephen Slappe:*

I'm a collector and a sifter first and foremost. All of my work begins with gathering—images, sounds, and objects—guided by an evolving set of social and political concerns. Collecting and sorting materials requires that I place my trust in their capacity to communicate with me, as I invest in their magic to lead the way. My archives include original and found photographs, screenshots, videotapes, films, etc. As I sort, I do not know what I am seeing exactly, or what I am searching for; and I cannot predict what will emerge. What I know, is that something palpable and electric grows between me and my material—a tender membrane, a creative and intellectual flypaper. I build my collections through both intentional and random acts: making videos; plucking physical media from flea markets and second-hand bins; and building digital image-banks from the residue of years of internet and social-media access.

Through the gradual process of amassing these audiovisual collections, I begin to see patterns of social behavior and environmental, and cultural, organization: visual ideologies, perhaps. Slowly, a space opens—a blur between

the representations we leave behind, and the invisible folds of who we are. But I'm more of a poet than a social scientist; I'm free to muse through my sensorium, editing and recombining, and selecting material to transform into other things. I've created: video installations; printed books; and fine-art prints, to name a few. This is where my solitude becomes most recognizable to others as works of art. Over the years, my practice has shifted from analyzing television news footage, to satirizing television and film tropes, to examining the influence of social media and mobile devices on our everyday experience. I'm collecting, dismantling, and rebuilding images, hoping to learn their structures and meanings.

In 2015, I created a four-channel video installation (and series of photographs) entitled *Our Peace*. The project grew from an archive of photographs and video footage recorded in neighborhood in Southeast Portland. For a few years after getting my first good digital camera, I carried it constantly, recording anything that caught my eye.

During the same period, while teaching video at Pacific Northwest College of Art, I had the remarkable opportunity to bring

a group of women filmmakers from Iraq, to present their work and engage with my students. In one film, my students and I noticed the U.S. military in the background of literally every intimate conversation (this is mostly ignored by the characters). We watched dust from a low flying helicopter swirling around a quarreling couple, and a line of Humvees barreling down a street behind two women chatting at the market. Through a State Department translator, I was able to speak with an actress from the film. I expressed my appreciation for the bravery and integrity required to “perform” the occupation through the lens of the banal. “It didn't look like I expected,” I told her. She gazed at me intensely, and said, through the translator: “Ten years. For ten years this is what our life is like every day. Until I met you and your students today, I thought all Americans were dogs.”

Not long afterward, while checking a folder of videos I recorded around Portland, I observed a pattern in my footage that spoke to the visual language of occupation here at home. I noticed how machines of war had been woven, incrementally, into our social fabric—transformed into comical Humvee limousines,



*Figure 6.*  
*Our Peace*, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions variable

Figure 7.  
Our Peace, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions  
variable



Figuring



Figure 8.  
Our Peace, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions  
variable

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Samantha Wall and Stephen Slappe

commercial jets, and clumsy bombdefusing robots. The recent protests in Portland made it very clear how many military weapons have been integrated into police departments across the country. We saw these weapons in Portland, and understood their purpose, amplified by an occupation of unwanted federal agents, assaulting, instead of protecting, our residents.

The main footage in *Our Peace* was captured in front of our old apartment. I witnessed and recorded four hours of a bomb-squad robot methodically tearing apart a 1960's Volkswagen Beetle. There's a long story as to why the car was considered dangerous, but trust me when I say, the police response was overkill. I couldn't have invented a more salient metaphor to describe our present moment. Here was the cute little VW, designed by the Nazis, which traveled to the United States and became an icon of free-love counterculture. Now, post-9/11, it symbolized anti-patriotic anarchy and radicalism. As I filmed, I watched the Beetle, slowly ripped and peeled like an orange, by the clumsy bomb-machine, controlled by overzealous agents.

Samantha Wall, originally from Seoul, South Korea, is an artist working in Portland, Oregon. Wall immigrated to the United States as a child and comes from a multiracial background. Operating from within this framework, her drawings embody the experience of navigating transcultural identity. Her projects have been exhibited at the Hangaram Art Museum in the Seoul Arts Center, CUE Art Foundation in New York, and Portland Art Museum, as well as exhibition spaces in New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Frankfurt. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards including an MFA Grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, a Golden Spot Residency Award at Crow's Shadow Institute for the Arts, and the Arlene Schnitzer Prize at Portland Art Museum.

Stephen Slappe (b. Charleston, WV) is an artist based in Portland, Oregon. Slappe's work has exhibited and screened internationally at the Karachi Biennale, Transart Triennale (Berlin), Centre Pompidou-Metz, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's TBA Festival, The Horse Hospital (London), The Sarai Media Lab (New Delhi), and Artists Television Access (San Francisco). His work has been funded by multiple grants from the Regional Arts and Culture Council of Portland and an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Oregon Arts Commission. His most recent project is Willamette Line, a permanent video installation inside the 5MLK Building in Portland, Oregon that can be viewed from the sidewalk on the East Side of the Burnside Bridge.



