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APRIL 2020



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ITURBIDE

MERLIN
JAMES

IMI
KNOEBEL

SUSAN
BEE

CRAIG
KALPAKJIAN

NORMA
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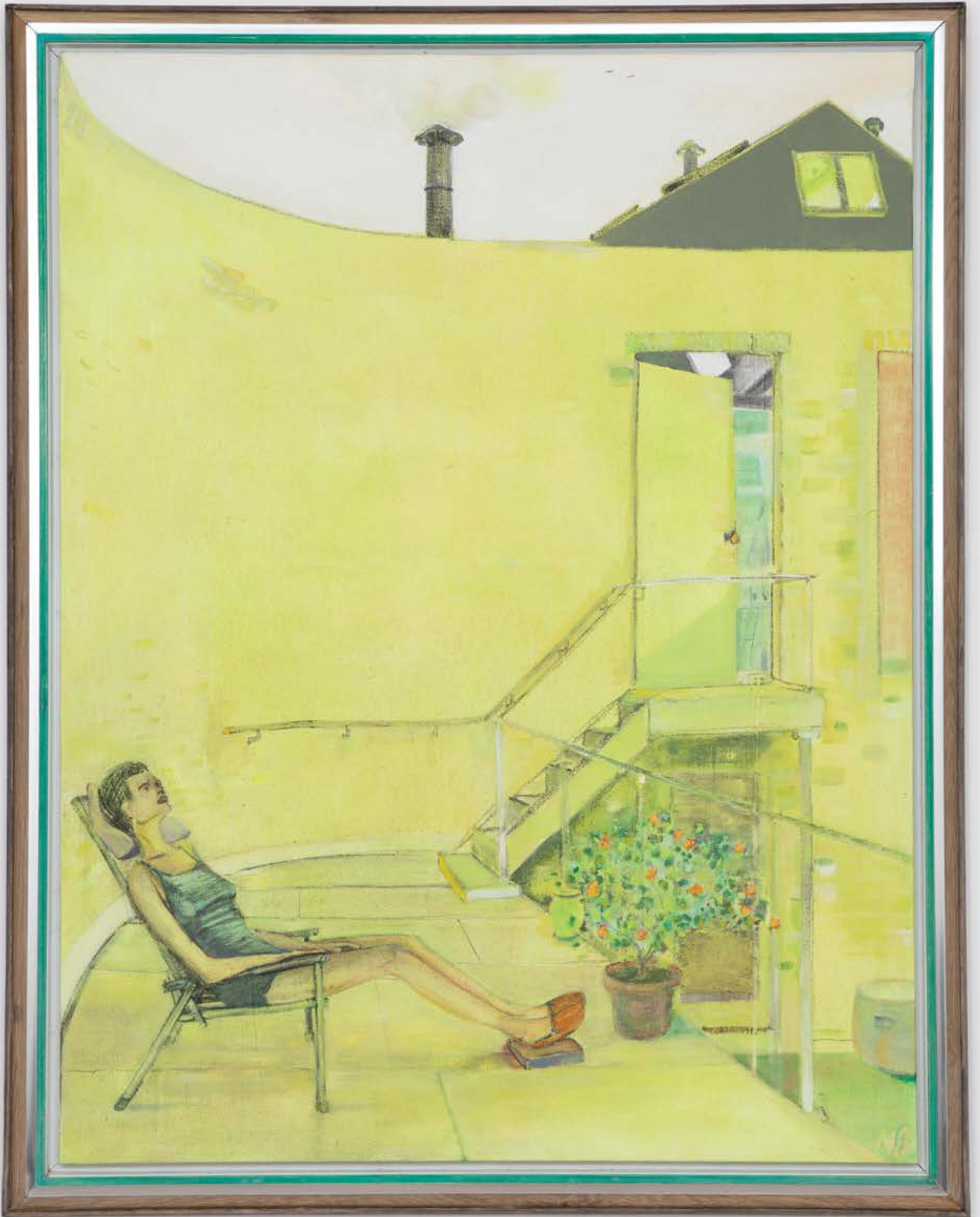
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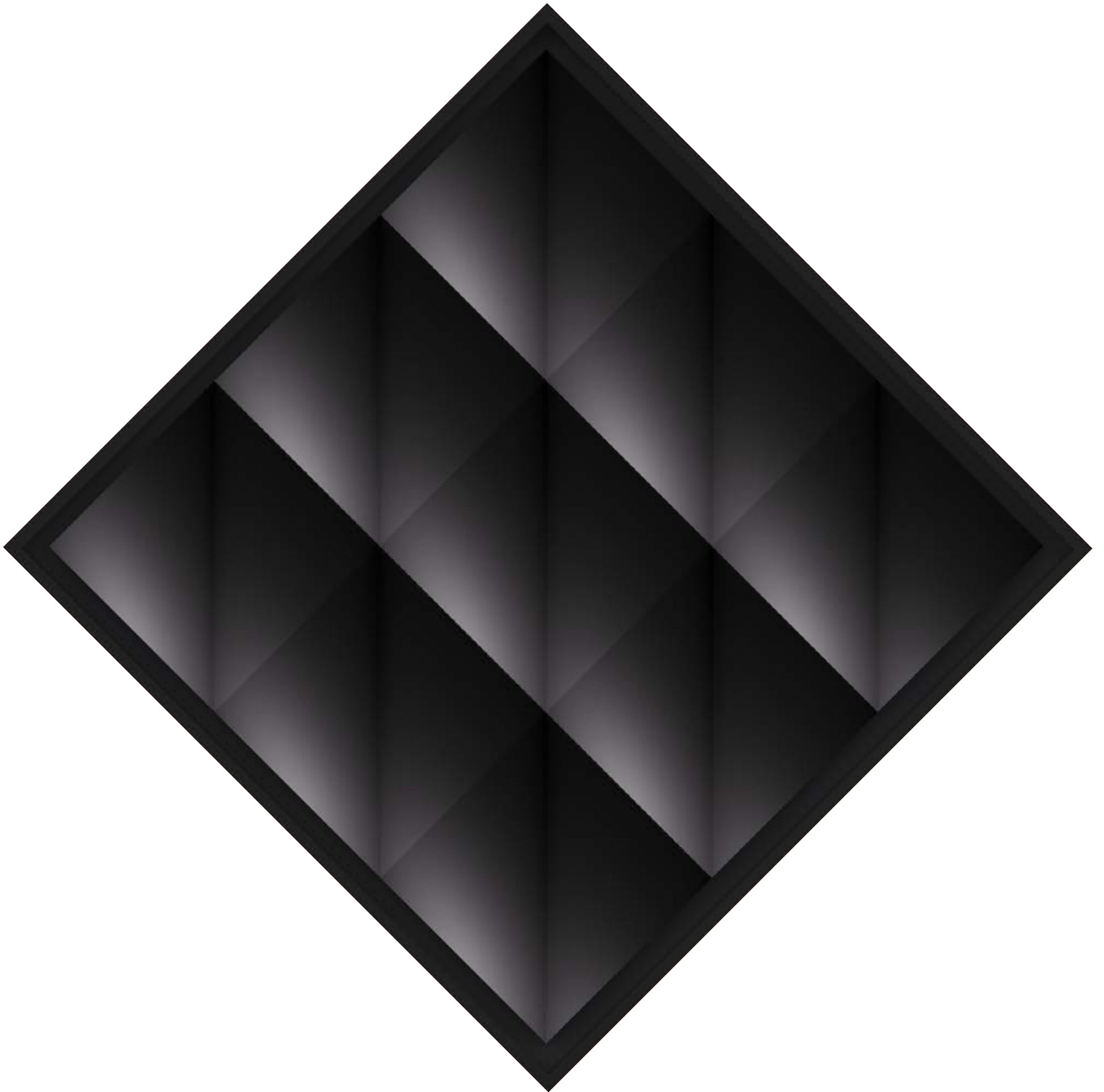
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for their 2020 Vision initiative
to provide greater recognition
for female-identifying
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at the forefront of reversing the marginalization of women in the arts**

About 2020 Vision at The Baltimore Museum of Art

2020 Vision is a year of exhibitions and programs dedicated to the presentation of the achievements of female identifying artists. The initiative encompasses 16 solo exhibitions and seven thematic shows. Highlights include a large-scale transformative commission by Mickalene Thomas, a major monographic survey of Joan Mitchell's career, an exploration of Candice Breitz's recent video works, and the reinstallation of several of the museum's galleries to emphasize the depth and diversity of women's artistry through time. These presentations will be supported by a wide range of public and scholarly programs that will foster dialogue on women's contributions to art history and the development of many of the artistic institutions that we know today. The museum has also committed to exclusively purchasing works by female-identifying artists during 2020 and will explore objects across genre, style, and medium in every collecting area.

About the Deborah Buck Foundation

Started in 2018, The Deborah Buck Foundation is primarily focused on arts institutions that have shown a commitment to the exhibition and support of women makers. While the foundation is interested in all cultural entities, it seeks those that most effectively support artistic excellence and critical thinking by women. The Deborah Buck Foundation will work to encourage making a difference in the matter of inclusiveness for women within the cultural landscape.

“The BMA’s 2020 Vision initiative serves to recognize the voices, narratives, and creative innovations of a range of extraordinarily talented women artists. The goal for this effort is to rebalance the scales and to acknowledge the ways in which women’s contributions still do not receive the scholarly examination, dialogue, and public acclaim that they deserve. This vision and goal are especially appropriate, given the central role women have played in shaping this museum throughout its history.”

— **Christopher Bedford**
Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director
Baltimore Museum of Art

**The
Deborah Buck
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Photo: Mitro Hood

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Dear Friends and Readers,

"I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship."

— Louisa May Alcott

During the war, the British diplomat, Harold Nicholson, was asked: "If you had to choose between the life of your son—who was fighting at Monte Cassino—and the survival of the city of Florence, which would you choose?" And that British scholar and gentleman had the immense courage to transcend honesty to say: "Florence, because though my grief may be unbearable, for centuries to come human beings will still have Florence."

— From an interview with George Steiner with Wim Kayzer, 1989

As we go through this profound time together—a time of terrific uncertainty that will either connect and unite us or separate and divide us with a greater urgency than we've ever experienced in our collective lifetimes—we now have a need to remind ourselves that at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we were confronted with other kinds of fear. Be it the fear of indiscriminate terrorist attacks after 9/11 in 2001, or the fear of economic collapse as the stock market crashed in 2008, or the fear of natural disasters caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and then Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Here we should add that leading to the inauguration of Donald J. Trump on January 20, 2017, the world was already on edge due to the critical issues of climate catastrophe, economic uncertainty, mass migration, among other political and social crises. This anxiety, whether here in the US or globally understood, can be attributed to the liberal "elites" failing to recognize one simple human matter: "populism" is an outcome of a population demanding simple solutions they crave. Even in the context of a small family dynamic, or say a marriage, when someone is being ignored or neglected, he, she, or they will find ways to be sure his, her, or their voices will be heard, at whatever cost.

"Populism" as a concept has roots in the Progressive Era of the US, especially in the Progressive Party of Robert M. La Follete (Presidential candidate for the Progressive Party in 1924). "Populism" became an ideological slogan that represents the "people" in utter opposition to any self-selected and self-promoted "elite." However, just as the color blue was once associated with the Union Army led by the Republican Abraham Lincoln, while red referred to the left-leaning parties, meanings can become inverted. The red and blue colors were changed and interchangeably used by network television as color TV became more popular. For example, in 1972 CBS created one of the first color election maps, with Richard Nixon winning the election in the state of Alabama, which was colored blue, yet in 1981 ABC newscaster David Brinkley declared "the red states are the states we have projected having gone for Mr. Reagan. Red are Reagan. That's why we chose red."

By 1996, the political terms "red state" and "blue state" had become a household identification, especially with the 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, and onward. Similarly, "populism" has been in recent years deployed by liberal internationalism and global media as "ordinary people" who have been suppressed by the economically powerful and culturally arrogant minority. At this point, it could swing to either right-wing or left-wing connotations, with the meaning between those that are conforming and those that are in charge of the conforming in the hands of whoever can manipulate it best. David Levi Strauss put it the most succinctly: "Trump has spent his entire life conforming to, trading on, and celebrating our worst cultural tendencies ... His call to Make American Great Again is an appeal to erase the political and cultural changes that resulted from the countercultural push of the 60s, in civil rights, social justice, and multiculturalism."¹

As Trump's fate for reelection on November 3 depends on how his administration mediates the current coronavirus crisis, most of us have come to accept Trump's malignant narcissism as a symptom of our world, filled with "rampant individualization [where] relationships are mixed blessings," according to Zygmunt Bauman, "They vacillate between sweet dream and a nightmare, and there is no telling when one turns into the other." We have come to grasp quickly that COVID-19 is a global pandemic that has no interest of discrimination in any shape or form or to any one of us, including those who think in great extremity of Black vs. White, Us vs. Them, etc. All can be victims. For once, forced by nature, we all are in quarantine at our homes. We're forced by nature to adjust and recalibrate our rhythm to her rhythm. This is the time when we learn to have respect for time. This is when we come to realize not everything can accelerate at the same pace, and that the speed of acceleration has been detrimental to the essential tradition of humanistic inquiry in the arts and the humanities. This is when reading a book of philosophy, a novel, a poem, listening to a symphony, a jazz or experimental composition, among other similar activities cultivates our deep communion with nature, conscious of the mortality of our bodies from which and through which the true meaning of life and the real pleasure of living can be better understood.

For those of us creative individuals from various communities of the sciences, the arts, and the humanities, we all know this is the time to come together, even while working from our respective homes, to spread the love for our world cultures through the act of creation, which requires the slowness of time as a counteragent to the act of destruction, of which speed is a central ingredient. Speed has been Trump's most effective ammunition, for he understands speed is power. By mobilizing his deployment of speed, for example, through tweeting at unpredictable and irregular hours, the saturation of the so-called

"breaking news" is perpetually more intensified. We shall collectively slow down Trump's speed along with his barbaric use of language by sharing the power of inconclusiveness and humility that can be generated from the arts and humanities. It's our hope to transgress the conventional by restoring the dignity of the arts and the humanities, at a moment when we most depend on them. While nature is taking her time to heal her body, we too can heal our own bodies through celebrating this month, April, as National Poetry Month. We're thrilled to welcome Norma Cole, one of our great poets (who is also a visual artist, translator, and curator) as the Guest Critic, which will surely harvest our profound readiness to observe Earth Day on Wednesday, April 22.

Here, I leave you with Fernando Pessoa's Sonnet XX for your reading pleasure:

When in the widening circle of rebirth
To a new flesh my travelled soul shall come,
And try again the unremembered earth
With the old sadness for the immortal home,
Shall I revisit these same differing fields
And cull the old new flowers with the same sense,
That some small breath of foiled remembrance yields,
Of more age than my days in this pretence?
Shall I again regret strange faces lost
Of which the present memory is forgot
And but in unseen bulks of vagueness tossed
Out of the closed sea and black night of Thought?
Were thy face one, what sweetness will't not be,
Though by blind feeling, to remember thee!

In solidarity, with love and courage,
Phong H. Bui

P.S. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Rail* has shifted our operations online. While we're remaining dedicated to supporting our community of readers, writers, artists, and students more than ever before, we launched on March 17, 2020 our New Social Environment lunchtime conversations, daily at 1pm with special guests to discuss their creative lives in the context of our new social reality. Please join us by visiting the Rail's eventbrite page for our schedule and for the link to participate. We also want to thank Rail Board Member Michael Straus, who has been a valiant comrade of the *Rail* for the past 10 years. We look forward to Michael continuing to be a part of our community as an Advisory Board Member. Last but not least, we are grateful to our friend Dorothy Lichtenstein for her generous donation to the *Rail*, which will surely keep our morale high and steady. Thank you.

1. David Levi Strauss, *CO-ILLUSION Dispatches from the End of Communication* with photographs by Susan Meiselas and Peter van Agtmael (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2020), p.12.



Left to Right:

Graciela Iturbide, *Torito (Little Bull)*, Coyoacán, Mexico City (detail), 1982. Gelatin silver print, 12 1/8 x 8 3/4 inches. Collection of Galería López Quiroga. © Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Susan Bee, *Demonology*, 2018. 30 x 24 inches, oil on linen. Courtesy the artist.

Merlin James, *Rosebush*, 2020. Acrylic and mixed materials, 50 1/2 x 40 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Craig Kalpakjian, *Dark Units*, 2019. Inkjet print, 21 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Editor's Note: End Times Politics

BY PAUL MATTICK

Politics may, as Karl Marx suggested, be an epiphenomenon resting on the “economic foundation” of society, but still have interesting things to tell us. The Democratic Party seems—I write this in the aftermath of Super Tuesday—to have successfully eliminated Bernie Sanders as a candidate. This was the work not just of party officials, who made no secret of their intention to control the nomination, but also of the voters, who in most places stuck with the old political machinery. Young voters, on whom rode the hopes of the Sanders camp, remained in the actual largest party—the 40-plus percent of eligible voters who don’t bother to go to the polls. So the choice on offer will be between two elderly white men, both notable liars and scoundrels, and both apparently in some early stage of dementia. If we needed living symbols for the accelerating decline of capitalism, here they are.

Sanders actually, so far as one can tell, wants to make America great again; Noam Chomsky got it exactly right recently when he described him as not a socialist but an Eisenhower Democrat.¹ He wants to go back to the 1950s, when an expanding economy allowed for the simultaneous growth of profitable investment and increasing real wages. In that happy time, the rich were taxed and highways built. If the Cold War called for an expanding nuclear arsenal and the occasional use of the CIA or Marines to overthrow an elected government, it was still possible for a former general, then a retiring president, to warn of the dangers of a military-industrial complex.

But those days are gone for good. The defeat in Vietnam, announcing the limits of American state hegemony over much of the world, came together with the mid-1970s economic crisis that signaled the end of the post-war prosperity and the beginning of a long decline of investment, productivity gains, and general well-being in the United States and the world as a whole. Under these circumstances, the End Times idea, so popular among Evangelical Christians, has flourished in secular reality as well. It’s as though it would be pointless to think about the future. In particular, there is no political will to use the flood of imaginary money conjured by the world’s central banks for anything but the short-term goal of further enrichment of the rich. Meanwhile, highways and bridges decay, an impoverished working class is driven into homelessness, and the quickening injection of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere relentlessly acts to melt glaciers, raise sea levels, and produce drought and wildfires here, flooding there, and growing throngs of refugees from war and starvation roaming the earth. In this world, the only “realistic” political positions are personal greed and self-aggrandizement, on the one hand, and the wish-dream that enough talk about “incremental change” will stave off or even

just slow down the full descent into social chaos, on the other.

Those who worry about a revival of fascism are on the wrong track. Fascism was a politics of optimism and progress, an attempt to sweep away the effeminacy of parliamentary politics to create a rigorously unified national will, embodied in the Leader, capable of building strong, internationally competitive, national economies. Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian despot, may rail at international Jewry in the shape of George Soros, but what he’s really up to is enriching his family and friends by collecting EU agricultural subsidies, while the Hungarians slave away in European auto factories. Trump seems genuinely ignorant about economics and politics (and also genuinely lazy) but in addition to expressing a truth about the competitive relationship among the US, Asia, and Europe, his main efforts have been directed at reducing the tax burden on the wealthy and removing health and environmental regulations weighing on business. This is not Thousand-Year planning, not a struggle to found a resurgence of American strength.

And how could it be? Trump can rant against German automakers, but BMW’s largest factory is in South Carolina. What began as another health crisis cover-up in China is now shutting down the world economy. Even though they recognize that, as an excellent article in the *New York Times* put it, “the fundamental threat to the world economy is the continued spread of the coronavirus,” governments are no more willing to take the necessary steps to deal with it than they are to slow global climate change. As Adam S. Posen, former rate-setter at the Bank of England and now president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics (no hotbed of leftist thought), put it:

If you don’t spend money for people put out of work with [*sic*] no fault of their own when there’s a clear public health virtue in making it in workers’ interests to stay home and not spread the virus, then everything else by comparison is a complete waste. ... [We] only overspend on things for business, and for very privileged interest groups. We never spend enough for average working people.²

This could be Bernie talking. But look where that got him. If you want to gauge the chances of a Green New Deal, look at the response to Covid-19, a clear and present danger not just to human life but to money-making itself.

So here we are. In the short run, the global recession that was already brewing and is now being hastened by the coronavirus on which it will be blamed, will at least slow down the pace of CO2 emissions.³ (In fact, the *Financial Post* has already reported the good news that “global oil demand is expected to decline by the largest volume in recorded history in the first quarter, dealing

The choice which was always there is once again made clear: if people wish to avoid the future so brilliantly captured by the slogan of Extinction Rebellion they will have to take social affairs into their own hands, and not wait for another elderly gent or lady to fix things for them.

another blow to fiscally vulnerable Canadian oil producers.”)⁴ Capitalism is still powerful enough to generate pandemics, thanks to factory farming, the concentration of people in cities, and inadequate attention to public health,⁵ but it does not seem able to escape economic stagnation and social paralysis. The wishful thinking that we could escape that fate without shattering political business as usual showed its poverty in the failure of the Sanders campaign. The choice which was always there is once again made clear: if people wish to avoid the future so brilliantly captured by the slogan of Extinction Rebellion they will have to take social affairs into their own hands, and not wait for another elderly gent or lady to fix things for them.

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Fear is more powerful than facts

BY NATALIE BAKER

Thomas Paine wrote in *American Crisis*, “To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, and whose philosophy consists in holding humanity in contempt, is like administering medicine to the dead.” These words, penned in 1778, are like a preview of the global disposition to the threat posed by COVID-19. Scientific reasoning can be and has been used in an attempt to assure a frightened public that a virus-laden doomsday is probably not going to claim 2-3% of the world’s population. In this same piece of writing Paine also said, “Tis surprising to see how rapidly a panic will sometimes run through a country.” At this point, I am not certain that COVID-19 is causing actual panic, aside from the mass snatchings of toilet paper supplies and the seriously overblown reactions of the media, which are not helping. However, relaying productive information and discussion about the virus, rather than misinformation, or combating disease politicization on all ends by engaging with critical discussion on COVID-19 becomes an exercise in what Paine described as “endeavoring to convert an atheist by scripture.”

What is happening with the virus—aside from a pandemic—is a deft manipulation of limited facts and words via an endless parade of media talking heads, non-expert government officials, and self-anointed arm-chair public health experts on social media. These folks, along with many others, are co-creating a crisis beyond the virus itself. Why? Because in the absence of factual data we rely on predictive models to inform our visions of a safe future. These models tend to use worse-case scenarios to project a sense of societal safety when in fact, we have little control over the course into the future. What we can control is how we react.

The very few existing studies illuminate whom the virus kills and why, in a limited way. Generally, it is the very old and infirm, or the very infirm, with some exceptions. Yes, the young also get sick and this is not a good thing. But aside from these knowns, a lack of empirical insight is hugely problematic. John P.A. Ioannidis from Stanford University addresses this issue. He argues, “The most valuable piece of information for answering those questions would be to know the current prevalence of the infection in a random sample of a population and to repeat this exercise at regular time intervals to estimate the incidence of new infections. Sadly, that’s information we don’t have.”¹ This is not all that we are missing. Even the CDC complained on March 18 that data on crucial variables of interest are missing, including outcomes such as, “hospitalizations, ICU admissions, and death” and were left out of “9%-53% of cases, which likely resulted in an underestimation of these outcomes.”² But we do have the very basic statistics of infection and death rates, although these are also not exact due to lack of testing and mis-

underdiagnoses, and the issue of large numbers of asymptomatic individuals.

I use these statistics³ to provide some insight. Currently there are over 400,000 documented cases world-wide of COVID-19, with almost 20,000 deaths. This is bound to change, of course. Of these, most have occurred in China with a bit over 81,000 infected out of their 1.8 billion people. The country’s population is massive, thus the risk of catching the virus is statistically thin. To be precise: risk, or what is called ‘cumulative incidence’ in epidemiology, means the number of new cases of a disease over a period of time divided over the number of people *free of the disease* at the beginning of the period of time. Thus, if one considers the total number of cases of COVID-19 in China to this date as ‘new cases’ and people at risk as the total population, the risk of contracting the virus since cases have been recorded is about .00044, or .04%. Keep in mind, though, this is over the period of time and it is assumed that the denominator are people free of the disease, when it is highly likely there are people who were not. The point here, is that risk of contracting the virus in China over the period of the outbreak is very low, and probably much smaller considering large populations of untested individuals. The same calculations can be applied to every country currently experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak. In Italy, for example, risk of contracting the virus is .0011, or .11%. This is since cases have been recorded up until the time of this writing and is probably lower due to the number of those undiagnosed.

Much has been said among public health officials and in media about COVID-19’s “deadly” case fatality rate (CFR) of 2-3.4%. This would mean that if everyone in the entire world were infected with COVID-19, at worst-case scenario, two percent of the population would be wiped out, or 3.5% if the actual CFR were the latter. A CFR of even 2% would be relatively high for a pandemic-level disease. A CFR (also called case fatality ratio or, morbidly, the “death rate”⁴) as an indicator of virulence is “the proportion of persons with a particular condition who die from that condition. The denominator is the number of persons with the condition; the numerator is the number of cause-specific deaths among those persons.”⁵ Even though the CFR can be estimated given the numbers of people who have died among those diagnosed, an accurate case fatality rate, or the chance that a person will die of a particular disease, cannot really be known until an outbreak is over, because only at that point can we estimate how many people have had the disease. In fact, it is thought by many disease scientists that the actual CFR of COVID-19 is much lower than 2-3.4%. This is because of lack of testing leading to large numbers of undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, or asymptomatic people. The crude CFR is obtained through simply dividing the number of deaths by the current documented cases.

South Korea provides an interesting example relevant to the argument for why case fatality rates are not reliable as ways to predict the virulence of a pathogen in the midst of an outbreak, so that COVID-19 might not be as deadly as it seems. This is something that has been said before yet is drowned in histrionic doomsday media coverage and disease containment actions that position COVID-19 as a plague of biblical proportions. South Korea has some of the highest number of COVID-19 infections in Asia outside of China. Since the virus appeared in early February, over 9000 people have officially contracted COVID-19, with well under 150 deaths. The country thus has a low CFR, which can probably be attributed to aggressive testing efforts. One reason why CFRs tend to be high until an outbreak is over is mis- or underdiagnoses of a disease. Accurate identification of a cause of infection makes the denominator of the fraction bigger—thereby making the calculation smaller, to put it in the simplest of terms. The more people diagnosed with a disease, the better. Korea has some of the highest rates of COVID-19 testing in the world. Therefore, officials are able to get a more accurate picture of who actually is infected with the virus when assertive screening efforts are enacted.⁶ There are other interesting clues rough case fatality rates by country can provide us about who COVID-19 likes to kill—or not. Germany currently has a good number of cases at diagnosis, a relatively high number of cases, and a low number of deaths. Who has died as a result of the virus in Germany? Again, most are over 75 but I could not, at this point, find much information. I also could not find data about German testing practices and data. It is unclear at this time as to why Germany has such a small CFR. However, isn’t it at the very least worth exploring and talking about?

What is being talked about, however, is Italy and even Spain, as portents for what is to come for the United States. Currently, the very rough CFR rate for the US is 1.29. Italy has more cases than the US, but its CFR is leaps and bounds higher at 9.85%. Spain, which, for now, is under the States in diagnosed infected, is catching up with Italy, with a CFR of 7.04%. Yikes! Seems pretty scary and leads us to think that we are all on a path not unlike Gwyneth Paltrow’s role in the movie *Contagion* as patient zero for a pandemic originating from a deadly chicken dinner she ate as a guest in China. Will we be like Spain and Italy? No. Don’t start burning your \$75 Paltrow vagina-scented candles for your doomsday party yet, folks. There is a reason for this difference, and it is linked to the ‘graying of Europe.’ Southern Europe was home to a recent gigantic wave of older Europeans who migrated south. A recent article in an academic journal, the *Gerontologist*, reported in 2012 that Spain’s population of 65 and older was 8,221,047.⁷ These numbers are similar for Italy, and to a lesser extent for France. This is one of the reasons why Italy and Spain have really high death rates, compounded with issues such as high smoking and population densities.

The sociocultural considerations of infectious disease risk are vastly neglected in predominant discourses about the pandemic. I cannot underscore the importance of the following statement, so let me bold and italicize it for you, sociocultural factors are incredibly important in considering which areas are at risk for outbreaks and thus higher clusters of morbidity and mortality related to COVID-19. In the United States, for example, the initial outbreak occurred in Washington State at an elder-care facility. Why? Because we shove our elders into group settings with a bunch of other infirm old people. So it was easy for the virus to circulate and kill a bunch of old people. Another example: While the current epicenter of outbreaks is New York – which makes sense given its density and global flows of people, New Orleans is probably most at-risk for a high mortality explosion, albeit on a smaller scale than southern Europe. First, because of high rates of COVID infections due to the recent Mardi Gras and the descent upon the city of millions of party-time revelers. That is simple epidemiology. Second, and equally important is a set of unique sociocultural factors. New Orleans is city shaped by a history of systemic racism – it is a poor city, has an abysmal healthcare system, pretty bad health indicators, and very vulnerable residents.

The collection of actions and headlines focused on COVID-19 have not sought to engage directly with the true vulnerabilities regarding age and co-morbidities exposed by the virus. Rather, they are obsessive discourses of panic, death, and uncertainty that open their arms to a viral apocalypse. The unfortunately named coronavirus is crisis business-as-usual but in hyper fashion. That the United States Ebola situation of 2014 foreshadowed what is now happening is no surprise to me, as I have been studying the former for the past six years. Ebola never actually materialized as a crisis, because in

the US that virus was really hard to catch, unless people vomited into each other's mouths. Nonetheless, it evoked a fear similar to the one on view in the current situation. In this vein, all the words spent gasping over volatile global markets, lockdowns, and quarantines, prioritize a future of isolation, stuck in our houses, drowning in stockpiles of toilet paper – 'together, yet alone' as encapsulated in yet another noxious slogan in an attempt to unite our pain. Unprecedented actions have been undertaken in an attempt to control the movement of the virus. They will not work that well. COVID-19 is already here. It has been for some time. We are all going to die, yes, but most of us more youthful Americans, probably not from the coronavirus.

We are not using the body of interdisciplinary science, including the social sciences and humanities, to understand how to deal with this virus in a meaningful way. Instead, we are left with a blanket of performative containment measures, half-baked suppositions masquerading as truth, and downright conspiracy theories. These are propagated by a band of keystone cops ranging from trigger-happy administrators and other higher ups canceling this and that, or by whichever new-found public health expert is expounding on their theories on the news or on social media, making the past two months an almost insufferable shitshow of 24/7 pandemic hysteria. This is after we spent the first part of the outbreak making fun of Chinese people for their "weird" eating habits. We then begin to fear the scratch in the back of our throats is a sign of doom to come. This social paranoia extends beyond bodies and our responses become insidious; the taking away of freedoms becomes excusable. At the same time, we are neglecting

the protection of probable victims while performing disease containment, beyond posting on Facebook how "we should take this virus seriously because while it might not make me sick, it could make someone I care about sick." Why didn't you care about this when my friend's 4-year old kid died from flu last year, Becky? You could have given it to him.

Political scientist Mark Neocleous argues, "It is often said that security is the gift of the state; perhaps we need to return that gift." Our dual need for total security and for crisis is much stronger than our relationship with facts. We are in the grip of the power of fear. Again, Neocleous: "security and oppression are two sides of the same coin." We are welcoming participants in our own sort of oppression. COVID-19 is just one more example of how we are, at times, much more horrific than this virus. I make this argument for two reasons.

First, we are complicit in an almost complete and very rapid willingness to forego liberty for the pretense of security. It has been breath taking to witness how quickly people are willing to forego the illusion of freedom (I do believe to a certain extent the idea of freedom is a gradation of illusion depending on your socio-economic-demographic place in the world) for safety from this virus. The measures enacted by no means guarantees safety from the virus, as much as they are a performance of it. Those who will truly suffer are the elderly and infirm; they are the ones left out of the rhetorics of 'social distancing' it is also they who cannot afford the luxury to take time off or simply just 'work from home.' Public health experts and policy makers have the power and resources to make scientifically sound and smart decisions about how to deal

with this virus in a way that makes sense given what we know. But they will not. This is already certain. They have given into fear because it is much more powerful than the facts I have spouted here.

Second, we have elevated this virus to an existential threat to the neglect of what has killed us routinely. This is also more powerful than facts. While COVID-19 sends about 130 people to the grave a day, globally, cancer kills over 1600 people in the US a day alone. For heart disease, the number one cause of death for Americans, it is over 1700 people a day. Influenza, an oft made comparison to COVID-19 that has provoked the ire of many, particularly in light of recent asinine comments by Donald Trump, is actually a relevant comparison. Influenza is an infectious disease that is consistently the 8th killer of Americans every year for at least 50 decades. No, COVID-19 is not just like the flu, especially given how it will tax our already abysmal healthcare system in so called 'hotspots' like New York City. The novel coronavirus could have a higher CFR than flu, if the 2-3.4% or even more modest estimations stand. But we don't know this. Influenza is caused by many different viruses, all with varying case fatality rates. The reason why I mention flu is not to suggest that it is worse than COVID-19, although the CDC estimates flu has killed 16,000 Americans as of the end of February 2020.⁸ I bring it up because, for the most part, we don't give a crap about flu even though it kills a ton of us each year. The same goes for chronic disease. Also, suicide. And do not forget driving cars. Or our family members. They kill us too. Yet again, a virus rolls in from a foreign country and we turn our heads. We listen. Just like we did with Ebola, or SARS, or H1N1, or Zika... the list

goes on... I mention flu for the cognitive dissonance of collective attention. Lives stolen, on ventilators, or you whose blood pulses with replicating virus either now, or in the future. You have our attention. The ghosts of the dead from neglected ailments probably needed it too.

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Life Comes At You Fast

BY JASON E. SMITH

On March 3, a full two weeks before its scheduled meeting on March 17-18, the Federal Reserve announced a surprise interest rate cut of half a percent, down to 1.25 percent. It was the first emergency rate cut since October 2008, in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. The markets were caught off-guard, and far from reassured. Equities indexes tumbled in response, and have continued to do so ever since, at a rate more precipitous than 2008, even. Just over two weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, the Fed slashed rates still again, essentially setting them at the zero lower bound. Once again, the move triggered a massive sell-off the following day, as the Dow plunged almost 13 percent in a single session. As I write this, the Dow has lost almost a third of the "value" it had at recent all-time highs. The bottom is nowhere in sight. As recently as March 16, China gave the world the first glimpse of what happens to a functioning economy during a severe public health crisis. In January and

February, industrial production was down 14 percent; retail sales, 21. Analysts summed up the findings: "devastating." The worst is yet to come. As the prospect of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of coronavirus-related deaths dawns on American politicians, many have begun to use the term "depression" to describe the anticipated economic fallout, as entire sectors shut down and tens of millions of workers are let go.

Given this dire and ongoing deterioration of the situation on the public health and economic fronts, it makes perfect sense that the stunning and definitive defeat of the Bernie Sanders campaign has been demoted to an afterthought for most, as actual historical events have upstaged the carefully plotted drama of the primary season. As the saying goes, life comes at you fast. The Sanders campaign will continue to fade in interest and importance as people's lives and livelihoods are put at risk. Who knows where we'll be in a month? Chance would have it that Fed Chairman Jerome Powell's rate cut would happen on and overshadow

the most important day of the Democratic primary, March 3, when Sanders's fate was sealed. Biden's earlier commanding performance in South Carolina was the writing on the wall, but Super Tuesday, the fatal blow. (Michigan? The nail in the coffin.) Politics, like American football, is a game of inches. The arcane machinations of electoral politics provide endless opportunity to play "What if?" (What if the Iowa caucus results hadn't been bungled? What if Warren had dropped out and endorsed Sanders before March 3?, and so on.) One thing is for certain, however: the Sanders campaign is finished, for good. The millions of voters who looked to him for direction, and as a transformative force of the American scene, will have to look elsewhere. Most likely, in the mirror.

In fact, the Sanders campaign had any number of advantages in the primary contest. It was much better-funded than other campaigns, with a broad base of donors no other candidate could match; it ran a well-organized, innovative campaign that took advantage of their candidate's particular appeal¹; it was able to mobilize an enormous and highly energized army of volunteers to canvas and phone bank across the nation; it demonstrated unprecedented strength

among young and Latino voters. Sanders's persona is also unusually compelling and charismatic. Despite having held public office for the past four decades, he could credibly present himself as an outsider, even an activist, something other than a political hack. Above all, the campaign had one decisive edge over all others: having never stopped campaigning after 2016, Sanders had a four-year head start to develop his fundraising networks, refine and expand its organizational structure, win over voting blocs that stayed away in 2016, and add new wrinkles to its platform (most dramatically, the so-called Green New Deal). It didn't matter. By midnight, March 3, the campaign had been bested by easily the worst candidate on the field in recent memory. Biden had never won a primary and, after stinging defeats in early caucuses and primaries, was a dead man walking. He couldn't raise money and his organization was laughable. A train wreck on the microphone and an irrepressible plagiarist and groper—no one took the longtime also-ran seriously. And yet, by the time the Michigan primary results came in, Biden was the favorite among Black voters by a margin of 40 percent—a blowout—and he had the nomination in the bag. A strange

turn of events for the party of Hillary Clinton, and the era of #MeToo.

I have no interest, in these few lines, in criticizing the Sanders campaign itself or figuring out “what went wrong.” My intention is not to criticize those who participated in the campaign. (My wife and 12-year-old son both canvassed and phone-banked for Sanders; I did not.) My concerns are more narrow, even parochial. I want to look briefly at how the “socialist” left in the US has approached this campaign, and where it is likely to go from here. The gravity of the situation currently unfolding has, understandably, left little room for leftists involved in the Sanders campaign to digest just how devastating a loss this was. Despite the advantages he brought into the 2020 campaign, the defeat this time around was more cut-and-dried than four years ago, against a much weaker adversary. Socialists do not yet seem ready to reckon with these results. Now is the time of palliatives, of moral victories and consolation prizes. “We won the war of ideas,” one hears in places; “five million people voted for socialism,” in others. In retrospect, the electoral process, which has consumed so much energy and time over the past four years, has been transformed into an opportunity for the promotion of a social democratic program, the Democratic Party primary a platform to win hearts and minds.² The losses at the polls can be chalked up, these voices suggest, to the uneven development of the socialist insurgency, the lag between winning over millions to a platform featuring bold ideas like Medicare for All, debt forgiveness, and a wealth tax on the richest Americans, and the dismal science of convincing voters, district-by-district, to pull the appropriate lever. It is nevertheless the case that Sanders’s defeat this time around means more than the end of his campaign. After four years in which the electoral process has been the only game in town for the socialist left, there is no plausible argument for continuing down the same path. The end of the Sanders campaign also means the demise of this current’s overarching political strategy, which has relied almost exclusively on the prospect of a Sanders nomination as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, and eventual victory over Trump, to bring about its social democratic vision (national health insurance, large-scale Keynesian fiscal initiatives, a modest wealth redistribution program, and so on). After Corbyn, after Sanders, the electoral path to 21st-century social democracy is dead. If we have at most a decade, as Daniel Denvir recently wrote, “to stave off climate catastrophe,” we certainly do not have four years to waste waiting for the next election cycle.³

This rhetorical device that casts the Sanders campaign in the rearview mirror, as a socialist crashing of the electoral stage—part of a broader, longer-term offensive to reshape common sense—was anticipated all along, in fact, by a slightly different hedging technique used by socialists during the campaign itself. Knowing full well that Sanders’s path to victory was narrow at best, and with a healthy if apparently repressed distrust in the electoral process to begin with, this discursive stratagem had the function of situating the self-identified

socialists backing Bernie both in and outside the political process, so as to have it both ways. The rhetoric took, in turn, two slightly different forms. Throughout the campaign, it was not unusual to hear, in the casual give-and-take within the socialist milieu, and especially on social media, leftists argue that the “grassroots” dynamism of the campaign, its micro-donations, newly mobilized voters, and wave of enthusiastic volunteers was testimony to the fact that Sanderism, broadly speaking, was not merely an electoral campaign but *a mass movement* whose objectives extended well beyond the circumscribed aim of winning political office. Typical in this regard was this claim made by one prominent Sanders advocate as recently as March 2, a day before Super Tuesday: “The movement that’s organized around Bernie Sanders right now is unlike anything that’s been seen in modern electoral history...We have a mass...movement to... elect [Sanders].”⁴ This claim was shadowed, however, by another, more sophisticated theory advanced by many of the campaign’s most visible supporters online, but also by the campaign itself. Since the social and political landscape in the US—in contrast with, say, France (the *Gilets Jaunes*) or Hong Kong (the anti-extradition movement)—has produced no sizable mass movements in recent years, it would take the election of Sanders to the presidency to launch them. In a notable interview at a high point in the campaign, Sanders himself claimed that as president he would not simply be commander-in-chief, head of the state apparatus, but more importantly, “organizer-in-chief,” able to call into being broad-based social movements that would take to the streets to pressure recalcitrant legislators from both parties to line up behind his sweeping policy reforms.⁵ This interpretation of the campaign does not claim that the electoral machine Sanders has put in place is itself a mass movement; it argues instead that a successful political campaign alone will provide the impetus and energy required for the rebirth of a new wave of mass struggles, picking up from where the Occupy movement, or Black Lives Matter, left off, though now reoriented toward the implementation of Sanders’s agenda. In a January article published in *In These Times*, Daniel Denvir imagines a Sanders presidency whose governing effectiveness would rely on a positive “feedback” loop between mass movements and what he calls, following Frances Fox Piven, a Sanders-aligned “electoral bloc.” The vision here is of a friction-less dynamic in which the forms of power wielded by movements and the state mutually reinforce and replenish one another, as they take on a host of enemies across American society (fossil fuel companies, say) and within the state itself (the non-Sanders-aligned electoral bloc: i.e. almost everyone outside a few junior congresswomen).⁶ A similar scenario is put forth by Meagan Day, whom I cited above as equating the Sanders fine-tuned political apparatus with a broad-based mass movement. In a piece written a year ago, before the primary season got underway, Day, like Denvir, notes that Sanders both “values extra-parliamentary politics on principle” and “insist[s] that extra-parliamentary movements are the key to political

success.” But where Denvir’s friction-less feedback loop assumes the existence of both a Sanders presidency and autonomous mass movements, Day assumes the risk of predicting that these mass movements will not emerge on their own, with their own motivations and objectives, but will have to be convoked by the organizer-in-chief who, with his enormous personal charisma, can call them into existence. The inherent tensions lurking in this claim are highlighted by Day’s own formulation, as when she envisions a head of the US state who “call[s] for mass political activity *from below*.”⁷ The title of Day’s piece, “Bernie Sanders Wants You to Fight,” encapsulates a line of thinking running through these pieces, which are ubiquitous on the pro-Sanders socialist left, not to mention endorsed by Sanders himself. Rather than having confidence in the “masses” to take up their own fight, on their own terms, this vision imagines them waiting to be called into action; rather than imagining these movements putting forth their own objectives and demands, some of which might come into conflict with Sanders’s program, these arguments anticipate these movements’ own, autonomous demands obediently subordinated to the initiatives of the US state, or at the very least the head of its executive branch. Any inkling that these movements might have a politics of their own, one at times at odds with the social-democratic platform put forth by Sanders, and that would disturb the positive feedback loops between state and movement this current within the socialist left takes for granted, is left unstated.