Figure 9.  
*Our Peace*, 2015.  
Video installation, dimensions variable

# Kurt Fisk's Monkey Fishes

~~~~~ Patrick Collier

I first saw Kurt Fisk's Monkey Fish drawings at ArtWorks, a gallery/project space that is part of Collaborative Employment Innovations (CEI), an employment service for people who experience disabilities in Corvallis, Oregon. I was drawn to one work in particular, a bright red, marquee-sized, collaged and hand-drawn promotional poster for the DVD release of his short animated film, *The Original Sea Monkey Fishes*. In short, it is the tale of a scientist's exploration of a sunken ship and his encounter with a merman-like Monkey Fish. Included on the DVD are drawings from various stages in the 45-year development of these fantasy creatures, the Monkey Fishes (the plural spelling is Fisk's).

In 1971, then twelve years old, Fisk ordered his first sea monkey kit from the back pages of a comic book. The brine shrimp he received looked nothing like the happy little alien creatures in the ad, so he decided to start from scratch, change their name to Monkey Fishes, and create his own cast of characters. Over the years he has filled notebook upon notebook with pen and marker drawings of these quasi-human aquatic beings, and modeled dozens of painted clay Monkey Fish figurines.

The first thing one might notice about Fisk's extraordinary creatures is that they are a fairly happy lot, often portrayed with big, open-mouthed, sharp-toothed smiles. Although they come in a variety of colors — frequently brown, and also vibrant blues, oranges, or yellows — all have hairy heads, scaly bodies, and webbed feet and hands. Taking cues from comic-book super heroes, Fisk has endowed them with the ability to shoot heat rays from their eyes and, when frightened, to camouflage themselves to blend into their surroundings. Captions on some drawings inform us that the males stand about twelve feet tall, and the females

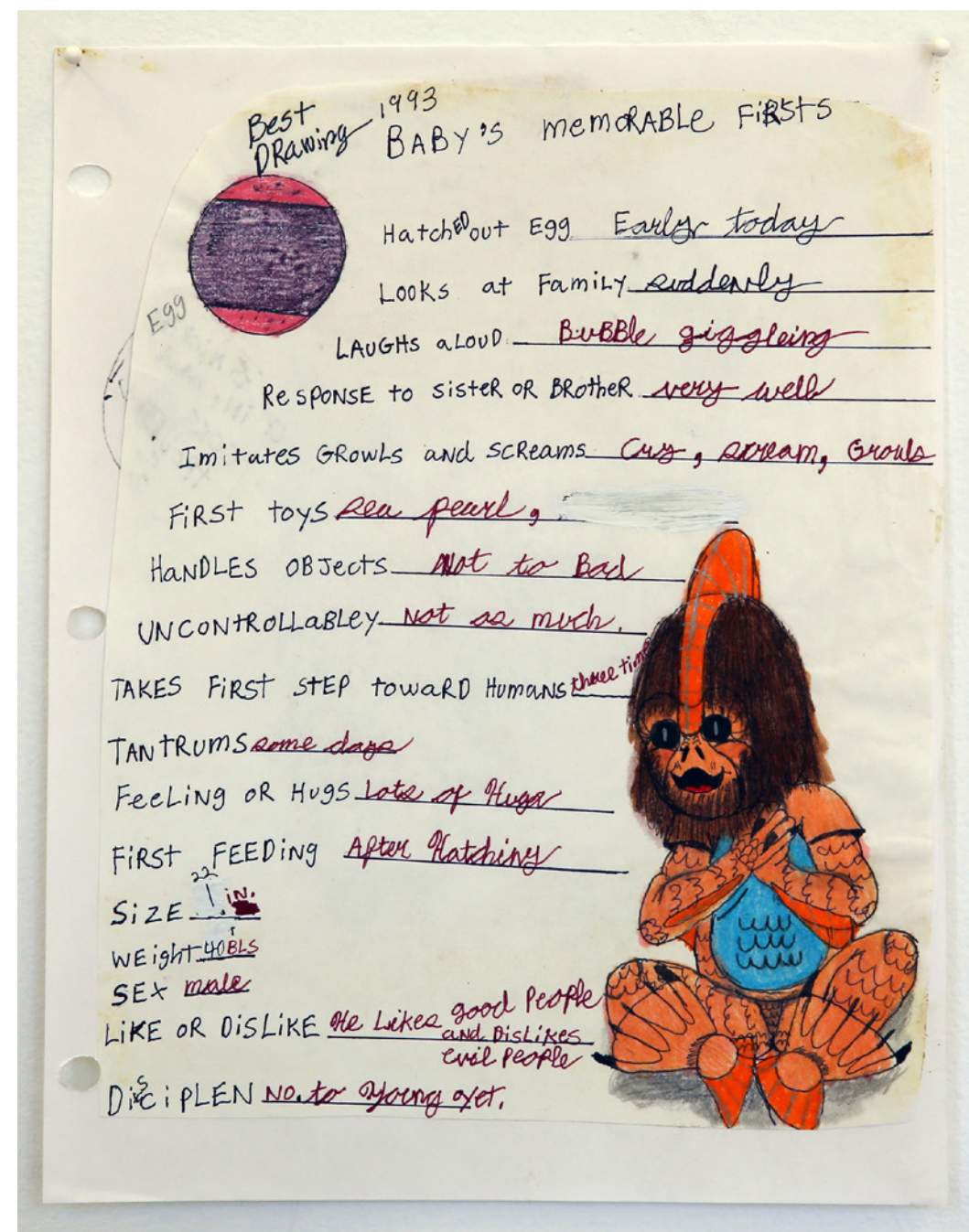


Figure 1.  
Kurt Fisk, *Baby's Memorable Firsts*, 1993. Ink-pen, marker, graphite, White Out, collage on note-book paper, 11½ × 8 in.

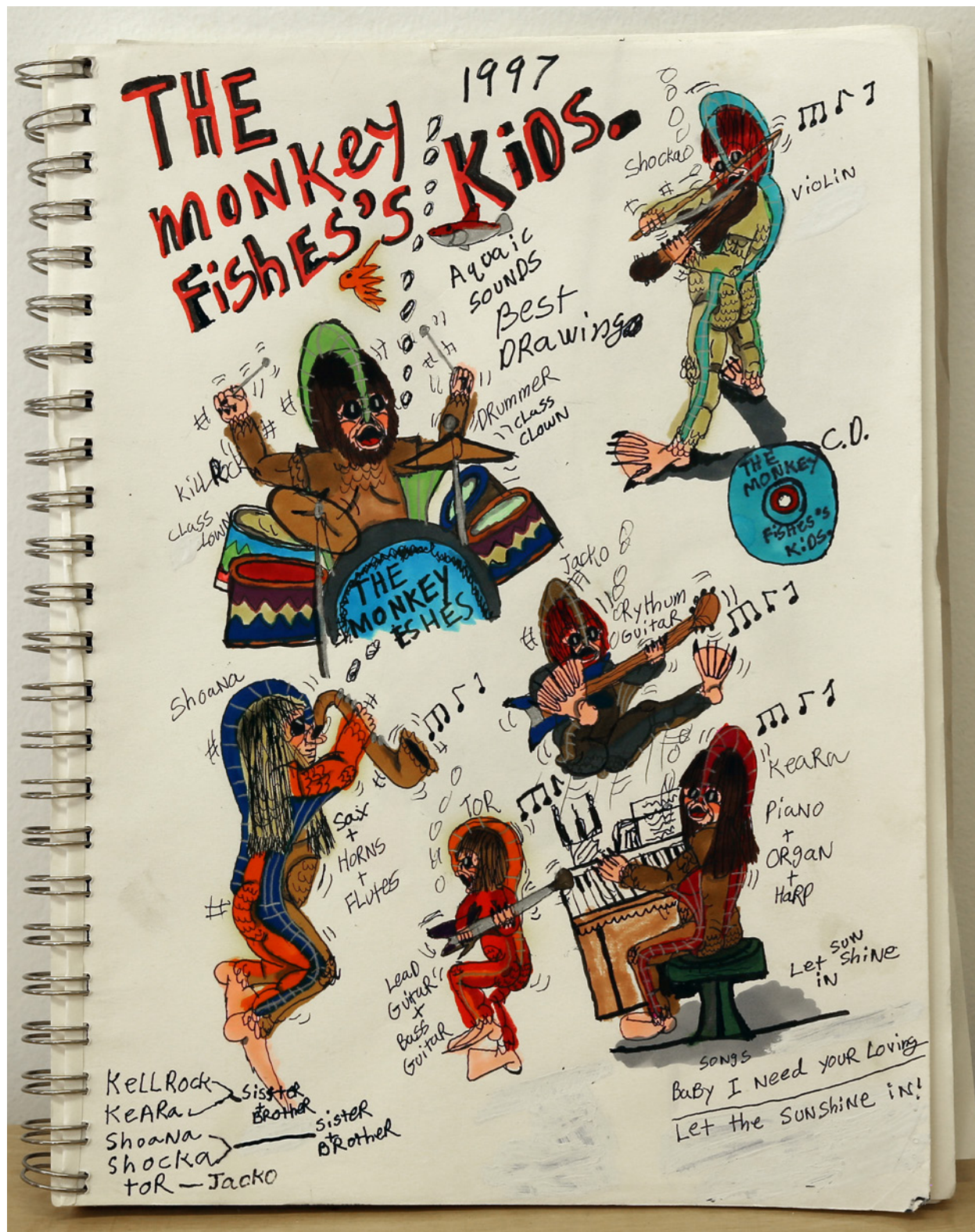


Figure 2. Kurt Fisk, *The Monkey Fishes's Kids*, 1997. Ink-pen, marker on drawing paper, 9 x 12 in.



Figure 3. Kurt Fisk, *Nasty Brat*, n.d.. Ink-pen, marker on drawing paper, 9 x 12 in.

Figure 4. Kurt Fisk, *Untitled (Eight Child Monkey Fishes)*, n.d. Ink-pen, marker on drawing paper, 9 x 12 in.



reach ten feet. In a drawing of the Monkey Fish skeletal structure, Fisk has added an additional ulna attached to each humerus and an extra fibula next to each femur, this to provide the webbed extremities the additional support the Fishes need to swim exceptionally fast. Perhaps most fascinating is their ability to shapeshift into human form.

Although I am aware of some of Fisk's personal story, it would be difficult for me to make a direct correlation based on the characteristics he has given to his creatures. The majority of his Monkey Fishes are shown in dynamic, supportive family units, the images laid out much as they would be in a family photo album. Some drawings depict naughty child Fishes being punished, yet often on the same sketchbook page Fisk shows tender moments between adults and their offspring. The most distressing, albeit rare portrayals are of children in foster care with humans, for these young Fishes seem to suffer terribly. I did not feel the need to quiz Fisk about any of this when we met, as it seems to me that the work of self-taught artists too often runs the danger of being subsumed by the tales of their lives. That said, he does provide his Fishes with enough of a range of emotions in combination with their abilities to make his art engrossing, and this in itself can lead one to make broad speculations about his personal history.

I asked Fisk to walk me page-by-page through several of his sketchbooks, and he was more than happy to oblige. As we began turning pages, it became clear that Fisk did not limit himself to his Monkey Fishes, for intermingled with those drawings were characters from *The Simpsons* and various other cartoons, creatures from the *Alien* films, robots galore, film stars, and television personalities. All seemed equally important to him. I didn't ask him if he watches a lot of TV, but he offered that he likes "mostly the old shows." It is clearly his primary source of inspiration and, I suspect, a reflection of his insularity.

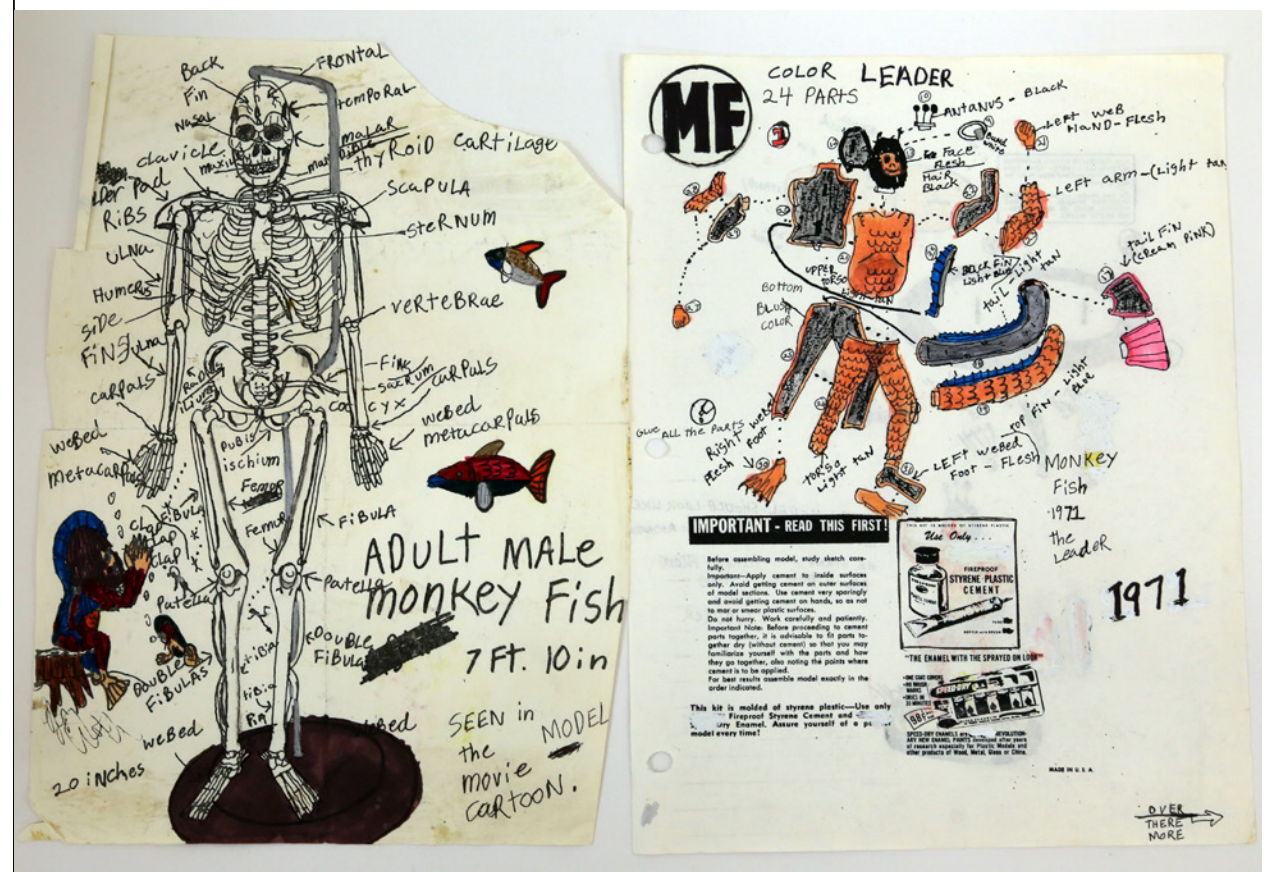
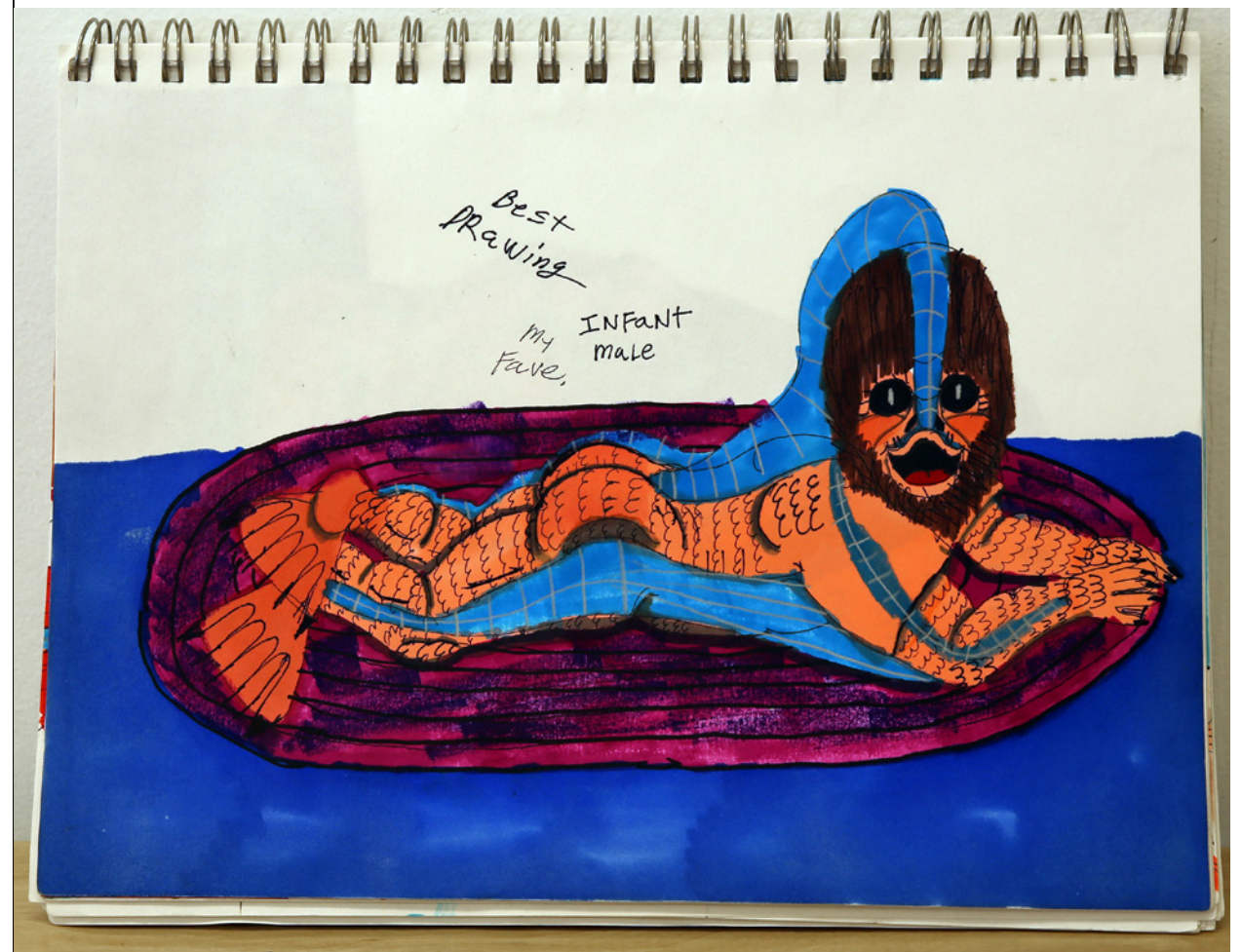
Some of the notations Fisk makes in his drawings hint at that isolation. Many pages in his sketchbooks are marked with a given year, sometimes out of sequence. ArtWorks director, Bruce Burris, cautions that these dates cannot necessarily be trusted. Instead, they indicate when an earlier rendition of the same drawing was made. Many drawings are peppered with notes that declare "Best Drawing" or "My Fave." I might suggest such archival notes work for Fisk in two ways: The dates and annotations are for a future audience while also giving him an immediate sense of self-relevance. Anticipating his own critical reception, he provides himself a compliment, something that might be rare in his experience.

However, there was a point in Fisk's life when he began to feel a connection with and response from the world outside—even if it was still the television. In 1992, CBS broadcast a Saturday morning live-action television program called *The Amazing Live Sea Monkeys*. Imagine how thrilled Fisk must have been, twenty years into drawing his Fishes, to see a television show based on those creatures from the back pages of comic books—the very concept that set him on his path! Suddenly, television not only inspired but validated him. We may not be surprised that when in episode 10 the characters created a rock band for a TV talent search, Fisk started drawing his imaginary rock band, The Monkey Fishes's [sic] Kids.

Noteworthy here is the focus Fisk brings to these particular drawings. Instead of pages peopled with a variety of characters from a number of sources, he

Figure 5.  
Kurt Fisk, *Untitled (Infant Male)*, n.d.  
Ink-pen, marker  
on drawing paper,  
9 x 12 in.

Figure 6.  
Kurt Fisk,  
*Skeleton and  
Model Kit*, 1971.  
Ink-pen, marker  
on drawing  
paper, 9 x 12 in.



dedicates whole pages to the band, full of both inventive and practical details: There is a rotation of four to seven members, sometimes with a green space creature, Sorack from Amadon, sitting in; each performer is assigned specific instruments; and Fisk even goes so far as to create setlists for the band. He apparently entertains ambitious hopes for his efforts as well. In one drawing he writes, “Move over Bart Simpson and Dennis the Menace,” and in another, not settling for television ratings, he gives the same challenge to the band Kiss. In this way, Fisk is like any kid in the last fifty years who has jammed with schoolmates in garages and paneled basements, collectively dreaming of rock stardom. The difference being the absence of mates.

I want to say, ‘This is what I am doing with these hands.’

In 2014, Fisk’s drawings finally saw the light of day when he was invited to participate in a pop-up exhibit in Corvallis. Burriss arranged the exhibition under his Outpost1000 projects, which promotes regional and underrepresented artists. Burriss remembers, “One of the things that Kurt said to me when I interviewed him for the pop-up was... ‘What took you so long?’” Fisk now has four exhibitions to his credit, in Corvallis, Eugene, and Salem, all arranged by Burriss, who seeks to give or find him (and a number of other CEI-affiliated artists) a venue, for this is how artists get recognized (and written about). And Fisk is eager for the attention: “It’s time,” he states, “for people to see what kind of talent I have. I want to say, ‘This is what I am doing with these hands.’”

*This piece was originally published in March 2017 by the Visual Arts Ecology Project.*

Patrick Collier writes criticism for *Oregon ArtsWatch* ([www.orartswatch.org](http://www.orartswatch.org)) in Portland. When he lived in Chicago, he wrote for the *New Art Examiner*. He is the author of a number of catalogue essays. Holding a BA in Philosophy and an MA in English Literature, both from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Collier is also an artist, with an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His approach to art making is multidisciplinary, including poetry, painting, sculpture, photography, and video, often in the same artwork or installation. Recent exhibitions include *The Suburban* in Oak Park, Illinois; *Nine Gallery* in Portland; and *ArtWorks CEI Project* in Corvallis. His photography is in the permanent collections of Hallie Ford Museum of Art and Art about Agriculture at Oregon State University. Collier and his wife, Gillian, moved to Oregon in 2003. They live in Corvallis.



Sharita Towne is a multidisciplinary artist and educator based in Portland, OR. Born and raised on the West Coast of the U.S. along Interstate 5 from Salem, OR, to Tacoma, WA and down to Sacramento, CA, Sharita is a true grand-daughter of the great migration. She is most interested in engaging local and global Black geographies, histories, and possibilities. In her work, a shared art penetrates and binds people—artists, audience, organizers, civic structures, sisters, cousins, and landscape—in collective catharsis, grief, and joy.

Sharita holds a BA from UC Berkeley, an MFA from Portland State University, and was recently appointed Program Head of the Pacific Northwest College of Art's MFA in Visual Studies. Sharita's work has received support from organizations like Creative Capital, the Fulbright Association, Art Matters, The Ford Family Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation, Oregon Arts Commission, The Miller Foundation, the Regional Arts and Culture Council, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Open Signal, SPACES in Cleveland, and the Independent Publishing Resource Center in Portland. She is a 2020 MRG Lilla Jewel Award recipient.

*Previous page:*  
Video still from  
*This is a Black  
Spatial Imaginary.*  
Image courtesy  
of Sharita Towne.

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Indigenous, and  
artists and audi-  
ences of color.”  
Edited by manuel  
arturo abreu

# What Comes after the Museum? Remembering PMOMA (The Portland Museum of Modern Art)