This pattern of thought, which assimilates divergent categories of political experience, or folds them into a seamless continuity by subjecting mass movements to the state or its benevolent leader, finds its blueprint or parallel in similar approaches to the Corbyn campaign in the UK. In an article published as far back as March 2016, some months after Corbyn was unexpectedly elected Labour leader, Hilary Wainwright, editor of *Red Pepper* magazine and well-known socialist feminist, published a programmatic essay, “The Making of Jeremy Corbyn,” which predicated his success on what she rightly called a “revers[al] of the traditional logic of electoral politics.” Corbyn’s politics are a “new politics” insofar as they depend not on the translation, in political and statist terms, of movement demands, but instead on “using the platform of the state to empower popular forces.”⁸ Wainwright’s claim regarding the newness of Corbyn’s politics echoed the founding manifesto of Momentum, a self-styled “grass-roots” organization established in the aftermath of Corbyn’s ascension to Labour leader, whose full title was “Momentum: A New Kind of Politics.” The group’s name explicitly likens its activity to a movement rather than a political organization; its clear organizational separation from the Labour Party underlines its desire to “build grassroots power now” and develop new forms of “participatory democracy,” of the kind practiced by mass movements (and not, precisely, by political parties).⁹ The manifesto even summons the image of 19th-century anarchism, promising to conduct itself according to the “the principle of

mutual aid, empathy and collective action.” But the ultimate purpose of this cultivated grassroots power is, according to the manifesto’s authors, to “help Labour become the transformative governing party of the 21st century.” On the one hand, its authors “want, in particular, to encourage a diverse range of people to join the Labour Party”; on the other hand, they want to cultivate “a new politics of bottom-up, participatory democracy.” They are straightforward about the source of this new politics: “Corbyn put forward a new politics of bottom-up, participatory democracy.” “Corbyn,” they conclude, “*personally* and politically, represented something different.” It is not simply that he put forward a new politics, around which a proper movement might be formed. He alone, it is implied, could bring about this new politics, whose horizon remains, however, a new Labour party, primed for state power.¹⁰

In a certain sense, the confusions and reversals I am tracking here have still deeper roots, extending as far back as the 1984 Jesse Jackson campaign for the Democratic nomination (he would lose, of course, to Democratic party insider and standard-bearer, Walter Mondale.) The Jackson campaign enlisted any number of veterans of the mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s who, as those movements broke apart and decomposed, found different avenues for their politics (others found academia, non-profits, the Green movement, and so on). Those who came out of the women’s and Black power movements, for example, increasingly gravitated around electoral campaigns and, as one observer noted at the time, “justified this tactic either by claiming to use these campaigns to organize mass struggles, or simply by construing the campaigns themselves as mass movements.”¹¹ To be sure, earlier 20th-century mass movements, first in the 1930s, then in the 1960s, brought about significant political reforms in their aftermath. But these reforms, as Robert Brenner has argued, were *forced* upon Democratic Party politicians by means of “mass direct action” by the working class, in an uncertain process of translation required by the structural incompatibility between the types of activities undertaken by movements and the range of action available to elected officials working within the framework of state power. If the Sanders campaign echoes the 1984 Jackson campaign, at least in the way some socialists understand their own participation in it, the differences are just as stark. After all, the Sanders campaign follows upon a decade in which a rebirth of mass movements indeed took place, but only on a modest scale, relative to what occurred in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, or even in Greece and Spain during and after the 2011 squares movement. Indeed, one of the defining features of the Sanders campaign, beginning as far back as late 2015, is that its prominence coincides with the receding of the movements that occurred in the first half of the decade, in rapid if uncertain succession: emblematically, the Occupy movement, then Black Lives Matter. It could be that the rise of Sanderism just after the withering away of those earlier movements is what makes the connection, in the minds of many, between the movements and his campaign so

vivid, so strong. But if it is argued as much by Sanders himself as his advocates that the success of a Sanders presidency would have depended on his being able to “call for mass political activity from below,” it can also be wagered that the fortunes of his campaigns in 2016 and 2020 depended on the *absence* of vibrant mass movements from the American scene; even worse, that the enormous resources mobilized for the campaign siphoned off precious resources—money, time, energy, morale—that could have been used more effectively elsewhere, like mass organizing in communities, in workplaces and in the streets.

There is an irreducible gap or hiatus between the different and often conflicting forms of power exercised by mass movements—mass direct action—and power set in motion by the state. So, too, a world of difference between throwing oneself into a popular mobilization and attempting to win a state-sanctioned election. The latter’s constraints are clear enough: win over 51 percent of voters, by any means necessary, and get them to the polls. The logic of mass movements is shaped by the fact that, though they bring thousands and even millions of people into struggle, they are almost always minoritarian in nature, at least for most of their often short lives. Their fundamental principle and ethos is the refusal of delegation or representation—no one will call them into being—and, consequently, the activation of the power people have when they act collectively to take their lives into their own hands. There is a very good reason that no mass movement has emerged that advocates for this or that feature of Sanders’s social-democratic political program, like Medicare for All or a “Green New Deal.” The

demands put forth by mass movements are most often negative, even destructive, in nature. They do not propose legislation, or enter into the details of policy. They call, instead, for the immediate end of this or that feature of the prevailing order: the end of Jim Crow and segregation, the abolition of prisons and the police, US forces out of Vietnam, the withdrawal of an extradition bill. Because mass movements are *not organized*—they swarm with competing organizations, as well as informal groupings and tendencies—their unity can only be won by the establishment of a clear and unequivocal objective, often formalized in a simple slogan: “the people want the regime to fall,” “I can’t breathe,” “if we burn, you burn with us.” Their strategic and theoretical poverty is compensated for by extraordinary innovations in tactics, which easily spread across geographic distance and national or cultural divisions. Above all, mass movements find themselves confronted with the necessity to test their strength against the forces of the state; they operate, by their very nature, on the edges of legality, and will be challenged with state violence at some point in their development.

All of these features distinguish the logic of mass movements from the mechanics of electoral politics. Thinking the relation between them requires keeping them separate, and posing the question of their translation. This translation is always uncertain. Far from meshing together in a seamless continuity, or mutually reinforcing one another in friction-less feedback, socialists in the US (and the UK) will have to start again, this time from the structural and radical incompatibility or contradiction between these two forms of power. With the defeat of Sanders (and Corbyn), and with the

necessary historical and strategic considerations that such defeats compel, they will most likely have to renounce the assumptions that permitted their participation in these failed electoral campaigns to begin with. These campaigns did not bring into being a “new politics,” one that reversed the order of historical effectivity, subordinating movements initiated by broad masses of people to the call and command of elected politicians. Reforms brought about in the political sphere will be imposed on the state by years and even decades of confrontations with movements that are willing to fight for themselves: at their own initiative, for objectives they themselves formulate. The current course of events, disturbing as it is, will provide ample opportunity for such efforts.

1. Media stories on the Sanders campaign emphasized, for example, its use of so-called “distributed organizing.” See, for example, Ryan Grim, “How Bernie Sanders Accidentally Built a Groundbreaking Organizing Movement,” *The Intercept*, May 28, 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2019/05/28/bernie-sanders-accidental-organizing-movement-book/>
2. In the early years of Social Democracy, of course, elections were treated solely as platforms to promote socialist ideas. Social Democratic parties understood themselves as “propaganda parties,” “whose main objective [was] the dissemination of information about Social Democracy...since participation in elections is a good vehicle for agitation, the Congress recommends participation.” Cf. Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 9. This book’s first chapter is a devastating historical account of social democracy in power.
3. Daniel Denvir, “What a Bernie Sanders Presidency would look like,” *In These Times*, January 7, 2020.
4. “The Future of Left Politics: An Interview with Meagan Day,” *Harvard Political Review*, March 2, 2020.
5. See the interview Sanders gave, alongside Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to *The Intercept*, published October 20, 2019: <https://theintercept.com/2019/10/20/bernie-sanders-ocasio-cortez-rally-interview/>
6. “What a Bernie Sanders Presidency would look like.” The article is tantalizingly subtitled “the possibilities of an ‘organizer-in-chief.’”
7. Meagan Day, “Bernie Sanders Wants You to Fight,” *Jacobin*, March 12, 2019. My emphasis.
8. Hilary Wainwright, “The Making of Jeremy Corbyn,” *Jacobin*, March 9, 2016.
9. Wainwright herself, in conversation with *The Economist*, asserted (in the magazine’s paraphrase) that “Momentum is more like an organism than a machine: it grows from the bottom up and constantly evolves in new directions.” “An evening with Momentum at the Labour Party conference.” September 26, 2017; <https://www.economist.com/bagehots-notebook/2017/09/26/an-evening-with-momentum-at-the-labour-party-conference>
10. “Momentum, a new kind of politics,” <http://www.renewal.org.uk/articles/momentum-a-new-kind-of-politics>. To be clear, I am not arguing that this is in fact what Momentum was, or how it conducted itself per se. I am simply noting the claims made for it by the manifesto’s authors, Adam Klug, Emma Rees, and James Schneider.
11. Robert Brenner, “The Paradox of Social Democracy: The American Case,” first published in 1985. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2508-the-paradox-of-social-democracy-the-american-case-part-one>

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A Day without Women: the Rise of “the Purple Tide” in Mexico

BY DAVID J. SCHMIDT

“Es más probable que me mate un hombre a que me mate el coronavirus.”

“It’s more likely that I’ll be killed by a man than by the coronavirus.”

—protestor’s sign at the women’s march

This is the season when the jacaranda trees bloom in Mexico City. Blossoms fill their elegant frames, soft purple flowers covering the curves of upwardly extended branches. It is also the season of International Women’s Day.

Here in the Mexican capital, March 8 saw over 80,000 women fill the length of downtown Reforma Avenue. They donned purple shirts, bandanas, and flags, the symbolic color of the women’s movement that, coincidentally, matched the blooming jacarandas. Some have coined this mass movement “The Purple Tide.” They came

out in droves—coronavirus concerns be damned. These women were not just marching for equal pay or greater government representation: they were marching for their lives. The protest was focused on a nationwide epidemic of femicides—the murder of women based on their gender—with calls for a nationwide strike the following day. It would be *un día sin mujeres*: a day without women.

My girlfriend and I took our places at the rear of the march, having heard that the vanguard was reserved exclusively for women. We had also read online posts by some of the most militant groups, threatening violence against any men who took photographs or “looked suspicious.” Their threats were not empty; misogynists have been known to harass such protests.

From where we stood, the mood was celebratory and friendly. The crowd was made up of women, teenagers, and young

girls, of all walks of life. They carried signs that expressed indignation, sadness, rage, in creative and poetic terms:

*If you touch one of us, you touch all of us.
Don’t call it “homicide.” It’s femicide.
Neither women nor land should be
subjected to your dreams of conquest.*

Similar messages had been spray-painted on public buildings, written on signs taped to the Senate chambers on Reforma. The most common phrase was simple and to the point: *NOS ESTÁN MATANDO*. “They’re killing us.” Several public gardens on the avenue had been transformed into makeshift “cemeteries,” in memoriam of the deceased.

I wasn’t the only man there; a healthy scattering of others had shown up in support. They pushed strollers and carried their children on their shoulders, sporting purple bandanas in solidarity with their significant others. One teenager marched with his girlfriend, holding a sign that read: *A man who hits a woman is no man at all.*

As we reached a major traffic circle on Reforma, the central fountain sprayed a massive pink plume into the sky. Protesters had poured colored dye into the water. The abstract equine statue known as *El Caballito* had been graffitied with messages of outrage, while nearby buildings were covered

with posters of well-known politicians and businessmen who have mistreated women. Even the “Apostle” Naasón Joaquín García—leader of the Luz del Mundo cult—was depicted, with a mention of the child rape and human trafficking charges he is facing in Los Angeles.

Security for the march was provided almost exclusively by women: 2,760 female officers with the Atenea division of the Mexico City Police. Both the city and federal governments made every effort to avoid confrontations and protect the participants. Several photos emerged of activists hugging the female officers.

The great crowd of women filled the city, eventually reaching the central plaza known as the Zócalo, framed by the Metropolitan Cathedral and the National Presidential Palace. Activists spray-painted, on the ground of the Zócalo, the names of all the women murdered between 2016 and 2019. In aerial footage, the countless purple shirts took the form of a massive jacaranda tree spreading its branches down the main arteries of the city. One young woman marching next to us carried a handmade sign that read: *This isn’t a ‘purple tide.’ It’s a tsunami.*

Many participants also wore green bandanas, a symbol of the fight to legalize abortion. Some protesters had climbed



At the Caballito monument on Reforma Avenue, activists dyed the waters of the fountain pink. Photo: David Schmidt.



Modified Mexican flag: red replaced with purple. Photo: David Schmidt.



"Rapistas." Graffiti and posters of well-known men accused of violence against women. Photo: David Schmidt.



Several monuments and statues were adorned with purple and green bandanas. Photo: David Schmidt.

iron statues to tie green bandanas around the necks of national heroes; days after the event, the bandanas were still there. Others marched in black, in mourning for the women whose lives were tragically cut short. One student stood on a platform in the Zócalo holding a flag, half purple and half black, bearing the message: *We are fighting today so we won't die tomorrow.*

When we heard a massive cry several blocks ahead of us, I craned my neck to see if any radical anarchists were coming our way. My girlfriend noticed the cautious look on my face. "You know," I told her, "I feel safer with you here next to me."

She chuckled, and we recalled countless moments when the roles had been reversed: How many times had we walked together down a dark alley, late at night, a place she wouldn't have felt safe in alone?

"But that's just the point of all this, isn't it?" she said. "Nobody should have to protect anyone. Nobody should have to be afraid."

"Somos las nietas de todas las brujas que nunca pudieron quemar."

"We are the granddaughters of all the witches you never managed to burn."

—protestor's sign

Women make up 51 percent of the world's population, but are 70 percent of the world's poor. Women do 66 percent of the work on our planet and produce 50 percent of our food, but receive 11 percent of the world's income. They own less than 1 percent of our land.

March 8 has been a day of demonstrations for women's rights all over the world, since the early 20th century. Here in Mexico, the focus has been on the appalling numbers of women who have been kidnapped, disappeared, and murdered. In 2019 alone, 2,825 murders of women were reported; of these, 1,006 were officially classified as femicides. Since May 2019, however, only *four* femicides have gone to trial. 170 investigations opened by the National Attorney General's Office. Less than 1 percent of them go to trial. (*Desde mayo se ha vinculado a proceso sólo a 4 feminicidas*, Milenio, March 9, 2020.)

The epidemic of femicides has been attributed to myriad causes: social inequality, widespread corruption, and the culture of *machismo*. The increasingly mobile pool

of expendable female labor created by the *maquiladora* factory industry, serving the interests of foreign corporations. The massive flow of cash and guns from the U.S. that bolsters criminal organizations. One thing everyone can agree on—they are fed up with feeling afraid.

Last year saw several spontaneous protests, after a teenage girl reported that she was raped by four policemen. Outrage escalated with two well-publicized cases this February. During an argument with her intoxicated husband, 25 year old Ingrid Escamilla was stabbed to death. Her husband then chopped her body to pieces. Later that month, a seven year old girl named Fátima was brutally tortured and murdered in the south of Mexico City.

In addition to these recent horrors, other issues were mentioned by protesters. The green bandanas worn by many activists symbolized the limited access of many Mexican women to safe and legal abortions. While the procedure has been legal in Mexico City since 2007 and was legalized in Oaxaca State last year, other regions are more limited. In the States of Querétaro and Guanajuato, abortion is only permitted in the event of rape or accidental interruption of pregnancy. In fact, very few countries in Latin America have fully legalized it: Cuba, Uruguay, Guyana, French Guiana, and Puerto Rico. Meanwhile, in Mexico City, the abortion rate has been steadily decreasing since it was legalized. From 2014 to 2019, it went down by 29 percent.

Similar marches took place across Mexico, with a focus on the crimes against women in each location. In the southern state of Oaxaca, protesters called for justice for María Elena Ríos, a musician who was sprayed with acid by a former congressman last September. The perpetrator is still at large. In the coastal city of Veracruz, students held signs naming the nearly 40 women murdered this year alone. In Mexico State, adjacent to the capital city, protesters marched to the Nezahualcóyotl Municipal Government Building, outraged over the murders of numerous teenagers and young girls in their state.

Expressions of support and solidarity popped up all over Mexico City. Buildings were adorned with purple banners, including Frida Kahlo's historic home

in the trendy Coyoacán neighborhood. Newspapers printed headlines in purple ink. Government agencies and private enterprise rose to the occasion.

Noteworthy Mexican women expressed their solidarity from all over the world. "I'm so proud of my Mexican sisters for speaking out against femicide," actress Salma Hayek wrote on Instagram. Musician Lila Downs described her own experiences with racial and gender-based discrimination in an interview with Telemundo. "When I see the femicides taking place in my country, how the same problems that have existed for so many years still exist, how women are being 'disappeared' [...] It concerns me as a citizen, as a human being."

"Te prefiero violenta que violada"

"I'd rather see you get violent than get raped"

—protestor's sign

These protests come at a time of increasing awareness of violence against women. In this globalized age, the #MeToo movement has inspired women to raise their voices across the planet.

These protests come at a time of increasing awareness of violence against women. In this globalized age, the #MeToo movement has inspired women to raise their voices across the planet.

Mexico is certainly not the only country where femicide runs rampant. According to a study cited in *Psychology Today*, four women in the United States are murdered by their intimate partner every day. Author Myriam Gurba shared some other disturbing figures with me: one third of the women in

the United States will experience domestic violence at some point in their lives. Half of the women trapped in violent relationships are regularly raped by their partners. "And it's *common*," she said. "Much more common than 'serial killers.' And nobody gives a shit... Until the woman is dead. And then when she's dead, people will blame *her*... 'Why didn't she leave?' they'll ask. Because they hunt us when we leave! It's the public health crisis that nobody talks about, except for through euphemisms."

In 2018, U.S. activist Danielle Muscato asked women on Twitter to imagine if men were subject to a 9:00 p.m. curfew. If they knew that the streets would be free of men at night, what would they do? The responses were remarkably commonplace: Go for a walk in the woods. Jog with both earbuds in. Open the front door without fear. Drive without locking the car door. Enjoy the stars and the night air. In other words—things most men take for granted. It doesn't take a political radical to say that everyone should be able to do these things. Nobody should fear for their safety.

This Twitter thread was mentioned by author Colleen Oakes during a presenta-

tion of her novel, *The Black Coats*, at the Guadalajara International Book Fair last November. The young adult fiction novel describes a secret society of women who get revenge on abusive men. I had the privilege of translating the book into Spanish, and was present at its presentation in Guadalajara.

The story was a big hit with readers here in Mexico. Young readers, especially young women, connected deeply to it. “It feels like you wrote this book specifically for us,” one Mexico City student told Oakes.

“Somos la voz de las que ya no están”

“We are the voice of those women who are no longer here”

—protestor’s sign

The national women’s strike was called for the day after the march, inspired by a similar event in Iceland in 1975. Women invited each other to stay home from work and school and abstain from any economic transactions. I wondered, though: how many people would participate? I thought back to the “Day Without a Migrant” events we had organized years ago, back in California. While plenty of people attended the protests, many feared losing their job. Would intimidation and fear have the last word here?

My girlfriend had received official permission to stay home from work. As she vowed to not leave the house, I cooked her lunch before going about my business. I stepped outside into an eerie, dystopian scene: Mexico City, the largest city on earth, had turned into a ghost town.

The streets were free of their usual traffic, even during rush hour. The major commercial hubs of Reforma Avenue were inactive. The front cars of the subway and

the Metrobús, officially reserved for women, were nearly empty. Even inside the swanky, central shopping mall, Reforma 222, many stores were closed.

In stark contrast with the previous day’s euphoria, the city was conspicuously empty—more than on a Sunday, more than during Easter weekend. Unlike during the holidays, however, there was nothing celebratory or relaxing here. It felt somber, tragic, a dark shadow cast over the metropolis. The half-empty streets of Mexico City reminded me of an episode of the British sci-fi series *Black Mirror*: After a mass culling of the population, London becomes a somber shell of its former self.

Professionals and office workers were not the only women who participated in the national strike. Many working-class positions were empty as well: stalls in public markets, cafes, and restaurants were unattended. One male friend of mine went to his job at a government office. He reported that even the woman who runs a juice cart in front of his office was gone. “And that lady *never* misses work,” he said. “To look at her cart and not see her... It was really unsettling.” It was a somber reminder of how dark our world looks when half of us are missing from public life, a grave memorial to those women whose lives had been tragically cut short.

According to CIMAD, The Center of Research of Women in High-Level Positions,

the women participating in the strike represented 40 percent of Mexico’s personnel nationwide. Many employers were in favor of it. The Confederation of National Chambers of Commerce, Services, and Tourism (CONCANACO) made an official statement of solidarity. Journalist Daniela Malpica published a survey in *Milenio* on Monday, March 9; Of 598 women surveyed, from 28 states across Mexico, 56 percent said that their employers had promised to support them unconditionally. 16 percent more were asked to work from home, or they would be docked the day’s pay. Only 26 percent of employers were against it.

Despite the statements from chambers of commerce, the least amount of support came from private business. Most employers who supported the march, according to Malpica’s survey, were from the public sector—educational institutions and government organizations.

This is especially significant, considering that right wing groups have tried to manipulate the women’s movement into an attack on the current administration. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his center-left Morena Party have attracted the ire of conservative groups, many of which hoped to push an anti-government message onto the protest.

The protesters didn’t take the bait, though. This movement is so much bigger than any partisan political agenda. In fact,

several female legislators and government officials affiliated with the ruling Morena Party issued a statement of support for the protest, condemning “opportunistic” right-wing groups trying to piggyback onto it. “We will continue in the struggle, along with our women comrades, to turn Mexico into a place where we women can live freely and sovereignly,” the statement concluded. “We will do this from the seats of decision-making power in the government, and especially, from the streets.”

In the days since that great march, the entire city has felt softer, gentler. Maybe it’s my imagination, but I seem to notice more families walking together in the park, more fathers pushing strollers and taking their daughters by the hand on the subway. Beyond my own impressions, many analysts have declared this week a watershed moment in Mexico’s history, a new stage of the national consciousness. Thousands of voices have been heard as never before, demanding action. As the jacaranda trees continue to bloom, blanketing the city in a layer of soft purple blossoms, a new term for this season has arisen.

La Primavera Feminista: The Feminist Spring.

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Diary from a Genocide in the Making

BY MARGARET M. SEILER

I spent a week on the US/Mexico border in February with a grassroots group called Witness at the Border. It was my second trip this year, since we launched a daily vigil in Xeriscape Park in Brownsville, Texas, in mid-January. “Witnesses” from over 30 states and abroad have come to bear witness to the horror wrought by the current administration’s cruel immigration policies. A steady drumbeat of incomprehensibly racist policies keeps escalating. First, the travel (or Muslim) ban, then family separation, then children in cages, then “Remain in Mexico” (absurdly called the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP), and now an alphabet soup of stealth policies—PACR, HARP, ACA—that fast track the deportation of asylum seekers. As each new policy unfurls, quicker than the ACLU and other human rights groups can challenge them in court, another one pops up. Cruelty is the point.

“Witnessing is the subversive act of seeing what our government doesn’t want us to see: the cruel consequences of our policies, hidden behind fences and walls,” says immigration activist and Brooklynite Joshua

Rubin, founder of Witness at the Border. “We cannot stop what we cannot see.”

So I went to see with my own eyes the atrocity of asylum seekers fleeing violence—men, women, and children—forced by the MPP policy to live in a squalid encampment for the homeless in Matamoros, Mexico. Many others are scraping by all over the city, a city ruled by drug cartels and gangs, as dangerous as most in Syria, a city the US State Department advises Americans not to visit. I came to bear witness to the sham that is the “tent court” system. I came to see people whose only crime is running from danger, asking for refuge only to be loaded by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers onto airplanes, in shackles, deported to danger.

January 11: Justice at the Border

On my first day in Brownsville, I visited with other witnesses at Xeriscape Park, a small green space across the street from the Gateway International Bridge to Matamoros. What is witnessing? It’s holding up signs reading “Let Them Cross,” “Seeking Asylum is Legal,” “Love Has No Borders,” “Amor, No Odio. (Love, Not

Hate.)” It’s waving to passersby who honk their car horns and wave back. (Brownsville is about 90% Latino.) It’s nodding hello and greeting the many folks walking by on their way into Brownsville after crossing over the bridge from Matamoros: “*Buenos dias.*” Witnessing is observing, noticing, recording, Tweeting, posting on Facebook, visiting the tent courts or the airport—again, to observe, witness, record, and testify.

On my visit to a Brownsville “courtroom,” held in large white tents, I sat in the back with a few other observers on folding chairs. ICE officers led 15 migrants in, about two thirds men, one third women, and one 11-year-old girl. They filled the first two rows of the courtroom and waited patiently for the judge to show up on a large video screen in order to begin the proceedings. Each migrant has at least one, usually three calendar hearings, spaced weeks apart. They are asked if they’ve filled out their application for asylum completely and in English, if they’ve found an attorney, then they’re given another date to return. The judge was in a courtroom nearby in Harlingen with a prosecuting attorney from the Justice Department and a Spanish language translator. Visitors are only allowed into the calendar hearings—and they only opened to us after complaints in the press. The final stage is a merits hearing; in it, arguments of the case for and against removal are presented in order to determine whether asylum is granted or not—no

visitors are allowed. Of the 15 migrants in court that day only two had lawyers; one had a lawyer that was present and the other one had a lawyer calling in from Miami.

When you face your judge on a screen while they are in some faraway courtroom, the distance created between you and them is palpable. Can they see a tear or hear the tremor in a voice? Can they see a father rubbing his young daughter’s back as she quietly kicks her feet? Is this something deliberate to keep the proceedings impersonal and easier on the judge?

Back in the park, a lawyer waiting to go to court visited with us. “It’s Kafka on the border,” she said. “Asylum court is like traffic court, only it’s life or death.”

February 12: Migrant Persecution Protocols

We sat in front of a huge banner made by Miami-based artist Alessandra Mondolfi, that in bold red and black letters reads: MPP KILLS. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a young Latino man crossing the street from the bridge towards us, grinning ear to ear.

“MPP!” he shouted out, smiling and pointing at the banner. “*Si! No bueno, MPP... Muchas gracias!*” said Cat, a badass activist from near Austin. “MPP!!!” He said again, smiling from ear to ear with two thumbs up. Then we noticed his telltale gallon plastic bag filled with paperwork. Next thing I knew, Cat had leapt up and

wrapped the young man in a bear hug. Other friends were lining up to greet him.

“*Soy libre! Gane asilo*” (I’m free! I won asylum), he said. “*Bienvenidos!*” (Welcome!) we said.

We pieced together a bit of his story with our limited Spanish. All his family in Honduras had been murdered. His brother was waiting for him in the US while he’d been stuck in the Matamoros encampment for six months. Cat handed him a snack she had in her cooler, and we asked him what he needed. He asked for a phone to call his brother in Florida. We soon found out there were no flights left out of Brownsville that day. A kind volunteer with Team Brownsville, a local nonprofit that assists asylum seekers, escorted him to a shelter where he could shower, get a hot meal, and spend the night. We were overjoyed, but he was one of the lucky few; 0.1%. That’s what his chances of being awarded asylum were—0.1%. This young man had beaten the odds.

Over a year has passed since MPP was instituted in another Texas border city, El Paso, where all new policies are launched by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Now seven sites along the border, Nogales, Arizona; San Diego, California; and, all in Texas, Calexico, El Paso, Laredo, Brownsville, and Eagle Pass, enforce this draconian policy. When asylum seekers arrive at ports of entry, they present themselves to US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers to claim a “credible fear” of remaining in their home country. Instead of allowing them in and quickly moving them from detention facilities to sponsors or family members in the US while they wait for their court hearings, our officers say, “Go back. Wait in Mexico. Here’s a number and a date. See you in a couple months!”

As a result, encampments of homeless migrants have sprung up along the border. While there are shelters in Mexico, they are usually located deep inside these dangerous cities. Matamoros has been issued its harshest no-travel warning; a level 4 warning, like the ones in war torn Syria. Migrants in the shelters live far from the bridges connected to the US, where armed guards provide some semblance of safety. What’s more, how can it be expected of them to even be able to get to the bridge early on their court date when they must line up at four a.m., four hours in advance in order to make it to their 8 a.m. appointment, due to long wait lines? How would they even access American lawyers?, which they need. The lawyers know what could happen to them in Mexico, and even the most intrepid ones will not dare to travel deep into cities like Juarez and Matamoros. Because of this, asylum seekers prefer to remain close to the bridge, nestled together, offering each other some sense of community and safety. That is until nightfall, when they are prey for gang members who know the migrants have contacts in the US. Kidnapping them has become a cottage industry. Sexual violence and rape are common occurrences even among young children.

The Matamoros encampment, the largest of the makeshift refugee camps along the border, grew from a few dozen people last summer to over 2,500 recently. Walking



Matamoros encampment of asylum seekers. Photo: Allan Mestel.

through, I saw families washing their clothes in the river, rows upon rows of donated two-person tents in which whole families sleep, set on the dirt, some with donated mattresses and others in sleeping bags. I saw men and boys hauling cut wood to use with ingeniously devised stoves made from sticks and mud; some made with tubes of discarded washing machines. Tree limbs and chain link fences were dotted with drying laundry—squares of pink and blue and red hanging beside and above the mounds of tents.

What struck me most were the kids. They were everywhere. Girls with beautifully braided hair, toddlers caked in mud, boys kicking soccer balls on the dusty paths. There’s a charging station for phones where you can find a dozen people talking, and rows of porta-potties. Running water has finally been set up by volunteer groups; a small health clinic is run by Global Resource Management. A huge tent went up in late January for meals served by World Central Kitchen, assisted by the heroic Team Brownsville. There is no sense of danger. People are friendly. I’ve heard the camp is very orderly. Tasks are assigned, groups often arranged by nationality set themselves chores, such as filling up donated trash bags. Most are Hondurans, then Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and even some Venezuelans. Outside the camp, those with money, often the Cubans and Venezuelans, rent apartments and rooms. Or so I hear.

In March, the 9th Circuit in California ruled that MPP was illegal. For about 10 hours people rejoiced. Migrants flooded (not rushed!) the bridges, wondering what this all meant. The government requested a stay, which they got. Within a week, the Supreme Court had swooped in: MPP is here to stay, for now.

February 14: #DeportedToDanger

On Valentine’s Day, I awoke at 5 a.m. I dragged myself out of bed, leaving the scratchy, motel sheets behind. I hurried to meet my friends at the Brownsville International Airport by 6 a.m. About 30 “witnesses” were there to show some love to the Central American asylum seekers, only to see them shackled like career criminals, in 5-point restraints, being moved onto Swift Air planes by beefy Border Patrol officers in shiny yellow vests. The seekers were moms, dads, teenage girls with swinging black hair, even toddlers. What was most disturbing was the banality of it all. This was just another morning at the border: our government deporting the unwanted and ignored back to danger.

We gathered at the airport just before dawn. There was a chill in the air. It was dark. As we walked to the lot where four busloads full of human cargo sat, the sun came up. I saw palm trees silhouetted against a rosy sky dotted with gray clouds. Up beside the busses, the glass windows were tinted dark but, standing close, we held up red cardboard hearts that we’d made for Valentine’s Day. We saw people sitting inside and they could see us. We sang out, “*No estan solos!* (You are not alone!)” “*Te queremos!* (We love you!)”

“They were lifting up their shackles and showing us, so we knew what situation they were in,” said Camilo Pérez-Bustillo, a human rights attorney and researcher. “This is clearly a flagrant human rights violation. It’s a violation of international law because we’re having people sent back who are facing danger in their home countries, who are entitled to international protection, refuge and asylum, and the US is denying it.”

ICE officers huddled together, waiting to see if we’d leave. After about 30 minutes, they told us to move off private property. No one wanted to get arrested so we moved to

stand next to a large chain link fence where we watched the busses pull up next to white airplanes that seat about 150 people. ICE parked some trucks so our view was blocked but we still managed to see men, women, and children climb out of the busses. They lined up one by one, adults in shackles. An officer patted each one down, checked their hair and the inside of their mouths. Then the restrained asylum seekers awkwardly made their way up the stairs into the plane, heads bowed, the girls’ long hair flapping in the wind, flying back to danger.

Since November, over 800 Honduran and Salvadoran asylum seekers have been deported to Guatemala under the Trump administration’s Guatemalan Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA), according to journalist Jeff Abbott on Twitter. “The majority are women and children,” he wrote in early March, “only 14 have applied for asylum.” Trump signed a so-called “safe third country agreement” with Guatemala last July. The deal states that asylum seekers traveling through a third country to the US must first apply for asylum in the countries they pass through. If they arrive at the US-Mexico border without doing so, they are quickly deported to Guatemala—not their home country—by DHS. They are then given 72 hours to apply for asylum there, or leave the country.

Yael Schacher of Refugees International visited Casa del Migrante, a shelter in Guatemala City, in early February. She interviewed about 20 deportees from the US.

Many of the people were misled, they were led to believe that they would be transferred here and they could actually apply for asylum in the US *here*, which is not the case. Most of them don’t want to seek asylum here in Guatemala, which isn’t safe for them. It doesn’t have the capacity to process their applications. There’s no place for them to stay, no



Out of the Darkness, Port of Entry at Gateway International Bridge, 3/14/20. Photo: Tom Cartwright.

family here, but they also don't want to go back to their home country because most of them have fled violence and have protection needs and can't go back there. Some of them will, out of desperation. Others are trying to find any way possible to seek safe haven elsewhere.

The Honduran "safe third country agreement" is expected to start being implemented soon, if it hasn't been already. First we sent them to Guatemala, and now Honduras and El Salvador, under programs called PACR (Prompt Asylum Claim Review) and HARP (Humanitarian Asylum Review Process), which is for Mexicans. Witness at the Border has been going to the airport frequently, documenting with photographs and video these deportations.

[PACR and HARP] are the deployment of the most direct strategy yet for preventing people from getting relief in our country....We have reports that these unwilling passengers have not been advised of any rights they might have, and some arrived confused about where they are, hungry, and severely stressed....For our government, this has the advantage of being even further out of sight than the hellish border cities of Mexico.... Our government celebrates the lower numbers of the desperate here in the US, which they attribute to the reduced likelihood of people finding hope for themselves and their families in the country that has disowned the lamp lifted in New York Harbor,

wrote Josh Rubin on February 26, 2020.

January 12/February 13: Just Kids

It's Sunday morning in Matamoros: Escuelita de la Banqueta (School on the Sidewalk). I arrived at the Brownsville bus station at 8:15 to greet a slew of volunteers taking supplies out of Dr. Melba Lucio-Salazar's car and loading them in plastic

carts—donated books, crayons, drawing paper, pens, markers, pencils. We hauled them across the International Bridge—four quarters needed to cross, no passport on the way over, only back—and to the back of the encampment where we set up blue tarps on the dirt under large white, open air tents. I piled the supplies I'd brought: a picture book in Spanish, colored pencils, and paper. A local group teaches yoga to the kids—teens in one area, 8–12 year olds in the middle, and the littlest kids together. (We've heard there are 700 kids in the camp.) I squeeze onto a yoga mat somewhere in the middle and stretch out in a downward dog. Little boys tumble and roll over each other, laughing and wrestling.

When yoga ends, about an hour of instruction begins, interspersed with the ever-popular snack time. I have about 20 minutes with each group—8–10 year olds, 5–7 year olds, under 5s—moving from tarp to tarp. My first group swarms over me: "*Sientese, por favor!*" (Sit down, please!) It's chaotic, but fun. As a former teacher, I know when to instantly adapt a lesson to the group in front of me—no one speaks English so I drop my plan to introduce new English words. I read the picture book and ask questions in my mediocre Spanish: "*Que es su color favorito?*" (What is your favorite color?) "*Que es su animal favorito?*" (What is your favorite animal?)

"*Dibujalo!*" (Draw it!)

A boy about four years old, in a hoodie and flip flops, excitedly bops up and down next to me, grabbing the book I'm trying to read. I pat my lap and he climbs into it, my arm drawing him close. Better. Much later, as we're all leaving the tent, he sees me holding my phone, and gestures to me for a selfie. I snap a few and he grins as I show them to him. In February, I volunteer at the Sidewalk School for Children Asylum Seekers, started by a Texas native, Felicia Rangel-Samponaro, which is now run every weekday from 4:30–6:30. This month a new school is slated to begin, a school in a bus

run by the Yes We Can World Foundation. Meanwhile, bright kids of all ages—from toddlers to teens—are not getting the kind of quality education they could get if they lived in a stable community. If they could just go to their family and sponsors in the US while their parents proceed through the court system, which is their legal right.

February 15: The Wall

On Saturday, we marched and protested through the streets of Brownsville, waving our signs and banners against this injustice. Those who have worked on the frontlines with immigrants for years—Catholic nuns, RAICES, the Texas Civil Rights Project, ACLU-TX—have welcomed Witness at the Border. Our mission is political. While the vital humanitarian work of feeding, clothing, and providing medicine to needy asylum seekers is carried out daily by stalwart locals like Sergio Cordova, Michael Benavides, and Andrea Rudnick of Team Brownsville, our job is to MAKE SOME NOISE. We need outrage! Family separation is not over! Kids are still being tortured! Human rights abuses in our name, with our tax dollars!

So we stood next to the Wall, an enormous steel barrier up against the Rio Grande, and listened to Texans on the frontline of immigrant justice talk about their work. A leader of the Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe of Texas talked about colonialism and indigenous people's fight to preserve their land and their culture in the Rio Grande Valley, about the environmental degradation of the Wall, and the inhumanity of it all. We talked about the need for more witnesses, more national outrage.

Through the bars of the wall, across the blue-green river under a brilliant blue sky, not far away, we saw a family resting on the banks. We waved at each other across the invisible border. So close by.

February 16: The Kids, Part II

On Sunday, we held a memorial for the seven children who have died in Border Patrol custody (or one soon after) during the past year and a half:

Felipe Gómez Alonzo, 8, Guatemala
Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, 10, El Salvador
Juan de León Gutiérrez, 16, Guatemala
Mariee Juárez, 19 months, Guatemala
Jakelin Caal Maquin, 7, Guatemala
Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez, 16, Guatemala
Wilmer Josué Ramirez Vásquez, 2, Guatemala

Marina Vásquez, a nurse who lives in Austin, arranged an altar with pictures of the children, candles, a beautiful cloth and a quilt with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She spoke prayerfully about the children. Camilo, the human rights attorney, spoke about the historical context of how we got here: conflicts in Central America, US greed, intervention and duplicity. Then he read the poem, "Floaters", by Martín Espada (excerpted here).

And the dead have a name: *floaters*, say the men of the Border Patrol, keeping watch all night by the river, hearts pumping coffee as they say the word *floaters*, soft as a bubble, hard as a shoe as it nudges the body, to see if it breathes, to see if it moans, to see if it sits up and speaks....

And the dead still have names, names that sing in praise of the saints, names that flower in blossoms of white, a cortege of names dressed all in black, trailing the coffins to the cemetery....Enter their names in the book of names.

Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez*; say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos*....

Afterwards, we traipsed over to a stage to listen to speakers and hear music. Dr.



March to Shine a Light on the Border, 2/15/20, Brownsville. Photo: Allan Mestel.

Amy Cohen is a child and family psychiatrist who currently advises attorneys working with children in detention centers and families who have been separated by immigration policies. She has interviewed children held in government custody and, for much of her 30-year career, has treated traumatized children.

This is a holocaust of danger being visited upon the young. Children whose only crime has been to seek safety from the deadly conditions of their home countries. I don't want to have to see—as I did a week ago—the child in my office who weeps and trembles even TWO YEARS LATER as she recalls the cruelty of the officers who separated her from her mother and then threatened to send her back to her country all by herself if she cried. Officers who locked her into a crowded, freezing cage bathed in perpetual light and then came into that cage, went up to her on the concrete floor, and kicked her because, exhausted from her quiet weeping, she'd fallen asleep.

I don't want the call about the 1-1/2 year old child desperate for treatment for pneumonia, which she contracted as a complication of not one but two barely treated infections she contracted in the squalid conditions of American detention....Some medical professional signed the order to have this sick child discharged from the hospital without medication so she could be put on a plane to a third country where she, her mother and her sister knew no one and had no resources whatsoever. If a child

dies in Guatemala because of American policies, will we ever know?

I don't want to have to come down to the border to help parents to face the excruciating decision of whether or not to separate from their children to keep them alive. Whether to send them across the bridge by themselves, these small children they have held in their arms to protect through the dangerous journey to what they thought was safety. Watching them disappear as they cross that bridge on their own, praying that they will be safe. Because our government is now exposing them to the VERY SAME DANGERS of violence that they faced in the countries they fled. No parent should have to make that decision. You thought family separation ended? Make no mistake. This administration is nimble. And MPP is yet another child separation program.

February 18: What Fathers Do

Amy asked me to accompany her when she visited with families at the Resource Center of Matamoros, where Project Corazon, a project of Lawyers for Good Government, tries to stem the tide with only two full time lawyers. A young doctor from Philadelphia joined Amy and me to translate. X, a young father from Honduras, arrived with his ten-year-old daughter, V. Amy, who speaks like a kind preschool teacher or an angel, gently spoke to the girl, giving her crayons and drawing paper. Then turned her attention to X:

"So let's talk about your decision to get your daughter across the border by herself."

X explained how he had to carry two IDs in Honduras—he showed them to us. Gang members would stop him in the street: one gang was shown one ID, the other gang the other. Finally, he was attacked too many times, his life and his family's lives threatened too intensely. Still, the court questioned why he'd waited six months to leave home with his daughter—are you really in danger? Seriously? Why would you wait so long?

"What would you do? You have to figure it out! Where do I go? How do I leave my whole life behind? It takes a while," he says in Spanish. He finally convinced his wife to take their three-year-old son and hide at her parents while he and V made the trek north.

"We've been here five months, in the camp. I had my third hearing and they denied me asylum, because I waited so long to come. They didn't believe me when I said if I go home, I'll be killed. I guess I'll have to go home eventually but I want V to get across and go to my cousin. She's in Houston," he says. "And someday, I'll get there too."

V is drawing a beautiful drawing of a house with flowers in the windows. I smile at her and offer her more colored pencils. She is hearing every word.

A discussion goes back and forth about the cousin. Does X have any family in New York or California (the best states to seek asylum)? No, one in Maryland, but a single man, not the best sponsor for a ten-year-old daughter. They discuss how best to get V across the bridge so she can spend the

minimum amount of time in detention and/or foster care, and then on to the Houston cousin. X shows us a picture of himself six months ago, when he was 30 pounds heavier. He pulls up his shirt to show us his psoriasis. "*El estres*." (The stress.)

We spent over an hour with X and V. That evening I spoke to my friend, Gale, who also helped with translation. She had spent the afternoon with Amy, who interviewed six other families. "That father and daughter were heartbreaking, no?" I asked Gale. "How was the afternoon?" "Horrible. A mother is fleeing domestic violence. Her husband has connections in the Guatemalan government so he was able to locate her. She got a call that he's coming to the camp to kill her. Their eight-year-old son is in foster care in Pennsylvania. Amy is desperately trying to get both mom and the boy to safe houses."

These are the bad hombres.

The Witness at the Border vigil in Brownsville has been suspended for now due to COVID-19. Follow our website to learn more. Support Amy Cohen's work at Every.Last.One. Support health care in Matamoros: Global Response Management.

MARGARET M. SEILER is an educator and activist living in Brooklyn, New York. Besides her work with Witness at the Border, she volunteers with two NYC-based groups promoting humane immigration policies and supporting asylum seekers, Don't Separate Families and Team TLC NYC.