~~~~~ *Libby Werbel*



Figure 1.  
Portland Museum  
of Modern Art  
(PMOMA), inside  
Mississippi  
Records, 2013

Figure 2.  
Michael Sterling  
performing  
an evening Raga,  
2013

Libby Werbel

Is it possible to grow your own museum? What would it look like? How would it be different from the museums you have come to know? In 2012, along with a coalition of artists, performers, and world builders, I set out to make my own deconstructed version of what a museum could be, outside of the mess they had become. In the basement of a record store that used to be an auto mechanic shop, I set out to build the Portland Museum of Modern Art.

By claiming that our small basement space was a “MoMA,” we were able to share the power of that name with anyone who joined in on the project. Portland is small enough that people outside of it wouldn’t know that we didn’t have a Museum of Modern Art. Through this intentional satire, both the artist and the audience were bonded in the long con. And because of the name, I would benefit from quicker responses to email requests, artist inquiries, and research projects, while the artists we exhibited would benefit by receiving faster access to their next opportunity—one that might require formal, institutional validation. All of this subverted the very notion of a museum and spoke directly to my general inquiries around authority in the arts.

I also believe that through this title, we conjured some important questions right off the bat. Who gets to determine what a museum is and what it collects? How do museums function within their communities? How have they helped our culture? How have they harmed it? Why have museums become synonymous with wealth, tax evasion, and cultural theft? What are the stories told about the objects and art in museums? Who did the art belong to first, and how did it get there? What gives museums so much power?

How could one circumvent that power—completely?

PMOMA was a humble little space, positioned inside the basement of Mississippi Records, and underneath the dry storage of the cafe Sweeedee. To build it, I constructed some plywood-backed walls, installed some cheap track lighting, bought a five-gallon bucket of white paint, and put a hand-painted sign over the entry that read “Museum.” It didn’t really matter what the physical space looked like. What mattered to

me was the ideas it would hold and the artists it would support, the community it would harness, and that it was free and available to all. These were the beginnings of this small intentional community art center—this future-thinking experiment.

One of my early agendas was to level hierarchies around who exhibited in the gallery, and upend any class or social status attached to the art. I would organize exhibitions by internationally acclaimed artists, right after a show of watercolors by neighborhood kids. Visitors wouldn’t know what to expect. They could show up and find a whole





show of original WPA oil paintings from the 1930s, a series of sequined cardboard cutouts of giraffes by a Navajo Nation artist, or cellphone-made self-portrait collages by teenagers from Mali. The surprise was part of it. My goal was to always present something that felt like a deep cultural cut people should know about. I wanted to tune people into different kinds of art and educate them, not by giving them didactics or written information about the importance of the work, but by showing them something so special they felt inspired to learn about it on their own. The shows were all equally important and helped establish the tone and vision of dismantling the hoax of fame.