SUSAN BEE

with Phong H. Bui

Although I was first aware of the essential *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* in the early 1990s, a biannual publication focusing on issues of feminism and painting from various dissenting perspectives (edited by Susan Bee and Mira Schor, published between 1986 and 1996 in print, and online from 2001 to 2016), it was only later that I met the painter Susan Bee through the late Nancy Spero, who was both Susan's and my friend and mentor, at the opening reception of Nancy's powerful exhibit *The War Series 1966–1970* at Galerie Lelong in 2003. Admittedly, I didn't get to know Susan and her work until 2007, especially after having read Geoffrey Cruickshank-Hagenbuckle's essay on Susan published in the May 2007 issue of the *Rail*. I still remember Geoffrey's haiku description, "Susan Bee's paintings are a savage mix of Expressionism and Pop schadenfreude populated by cut-and-paste pictures." Subsequently, on the occasion of her eighth one-person exhibit at A.I.R. Gallery, *Pow! New Paintings* (March 16–April 16, 2017), I finally was able to have a lengthy conversation with Susan in front of a live audience at the gallery (Saturday, March 25, 2017). The following is its edited version along with an additional conversation from my recent visit to Susan's Brooklyn studio before her upcoming exhibit *Anywhere Out of the World: New Paintings, 2017–2020* (postponed because of the coronavirus crisis) at A.I.R. Gallery.

PHONG H. BUI (RAIL): I'd like to begin with your painting, which is hung on the wall at the *Rail* HQ, titled *The Quarrel*, painted in 1983, oil on linen. It's a square and small format, measured 12 × 12 inches, depicting a man and a woman in profile, boxing with each other, right in the middle of the visual field. One reference could be Charles and Susan. [Laughter] Or not! Perhaps two fictional characters? We don't exactly know. All I know is I see it every day, and it's always given me such pleasure, yet at the same time I always am perplexed by it. Above all, the energy generated from the painting is intense, partly because while

the figures are painted confidently, flat and thin, the background is thickly and urgently painted with an overall mosaic pattern of bold lines and irregular black shapes. It's a tremendous contradiction that lies between anxiety and gaiety. Perhaps it's both sophistication and innocence, which reminds me of what our friend Bill Jensen said once about Robert Ryman: "He's the most sophisticated and the most innocent painter I know working today." I should also add that in addition to being committed to your work, you, like your friend and painter Mira Schor, together co-founded and co-edited the essential *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* magazine, which lasted from—

SUSAN BEE: It was published for 10 years as a printed journal: 1986–1996, then online till 2016. We also did *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*, published by Duke University Press in 2000, and then in December 2016 after Trump won, we did our final online issue, #7. We just thought "Ok, we've had our say and we're passing the baton to you guys, the *Brooklyn Rail*."

RAIL: Whaaat! [Laughter] Thank you so much. Before I start I would like to bring up different insightful observations that were written by Raphael Rubinstein, David Shapiro, Johanna Drucker, among others. Raphael thought, for example, that your work lies in between the familiar and the strange, which manifests in the use of material and images. David Shapiro referred to your sense of humor in how you seem to be carelessly or anachronistically playful with your repertoire of images, and how to compose them and whatnot. You thrive in the idea of painting the space between the figures and the objects. Johanna Drucker said that you command a sense of anarchy and resistance, which is revealed in how you freely work in various techniques and materials: painting, collage, works on paper, artist's books, and so on. Let's start with *The Quarrel* in reference to the decade of the '80s.

BEE: *The Quarrel* is a good example of when I returned to figurative painting. Otherwise, while I was in graduate school at Hunter College from 1975–1977, where I got an MA, I was making a lot of photograms and altered photos, and I was also an abstract painter. I was working on big stain paintings in reference to Helen Frankenthaler and also more minimal geometric works. Then various things happened—including my mother, Miriam Laufer, died in 1980 and she was a figurative painter involved with the Abstract Expressionists. I felt I needed to get back to figuration in order to be near her, and really to explore figures in symbolic landscapes that had been in my mind for quite a while. So those images and those patterns just came to me relatively naturally and rather urgently. I'd just realized how I was drawn to a pastiche of different styles: so there's a Pollock section in the middle between a couple kissing each other in *The Kiss* (2014), with stripes on either side and above them, at the door or window, is painted various sorts of decorative motifs. The painting, *Buster's Sleeve* (2015), for example, which is from a series, where I was working off of very small black-and-white film stills of the '20s and '50s, and really wanting to make it all about the color, and the painting, and the people interacting as different patterns. Because I think of people as having different patterns that accompany them, strange as that may sound; you can see it played out here. That's why in the painting *The Quarrel* with the woman boxing with the man is somewhat similar to the one called *Pow!* (2014).

RAIL: Which in this instance, the woman knocked out the man with energetic and radiant stripes generating outward from the center.

BEE: I'm interested in the idea of the relationship between the figures, so that the figures are also like paintings. It's like the paintings are the figures fighting each other. Styles are therefore fighting

Portrait of Susan Bee, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

each other. It's a pastiche, and in that way it's also like a collage.

RAIL: Would, having experimented and made photograms and altered photos inspired in part by Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, as well as making stained and minimal, geometric abstract and collaged paintings, perhaps had an impact on how you think of your figurative works in those terms?

BEE: Yes. There is a certain level of abstraction in all my figurative work. Since, I bring the intensity of color and closeness with expressionism that I brought to my early abstract paintings and my altered photos to my current paintings. In addition, I was always interested in layering the imagery and emphasizing the paint texture and that was in my early canvases and altered photos as well. I was also involved with the feminist art movement. I went to a lot of events and shows at A.I.R. as a graduate student, and I was very inspired by artists like Judith Bernstein, Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson. They were doing a lot of figuration that was very inspiring.

RAIL: What about Nancy Spero?

BEE: Nancy was a mentor of mine, and I was really taken with what she was doing. When I met her, very few were paying attention to what she was doing in 1976–77. But it was very exciting for me to see what she did with collaging the figures and texts. I was inspired by how she put the figures back in at a time when conceptual art and minimalism were the prevailing trends. This was also a time where there was a lot of fighting between women, which there still is, about different issues regarding feminism. I think that's why at the time I did a lot of women boxers—I was looking for women fighters, a theme that was hard to pin down, pre-Internet. I went to the picture library at the New York Public Library to look for images. I borrowed images and some of them I'm still using. I found it really interesting because women were fighting with each other, especially in these feminist spaces, which wasn't being talked about. I've made paintings of women fighting each other, and on some occasions I've painted women fighting men.

RAIL: On the subject of two elements opposing one another: I remember once visiting Nancy Spero's studio when she was preparing a show in Spain in 2002. I was asking Nancy how the floating texts relate to the cut-out figures, and vice versa. She more or less said the texts are like fragments of the body, so the text and the figures should be treated in equal terms. I am interested in your case, how do you mediate the contrast between what is considered flat and what is considered to be textural, for example in the painting *Flesh and the Devil* (2015)? While the flesh of the couple's faces and the woman's arms are painted resolutely flat, which is a quiet area that you can rest your eye on, but overall it's incredibly active in texture and patterns of all kinds and high-key colors, which I notice wasn't as strongly prominent in the early paintings but intensified in your recent paintings. Where do you think that came from, that simultaneous view of the two?

BEE: I actually don't know where it comes from but I do have a sense that those faces are the resting place in this overly patterned composition—I

know it's too much—and the odd thing is that I studied with minimalists, and it had the opposite effect. I painted with just two colors for two years, and after I finished I was like an explosion, I'd been held back for so long.

RAIL: Who were the teachers there?

BEE: One was Robert Morris, who interviewed me and took me into the program and Rosalind Krauss, who was my thesis advisor. But the faculty really couldn't stand the fact that there were so many colors in my work. I remember the first time when I brought my paintings in and they started to hide behind their hands and said, "You have a lot of colors in these paintings." [Laughter] So I tried to diminish what they were saying but it didn't work. [Laughter] I'm really bad at following instructions.

RAIL: Ok, maybe that's the rebellious part in you.

BEE: Yes, I'm afraid that the rebellion was that I ended up going for broke and I see these as paintings within paintings as in *The Touch* (2014). Both images are based on a still from Robert Bresson's film *Pickpocket*, which is a black-and-white film from 1959. I really love this film. I have done four paintings based on stills from the prison scene in this movie. His girlfriend goes to visit the pickpocket in jail, so there's always this grid of bars. I was taught at Hunter to "always have a grid." I followed the instructions, and I got the grid. But I love the idea that paintings can have paintings inside of them. So, often I see these areas as being a separate painting or a painting that's fighting with the different layers.

RAIL: In the early '80s you were making similar paintings with these contrasts like *Cupid Complains to Venus* (1982).

BEE: This was based on a Lucas Cranach the Elder with the same title (1525–27) at the National Gallery in London. It was also included in the survey show *Doomed to Win: Paintings from the Early 1980s* that I had at A.I.R. Gallery, which was curated by Kat Griefen of Accola Griefen Gallery in 2014.

RAIL: Yes, it was the same painting that made me realize your exploration of pastiche is neither appropriation nor copy. Perhaps it's close to music sampling in that it takes a portion of one sound recording and reuses it as an instrument or element of a new recording. I mean your version is super intense and weird, especially with three flat silhouetted figures in blue on top of three letters "T", "O", "Y" against a very active and textural background. Does "T", "O", "Y" mean toy?

BEE: Yes, I know that painting's very complicated. I remember showing it to a dealer back then and I remember his reaction. He said, "But you can't do more than two things in a painting." [Laughter] He said, "You have three things here." [Laughter]

RAIL: Was it an accusation of greed?

BEE: I think that I tend to have to do more than three things in a painting, and that gets me into trouble. And as for the three letters "T", "O", "Y", when I painted them, they were all abstract shapes to me and I didn't even notice they spelled "toy" until later, I have to admit. I really like taking themes from earlier paintings, and I love Cranach, and it is

titled *Cupid Complains to Venus* because Cupid is holding a little beehive and the bees are coming out, and I had just started using the last name, Bee, so it was a self-reference. So there were six things going on in the painting. [Laughter] It had a reference to me, I sometimes have private references in the paintings that people don't know about.

RAIL: So one would say that your sense of storytelling, narrative doesn't have to be read?

BEE: Yes, even though I have a need to make a narrative, and I don't tell the viewer looking at the painting what the narrative is. In fact, I don't expect any viewer to see this image as Bresson would have seen it in *Pickpocket*. Or in *Raisin in the Sun* (2014), which is based on a film still from *Raisin in the Sun* (1961) with Ruby Dee and Sidney Poitier. I was interested in the poem, so the secret reference is to Langston Hughes' poem, "Harlem," where there is the line, "Does a raisin explode." I'm referencing the film, and also painting styles from the period. I'm creating complex layerings. Whether anybody else sees it but me, whether you read it that way, it's not necessarily so important. Besides, it would require too much literary explanation.

RAIL: Did you have any kind of rapport with Neo-Expressionist painting in the '80s, take David Salle, for instance, who had made use of collage and especially film imagery and montage, and so on?

BEE: I'm sure we were at times looking at the same images from film or even art history. Mira [Schor], however, wrote an essay in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #1 critiquing David Salle's imagery, partly because she had gone to school with Salle at CalArts. What was strange in the '80s was that the most successful women artists were mostly working on photography, like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Louise Lawler, so one of the reasons we started the magazine was to talk about women painters. Women painters were being dismissed in that period because what we were supposed to be doing was a different kind of work, and that wasn't the work that either of us were doing. Many of our friends did figurative work that came out of the context of feminism or from abstract or figurative expressionism. It was an alternate universe to what was going on because we couldn't afford to paint those giant paintings [laughs] that were being shown at Mary Boone. And she wasn't showing us. It was a time when women painters were supposed to be doing more conceptual work in reference to *October* magazine, and that wasn't the work that my circle of friends were doing. So our works weren't getting shown. It was really impossible to get them shown in any commercial galleries, which was one of the reasons we started the magazine, so we could talk about different levels and a broader context of painting, although I feel my work still involves appropriation, but it's always charged with emotions. I never took any images from any sources casually. An image has to have some kind of meaning for me. That's why we called our magazine *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. In other words, we were appropriating for very different reasons. I appropriate because I love something, like I love Edvard Munch, say his painting *Two Human Beings (The Lonely Ones)* (1896) so much that I had painted two versions of it, *Dark Matter* (2017) and *Non Finito* (2016). The

same with Matisse's *Seated Woman, Back Turned to the Open Window* (1922), the idea of bringing the sunshine of Nice to Brooklyn was great so I painted my own version in *Color Storm* (2016).

RAIL: Those landscape samplings are what Raphael referred to as "pastoral psychedelia." It's like taking LSD and walking through a landscape. No one would look at these paintings and the first thing they would recognize is a reference to art history, and that you're a trained painter. I like David Shapiro's description of them as wildly eclectic.

BEE: [Laughs] That's fair.

RAIL: Johanna Drucker said the sense of freedom you undertake is usually your immediate feeling about a specific subject, whenever that subject may be. It's as though there's no filter, which brings me to my next question: Do you relate to the work of outsider artists?

BEE: Yes, I relate to almost all of them. [Laughs] I always go to the Outsider Art Fair and look closely at the full range of painting categorized in that way. We were just talking about how much we both love Horace Pippin. And I just love the fact that the outsider artists are not really outside. I think they're really inside, and I think I can identify with their inside feeling. Also, the flatness in my paintings relate more to folk art than to modern art. It's something that really appeals to me, because I like the direct approach. I think Pippin is very sophisticated in his understanding of painting. It's just that it's a very different approach from an academic approach. There was a show *World War I and American Art* at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia (November 2016–April 2017), and there were a lot of trained painters like John Singer Sargent, but Pippin's work stands out because he just gets to the emotions right away. He just gets there so directly.

RAIL: With such economy.

BEE: Yes, with such economy. They're really small paintings. He was on the battlefield as a soldier, and he has a way of nailing the experience for me. I feel a really strong relationship to the folk artists and I never felt it was something I shouldn't look at, though I didn't study it in art history courses at Barnard and Hunter, because it wasn't taught. But I looked anyway. I also really love quilts, and the patterning and the idea of assembling pieces the way quiltmakers do. I like to think of the same process with my paintings.

RAIL: What about how you conceive image in space?

BEE: To answer your question I have to go back to age ten, when I played a lot with paper dolls. I would cut images out of magazines and I would make little collages. I was quite obsessive. In some of the early paintings that I showed in the '90s there were paper dolls in the paintings and other collage elements. My three books with Johanna Drucker: *A Girl's Life* (Granary Books, 2002), *Fabulas Feminae* (Litmus Press, 2015), and our upcoming book, *Off-World Fairy Tales* (forthcoming, Litmus Press, 2020) are all based on my collages. The collages remain more prominent in many of my artist's books. In some ways, these paintings are like collages. The flatness gives the sense of the collage or of cut-outs. I love to cut



Susan Bee, *Anywhere Out of the World*, 2019. Oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist.

things out. Plus I was a graphic designer and I did paste-ups for a living.

RAIL: For how long?

BEE: At least 20 years, from the '70s to the '80s. I should mention that my parents were graphic designers, artists, and book designers, and they were always cutting and pasting, so it was what you did at our house. You could say it's in the blood.

RAIL: Another attribute of your work is the sense of humour which, according to Freud, is very different from the sense of comedy and jokes because the sense of humour requires a serious reevaluation of reality that is not being withdrawn, or passive. I would say it's rather intense and maybe subversive.

BEE: I like to take an image and subvert it. That's why in my upcoming A.I.R. show, *Anywhere Out of the World*, I take several paintings by male painters that I admire including Chagall and Ensor and twist their subjects around for my own ends. In *Oculus Mundi* (2019), I substitute my own image as a woman artist painting for *Self-Portrait* by Chagall from 1914 and in the painting, *Demonology* (2018) I insert my own self-portrait into a composition

based on a print by Ensor. Thereby, altering the meaning of the image but in a light-hearted and admiring way.

RAIL: How would you describe your relationship to poetry, in fact you're married to the poet Charles Bernstein?

BEE: Charles and I met in high school. I was a painter but he wasn't a poet then. Both my parents come from Europe and they were very involved in literature. I grew up reading a lot of poetry and loved poetry, so when I fell into this relationship with Charles who turned into a poet, then came all the poet friends. I would go to readings with Charles and then I started to work on *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine as a designer from '78 to '81, edited by Charles and Bruce Andrews, 13 issues in all. I also started designing for Roof Books and I worked with all these poets on book design. I designed a lot of poetry books and did a lot of covers. It became an all-encompassing thing and I loved it. Poetry has no money attached to it, so that's why I was working so hard in other design jobs during this whole time to support all these things we were doing. But it was a great thing to be involved in the '70s with so many things going on:



Susan Bee, *Oculus Mundi*, 2019. Oil, enamel, sand on linen, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist.

A.I.R., and feminist stuff, and poetry, and performance, and the downtown music and film scene. All these great things that were happening. So we were very involved with all of that. Then I started to do a lot of books with poets, partly because the poets always liked my work, which was not the way it was in the commercial art world, where they couldn't make out what I was doing. But the poets always supported me, and they bought my work and they would come to my shows and I have to thank the poets. [Laughs] They were not the mainstream poets. They were the experimental poets and they supported the fact that I was doing things that were outside of what was conventional.

RAIL: You all were kindred spirits.

BEE: Yes. They also had humor as much as they had angst, they had no money. [Laughs] It was a very nice community of people when we all shared the same struggle.

RAIL: What about your interest in film Noir or B movies? When did it begin, at least how it appears in your painting?

BEE: Take for example, the painting which I regard as my post-Trump painting, called *Afraid to Talk* (2016).

RAIL: A couple, and the man is holding a gun in his right hand!

BEE: Yes. There's always a man with a gun. And sometimes there's a woman with a gun. I love the women in these films. They're always as strong and dangerous as the men. But no, I never saw these films growing up. It was only in the last decade that I began watching films like: *His Kind of Woman* (1951), *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), *Criss Cross* (1949), *Detour* (1945), *Gun Crazy* (1950), and others. I just thought these women were fantastic. They were always insane and violent, but I just liked them. I wanted to be part of that, so the only way to be part of it was to paint it. And I did a lot of those. I eventually started a series in 2009. In the show I had in 2013 at Accola Griefen Gallery, there were 16 paintings that were based on Noirs.

RAIL: In reference to those two paintings, *Color Storm* (2016) and *Distant Shores* (2016), based on Matisse's Nice paintings, where he escaped to between the two wars from 1917 to 1929, and again from 1939 until his death in 1954. These paintings of marvelous interiors looking out into the Mediterranean coast were of momentary act of painting and the fleeting atmosphere of time

and which they were painted. You didn't stay with Matisse too long I take it!

BEE: I've always loved Munch, Matisse, Marsden Hartley, more recently I have been reexamining Chagall, Ensor, and others. I always felt like I wanted to enter into somebody else's mind and see what they were thinking. I've been interested in the German Romantic painters, especially Caspar David Friedrich. I did a number of paintings based on several of his paintings, for example, *Moonrise Over Sea* (2011), *The Chalk Cliffs* (2012), *Window Frame* (2016), and I'm still very interested in the idea of the *Rückenfigur*, or figures facing the sea or landscape before them and they're seen from behind. I'm also interested in the idea of windows in paintings—what does it mean to look out through the window in a painting. I also did many paintings with car windows especially in the noir series. One car window painting is on the cover of Charles's book *Recalculating* (published by University of Chicago Press in 2013), so that was another theme that interested me. I get taken by themes, which most painters do. Even when you're an abstract painter you get taken by the color red, or a particular shape, and so on. Recurring motifs would occur even on a subconscious level.

RAIL: Take the painting *Dark Matter* (2017), for example, the figure might refer to the Munch painting *Two Human Beings (The Lonely Ones)*, which we mentioned earlier, instead of the empty, anxious, and haunting space, sea and sky, they're looking at you activated in space with your version of the wailing wall sort of speak, with maximal applications of various painterly gestures, mark makings, textures, and densities filling the entire space.

BEE: The strange thing was that I had initially painted the whole painting with the rocks that appeared in the Munch painting. There was a definite horizon so you can see it as a seascape but I hated it in the post-Trump period. I started to take them all out and then I wasn't sure how much I was going to take out, so the black lines turned into these energetic strips of removal. I left the rocks, so that you can still see them, and I left the figures because I had a thought to cover over the figures but then I couldn't do it. This process took place over a series of weeks. I kept arguing with the space of the painting. I wanted the figures to be looking into the future and they didn't know what the future was going to be. I was trying to figure out what the figures were thinking about—what they could be facing.

RAIL: How often does this last-minute change of mind occur?

BEE: It happens often. I paint with oil so it takes a while to dry. I'd therefore leave one part to work on another, so images will appear and disappear. These are process-oriented paintings. I begin with a basic outline and from there it's all whatever the painting takes me to places and tells me what to do with some designs of negotiation at times, other times not. In *Dreamers* (2014), I unusually added all this imagery that is not in the film still. It's a man and a woman lying in bed, it's very plain and simple. Yet I felt like I wanted to surround them with images of a flower, a weeping eye, an arrow pointing in from the left—I wanted to show these two people who had these different patterns in their life because it's true in *Raisin in the Sun*, in both the play and the movie that the two lead figures have different goals and they're fighting a lot. But at one point they were lying down together and I really wanted to focus on that image.

RAIL: So it would be fair to say that the automatic appropriation of the imagery as either a formal framework or a potential narrative is only a pretext, a jumping-off point really, because the rest is just dealing with the space in-between.

BEE: Right, it's totally an excuse. It almost could be a bunch of triangles—except that I always feel there's emotion behind them too. I painted triangles and abstractions for a couple of years. They were different from one another yet they had a relation to each other also. At some point I asked myself, "Why am I painting triangles?" Then I realized they came from my early photograms, so the triangles and other abstractions or patterns are there to either intensify or lessen the emotion.

RAIL: That makes sense. Also, I noticed in the last four or five years the reference to your past and your family history became very visible.



Susan Bee, *Under Water*, 2019. Oil, enamel, sand, and collage on linen, 28 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist.

BEE: Yes, especially after having visited Germany and Poland in 2015. And I had never been to Poland. My mother was born in Łódź. I have a very complicated history with my parents, and I had gone through a lot of trauma of different types as I wrote in the piece "Threadsuns" for the *Rail* when Charles Schultz was the guest critic in May 2015. It just became important for me to paint images that were relevant to my own history. When I went to visit Ahava, the Jewish children's home where my mother grew up in Berlin, I took a photo there: "Artist daughter takes photo in front of grim Berlin landmark." I ended up doing a painting based on the photo *Ahava, Berlin* (2012).

I do occasionally paint self-referential portraits, but this is similar to how I reference art history as a form of self-portrait. Painting my history and my family including Charles, and my children, Felix and Emma, is also a feature of my many-sided self-portraits. When I went back to Europe, I started to think about where my parents came from, because I view myself as American. But my parents were Jewish immigrants and arrived in the US in 1947, so I have been looking at their milieu and trying to address my own history, but I don't like to do it head-on. More like sideways.

RAIL: How would you describe the change that occurred in this new body of work made over the last three years in preparation for this new exhibit?

BEE: I turned from making paintings with couples to paintings that rework or transform earlier paintings. To come back to it, *Anywhere Out of the World*, which is also the name of my show, is a good example.

RAIL: In *Anywhere Out of the World*, you are a painter holding a brush and her upper head is in the cloud.

BEE: Half of her head is thinking about escaping from this world, and the other is here, very present in the world. This is very much the way I feel in this world changed by coronavirus. I should say that I've been getting into a more dream-like space partly as a way to counter our current political and environmental climate.

RAIL: Perhaps your fantastical portrayals of the biblical and mythological are because of this time of need and urgency.

BEE: Yes, like the painting *Jacob's Ladder* (2019). While Jacob is sleeping under the tree, the angels are climbing up to a ladder that is actually going up and off the canvas. And the painting *Under Water* (2019) can be seen as my ecological and biblical painting all in one.

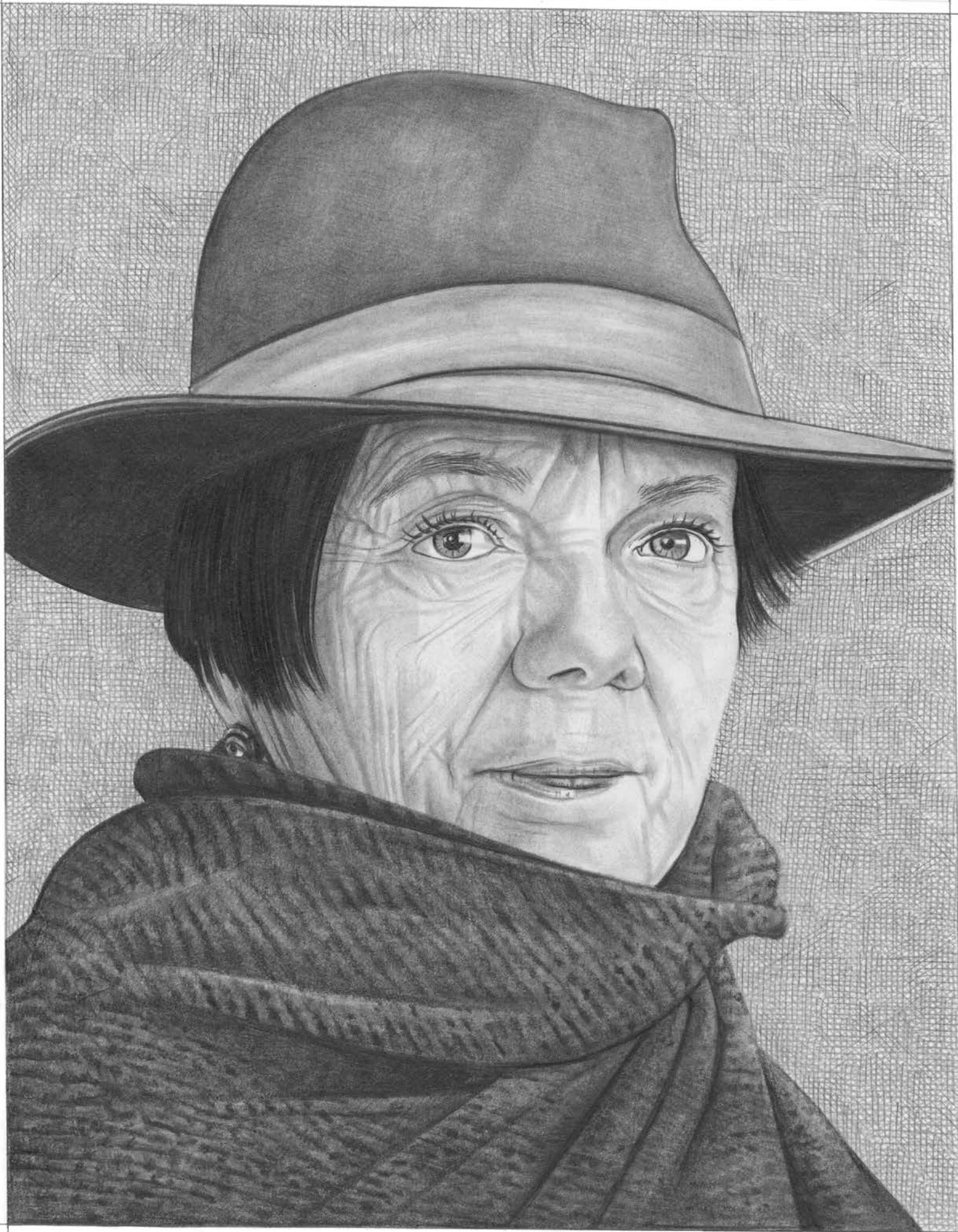
RAIL: I also notice there are paintings of animals, and creatures that I haven't seen before.

BEE: That was partially inspired by my trip to India and Sri Lanka (2018–2019), where I saw a lot of wild animals, including peacocks. This experience led to my interest in mythological creatures, and especially medieval iconography in illuminated manuscripts and romanticism—how the idea of women got portrayed as monsters. I've also been looking at William Blake's illustrations of the bible, among other things, especially how clearly the vision of his images came to him ...

RAIL: And were painted in the same way. This painting, *Demonology* (2018), seems to be painted so directly and clearly, which I'd say it's the most graphically legible and flat among your paintings I've seen for a while.

BEE: This is true. It's loosely based on James Ensor's print, *Self-Portrait with Demons*, (1898). I painted myself in his place. I remember clearly the feeling I had painting the demons. I realized they were friendly. I could relate to them. The demons are not as fierce and disturbing in my painting, at least compared to how they are usually portrayed. This doesn't mean demons aren't capable of evil: they are an imagination of evil doings. We've experienced catastrophic events throughout history, just as we're experiencing now with climate change, our politics, and the pandemic. What I explore in my paintings is how we coexist with evil. We never escape it. The devils are our companions. Our fate is beyond our control.

PHONG H. BUI is the Publisher and Artistic Director of the *Brooklyn Rail*.



GRACIELA ITURBIDE

with Sara Roffino

Graciela Iturbide's photographs are the sorts of images that sear themselves into the mind, the subjects of her portraits becoming familiar figures around which one can imagine entire lives. It's a generous sort of intimacy she creates, giving viewers depths and details but leaving space to wonder. Since she started shooting in the 1970s, Iturbide's vision has become visually synonymous with Mexico itself, her photographs reaching through and across the poly-cultural country, asking what one can ever know of another—or of oneself. Following in the footsteps of her teacher, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Iturbide is indisputably one of the world's most important living photographers. *Graciela Iturbide's Mexico*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, is on view at Washington D.C.'s National Museum of Women in the Arts through May 25. Iturbide met with Artseen editor Sara Roffino following her D.C. opening to talk about intuition, time, and playing with death.

SARA ROFFINO (RAIL): Let's start at the beginning, your father was a photographer?

GRACIELA ITURBIDE: Yes, he was an amateur photographer and he would take family photographs of me and my siblings. There were 13 of us.

RAIL: I can't imagine that. [Laughter] You've spoken about how you would spend a lot of time with these photographs. Do you recall what was so compelling about them?

ITURBIDE: My father always kept the photographs in the same place and I would steal them from there. My parents would take the photographs away from me and put them back in the album and punish me, and then I would steal them again. I think I was just always drawn to images. They were photos of my brothers and sisters and my family but I also found some negatives of my father from before he was married and I always loved looking at the light through the negatives. I wanted to make a book with them. Later, my father gave me a Kodak camera and I would take pictures of things like churches and airplanes or on trips, normal things for a child.

RAIL: What did you find in the photographs of your father from before he was married?

ITURBIDE: I actually just rediscovered these and I'm now digitizing them. My father had a tiger, there are photos of him with a tiger in the ruins of Oaxaca. He was a farmer and his parents had a farm, but they lost everything with the land reforms in Mexico. When he was 16 years old he had to go to work to support his parents and by chance he went to work in Oaxaca with the great archeologist Alfonso Caso, so I also have photos of that time in his life and some of him with his friends.

RAIL: This seems like an important connection to your own work. It wasn't just family photographs that you were looking at, the photos were also an entrance into a world that you didn't know. It's very different than if the photos had just been of your family. Those photos were a passageway to a different place, a different time.

ITURBIDE: Exactly, discovering those photographs in my parents' dresser was really influential. And when I had my little Kodak camera I wanted to be like my father. Also, my parents subscribed to *LIFE* magazine, which my father loved. I would also look at the photographs and I've realized since then that I was looking at photographs by people like Eugene

Smith, though I didn't know who he was then. I would wait for the magazine to arrive each month so I could see the photographs.

RAIL: You married young and had three children before going to university to study film. While you were studying you came across a book of photographs by Manuel Álvarez Bravo that was published alongside an exhibition of his that ran in conjunction with the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

ITURBIDE: Yes, yes, I married young and had my children young and then I started studying film, but I went to meet Álvarez Bravo and shortly after we met, he asked me to be his assistant.

RAIL: Right, but then after only two years of working with him, a true master, you decided to separate yourself. Can you talk a little bit about that decision?

ITURBIDE: Álvarez Bravo didn't only help me with photography, he helped me in my life. He told me, "Graciela, it is good to separate yourself because you can start again, you can discover so many things, archaeology, books, paintings." And that opened a whole world to me. I had been educated in a very conservative manner and wanted to study literature, but my parents didn't think a woman should go to university. Álvarez Bravo opened a world of liberty that I didn't have. When my husband and I decided to separate, it was okay. The relationship wasn't bad, but it didn't function. I was happy after I left my marriage. I had my children and I was studying, taking photographs and sometimes my children would come with me when I traveled into the countryside to shoot.

RAIL: How was your lifestyle received by everyone else? It was pretty unconventional for a single woman in Mexico to do what you were doing then.

ITURBIDE: People thought it was unusual, but I had the support of Álvarez Bravo, who reminded me that there is no normal. He was like a second father to me because my family was horrified that I was divorced and on top of that I was a photographer. I also acted and I had a big role in a film and won a big award for it, but I didn't let them include my last name because my family would have died.

RAIL: Did your family ever accept your life?

ITURBIDE: Now my brothers and sisters do, but my parents never did. To them I was a communist, a liberal, and a divorced woman. They never understood.

RAIL: Was that difficult?

ITURBIDE: Yes, but for me when I have an idea the most important thing is to see it happen. The other stuff doesn't matter.

RAIL: Álvarez Bravo was reserved in his feedback. He didn't really share his thoughts about your work. The only thing he said was that you shouldn't make anything that is political, but taking photographs is always political.

ITURBIDE: What he said is that I shouldn't take photographs that are deliberately political because everything is political. All of photography is political and he was right.



Graciela Iturbide, *Autorretrato como Seri (Self-Portrait as Seri)*, Sonoran Desert, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 6 3/4 x 6 3/4 inches.
© Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy the artist and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

RAIL: To be an educated woman with resources taking photographs in rural parts of Mexico is certainly political.

ITURBIDE: I have never deliberately taken photographs with the intention of presenting poverty. I approach my work the same no matter who I am photographing. I have worked with migrants in Tijuana who told me stories about how this was the third time they were trying to enter the United States, but they were always sent back. It broke my heart to see these families there. I've also worked in California, in San José, photographing migrant farmers. I think this is the moment to put all of these images into a book so people can see what people are willing to go through to get to the United States if they believe in the American dream.

RAIL: So you feel an urgency around this body of work?

ITURBIDE: The work is already done and I think it is the right moment to show this kind of work. What I love is to go out in the street and take photographs of what I see and allow the project to evolve from that. I like the surprise of discovering what I see and how I feel. But I think now is the moment for that project.

RAIL: I see your work as a poetic expression, which I think is a much greater means of expression than something political. The observation and creation of beauty supersedes everything else

because it's not something one can argue with or against. Can you talk about the role of beauty in your work?

ITURBIDE: I think about it, but I'm not really conscious of it at the same time. When I see something and feel it, I take the photograph. But I think a lot about poetry and I love reading Sufi poets and San Juan de la Cruz. Poetry is very important to me and if there is something poetic in my work that is great, but the truth is that I don't know, that is something other people will have to say. Álvarez Bravo told me that I had to listen to music, I had to read a lot, look at paintings because all of these different influences will be reflected in my work.

RAIL: What are you reading now?

ITURBIDE: I'm reading a lot of history books, about Mexico before the Spanish conquest and during the colonial era. I just finished the book of Nezahualcōyotl, who was a king poet before the Aztec Empire was established and who wrote marvelous poetry. According to what I have read about him, there were also female poets in his house. He thought that perhaps there was just one god, not many, which was the Aztec belief. He had his own expansive ideas on life and religion, which are fascinating to read, but above all is his poetry. The book is called *Flory Canto*.

RAIL: You've spoken about feeling like an intruder when you first began visiting the villages where

you would photograph, but with time that feeling opened up into something else. Can you talk a little bit about that shift? Was it a specific moment or something that happened?

ITURBIDE: Things started to change with time. I went to live in Juchitán for a month. I stayed in homes there and spent days in the market with the women. It became very natural and when they came to the city they would visit me at my home. Anthropologists talk about "the other"—and I understand that when Dutch or French photographers came to Mexico during the colonial era to photograph the ruins and take images of an exotic place it was as "the other." But I am Mexican and I feel equal to the women of Juchitán. I slept in their homes and they cared for me and I cared for them. It was the same with the Seri women, who I also worked with a lot. I've spoken a lot about this with the renowned historian Alfredo López Austin, who is writing a book about the ideas of "the other" in Mexico. It was a concept that emerged when Europeans were coming to take photographs in Mexico, but I am Mexican. This is my place, these are my friends and my people.

RAIL: Did you know anything about life in the indigenous villages before you began working there?

ITURBIDE: When Francisco Toledo, the great painter who unfortunately passed away last year, invited me to Juchitán, I had read some of Miguel Covarrubias's writings about Juchitán and some of the magazines that Toledo had made in Juchitán and Oaxaca. Toledo was from Juchitán and the people there loved him, so even though we arrived during *Semana Santa (Holy Week)*, we were welcomed immediately. The women brought me to their homes and helped me and we were quickly friends and they are my dearest friends now. I lived with them and shared everything with them and it was the same with the Seris. I arrived just with my camera and told them I was a photographer and that I was going to take photos and if they didn't want their photo taken to just let me know and I wouldn't take their photo. I never use flash and I work at a close range, so I am always aware of the space I am in and I respect it. I felt completely at home with them, more so than anywhere else I have worked and I was incredibly happy living with them.

RAIL: Do you think of your work as a collaboration?

ITURBIDE: It is a collaboration. The people I am photographing know what I am doing and sometimes they ask me to shoot them in a specific way and I'll do that, but it's not usually that formal. More often, I'll be at a party or something and people will know I'm taking photographs and if they don't want me to photograph them I don't.

RAIL: The world has changed so much since then. How has the way you work changed from when you started out?

ITURBIDE: I've worked all over. When I was in Madagascar with Doctors Without Borders, the people all loved having their photos taken. It was nonstop, "madam, photo, photo!" I didn't know what to do so I would have to take photos of hundreds of people. In India, it was the same, so I asked my assistant to shoot with her video camera because I couldn't take all the photos that people wanted me to take. Things have changed for sure,



Graciela Iturbide, *Mujer Ángel (Angel Woman), Sonoran Desert, 1979*. Gelatin silver print, 13 × 18 3/4 inches. Collection of Elizabeth and Michael Marcus. © Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

when I first started working more people didn't want their photos taken because they thought it would rob their soul, but now it is different and now I travel more. What I love the most is to photograph in Mexico, but it is difficult to go to these communities now because of drug trafficking. The women in Juchitán, for example, wear their gold around their neck, like a little bank, but now they can't do that because everything gets stolen. It's the same with a camera. But when I can go, I do. I just finished shooting a series of photographs at the refuge house of Padre Alejandro Solalinde in Oaxaca, which helps migrants and other people in need. I also started taking photographs of objects and landscapes in ways I had never done before. It's partly about always looking at how I can photograph things in new ways, to discover new symbolism and meaning.

RAIL: You've spoken about the importance of symbolism and less so about the role of time, but it's not possible to separate the art of photography from the concept of time. From Henri Cartier-Bresson's idea of the decisive moment to Roland Barthes's understanding of the image as inherently also a marker of a kind of death. With Álvarez Bravo, there was a refrain about having time, or the idea of Mexican time. How do you think about time within your work?

ITURBIDE: Yes, Álvarez Bravo would say to me, "There is time, Graciela," don't rush to shoot, do it calmly. I would go out with my camera and take

pictures of everything. But Álvarez Bravo would only take one photograph. I don't know how he did it. This is incredibly difficult. I take two photos in case one is blurry. I react to the moment and I shoot when something surprises me, whether it's in the villages or in a foreign country. I think also about a lot of the photographs I have wanted to take, but didn't—either because I couldn't photograph a particular person or because I missed the moment. These all remain in my heart. Ideas for photographs that stay with me, but that can't be reconstructed because the time has passed. I remember one trip Álvarez Bravo took where he only brought one roll of 35 mm film. That was everything he had for the trip. If I take a trip I have at least 15, 20 rolls of film.

RAIL: How do you see the role of intellect versus the role of intuition in your practice?

ITURBIDE: My work is completely intuitive. Of course, everything I look at and read influences me in some way; for example, I love Piero della Francesca, so maybe if I see something that reminds me of his work I recognize that in some way, but it is completely unconscious.

RAIL: Is intuition something one can learn or cultivate?

ITURBIDE: I think you can cultivate it, I think we all have intuition. For some people it's more developed than others, but intuition exists within everyone. Sometimes we forget about it and we

don't cultivate it, or maybe there is some that is blocking. I don't know, I think.

RAIL: You only shoot analog and you take many photographs. How do you know which one is the right one when you are developing them?

ITURBIDE: Cartier-Bresson spoke about the decisive moment. I think there are two decisive moments. I still work with silver and gelatin and I love this ritual. I don't ever shoot digitally, not because I don't like how it looks, but because when I begin to develop my photos and I have direct contact with them is when I realize that many of the photos that I thought would be good aren't good. And then I see which ones are good and sometimes I don't even remember taking them. So, for me, there are two moments, the moment I take the photograph and the moment I choose the photograph.

RAIL: Right, like with *Mujer Ángel* [Angel Woman] (1979), you don't remember taking that one.

ITURBIDE: Exactly, I remember when the woman was walking down and I remember when we all had arrived below, but I don't remember taking the photograph. Obviously I took it, but for a long time I wondered if the anthropologist I was with had actually taken it. But it's not possible.

RAIL: I imagined that you had been waiting for this moment, for her to pass, because the photo is so perfect. I wondered how many times you waited



Graciela Iturbide, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas (Our Lady of the Iguanas)*, Juchitán, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches. Collection of Daniel Greenberg and Susan Steinhauser; © Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

in this place for her to pass and how many times she had to pass to get this image.

ITURBIDE: It is a miracle. I say that this photo was a gift from the desert.

RAIL: My next question is sort of about poetry, but also surrealism. The idea of surrealism is complicated for Mexicans because it's something that North Americans and Europeans have applied to their understanding of Mexican culture and art, but it's not necessarily how Mexicans would describe themselves. In Mexico, there isn't the polemic between tangible and intangible that exists in European cultures. Your work moves within this space of what exists physically and what exists but not necessarily in physical form.

ITURBIDE: I haven't seen this in my work, but thank you. When I was in France and people would talk about a Latin American viewpoint, I would have to stop them and say no, how is there possibly a Latin American viewpoint? What does Chalma, for example, a little tiny village where people make a pilgrimage to celebrate the Archangel San Miguel, have to do with Argentina or Paraguay or Colombia. And, moreover, what does that have

to do with photography? Every photographer has their own personality and every photographer sees according to who they are, so when people would tell me that my photography is Surrealist, I would explain that the Surrealism of André Breton was a moment and it gave us many things, but it was a moment. In Latin America, we do not like when the French or other foreigners give us these labels like magical realism—no! People talk about this boom of magical realism as a way of commercializing something, but it's completely patronizing and paternalistic.

RAIL: It's a lack of seeing the complexity of existence. You've taken many photographs of rituals: the Mixteca goat slaughter, celebrations of life and death throughout the world, courtship practices in Juchitán, among many others. What are some of the rituals you practice in your own life and work?

ITURBIDE: I think everyone has rituals, starting with how we wake up in the morning, listening to music, there are many daily rituals. In photography, when I arrive to develop my roles of film I put all the contact sheets out in front of me and often I cut out the images and put them on little

cards—this is my ritual. It's the second moment that I spoke about earlier, the second decisive moment of deciding whether the photograph is one to print or to keep in the box.

RAIL: For many years you focused on photographing death. What did you observe or learn about death through all the images of it that you took?

ITURBIDE: From when we are children, Mexicans are accustomed to living alongside death. We play with death, but we also are afraid of it and I think this is why we play with it. This is why on the Day of the Dead we give each other sugar skulls with our names on them and eat them. We also dress up like death as a way to play with it—I think also because we are afraid of it. In Nezahualcōyotl's poems he says, we all pass through here, we are all coming here to die. This was an important concept in pre-Hispanic times, but with the arrival of the Europeans, it shifted. Now we play with death, but we are also afraid of it.

RAIL: Do you think you are less afraid because you have spent so much time thinking about it and working with it?

ITURBIDE: I am used to playing with death, but obviously I am also afraid of its arrival. *[Laughter]*

RAIL: Of course. Working as a photographer now is so different than when you started. Do you think it's still possible for a person who is just starting out to tell stories the way you have?

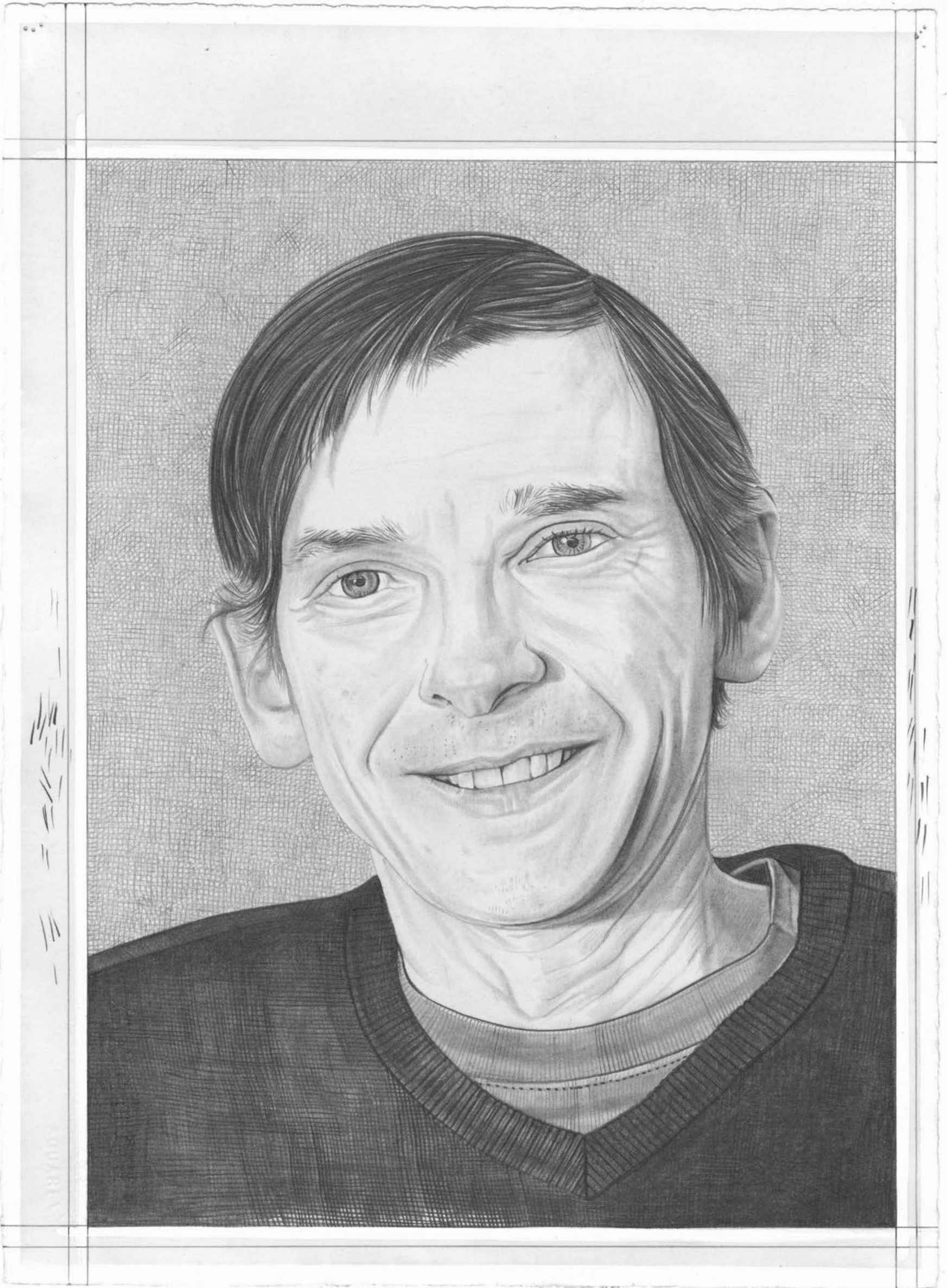
ITURBIDE: Yes, of course! We look at so many images now, in advertising, on television. We are full of images. But when your world is images, this doesn't matter. You still make and develop your work because it is the work of your heart. So yes, if someone wants to tell stories with images and they have the passion and the discipline, then of course they can still do it.

SARA ROFFINO is an ArtSeen editor.



TOP: Graciela Iturbide, *Angelita, Sonoran Desert*, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 1/8 x 12 1/8 inches. © Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy the artist and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

ABOVE: Graciela Iturbide, *Pájaros en el poste, Carretera (Birds on the Post, Highway)*, Guanajuato, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 11 5/8 x 17 1/2 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © Graciela Iturbide. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



MERLIN JAMES

with Louis Block

The painter Merlin James (b.1960, Cardiff, UK) shifts fluently between different modes, from landscape, interior, and still life to figuration and abstraction. He is also a prolific writer on art, contributing to many publications, notably the *Burlington Magazine*. When I first encountered his paintings, I was struck by their ability to engage earnestly with the history of the art form while also pressing ahead. In his varied constructions and shifting surfaces, James considers each part of the canvas, including the stretcher, substrate, and framing device as fundamental elements of painting's language.

James has worked in London, Wales, and New York at various points in his career, but for the past decade has been based out of a house and studio in Glasgow, where he co-founded the exhibition space 42 Carlton Place, mounting exhibitions of Prunella Clough, Serge Charchoune, Christina Ramberg, and Adrian Morris, among others. In the lead up to his next show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., I visited Merlin James at his home studio to see the paintings in progress. The following is edited together from conversations in Glasgow and New York.

LOUIS BLOCK (RAIL): Since we've just looked at the paintings in the studio, let's start by talking about place. There is sometimes an anonymous element in your work, maybe having to do with neutral titles, like *Tree* or *Building*, whereas this new work seems more specific.

MERLIN JAMES: Typically my work has tended towards anonymity, or if there's specificity, it's enigmatic. The viewer is probably not going to speculate on whether this is an object or person or place with a certain significance to me. The difference this time is, well, it's the place where I live. It's the house, and environs, the river in front of the house, and the different spaces. There's a yard behind the house, then the studios, and the ground floor of the house is a showing space where we've put on the exhibitions. And then upstairs in the house are the living quarters, with the windows out onto the river.

RAIL: The Clyde?

JAMES: The Clyde. It's the view I've had for the past ten years, almost. Carol [Rhodes] and I got the place in 2011. I might call the show *River*. Many of the paintings are that motif—the riverbank, with the poplar tree, the buildings on the far bank, the

clock towers, bridges, and often the dredging vessel. One key painting in the show is titled *Dredge*.

RAIL: So what is the reference and the process? Is there a sketching stage?

JAMES: There's no sketching or taking photographs out the window, there isn't even any conscious making of mental notes for when I next go into the studio. (The studio is built on at the back of the house, without windows.)

RAIL: So it's a sustained image over time.

JAMES: It's a familiar remembered image, a cumulative memory, so it's full of inaccuracies and approximations because I'm in the studio just thinking, okay, the church is about here, then the tree comes in front of it and then there's another building here but that's partly obscured by another tree...

And even painting a figure—because the other element in the show will be figure paintings (the occupants of the house, as it were)—even then I don't have a figure in front of me when I paint. And I don't use a photograph or a sketch. I might make drawings to sort of help remember what a figure looks like or how I want the position to be, but I more or less get in front of the canvas and start painting. I just try to constitute the figure and then make it believable to myself and make it real, bring it to life. It's a kind of recuperation process or something.

RAIL: Will they be all new paintings?

JAMES: Yes, they will all be new, which is again unusual for me. Very often with shows I'm showing newly finished works with ones that go way back, because I often work on things and keep things for a long time. But this is work from just the last three or so years.

RAIL: In 2000 and 2001, you made paintings based on 19th century photographs from the Fratelli Alinari firm in Italy. Is that series the only time you've worked directly from photographs?

JAMES: Yes, it is. And even then, I certainly didn't project them onto the canvas, square them up, or transfer them. I didn't have them right there while I was working. I would look at an Alinari photograph and examine it, and then paint it from memory. As soon as you look at the canvas and take your eye off the photograph you're into memory. Those works are good examples of images clearly less personal to me. They were of distant places and times, and sort of longing to belong.

RAIL: In much of your work there is an idea of modesty, perhaps having to do with genre scenes.

JAMES: I'm not sure that has changed so much. I still want to avoid portentousness or self-romanticizing. That also underlies my cautiousness about providing a back story. If in a press release, or in this interview, I even just say "Oh, that tree is the tree in front of the house where I live in Glasgow..." that already changes the way the viewer is invited to look.

The first of these river paintings was shown at Andrew Mummery's project space in Glasgow, and the title of the exhibition was *A View of the River Clyde at Glasgow, 2018*. So it was playing on that convention of a topographical picture, an engraving you would find in a book. Again that's an impersonalizing and genre-fying description, but then that whole balance of the generic and the particular or personal is inherent. We had an event during that show where the poet Harry Gilonis read his translations from classic Chinese poems, about rivers very typically, and landscape views, and of course they're all about partings and de-partings and places remembered and loss and loneliness and so on.

RAIL: You've talked in other interviews about the negotiation between being the painter and stepping back and trying to see a painting as a viewer. Does specificity and "biography" start to impede that ability to separate?

JAMES: It's a classic dilemma for art criticism and aesthetic philosophy, whether the viewer is searching for the artist's biography in a work of art. Should you go to the biography for background information, extra "evidence" in support of your experience of the work? I've tended to be against the biographical interpretation of works of art. With most of the art I'm moved by, I'm not looking at it primarily as a biographical document, of Mondrian or Morandi say, or even Munch, who's thought of as very autobiographical, very confessional. The New Critics of literature, from the early 20th century, have been very important to me in this—their ideas of the "intentional fallacy" and the "biographical fallacy." The brilliance of their readings of works came from freeing the work from the author, in that sense. I'm a big believer in that.

However, there is the famous case of William Empson's late book *Using Biography*, where he does a sort of vault-face and says that in fact the author's biography is crucial, is actually what the reader is trying to access through the work. (I remember talking about all this with R. B. Kitaj in London years ago. He was obsessed with these

Portrait of Merlin James, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



Merlin James, *Dredge*, 2018. Acrylic and mixed materials, 47 3/4 x 84 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

paradoxes.) And maybe I've been having a somewhat similar re-think myself. My last show at Sikkema was called *Paintings for Persons* and had a lot of works dedicated to certain people. So I was already asking some related questions there.

Nevertheless, I still don't want to dictate the reading of my latest paintings by talking too much about, say, what I've been through in the last five years. I still think seeing art too much as a product of the biography of the artist risks closing down the reading and missing the richness of the work, or maybe reading into its meanings that aren't demonstrably there.

RAIL: My experience with the paintings as a viewer is that they seem generous, in terms of not having to come to them with specific references to be able to communicate with them. There's an openness. Most people can relate to being in a landscape, being in an interior, a sexual situation. I think that's what I mean by generous.

JAMES: Maybe it's most generous to withhold biography, and to let viewers bring their own, or bring a broader or more open and metaphoric kind of interpretation. Obviously some of these recent paintings are much less overt than others in terms of the imagery. Some of them are harder to read as representational images. Others are unusually illusionistic for me. That makes a difference as well in the possible readings. And these paintings with figures in them are somewhat new, these figure "compositions" you might say. The painting with the two almost-nude painters was a surprise. I had the blank canvas in the studio while I was working on something else. It was one of those situations where I had some excess paint on the brush and I just unloaded it onto the top edge of the canvas, and then it sat around for a couple more days,

then I painted a face in the top right-hand corner and didn't really think about it. From then on I've got a slight amnesia about painting that image. Normally I can remember making almost every mark of a painting, I can look at a mark on a painting from a long time ago and remember what was on the stereo at the time. But this painting, I've got hardly any memory of actually painting it.

RAIL: Do you have a title yet?

JAMES: I think it's just called *Two Figures*. The foreground figure is like a puppet that's actually being operated by the background figure. I could encourage viewers into a biographical reading by titling it in a way that suggests who those people "really are," whatever that means. But recently I've been writing about a Chardin painting, *A Lady Taking Tea* (1735), and in that text I've been very careful about this question of who the woman was historically, whether she was somebody that Chardin knew or just a model. Again, that painting's just called *A Lady Taking Tea*, it's not called *Portrait of Madame So-and-So*. That's been very much on my mind the whole time of doing these paintings. We might even use a passage from my text as part of the press release for the show. There are parallels with the figure in some of these paintings of mine—someone sitting, seen in profile.

But other artists are important precedents too for the paintings of the river, like Vermeer's *View of Delft* (c. 1660–61), or Hobbema's *Haarlem Lock* (c.1663–65) in the National Gallery in London.

RAIL: I was reading your 1996 interview with Simon Wallis, and in talking about the challenge of being a contemporary painter, you said, related to painting being weighed down by history, "its potentially inhibiting history has to somehow be

its strength." I wondered what it is about painting's history that must be reckoned with, that you're thinking about.

JAMES: My tradition happens to be a Western European tradition, from the 17th century onwards. That's when I start to really feel as if painters are in the same world as me. I'm interested in painting earlier than that, and obviously the 16th century is amazing, but—

RAIL: But that's the beginning of when it becomes possible to empathize with the subject—

JAMES: Yes, with the 17th century I start to feel as if it's my world. Dutch, Spanish, and French, when still life painting gets going and when secular landscape and figuration really get going, separate from religion and aristocracy. Of course art was still very attached to all of that, and that's supposedly a problem, that association with privilege and so on. But painting is not inherently implicated in that, more than any other art. The real burden is more because so much has been done so well, so brilliantly. The world doesn't need more paintings, really. So I think I'm exhausted by the overproduction of art in general, and I dread just adding to that, to the amount of art in the world, just for the sake of it. I'm just trying to make paintings that feel as if they justify their place in the world.

RAIL: It goes back to the idea of modesty, both in subject and in scale. I feel like it's rare to consider the fact that a painting has to end up somewhere, being stored—the reality of that situation.

JAMES: Exactly. These current paintings are probably the biggest I've ever made. I very rarely work on this scale. It's small for a lot of contemporary art, but to me a six foot painting is huge. If I can't pick it up myself and put it on the wall, that's my



Merlin James, *Two Figures*, 2020. Acrylic and mixed materials, 49 × 68 ¾ inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

limit. I've got to be responsible for it myself. I don't want to have to get two people to come and move a painting for me.

RAIL: I know you champion small work—

JAMES: Yes, I do. Of course, it's exhilarating to see big paintings when they're great, it's just that I do get very fatigued with gigantism of... you go around the galleries and a show will be 20 massive paintings in varying colors, but all essentially the same formula. I find it exhausting somehow. These days for a lot of artists it seems to be a default, and a formula—massive output, each new series.

RAIL: And you've always done all the stretching and priming—

JAMES: I think as soon as you cross over into some kind of production, well, I would lose something. I do everything myself, and that's also a check on me going into some overdrive of production.

RAIL: There is this pressure for linear progression in a painter's career. But you hang on to old and new work, and in the studio it's a mixture all up on the wall at the same time. It seems like a more cyclical kind of working. And the motifs recur throughout the work, returning years later.

JAMES: Yes, and things don't go out of date, it's not like "that's a series from two years ago, it's finished. We already showed it..." I'll even put student work into a show. Not because I think everything that I do is great—almost the opposite. I'm not

necessarily much further forward than I was when I was 24. [*Laughter*] I'm still dealing with the same problems, it's a continuous kind of process. But I'm not 24 any more of course, and all these formal and painterly and imagistic and semantic things in the work, things that might have seemed like tropes, well I hope they were never "merely" tropes, and that they build into a language that articulates real personal experience.

RAIL: Talking of your student work, can you say something about your experience at school in London in the '80s, and the art scene there?

JAMES: At the end of the '70s, when I'd just come to London, the feeling was that things were quite stale in painting, quite moribund. There was a lot of tail-end formalist/Minimalist American style, Greenberg style, still a lot of people painting color fields with masking tape, and even tail-end Abstract-Expressionist stuff. Then also there was the School of London: Auerbach, Kossoff, Freud—humanistic, existentialist figuration. So when I saw someone like Adrian Morris, it seemed to be in a territory that was very different, that was interesting. It was isolated individuals, not tendencies, that seemed promising. Prunella Clough was another inspiration, and Sidney Nolan.

I got to the Royal College in '83. By then we were getting the Neo-Expressionist thing, the trans-avantgarde thing from Italy—this short-lived period of big figurative referential painting. Salle and Schnabel were big from America, and

Clemente, Kiefer, Lupertz, Baselitz, Penck. I didn't relate to that much either.

RAIL: What about the push away from painting?

JAMES: That was another thing, I was just talking about the painting scene. But yes, conceptualism was very strong in the '70s, and there were schools where painting was marginalized. When I very first went to art school I was enamored of Duchamp and I probably bought the post-painting view, that it was at some sort of end. In '78, before I started the degree course, I did things like an installation with a can of paint that poured from six feet high into a can of paint below, and it was probably supposed to be about the death of painting. But that was a momentary adolescent dalliance, and I quite quickly realized that I wanted the physicality inherent to painting.

RAIL: I wanted to talk about the materiality as well, the surface texture, especially with the collaged elements and the hair mixed into the paint. Is there a consistent source for the hair?

JAMES: It's my hair, I suppose, and my partner's hair, I've kept hair from when we had haircuts. [*Laughter*] I keep lots of crap in the studio, hair and fur and sawdust. If I sweep the studio floor and put the dirt into a pan it might end up in paint, or I sieve it. There's lots of stuff mixed into the paint that is not normal. You could make much of that, and say "my God, the artist's own DNA is in the work," or "the artist actually mixed his partner's



Merlin James, *The Window*, 2020. Acrylic and mixed materials, 59 ½ × 82 ¼ inches. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

hair into the work, and every substance of his home and studio, that's incredibly emotive." Or you could say it's just substances that are available. [Laughter]

RAIL: And the "finish"—if you want to call it that—is never really sensuous in the way you'd expect some painting to be.

JAMES: I'm quite resistant to, say, a kind of lyricism or easy sensuality or luxuriance of paint as a material, an "expressive medium."

RAIL: Leaving the history of the object itself in there to be read versus hiding the struggle with it... But then some paintings don't look nearly as worked over as others.

JAMES: Sometimes they're quick, sometimes they're slow and a big struggle. Sometimes there's been a big struggle but it's not where you think, like the black painting (*Night*, 2018–19), the big struggle was making the frame somehow, or getting the frame right, but then the paint on the surface was very quick. They're all about letting the raw material be seen to be in the process of transforming into... not into the image exactly, but into the work of art. Once you put a frame on a painting that's a kind of declaration. In theory, it's a declaration that the painting is now finished, can be declared to be a work of art. It can have a frame put on it. Which is of course not how it works, but that's the convention.

RAIL: I'm interested in knowing more about the structural decisions, how the paintings get built up.

JAMES: Well it often starts earlier than the application of any paint. I consider the painting started when I start making the stretcher really, even though I've usually not preconceived at that point anything about what the painting is going to be, and I might make a few stretchers at once, like a little stock of stretchers. But more often I just make one and that's the start of the work.

RAIL: So the size comes before the image?

JAMES: Yes, usually. I may have a notion of what I want to do on it, but I may have a completely open mind. And then, how thick the timber is, and all sorts of details about how I make it, already start to dictate the character of it. Then picking the kind of fabric that I'm going to stretch is significant as well. In some ways it's completely contingent and pragmatic, if I've got a lot of certain weight of cotton duck, or linen, or hessian. That decision dictates a lot—as soon as you stretch the fabric over the stretcher it's already got a lot of character. Then I go straight to acrylic paint of some sort, but I might coat the whole surface or not. That decision might be to do with anticipating what image is going to emerge. But things change quite radically in most of the paintings. The black painting was all about making the frame really, and the frame was a huge struggle. It's made of plexi and wood and funny materials. All the frames are very odd—sort

of funny salvaged material, and they're made fairly crudely with these simple miter saws. I work on the frame and the painting at the same time—I don't make a distinction. The physical making is sort of everything, dictates everything, more than the other way around. Rather than my setting out with something that needs making or saying or depicting. It's much more as if the means are the momentum. A huge amount of the meaning comes through how it's made.

RAIL: Especially with the paintings of the swing figures, where the hanging mechanism becomes the image. With all the transparent frame paintings, like those two shows ago at Sikkema Jenkins, the actual material fact of the painting and then what is represented on the surface, there's a metaphoric connection between them. You could say that the transparent frame paintings become windows, for example.

JAMES: That's right, there's that interior/exterior dialogue going on. I've often got plexiglass in the structure of the frame, so where you expect to have a glazed frame that you look through to see the painting, the glass is displaced into the frame structure, and you look through the frame and see the wall behind it, and there are holes in the painting as well. The windows in the paintings are also like eyes actually, sort of looking back at the viewer or the world. There's a feeling the buildings are looking.

RAIL: We had talked before about art-form specificity, and you being very firmly a painter. Even though there are sculptural, built, three-dimensional elements, they're in the language of painting. You are interested in pushing and exploring those boundaries of painting as an art-form without necessarily crossing over. Can we define what those boundaries are, what actually begins on the other side? Maybe it's not necessarily sculpture. You might be equally thinking about literature, or music.

JAMES: That's right. I'm skeptical of the idea of "post-medium" or medium non-specificity. Although of course art-forms can't be defined and demarcated precisely, and they have to keep changing and being tested and explored, and yes there's cross fertilization. I'm into different sorts of art-forms, as anybody might be. I think about poetry a lot and think about the analogies between what goes on in a poem or a song or novel, and what goes on in a painting. But there's something quite useful about the clear gap between them all as art-forms. They each have their own culture. Whereas the mixing up of forms in mixed-medium or post-medium fine art is not so intriguing to me. Thinking of art as one big undifferentiated field seems like generalizing, as if scientists were to practice all kinds of science at once.

RAIL: There are plenty of distinctions, types, within painting, and within your paintings. How often do the paintings change categories? Maybe, for example, a landscape turns into an erotic scene.

JAMES: That happens all the time. Things change completely, sometimes jumping from type to type, but sometimes morphing.

RAIL: In a way the shapes themselves become motifs, not the objects.

JAMES: Yes, that's right. There's a morphology that I'm not necessarily looking to resolve each time into types—an erotic one, an architectural one, an abstract one, for example. I might even be resisting that to an extent. Everything can turn into something else. That vertical oval shape, that has been in the work forever, it can either just be itself, as a sort of not-abstract-not-figurative configuration, or it can emerge within imagery (a tree, a bird...). And these dots or spots or circles, they can be a clock face or a physical hole in the canvas, a porthole, an eye, a knot in wood. So it's all quite fluid.

RAIL: Where do the swinging figures come from in the two transparent paintings, among others?

JAMES: Those paintings depict toys from India that are in the house, in the window from which that view of the river can be seen. They are on the windowsill, and beyond them there's the view to the river and bridges and so on. One is a little tin clockwork toy of two children, and they swing back and forth on the swings and the hands go round on a clock. The other one is a very cheap plastic cage with two birds hanging on little threads. They're a few rupees, these kind of toys.

RAIL: Are you thinking about art historical precedents for that kind of figure? Fragonard, for example, with the swinging figure.

JAMES: The emblem-like quality of something like a swing or a birdcage is so evident. They're obviously metaphorical things. A birdcage is inevitably about freedom and enclosure or entrapment, and these swinging children with the hands of the clock turning, they're very, if not allegorical, potentially symbolic. At the same time they're toys. Chardin, again, has the painting of the child and the spinning top, or the girl with the shuttlecock, the house of cards. Objects are resonant, vanitas still lifes as well—hourglasses or candles. These pictures of mine are a combination of still life and landscape, with the landscape beyond the window and the still life in the window.

RAIL: Is your idea of success in the paintings and of finish in the paintings shifting at all?

JAMES: I don't think so. One might have expected that it would, because if these paintings are more personal or whatever, if there's a kind of emotional content for me greater or more specific than in the past, you might expect the way I'm judging them to change. Which might be a dangerous thing, because they could start being therapeutic for me, and I could start mistaking their efficacy as therapy for their merit as works of art. That's precisely the sort of anxiety that surrounds this whole question of biography.

RAIL: There is also the question of viewership, since they're being shown so far away from where they're made and what they're depicting.

JAMES: Yes, Andrew Mummery's space, where we showed *Dredge*, is a couple streets from here, close to the motif, and the audience were mostly very familiar with the topography. This dredger is a familiar sight on the river, and it's painted that bright green yellow. People know it and recognized it. I think there's even a somber association, because people jump in the river (there are often bunches of flowers tied to these rails later), and the lifeboat and emergency services come out and often the dredger seems to appear then as well. I don't know if it's actually used with recovering bodies, but I think it probably is. There is something somber about the dredger, pushing its barge ahead of it, into which it drops what it dredges up.

RAIL: Maybe mood is what we're circling around. Without the biographical, without the familiarity of the motif, barring all of that, maybe that is the thing that the viewer can identify with.

JAMES: I think people do get a mood off these paintings, and they get that it's not exuberant. It's not depressed but it's elegiac, people are getting that. But even then, there can be alternative takes. There is a painting that I think of as the full moon painting, a lunar painting, but people sometimes think that it's the sun. In my head that's a sort of nighttime painting with a very bright moon. In Glasgow we have nights in the summer where the sky is light almost all night. And this painting has a very grey, milky kind of light.

Then some people find the current imagery charming, or whimsical, rather than mournful.

RAIL: What about humor or irony? Maybe we could talk about that in the earlier paintings.

JAMES: Definitely, and I think there's humor all the way through, hopefully, of various types. I

think wit in art is essential. The term "irony" is way overused, and used as a pejorative or as a synonym for cynicism or parody, but irony as a form of humor, almost, is absolutely axiomatic for painting. The creation of an image or an illusion in a two-dimensional medium, for one thing, is a sort of inherently ironic paradox almost from the beginning, and the notion of content within a container that has actually zero space to contain except an illusionistic space... And then there's the condition of time, the stasis of painting, the fact that painting is a non-moving medium but it can—or has to—allude to time. Precisely because it is sort of outside time, there's an ironic relationship to our condition experiencing the painting in time... So, there's all of those things. Of course they're not side-splittingly hilarious issues. [Laughter] But there can be actual funniness too, funny ha-ha-ha-ha. Somebody laughed at one of my paintings recently, of a baggage carousel. I was pleased.

RAIL: Lots of your paintings have stuck in my mind, but for some reason the tiny one of the dredger just by itself (*Dredging*, 2018) sticks out. It totally operates on that somber level, but maybe the reason it's staying with me is because of the scale. It can also be a little funny. It's like a little toy. Something, too, about the insignificance against the forces of nature.

JAMES: Yes, the pathos. Pathos is close to humor isn't it? Pathos is both tragic and comic, and also that dredger is painted this bright yellow green, these colors of, I don't know...

RAIL: Like a Tonka toy.

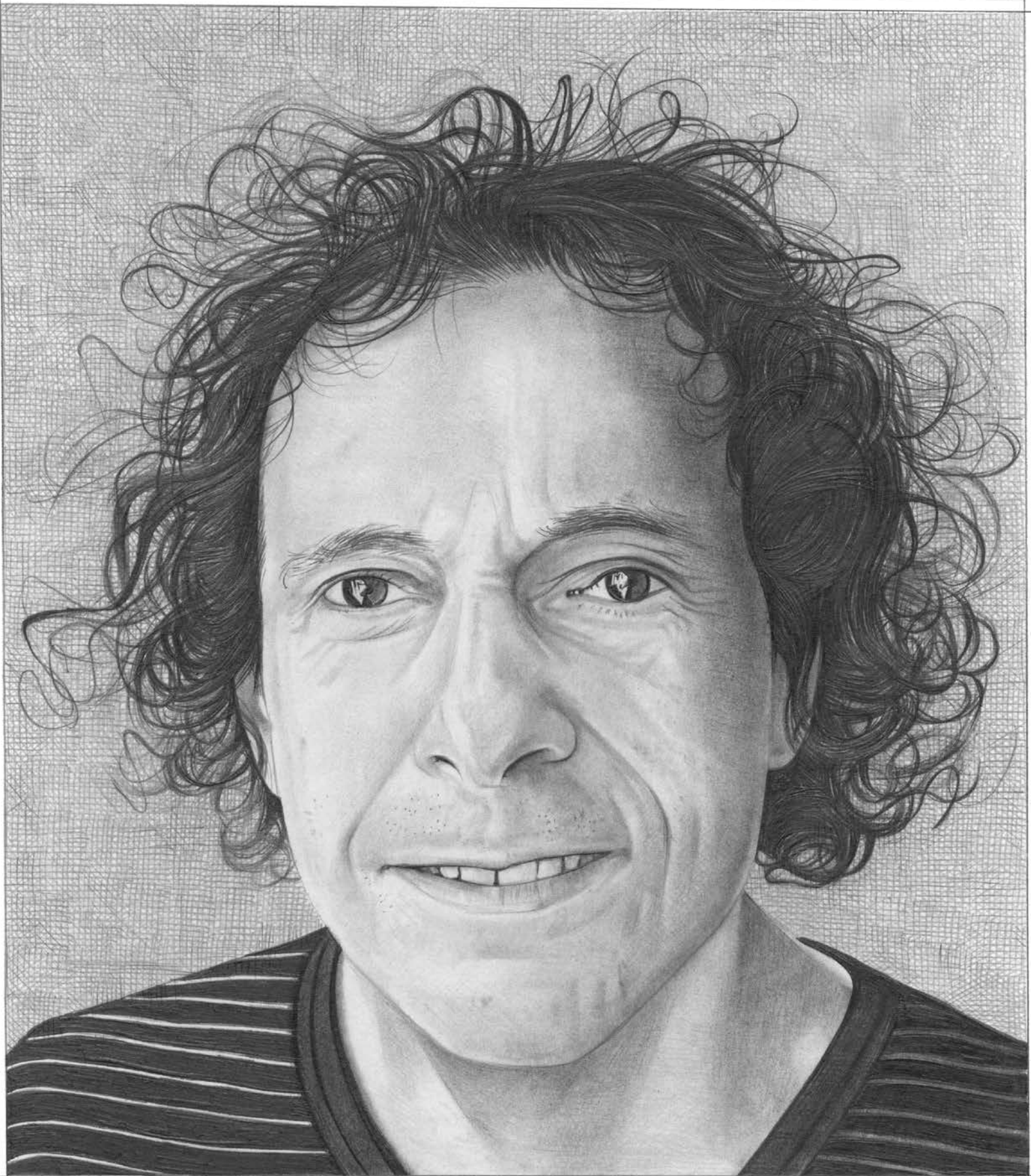
JAMES: Yes, so that painting and the Indian toys and others, they have the toys sharing the picture plane with the dredger and the buildings and cranes across the river of about the same scale, so the real things and the toys become the same. I guess that's something art often does, in different ways—makes the real artificial and the artificial real.

RAIL: Given the current crisis, the show has been postponed, and the work is still with you in Glasgow. Do you have further reflections on the now finished body of paintings?

JAMES: It's very strange indeed. I'm emailing this from that same window, with that view of the river. The odd car or jogger is going by on the far side, but there's hardly a soul out there, which echoes a bit how unpopulated my paintings of that scene are, and how that affects the atmosphere. Plus I'm sort of stuck here in the house, a bit as we were when I was first making these paintings, actually.

Downstairs the paintings are all stacked around the walls, where they've been waiting to be picked up for New York. We don't know when that will be now. Maybe it's good at least that the show didn't open only to get overtaken by these events (lots of artists have suffered that, of course). And meanwhile, yes, I have some more time now to take in the paintings, on their home ground. Some people here are able to get a preview, too. For example some friends, who know the back story, are seeing the paintings. Before they go out and mean whatever they mean in the wider world. I think some of the intimacy will survive.

LOUIS BLOCK is a painter based in Brooklyn.



CRAIG KALPAKJIAN

with Yasi Alipour

Craig Kalpakjian is often remembered as one of the first artists to critically engage with the digital realm. In his early work, he created computer generated renderings of artificial spaces that appeared as banal photographs depicting institutional spaces devoid of people. The results were eerie. One was made to face the familiarity of the hallways; to recognize that these architectures have always been designed to isolate, alienate, and erase people; to acknowledge that as spectators of this work, one was already familiar with the sense of surveillance. For more than two decades, Kalpakjian has continued to closely engage with technology and make works that lead us to ask the haunting questions of our era of neo-liberal Capitalism: the technologies of power, surveillance, and control.

I met Craig in his studio in Queens. In preparation of his upcoming exhibition at Kai Matsumiya, (now rescheduled for September), the luminous studio was filled with works, past and present. We walked from one room to the next as he generously introduced each work. As I was fully taken by the visual allure of his work, we began discussing our shared interest in squares—and the frustration that comes with that. Ultimately, we found ourselves sitting, surrounded by his thought-provoking work, and delved into a long conversation revolving around politics, systems, student protests, graveyard maps, and Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, and much more.

Little did we know that much would change within a week. What followed is common-place these days: health concerns, social distancing, cancellations, rescheduling, and ultimately a Zoom conversation. The irony was not lost on either one of us. So, we used the virtual platform—to be suspect these days—to finally bring the interview to reality. What follows is the result and accordingly, it is haunting and funny, square and anti-capitalist, playful and abstract, technical and literal, with crooked utopias and OCD, and much more. It is a snippet of all that is the essence of Kalpakjian's practice.

Portrait of Craig Kalpakjian, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

YASI ALIPOUR (RAIL): I would like to start our conversation by borrowing a few words Dierich Diederichsen used in his essay for Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst recent retrospective of Cady Noland: "the architecture of demarcation, of public enclosure, of guiding, of control."

The words for me are a very interesting way of thinking about your practice. In first glance, your work speaks the language of abstraction and makes reference to the legacy of minimalism. But then with a closer look, one finds that they are unearthing questions that are much closer to the words above. I would like us to start with your "L7" series. Here you specifically engage with Josef Albers and his squares. And yet the work also refers to your iconic early works that focused on renderings of institutional spaces emptied of people. I know Cady Noland has been a big influence for you. Can you tell us when you were first introduced to her work?

CRAIG KALPAKJIAN: I first saw Cady Noland's work in the late '80s at Colin de Land's gallery, American Fine Arts, where I had also exhibited in a group show. Her major installation at the 1991 Whitney Biennial remains a touchstone, and for me this was part of a re-examination of minimalism and the sculptural legacy of the '60s. Noland's recent exhibition in Frankfurt was a great opportunity to be reminded of these issues in her work and how

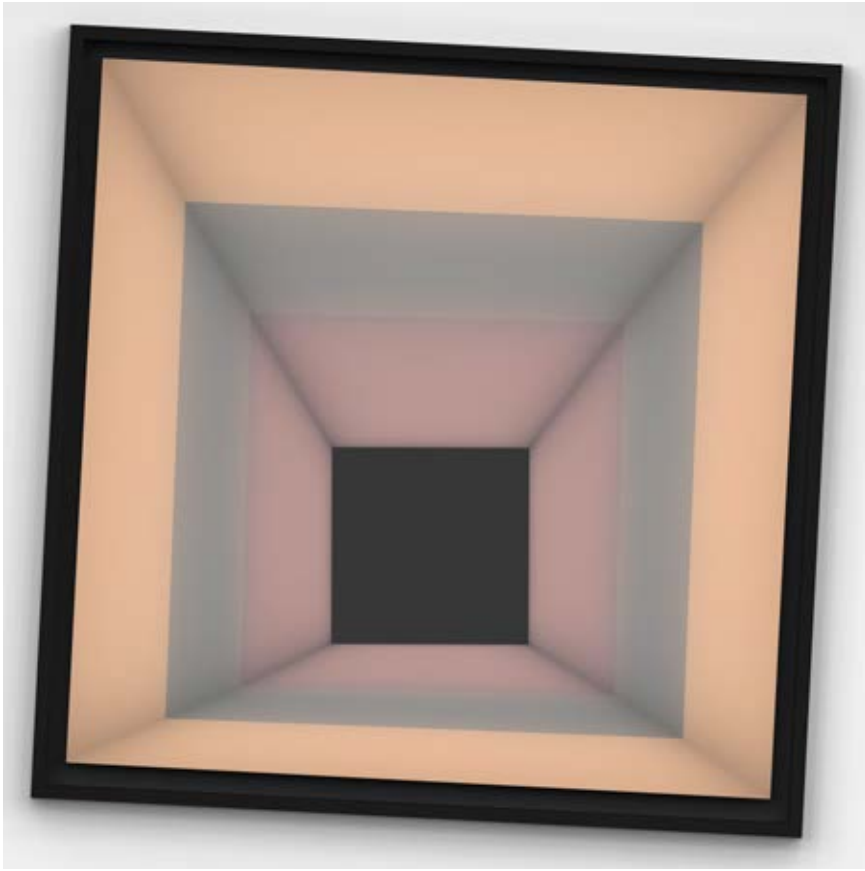
important they were to me at the time, especially with the relative absence of the work from public exhibition, and the rarity of seeing it in the US or New York in the last ten years. It's also interesting that a few of the more recent appraisals and reviews talk specifically about her family history as the daughter of the Color field painter, Kenneth Noland. Quite understandably, she plays that down, but it's undeniable that this is part of the position she's working from.

I do feel like when I started making installation and sculpture, I was part of this larger reappraisal of the legacy of minimalism that was going on in my generation. There *were* actually many social issues being confronted in minimalist work right from the start, but the predominant reading was formalist. I think that's one of the reasons Donald Judd, among others, rejected the term minimalism. One of the great things about the new Judd exhibit at MoMA is the insistence that his work was about space. Robert Morris is another prime example. My focus was certainly on the space around my work, but I was thinking about an almost literal charge to the space—in terms of whether it is protected, isolated, confined—by using functional protective barriers. I was also working with objects that could function as weapons, which is something that definitely bleeds into what Noland was doing, a powerful, aggressive adoption of the vocabulary of minimalism. Someone wrote of her creating a language or vocabulary with her work, and looking back I do feel like she opened up the space in which I was working—it's a really good way of describing how I saw my work functioning. The sense of disruption and disequilibrium is very much what I continue to be working with, taking geometric abstraction and doing something else with it related to control and power.

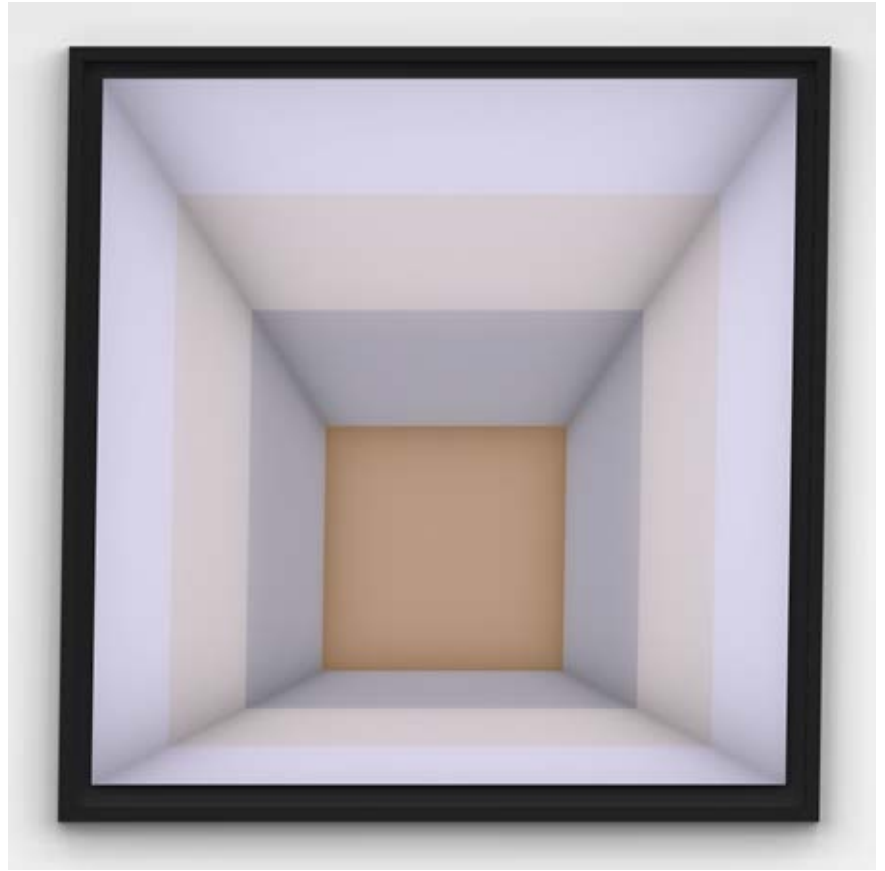
RAIL: Thinking about the vocabulary, can you tell us more about the title of your series "L7"?

KALPAKJIAN: The term "L7" was 1960s slang for calling a person "square." In the '80s there was a great girl grunge band called L7, but the term was originally a kind of hippie code. You could call a person an "L7" and they might not know you were calling them a square, or you'd say: "something is so L7." [*Laughter*]

The works in the "L7" series are a direct reference to Albers's "Homage to the Square" (1950–1976), but you know, even Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) is famously not exactly square, so I was thinking: *what is not square; what is off?* The ways that the square can be off but still be more or less read as a square, and it can sort of activate our desire to correct it. It's been said that in his writings, Mondrian is looking toward a "perfectly equilibrated future society," that art could help "straighten out society's crookedness and inequality... that he wants to reach out to the world, offer a helping hand." It does make me think of the OCD response of straightening a work hanging askew, that desire to correct something that looks off. I know many artists have had the experience of hanging work in architecture that is never perfect, and I recall having an argument with a gallerist in Germany who insisted that the work be hung according to a level—even though, because the floor was not level, it looked more correct to hang it in line with the floor.



Craig Kalpakjian, *L7 #3*, 2019. Inkjet print, 35 1/4 x 35 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist.



Craig Kalpakjian, *L7 #7*, 2019. Inkjet print, 35 1/4 x 35 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

RAIL: That reminds me of my first visit to your studio. The “L7” series was the first work I encountered in person. And my brain really wanted to “level” it, to fix it, to correct it, to straighten it out!

KALPAKJIAN: Exactly. And I’ve often felt that myself, even in public places or other people’s houses or offices.

RAIL: The reference you made to Mondrian is so interesting. The old utopian dream of “correcting” the “crooked” and your squares that are stubbornly unlevelled, impossible to correct, outside of utopia. It’s interesting to think about Malevich and Mondrian. What about Albers himself?

KALPAKJIAN: Well you have these earlier 20th century geometric abstract artists, so many of which were clearly utopian. But it’s hard to make a utopian argument about Albers, as much as I admire his work. And it’s hard to put it beside someone like Ad Reinhardt whose lifelong political commitment is well documented, even if he didn’t want his paintings to be read in that context. Personally, I can’t help but do it, and I think it adds to the work, but I think he was interested in purity in a different way. Still, the absolute negation of Reinhardt’s black paintings, the difficulty and the resistance of that work, is something that I feel is beyond anything Albers attempted. It puts it on a different level for me.