As a city, Portland has never had a major contemporary art museum, and I could sense how thirsty it was for someone to point to how that affects the culture of a place. I now have to admit a few major blind spots I negotiated at the uptick of my investigation. I hadn't done much research about the fertile history of self-organized or artist-run spaces that had informed Portland's art ecology for many years prior. Looking back now, after learning about the lack of citywide infrastructure to support the arts, I think it was better that I didn't let those other projects inform me. Their findings, successes, and failures might have dissuaded me from trying at all. I instead had looked at models such as: FOOD (Gordon Matta-Clark's 1970s Soho project); Artists Space, operating with an *artist curating artists* model and still thriving in New York; Either/Or Gallery that was based in Seattle; Vox Populi in Philadelphia; and the Wrong Gallery, an infamous, glassed-in door front gallery in Chelsea. These art projects helped guide me in developing the principles of PMOMA, but mostly, I just winged it.

Foundationally, PMOMA started with a basic strategy for each exhibition to be collaborative. My aim was to explore collective ideas of mutual care through the lens of institutionality with different artists I worked with. It was always fun and always exceptionally hard work. Over the course of five years PMOMA saw countless collaborators, but some seminal people remained constant throughout: Eric Issacson of Mississippi Records; artists Chris Johanson, Johanna Jackson, and Vanessa Renwick; performance artist Jibz Cameron (Dynasty Handbag); Eloise Augustine of Sweedeedee; musicians Michael Hurley and Brian Mumford; writers Patrick DeWitt, Jon Raymond, and Lily Hudson; and Christopher Kirkley of Sahel Sounds.

Thinking through diverse representation was a baseline, and remained consistent throughout the programming of PMOMA. We created this project on what was historically a village site for the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, and Chinook tribes, that later became the corner of Sumner and Albina in North Portland. In 1962, the Albina neighborhood housed eighty percent of Portland's Black community, and by 2012, the community had almost entirely been eradicated by gentrification. Because we were located in this historical neighborhood, right next to a high school with the highest ratio of Black and Brown students in Portland, consideration and inclusion of our neighbors, and their interests, was essential to the whole of it. Artists from a multitude of identities and intersectionalities were there with us, inside those walls, helping us envision

*Figure 3.* Lonnie Holley and Michael Hurley perform together at the opening of Lonnie Holley's self-titled exhibition, 2014

*Figure 4.* Rose Mackey's exhibition, "COSTUME," 2015. Artist-made costumes and performance





something different and better together. Unfortunately, because we were in the basement of an old building, we were inaccessible to a whole population of people who could not navigate stairs, so even in its most aspiring moments, PMOMA was never truly able to be open to all. This is a hard and disheartening aspect of navigating the margins of alternative space-making without resources.

Despite our shortcomings, we still aimed for everything that took place at PMOMA to be warm and welcoming. Everyone who exhibited needed to agree with our goals of accessibility, and asking bigger questions, knowing the results would most likely be different than other exhibitions, based on the obvious limitations of size and resources. My collaborators knew that PMOMA was not trying to emulate the very thing it was critiquing. It desperately wanted people's bodies to feel good in the space. We weren't scared to let people know that this place was daring to be sincere, daring to lead with joy—and that too was radical.

Strategies of inclusion, belonging, and ownership, were critical. Through the first year of PMOMA I had friends and family in place at each opening who were tasked with approaching anyone they noticed standing alone, to welcome and party with them. After that first year I didn't have to install these "plants" to help strangers feel good about being there. Everyone was doing that on their own, with each other. Each public event or opening always had a performance, as a way to give people something else to focus on if they needed it. Some openings would have themes and people showing up in costumes. We had a deep well of musical acts to pull from because of our relationship and

Figure 5.  
Installation view,  
Chris Johanson,  
"SELF(ISH)  
EXPRESSION(ISM),"  
2014



collaboration with Mississippi Records. Their network of talent helped make each party uniquely memorable. Throughout the years we hosted everything from Indian ragas, Reggae deejays, traveling harpists, garage punk bands, Saharan guitarists, folk legends, to teen hip-hop cyphers.

Our openings had an abundance of food and drink. Food was the easiest way to encourage folks to stay a while, and to let them know you wanted them there. Conceptually, the food tied into the exhibits: gold-leaved roasted chicken and fruit; vegetable and hummus platters made into the shapes of mythical creatures; monochromatic cheese-and-cracker spreads; tropical Jell-O molds; and hamburger-shaped cakes. Our events trickled out into the street, went late into the night, and always offered comfort and release. We took over our neighboring parks and pools; we would host drive-in movies and impromptu concerts. We would have days where the Space Lady or Lonnie Holley would be playing electric pianos outside on the grass, or a traveling

Figure 6.  
"Gettin To The  
Roots Of All  
Evils," PMOMA's  
first exhibition,  
2012. Exhibition  
poster



gamelan band from Indonesia would be offering us a turmeric drink called *jamu*. I would never have thought that one critical key to a better museum would be having really good parties where people felt cared for, but I am certain of it now. Shouldn't our sites of cultural and civic record also celebrate the communities they support?

While juggling the roles of director, curator, financier, janitor, and caterer, PMOMA was also funded almost entirely by my waitressing tips, which would prove itself to be a constant drain on my financial stability. But I believe the economics (or lack thereof) was crucial to its success. I didn't have any money to pay anyone, but luckily, I had an established network of interested builders, makers, and designers. We had people volunteering at all the events, but the support extended so far beyond that. Once, when Dynasty Handbag showed up from out of town to perform with a neck spasm, she had free appointments within minutes to see a chiropractor and a masseuse. Someone even let her take a long soak in their bathtub before the show. This example of mutual aid happened during every exhibit. We all were working to make this thing exist, together. We wanted a museum that took care of us.

As PMOMA kept growing, I started getting requests from new collaborators that were usually reserved for better-resourced galleries and museums. The bar started rising, and while I was honored and wanted to keep up, it started to mean barely making rent each month, and living on fewer dollars each day. It was hard to reconcile my limitations financially with how grand I wanted PMOMA to be. It had to take care of everyone, as that became essential to the experiment, but often this would be at my own expense or detriment. In the end, by wanting PMOMA to be equitable and support artists in all the ways they deserved, I argued myself out of the project. PMOMA was "paused" in the fall of 2017. The physical space went away without any fanfare or announcement, but my research in alternative museum models continued and I began working on a larger public scale.

In the summer of 2016, I created a giant outdoor Portland Museum of Modern Art installation in Pioneer Courthouse Square. Working through some of the same questions around access, PMOMA brought its feral and audacious spirit to the city center and hosted free performances, interventions, and artworks for thousands and thousands of people. I went on to collaborate with the actual Portland Art Museum (PAM) to expand on my interest in institutional critique. This resulted in a full year of exhibitions and performances entitled *We Construct. Marvels. Between. Monuments.* This



In the end, by wanting PMOMA to be equitable and support artists in all the ways they deserved, I argued myself out of the project.

expansive project furthered my own research into the infrastructure, history, and mechanisms of museums, and propelled me in my own quest to discern whether or not there really is a place for museums in a radical, abolitionist future. Ultimately, I decided...not in their current state.

When I started PMOMA, it was out of a direct need to bring my own questions to action and make sense of a world I didn't particularly agree with. I learned that a museum doesn't have to be monumental or grand. It can be small, and exceptionally scrappy, and still create immeasurable change. It can be anything you want it to be. It doesn't need a collection or a board of trustees. It doesn't need deep pockets or docents. It should look like the thing that comes after the museum. We don't need anyone's permission to grow our own version of what comes next. And we definitely should.

Libby Werbel is an artist, curator, and social organizer living and working in Portland, Oregon.



Figure 7.  
Lonnie Holley  
installing work,  
2014

Figure 8.  
Hand drawn logo  
by Eric Isaacson  
of Mississippi  
Records, 2012

# Questioning Success: Reading and Thinking Together

~~~~~ *Bean Gilsdorf*

# 128

Bean Gilsdorf

William Deresiewicz's latest book, *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*, is a dry-eyed look at how the internet has shifted the conditions under which artists of all kinds (writers, musicians, visual artists) are attempting to make their work and live. Deresiewicz critiques the cultural narrative that anyone can be a professional artist now that the means of production are cheap and the internet functions as the ultimate tool of distribution. In particular, Chapter 13, "The Fourth Paradigm," delves into Deresiewicz's concept that the Web has created a marketplace that is unavoidable and inescapable: "When the market is everything, everything gets sucked into the market" (p. 250). Operating in this new marketplace creates a marketplace mentality, to the extent that art becomes merely another cog in the wheels of commerce. To compete, an artist must appeal to her fans at all times; to grow and maintain an audience, her work must be consistent and recognizable, formulaic even—a brand. Success is defined entirely by the artist's ability to sell her work, so the logic of commerce prevails. Finally, Deresiewicz argues, while the earlier paradigms of "artist," "art worker," and "entrepreneur" no longer apply, the bland descriptor "producer"—a quintessential market term—now encapsulates what the erstwhile artist has become.

At a glance, this seems to be a pragmatic (if somewhat mercenary) gambit for artists, to capitulate to market logic and formulate a practice that can exist somewhat reliably within the constructs of marketplace expectations. Yet reading Deresiewicz's analysis made me feel incredibly disheartened and lonely—this isn't why I am an artist, nor do I want to define myself and my work in those terms. In fact, I have been content to have a highly independent studio practice and earn money through pursuits connected to the arts, mainly editing and writing. When executive editor Brian Gillis of the Oregon Visual Arts Ecology Project asked me to moderate a Critical Conversation on the topic of my choice, I took the opportunity to reach out to three other Oregon artists, Srijon Chowdhury, Jaleesa Johnston, and Melanie Stevens, who also operate professionally in art-adjacent roles such as instructor, administrator, writer, illustrator, and/or curator.

In our discussion of "The Fourth Paradigm," we focused on the points at which our practices differ from Deresiewicz's conceptions of a contemporary artist's life. We took issue with his implicit assumption that everyone *wants* to be an "art star," or to occupy whatever the highest-status position is. He discusses internet-fed requirements for that position—branding yourself in a niche market by producing a stable, consistent product—but he doesn't really consider the downsides, such as the artist's own boredom with creating the same thing over and over again, or the precarity of relying on an audience's taste, when trends rise and then shift rapidly away to the next big thing.

A popular question in many MFA critiques is, "Who is your audience?" That question holds different shades of meaning depending on the program, but as students we had all heard and grappled with it. Naturally, our discussion delved into the concept of the audience, what it means to have one, and whether or not "an audience" is equal to "a market." Chowdhury thought that the author's definition of the marketplace was somewhat populist, conflating a general audience with one that actually buys artworks, and perhaps the term didn't even apply to specific corners of the commercial gallery system. Stevens was disappointed that Deresiewicz doesn't acknowledge how much capitalism effectuates

# Recommended for Further Reading

violence and suffering; “to automatically subsume oneself into that particular framework,” she asserted, “is already a problem for me.” Johnston was uncomfortable with the strictures of branding, and worried about what such external pressures were doing to her students as they developed their own work.

Success, we agreed, wasn’t about having a particular number of Instagram followers or selling work for a particular price—or sometimes at all. Instead, each of us is trying to stay focused on what is meaningful to our own inquiries in the studio. I found this part of our conversation to be an antidote to the repressive structures that Deresiewicz outlines. For Stevens, success means “being able to continue to...make art that speaks to [her], and delivers the kind of narrative that [she is] interested in investigating.” Chowdhury talked about the tension between wanting to sell work and having “the work [feel] honest and fulfilling.” Johnston directly opposed the lock-step requirements of the marketplace: “For me” she said, “being free is trying to step closer to [a centered practice], even if it’s the opposite of making a living off my work. I guess when I’m saying free, I mean stepping further away from caring what anyone else thinks, or caring if someone will show this, or if someone will buy this.” The most important question for her is: “Do I feel like I lived that moment in my practice to its fullest with what I had?” That’s a powerful re-centering of devotion to an artistic discipline, which is about potential rather than product.

It is interesting to me that, among the many points raised in “The Fourth Paradigm,” we focused most on the external pressures we are trying to resist. Many visual artists *do* attempt to join the marketplace as described by Deresiewicz; some are very good at it, and reap the putative rewards. And even those who are still climbing the lower rungs of the ladder try to obtain the visible markers of “success” that seem to apply mainly to other artforms, like pop music, such as a fixed, marketable product; global travel that implies sophistication and a broad network; and hordes of followers and buzzy interactions on social media. These artists seek the trappings of marketplace success by embracing the old adage “dress for the job you want,” thus signaling that they are ready to be instrumentalized by a machine that values the product but not the producer. That’s not to cast aspersions on other people’s aspirations, but to assert that if success can only ever mean selling one’s work, then even artists consciously nonaligned with the market feel incessant pressure to conform to its forces.

It’s a shame that time did not allow our group to also read and discuss the final chapter of Deresiewicz’s book, “Don’t Mourn, Organize,” which briefly outlines some of the attempts that artists are making to circumvent this system. It is a reminder that there is no art world, only art *worlds*, overlapping circles that encompass diverse ways of operating, each according to customs and conventions defined by smaller communities with their own objectives. Overall, *The Death of the Artist* points to the need to explore important notions that our conversation only touched on, making external pressures more visible to stakeholders in the field who are also affected by their proximity to these capitalist strictures—educators, curators, gallerists, collectors, grant makers—and all those that have an interest in sustaining emancipated art practices. Further investigation at a community level might assist artists in finding ways to think critically and act collectively to reject the most paralyzing of these market-driven narratives.

Abbing, Hans. *Why Are Artists Poor?: The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008.

The “exceptional economy” here refers to cultures that assume artists are willing to work for free. The author is a sociologist, economist, and painter, and is thus uniquely poised to speak to the financial impoverishment of artists from both an academic and a personal perspective.

Buskirk, Martha. *Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art between Museum and Marketplace*. London: Continuum Publishing, 2012.

An account of the complicated, sometimes contradictory, often problematic relationship between museums and contemporary art.

Dávila, Arlene. *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020.

While emphasizing the influence of race and class in shaping art markets, Dávila introduces the reader to work by contemporary Latinx artists through interviews with artists, gallerists, and curators.

Davis, Ben. *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013.

Contemporary art meets commerce meets class relations in chapters such as “How Political Are Aesthetic Politics?” and “Art and Inequality.” Chapter Two lays out the “9.5 Theses on Art and

Class,” a widely debated stand-alone work Davis published in pamphlet form before he wrote the book.

Deresiewicz, William. *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2020.

The author investigates the tension between the narrative claiming that anyone with access to the internet and cheap production tools can be an artist, and the reality that most artists aren’t paid for their work anymore. Of particular note is “Chapter 14: The Fourth Paradigm,” in which Deresiewicz argues that digital capitalism has flattened the distinctions among various art forms, and that the terms “artist,” “art worker,” and “entrepreneur” are no longer relevant to how artists must operate.

Graw, Isabelle. *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture*. New York: Sternberg Press, 2009.

Graw describes the interactions among the artist-as-entrepreneur, the art market, and celebrity culture to argue that the relationship between art and the market is not truly oppositional. The book builds its thesis around the production and public/market reception of works by well-known artists such as Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Julian Schnabel, and Andrea Fraser.

Louden, Sharon. *The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Across forty essays written by practicing artists, the editor builds a case that artists provide a public service, both in economic value and by contributing to the culture, and thus the well-being, of their communities.

Plattner, Stuart. *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

This book is the culmination of 137 interviews with artists, collectors, gallerists, etc., regarding the St. Louis art scene, including their relationship to the cultural hegemony of New York. Plattner presents an informative view of the advantages and challenges for arts workers who can’t/won’t relocate to a major arts hub.

Relyea, Lane. *Your Everyday Art World*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017.

Relyea uses the metaphor of the network to investigate the changes in art-world social and economic dynamics since the advent of globalization, and their political ramifications.

Shnayerson, Michael. *Boom: Mad Money, Mega Dealers, and the Rise of Contemporary Art*. New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2020.

The art market is largely unregulated, and a handful of high-powered galleries with multiple locations around the world are responsible for moving massive sums of money. This book tracks the activities of dealers like David Zwirner and Larry Gagosian to create a history of the business of art at its highest echelons.

Sholette, Gregory. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. New York: Pluto Press, 2011.

Most artists will never receive critical or market success, but the author argues that these workers (the “dark matter” of the book) are essential to the production and maintenance of the few who achieve high rank. Further, the collective action of the many has the potential to subvert dominant systems.

Thornton, Sarah. *Seven Days in the Art World*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Across seven chapters, Thornton (partner to influential gallerist Jessica Silverman) walks the reader through an art auction, an MFA critique, an art fair, a studio visit, and more. This book should be required reading for all BFA seniors.

White, Roger. *The Contemporaries: Travels in the 21st-Century Art World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

With the advent of new technologies and through scope creep, anyone can be an artist—or maybe everything is art. The author travels through some of the lesser-known corners of the art world to discuss how contemporary art is produced and evaluated.

Zarobell, John. *Art and the Global Economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