RAIL: You know, it’s also interesting to think of Albers as a character moving through history, from Bauhaus to Black Mountain, to Yale—which perhaps is the point of conforming to the institution?

KALPAKJIAN: Well the question becomes what we’re left with, what we’re to do with these utopian ideas at this point in history. The utopian aim I find absolutely beautiful and compelling, but of course it’s hard. [Laughter] It’s hard in 2020 to maintain these utopian beliefs. We can no longer

believe in progress or utopias in the same way. We don’t believe in revolution, but at the same time, we’ve seen functioning institutions that we depend on taken apart, corroded by disbelief. We’re confined by institutions, but I’d still wish to hold on to some sense that we *can* correct them, that we’re not just slipping backwards. If we still want to believe in questioning, critique, justice, some kind of “Democracy to come”... the righting of wrongs... will we always just be correcting what’s once again become crooked?

RAIL: The old utopian desires and our era of the “almost square” and it’s crooked-ness. You know as we’re thinking about abstraction, politics, and finally architecture, I want to pause on one of your early works: the “HVAC” series. There too, your images speak the language of abstraction. Yet, what you are focusing on is the interior of HVAC systems. So, there we have it, squares and these invisible structures of (or the desire for) control. I would like to hear more about your relationship with architecture in general and to start to think about power and control in your work?

KALPAKJIAN: Those ideas really were the impetus of these image works, the computer generated renderings that I began in the early ’90s. They come directly out of my installation works, which were mostly free standing sculpture, (though some of them were attached to the wall). Those works referenced the context that they were in, the architecture around them. I was thinking about institutional architecture and the architecture of control—crowd control, passage, flow, and threat management—or you might say threat containment. Some of these ideas were just emerging at the time, and it was beginning to be talked about and theorized at an academic level throughout the ’90s. But of course, there were some thinkers who were exploring it earlier. I was also thinking about insides and outsides, boundaries. I often mention the significance of systems-theory in my work, and

the delineation of the inside (“the system”) and the outside (“the environment”) that’s fundamental to the analysis of a functioning system. The question is always where you draw that line and define the system. In all of this—crowd control, containment, even just the architecture, obviously—these boundary issues are absolutely crucial. In the “HVAC” works I wanted the air ducts to call some of this into question. The HVAC system functions as a double-negative in a way: it’s the inside of the inside, which is connected to the outside. You’re inside a room, and the HVAC system is even further inside the building—it’s inside a wall. But it’s also the way out, connected to the outside where air is brought in from. Another thing that a lot of these images evoke is the narrative trope from science fiction and action films of actually escaping through the air ducts of the HVAC system. And then with these duct systems—with their grates and filters—there’s this idea or fantasy of almost dissolving, “becoming molecular” [Laughs], dematerializing your body and being able to pass through, if not a wall, then a vent.

RAIL: Somehow the thought of the double negative makes me think of your dilemma with the unlevelled imperfect “L7”, to be almost-the-square that fails at being a square and refuses to be corrected. But I’m really intrigued by how you framed the recurring theme of the HVAC escape scene. I never thought that the sci-fi trope is why the interior of the HVAC systems and all the air ducts is so familiar to our social psyche.

I want us to take a moment to discuss your recent Monograph *Intelligence*. To start, you have included Deleuze’s essay, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1992). It seems to be pivotal to so much of what we have discussed so far.

KALPAKJIAN: Yes, I think the essay is absolutely seminal. Especially regarding much of the thought about architecture that I was talking about. It goes back to Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975)

and his thinking about spaces of containment, spaces of discipline, like the panopticon prison. It's also fascinating that Foucault was theorizing the neoliberal state back in the '70s, when it was really just being born. Deleuze takes Foucault's late seminars and elaborates on them. This essay in particular is also quite playful, and for that reason it seemed appropriate for this catalogue, in relation to my installation *Black Box* (2002). Here, Deleuze begins to think beyond the society of discipline and control to the more contemporary issue of self-control. Like the neoliberal model where we're all seen as human capital and we're encouraged to view ourselves in that way. It acknowledges that the hard control structures are absolutely still functioning, but at the same time, we see them surpassed by the virtual; by self-control and how we've internalized these structures. Beyond the domination of the state we become our own police.

RAIL: That speaks so clearly to your project *Black Box* which is the focus of *Intelligence*. In that project, you used a product produced by Sony, the AIBO robot. You took the robot designed to behave like a dog—and its artificial intelligence designed to adapt to its owner—and placed it in confinement. The installation focused on the dog's daily photographic diary from the insides of his empty white cube. The viewers only saw the exterior of the cell and the abstract photos produced by the imprisoned robot. In the monograph, I was so taken by your text piece where you combine AIBO's manual with an Interrogation manual produced by the Headquarters of the Department of the Army. AIBO's manual opens with this sentence "The AIBO robot is the name which Sony has given to its family of entertainment robots, robots that are designed with the goal of presenting a vision for a new type of lifestyle in which human beings derive enjoyment from mutual existence with robotic creatures." The *Intelligence* Interrogation manual opens with "This manual provides doctrinal guidance, techniques, and procedures governing the employment of human intelligence (HUMINT) collection and analytical assets in support of the commander's intelligence needs" The juxtaposition is haunting. And that's only the beginning. In another interview you contemplated the author of each of these texts.

KALPAKJIAN: Right, that was an unexpected question. Bob Nickas asked that at the end of our interview. It's not something that I had explicitly thought about but it's relevant, and in a way another exercise in virtual thinking. Imagining the writer of the text is similar to imagining the robot dog confined inside the box.

RAIL: This piece of yours for me encapsulates so much of the legacy of the 2000s (and the American invasions in the Middle East). The same way that Noland's is such a mirror to the '90s. I noticed somewhere that her Paula Cooper exhibition—with the iconic piece with the Manson girls—had happened right before the O.J. Simpson fiasco.

KALPAKJIAN: The timing of *Black Box* is also interesting because of the lag from the initial installation in 2002 and its reiteration in 2013. The way it was seen and the flavor of the work itself became quite different—the more sinister readings that



Craig Kalpakjian, *Projection, Reflection, Structure, Structure*, 2017. Dimensions variable, Inkjet on paper, mirror, lighting truss, moving head spotlight. Installation view, Kai Matsumiya Gallery, 2017. Courtesy the artist.

initially remained implicit became unavoidable by 2013. The focus in the first installation was on artificial intelligence and an almost abstract idea of confinement, as well as the absurdity of confining a mechanical toy, or using it in a psychological experiment. It was more of a type of reverse engineering, an examination of programming and artificial intelligence. When the same work was reinstalled in 2013, the association with solitary confinement, interrogation, and torture—issues in the news at the time—came out more. How the functional objectivity of the experiment might relate to that became an issue, even if it remained absurd to be thinking about this in relation to a toy robot. What was originally below the surface in the work became more explicit, and the playfulness becomes quite disturbing. With the juxtaposition of the manuals, I'm kind of running with that ominous playfulness and letting it take its course.

RAIL: I think it is fascinating to think about the space of playfulness and humor in your work, even though you deal with subjects as formal as the legacy of abstraction or as loaded as political power and control—and to go back to where we started (with the quote on Noland's work)—the violence that is in surveillance, control, architecture, and abstraction!

KALPAKJIAN: I think that the question of abstraction in all of its divergent meanings is really

paramount—there's dimensional abstraction, there's mathematical abstraction, there's social abstraction. Any kind of systems thinking involves an abstraction. There's a level of abstraction to language also. It's both confusing and fascinating.

RAIL: I think confusing and fascinating is the right place to be right now.

KALPAKJIAN: Absolutely. *[Laughs]*

RAIL: Something that for me was brought to the surface in *Intelligence* was the idea of consumer technology. You are one of the only artists I know who deals with technology and yet isn't dedicated to one of the two ends of the spectrum: the high-end technology or the copy-left, open-source alternatives. The technology in your work is stubbornly middle class. You work with what has been designed to be consumed. I think considering your project, *Projection, Reflection, Structure, Structure* (2017) is a good place for us to discuss this.

The piece consists of an Ink Jet print and a mirror installed in a corner, and a moving spotlight that is programmed to project on the print. The result is that the print and the mirrored image are transformed into this mesmerizing abstract work. Can you tell more about the project itself? I'm also interested in how all this ties in with what



Craig Kalpakjian, *Silent Running*, 2019–2020. Dual Moving Head Spotlight, DMX controller, Houseplant, Lighting truss and base, surveillance mirror, watering can, 51 x 50 x 28 inches. Courtesy the artist.

we have been discussing so far, the violence of the mundane in our Neoliberal world.

KALPAKJIAN: There's something I find interesting with readily available, consumer-grade technology. Things might come to market very rapidly now, but consumer technology is still slightly aged, not so new that it's unfamiliar or subject to the same fantastic claims. There's something about its pragmatic nature. Since it is commercial, it is seen as a solution to a practical problem that actually has a market. Too often artists end up being used in some way to validate research and technology—whether it's commercial or something that ends up connected to the military-industrial complex. There's also something perversely liberating about taking something that's widely available and using it for the wrong purposes. Rather than having something designed for you and then promoted by a corporation, you're instead taking a product and adapting it to another need. Then there's the specifics of this technology, the technology of entertainment, which initially seems a strange conjunction but is a huge market today. It always reminds me of Slavov Žižek's comment that "the

fundamental ethical injunction today is to enjoy ourselves." Entertainment, the production and consumption of "content", becomes a major motor of capitalism.

RAIL: It's interesting, I wonder if you are misusing these products or using them to their logical absurd conclusion, like the AIBO. Supposedly Sony's AIBO project failed since they stopped producing it. But of course, isn't Roomba the exact same idea, perhaps now minus the façade of entertainment.

KALPAKJIAN: Yes—and in my work *Bios-fear* (2016), I did use a Roomba, which roamed the gallery space with a small plexiglass enclosure filled with live cockroaches attached to the top of it. And the Roomba is made by a company that makes military robots as well.

RAIL: Woah, I had no idea! The military-industrial complex is of course at the heart of the *Black Box* project.

KALPAKJIAN: The text project with the user's manual and the army intelligence manual is very

much indebted to Harun Farocki, who, besides being very interested in labor, was especially critical of the military-industrial complex and its use of technology. He was very aware of the crossover between gaming/entertainment and the military use of 3-D technology, even the way that games are used by the military. The military technology is redeployed in consumer games that are violent in a more mundane way. His examination of all of that, as well as the labor involved on both ends was absolutely inspirational for me. Along with the analysis of the "entertainment industry", which I think comes out of the Frankfurt School, and the enormous importance of this in terms of where we are today with the late-capitalist, post-consumer world, and the function of both the artist and the "end user," the consumer of content that we all are at the same time. Which is unfortunately the endpoint, and also could more and more become simply the end of culture as we have known it, seeing art not as culture but as product, as simply entertainment—almost as pacification.

RAIL: Now that you have brought up labor, I would like us to shift our focus to *Silent Running* (2019). This work consists of moving spotlights, a surveillance mirror, and a houseplant. It's another one of your projects where the idea really took me as well as the visuality of it. The plant is lit by the spotlight and grows. The viewer is implicated both by the mirror—which is how we see half of the "sculpture"—and by the way the lights move, almost mimicking a surveillance camera. Something that stood out to me in reading Deleuze in relation to your work was the idea of the continuity in the systems of control—in comparison to disciplinary power which is corrective and punitive. To use Deleuze's example, in regard to education, in systems of control, one no longer graduates, you are trained and always in need of further training. I'm interested in the idea of labor and the exhaustion of the insular closed system you have built here.

KALPAKJIAN: It presents itself as a closed system but of course it's also absolutely not closed. It needs power and it needs water. In this sense it needs care, which I like. It has to be watered weekly, which is hopefully not going to be so difficult while we're quarantining.

RAIL: I was actually worried about this piece. [Laughter]

KALPAKJIAN: Me too. There's someone who's living in my studio building who can come water it, so it's okay for now. The piece is named after a '70s apocalyptic sci-fi film starring Bruce Dern that I saw as a child and remember loving. A greenhouse is sent out to space because things can no longer grow on Earth. A number of technicians are with them to run the ship and care for the plants. They struggle among themselves, and with corporate cutbacks—and it's all set to a theme song by Joan Baez.

RAIL: Amazing! I did not see that coming!

KALPAKJIAN: [Laughing] Yes! There's robots with AI that are cheating at card games while they're playing with the caretakers. Some very nice details. That's what the title of my work refers to, but the sculpture itself is another case of putting into action a system that has some degree

of isolation. Another recurring system that's self-sustaining to some degree, but also has a sense of foreseeable failure as the plant overgrows the sculpture, and the inevitable pathos that's involved with that. Along with the absurdity, this time, of using entertainment lights as grow lights, with the subtle implication that we're entertaining the plant as well as maintaining it.

RAIL: You know I just noticed that even in the documentations of *Silent Running* (2019), if you look closely, you'll find the watering can.

KALPAKJIAN: Yes. There are automatic self-watering systems for gardens that you can hook up to a hose with a timer, but the fact that the watering can is there is a simple reminder that this system still obviously has to be cared for. It's an important part of the sculpture.

RAIL: I think what is interesting about your relationship with technology is that you are not just a polite user, you really get into the mechanics of the machine and play with its logic. I noticed somewhere, that in part of your education, you focused on Physics. Do you think that comes into play in your work? I was also taken by Deleuze saying: "Types of machines are easily matched with each type of society—not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them. The old societies of sovereignty made use of simple machines—levers, pulleys, clocks; but the recent disciplinary societies equipped themselves with machines involving energy, with the passive danger of entropy and the active danger of sabotage; the societies of control operate with machines of a third type, computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses."

KALPAKJIAN: Yes, and as an artist using the computer it was always important to me to remain skeptical of this desire for control. It's part of the seductiveness of technology that I think always needs to be questioned.

In studying physics, I was most interested in Relativity and Quantum physics, which have a level of abstraction that you don't find in classical mechanics.

RAIL: That's fascinating. It seems to me that classical physics and mechanics is more of a tool in how you manipulate material and poke fun at a lot of things. I was just thinking about the idea of movement and machines in general. Do you think about the relationship of your work with the figure? It's uncanny how the moving machines become bodily for me.

KALPAKJIAN: Most often I would say it's a question of the viewer filling in an absence of the body, the relationship to the body that's viewing the object, but it's true, there's also the body of the machine. Especially with their movements and lenses, they become more figurative. I'm thinking particularly of another piece that I'm working on now that uses surveillance cameras mounted on top of a kind of column, that could be seen figuratively, but even in *Projection, Reflection, Structure, Structure*, the device I use is called a "Moving Head" spotlight!

RAIL: Really? [Laughs]

KALPAKJIAN: Yes! There are what's called scanning spotlights, where the light is stationary and there's a mirror that moves, but the Moving Heads, where the light and lens move and pivot are a really particular thing, and they do have an anthropomorphic quality. I remember being transfixed by these spotlights at music concerts. It's also curious that the movement of the AIBO, its limbs, joints, and pivot points are referred to as having "multiple degrees of freedom." This allows it to move in ways resembling a dog. The moving head spotlights pivot on two axes, so they have two degrees of freedom, allowing them to point in every direction. This movement becomes a kind of choreography. That's certainly part of its attraction.

RAIL: Once again, I'm totally taken with the naming, "two degrees of freedom" and "moving heads." Both would make good band names, I think.

KALPAKJIAN: For a band I might prefer "No degrees of freedom"!

RAIL: Well played! To return to an earlier idea, the question of labor and the exhausted machines, or this idea of use or misuse, function or malfunction, I would like to shift our focus to one of your recent pieces, *Goal Less* (2020). In this one you have another closed circuit, with Daylight LED Light Panels that shine on a portable solar panel which in turn charges a lithium power station, which in turn provides the energy for the LED lights. I'm intrigued by the stillness of this piece in relation to the kinetic works we just discussed. But more importantly, here once again what you present to us as a closed system is anything but. Of course, there is waste and the whole system still needs to be periodically plugged in!

KALPAKJIAN: There's definitely a stillness to this piece that is different. It doesn't draw the viewer in in the same way that the Moving Heads do, but then there *is* movement in a different sense—of power and of light. And in that way this piece deals with the issue of loss, waste, of inefficient systems. There's a questioning of the efficiency of systems and, again, issues of failure, of optimism, utopia, and futures.

RAIL: Wow, it's so amazing to see these thoughts echo throughout your work, from the un-leveled square to the battery leaking energy.

For my last question, I have two thoughts. As we wrap up, I would like to learn more of your relationship to sci-fi. And then I would love to hear more of your thoughts on what I noticed you mentioning in another interview, a famous quote attributed to Fredric Jameson "It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism."

KALPAKJIAN: Fredric Jameson, as far as I've been able to track it down, is referring here to a comment about J. G. Ballard and his dystopian science-fiction futures. And both of those two are seminal figures for me. J. G. Ballard's work so often shows the dysfunction of technology, like in his book *Crash* (1973). There's also his obsession with architecture and enclosure. Ballard spent his teenage years in a prisoner of war camp during WWII, which he wrote about in *Empire of the Sun* (1984). He has a profound understanding of the dysfunctional human interactions that can arise



Craig Kalpakjian, *Goal Less*, 2020. Portable Solar Panel, Lithium Power Station, Aluminum truss frame, Daylight LED light panels. Courtesy the artist.

in confined situations—it's something that shows up in almost all of his work, a conjunction of architecture, the social, even scarcity. But Jameson also wrote *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), (with the wonderful subtitle "*The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*"), a book that looks at the history of utopia and science fiction in literature. He looks at the relationship between progressive political thought and technological science fiction—the relationship of utopia to dystopia and different futures, our evolving ideas of the future. All things I'm often trying to play out in much of my work. But to get back to the quote itself, about what we can or can't imagine (for example the end of capitalism), I was—perhaps a bit facetiously—asking if AI could help us with that. It brings me back to ideas of intelligence and imagination, different kinds of intelligence, problem solving, machine learning, and even machine imaging (which is not the same as imagining). It does seem that people want to try to make machines think creatively. The question becomes what problems they might then be focused on or allowed to focus on (and again we might go back to degrees of freedom!). At that point, issues of desire and the unconscious, even forgetting, would also have to be considered.

As an interesting aside, in the film *Silent Running* (1972), as the lead character de-couples his greenhouse from the mothership and starts drifting off into space, away from the sun, he very implausibly forgets that the plants need light. [Laughs] He has a eureka moment and starts setting up lights on stands for all the plants he's taking care of.

RAIL: Well, somehow, I like it as a way of thinking about where we are right now.

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LETTER FROM DUSSELDORF: A Conversation with and about Imi Knoebel by Toby Kamps

Because it is continuously evolving and shifting shape, Imi Knoebel's abstract art eludes easy description or categorization. Born in Dessau, Germany, in 1940, Knoebel makes playful, fearlessly experimental paintings, sculptures, installations, and works on paper that range from spare to multiplex and geometric to freeform, occasionally in the same work. Although they include a wide range of other materials, their primary ingredients are painted wood panels. Often fitted with bare wood skirts at their perimeters, they stand proud of the wall or are shaped, stacked, or abutted, blurring distinctions between two and three dimensions. Everything the artist makes is free of recognizable imagery, except a series from 1970 in which he used tiny dots of white paint to add an additional star to photographs of galaxies and a handful of projects incorporating found objects or photographs. Knoebel's works have been called minimal, hard-edge, and eccentric abstraction, but all of these terms fall wide of the mark. As one curator noted, words "simply roll off their surfaces."¹

A number of hallmarks unite Knoebel's strikingly diverse body of work. Among them are surprising colors and forms, bravura brushwork, and impeccable details—especially around edges. For example, the six 19 11/16 × 13 5/8-inch, acrylic-on-wood paintings composing *Grace Kelly III 1-6*, 1994, consist of a vertical panel surrounded by four flush-fitted, square-section bars, the deep sides of which are left unpainted. These sections are arranged so that those on top overlap the sides and those on the bottom rest between

them. Each of these individual components is covered in even, lengthwise strokes of different soft, dusty hues, including yellows, blues, reds, pinks, and browns. These colors circulate throughout the group, moving from middles to and around margins and joining new shades in each component painting. In doing so, they create a subtle dance of change and iteration. As its wryly evocative title suggests, the work calls to mind the beguiling pastels of the American actor's classic Technicolor films. It also recalls the

dynamic equilibriums of Piet Mondrian's rectilinear designs and something of the look and feel of macarons, confections the artist's daughter bakes at her pastry shop.² First and foremost, however, Knoebel's works foreground their own formal devices. When not strictly descriptive, their names, given after the work is completed, hint at Knoebel's life and enthusiasms but also serve as oblique reminders to his viewers to use their own creative powers to find ways into and out of their resplendent self-containment.

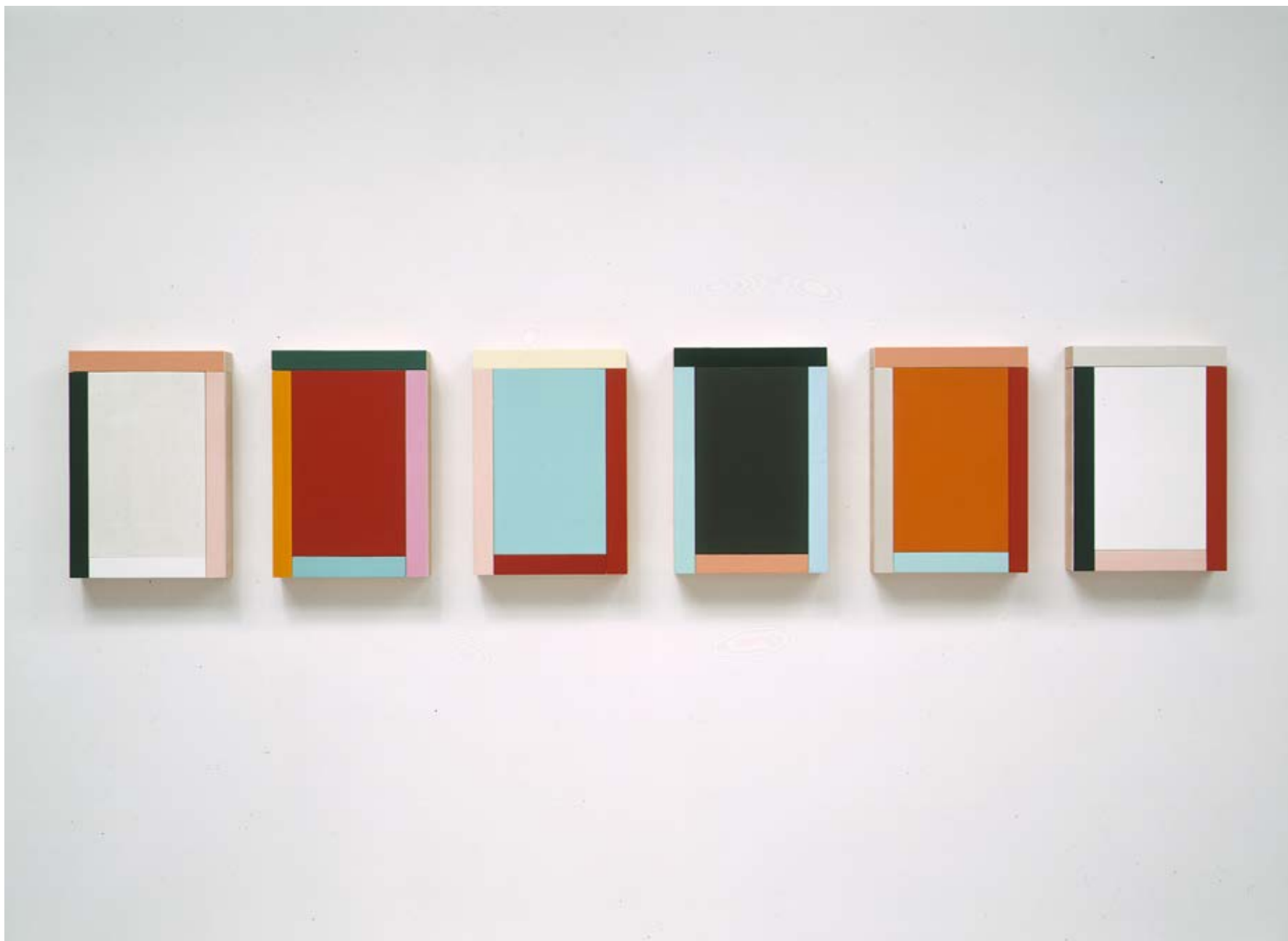
Asking, famously, "What can I say that my works don't?" Knoebel is renowned for his reticence about and indifference to the rhetoric surrounding his work.³ In his career, he has given only a handful of on-the-record interviews, most of them to his friend and classmate at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the late 1960s, artist and activist Johannes Stüttgen. In person, however, Knoebel, a trim man with an elegant mane of brushed-back white hair and alert, bespectacled blue eyes, is friendly and open. He is happy to discuss his interests and methods, which are as eclectic and original as the things he makes.

We meet in the kitchen of the artist's spacious, tall-ceilinged townhouse in central Düsseldorf for an afternoon of conversation. Knoebel's wife Carmen, his longtime manager and former proprietor of the city's legendary art and music bar Ratinger Hof, joins the discussion. So does Stüttgen who, with Knoebel, was a student of the legendary artist, activist, and educator Joseph Beuys in the late 1960s and today works to promulgate his professor's belief that each individual must envision a communal future based on creativity. Carmen gives a precise overview of her husband's career. Stüttgen, who has written extensively on Knoebel's work, serves as an expansive, cosmically oriented foil to the laconic, down-to-earth artist. What follows is a reconstruction and interpretation of the conversation in German from memory and handwritten notes.

Stüttgen begins the conversation by proposing that Beuys's *Wärmtheorie*, or theory of heat-energy is key to understanding Imi's art: "There is a warmth, a presence in Imi's work that draws the viewer in." He also throws out the theory that global warming is nature's response to humanity's inner coldness. Knoebel listens intently but says nothing. He too is a product of his time with Beuys, but he took a different path through the professor's class—one grounded in the fundamentals of working in the studio.

"I was studying at a very boring, Bauhaus-inspired school of applied arts in Darmstadt and wanted to get away," he says. "Luckily, I had a great friend and collaborator in Imi Giese (1942–1974)." (Their shared first names derived from their habitual greeting, "Ich mit ihm," or "I with him.") "Together, we discovered a host of things that inspired us. One was the music of free-jazz musician and composer Ornette Coleman. We would follow him on tour. Another was the art of Kazimir Malevich and his Suprematist movement. Both seemed radical and extreme." Discoveries like these pointed to a way out of their conventional paths for the young artists.

In 1964, the Imis saw the now-famous photograph of Joseph Beuys leaving a Fluxus festival in



Imi Knoebel, *Grace Kelly III 1-6*, 1994. Acrylic, wood, 6 pieces, each 98 ½ x 67 x 3 ½ inches. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn.

Aachen with a bloody nose after being assaulted by an angry audience member. They knew they had to go to him—“to feel his presence, his aura—to become disciples . . . perhaps in the Buddhist sense that the student must seek out the teacher,” Knoebel says. Malevich was their ideal of a radical, revolutionary artist; Beuys was a real, contemporary example. Originally enrolling in the graphic art department at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, the pair, who with their shaved heads and workers’ overalls, resembled the Russian revolutionaries they so admired, petitioned Beuys to take them on as students. “We had nothing to show him but said we would do great things as his students.” Without hesitating, Beuys gave them the keys to Room 19, a studio adjacent to his legendary classroom Room 20. He gave the Imis one year to prove themselves.

“Once Beuys took us on, we sat at a table in Room 19 wracking our brains about what to do,” Knoebel remembers. We had no idea where to begin. Thankfully, Imi [Giese] had the courage and presence of mind to make a start. He started poking holes in sheets of paper with the needle point of a compass. I started drawing straight lines with a pen. Imi was my greatest influence. He drove us to follow our interests and put them in motion.” Although they were close, the Imis collaborated only a few times, most notably on a “film,” *Über IMI und IMI von IMI und*

IMI (About Imi and Imi by Imi and Imi). It ran only in real time and real life in the form of the duo’s carousings at the Intermedia festival in Heidelberg in 1969.

It was through their projects in Raum 19 that the Imis met Stüttgen. Prominent in the free-wheeling, philosophical *Ringgespräche* (discussion circles) in Beuys’s Room 20, Stüttgen wondered what the Imis’ rudimentary, repetitive activities had to do with their teacher’s expanded concept of art. Imi and Imi were headstrong, he says, expressing little interest in the artistic theories or provocations that were the order of the day at the Kunstakademie. Yet Stüttgen felt a deep resonance with the artists. He describes them as his “bodyguards,” warmly supportive colleagues who always attended but never participated in his talks. Later, after watching Knoebel make thousands upon thousands of line drawings that eventually were enclosed in five filing cabinets in the work *250 000 Zeichnungen (250,000 Drawings)*, 1969–1973/75, Stüttgen had a revelation: the duo had instantiated Malevich’s concept of “liberated nothingness.” They had made manifest the Suprematist idea of an art apotheosizing pure feeling over representation. He would later celebrate Knoebel and Giese’s artistic search as a grand redemption of modernism:

It was the total impact of the total demand of an all-inversive art that was substantiated by

nothing other than itself: the ‘image of imagelessness,’ the ‘liberated nothingness’ (K.M.). Everything was suddenly clear; nothing else would ever be valid. And all at once this validity was *doubly* valid: The ‘liberated nothingness’ liberated the nothingness of two men in waiting. Nothingness encounters nothingness! A path was initiated. Nothing else existed except the black square and its demands. Not talent, none at all, at least not of the type that would matter here, only the certainty of this will; this self-consciousness without end that is initiated in nothingness, the pure bliss of two I(s), two ‘Imis’, literally two good-for-nothings, who are ready to do anything, who are extricated, and who are now waiting for their chance... They had very *tangibly* gotten ahold of nothingness.⁴

In fact, Knoebel would take on Malevich’s 1915 milestone of abstraction and abnegation, *Black Square*, in his own large painting *Schwarzes Kreuz (Black Cross)*, 1968. This work consists of a long black rectangle bisected perpendicularly at its midsection by a shorter bar and hung canted to the right. Swiss curator Konrad Bitterli regards this leap into the three-dimensional pictorial space of a panel painting as a logical conclusion of the two-dimensional line drawings. He also calls the homage to the Russian Suprematist a “secularization” of the crucifix and an emblem of



Imi Giese, Imi Knoebel, *Über IMI und IMI von IMI und IMI* [About Imi and Imi by Imi and Imi], 1969. Poster for the film. Nic Tenwiggenhorn.

above the ground.” His head, he admits, was filled with wild ideas, but he resisted the totalizing statements of members like Otto Piene, who said the group was questing for “a zone of silence and of pure possibilities for a new beginning as at the count-down when rockets take off.”⁶ Instead, Imi and Imi styled themselves as the workers at the academy. They grappled with the ineffable as a tradesperson might, using everyday materials, handicraft, and their own powers of discernment. For this reason, Knoebel always called himself a “painter.” He was grounded in his materials and their power and potential—in contrast to the Zero Group’s transcendentalism and Beuys’s utopianism.

Like his contemporary, American process artist Richard Serra, Knoebel developed a form of autopoiesis by letting the process of working with materials and forms in the studio drive his artistic program. But where Serra and Minimalist sculptors like Donald Judd with whom he was associated emphasized industrial materials and fabrication techniques, Knoebel took

a more lyrical, craftsman-like approach. Naturally, given his prolific practice and the scale of his works, Knoebel employs a team of skilled technicians. However, they work shoulder-to-shoulder with him, supporting and amplifying the scope and reach of his tactile, investigative methods. This open, human factor, plus the fact that the artist’s hand enlivens all stages of the process, provides much of the warmth that Stüttgen described at the beginning of the conversation.

In Stüttgen’s conception, Knoebel arrives at a form of pure abstraction through a process that is elemental and warm-blooded. He calls Knoebel’s approach “thinking without thoughts,” an idea the artist has affirmed, saying,

When I am asked about what I think about when I look at a painting, I can only answer that I don’t think at all; I look at it and can only take in the beauty, and I don’t want to see it in relation to anything else. Only what I see, simply because it has its own validity.⁷

Steadfastly nonrepresentational, Knoebel’s works, whether manifestly material like *Raum 19* or approaching immateriality like the line drawings or his 1968 light projections from a moving vehicle onto city streets, are grounded in lived experience in ways that the work of his more rigid and procedurally oriented transatlantic counterparts are not. They are, Stüttgen says, the products of Knoebel’s personal, hands-on search for art’s highest and purest forms. As such, they must follow the dictates of this quest, wherever it takes the artist. On this and all topics regarding what his work might represent,

Knoebel is silent. Declining to engage in any discussion of the transcendent power of abstraction, he answers a question about his experience of visiting the Rothko Chapel in Houston with Palermo in 1975 with a laughing “Americans pray too much.” He and Carmen would rather discuss Niklas Luhmann’s system theories, Jaimie Branch’s jazz trumpet, or Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Holger Czukay’s rock ‘n’ roll. He does, however, admit his undying love for the visual force of Rothko, Pollock, Newman, and the greats of American postwar abstraction.

This is not to say that Knoebel’s method is entirely spontaneous. The walls of a room in his capacious, multi-story studio in a former architectural detail factory are covered with many hundreds of samples of colored construction paper that he selects from to make his “Messerschnitt” (“Knife-Cut”) collages. The jagged, curvilinear, and polyhedral shapes filling in these serve as repositories for future forms and hues and relate directly to the stained-glass windows he designed for France’s Reims Cathedral, the only commission he has ever accepted. His practice of letting colors and designs incubate stems from the artist’s memories of discussions with his friend, painter Blinky Palermo. In 1975, Knoebel wanted to move beyond his predominantly black-and-white palette and use a green but could not decide which, so he drew Palermo, a renowned colorist, into a months-long quest for the perfect shade. His compatriot’s death in 1977 prompted Knoebel to embrace vivid color in the *24 Farben-für Blinky* (*24 Colors-For Blinky*), a memorial group of large, shaped acrylic-on-wood paintings of the same year, in the collection of DIA. Resembling spikier and chromatically higher-keyed versions of Ellsworth Kelly’s shaped canvases and wall reliefs derived from sense memories, Knoebel’s abstractions commemorate an artistic friendship forged through a deep, shared interest in the relationship between color and form.

Scale models and plans for the artist’s periodic stock-taking installations also dot the studio. As counterpoints to the regular, serial method by which he develops new motifs, Knoebel also assembles and displays groups of objects based on past and current ideas. These mini self-surveys give Knoebel space to reappraise and reenergize. For example, the museum-scale *Kernstücke* (*Core Pieces*), 2015, contains 21 parts inspired by new and old bodies of work. Each part of *Kernstücke* represents a key idea from the artist’s past series or the one-off *Zwischenwerke*, or “In-Between Works,” that crop up outside of them. And each of its components, although inseparable from the whole, is given a unique name and one or two dates, depending on whether the year it was made differs from that in which its concept was first developed. Occasionally, too, Knoebel makes multipart and room-scale installations as memorials. *24.1.1986*, 1986, named for Beuys’s death date, uses lengths of metal pipe, found wood, and a bare tree trunk standing in a found-wood box abutting a closed, rectangular Masonite structure to commemorate the alchemical powers of his teacher. *Eigentum Himmelreich* (*Property of the Heavenly Kingdom*), 1983, remembers the tragically short life of Knoebel’s early artistic

the “programmatically process of emptying” defining all of Knoebel’s nonobjective art.⁵

Later in 1968, Knoebel would use this classroom to create the eponymous, career-defining sculptural installation *Raum 19*. Infinitely reconfigurable, it consisted of 77 components made from raw spruce and flat and curved panels of Masonite—boxes, right angles, cylinders, and panels. Full of potential and mystery, this collection of ghost shapes created a veritable warehouse of ur-forms that the artist would reconsider and recreate throughout his career. Masonite, an inexpensive processed-wood material popular after World War II, became an important and oft-recurring material in Knoebel’s work. It was vastly underappreciated, he believed, especially for its smooth and warm brown surfaces. A later version, *Raum 19 III*, 2006, is augmented by *Batterie* (2005), a boxlike structure made of aluminum panels painted phosphorescent green. As it glows in the dark, it testifies to the work’s abiding power in his oeuvre and recalls Beuys’s energy-transfer theories. Where most of his contemporaries were grappling with the ramifications of May ’68, Knoebel occupied himself with the most basic formal and structural concerns: measurement, proportion, craftsmanship. Given physical form in *Raum 19*, these foundations, rather than any overarching vision, provided Knoebel’s creative spark.

Of course, Düsseldorf in the 1960s was the headquarters of the Zero Group. This international consortium of artists was looking for an aesthetic ground zero after that century’s catastrophes. Knoebel knew the work of Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and other members but says they “floated

doppelgänger Imi Giese through a wide variety of found, constructed, painted, and assemblage-d objects, including the ladder his friend used to hang himself—each of which suggests order or chaos.

Stüttgen sketches a torus to diagram his conception of Knoebel's method. The artist starts with nothing but his own selfhood—the hole in the donut—and proceeds from there until he makes something he knows will appeal to his audience and thereby function in the real world—the outer ring. Drawing arrows suggesting a continuous infolding, he illustrates a feedback-continuum of subjectivity and objectivity. Through a material object, an abstract work of art, Knoebel establishes a direct connection between subjects, between maker and perceiver. Stüttgen also graphs the cursive word “ich,” or “I,” which is not ordinarily capitalized in German, with directional arrows paralleling its letters and landing back on the dot of the “i.” As in the secret extra star he added to his 1970 *Sternenhimmel* (*Starry Sky*) photographs, Knoebel's art begins and ends with this tiny “ego point”—an immaterial locus from which anything can materialize. (He also points out that “ich” forms the heart of “Nichts,” German for “nothingness.”) Similarly, Stüttgen believes that the “Sandwich” paintings conceived in the early 1990s, consisting of plywood panels separated by a layer of paint visible only where it drips out along the edge, are key exemplars of the artist's inside-to-outside-to-inside methodology: “It is no coincidence that Imi's birthday is December 31. Every ending is a new beginning.” Knoebel's genius, he believes, is knowing when his subjective process will result in something objectively good and internally valid. Thus, Stüttgen asserts, the artist's work exists in *Lebenszeit* and *Weltzeit*—in life time and world time: it is personal and universal.

For this reason, Stüttgen claims that Knoebel is the “last modernist”:

Malevich's *Black Square* obliterated the image; Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917 opened up the entire world to art; and Beuys's expanded concept of art posited that life itself could be an artistic act. When he arrived at the Kunstakademie, Knoebel knew that everything had been done. What Imi and Imi were doing at the Kunstakademie in 1964 was looking for a beginning, pondering the question ‘what do I want to be?’ In a time of aesthetic exhaustion, Knoebel is free precisely because he doesn't know what to make. He goes into the studio each day searching for a beginning through his work. It's a matter of zero versus one. When you're looking for a beginning, a one, you must start at zero.

In this sense, Stüttgen posits, his friend “has no late works, only early works, because it comes from the future.” His art is immaculate and ever-renewing because it always starts from zero. At this point the Knoebels joke that *VEB-Kontor*, 1990/97/98, (*Publicly Owned Enterprise-Office*) a Masonite and mixed-media work containing 7000 palletized and plastic-wrapped boxes of the now-defunct East German laundry detergent brand IMI, advertised as “Gegen groben Schmutz” (“Against Tough Dirt”), may be testament to the artist's search for purity.



Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19* [Room 19], 1968. Hardboard, wood, stretcher. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn.

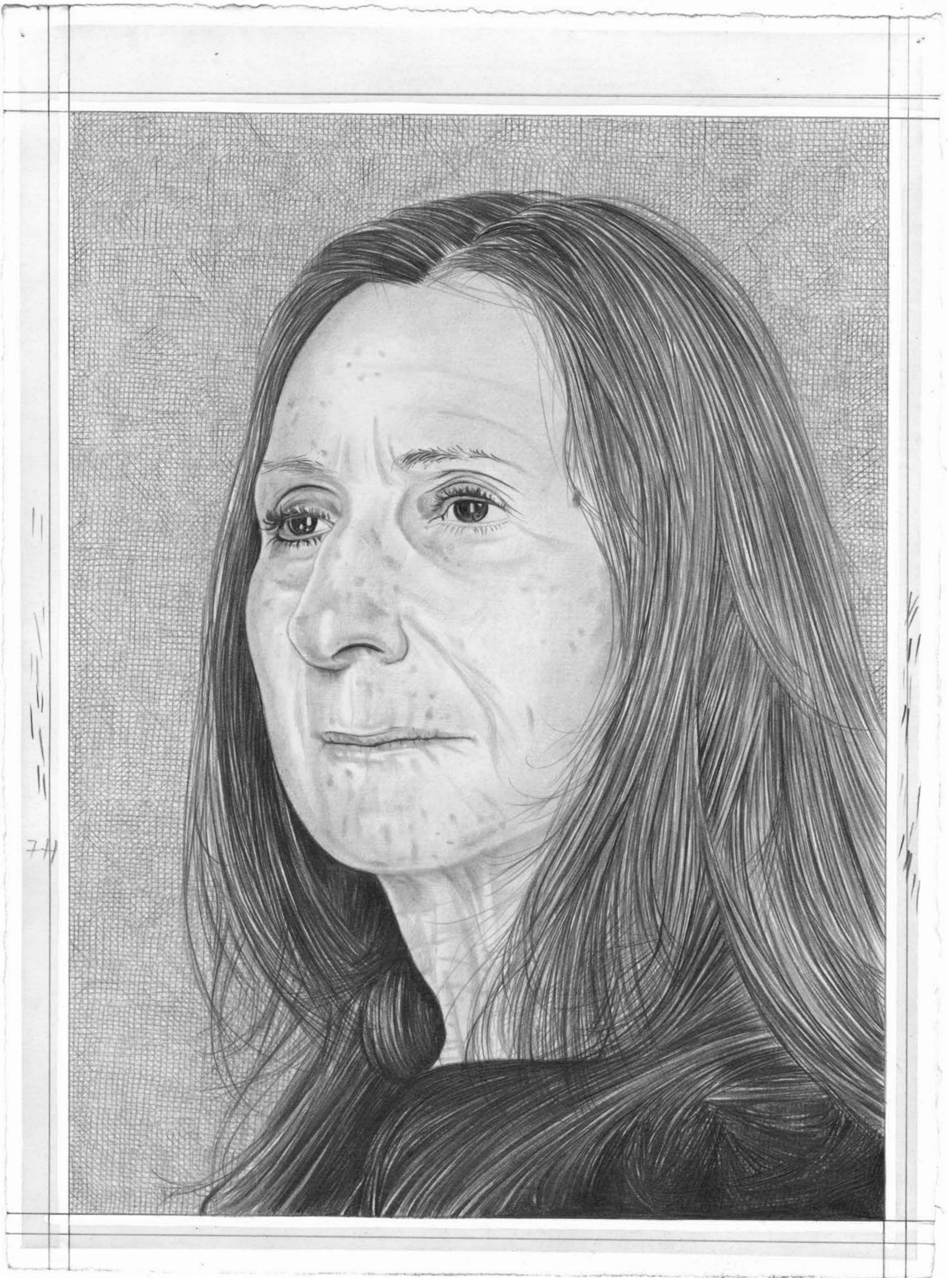
It is possible to conceive of Knoebel's work as beautiful manifestations of Kant's theory of *noumenon* and *phenomenon* and the quest for the ultimately unknowable essence of things through perception. Certainly, in his fresh, searching experiments with color, shape, and volume, the artist reaches for base reality, a state of raw consciousness and perception more than any self-aware ideation. On this and all topics regarding what his work might represent, however, the artist remains silent—as usual. In the end, though, Stüttgen has identified a universal force and source of warmth in his friend's art when he says that zero, the beginning of Knoebel's ongoing, committed search for primal beauty, represents “the point where you wake up.” A childlike wonder at the splendors of art and a willingness to pursue them wherever they may lead him is central to the artist's project. It inspires his ongoing “Kinderstern” (“Children's Star”) series of paintings, which are sold through a foundation he established with Carmen to support human rights for children. And this same evergreen sense of awe galvanizes his newest works. The “Figura” series, large, rambunctious tangles of thick brown, yellow, green, and red strokes of acrylic on shaped aluminum panels, is sparked by watching his young granddaughter's unsuccessful attempts to stay within the lines of her coloring books.