A critic, curator, and arts administrator, Zarobell analyzes twenty years of globalization and how it has transformed the way in which art is exhibited and sold.

# May It Always Be Legendary

bart fitzgerald



## I.

Santal 33. Boonk. A libation awaits—whether prepared, or freshly colliding due to the presence of its necessary ingredients—Hennessy and sticky-sweet pineapple juice *to chase*. Olfactory invitations usher the patron into the atmosphere before any salutation is uttered. These collisions suffice as greetings, as language may never be offered, may never be necessary. Conclaves transpire on wooden tables, benches, chairs, and stools. Their wooden slats are not frightened by the musings of meteorologists; their occupants are equally unbothered. Through unencumbered discussion the finest argumentation develops, ripened by these conditions. Some meet weekly, at a standing time. Dinner, two drinks, smoke break, then out before it gets too late. Others only arrive after midnight: six drinks while smoking, hosting the after-hours, as our celebration grows uninterrupted. These separate parties are equally regal, yet may never encounter one another. To hear their two perspectives, one might believe they were never in the same place at all. *The range of experiences is the nature of our gathering.*

For many, the gathering is already part two of an evening caper—the chosen occasion for a post-lecture cocktail, or the first public appearance after a rendezvous—as *this is the only place we can be seen together*. Many are itinerant. Whether they roam to and from the city, or simply the celebration, I do not know. But the space persists for their return. There is no written dress code, but expectations are implied. What is garish is frowned upon—the absolute finest is expected. Discretion is our organizing principle. Intentional guests do not seek the raucous praise

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of applause, but quiet affirmation. *You are seen and honored, we take notice of your engagement.* There is a slow and dedicated attention to image. Branding is minimal. Here at the gathering we imagine that the last has become the first, the finest. Our leaders do not emerge from among those who stratify, but those who seek stratification are also welcome. (They gain respite from their strivings in our queer alternative artwork.) The lowly labor more for the stratifiers than they could ever imagine, and that they will ever repay through their corporate giving campaigns. To this point, collaborations unimagined are the norm. We gather from a wide variety of backgrounds. There are no rules. This absence does not create lawlessness. We learn our needs and limits. We teach. We grow and critique growth.

Cigarette Smoke,  
Menthols. Motorcycle Exhaust. Sweat. Uninhibited by borders, the gathering rejects the concept of private property—every awning, stoop, driveway, and doorway in a two-block radius becomes a satellite of our celebration. Crowds splinter into more intimate whispers: taking a break, striding a walk, calling in sick, reassuring a lover. We may not make it home tonight. We have not yet made it inside.



## II.

24 November, 2014. A St. Louis County Grand Jury determines that Officer Darren Wilson did not break the law when he murdered Mike Brown. Mike will never reach the age required to join us inside. I watch from a bitter bed, while the streets around the nation revolt. I join my city, occupying spaces of injustice, lying in the streets, breaking off into smaller groups. We incite riots. We interrupt the flow of traffic. *Black Lives Matter!* we scream, hoarse and exhausted. We must continue to gather. We are deathly aware of the world around us. Each gathering need not be the same. There is more to protest. *Our protests are not the measure of our experiences.*

I begin to organize a brunch. Is it frivolous and decadent to plan a feast while the world is burning? I am not alone in my desire for decadence. Our aesthetic indulgence is not the culprit of our decline—the *world has failed us*. We demand to fashion our own responses. Just a few days after Christmas things will be arduous, and we'll need this celebration more than we know. Brunch will feature books for radicalizing and revelation wrapped in bows and ties, and chocolate bars, wrapped in fine paper monogrammed with our initials. I don't know who all will show up, it's a holiday, and folks have their own traditions. Maybe no one comes. It is, of course, Sunday Morning—people will be enjoying their last Sunday of the year in church. Nevertheless, an invitation is released. I plaster it over internet walls and the inboxes of my beloveds.



Sunday evening is R&B Night at a local watering hole. After church is out, we gather on Broadway, resplendent in shirt and tie, yet still hidden in plain sight. We review our experiences with the divine and express, lyrically, our desire for romantic love. We confess while drinking. The watering hole is too mellow for downing shots, but we engage in



speed-sipping, and we elevate properly. Often we are the only party there. The hole becomes another gathering space where we can choose to hide, or be seen together. As glasses clink and the music soars, somewhere in between being “weak in the knees” and begging the question “How did you get here?” I find the opportunity to get the deejay’s attention. I compliment his work and ask if he’d be available on the day of the brunch. He’s willing to come, if I do him a favor.

## IV.

There is no conviction. Here, is the most conviction. We are sure of our need for one another. The invitation is simple. Who has been the most discussed person that week, for fame or for infamy? Where are they hiding on any given day? This is the mood. There are artists, models, writers, professors, culture workers, curators, advertising executives, and those with more complex occupations. Whether to excite their mundane lives or match the lively pace of their quotidian days, the celebration is a welcome diversion and cure. One person’s escape is another’s every day. The beauty of the gathering is captured in images, but the lives they represent are rarely handled with care and concern. I place black bars on the eyes of the weekly icons; this aesthetic intervention slows the process of their circulation. Who am I seeing? What can I depend on without eyes? If it’s worth believing that the eyes are the windows to the soul, the visual asks: *If we refuse the window—not only refuse to open it, but black it out completely—do we become soulless? Are our souls protected from the eyes we are forced to endure?*

From a secluded huddle, a fight breaks out. A mason jar flies, it bounces on the asphalt, reluctant to break. There are cheers, overseers, comments of praise and disgust. They all contribute to the energy of the scuffle, with glances and guffaws. The outdoors collides with the interior. The entanglement ignites censure, provoking reinforcement from the one-man-show that security performs. *The police are always already here*—there is rarely a need to invite them to seek what they’re already looking for. The fight calms. The celebration continues. At the core of our community, we are siblings, cousins, play-cousins, schoolmates from elementary...Our wrestling is different. If we are not siblings, we share one. We are tied to one another in deeper ways, in a place that proclaims we aren’t here.

## IV.

Brut. Maple. Holly. Brunch goes off without a hitch, save the kitchen’s lag in keeping up with our needs: eggs, extra hollandaise, bacon (fried hard), and the delicious avocado chutney that accompanies the crispy chicken benedict. It is a floodgate, a sign—the community is ripe for gathering. The people need a party. There are six months between the brunch, and the invitation to the first celebration of the season. I insert myself into nightlife culture, make proper introductions, make friends, pay my dues. Folks might already know me from here or there, so there isn’t too much work to do, but I have an impulse to show honor and learn the landscape. After wrapping up my workday at Powell’s Books, I make casual appearances at weekly functions in the city. Powell’s closed at eleven then, a perfect time to arrive at a nightclub, unassuming, sporting attire too cool for the coffee shop, but absolutely perfect for the club.



I chat up the bartender, discuss the most obscure liqueur on the shelf. It turns out they’ve been working on something to feature it, but they’re unsure if it will go over well. Would you like to taste it? We are now old friends. The gathering is taking shape. The deejay is running things, his responsibilities keep him busy. To establish a genuine rapport, I find him during a smoke break, compliment the work I enjoy, follow his nights, learn how he gigs, see if collaboration is possible. A network begins to emerge.

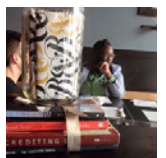
Six months are winding down, and we must make choices. What does our queer space mean now, after so much has changed? What does our queerness look like? To create a space of respite, I labor. Who am I designing it for? My presence and intentions are the only conditions I can control. I might shape the music’s direction, but I do not run Serato. I can speak to the bartender’s behavior, but I cannot control his moods. I am not furniture, but I do know how to take up more space than I need, to ensure that my folks have room. They arrive from long-distance travel, or to celebrate a move, or a milestone year—there is space for them. There are no banners bearing their names. Never an official photographer, none formally welcomed, no waivers signed for film or video. Many images are made, for various reasons, but none for the attraction of capital support, media coverage, or increased turnout. Celebrations build naturally, from Opening Ceremony to Finale, with a slow night or two in between, but never flatness, never dullness. This artistic practice is creating a life, one surrounded by those who are holding the moment and practicing the future. This practice is trusted enough for folks to spend a Monday night with me. We savor.



Inside, sweat pours from the glass door and the floor-to-ceiling windows. It offers protection from the inevitable surveillance of our gathering. The door negotiates our conflict with the elements. It’s too cold outside for it to remain open. It’s too hot inside for it to remain closed. Striving with the weather mirrors our condition, our possibilities. While there is little canopy, the outdoors provides space for what has been outlawed inside. What is allowed inside will never touch our interior limits. I am still only doing the deejay a favor.

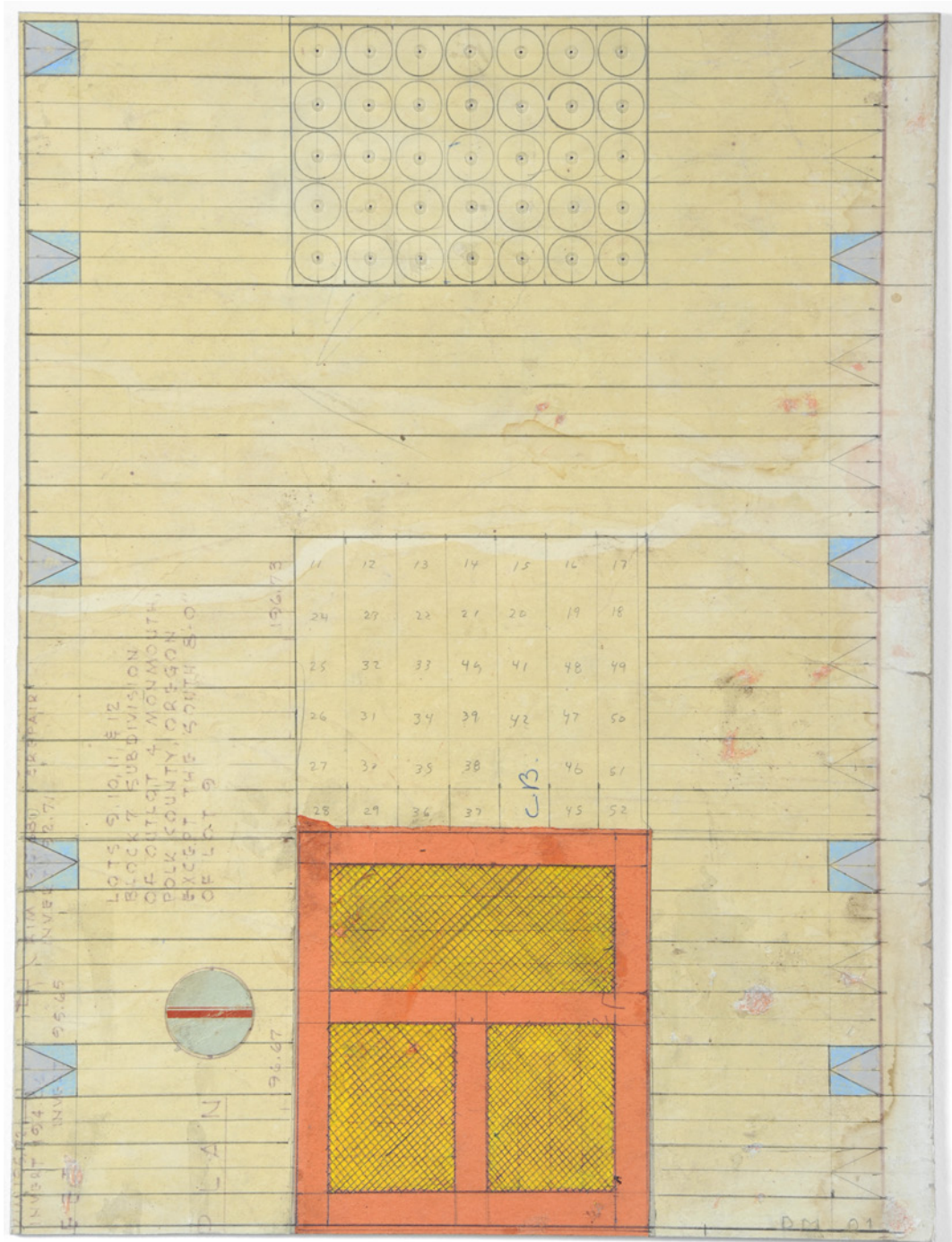
If partygoers are patrons, artists must be accessed spiritually—discerned—as they are not discourse. Patrons will never find works of art to archive under the capitalist banners of their family names, or house within their city’s museums. This art is ephemeral; the ties it produces cannot be traced—they race beyond time. Songs are born, collections emerge, a fight erupts elsewhere. Relationships may be broken, new ones come. They contribute to the story beyond. Rising from the table at just the right moment becomes the perfect opportunity for another to sit and meet their next producer. Hopping on the dance floor when a song drops creates the space to meet a muse. There has never been a cover charge to engage this artwork. All have been welcome; but we have always known it hasn’t happened without a cost. Art always rises when artists gather their audiences. *May it always be legendary.*

bart fitzgerald (b. 1991) is a pastor, scholar, and cultural critic.



# D.E. May and the Gift of Unknowable Intimacy

Abigail Susik



Figuring

Abigail Susik

I.

One of the reasons for abstract art's ascendancy over the last century is surely its simultaneous accommodation of the ego's conflicting desires for both symbolic annihilation and reflection of the self.

On the one hand, the formal hermeticism and token minimalism of visual abstraction may provide a rest from the ego's incessant interjections. In the devastating silence of Rothko's chapel, for instance, the relentless preoccupation with the self is absorbed into the quicksand of pure pigment. This has been called "visual purity" or "optical transcendence," but another way to think about it is simply as a temporary cessation of narcissism.