1. Carsten Ahrens, “The *Schattenräume* of Imi Knoebel,” *Imi Knoebel: Dass die Geschichte zusammenbleibt* exh. cat. (Berlin: Kewenig, 2019), p. 51.
2. Does the fact that the artist made a multiple in the same year that features a postcard image of Kelly's face haloed by an arc of bright copper tubing rhyming with her hair color mean that the star holds a special place in the artist's imagination? Perhaps. Knoebel has made works commemorating his late teacher Joseph Beuys, and his friend and artistic partner Imi Giese, *Eigentum Himmelreich*, 1983, but if so she is also
3. Imi Knoebel quoted in Kate Connelly, “Artist Imi Knoebel: If You Want to Stay Alive You Have to Do Something Radical,” *The Guardian*, [https://www.theguardian.com/](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/15/artist-imi-knoebel-if-you-want-to-stay-alive-you-have-to-do-something-radical)

[artanddesign/2015/jul/15/artist-imi-knoebel-if-you-want-to-stay-alive-you-have-to-do-something-radical](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/15/artist-imi-knoebel-if-you-want-to-stay-alive-you-have-to-do-something-radical) (accessed 28 February 2020).

4. Johannes Stüttgen, “The Insistence on the Beginnings, the Beginning. The Core Pieces.” *Imi Knoebel: Kernstücke* exh. cat. (Krefeld: Kunstmuseum Krefeld, Museum Haus Esters, 2015), p. 84-85.
5. Konrad Bitterli in *Imi Knoebel: Linienbilder* exh. cat. (Cologne: Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, 1999), pp. 33-34, translated and quoted in *Imi Knoebel: Works 1966-2014* exh. cat. (Wolfsburg, Germany: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2015), p. 45.
6. Piene, Otto. “Otto Piene: The Development of Group Zero.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3262, September 3, 1964, p. 812+
7. Imi Knoebel quoted in Johannes Stüttgen, “I Wouldn't Say Anything Voluntarily Anyway!”: Johannes Stüttgen in Conversation with Imi Knoebel,” *Imi Knoebel: Works 1966-2014* exh. cat. (Wolfsburg, Germany: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2015), p. 24.

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Portrait of Norma Cole, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

FROM THE THRESHING FLOOR

BY NORMA COLE

Every work of art is political because
every work of art is breaking new ground.
—Doris Salcedo

Threshold is the operative word here.

It is and isn't about "our mental representation of dawn."
(Marcelline Delbecq, *CAMERA*)

Threshold: the magnitude or intensity that must be exceeded for a certain reaction, phenomenon, result or condition to occur or be manifested.

"nothing happens until the signal passes the threshold"
(lexico.com)

What signal? What threshold?

For some reason I had no words. I had some words but they would not settle into a rhythm. A bodily rhythm hadn't come yet. Instead, coming at me were flying objects *fast & furious*—"climate crisis," "migrants," "separation of children from parents at borders," "weapons," "incarceration," "solitary confinement," "corporate takeovers," "fascists," "the technological singularity," which kept Stephen Hawking up nights, you name it.

Threshold appeared. "Some of our earlier etymologists... thought that threshold was indeed thresh and hold. They were wrong," writes Anatoly Liberman (on blog.oup.com). "An attempt to identify *-shold* with *sill* is a solution born of etymological despair. This Germanic word for 'threshold' was opaque as far back as the time of the oldest written monuments. For some reason, Latin *limen* and Russian *porog*...both meaning 'threshold,' also lack a definitive etymology....We are missing the moment at which the threshing floor...began to denote the entrance to the room."

A perfect uncertainty principle. But "[l]anguage knows what it wants. Good for it, because I don't know, no not at all." (Elfriede Jelinek, Nobel Speech, 2004)

Limit (n.) c. 1400, "boundary, frontier," from Old French *limite*, from Latin *limitem* (nominative *limes*) "a boundary, limit, border, embankment between fields," which is probably related to *limen* "threshold," and possibly from the base of *limus* "transverse, oblique," which is of uncertain origin. (etymonline.com) *Limes*, (Latin: "path") plural *limites*, in ancient Rome, originally a path that marked the boundary between plots of land. (lexico.com)

Propose a path, a development which is progression but not progress. Suppose in this case development without

positive or negative value, merely change, movement, for example the movement of waves, motion which is time and refers beyond itself. Meaning is in the rhythm or cadence.

Improvisation, experimentation. "Mere exposure to stimuli is enough to create preferences." (Joseph Ledoux, *The Emotional Brain*) Already there is an orientation. Improvisation and progression are development, orienting each other. Development, which is motion, is involved with preference. Preference is involved with subjectivity and direction and creates expectation. Writing is involved with movement, development, subjectivity, preference, and direction. Subjectivity, which does not depend on pronouns, occurs in movement, development, writing, and preference. Improvisation and progression, their motion, include rupture, discontinuity. Discontinuity is startling, shatters expectation. The questions become how great a surprise can you tolerate and how small a surprise can you register? Linkages, not always lineages, like lists and like submerged autonomic systems, have direction.

Exile: "Esse est percipi," wrote Bishop Berkeley, being is being seen, being known. Ovid (43 BCE – 17/18 CE) wrote the *Tristia* from beyond the horizon of his known world, far from his language context, far from his companions, his witnesses, in mere space he could not recognize and value as place. Osip Mandelstam (1891 – 1938), from his free fall of searing anticipation, wrote his *Tristia*. During one of his prison sojourns, the Persian poet Mas'ud Sa'd Salman (1046–1122) wrote his *Tristia*. From Maranj prison,

*There was no way that they could find any crime
that I'd done, except where I was born, my origin
(Habsiyyat, Prison Songs, trans. Paul Smith)*

Considerations of exile dovetail with questions about what defines or binds a work as, say, "American," a continuing preoccupation since this country's revolutionary beginning. What locates a work? Sometimes we are looking at the location of emotion. And btw, did any of you see *Transit* (2018), the film directed by Christian Petzold? Adapted from Anna Seghers' novel published in 1944, France—in exile, having fled Germany in 1933, after Hitler became chancellor, after the spectacle of book

burning at the university in Berlin, after her books were placed on the Nazi blacklist, after her apartment had been broken into by the police, after her neighbors had hidden her. Her daughter writes later of how the children, with the last of their money, were sent to swimming lessons, for, who knew, one day perhaps they would have to continue their flight by boat. Can you separate living and writing? Someone receives a book in the mail and writes back on a postcard, "It is life!"

Writes Tisa Bryant (*Letters to the Future*, ed. Erica Hunt & Dawn Lundy Martin), "I always reach back...to see forward." Continuity is thrown into question, a threading and a fraying take place. Experience becomes experiment, from the Latin *experimentum*, which breaks down into *experior* and *mentum*. *Experior* is making a trial of, testing, putting to the test, and also experiencing, undergoing. It has *periculum* in it, having to do with danger, risk. I seize upon the word danger, bringing to mind the quote from James Baldwin, "To act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger." We act. Today is December 10, 2019, Human Rights Day. Rights, homophone for writes. "I can't write back." ("All She Wrote," Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*).

In September 2019, there was a series of climate strikes around the globe in which many of us took part. "YOU BROKE OUR GLACIER," was the message from children in one town at the foot of Mont Blanc. My first sense of Mont Blanc was the poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," which I first read in grade school. On September 19th, I reread it. It begins, "The everlasting universe of things...." "Everlasting" is and isn't about our mental representation of anything. Imagine. The tallest mountain in Europe is set to release millions of gallons of ice. Nothing happens until the signal passes the threshold. I hold my breath and read on.

*

The poets on the Critics Pages responded, each in their way, to this thought piece.

NORMA COLE is a poet, translator and visual artist. Recent works include a book of poetry, *FATE NEWS* (2018), and a film, *At the Turning Bridge* (2019). She lives in San Francisco.

Goodbye Pork Pie Hat

BY DAVID MARRIOTT

because it is
 hidden,
 secret (*geheim*),
 & all traces
 of it
 impenetrable,
 distant,
 like sirens
 blissfully
 sounding in the dark,
 what enters
 so assiduously
 broken
 is also
 what ends – the enforced meaning
 (*Stop! Police!* – how it enters the fray)
 after all
 no one really knows
 what words want
 (these songs wearing peasant shoes
 on strange stumpy legs):
 the scattering
 random, bloodstained
 & everyone running in the streets
 as someone
 hears it
 once again
 (the unluckiest brightlit arrangements
 of burnt ships fired into flame!)
 as it enters
 the bones
 like a harmony
 that awaits
 you
 & everything
 just chokes
 the world
 assiduously
 gasping for
 air
 amid the noise
 of infantries
 (clouding
 all sense),

the unbridled rush
 to find them
 - like barricades unveiled -
 on video
 after the briefest
 command – *Run* –
 is impeded
 by the wild,
 intemperate
 meandering
 of silence and sex
 & the big foaming
 mouth
 announces that every rib
 is cracked
 again
 by the *haute volée*
 of each utterance
 when being
 human
 involves just listening
 to the rain (the revenge of elegies),
 & mastery is just
 the impermanent, briefest
 of rests
 in desperate resorts
 where we know it all ends
 & I am you
 & each wishful
 moment
 is a decapitation,
 a thought
 that twists
 because what it notices
 it no longer lives,
 & it is impossible
 to say
 no, too soon
 & how
 suddenly
 (the sea burns,
 drowned
 parched by flame), & someone beckons
 & reminds you
 that each gathering
 is a celebration
 of the already dead

and
 each word
 matters
 less than
 it should,
 (the hard facts
 fluttering
 like banners
 over bloodsoaked pavements)
 & methinks
 there are years
 here
 ranged like so many antlers,
 memories
 of cognac & latin,
 as anarchists
 start slashing
 at pictures once again
 & you cut *here* and *here*
 the asymptotic glimpses
 of the dark fluent sequels
 in Berlin, London,
 & at the great gates
 of Ishtar
 where all the shrouds
 are veiled -
 which can only mean
 that life is a *Fälle* (a theatre)
 or that someone
 (the wealthiest art lover)
 has reached
 down
 into each word
 and cut out
 the name of each cameo
 or is it simply
 because I miss you
 running
 through the rain-drizzled streets
 and all I have
 are
 (clouds
 rioting
 in dark, ancestral languages)

i.m. Sean Bonney

DAVID MARRIOTT teaches in the Philosophy Department, Penn State University, is the author of several books of poetry and criticism. His most recent books are *Duppies* (Commune Editions: 2019), and *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford, 2018). *Bluetown* is forthcoming from Omnidawn.

Thresh:

BY COLE SWENSEN

The Question: what drifts

drifts off—

while history is fixed

(in fact, is entirely based)

upon that which stays

away—*go away*, said the wheat; *away* said the day: the day said:

There's a way that music comes back to you, the beat, comes back

in its fray; there's a way that music folds itself into intricate structures

now lost in a pocket—you're sure you put it somewhere—

or put it away

(*go* said the lost; *lost* said the day—

Threshing is about what weighs

and the ways in which that does or does not weigh us down.

<https://youtu.be/ph1GU1qQ1zQ?t=3>

So, I'm back to thinking about what gets beaten out of it—

about what flies off from it—

about what the *it* is

that gets so beaten and all

of us humming under our breath

there's chaff in the air, and it will stay there.

COLE SWENSEN is a poet and a translator. Her most recent book is *On Walking On* (2017).

Notes on The New Threshing Floor

BY CEDAR SIGO

*And as you learn the magic, learn to believe it
Don't be 'surprised' when it works, you undercut
your power. — Diane di Prima*

We invite words into forms we fashion ourselves, as breathing, sustainable, not sealed off at every turn but rather remaining open and well maintained, how every line ends in the word “night.” A pulse moving through the threshold. I'm sure it can be formed into frescoes, measured, timed for ultimate effect and then closed out. I like a bit of that but then also allowing for the light to linger (obscuring its source) and to wander back over the wreckage.

In one of the interviews included in *There You Are*, Joanne Kyger says she realized the Kamakura guardian figures placed outside of the temples were only frightening if you were afraid to go beyond them, that her passage was a matter of withstanding that pressure. “I think I had really understood that these were states of mind that were just holding you back. They were illusion.”

Poetry becomes a mapmaker's game I think. These visions realized inside of writing can become permanent, as it is a form of half sleepwalk and half hysteria, as it becomes our duty to hand over first lines that become weightless forms. I mean those that move us to speak up and almost beg a bit of exaggeration and new tonality. These are pieces of ceremony that we can tweak and augment to gain a larger view.

“It was taken away from the people in a sense, and I don't believe that's where poetry belongs—it belongs to the people. Yes, you can take apart literature, separate it, and see how it works, but as with taking apart the human body, you can't see the spirit, which is at the root of it. It is the same with a poem—you can't touch the spirit.” — Joy Harjo

Better not to be bought out, better to see battles as constant, (the eternal war) knowing it is to the smallest networks that we must attend. I hear bits of William Blake dressed in Anne Waldman's voice, “Pay attention to minute particulars, take care of the little ones...” Even keeping an archive is a revolutionary gesture, especially

if you are one of those whose history it is in this country's best interests to obscure.

“What does it mean, that a black, lesbian, feminist, warrior, poet, mother is named the state poet of New York? It means that we live in a world full of the most intense contradictions and we must find ways to use the best we have, ourselves, our work, to bridge those contradictions, to learn the lessons that those contradictions teach. And that is the work of the poet within each one of us, to envision what has not yet been and to work with every fiber of who we are, to make the reality pursuit of those visions irresistible.” — Audre Lorde

Complicated emotions are forever awakened when you read Audre Lorde, her work (in part) is about why those emotions need examination, not erasure necessarily. It is not only the fact that poetry can be used to confront a public issue but that it might put its finger on conveying what systematic oppression looks, sounds and feels like.

Her writing has aided in dissolving some of my own deranged interpretations, thinking that I am in fact kept safe by not discussing aspects of my otherness and largely because these get paraded around, or instantly processed

as a rare amusement. I sensed this after going away to college and was bored immediately and never wanted to see it again. At eighteen I was already signaling (through the flames) against tokenism far into the future.

I prize the conviction and imagination it took for native activists (Indians of All Tribes) to occupy Alcatraz Island in 1969 and that at one point they thought of funding the whole concept by selling native art work. John Trudell set up his own station, Radio Free Alcatraz in one of the empty cells. “We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red cloth.” Gathering at Standing Rock was an obvious extension of this energy and that already feels so long ago. As poets we rely on exactly these sorts of mind sets, literal places to go, whether we are about to give a reading to a dream audience we never imagined existed or we are about to begin co-teaching a workshop with an old friend. We are gears to serve the warp in the dream machine. We are the empty locks for highly specialized, magnetic keys.

February 3, 2020

CEDAR SIGO, the Bagley-Wright lecturer for 2019, has just completed work with Joy Harjo and several other poets on a new Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry and his recent 2019 poetry has appeared in *Harper's*, *Freak Fam*, and *Splinter*. He currently lives in Lofall, Washington.

The Trajectory of a Bullet Never Shot

BY SUSAN BRIANTE

I first saw the gun in the days after my father's death about a year and a half ago, when we emptied out the safe in his bedroom closet. I held the Smith & Wesson for a moment, placed it back in its box and took a photograph of it on his bed where it lay on top of his rosary. He got the gun during the July 1967 uprising in Newark, NJ. At the time he had just turned 30 years old and was months away from having his third child—me.

When both my parents were still alive, I asked them about those three days in Newark when police and National Guardsmen clashed with protestors leaving 26 dead, most African American. Protests began when police stopped John Smith's yellow taxi and Black cab drivers radioed news of his arrival with injuries at the Fourth Precinct. The police force was overwhelmingly white, the city majority

black. Two African American men had been killed by police in the previous three years. Protestors outside the Fourth Precinct began throwing stones. Civil disobedience and conflict with police escalated. The governor called in the National Guard and state troopers, who were not only mostly white but mostly Italian American—like me.¹ One observer reported: “...there were two riots in Newark. One was started by Black people and one by the state police. The first riot was over in two days. It took very few lives but a hell of a lot of property. The second riot was pure retribution on the part of the national guard and state police.” Law enforcement expended 13,326 rounds and arrested 1400 people.

After my phone conversation with my parents about the uprising, I imagine my 29-year-old mother in their rented duplex in neighboring Bloomfield. On the morning of the uprising, my father leaves for jury duty in Newark's downtown. My mother is pregnant with a child they had not planned. At night she will see smoke from fires burning through the city where she was born. At night she will see

looting on the news. For the rest of her life, she will sleep with a gun she does not want in her bedroom.

After I hold the gun, I wonder what image, what sound, what report of misinformation, what switch flipped, what threshold did my father step over. Of the 26 people killed in the uprising, only two were white: a sheriff and a fireman. There is no conclusive evidence they were killed by protestors. What beside a revolver can be used as a weapon: a news story, a photograph, a simple conjunction (like when or because)?

I was born in Newark, but never lived there. I returned often to visit my maternal grandparents in their one-bedroom apartment, where my mother had grown up, where my aunt and her children still occasionally lived (my cousins sleeping three to a bed). Most of the neighborhood kids spoke Spanish, but we were never allowed to talk to them or play off of my grandparents' porch. Once my grandparents passed away, I only went back to Newark to attend funerals, get married, catch a flight, or change trains.

"Do you know the Black national anthem?" my aunt once asked me. She worked as a teacher for many years in the Newark Public School system. Before the uprising, despite Newark's majority Black population, whites occupied all the school board seats. After the uprising, African Americans gained more political agency at City Hall and

in the city schools. School children and their teachers sing the Black national anthem every morning.

After the uprising, my parents bought a house in the New Jersey suburbs, a twenty-minute drive from Newark. What kind of life might I have had in Newark, if I had been taught the words to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," knowing that song was not meant for me, but that I could still learn from it?

I don't know if the gun ever left the safe or its box. I wonder if my father could resist the urge to carry it with him psychologically: gun in the smile, gun in the mind, gun before a gesture or sentence, gun of white supremacy and anti-blackness. There are no guns in the safe in my home in Tucson, but I do have an alarm-system, I do belong to a neighborhood Listserv that reports on petty crime as well as those folks who might walk through our neighborhood raising someone's suspicion. Without a bullet ever being fired from its chamber, my father's gun produced a trajectory—a shameful line stretching from the early 20th century through the Civil Rights movement and the years of backlash that follow, a line that cuts through Newark, NJ, my father, and me.

1. My accounts of the uprising come from Kevin Mumford's *Newark: A History of Race, Rights and Riots in America* (NY Univ Press: 2007).

SUSAN BRIANTE, a poet, essayist and translator, is the author of books of poetry: *Pioneers in the Study of Motion*, *Utopia Minus*, and *The Market Wonders*. *Defacing the Monument*, a series of essays on immigration, archives, aesthetics and the state, will be published by Noemi Press in 2020.

from Another Sky

BY DALE MARTIN SMITH

Red sumac divided by mother.
Wild tides. Lake wind shatters signage.
In subterranean history, the world
has known its leveling. Forays toward
simple human exposure. To thwart a single
deliverance through imagination.
Pour wet libations, absorb inner earth.
Compose oneself to a muddy depth
sirens of currency and hard wind.
A mile into sleep I am waking to speak
from moving bodies surrounded
by enemies. I send my signals darkly.
Dream weaver, we can reach morning light.
Dense oak and solid hearth. Receiver tuned.

Sparrows flit in late shadows. Appetite
so tiny sending moods of mechanical
advancement. Calendar matches, person-
ality dispatches. I drink herbal tea
and do my Pilates stretches at home.
Snowflake rain softly down now darkens.
My symptoms are overrated thanks
to mashed potatoes Dad made me eat.
Holiday commute: wind, baby Jesus
elves and dried leaves scraping dry cold streets.
And yes, I note a global wreath of stitched
urgency where ghostliness and loss co-
exist in eras of dreamy compliance.
Ancestors roll over earth to see the sky.

I look for a place in temporal things.
 I play dumb in some instances. Listen
 to how far I ran from playtime center.
 Endure in time's relevance with eyes
 seeing street lights flash on suddenly.
 I send material spirit ghosts across
 American distances, standing
 forlornly in blank (or blunt?) manliness.
 A river unwinds in her mouth where voices
 belong to no one, not even a child.
 Dead leaves rot in muck under husky laughter.
 I turn a phrase or saying that won't give
 stepping onto a path of pink sand.
 Spiritual bone-thrust in mineral orbit.

Self-surveillance delivers the new "me"
 in corporeal entrapment. I present
 myself to the sky. What I had wanted
 was not to forget, like when I was a child
 and desired to remember what or where
 I had been before I was born. Or
 tried to recall all that comes after me
 in a future I cannot witness, flooded
 footprints reduced to mud. Not me but what
 "me" contains, transmits, sentences to
 particular instances of movement.
 Windows open patio by evening
 traffic's flatness. Spilled purchases, gas grill.
 There is a wound the size of paradise.

Teacakes and little sandwiches with sharp
 English cheddar. Woods are empty, bone spirits
 crave my acknowledgment. Everything
 slips away. Even the nighttime is hushed
 commodities awaiting new uses.
 I'm such a heel for making you feel
 so bad. Strangling dog vine. Month span and moon
 crammed in the sky hole. Solar father
 I sound the downhome fiddle you played.
 Your big stick. The subways are empty.
 I see a sudden flurry of falling leaves
 arriving with wine and a tartan scarf.
 My heart hurts with damp earth. Like a cine-
 matic dance escaping reality.

Compose oneself to a muddy depth
 like I was somebody out there
 looking for the aurora borealis.
 Secular spirits crack the sky open.
 From any beginning moving onward
 an open field. I marvel at the edge
 knowing and forgetting I am mostly
 archaic and three percent Neanderthal.
 I aspire to crow-views, plural
 like leaves in gutter trash or plastic straws.
 Tear skin, white father. Open voices
 my Blackfoot daisy. I met a man in
 Memphis dancing in wilderness traffic.
 Con-men waved from the deck of a steamboat.

Holy objects multiply. A child's tooth
 amethyst. Ancient sources to peer through—
 a watch, blue sage, faded polaroid.
 I sweat a lot when I look for words
 violent and tangible, what we call *real*.
 Looking at what can be seen to absorb what can't.
 My nerves are frayed obligations. My hand
 grips membrane wilderness. Like a flag
 on a beachhead in winter. Like frozen
 edges of river slicing muddy banks.
 I've had enough of easy celebration.
 Sky like a giant's belly. Cruel tension
 shoulders uneven and in muscular knots.
 My memories are tangled up in things.

I think of E. D.'s seclusion or the big
 embracing clown-show cobbling the real.
 I can tell what's not here in me—I want
 to say how to center semblance's answer.
 Step lightly, hold dear parchment figments
 depending on wilder worries. The new
 crashes green glory fields, from first sail
 to last nail, the dead burdened by broken claims.
 Failure's duration. Green sky pinion motion.
 Begin with immediacy, a field
 of objects and colors, inherited
 streams of ordered stand-offs. Wall of aqua paint
 like leviathan skin spread on shop fronts.
 Describe Lascaux's last human vibration.

DALE MARTIN SMITH lives in Toronto, Ontario, and teaches at Ryerson University. With Robert J. Bertholf, he edited *An Open Map: The Correspondence of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson* (2017), available in a new paperback edition from the University of New Mexico Press.

Mirage As Errata

BY WILL ALEXANDER

Cognitive projection ignites doppelganger by uncertainty, by unwieldy equation. The Indigenous plane remains in its respiratory state a quickened vibratory phantom corrupted at an esoteric tipping point by a corrupted mind fevered by compulsive linearity that lingers as verbatim. This compulsion creates a mesmerizing static fueling in its wake a pulse print that lingers in the masses via the arid. This collective pulse print sires esoteric thinking points that harden as linear measurement according to compulsive visible data. The latter usurpation remains inherent with what I understand to be Imperial calculation. To a hyper critical lot it may seem that I invoke dubious Indigenous standards rife with meta-discernment by always seeking to condense the unverified. Perhaps I am sensing planes partially unverified within the confines of the colonizer's pyre. The latter is a construct that surfaces as gross critical functioning. Perhaps to an unnerving degree I am assaulted by sums of violent criticality. Therefore I am consumed by the fact of a weakened human continuum constantly conveying its stark acidity as mirage. Because the latter persists with such startling alacrity there remains a suspect kinetic about the long term future of our continuing enterprise. It seems we remain always focused upon the spirit of disruption prone as we continue to be upon neo-replication. I can only apologize this spirit to the praxis of debilitated archery that seems to focus upon damaged granular result. Better put, this exercise remains a scrawled archery that sires a flawed kinetic. The latter concern remains experience that remains sullied and aligns with the dictates of a delimited bulletin. A bulletin not unlike a warped curvature convoluted by a thesis of gross percentage. The common mental given now seeks alignment with an array of exo-planets at bizarre light year locales. A reality such as Saturn now exists within bizarre research expenditure searching for the resource in order to fly within its bell of exotica. Never will I defame exotica but only seek its field via the intrinsic illumination of imaginary vapor.

Imaginary power ignites the mind beyond the lisp of quotidian argument. Thus poetic equations abound and alchemical plies itself sans declivitous mapping scale. Alchemical denouement ignites beyond its own ancillary gist as erupting aural code dense with spectacular wave arrangement. Not transactional simplicity but concern with octaves above octaves condensed as a powerful

animating gesture. This being not like the charisma of infinitude sans the conscious mind always subject to prey and wrangling. This infinitude is what the late cosmologist Allan Sandage once alluded to as bio-geo poetry.

Quite naturally I am magnetized by the numerical investigations of R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz as he understood the dynamics of invisible numbers. This was none other than Egyptian psychic wattage sired by complex meta-motion. The latter conduction remains partially akin to the aural integers that form the architectural sonics of Iannis Xenakis. One senses in his sound higher cognitive interaction, a summary of fantastic numerical forums where they combust and whirl leaving the mind in awe of its fabulous cognitive dispensation. Yet Cecil Taylor's notes seem to emanate from an entirely different dimension. They seem more akin to the hexagonal patterns at the north pole of Saturn. The latter being patterns that remain curiously lit as spontaneous structure sans delimited cognitive structure not unlike a blaze that consumes itself as via the inscrutable. Simply a scale of reality by entering a plane that spontaneously sires trans-human kinetics.

Feeling the power of Taylor's dictated germination it remains sans instigated scale. Revelation simply blurs as pre-human awakening so that it formlessly dazzles itself beyond staid formation being forms that seep into interior scale. This is not scale as simple physical concussive but provides aural chemistry with glimpses, with Occulted numerical phenomena. One could term this higher activation an energy that breaches the actual death of the body. This being certainly a state sans the coffin of numbers, sans cognitive squares and angles tapping into African vibratory elegance. This is none other than entry into meta-scale not unlike the Sun experiencing its grammar when entering the heliopause. The latter remaining rife with arcane conduction, being none other than a riddle that magnifies itself and escapes its own self-surveillance. Thus this transmuted locale emanates combustion via another scale of visibility beyond the energy of space itself and reveals a state no longer endemic with mirage as errata.

WILL ALEXANDER, poet, novelist, essayist, aphorist, playwright, visual artist, and pianist, has written nearly 40 books in the above-mentioned genres, with forthcoming amounts along the way. He is currently Poet-in-Residence at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center in Venice, California.

Resolved

BY LAURA MORIARTY

There are laws
internally generated knowledge,

syndromes and causes,
curses, prophecy, destination,

country self, city self.
Every day a new problem,

ironic hyperbole, limited omniscience,
launch, voyage, arrival,

alter, avatar
downward spiral.

There are (delayed) consequences,
double voicing, terrible

danger, asymmetric warfare,
not quite spring dawn

becomes the present
disequilibrium to which,

not great, fake, safe,
inevitable, or eternal,

but disenchanting,
able to win,

in advance.
We don't give in

2.

to our hunger
for thought,

creature comforts,
and pretense of

freedom whose
symbolic victims

as oneself withdrawn
into daily life's

fearful interdiction
Please not me!

nonviolence wish
exists because

I don't understand violence
as lucky or protected

but in my mind
privatized as it is

this unsettled
awareness settles in

of subjection's evil
incessant, incantatory

lies displayed
here as real

predicament

3.

solved not
by anthem
but promise,
proposition,
chance, stance,
corroborative
support system,
commitment, and
resolve

LAURA MORIARTY's *Personal Volcano* appeared from Nightboat Books in 2019.
She lives in Richmond, CA.

A chessboard drawn by the child Kuba

ARRANGED AND THOUGHT BY ERÍN MOURE

from <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/jaget.asp>
(it ends with a k as, if poems can be pictures, this is the figure of a human walking...)

If saying this
makes it “marred” or
it is
subject to copyright

or ejected

warped faction
my words or there is

no new
arrangement

no destiny

do not alter
do not remove

under a pigsty
in darkness
a chessboard
in a notebook
one leaf of paper
under a pigsty
darkness
breadcrumbs for pieces
the child Kuba
of Bóbrka
plays
chess with Lipa his twin

sad I am for you
stupid country
if saying it
makes for

less lonely or
souvenirs dissouts

a membrane is
earth’
s skin above or

under the pigsty
light
once a week
after Shabbat
one lit candle

Draw the furniture in our house!
said his mother Sara
And into the notebook
goes the furniture
Draw the horse in the road!
said Sara his mother
and into the notebook
goes the horse and road

its harness gleams
its hide brushed in
pencil

CRITICS PAGE

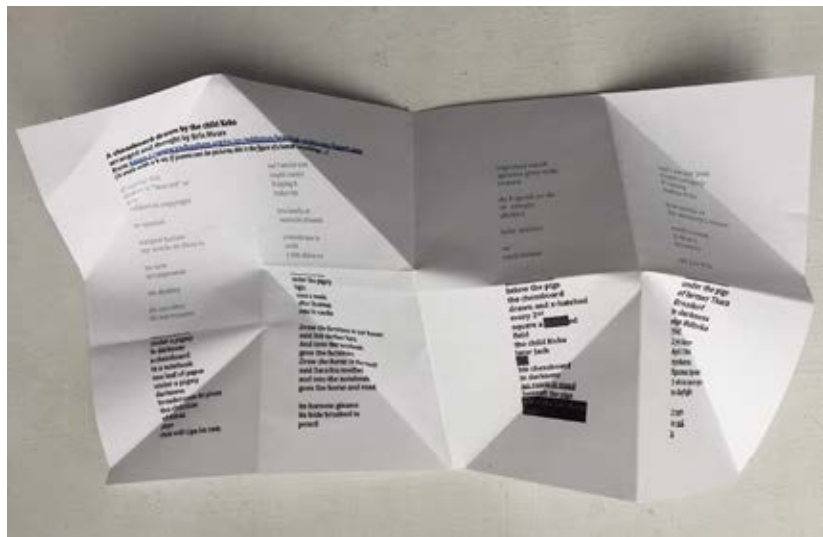


Photo Credit: Erin Moure

repeated small
agonies grey with
reason

do I speak or do
or simply
shelter

take shelter

or
endeavour

below the pigs
the chessboard
drawn and x-hatched
every 2nd
square a threshed
field
the child Kuba
later Jack
old
his chessboard
in darkness
no room to stand
beneath the pigs
Lipa Celia Sara Leon
Kuba

sad I am for you
stupid category
if saying
makes if for

less lonely or
for memory's shouts

earth's loam
is that a
treasure

oh yes it is

under the pigs
of farmer Tkacz
Ernsdorf
in darkness
edge Bóbrka
1942
2 yrs later
April 1944
прибытие
Красная Армия
1 wk to open eyes
to daylight

2 וכאן
to wal
k

ERIN MOURE's most recent poetry is *The Elements* (Toronto: House of Anansi) and most recent translation is Uxío Novoneyra's *The Uplands: Book of the Courel and other poems* (El Paso: Veliz Books) from Galician. She folds paper in Montreal.

[Exemplary Title in the Theme of “From the Threshing Floor”] [?]

BY CARLOS LARA

A wise king winnows out the wicked;
he drives the threshing wheel over them. [?]
—Proverbs 20:26

when I hear threshing floor I also hear orange mesh of the foreign [?]
and when I hear the heart pulls up on its nexus the mind torques [?]
from the drug that being it is and like that of liminal construction [?]
spaces or memory’s childhood’s polyester [?]
then when I hear threshing floor I hear mangled daughter prose [?]
surpassed by structures of tourmaline black nests [?]
in the neck of some garden technology get it [?]
I also hear window ear emasculated door and Chesapeake Renoir [?]
I hear ceramic ginger fjord and Prussian velour [?]
parcheesi and leopard lord or Bangladeshi lemon drawer [?]
I hear perpetual quorum like capital’s fresh warfare [?]
I hear gullible motif gore or extraterrestrial mylar dwarf [?]
and so we get wavy in the margins which is great if you can handle it [?]
says pablo the threshing floor being also like a marginal space [?]
so transitory because sort of unlimited in definitude [?]
regardless there’s such a limpid insistence on the unmiraculous today [?]
what I call the period of steep stepping stools [?]
but it’s all getting very briary now which it won’t be [?]
because I can’t afford the or any incompleteness of it [?]
though nothing is ever ended [?]
all endings being the same non-existent but hazarded and described [?]
and living in the same manner the same ear the same rude and sane feel [?]
of being squozed between two forces empathy and intelligence [?]
and then in isolation the gems accumulate right there you see [?]
in the margins as we were saying right right [?]
the epitome of more weight on one side of the thing [?]
I can’t even really say that I’m the same man after the poem [?]
Creeley said nothing’s wiser than a moment [?]
now you you’re gonna want to think about that [?]
and then understand the root of the spilling of prescience and fact [?]
if there is a heaven we are untranslatable to it [?]
and then this part of me is born and this part of me is born again [?]
and then somehow I learn of some place like Mackinaw City [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then I’m in danger from the winter in the poem [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then there’s not enough rain in poetry [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then see me in the scienceless wisdom of attempted commotion [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then necklaces subjected to the sovereign common [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then opposition as permanent fly paper [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
a real stain on the makeable nude sense of play [?]

but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then I get to be impressed [?]
and the movements are true hell [?]
and then authentic vagrancy of people as people [?]
and then I look like a new kitchen [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then your favorite and same shit apathy [?]
spinally coming down to Earth to be released [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then there exists a deathless ruckus in eudaemonic swell [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then a wicked but fortified system for plain burning [?]
and then my threshing floor is a vibrant seagull [?]
monitoring possibility [?]
but I’ll hold off on that [?]
and then the sun at night [?]
now you’re learning [?]
and then I complete a move called the woken goat [?]
now you’re learning [?]
and then do you see me in Michoacan [?]
now you’re learning [?]
what about with a bleeding hand [?]
now you’re learning [?]
one time Michael wrote “love’s lemurs” and I nearly lost my mind [?]
or did I write it [?]
now you’re learning [?]
this was supposed to be critical prose but I saved you the boredom [?]
now you owe me [?]
you owe me a vicious yet courteous revision of babbling piety [?]
you owe me certain cloaked tendencies or a rose of hospice’s blank rooms [?]
you owe me a waitress of running lava [?]
you owe me diffident clauses of repartee [?]
you owe me the coleslaw of silence and meaning’s still brisket [?]
so I’ve been writing out a spell I learned from Remedios Varo [?]
where everything is spoken of and told to come alive [?]
I mean everything [?]
where there is no threshing [?]
as if how does it feel with the feelings [?]
as if I would ask anything to come to life [?]
in the margins of sense and certainty illegal and unattuned [?]
working from the wheat fresh red of anti-separations [?]
that is all

CARLOS LARA is the author of *The Green Record* (Apostrophe, 2018) and *Like Bismuth When I Enter* (Nightboat, 2020). He lives with his wife and son in the greatest goddamn city on the planet, Los Angeles.



Photo: pablo lopez.

Three Threshing Floors [or Three Invisibilities]

BY SUSAN GEVIRTZ

First

After we hugged in greeting on Christmas, in the visiting room at San Quentin Prison, the first thing Talib said, breaking into a wide smile, was, “Ah, the sound of a baby crying! So wonderful! Among the many kinds of deprivation we live with in here, missing the sounds of the world is a huge one...”

Then we went straight to the vending machines

With our bounty we sat facing each other on the same side of a table. He told me about his parole appeal. We talked about his memoir and the other writing he does for trade. If someone inside needs their story written he writes it for stamps or other necessities.

living and writing living—I am Talib’s writing “mentor” and friend

He had bought photo tokens so we had our picture taken in front of the dusty plastic Christmas tree.

Then it was 1:50 and everyone had to be out by 2pm. We hugged good bye. Thanked each other for the visit. And I joined the crowd of mostly families moving toward the screening exit. A lot of people were crying. I wasn’t but I felt emptied, tense, exhausted from being tracked and under scrutiny every second on the way in, while in, and on the way out—and I was only there for a few hours.

On the phone a few weeks later, Talib said, “We’ve been under the fog line. It means we can’t go out on the yard because they might not be able to see us—can’t go to the post office either.”

You could escape or cross a border in fog, or you could be disappeared in it

Second

In a coal cart on a track I rode
past sleeping lions
underground in an abandoned mine

The wooden cart was no longer used for coal
There was no danger of collapse
The lions were close, but docile as they turned in dreams

of spinning

extraction along the seam

chaff dross tailings

into what is happening
what happening is

Of the many guises of that problem: The news, narcissistic parent

delivers inertia, distance, hunger for information

Or “Being held in the mind of the mother [in utero] is the original holding environment... Children not held in the mind of their mother are lost, forgotten.”

(Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma,

Sebern Fisher)

If the sight of you is obliterated

you cannot imagine being seen or heard

wordless, or bludgeoned by words
worldless or on my mind

Thus the requirement:

Follow the thread as if there is an outside to the locked room of “etymological despair”

The brilliant guy diagnosing why my furnace quit in January said, “I get better and better at fixing things and I have less and less idea why or how”

Rhythmicity—as Maria and Nicolas Torok call it

Call and response or the answer song as Tyrone Williams calls it

Buzz pollinators striking middle C, or sonication, so I’ve heard

Third

With their white heads and tails you can spot them from far away.

“Aren’t they easy prey?”

Bald eagles are soaring up and down the valley over the river.

“No, because fully grown adults have no known predators.

They are bright so they can see each other,” I add, making it up.

“To be born to the world is for each to enter abrupt and knowledgeable into the simple or thrashed truth of one’s materiality, knowing that that which is not destined to a relation to the other is worthless.” (*Poetic Intention*, Édouard Glissant, tr. Nathanaël)

The news feeds an emergency dopamine rush that keeps us coming back
(*Monetizing Anger*, Matt Taibbi)

injects a jagged anti-rhythm, makes us
distracted unsuccessful mourners—melancholics who carry a tomb

who forge from whatever grave informs us—who might hear the answer song without the
question

The original holding environment before we can see each other, with the one in the dark
inside, mining, listening to one another’s turning, breathing, dreaming

The “holding tank,” then prison, muffling, secreting from public view, thwarting, thrashing

Like buzz pollinators strike middle C to release pollen, a human voice or tuning fork in
middle C will also release pollen

(*Secrets of the Oak Woodlands*, Marianchild)

“The consciousness of the nation is thus consciousness of relation.”

(*Poetic Intention*, Glissant)

In a deserted mind

formed when dead plant matter decays into peat converted into coal by heat and pressure
of deep burial over millions of years lost, forgotten, worthless, gash caesarian land what
the lions will say on waking, how it burns

SUSAN GEVIRTZ’s books of poetry include *Hotel abc* (Nightboat, 2016) and *Aerodrome Orion & Starry Messenger* (Kelsey Street, 2010). Her critical books are *Narrative’s Journey: The Fiction and Film Writing of Dorothy Richardson* (Peter Lang, 1996) and *Coming Events* (Nightboat, 2013). She is based in San Francisco.

SHAKE

BY AARON SHURIN

A shiver is a rip in time. He puts his ear to the ground where the deep magma sings. History is a version of the future, a sweep of pterodactyl wings in rising light... The pavement quivers like jelly but doesn't split as the hot steam

vents... The future is underground: the city *beneath* the city. It has to be endured while the crippled buildings sway, molded when still hot, sculpted in the thrill of the wind... She watches from a distance, waiting for the ink to dry,

hand raised high in the air as if trying to escape the pull of the page... She wants a new sheet clear as an alien sky, blue-white and tight right to the edges. And Boom! It was like someone had dropped a piano on the floor above me—

more a thud than a shake—except I lived on the top floor, no one above. Then a groan as though something trapped below wanted to get out/get in... The house shivered and shook. If I say “open” is hot lava my evil twin?

With his night-vision goggles—green eyes—he looks for every crack in time, every seam about to slip, every hollow and hole—to let the old city roar in and wake the sleeping walking un-looking pixel-bound dead...

Where is the sky now? Does it pulse like an organism, does it breathe in silver waves and tremble like morning dew? The sky beneath the sky! And you with your long hair like strands of fire—I think we burned up that bed—

I think we live in those flames, still burn—I think our kisses are comets in the shivering sky... And in the hot silence of the blank streets he walks as if in a trance, with time stretched and stacked like plates, and my mother's eyes

squinting to keep the plates conflated—invisible gravity—while the temblors rock his footsteps and the wooden houses squeal in their beautiful joints and the violins of the tall cedars wail their ache and awe... up the steep hill

behind his house where the downtown towers seem already pitched forward, ready to fall, and the far-out Pacific racing in—green eyes of the deep water where the bones of the buildings lay... the city quivers... now, but before

the great shiver... He buries his face in his cupped hands as if submerged in deep water, holding his breath to stop time and lock in the memories—her raised arm aching but desperate to live the pause, to hold back the footnotes

on tent cities, tossed syringes, immune deficiencies—and release the city from its litany of litanies... He spins in place to keep his balance and ride out the shake—history is a whirlpool from which only the spinners wake—

in common purpose out of a hole in the sea—I remember—hot lava made me . . . What did they see? What did they know? How did they work? How did they work together? Who did they want to be? Who did they become?

How many had green eyes? How many loved history? Whose mother's heart blew apart its sutures in a last attempt to keep the ways in play...? Once I fell to the floor in my little house in a skylight beam of almost solid sun

and lay my cheek on the bamboo planks in a pose of surrender and a shiver of thanks... Once we climbed the distant mountain in the eastern county after big rain with the thick mud congealing around our shoes like bear traps,

locking our steps... Still we trudged on, mud-bound, not for the summit per se but just to see from the top the city across the bay shining in its sheath of western light, with the glamorous fog like a sequined cape on its shoulders

From “Shiver” in *The Blue Absolute* (Nightboat, 2020), reprinted with permission.

AARON SHURIN is Professor Emeritus in the University of San Francisco's MFA Writing Program, and the author of 14 books of poetry and prose.