On the other hand, much abstract art has the potential to figure as a metaphorical plaything for the beholder's fantasies and identifications. Associatively, Mondrian's grid becomes a cityscape, a microchip, or a representation of the Platonic ideal. In a biomorphic example, Anish Kapoor's *Cloudgate* morphs into the Chicago Bean, generating a selfie maelstrom. The paradoxical pliancy of abstraction's reserve supports the inevitable intrusion of the ever formulating universe of the individual viewer.

However, the dual obduracy and porousness of abstraction can neither be taken as the summation of a viewer's experience, nor as a given precept of an artist's impetus or approach. There may still be room to uncover unexpected permutations in abstraction's presumed operations. At some point, it may no longer be the case that most viewers default to modalities of self-engagement when they confront artworks constructed in the language of abstraction.

What then becomes of contemporary practices that resist engagement with the beholder's narcissism? Such artworks possess immunity to the desire for denial or access, not because of the work's avoidance of familiar formal tropes such as linear, curvilinear, or gestural structures, but as a result of the inscrutable specificity of their construction.

What is the nature of an artistic practice of abstraction that is at once entirely concrete and fully opaque? Can we embrace an abstract art that fails to offer envelopment, quiescence, or the pleasure of free association?

II.

It was the Oregon artist D. E. May (1952–2019) who taught me this difficult and redemptive lesson over the past decade: his art would never be fully knowable as a result of the depths of its idiosyncratic essence.

Don't let the language of modernist abstraction so often present in this artist's work across media—from drawings to collages, assemblages, and mail art—fool you. There is no empathetic experience there to comfort or console, no moment of peaceful respite from yourself, nor even an anonymous surface onto which you can project.

Every artwork made by D. E. May—or, as his friends called him, Dan—is part of a living myth he cultivated in his artistic practice over the course of his life. This personal myth, comprised of all the million intricacies of his private existence, is firmly rooted in one place: his hometown and lifelong residence: Salem, Oregon. Dan's was a myth constructed around the specific tenor of his relationship to that place and the momentous sensuous and emotional character—neither narrative nor history—

Figure 1.  
D. E. May,  
*Reservoir District*  
(224), 2001.  
Mixed mediums,  
12 × 9 in. Collection  
of the Hallie  
Ford Museum of  
Art, Willamette  
University, Salem,  
OR. Gift of  
John T. Casey in  
memory of Larry  
J. Stobie (Photo:  
Dale Peterson)



of this illuminated rapport between dweller and dwelling. His work can certainly not be fully understood outside of this context, but even insider information as to the particulars of this local sphere will not permit guaranteed access. More mysterious than the autobiographical sketch, the reflective memoir, or the repetitive analysis involved in self-portraiture, Dan's works remain inscrutable psychosomatic reservoirs of experience, holding the moment of their making in a state of suspension.

His art is unknowable both despite and because of its intimacy. This riddle initially frustrated me. The tension arose not because Dan's work is so often unpredictable, as when it evokes aspects of high-modernist abstraction via lovingly reconstituted remainders of discarded trash found in Salem's downtown alleyways. This high-low aesthetic twist is an appealing schema in the work, but not its core. Rather, I was dissatisfied precisely because of my passion for the art and my desire for proximity to it.

Each work is a distinct fragment of Dan's space, evidence of his encounter with a moment. Yet the carefully ordered drawings or collages are not at all about the artist, they do not tally his memories or reconfigure his sensations. The artist is not present in them. Whether it was an old postcard he refitted for mailing and sent to my house, or a booklet of miniature collages he bestowed on the occasion of my wedding, these constructions always gestured toward the same thing to me when I was finally capable of sensing it: *they are places*.

### III.

My attempt to get to know Dan and his practice started when I was a newcomer in Oregon a decade ago. During the initial months of my debut university post, I encountered Dan's work in reverse order. Instead of seeing finished pieces in a gallery or museum setting, poised and priced, I visited the artist's legendary workroom in downtown Salem. Standing in that dim undersea atmosphere, constructed entirely of gleaned refuse and industrial scraps, my art historical mind-set instantly jumped to those comparisons nearly all writers make when discussing Dan's work: Duchamp appeared in the penchant for compulsive measurement; Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* found a West-Coast correlate between those walls; imprint, index, and the aesthetics of the archive rallied to the tip of the tongue.

Over the years of getting to know Dan better, I realized that such comparisons are ultimately ill-fitting. Dan himself agreed with this, I think, despite his respect for avant-garde predecessors, especially Duchamp. If modernism informs his practice, it is modernism as heavily filtered through rows of bank cubicles, janitorial closets, and small business storefronts amidst Salem's circumscribed city center. Nor are the artist's frequent dips into a spare type of figuration reliably art historical or even concretely referential. While Dan's constructions tend to conjure reveries of microcosmic and macrocosmic architectures, or lost ledgers of forgotten engineers, in the end they resist metaphorical and speculative reflections.

His materials speak to local industries, even when they are repurposed shipping boxes mailed from afar, found in a back alley. Dan built his oeuvre out of the most abstracted products of the Oregon logging industry, from wood pulp and chips, to glassine and embossing—

*Figure 2.*  
D. E. May, Untitled,  
2006, collage,  
paper, wood,  
6 × 4 in. Collection  
of the Hallie  
Ford Museum of  
Art, Willamette  
University, Salem,  
OR. Maribeth  
Collins Art  
Acquisition Fund  
(Photo: Dale  
Peterson)



so many trappings of our mail-order information society. The word *manufacture*, when taken in its etymological sense, *manu factum* (made by hand), comes to mind. Dan turned the soggy, scraped, and faded remainders of technocratic product distribution into homemade monuments. He remade the machine-made.

## IV.

During my final visit to Dan's work space—over a too generous glass of whisky, *The Ipcriss File* soundtrack playing on vinyl in the background—I was able to resign myself to the idea that Dan's art was as elusively singular as the man himself. As an art historian, I had hoped to do better with the artwork at least.

The truth is that I barely got to know D. E. May, despite the fact that I think he would have agreed we were friends. To this day, I still struggle to be as present as possible with the work as it exists in its own space and distinct specificity. And if it seems that I mourn what I am calling the supremely intimate unknowability of his art, it may just be that my own grief over his recent loss seeps through my words.

He is of course irreplaceable, but as he once stated, the work itself will last. In that case, what I mean to say is, the lesson he taught me about his work's solidly emphatic identity is not a cause for lament. Actually, the emotional and cognitive abundance of Dan's personal myth of "Islandsalem" somehow arrives in my awareness intact as a kind of gift, a durational paean to his existence, which in turn brightens my own. Although Dan's work was not an homage to Salem, it is my experience of the work as generous—despite its unknowability—that allows it to morph into an homage to the artist himself.

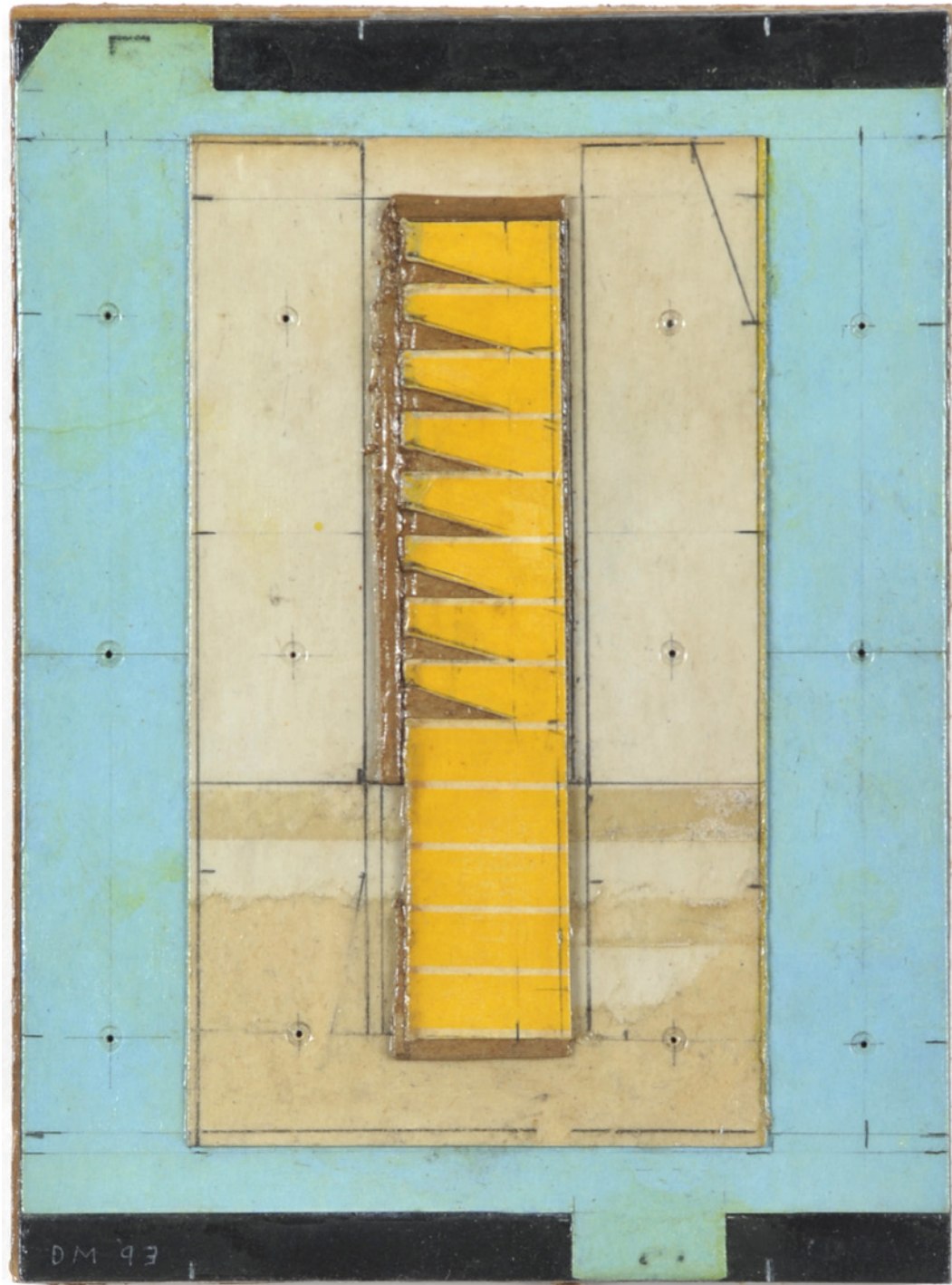
It is natural for Dan's many friends and admirers to continue to look for him in the corner booth of his favorite bar in Salem, and to search for his inimitable silhouette moving across the nighttime streets. His relationship to his city, however, is not reliably characterizable. Salem: where the river undertakes serpentine curves; state capital; bureaucratic zone of hospitals, trials, and incarceration; blossom-filled flood plain; venerable university town. The most mundane manifestations of life in Salem composed Dan's exquisite mythic horizon. Such patient and diligent lifelong habitation of a place the artist called home offers an astounding example of the buoyant possibilities for being to anyone who can embrace it.

*Author's Note: I am grateful to Dr. Sue Taylor and to Jonathan Bucci, John Olbrantz Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, for their assistance with this essay.*

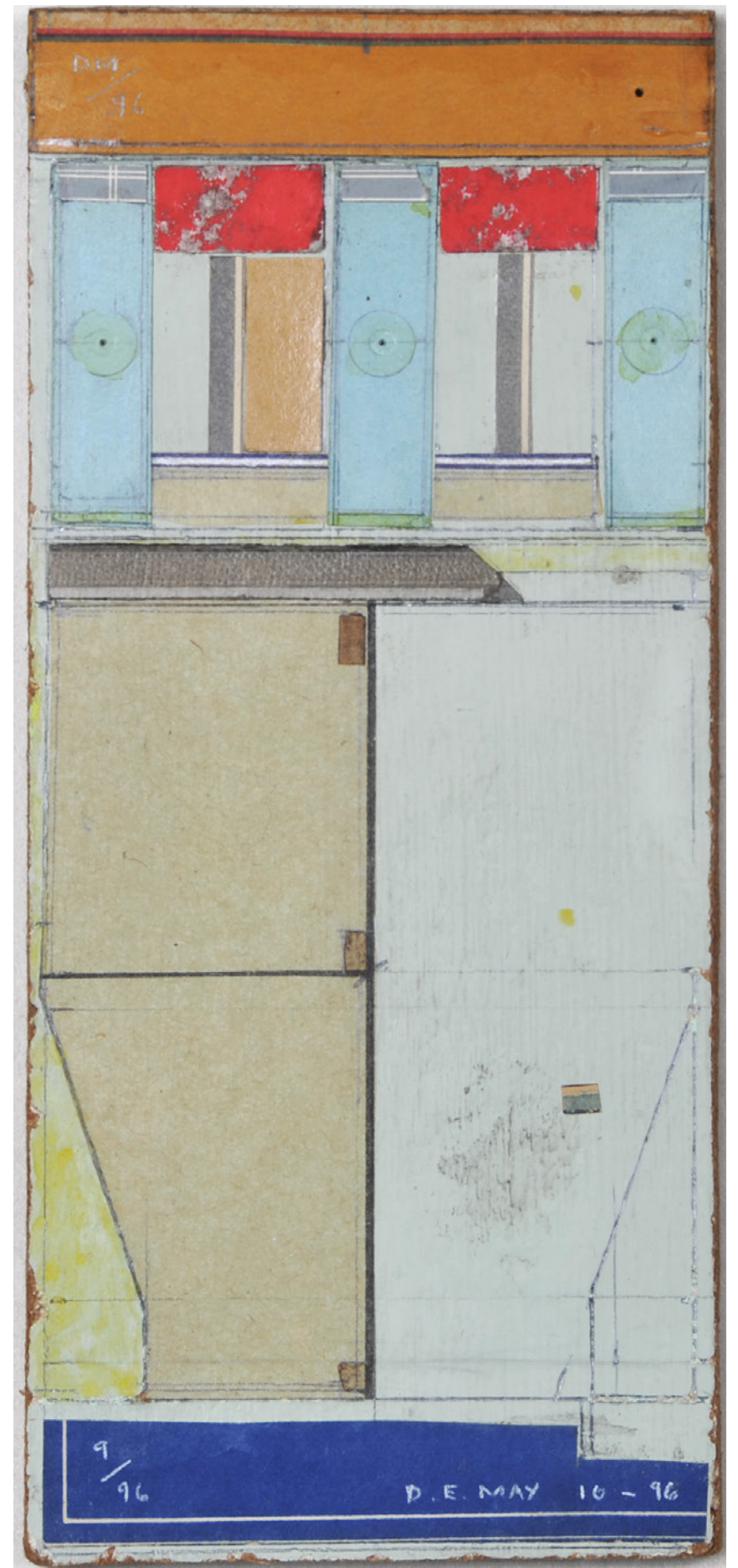
Abigail Susik is Associate Professor of Art History at Willamette University, where in 2016 she curated a major survey of Imogen Cunningham's photographs for the Hallie Ford Museum of Art. Author of *Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work* (Manchester University Press, 2021), Dr. Susik has published many essays on Surrealism and is co-editor of both *Surrealism and Film after 1945: Absolutely Modern Mysteries* (Manchester University Press, 2021) and *Radical Dreams: Surrealism, Counterculture, Resistance* (Penn State University Press, 2021). She is a co-curator of the exhibition *Alan Glass: Surrealism's Secret at Leeds Arts University* (2021), and a founding board member of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism and co-organizer of its 2018, 2019, and 2021 conferences.

*Figure 3.*  
D. E. May,  
Untitled, 1993.  
Mixed mediums  
on cardboard,  
5 × 6¾ in.  
Collection of  
the Hallie Ford  
Museum of  
Art, Willamette  
University, Salem,  
OR. Gift of  
William A. Mosser  
(Photo: Dale  
Peterson)

*Figure 4.*  
D. E. May,  
Untitled, 1996.  
Mixed mediums,  
7⅞ × 3½ in.  
Collection of  
the Hallie Ford  
Museum of  
Art, Willamette  
University, Salem,  
OR. Gift of  
Leo K. Michelson  
(Photo: Dale  
Peterson)



Figuring



# Acknowledgments



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Covers:  
Demian Dineyazhi,  
sacred, ancestral,  
Indigenous Land



Jess Perltz,  
*Body without  
body masks*,  
2019, Abaca  
pulp, dimensions  
variable (Photo:  
Mario Gallucci)



Samantha Wall,  
*Sigourney  
(Invisible  
series)*, 2013,  
Graphite on  
paper, 30 x 22 in.



In 1957, Kenneth Ford and Hallie Ford established a then-modest foundation to give back to the timber communities of southwest Oregon. It grew in size, scope, and geography to become The Ford Family Foundation in 1996. With its headquarters office in Roseburg, Oregon, and its scholarship office in Eugene, Oregon, The Ford Family Foundation now manages large, internal initiatives and makes grants to public charities predominantly benefiting communities in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County, Calif.

The Visual Arts Program honors Hallie Ford's lifelong interest in the arts by helping Oregon's most promising, established visual artists actively pursue their work. It also seeks to enrich Oregon's visual arts ecology by growing centers of excellence. The program, at times in collaboration with state and national partners, supports creative-work time and space, provides resources to artists at crossroads in their practice, engages arts writers and curators in critical conversations, and makes investments in Oregon visual arts institutions.

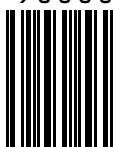
Critical Conversations is a collaborative program developed by the University of Oregon and The Ford Family Foundation, with partners Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland State University and Reed College. These partners create a year-round calendar of visiting critics and curators for studio visits, public lectures and other forms of engagement, as well as overseeing commissioned arts writing for this publication and the Oregon Visual Arts Ecology project, an online partnership with the Oregon Arts Commission.



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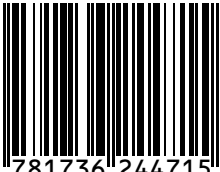
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**OREGON**

Center for Art Research

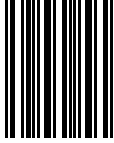
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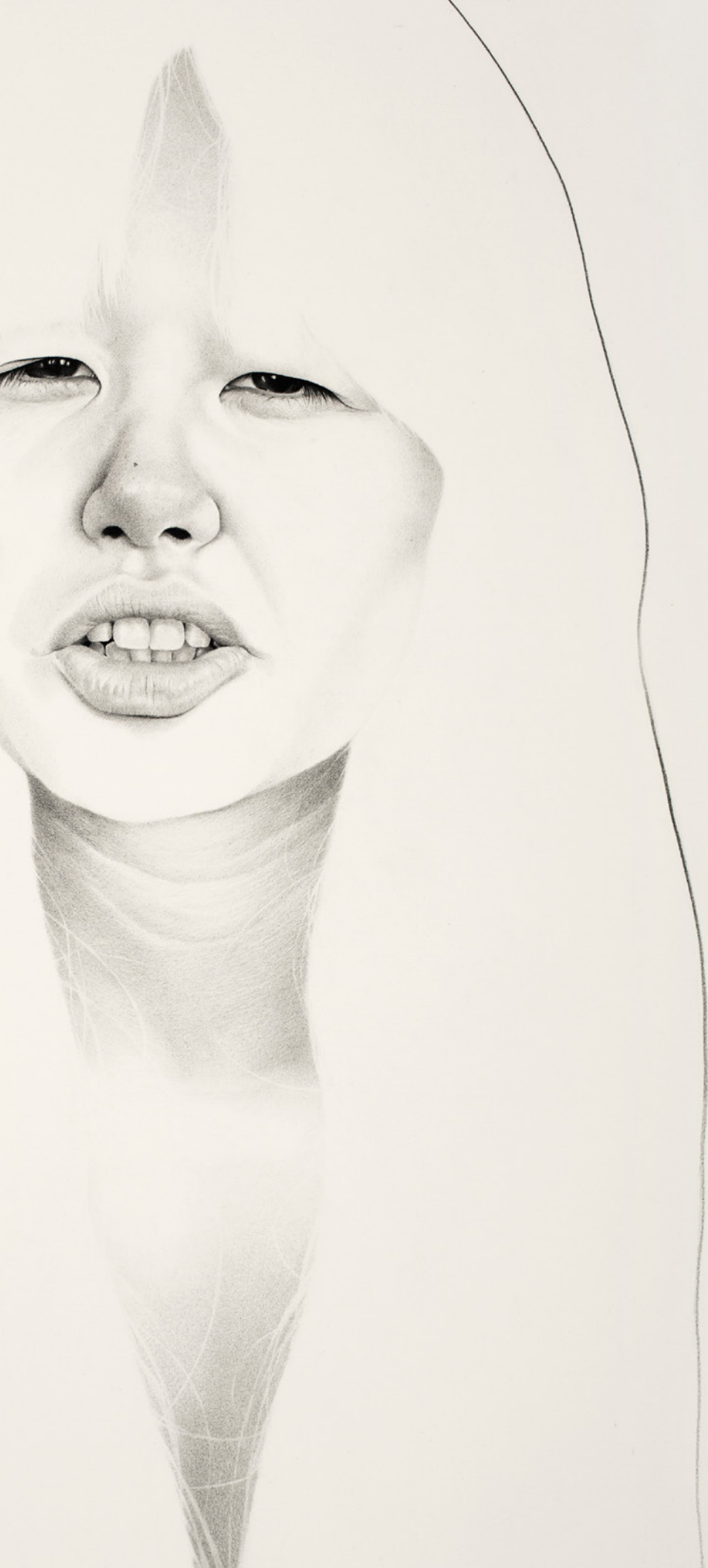
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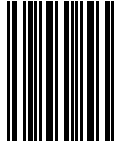


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