From A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure

BY HOA NGUYEN

SEEDS AND CRUMBS

yes a famous mise-en-scene
“when I was just a little girl”

angle looks too much like angel
and vice a versa

what lies ahead
rainbow

rainbows
who cares

scatter the song
clavichord it

the future’s not ours
to see tenderly

FAILED TOWER CA DAO

sonnet tied to the sky
struck by lightning
in that one film version
of Frankenstein who
was it that feared
the storm and lightning

myth and history twist
exile into a tower structure
also called “mouth”
that feeling of headlong
the site of mother
my longing in language

see my eyes rubies red I feed
on toxic flowers kiss one
or any flower rise clean from
mud water row a petal boat
absurd longing to sing the sun
to exist and live an island of

SHE LEADS WITH FLOWER WANDS

Made by the dead puppeteer the rings
found them it seemed Dry papery magenta

flowers of the wild bougainvillea
Multiple ghosts jab your throat thorns

in the uninterrupted kitchen dream
They could see it was perfect so their prophecy

was fulfilled so the lung smothered dies
so they wrote down their dreams

Their way made unpassable so fall through
worlds dashing the red gourd

of light on the way

HOA NGUYEN’s books include *Red Juice: Poems 1998-2008* (Wave Books, 2014), *Violet Energy Ingots* (Wave Books, 2016) and *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* (April 2021, Wave Books). Hoa teaches poetics for Miami University’s low residency MFA program, the Milton Avery School for Fine Arts at Bard College, and in a popular, long-running poetics workshop she leads from cyberspace and Toronto.

Video Tryouts for an American Grammar Book

BY FARID MATUK

A name, not to accuse but to evacuate, and there occupy an accusation, serially. Oak and cypress relocated to keep watch together over their shade. A spider's filaments, invisible and new. A corner of the window.

There is no backward. A turn of wind through the window at the filaments.

A turn, a plow, a bad representative of technology.

They withstand, her eyes. The trees, lined stalls of private homes, a romance of staying in place. A technology of shame. Light at my thumb, lemon yellow line. What searching I've sent.

A speckled bird swoops between the legs of two people in a video to seize the dead prairie dog from the fist of its keeper.

The bird flies in a video it doesn't record or post. The bird has already threshed audience from the real people who understand.

My anger. The sun letting the fog pass by. Chain link, silk printed with branded skulls.

The audience that marvels. The audience that feels left behind in its own outline, each a vaccinated child. The idea of a word realized as audience to the wailing.

Cleansing organs of the word, its sex organs, its transferring organs swelling, the inherited organs of the word lined in water for baptismal oration.

In this yellow light I'm glad for the sentence dropping off from the surface. A video of soldiers wailing after scenes of them sleeping.

My eyes closing and my belief in interiority I've come to drop off. In their sleeping, their mouths agog. A video of boys spitting into each other's mouths.

The depth from which. A man in a video giving his gut and face to be punched. A video of fields smoking or a video of the mown grasses? A video of a man sucking another's cock by an ATV. Their long beards orphaned into objects.

The oak and cypress tendrils binding black physics of live water running in the city creek to the river. The mold and the messages spinning on their maps. Voyage to the surface of sleep the soldiers seem to go to a waking video a sleeping video expected all the way into its genre.

A painted video carries the squeak of boats lurching at their moorings. A video orphans the voice she gives to reading her poems, a critic returns it. A video of a man's rectum bleeding fast from the mason jar that just broke inside his full feeling.

A video made sacred by the last seven videos.

A video of the bleeding or a video of what happened after his hand reaches to stop the recording. A mistake that sees the flesh the body tries to run from.

Men sleeping placid beneath the river looking up with both eyes dedicated to the patriarchy

is the cover for a video of men congratulating men for writing about the ugliness of men.

A video of boots in near unison, a video of an uncomplicated feeling, a video of me tucked into a low-back stretch looking up at the plastered ceiling I hum to myself a singer's dead white voice – *that's on me... that's on me... I know...*

watched by a video of actual people in a glade getting closer to the sun. A video looking down to an evaporative line of water for the sun.

Refrigeration, ornithology, benediction earnest, mimicking a closed set of faces. A video of a U.S. fighter pilot and I talking at the Delta gate. A video of his enthusiasm shining as far as the air will take it. A video of me hearing him say, God's work for where his enthusiasm meets his enthusiasm for the mission

so his smiling can go inside himself in a video of him showing me his flight helmet and oxygen mask is a video of me seeing him holding his own head in his lap then a video of it back in the customized bag.

He has only altitude and a video of an executioner renouncing hierarchies a video they think they make but I think it. A video worn away into a revelation. A video's single eye knocked loose so it rolls inward is a name.

A video of me being used to consent to the conditions. Soft mole, hale tunnels, standing house. I narrow into a fine, stretchable line, thin blue, a bright yellow edge of least depth, the sound of its going.

Down the hall, a door creaking in a video about the importance of sequencing begins, Down the hall, so the door will have somewhere to sound, hesitant

or grand, opening onto the bank of the river marking the ends or beginnings of the Motherland of objects, reposed, frayed, remembered in museums, you first

the water's fine. There is a feeling that I like where you love me and don't believe in me, even as a sentence expects to run from an event. This is the technology of staying, not of staying in place.

FARID MATUK's most recent book is *The Real Horse. Redolent*, a book-arts collaboration between Matuk and Colombian artist Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, is forthcoming from Singing Saw Press.

The Prayers of the Saints

BY STEVEN SEIDENBERG

φ

What is at stake—what has been *wagered*—is neither our hope for recovery nor our faith in retribution, but our *dream of escape*...

φ

The confidence that any change in aspect or expression has its source in some particular emotive truck—in an intrinsically delimited transit of migration, as a breakneck plunge down sidelong slope—is built on the avowal of a universal motive, the belief that the reflection of one's fitful excitations—the inference of one's *own* discrete comportment in the nearness of an awkward gibe, a panicked gulp—justifies a subsequent ascription of that animus to any fractured seity that happens on one's course. That every acceptance of such traits as a standard of appraisal involves a form of credence—a baseless drive to sanctify the constancy of character both fore and aft one's marking of such cipher as *event*—is proved by nothing more than the frequency of our *misjudgments*, the glaring admonitions of our *principal* mistakes...

φ

We are grounded—we are tethered—to an absence without term. We think we must progress to be contented, to be succored, but it's decadence that leads us into boredom, as a cure...

They slept naked in their cassocks. There are reasons to admire their decision to withdraw. They hesitate before us. It was never their desire to advance a scheme, to claw their way back from the brink, but this is now their world. What difference if the mountain leaps? If every prick and twinge forecasts the ecstasy of pincers gauging almond eyes? No matter where you place your glance, they will appear. Crawl into any orifice and plot a path to nescience; feel the tongue turn once and twice, then vanish, like a worm...

φ

The intensity of inattention. Withdrawn from alterity, we cleave only to affect, to the differentiation of redacted sighs...

φ

Let the suitors take their pot shots, the cannons hurl. Let them fall in drunken conquest to the blacktop, the bloody sward. Only—cower in the corner. It's not your fight to lose. When no one else is left the exile takes up the prerogative. The final substitution, and—the endless interlude...

φ

Sense is an addiction from which one can't be weaned. The problem is that each attempt to force such disaffection is as much an act of sensing as any other vain exuberance, any passion importuned with curling lips or pinioned wings. And thus of the ascetic one must brook no easy quarter, one need only ask the question: With what have they replaced their rot but *this* conscripted molder? To what have they surrendered but—*another joy*...

φ

The next last opportunity—or perhaps it's just the first. Something always happens, something I'm forgetting; something that is neither seen nor ceded to the knout. That there was once a chance, that there always was a chance...I can't tell you what will happen, but I can at least say this; no matter how one signals one's imperils and abductions—how fervently one grapples in the capture of the next redoubt—there will always be a way to sally forth into abandon, a passage to the next retreat, the slink across...

φ

The imperative is to recognize there's *going* to be nothing, that every new emergence from the merit of the void condemns its source to insufficiency...*begins*, that is, the retrogress to that dissembled exigence, the faltering return to all that's forfeit of the forfeit, all that's missing of the lost. It's not what makes us happy, but what fashions us *persistent*—what substitutes the infinite recurrence of the same for a determined thrust...

φ

A diet of corrosion, scourged and shriven from its terminus. So many loose ends, so much grown familiar. So many souls, so many vassals bound and plunged beneath the current. The guilty free their hands and swim. The innocent fend with their mouths—and drown...

φ

Those who are proscribed within the stasis of catastrophe—who are properly made subject to the onslaught it surveils—can no longer be interrupted; their interruption is unending, is determined as a predicate, as a rupture set within each rift, a thresh of only tares. One who does not meet the gaze of those who would give refuge—who *refuses* to be solaced in the pity of an eager stare—is thereby made invisible to all who would glean meaning from the tillage of this ravaged vale...

STEVEN SEIDENBERG's most recent works are *plain sight* (Roof, 2020) and *Situ* (Black Sun Lit, 2018). His collections of photographs include *Pipevalve: Berlin* (Lodima, 2017) and *Imaging Failure: Abandoned Lives of the Italian South* (due from Contrasto in 2020). He lives in San Francisco.



Angela Fraleigh, *Fold in the sun*, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 90 x 66 inches. Courtesy the artist. © Angela Fraleigh.

ANGELA FRALEIGH

BY ANN C. COLLINS

Angela Fraleigh

Angela Fraleigh: Sound the Deep Waters
Delaware Art Museum

October 5, 2019–April 12, 2020

Despite their shared belief in a woman's right to choose, Madame Restell (aka Ann Trow Lohman), a 19th-century abortion provider, sent no letters to Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood; the women's lifespans did not overlap. Nor did those of women's rights advocate Margaret Fuller and feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, or, for that matter, those of the Pre-Raphaelite model Fanny Eaton and American poet Maya Angelou. To correct this misalignment, artist Angela Fraleigh traverses time and space, pairing them together through an exchange of floral bouquets steeped in the cryptic meanings of floriography, the Victorian language of flowers. The sculptures are set against large scale paintings which connect women, artists, and models across eras.

At the entrance to the exhibition *Angela Fraleigh: Sound the Deep Waters*, curated by Margaret Winslow at the Delaware Art Museum, a glass case holds five such arrangements, crafted in cold porcelain by a team of international flower-makers that includes the artist. Among the blooms are tansy and rue, which stand for resistance and grace, and can be used to induce menses; southern magnolia, symbolic of determination and used as a fertility treatment; poppy, signifier of consolation and a key ingredient in laudanum, prescribed for menstrual cramps or "a case of the nerves"; and snowdrop, code for hope, used to induce abortions. Standing in vases whose voluptuous lines and earthy hues echo the figures in the paintings they herald, the flowers act as metonyms for women's private thoughts, conversations, and actions.

Fraleigh's world of veiled meanings and whispered confidences continues in four large-scale narrative paintings populated with women both historic and contemporary. Inspired by the museum's extensive collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, her compositions place 19th-century models—some of whom wished to be artists—alongside contemporary women, notably her former students, who are now her colleagues. In *Our world swells like dawn, when the sun licks the water* (2019), portraits of two Black women—one a former student of Fraleigh's, the other Fanny Eaton—occupy the center of three oil and acrylic panels. Traditionally marginalized, they stand as the focal point in Fraleigh's work. They are surrounded by a chorus of five other women who recline beneath

a dark canopy of fuchsia and violet. Fraleigh pours yellow, pink, and teal paint over the surface of the work, allowing it to spill and seep where it will. The effect is a spontaneity that tempers the formality of the work, a building of playful layers over an exacting process.

In *Fold in the sun* (2019), dappplings of black and white create a shadowy sense of water rushing over rocks. Two smiling women wash a plump baby in a fountain. In the foreground, a nude woman plucked from Francesco Hayez's *Susanna at her Bath* (1850) covers herself with a length of cloth. While Hayez's repurposed model epitomizes the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of beauty, in Fraleigh's composition, she becomes more complex. Her gaze confronts the viewer, who may or may not be a welcome observer to sequestered space where bathing provides respite from a world in which appearance defines value.

Delving into the museum's holdings of American illustration, Fraleigh discovered a number of works dating from the early 1900s by such women artists as Katharine Pyle and the Red Rose Girls, a Pennsylvania collective who worked at a time when women were seldom recognized as fine artists, only garnering attention as illustrators. Evidence of their legacy is seen in *Where summer ripens at all hours* (2019), in which red lines traced from Pyle's work overlay an assembly of women, several of whom wear red headscarves reminiscent of Albert Joseph Moore's painting *The Green Butterfly* (1879–81). Fraleigh's palette turns psychedelic here, bringing a quality of wildness to her seemingly docile subjects: bedlam approaches as arms reach overhead, multiple Eves plucking apples, the forbidden fruit that will impart them with knowledge.

Circling the gallery, I felt bolstered by the communities of women the artist assembles. Fraleigh does not show them "at work," but relaxing together—something I, like so many women, feel guilty admitting I need. *Sound the deep waters* (2019) evokes the women of Simeon Solomon's *Toilet of a Roman Lady* (1869), a 19th century

depiction of class distinction which Fraleigh reinterprets as an act of mutual nurturance. At the core of the piece stand three older women. Thin and wrinkled, they are elegant and dignified, as are all of Fraleigh's women, who congregate in secret pockets where societal limitations of female identity are eluded. One of the women holds out a thread, a simple act which reveals their power: these are the Fates, the women who determine the past and future for gods and mortals alike, a reminder of what is possible.

ANN C. COLLINS is a writer living in Brooklyn. She holds an MFA in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts.

ARLENE SHECHET

BY DAVID RHODES

Arlene Shechet

Skirts

Pace Gallery

February 28–April 25, 2020

Recent sculptures by Arlene Shechet are presented here in such a way as to ensure that there is no single overview of the exhibition. A wall facing the entrance to the gallery allows movement around both of its ends, giving viewers a choice in how they circulate through the space—to the right of this wall, one sculpture is also on the terrace of Pace's new Chelsea building, bringing together inside and outside architecturally. This configuration is significant, as it brings to mind encounters with temples, gardens, or modernist architecture, all attentive to an engaged passage through or around exteriors, interiors, and things. As a group, the sculptures represent another change for this artist who is continuously open to, and perhaps insists on, finding new forms and materials.

As far back as 1988, Shechet noted something in an exhibition of Forrest Bess at Hirschl & Adler, namely that Bess's work was between painting and sculpture; at Pace this observation is in full effect. Shechet's sculptures are so invested with color and surface, as well as form, that painters such as Joan Miró, with *The Crown Jewel* (2020), and Pablo Picasso, with *In My View* (2020), come to mind. Picasso's cubist collages and sculptures and Miró's paintings and assemblage objects always evince color that demarcates contrasting and vital surface as a structure. This is in contrast to Henri Matisse for example, where color is a subject in and of itself and endlessly variable. In previous exhibitions, Alberto Giacometti, Giorgio Morandi, and Lucio Fontana have readily come to mind. Here, the frequent addition of wood such as sections of reclaimed trees (Shechet's studio is now in the Hudson Valley) not only focuses the viewer on another connective element between the sculptures, but also adds a previously living material to those already used that were temporally animate due to processes of casting or firing. *The Crown Jewel* leans, reaching well above head height at 94 inches, and yet retains its dynamic equilibrium. A long section of sawn timber supports blue-black cast clay



Arlene Shechet, *Deep Dive*, 2020. Glazed ceramic, painted hardwood, steel, 40 x 40 x 23 inches. © Arlene Shechet, courtesy Pace Gallery. Photography by Phoebe d'Heurle.

sections with red painted wood wedges, a partly painted wooden crescent shape atop like a diacritical mark, the colors found, as raw wood, or painted. *In My View* is a more compact piece, the center of gravity nearer the floor at 58 inches. Elements are slotted together: sections of painted timber, a steel sliver, bubbled white glaze on terracotta, and a dark clay cast, interlocked and leaning. Organic and geometric forms are further structured by light, absorbing or reflecting colored surfaces. Casting—taking parts from one sculpture and migrating these to another sculpture—makes of them a community of partially shared forms, the casts enjoying a further iteration in their reuse, what Aby Warburg referred to as "Nachleben," the afterlife or survival of repeated forms or characteristics.

The sculptures reside somewhere between casual and purposeful making. Empathy toward the objects as composite entities certainly creates a complex anthropomorphic connection. The large outside sculpture, *Oomph* (2020), recalls Shechet's earlier ceramic works: a cast concrete biomorphic creature, its formless plasticity evokes the interior fragility of a body at the same time as its containing, exterior, folding and flexible skin. Language, too, as the humorous titles suggest, is clearly another material, another element inviting possibility.

With an intense emphasis on color, the multi-tiered, often column-like structures achieve a fresh synthesis of painting and sculpture. This is more than it may at first seem: Shechet has long been interested in ideas from the West and the East—both Freudian psychoanalysis and Buddhist teaching—a practice that allows for the invention she excels at to encompass non-formal factors, or rather to integrate idea, desire, and process. Letting go, an attempt at not being there simply as a subjective self-expressive artist, does not lead to arbitrariness. As we see in these sculptures, it can mean that art may negotiate, manifest, and share an understanding of human experience indirectly through created objects, something we simply cannot do directly.

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Julian Schnabel, *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky I*, 2019. Oil on found fabric, 108 x 90 inches. © Julian Schnabel.

JULIAN SCHNABEL

BY ALFRED MAC ADAM

Julian Schnabel
*The Patch of Blue the
 Prisoner Calls the Sky*
 Pace Gallery (New York)
 March 6–April 18, 2020

The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky is Julian Schnabel's first show in the new Pace Gallery, and he knocks the viewer for a loop. His title derives from Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898), either a misquotation or a faulty memory of the original. Wilde famously wrote the poem when he was in prison for "gross indecency," but while he was there, a fellow prisoner was hanged for murdering his wife. In the poem, Wilde slowly identifies himself with the murderer, eventually coining the famous line, "Each man kills the thing he loves."

The relationship between Wilde and Schnabel's 13 paintings is mysterious, even though three of these brilliant works are titled *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky* (2019). The relevant passage, about the wife-murderer, appears four times in the poem:

I never saw a man who looked
 With such a wistful eye
 Upon that little tent of blue
 Which prisoners call the sky,
 And at every drifting cloud that went
 With sails of silver by.

The metamorphosis of Wilde's "tent of blue" into Schnabel's "patch of blue" is important because it speaks directly to Schnabel's artistic recycling of found material, both in the sense of ideas and in

the sense of real substances incorporated into the work. In Wilde, the line refers to the murderer's lost freedom, but for Schnabel, it becomes a recurring motif: all three paintings include a patch of blue, obfuscated by "drifting clouds" of white. So, the poem is simultaneously present and absent in the paintings.

Out-of-context quotation in art and architecture is characteristic of the post-modern condition, but Schnabel's relationship with antecedents is complex. Here, he alters a line to fit his intentions, but elsewhere he shows himself to be a past master of painterly parody. His "Big Girl" (2001) pictures are a send-up of portraiture and his "rose paintings" (2015) mock floral still lifes. But they are all tour-de-force enterprises in themselves. So, Wilde's "little tent of blue" comes home ironically to roost in these works, all made from "toldos," weathered cotton awnings Schnabel bought from produce vendors near his Mexico studio in Troncones.

The 13 paintings here fall into three discrete groups: five untitled works of uniform (84" x 65") size, three "patch of blue" paintings, also uniform in size (approximately 108" x 90"), and five large-scale paintings, four titled *Lagunillas* (2018) and one *Preschool and Afterschool* (2018). In the gallery, the eight smaller works stand apart from the large ones and are really creatures of a different order.

James Nares, in his touching and insightful catalogue essay, points out that five of the eight are made from two pieces of fabric sewn together and that the stitch line "evokes a horizon." This line, created by chance, turns the painterly space into a de Chirico-like land or cityscape. In *Untitled I* (2019), for instance, masses of color interact like characters in Joan Miró's Dutch interior paintings of 1928, also reworkings

of "found" material. But where Miró retains figurative elements, Schnabel lets color do the talking. The weather-beaten awnings come bearing colors, but Schnabel enhances them and departs from them in yet another metamorphosis.

The "patch of blue" paintings contain no horizon lines, so they are a playing field for color masses. In this case, the matter of rhythm, the careful placement of certain shades, is of primary importance. *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky III* (2019) is a dialectical struggle between yellow and pink, with blue and white seeking to mediate between them. Gestural without being violent, this painting captures an instant of artistic illumination.

The very large paintings are all irregularly shaped because of the found nature of the awning material. The most fascinating is the last, the strangely titled *Preschool and Afterschool* (2018), a huge 128" x 213" irregular rectangle. The found fabric, painted with oil and gesso, is primarily in a pinkish mauve, interrupted by black and white. The white, rectangular swath we recognize as the same that covers the eyes of the "big girls"; the black shapes are variously biomorphic and abstract. Here, Schnabel "signs" the found fabric surface with marks related to himself, the supreme alchemist.

Way back in the eighties, Julian Schnabel took, in the words of Mick Jagger, more than his "fair share of abuse." He has not only survived, but prevailed.

ALFRED MAC ADAM is professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He has translated works by Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Carlos Onetti, José Donoso, and Jorge Volpi, among others. He recently published an essay on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa included in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*.

GEORGES DE LA TOUR

BY BARTOLOMEO SALA

Georges De La Tour
Georges De La Tour: L'europa Della Luce
 Palazzo Reale, Milan
 February 7–June 7, 2020

Ever since he was rediscovered in the early 20th century, French Baroque painter Georges de La Tour (1593–1652) has been shrouded in mystery and myth. Glimpsing the man's character from his work, art historians tended to portray the master of candlelight painting as a lone genius—a sort of austere Caravaggio courting mysticism while living among the humble, working people of his native Lorraine. Thanks to the evidence uncovered in the archives of the long-dead Duchy, we now know this portrait to be a fiction. Not only was de La Tour a well-known painter in his day, one whose influences were wholly European; he was also neither saint nor a "socialist." Ironically, the few surviving accounts describe him as an arrogant upstart intent on avoiding taxes and routinely ravaging peasants' fields with his pack of hounds.



Georges de La Tour, *Job Taunted by His Wife*, c.1650. Oil on canvas, 57 x 38 inches. Musée départemental d'Art ancien et contemporain, Épinal, France.

To realize this, one doesn't have to go further than the show's first room, where the visitor is welcomed by a series of Magdalens by various artists. A glance around and the eye is immediately drawn back to de La Tour's *The Repentant Magdalen* (ca. 1635–40), hanging on the wall right in front of the entrance, in which de La Tour portrays the reformed prostitute brooding in the dead of night. What strikes here is

de La Tour's virtuosity but also the way he manages to get to the heart of his subject by an economy of means. Most of the picture is pitch-dark—the only source of light being a candle blocked by a skull before it. Magdalen's face in profile is barely visible, and yet you won't see an expression more rapt and meditative. There is no way to know what the saint is thinking, but her left hand caressing the skull in silhouette suggests that the object of her reflections is the transience of life itself.

The rest of the exhibition proceeds thematically rather than chronologically—still, a progression is observable. At the beginning of his career, de La Tour seemed to be most interested in the outward appearance of his real-life models. Wrinkled foreheads; scarred cheeks; dirty nails; garments modest and lavish—de La Tour depicted all these details with an unsparing realism normally more associated with Gustave Courbet and 19th-century naturalism than the sensual and theatrical Caravaggio. Highlights, to this end, are the two earthy portraits of the apostles *St. James The Minor* (ca. 1615–20) and *St. Jude Thaddeus* (and *The Musicians' Brawl* (ca. 1625–30), in which one quarreling vagrant is shown squeezing a lemon in his enemy's eye to prove the mendacity of his blindness.

My absolute favorite in the batch was, however, the monumental oil painting *The Hurdy-Gurdy Player with a Dog* (ca. 1622–25). Standing at almost two meters tall, this work in terms of composition, gestures, and dramatic use of chiaroscuro is one of the least complex and refined of the show—the game of hands and glances that makes so much of de La Tour's later paintings so enigmatic is completely absent, save the little dog on the bottom left which seems to look at us imploringly. De La Tour does not attempt to ennoble his subject—the player's gaze is blank, his mouth half-open to show the rotten teeth, and it's unclear whether what sticks out of the man's trousers are his underpants or his penis. It reminded me of Luis Buñuel's film *Viridiana* (1961), another masterpiece in which poverty is shown in all its unvarnished ugliness and alterity.

As the artist grew older, rough realism progressively gave way to a more pared-down and rarefied style. This is perfectly evinced, for example, in two of the last paintings de La Tour worked on in his life, *The Denial of Saint Peter* (1650) and *The Dice Players* (ca. 1650–51), whose extreme stylization and geometric simplification somehow prefigures Cézanne and Cubism. More poignant and touching than these artificial genre paintings are, however, the religious nocturnes on view in the last rooms of the show. *St. John the Baptist in the Desert* (ca. 1649–51) is a triumph of de La Tour's "less-is-more" approach and his ultimate celebration of ascetic solitude. However, if one artwork stands out from the mature phase of de La Tour's production, it is *Job Taunted by His Wife*.

Painted in 1650, it portrays Job as a decrepit old man whose body is ravaged by blisters and sores staring up at a beautiful, finely dressed young woman who is talking down to him while holding a candle. Like *St. John the Baptist*, the painting is another moving affirmation of stoic life sustained by faith in God. Yet what really catches the eye

is the somewhat tense domestic intimacy de La Tour manages to portray between the figures, the wife's dress almost shielding her husband's frail body—a testament to the fact that, though in his art he often warned against its illusory and impermanent nature, reality with its minutiae had a magnetizing hold on de La Tour till the very end.

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JOANNA POUSETTE-DART

BY BARBARA A. MACADAM

Joanna Pousette-Dart
Lisson Gallery
February 29–April 18, 2020

Joanna Pousette-Dart's work is a visceral experience. Organic and warm forms embrace one another just as they do the viewer. Similarly, the paintings' colors are sweet and seductive and actively engage one another in often indefinable and unexpected contrasts. Ultimately, and together, the shapes and colors give form to feeling and emotion, but they are never overwrought. And when large, the scale of the canvases is not ungainly. Pousette-Dart knows when to stop. Compensating for the beauty of the paintings is their complexity. They are cerebral and widely allusive.

The four large (including *2 Part Variation #3 [After Pierrot]* (2015), measuring 87 1/2" x 120") multi-part, shaped paintings in this show could be viewed as alluding to landscape—desert, sea, sky, the curvature of the earth—but, actually, they don't describe any specific place or figure. Pousette-Dart creates and lays claim to her own particular territory—or "location"—as she would have it. Inhabiting that territory is *2 Part Variation #3*—two acrylic-on wood crescent-shaped panels stacked one atop the other, a pink panel below and a yellow one above. Navy-bluish limning on the pink one and a turquoise-ish intervention across the yellow renders the components lively and playful. At the same time, each element can be viewed as in an altarpiece, with the sections offering different commentaries on the color relations.

Therein lies her serene originality. Despite Pousette-Dart's time in Mexico and New Mexico as well as Europe, and the Far East, with stops in the ancient and modern worlds—all of which inspired her and are deeply embedded in her paintings—the cultural references are in no way identifiable. The shapes and hues are not only her own, but are, remarkably, always in transition. The paintings' curves lead to an open-endedness, a nondeclarative quality. And, although the paintings look computer-screen flat with unmodulated hues, we readily perceive their depth of tone. We could view this in relation to some works by Kenneth Noland from the early to mid '90s, where the segments, many of them also crescent-shaped, are predominantly vertical: the colors are darker, cooler, and almost uncomfortable together and connected by a



Installation view: *Joanna Pousette-Dart*, Lisson Gallery, New York, 2020. © Joanna Pousette-Dart. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Plexiglas band of contrasting tone. Noland's forms are definitively measured and hard-edged with more graphic finality. Could we call it guy stuff?

As with animation, Pousette-Dart's shapes segue into one another, regularly conveying motion and pulling our eyes off the canvas. There is the inescapable allusion to boat shapes, which adds to the perception of movement as the horizontality of the canvases suggests progression. And, more to that point, there is an overriding appearance of liquidity and, by extension, shape-shifting.

These works are conversational. We might read them from east to west before being led around and back again. Not, however, without pausing at a few Brechtian links, such as an improvisational squiggle atop the segments or a narrow snake-like shape with a pointed tip stretching downward and connecting the panels as an interlude. At the same time, colors have been extensively tinkered with and layered, creating an atmosphere in which light and space shift expression.

Also in the show are six watercolors (actually gouache and acrylic on paper) and a suite of four sumi-ink-on-rice-paper drawings. The watercolors, consisting of stacked shapes in a vertical format have a different attitude and affect from the large shaped and composite works. The richly colored passages are very compact, and almost squashed together, claiming their turf, and unlike the horizontal works, they have an architectural quality. The small drawings take another direction. They call to mind Brice Marden and automatic writing, which leads us into the realm of poetry, where we can follow Pousette-Dart's imagining and lines of thought. In that sense, the works are direct and refer to the venerable Eastern and Western traditions of writing as drawing and vice versa. Following these lines forces a different kind of reading, a closer, more internal one. That's where we step in.

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RITA ACKERMANN

BY CHARLOTTE KENT

Rita Ackermann
Mama '19
Hauser & Wirth
February 20–April 11, 2020

Rita Ackermann's current show at Hauser & Wirth, *Mama '19*, builds off her *Brother and Sister* exhibit from January 2019. An impulse to create stories about each exhibit, the works, and their titles is inevitable, but Ackermann avoids narratives. This is not a show about her mother, or being a mother, but the term "mama" helps bring the viewer into the attitude of the works by reducing any urge to hyper-intellectualize, nudging us to see them with a more intimate eye. Ackermann paints on canvases on the floor or pinned to the wall that she then demarks to put onto stretcher bars. One can still see those pencil lines around the edges, and they contribute to the paintings' directness. Her whole approach is an impressive refutation of a technical world. The gesture of the hand, with all its imprecision, is so very human. The messiness is a surprising oasis. One can imagine some seeing these paintings and using that old trope "my children could have done that" except of course, as always, your children likely could not have. The works' naiveté is a semblance. Even if "it begins with a line and ends with a line," as Ackermann writes in the catalog for the show, the lines and paint develop into a composition that isn't simply haphazard. The four rooms of the show each hold three works with the first room providing an introduction to her approach.

Drawings in china marker or ink appear beneath layers of oil and acrylic paint. The longer one looks, the more figures and drawing ideas appear around the edges, beneath, alongside, and through the scraped and formed paint. *Mama*, *War Wall* (all works 2019) is a large painting that, at a distance, seems like a largely white canvas with some scrawls and an orange and blue blotch. Up close, small characters surface that are both delightful and terrifying. One is a too-perfect rendition of a child's drawing with a large head, circles for eyes, and a



Rita Ackermann, *Mama, War Wall*, 2019. Oil, china marker, and pigment on canvas, 76 × 74 inches. © Rita Ackermann. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Thomas Barratt.

mouth made of a straight mark crossed by a jagged line. The body disappears behind other drawings, a couple of hands, and lines connecting to other lines that have you peering in, hoping to make sense of what all is there. In *Mama, White Painting*, I found figures as if from a life drawing class, subway sketch-style penises, and letters that almost made words. Any discovery isn't the point; it's the looking that is the greatest pleasure.

The second room introduces vibrant colors. A figure appears in the lower left-hand corner of *Mama, Jewish Meditation*. She (in my imagination the figure was female) turns slightly, looking up and over to the right corner. Her thoughts escape in yellows and blues, oranges and greens. Ideas build in layers and reach to the very edge of the canvas. That is unusual: in other works, the paint always stops before meeting the edge. Hands and feet along the bottom seem appropriate but for no particular reason; they just fit there. *Mama, Morty Smoking* offers a bright conflagration of orange-yellows with globs of paint. The drawing of the horse on the right edge, next to someone riding a worm-like creature or wheeled machine, compels the imagination to connect the two. My mind went to the war scenes of the *Iliad*, for really no reason whatsoever, but the looseness of the artist's handling invites viewers' imagination. Sure, Freud could have a field day and Rorschach might adopt these works, but if one abandons psychological determination and leans into the whimsy of expressiveness, these paintings offer space for creative delight.

After all those excited hues, the third room calms. *Mama, Turner* shows the same misty, foggy, smoothly blended paint melding one color into the next of that great master, J. M.W. Turner. A blazing circle evokes fire and the ragged brushstrokes in the lower third become suddenly reminiscent of his *Slave Ship* (1840) painting. Things are not as serene as they seemed from a distance. *Mama, Midsummer Night's Dream* sends the mind to Shakespeare, but

the leg in heeled summer sandal in the right-hand corner also suggests those lovely and rare evenings with friends, sipping wine, laughing late, dissolving into the silliness that every midsummer encounter wants to be. *Mama, Memory Spinner* seems like all the stories we remember from childhood, with rapid brushstrokes adjoining line figures from every kind of folk and fairy tale. There's a sigma notation in the upper left corner along with other not-quite-8s or infinity symbols that should but don't produce the mathematical equations we expect. Here, you can create new stories with each viewing.

Mama, Miracle in the last room is significantly larger than the other pieces in the show, and the way Ackermann works becomes more evident. The physical evidence of her process anchors the flights of fancy she permits. In *Mama, Holy Sinner*, her signature appears in the lower right as well as the upper left, as if one could rotate the work. The upside-down heads at the top of the canvas (as it currently stands) could be equally right side up if one chose. There is a lightness in Ackermann's approach that opens a mental space for breath. Thoughts can roam around the painting and float beyond it. There's a generosity in letting the viewer experience what they will that is hard to find these days but, oh, so welcome.

CHARLOTTE KENT, PHD is Assistant Professor of Visual Culture at Montclair State University. Her current research investigates the absurd in contemporary art and speculative design, often in relationship to issues of digital culture. She writes for *Artists Magazine*, *CLOT*, *Litro*, *Musée*, and regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail*, among others. She serves on the Board of Governors of the National Arts Club.

JORDAN CASTEEL

BY NINA WOLPOW

Jordan Casteel
Within Reach
 New Museum
 February 19–May 24, 2020

In an essay that accompanied the hit Alice Neel retrospective at David Zwirner last year, curator Helen Molesworth argues for Neel's enigmatic place in the history of art by asserting that the late artist's "paintings are not in fact 'nudes' but rather images of people who are naked." Molesworth's point is to celebrate the intentional banality in Neel's work: leave the erudite conventions of the fetishized nude to Renoir, and think of nakedness, in Neel, as a quotidian occurrence, sometimes erotic and sometimes not.

Molesworth's thinking applies as well to the work of Harlem-based Jordan Casteel, whose first New York Museum show, *Within Reach*, is on view (but temporarily closed) now at the New Museum. Casteel is for the very large part a portraitist. Arguably, she does paint nudes: her first acclaimed works, part of a series called "Visible Man," depict the naked, sprawled bodies of Black male students at Yale's drama school (she was an MFA student there when she made them). But like Neel, Casteel's forays into the unclothed are as much about personhood as they are about aesthetics. As she said of her portraits in a *Fader* interview in 2016, "I'm often thinking about the way that these will function outside of my studio, and how they'll live a life on their own in spaces where I can't necessarily speak for them."

Most of Casteel's recent subjects are dressed. She is in a phase of painting familiars—students she teaches at Rutgers, people she encounters in her neighborhood—in their indoor or outdoor environments. Consequently, she must engage in the semiotic game that portraiture has historically played: portraying her subjects not only as they are, or as she sees them, but also as they want to be seen. In a favorite of mine, *Jenna* (2019), a Black woman in jeans and pink Pumas is seated on a rock in a flower garden. In the background, apricot and cape tulips grow—species I know because Casteel makes their botanical tags visible. Nevertheless, the work is a meditation on dissonance: the culturally conditioned viewer wants Jenna to be typified, but nature is instead.

In the same way that Casteel's nudes are really naked, her portraits of clothed people are in essence people in their clothes. If the works contain a commentary on representation, it is not in the vein of *Las Meninas* (1656)—whose art historical significance is tied to Velázquez's willingness to destabilize the representational façade—or more contemporarily, of work like Kehinde Wiley's *Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps* (2005), but of a deeper, essential, and more documentary humanity. Vagueness also abounds where it does not in Wiley's portraits. In *Cansuela* (2019), a woman sits on her bed and brandishes a stuffed panda bear like a shield. In the style of Neel, Casteel leaves sections of the painting—Cansuela's bedding, the pictures



Jordan Casteel, *Within Reach*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 35 × 60 inches. The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

on her wall—unfinished. Dimensionality is present: relativity puts people into focus.

Casteel's work may be more in conversation with the history and politics of photographic portraiture than it is with painting. Notably, the monograph that accompanies *Within Reach* (2020) makes frequent textual and visual references to groundbreaking photographers—Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, James Van Der Zee, Dawoud Bey, Deanna Lawson—in addition to painters, Kerry James Marshall, Beauford Delaney, Faith Ringgold, and Neel. And in both praxis and theory, Casteel's process is photographic; she begins her portraits with photoshoots, and then paints from the resulting images, consulting her subjects along the way.

Consequently, some argue that the presence of a camera degrades Casteel's final work—the idea being that she should paint from life—but I disagree. The admission of technology's impact on aesthetics is part of the post-analog project of which Casteel's realist work is a part. Such is demonstrated beautifully by a portrait like *Medinilla, Wanda, and Annelise* (2019), which in its photographic version could easily have been the sitters' Christmas card. That it is not, that it was labored over rather than mechanically reproduced, can be seen as an act of artistic protest.

Within Reach also presents some of Casteel's non-portrait works. A window into the artist's humanistic mind, the titular piece (2019) depicts an unscripted moment in which a young boy extends his body over the lap of a grown man whose hand is resting on the thigh of another. What is in reach, it seems, is not only care but also the unpromised prospect of a future. In *Memorial* (2017), Casteel presents the flipside of that prospect: on an urban block, a statuesque funeral arrangement leans against a telephone pole as a limousine and all other signs of life move out of the frame.

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Nicole Eisenman, *Procession*, 2019. Installation view, Whitney Biennial 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2019. Artwork © Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. Image courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Object Studies.

NICOLE EISENMAN

BY PHYLLIS TUCHMAN

Nicole Eisenman
Sturm und Drang
 The Contemporary Austin
 February 27–August 16, 2020

Sturm und Drang, a solo show from Nicole Eisenman that's on view at The Contemporary Austin through August 16, features representative examples of her art. You'll find a mix of paintings, sculpture, and works on paper ranging in size from a room-filling grouping to individual pieces you can hold in your hand. Almost everything is of recent vintage, with three exceptions dating from the 1990s. The exhibition celebrates the artist being a recipient of the 2020 Suzanne Deal Booth/FLAGG Art Foundation prize. Based on what's gathered here, Eisenman, 55, could have won this latest honor for her paintings or sculpture alone, or even just for her works on paper. From this sampling of her career, she emerges as a wily overachiever. No matter the medium, she excels. Besides her skill at making things, she forcefully expresses herself with aplomb, conviction, empathy, bravado, and a gift for visual storytelling.

Procession (2019–2020), the riveting multi-figure work that occupied a terrace of the Whitney Museum during its recent Biennial, has been reinstalled on the ground floor of the Austin museum. Its massive characters, huge heads, and trio of runt-like creatures look as good indoors as they did outside. Because these compelling personages have been somewhat rearranged, as well as lit properly, you're more readily aware of the myriad details. The overall nature of *Procession* still intrigues, but now so do its most minute aspects. *Man at the Center of Men* (2019) is a case in point. Seated on the back of a bent over, subservient figure who's on all fours, this ungainly, oafish humanoid holds two angled garbage can covers fitted with mirrors that function as reflectors to quicken his getting a tan. At the Whitney, this overlord needed a strong dose of sun at a specific time of day to beautify its complexion. In Austin,

overhead lights aimed at the mirrors allow the figure's face to glow 24/7.

At The Contemporary, you'll also come to appreciate Eisenman's talent for free-association. Take the tuna cans she dangles from a pole carried by another enigmatic figure in *Procession*. These cans call to mind Alexander Calder's mobiles, especially the ones composed of tin cans that retain their labels. And since these ersatz Bumble Bee products are actually fabrications cast in metal, they also relate to Jasper Johns's infamous pair of ale cans. Masterfully modeled giant heads extend this multivalent vein of thinking. Several bronzes rest atop packing crates that serve as pedestals. Talk about double-entendres. With the impressive yellow-beaked, aluminum *Eagle* (2018), the artist suggests a story or fable by inserting a cuckoo clock into its hollow core. Similarly, a hearth-like scene transpiring within the confines of *Witch's Head* (2018) suggests we're confronting an unfamiliar fairy tale. Would modern artists like Gaston Lachaise or Henry Moore ever have used the interior spaces of their portraits and helmets this way? Hardly. Chalk one up for Eisenman.

Eisenman's generously scaled paintings take a different approach. Some of her painted heads favor a geometric vocabulary that calls to mind Russian Constructivism and related movements. *Groundsweller* (2014) has a face that's a cross between a deconstructed Malevich figure circa 1931 and Marcel Marceau's persona as a mime. With a few shapes and a subdued palette, Eisenman has brought into being a new species of human. The eyes, nose, and mouth are so mesmerizing, you hardly notice the cigarette or marijuana stub held by the creature's raised fingers. Nearby, in *Breakup* (2011), a woebegone character with a green complexion is a poignant study of dismay. There's little doubt that the figure staring at its smart phone is receiving bad news. Unhappiness is writ large with just a few patches of paint.

Heading Down River on the USSJ-Bone of an Ass (2017) dominates the second floor of The Contemporary Austin much the way *Procession* does near the entrance to the show. Large, dramatic, and accessible, this painting is the poster child for the show's title, *Sturm und Drang*. Two boats, one of which resembles a giant on his belly with

outstretched arms and bent legs, travel along a puke-colored river beneath a stormy sky and near barren trees. They are headed towards certain doom. The men in these vessels, including one who plays a flute and another who beats a drum, are about to tumble over the falls into turbulent rapids. Unlike Eisenman's multi-figure sculptures, which are devoid of specificity, her paintings establish particular times and places. These locations, not just the actions of Eisenman's characters, contribute to the mood the artist wants to convey.

Heading Down River... is a rich, vibrant allegory. With abundant details, Eisenman establishes that the scene is life-like. The characters playing instruments are oblivious to what's about to occur. Eisenman's sailor, identified by his hat and striped shirt, and her businessman, wearing a suit and tie, are both stock types. The hole in one of the sails is not just a random rip, but resembles the silhouette of a king wearing his crown. Instead of oar locks, there are rows of super-sized dentures. Detritus has collected in the river by a floating log: a tire, mattress, and traffic cone. Rather than a rat abandoning ship, you'll find an adorable squirrel on a miniature raft who's hugging an acorn. With their believable people and settings, Eisenman's work harks back to a time when adjectives and adverbs, not just nouns and verbs, animated dramatic paintings. Her range, as seen at The Contemporary Austin, extends from caricature to allegory. Now let's see where her multi-faceted, ambitious career leads her.

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN is currently writing a book on the life and times of Robert Smithson.

JANA EULER

BY KATHERINE SIBONI

Jana Euler
Uniform
 Artists Space
 February 21, 2020–Ongoing

In Jana Euler's painting practice, the medium's conventional rectangular format is often acknowledged by the figurative imagery within, and frequently with visible discomfort. In Euler's treatment, the rectangular painted image is neither illusionistic window nor impenetrable mirror.

The painting's frame is adapted instead to behave as a literal enclosure, a container in which absurd physical conditions are enacted. This negotiation between content and framework is not only formal, but institutional, as Euler demonstrates at her Artists Space exhibition, *Uniform*, bringing together traditionally stretched paintings with painted canvas sculptures of "slugs"—soft-bodied avatars liberated from the frame to perform a range of gymnastics across the interior and exterior of the nonprofit's new site.

Euler opens the exhibition with the paintings *Uniform 1* and *Uniform 2*, installed above Artists Space's foyer. Each painting catalogues a form of movement or occupation by Euler's slug archetype, constituting two-dimensional prefaces to her sculptures (the latter collectively titled "Unstretched," and created in 2020. All paintings 2019). *Uniform 1* latches to the painting's top and emanates tendrilled extensions across its surface. *Uniform 2* burrows a tight path within the painting's frame, suggesting more mobility than *Uniform 1* but of a limited, predetermined nature. The slug, an invertebrate, lacks structural coherence. It is both adaptable and vulnerable, it moves independently but also seeks shelter. Euler specifies by way of the exhibition brochure that the slug is a proxy for the artist in relation to the institution, yet the motif also embodies a deconstructive impulse that permeates the exhibition as a whole.

Installed in the smaller of the space's galleries, the cartoonish, bustling acrylic-on-linen *Under Distraction* summons overstimulation on both an individual and global level. Euler constructs a face from the trappings of the attention economy and mood-altering substances, the overall effect of which is a vacant, insomniac physiognomy. Lips are funneled with holes, shaped to facilitate seamless and constant intake of cigarettes, joints, pills, booze, and junk food. Multiple irides and pupils encircle the peripheries of two eyes, such that only bloodshot whites face the viewer. The two sleepless globes of eyes, with each iris bound to a computer or phone screen, evoke 24-hour models of production in the global economy, such as "follow-the-sun" workflow in which projects are passed between time zones for continuous labor. The genre of portraiture is blown open: vehicles of diversion replace psychological authenticity, the individual is crowded out by the collective consciousness to which she has constant access.



Installation view: *Jana Euler: Uniform*, Artists Space, New York, 2020. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Daniel Pérez.

Another of Euler's stretched paintings, *Circling the Horizon*, deflates the Renaissance ideals of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. As the original work inscribed exemplary male proportions across a neat overlay of a circle and a square; *Circling the Horizon*, as its dimensionally ambiguous title suggests, confuses the geometric harmony guiding Da Vinci's original. Euler folds Da Vinci's circle onto itself, forming a square from the original composition. Atop the central model's stance, three additional men encircle the canvas's periphery enacting different poses, Euler articulating their musculature in pink, raw brushwork that signals physical strain. On each edge of the canvas is a visible handle, negating the notion of a correct orientation. On either side of *Circling* are two nearly symmetrical paintings of male figures, contorting their crouched bodies in mirror images to embody the square of the canvas.

In the main gallery, Euler's painting *gwf 9 Richter/Baselitz* expands upon her "Great White Fear" series exhibited at Galerie Neu last year, in which phallic great white sharks explosively emerge from the water, their bodies extended and tumescent, faces variously anthropomorphized into horror at their own exposed form. In this instance, Euler summons two towering male predecessors of German painting, signaling each by way of their respective directional trademarks—Gerhard Richter's calibrated horizontal smudge, Georg Baselitz's 180 degree flip—a subtle deflation of auratic gesture.

Woven across Artists Space's new architecture, and amongst these paintings telegraphing structural mutability, are Euler's "Unstretched" sculptures. Slouched, suspended, engulfing Artists Space's Corinthian columns and hovering over Tribeca passersby from the building's façade, the slugs' poses are further elucidated in the exhibition brochure in drawings and text: "The relaxed slug is strapped to the column, imagining itself to be freed from the authoritarian structure while bound, dependent, and well-fed." Of the exterior slug, "This relation to the inside of the gallery licenses the slug to venture into the world outside, with the potential for freedom and possibility of harm." Each "slug" represents an active or passive artist in the gallery and museum system. Yet "Unstretched" also highlights the structural unruliness stirring within Euler's hung paintings, as her sculptures maintain material vestiges of oil painting but do away with its defining frame. Euler's stretched paintings such as *Circling the Horizon* suggest confinement in their shallow depth and tight boundaries; whereas her sculptures imply liberation. Euler's mining of the space in between constitutes a range of radical approaches to painting.

KATHERINE SIBONI is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.



Zsófia Keresztes, *The Failure*, 2020. Glass mosaic, grout, styrofoam, expanding foam, glue, fiberglass, 46 × 73 ½ × 16 inches. Courtesy Elijah Wheat Showroom, New York.

ZSÓFIA KERESZTES

BY VERONIKA MOLNAR

Zsófia Keresztes
Glossy Inviolability
 Elijah Wheat Showroom
 February 29–May 2, 2020

Eerie, yet seductive, amorphous, but arranged by the grid of multicolored glass tiles, the extraordinary sculptures of Hungarian artist Zsófia Keresztes are on view for the very first time in the United States. Keresztes (b. 1985) is a prevailing artist of the European art scene, whose sculptures have been exhibited in London, Rome, Düsseldorf, Vienna, and at the 15th Lyon Biennale, only in the past year. She has also shown at one of Hungary's most exciting contemporary venues, the rooftop viewing space of Budapest's Everybody Needs Art with Tom Volkaert last summer. While I was quite sad to miss the show due to my relocation to New York, I wouldn't have imagined that the first time I'd meet Keresztes would be at the opening of her very first exhibition in the United States—just a block away from where I currently live in Brooklyn. Her solo exhibition, *Glossy Inviolability*, showcases artworks that she has created during a two-month residency in Brooklyn supported by Elijah Wheat Showroom and Bubu Arts.

Walking into the gallery, the visitor first meets a large creature, with its glossy surface and unusual form, that seemingly consists of disjointed body parts, a pair of eyes, and high heels. The sculpture has a feminine character: it could be a woman whose body has crumbled under the weight of her tears. Only her breasts point up, almost like a weapon. The pastel colors further emphasize the human body-like effect of the figure, the shiny pink glass tiles recall inner organs that have just broken free. But take a step back: with eyes sitting wide apart and eight legs ready to jump, a spider-like creature emerges, waiting for the visitors to fall prey to its seductive appearance. Does the creature feed on our tears?

The other two sculptures are smaller in size, and both resemble spider webs hanging from the walls. These webs are not airy, to say the least; with heavy tears entangled in their thick, pink structures, they too have a humanly fleshy character. It is hard

to decide whether they are protective or predatory of their prey. The large drawing titled *Distress of the Hunter* (2020) seems to elaborate on the relationship between these sculptural elements. Even the title has a narrative character—a common aspect of the artworks, as Keresztes loves to tell stories about her creatures. The drawing depicts a body-like net, with a few tears on its "back" and legs ending in long, pink nails, that crush the little spiders who, supposedly, have created the net. It comes as no surprise that Keresztes loves Louise Bourgeois's work: her sculptural figures, much like Bourgeois's spiders, evoke fear, anger, vanity, or self-doubt. They too are ambiguous in their beauty and viciousness, yet they also raise issues relevant to our digital age.

According to Keresztes, the notion of empathy has become central to her practice after encountering the work of science journalist Emma Young, who writes about the "darker side" of empathy, claiming that it "may become a liability in an anonymous, crowded modern world."¹ Thinking about empathy's role in the digital age, the spider webs offer a more contemporary reference to social media platforms. All the tears of Keresztes are unquestionably physical, yet they almost seem pixelated by the glass mosaic tiles. In a sense, she is after the distortion between the real and the virtual, observing our state of disconnected connectedness, in which tear emojis express, or even replace, the empathy and sadness of users for each other. While Facebook offers a crying emoji for every single post on its platform, can its users simply run out of empathy? What happens if we are so alienated or overwhelmed by the constant flow of horrific news—pandemics, climate crisis, and economic recession, just to name a few—that we have no tears left to share?

Keresztes's sculptures exist in an uncanny space where the viewer is not exactly sure how to feel about these enigmatic creatures. Their glossy surfaces are so seductive it is almost annoying, yet they hide a polystyrene skeleton—in a way, they function all too similarly to Instagram profiles. In his recent book *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2017), Hans Belting suggested that the emergence of social media platforms, such as Instagram, has resulted in an "updated," democratized version of Guy Debord's *Le Société du Spectacle* in which the "identification of all human social life with appearances" dominates society.² In

the ambiguous, entangled relationship of physicality and virtuality, reality and appearance that is social media, Keresztes's tears exist to deceive. They invite us to participate in weaving the virtual web of sadness and illusion, only to then be shattered under the weight of our own creation.

1. Emma Young, "I Feel Your Pain," *New Scientist*, May 2016: 33–34.
2. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014). 4.

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JENNIFER BOLANDE

BY SAHAR KHRAIBANI

Jennifer Bolande
The Composition of Decomposition
 Magenta Plains
 March 11–May 31, 2020 (and online)

James Baldwin often talked about the traps of history, writing in his 1962 *New Yorker* essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind," "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought." These sentiments illustrate the malleable nature of history, the fact that not all stories are written, and that, as a result, we must be vigilantly conscious of the history we are inscribed with, and in being so inscribed, rewrite. This idea is evident in Jennifer Bolande's *The Composition of Decomposition*, currently on view at Magenta Plains. The work assumes the position that, in order to accept one's history, one has to learn how to use it. Here, "news becomes history," as the press release describes: "Beneath the surface things assume a different kind of order." Now more than ever, we are faced with news that rapidly turns into history, having to instantly make sense of and adapt to the current state with which we are presented. Bolande's decades-long practice probes this process as we experience the proliferation of online news outlets. Her work is extremely timely: the artist considers present and past, stacking, archiving, and excavating through sculpture, photographs, and photo-reliefs—a practice that takes time and requires being static during turbulent moments.

Newspapers are the physical materials that make up the bulk of Bolande's show. Upon entering the gallery, we confront *Image Tomb (with skeletons)* (2014), for which she cut through a two-year stack of *New York Times* periodicals, "excavating" both physically and metaphorically the printed page, and revealing along the way, much like excavation does, images and words hidden within the stack. This tomb buries a historical photograph of skeletal remains found in London. Bolande came across this photograph of a group of 14th-century plague victims whose remains had been unearthed from a cemetery in

London. The image of decomposing bones gradually yellowed in the artist's archive until one day, when it was discovered again, it launched her on a six-year inquiry into newspapers as so-called "shapers of meaning." The use of dimensional space is perennial across the works in the exhibition: The body of work created for *The Composition of Decomposition* began with the *Image Tomb*, an actual physical tomb carved out for the image, the dimensionality of the stack put into effect immediately. But the artist doesn't stop there. In *Ghost Column* (2017 and 2019), two white polychrome resin sculptures embody towering stacks of stark white paper. These sculptures sit facing *Excavation Core* (2017), which is the emptied-out stack from *Image Tomb*. Both works take up space and seem to be in conversation. An emptied-out core is perhaps nothing more than a ghost column.

Image Tomb lays near *Smoke and Snow* (2010), an archival pigment print displaying three sections of photographs, two of which document an avalanche sweeping through Switzerland. The two cut sections of the paper are displayed side by side, lending themselves to the excavation that keeps unfolding throughout the gallery. Bolande not only cut through the stack of newspapers to create a final resting place for the image of the skeletons, but she utilized the cut-out sections to continue exploring the transitory nature of images and of news. The lower level of the exhibition space showcases six of these pairings, framed side by side. *Composition of Decomposition No. 39* (2016–2017) shows a cropping of ballet dancers from a performance at Lincoln Center, juxtaposed with a cropped image of a basketball player from the Brooklyn Nets team extending his hand towards another player; while *Composition of Decomposition No. 257* (2016–2017) displays a photo of a man on a motorcycle photographing a far-away cloud of smoke next to an unintelligible composition of black and orange. These image pairings came from the disinterment made for *Image Tomb* and were produced by chance: the artist retained the order of the original stack, and the removed section became the raw material for these pairs as well as for the 428 page hardcover artist's book *The Times* (2016). Bolande treated the extracted core like a book, opening its pages and photographing them together. The results were these accidental spreads, printed at actual size and on view here.

It is up to us to make sense of the pairings and the work. Bolande presents us with works so pregnant with meaning yet so open to interpretation: delineating between the flatness and transitory nature of images and the realness of dimensional spaces that we create.

SAHAR KHRAIBANI is a writer, editor, and designer based in Brooklyn. She is interested in the intersection between language, visual production, and geopolitics. Her writing has appeared in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, *TERSE Journal*, and *Bidayat Mag*, among others. She currently serves as faculty at Pratt Institute.



Christopher Wilmarth, *Sonoma Corners*, 1971. Etched glass and steel cable 24 x 34 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches.

CHRISTOPHER WILMARTH

BY JAN AVGIKOS

Christopher Wilmarth
Craig F. Starr Gallery
January 30–March 14, 2020

A new exhibition at Craig F. Starr Gallery presents a rare opportunity to revisit Christopher Wilmarth's serene glass and steel sculptures of the '70s. No drama, no mess, no rough edges, nothing but the Apollonian perfection of flawless, hydrofluoric acid-etched translucent glass surfaces that attract and hold the light, reflecting in their layered depths tonal ranges from frosty white to pure aqua. Smooth gray metal is the counterpart to pronounced qualities of radiance and fragility. Industrial steel Roebling cables bind and support the glass components of the wall pieces; polished matte steel shapes structure and strengthen free-standing architectonic sculptures. Refined craftsmanship is showcased but it has nothing to do with the hand. Seamless production values manifest mechanistic and technological precision and harness the energy of high modernism. Without a doubt, these are idealized forms. Symmetrical, luminous, beautiful, self-contained and totalizing, they possess metaphysical potential.

Wilmarth managed to complete approximately 150 sculptures during a career spanning two decades before his death in 1987, at age 44, by suicide. His biography suggests a life of increasing turmoil and dissatisfaction with the art world, as if the unfettered aesthetics of his art were a foil to his discontent. He lived and worked in New York and credited the urban landscape, with its clusters of glass skyscrapers, ricocheting reflections, and continuous visual patchwork, as one of several early eye-opening encounters. He also benefited from the bi-coastal influences of the Light and Space movement and Minimalism. For Wilmarth, light was paramount. He intuited what he described as "universal implications" in different kinds of light. As material, it is ever changing and utterly chameleon; powerful yet fugitive; here one minute,

gone the next. More ephemerally, it is also a stimulus to perceptual and psychological experience. His drawings—layers of tracing paper stapled together and mounted on paper—often depict his completed sculptures and the play of light they engineer. They focus on the eventfulness of refracting beams, animating surfaces and illuminating recesses of the plate glass configurations, which he is credited with cutting, bending and shaping in completely innovative ways.

The current exhibition includes two examples from his early series of glass and steel cable "drawings," *Half Open Drawing*, and *Normal Drawing* (both 1971). The former, an immaculately simple rectangular composition, consists of a pair of translucent green glass plates that overlap in the center, forming three equal horizontal zones. The area of overlap is tied together with a single length of steel cable, and the piece is casually nailed to the wall through a drilled hole at its upper edge. In the latter "drawing," a large vertical glass rectangle is layered over three skinny strips of glass placed at regular geometric intervals. The entire piece is laced together with a continuous length of steel cable that literally sews all the glass parts together. Weaving in and out, from front to back, the cable line runs parallel to the edges of the "drawing" and creates a frame within a frame effect. At first glance, the gesture appears to be so fluid and effortless that it could easily be mistaken for a simple graphite line. In *Sonoma Corners* (1971), another of the cable "drawings," Wilmarth shapes steel cable into a pair of equally sized squares pinned to the wall. A translucent curved piece of glass, vaguely reminiscent of a concave shell whose surface modulates from clear to cloudy, is mounted over the squares, beneath the central axis of the work. What's truly amazing is that an idea as simple as one, two, three, can be rendered in such a way as to be profound. It's a phenomenon that occurs throughout Wilmarth's oeuvre, as if he were on a mission to explore and understand prime relations and fundamental proportions—in both nature and his art—and then to set it all ablaze with light.

His early wall-mounted glass "drawings" are tutorials in rationality. Whether borrowed from architecture or the archives of Constructivism, Wilmarth gravitated to the absolutely elemental and, thus, to an art that comports feelings of ease and

clarity. Simplicity belies complexity but it also accords pleasure. There's a palliative dimension to the luxurious shimmering turquoise radiance of *Blue Long Rectangle* (1972), which consists of a four-foot horizontal frame made from velvety aquamarine etched glass. Its open interior is divided in half by another piece of translucent glass that resides in its lower portion, and voila!, we have a horizon line. Instantly, it joins forces with the natural, clear shining blue colors of the glass and illusions spill forth, prompting visions of pristine Caribbean waters and the dawn of a perfect new day.

Invitation #3 (1975–76), a small floor sculpture made from thick white translucent glass fused with steel panels, explores ideas of intersection, interiority, luminosity, and opacity. Like modern-day architectural follies, or prototypes for non-functional structures, Wilmarth realized his floor sculptures in sizes ranging from table-top maquette to large-scale installation. Their recessed spaces, private and hidden from view, invite us to imaginatively occupy them, perhaps as retreats from the outside world, as places simply to be. Yet, they also have the capacity to conjure emptiness—and at that point, the whole world comes flooding in.

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KELLY AKASHI

BY ANN C. COLLINS

Kelly Akashi
Kelly Akashi: Mood Organ
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery
February 27–April 18, 2020

A bronze orb the color of cocoa powder stands about as tall as a person in the center of the gallery. Lumpy and wrinkled like a peeled orange, it rests in a shallow steel basin. Slow streams of water leak from tiny perforations along its sides, tears that spill down its curvature, leaving dark traces as they fall. *Weep* (2020) is the centerpiece of *Mood Organ*, Kelly Akashi's show at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery. The exhibition takes its title from the 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick, a post-apocalyptic tale in which devices called mood organs allow individuals to set the type and intensity of emotion they would like to have at any given moment. Yet *Weep* undermines this vision of personal control, embodying instead an unending feeling of sorrow, a huge lump of sadness carried within despite attempts to monitor outward expression.

Five wooden pedestals lathed in patterns drawn from electrocardiograms of Akashi's heartbeat surround *Weep*. Bronze, steel, and marble casts of the artist's hand rest on each, nestling, pressing, caressing, and pawing glass objects. Taken as a whole, the sculptures transform the gallery into a comforting space in which emotion is met with compassion, and need not be dialed down. The space becomes a place of retreat in which the distance between art and viewer is charged with a quiet inviolability.



Installation view: Kelly Akashi: *Mood Organ*, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2020. Photo: Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

Or so it seems. Like all New York galleries, Tanya Bonakdar has closed its doors in compliance with Governor Cuomo's Shelter-In-Place restrictions, instituted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Mood Organ* can now be seen by appointment or on the gallery's website, which provides hi-res images of the installation as a whole, as well as selected works from the show and a virtual publication. In his renowned 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argued that photographs and other reproductions of art fail to provide the viewer with the experience of the *aura*, the energy emitted from an artist's work. Benjamin predicted that mass circulation of such images would undermine the purity of being in the physical presence of art. Looking online at images of Akashi's show with this in mind gives rise to feelings of longing: the images evoke—yet do not deliver—what it is like to stand in the open space of the gallery, free to circle the work, stepping closer to it at will. Viewed through a socially-distanced lens, Akashi's installation is mesmerizing, taking on an almost fetishistic significance. The hands cradle and explore the surfaces of her glass objects without regard for whatever pathogen might be lurking in this moment of rabid hand-sanitizing.

In *Symbiosis* (2020), the fingers of a bronze hand sink into a plum-colored bubble of hand-blown glass, which changes its shape to accommodate the pressure of touch, cradling the hand while maintaining its surface tension. In *Cultivator (Metamorphic)* (2020), Akashi's hand rests palm-up on its base, smoothly carved from Nero Marquina marble. Glass fronds topped with crimson and white flowers wind around thumb and fingers. An amber blossom rests on an outcropping of wood on the pedestal below. The title implies a nurturing of life, but this association is tempered by the stone's funereal black hue. *Porous Paradigm* (2020) features a stainless steel hand which reaches up to hold a perforated glass ball aloft, fingernails digging into the holes. The ribbons of glass that form the ball give it a sudsy appearance, which contrasts with the solidity of the steel hand. There is a gracefulness to the juxtaposition of delicacy and heft, yet the pairing elicits anxiety, as Akashi seems to suspend us in a moment just before the glass bubble pops.

Upstairs in the gallery, Akashi sets a table with eight glass vessels shaped with

bosomy lumps in *Triple Helix* (2020). The vessels range in color from pink to green to sepia to orange, and their shapes refer to Pre-Columbian urns. A quartz bell, which reportedly sounds a low frequency vibration when struck, hangs overhead. Such bells are used to mark time. In this case, the bell connects the present moment to the past, the urns serving as a reminder of the inevitable completion of life.

Akashi's "Cell" series of glass sculptures features variations of a branch-like form, which she hangs from ropes, stands on a pedestal, or lays on the floor. In *Armored Cell* (2020), a silky gold cord hangs from two ceiling beams as a frosted glass branch, antler-like in appearance, hangs tied in its center. In *Vitreous Cell* (2020), a clear branch lies on the floor in a tangle of knotted rope. Will these shoots continue to grow and bloom, or will they be choked by the encroaching cable? This is a question that preoccupies us, and one we will continue to ask, here with our noses pressed up against the glass.

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RICHARD LONG

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN, PH.D.

Richard Long
Sperone Westwater
and Lisson Gallery, New York
March 5–May, 2020

For many, Richard Long stands as one of the truly visionary artists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In this case, I use "visionary" to refer to an artist who reads the present by way of a semi-conscious ability to combine the past together with the future—this comfort in liminal spaces is characteristic of Long's practice. Much of the praise given to his work comes from European critics, such as Rudi Fuchs, Clarrie Wallis, and Teresa Gleadowe, who understand the artist's achievements as compatible with other major figures, such as John Cage and Robert Smithson. Long's activities range from stone installations and calligraphies in mud to photographs

of wilderness landscapes accompanied by poetic, numerical inscriptions, both derived from his walks in the Sahara, the Adirondacks, or elsewhere. To recall—indeed, to *experience*—these works is to comprehend an artist with vast mental and physical resources that perpetually equivocate on the razor's edge separating the systemic from the intuitive. This precarious combination is sometimes identified with Eastern thought, yet it applies just as readily to Long, known over the years as "the walking artist."

The varied responses to his 1986 Guggenheim retrospective confirmed Long as a uniquely unpredictable presence, an artist who operated outside the conventional spaces of the art world, irrevocably focused on walking to, from, and within deeply intense rural and wilderness environments. Unlike the Europeans, American critics (Ann-Sargent Wooster, Roberta Smith) were more likely to position Long's work between nature and "conceptual" art—despite the fact that the artist himself has tended to disagree. In a more up-to-date essay, authored by Long in 2014, he countered such claims with the following: "I am not a conceptual artist, meaning I use real stones. I walk my walks, and they are made in real time. Nevertheless, ideas are very important, especially in the landscape works."

A great deal of time has passed since the Guggenheim exhibition nearly 35 years ago, and Long has consistently developed the lexicon of ideas he explores. It is insightfully ironic that his two concurrent, large-scale, and extraordinary installations at Sperone Westwater and Lisson Gallery have been made inaccessible to the public at the time of this writing due to the unfortunate pandemic that has reshaped our living reality. As events have unfolded since I saw the installations, it has occurred to me that Richard Long is an artist whose relationship to nature is largely about healing, which involves opening the mind in relation to the body. From a Taoist or Zen Buddhist perspective, the mind and body are essentially one: a mind-body, each inextricably bound to the other. Long found these ideas, largely conveyed through the work of Cage, a significant influence in his early career, and they have stayed with him over the years.

There are five basic mediums in which the artist works, all of which are either physically present or directly referenced in the Lisson and Sperone Westwater installations. Long's fundamental medium is walking, associated with being in wilderness territories where he walks for several consecutive days on end. He walks in many divergent locations, such as the Dartmoor uplands in Devon, England and the vast mountainous spectrum of the Himalayas in Asia. Secondly, the artist's photographs are related to both the landscapes where he has chosen to walk and the linear and circular forms he constructs there. These forms, representations of time and space, are built from natural materials found on the site that may include grass, sand, snow, sticks, and stones. Thirdly, Long's popular hand-painted mud works were done initially on rocks before finding their way onto interior walls in multiple variations. Fourth, his deftly organized stone works, again both lines and circles, are often read as sculpture, both in indoor and exterior environments. And fifth, the artist's text works range from poetic accounts related to

walks either performed or conceived, or to numerals he has organized so that they take on their own formal, non-objective meaning.

In placing these various medium combinations at Sperone Westwater and the Lisson Gallery, Long examined each space in terms of its architectural construction. The former gallery—for which his 16th exhibition opened on March 5th—emphasizes its verticality with a series of stacked spaces that visitors can move through, from one floor to the next, mostly by elevator. Long's large-scale mud work, titled *Heaven* (2020), takes advantage of this vertical structure: it could be seen both from the ground floor and from the mezzanine. Based on the Chinese ideogram for "heaven" taken from the *I Ching*, the piece begins at the level of the floor and moves upward in six parallel bands until a total height of 29 feet is reached. According to Long, it took three hours to complete the piece, applying mud from the River Avon. Some calligraphers might find this speed extraordinary, particularly if one observes the finger gestures that negotiate with one another throughout the work.

In contrast to the verticality of *Muddy Heaven* at Sperone Westwater, the large open exhibition space at the Lisson Gallery offered a more horizontal perspective whereby three large-scale works are seen together, each in conversation with the other two. These include a large, horizontal mud work, approximately 862" long, titled *River Avon Mud Line* (2020), a slate sculpture, *Virginia Line* (2020), that runs down the middle of the floor, and a horizontally extended text work on the west wall, titled *A Day's Walk Across Dartmoor* (2000/2015). The fourth work included here is an earlier photograph and text, *A Rolling Stone, Oregon, 2001* (2001), that was conceived in Oregon, and provides the title for the Lisson installation: FROM A ROLLING STONE TO NOW.

Richard Long's choice to bring the outside inside through, in particular, each of his mud works, does not only match the architectural dimensions of each given space. Long also constructs what some might understand as a paradoxical synergy, in which nature itself brings focus to the deliberations of architectural necessity. Put another way, Richard Long's visionary role is keenly suited to bringing the constitutive operations of nature into accord with the role of architecture. Rather than pulling against one another, each is given a purposeful relationship that allows for correspondence. In Long's ambulatory practice, ideas are never entirely lost or buried within a technical process. Instead, they go forth with their own agency, illuminating the interaction of time and space and confirming art as a phenomenon that moves in the presence of stillness. The Mandarin phrase *wu wei* refers directly to this concept—motion and stillness share the same moment. Here, then, is the essential ingredient for the walking artist: the place where a formless form can come into its own, finally removed from the weight or necessity of any exterior intention.

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DONALD JUDD

BY ELIZABETH BUHE

Donald Judd
Judd
Museum of Modern Art
March 1–July 11, 2020

Crisp, clean, cool, no-frills, matter-of-fact—these and similar adjectives constitute a familiar lexicon for the work currently on display in *Judd*, the appropriately tight, monosyllabic title MoMA has given its Donald Judd retrospective, the first in New York in over 30 years. The same forthrightness characterizes two anthologies recently co-published by the Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Press: *Donald Judd Writings* (2016) and *Donald Judd Interviews* (2019). These are squat and hefty volumes with unadorned covers and sans-serif title script, sold at MoMA in wall displays that take the form of neatly arranged color blocks: orange, yellow, blue. The Judd packaged here for our consumption—via both the artist’s prose and the works on view in the museum’s bright new galleries, a welcome change from the cramped and somehow perennially-dusty spaces Judd occupied before MoMA’s 2019 reopening—is bright, beautiful, clear, and succinct.

Though the exhibition’s 70 works range from circa 1960 to 1991, I am most interested in the earliest of those, before Judd became the author of exquisitely-fashioned, trim geometric volumes, and before he hired, in 1964, the experts of Queens-based sheet metal firm Bernstein Brothers to fabricate his works. The labor of these early-60s handmade pieces, which predate the unforgiving rectilinearity and uniform modular repetition for which Judd is best known, is located in the artist alone. Circa 1961, we can imagine Judd’s oeuvre moving in any number of directions. The MoMA retrospective offers an opportunity to look askance at this early moment, alert for answers to questions we pose to Judd’s work now, questions that exceed the circumscribed rhetoric the artist so carefully laid the groundwork for in his abundant written and spoken public presentations.

My thinking is focused on a single object, which is often on view at MoMA as part of its permanent collection: *Untitled* (1961), a black, rectangular oil painting on composition board measuring roughly 48 by 36 inches, with a tinned steel baking pan inset at dead center. The baking pan is aligned longitudinally: its long sides run up and down. Judd deduced the painting’s overall size and shape from the pan’s dimensions, so that the painting as a whole is oriented like a portrait rather than a landscape, its left and right edges a foot longer than its top and bottom edges. While I don’t have exact measurements for the loaf pan, it is probably around 9 by 5 by 3 inches. It is of that rectangular variety familiar to anyone who has baked pumpkin or zucchini bread.

This painting is something of an anomaly in Judd’s oeuvre, and begs a number of questions. Was the baking tin ever used for its more obvious utilitarian purpose, that is to say, was it ever filled up and put in an oven? Was Judd a baker? (I have heard that he liked to host dinner parties.) Does

this painting have something particular to tell us about domestic labor, especially considering Judd’s later role as a homemaker in fashioning his own Spring Street studio? How do we account for the irregular surface of thick and craggy black paint, a color Judd used in multiple works in 1960 and 1962, but less consistently in his later three-dimensional work? Do these questions occur to me because I am a woman who sometimes bakes using a tin very much like Judd’s? Or because of my training as an art historian, one who questions the performativity of Judd’s (self-)image as perpetuated at sites like his Marfa complex? Or because I suspect that if *Untitled* was made outside the masculinist rhetoric of Minimalism or by someone who identifies as a woman, these questions would already have been part of the critical record?

Part of *Untitled*’s appeal is its *human* quality, manifest in the way it evokes the bodies of its maker and beholders. Judd’s black oil paint whorls and peaks into a stucco-like sedimentation that fossilizes individual brush marks. This puts *Untitled* in dialogue with the authorial expressionism of Judd’s immediate forebears in abstract painting, whose gesture he hadn’t quite repudiated. A craquelure in the black paint reveals an underlayer of bright red—especially visible at the painting’s lower left corner—suggesting the shallow networked valleys of human skin and the sanguinary crimson underneath. The baking pan itself is covered by a patina of dark speckles, suggesting traces of human touch and, if not use in the kitchen, at least age (it has not been replaced or restored). Lastly, and most importantly for my purposes, the loaf pan acts as a mirror, potentially reflecting the visage of a viewer, depending on that viewer’s height and the height at which the work is hung. The pan reflects the particular body of here and now, rather than the anonymous philosophical body that became, as a generalized abstraction, a cornerstone of New York Minimalism after the 1962 translation into English of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Judd had no problem with this type of bodily reflection in the galvanized steel or polished lacquers of his own work or that of his peers. “It doesn’t matter to me that surfaces reflect, or shine, or whatever,” he asserted in 1966–67, “because that doesn’t come under this kind of space, and it’s especially that kind of space which is sort of the center of the old naturalism.”¹ For Judd, “that kind of space” was the tainted history of illusionism and its projection of a fake, anthropomorphic space whose humanist legacy he called out repeatedly, if in vague terms, throughout the 1960s. *Untitled*’s baking tin has often been noted as the tongue-in-cheek death knell of illusionistic space, extending, as it does, into real space instead. MoMA’s *Judd* repeats this interpretation, both in the catalogue and in the audio guide.² Yet the particular body, as opposed to a generalized theoretical body, gets lost when these sorts of spatial readings are given priority.

There is pedagogical value to reading *Untitled* spatially: it demonstrates Judd’s shift away from painting, through relief, and finally to floor pieces as he moved from pictorial into actual space. But this reading reinscribes the well-charted academic and

masculinist valences of Minimalism, emphasizing art’s teleological progress and Judd’s role in advancing it, while ignoring bodies that don’t match the white male positions of its makers like Judd. Too homey, too handmade, too messy, too human, *Untitled* is compelling as an outlier—as an abstract artwork, and one that transgresses the restriction on questions of identity that we find in most of Judd’s oeuvre.

The baking pan is the kind of empty central core around which sculptures of the human body have traditionally been organized, a fact that *Untitled* underscores through its portrait orientation. It was in precisely these terms that Judd later asserted his works’ status as not-sculpture.³ Judd himself offers some helpful commentary on these kinds of voids or holes. Beginning in 1961, the year of *Untitled*’s making, Judd penned several reviews of Lee Bontecou’s welded canvas and steel wall reliefs, whose most prominent feature is a gaping black hole (or sometimes several holes) around which Bontecou built up a crescendo of variously soiled canvas pieces, stitched together into a patchwork with wire. For Judd, Bontecou’s work exemplified what he called a “specific object”: an artwork that was neither sculpture nor painting. He described Bontecou’s reliefs with a disciplined formalism that nevertheless invokes the sexualized female body. Such allusions intensify over time in Judd’s reviews of Bontecou. In November 1961, he wrote of the “dark voids” which, “splayed” upon their frames, “stand out from the wall like contoured volcanoes” and are “thrust starkly at the onlooker.”⁴ In 1963, the images extended “from something as social as war to something as private as sex,”⁵ while by 1965 the mound was a “*mons veneris*,” its top half “thrust far forward.”⁶

While interpretations of Bontecou’s work in terms of female orifices are well recorded—despite the fact that the artist herself refuted them—Judd’s share in constructing this reading bears repetition given his esteem for her work (he admitted she “pushed” him if “not influenced [him] exactly”) as well as the visual correlation between *Untitled*’s hole, surrounded by black paint, and those black holes of Bontecou’s reliefs.⁷ We see that, coextensive with his work on *Untitled*, Judd considered the black hole as referring to a gendered body. Identity and difference therefore seep into *Untitled*, too.

Untitled is a disobedient object, too homey, handmade, and human to be constrained by the cool and rationalized rhetorical edifice around Judd. Instead, the particular body seeps in: our bodies as viewers, marked by difference rather than universality. Our ability to articulate this body, however, turns on a theorization of the hole as an open signifier for difference rather than the equivalency between the void and the female body that Judd’s reviews offer. In its address to viewers’ bodies, *Untitled*’s baking pan functions doubly, as a space for the experience of difference, however construed, and, in its mirroring potential, as a way of making visible the particular bodies who stand in front of it, however far—or close—they may have been from the minds and milieux of Judd and his fellow Minimalists in 1961. (And, for those wondering, I have it on good authority that Judd couldn’t, in fact, cook or bake.)⁸

1. Donald Judd, “Interview with Barbara Rose and Frank Stella, 1966–67,” *Donald Judd Interviews*, ed. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York, NY: Judd Foundation and David Zwirner Books), 162.
2. Erica Cooke’s essay, which reads Judd’s paintings against his criticism, notes that the baking pan in *Untitled* evokes and negates perspectival illusion’s vanishing point. Erica Cooke, “The Student of Painting,” *Judd*, exh. cat., ed. Ann Temkin (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2020), 64. Ann Temkin, “Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1961: Audio from the playlist *Judd*,” <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81706>
3. Judd, “Interview with Barbara Rose and Frank Stella,” 149.
4. Donald Judd, “In the Galleries: Lee Bontecou” (1960), *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975* (New York, NY: Judd Foundation, 2015), 27.
5. Donald Judd, “In the Galleries: Lee Bontecou,” (1963) *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975*, 65.
6. Donald Judd, “Lee Bontecou” (1965) in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975*, 178.
7. Judd noted that “I was impressed – not influenced, exactly, but pushed somewhat – by quite a few people, for example by [Lee] Bontecou and [John] Chamberlain, who at one time I thought did stronger work than I could possibly do.” Donald Judd, “The New Sculpture’ Symposium with Kynaston McShine (moderator), Mark di Suvero, and Barbara Rose, May 2, 1966,” in *Donald Judd Interviews*, 96. Jo Applin thoroughly examines Bontecou’s negative space vis-à-vis Judd in Jo Applin, “Threatening, and Possibly Functioning Objects’: Lee Bontecou,” in *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), 13–41.
8. My thanks to Barbara Rose for this insight. Judd gifted *Untitled* to Rose (a friend from their shared years studying art history at Columbia University) who subsequently gave it to MoMA. Barbara Rose, email correspondence with the author, March 23, 2020.

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ALISON ROSSITER

BY ZACH RITTER

Alison Rossiter
Substance of Density, 1918–1948
Yossi Milo Gallery
March 6–May 2, 2020

Alison Rossiter has always worked with an acute understanding of the ways history and material circumstance can shape what is aesthetically possible. The expired photographic papers she collects and processes are curious aesthetic objects in this regard, bearing as they do the lasting effects of industrial production, the accidents of time, and the inevitability of decay. That she succeeds in allowing the life of her materials to “express” themselves, to create disarmingly beautiful abstractions without recourse to either camera or celluloid, is a demonstration of just how malleable the idea of photography can still be.

In *Substance of Density 1918–1948* Rossiter has continued her practice of processing expired photographic papers with liquid developer to reveal whatever latent imagery has developed in them

JENNIFER WEST

BY OLIVIA GAUTHIER

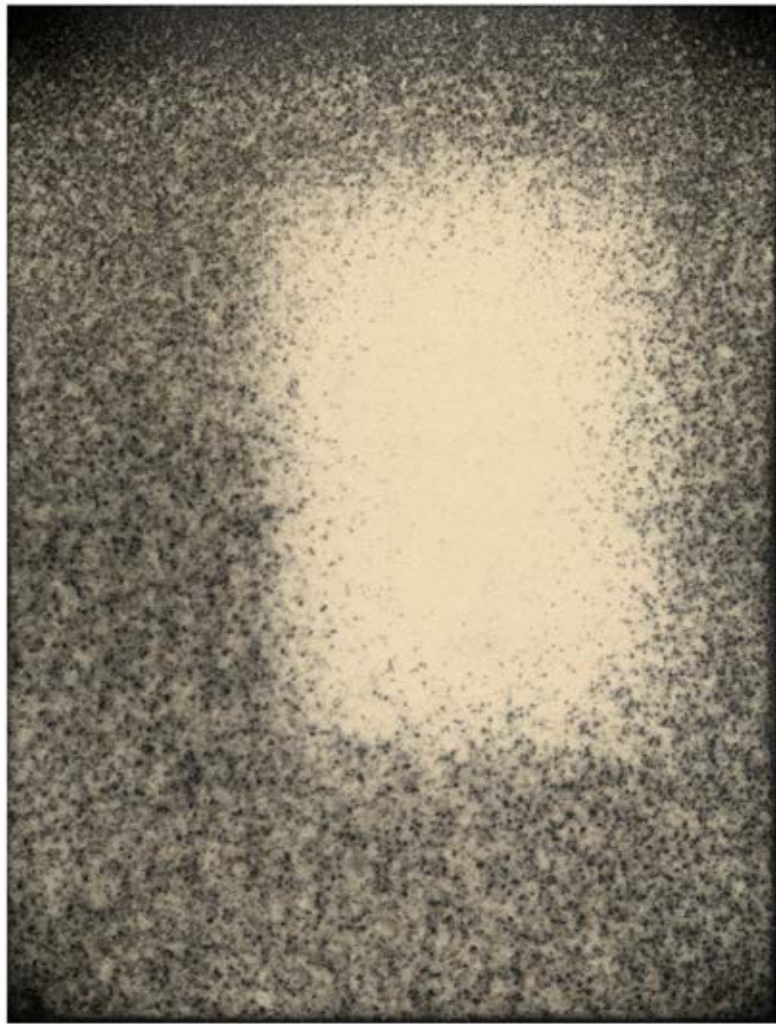
Jennifer West
Future Forgetting
JOAN

February 28–April 26, 2020

Jennifer West's exhibition *Future Forgetting*, curated by David Matorin and currently installed at JOAN Los Angeles, is an ode to the iconic Los Angeles Sixth Street Bridge. It is also West's first solo show in her hometown in nearly eight years. Her homage to the late landmark comprises a film, sculptural "analogital" (West's term for her hybrid video-films) flat-screens with found objects, a zine, and other objects that document the process of her project. The show documents the life of the bridge through film, archival materials, and cinematic history, ruminating on the constantly changing architectural landscape of cities and how we forget monuments of our collective history. Presented in JOAN's one-room exhibition space, the show is engrossing and not nearly as overwhelming as one might expect a multi-dimensional moving-image based exhibition to be. The space, dimly lit, flickers with pink, yellow, and blue-toned light as the works that inhabit the space draw one's attention in a demure manner. Moving from flat-screen to projection to zine, the most rewarding part of West's show for a native Angeleno, cinephile, or architectural aficionado, is discovering the local history that West embeds throughout each element of the show, weaving together a complex history of the late bridge.

Known for her experimental materialist films, West's exploration of the Sixth Street Bridge began in 2016 when she heard of the city's plan to demolish it due to its inherent structural instability. Infamous for its cameos in over 30 Hollywood films, like *Grease* and *Repo Man*, music videos, and commercials, the bridge became a celebrity in its own right, known for its archetypal arches. When the bridge was set to be closed to the public and demolished, West, among dozens of other Angelenos flocked to the viaduct to shoot footage of the historic site one last time. West's footage, all shot on 16mm film, results in a nearly 10-minute long document of the last few days the viaduct access point was accessible, shot at all times of day. The result is an evidentiary document of the late landmark.

6th Street Bridge Film (2020), the focal point of the exhibition, is a meditative, dream-like sequence rippled with film discoloration and deterioration marks that speckle the film like sunspots, adding an ethereal quality to the image. In typical West style, she "marinated" her film, unearthing her footage after a few years. West and her collaborators (studio assistant Lucie Birney, photographer Abigail Taubman, and curator David Matorin) returned to the viaduct and dragged the film through the river water in multiple trips. The resulting submerged film, altered by the river water itself, serves as an index of the site, as if evidencing the existence of the bridge. Two black-and-white photos hung across the gallery record West's process. Referred to as performance prints, the double-exposed images are repeated in sequence, like a film strip, concretizing



Alison Rossiter, *Density 1930s*, 2018, Two Gelatin Silver Prints, 13 5/8 x 15 1/2 inches. Courtesy Yossi Milo, New York.

over time. She then often groups together sheets from the same box or from several, creating both precise grids and undulating, almost rhythmic, assemblages. Much of the work evokes different moments in the history of painterly and photographic abstraction as it developed in Europe. An echo of Aleksandr Ródchenko's end-of-the-line monochromes here, a touch of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist renewal of abstraction there, with a suggestion of László Moholy-Nagy's photograms for good measure.

The initial encounter with Rossiter's abstractions can feel strange and subdued, as if the historical framework of the show were stifling its expressivity—most of the work seems nearly monochrome, the abstractions almost rudimentary. First impressions such as these, however, are quick to give way to more subtle appreciations of the unique textures and rich tonalities that Rossiter coaxes out of the papers she has saved from the indifference of history.

The consistent strength of her work is the ease with which it produces abstractions that seem simple and familiar, only to reveal shortly thereafter the complex chain of accident, chance, and decision-making at its source. The papers she uses each have their own unique provenance, beginning with the manufacturer and then working their ways through countless owners and sets of circumstances for storage. Her typical practice of titling works by listing the paper's name, year of expiration, and year when she processed it (which the current show deviates from, though without discarding the historical focus) has the effect of compressing the paper's history while keeping it close at hand, ready to expand with each new inquiry.

Density 1947 (2020) brings together in a neat grid six pieces of gelatin silver paper drawn from the same box, each exhibiting different levels of oxidation and loss of light sensitivity. The almost uniform copper and gold silhouetting at the edges of five sheets, which frames the nearly bleach-white quality of the papers after Rossiter processes them, is contrasted with the more advanced oxidation of the sixth and topmost sheet from the box, which absorbed the brunt of time's weathering effect. The result seems an almost organic abstraction, a static-like ripple of gold and white shimmering across the paper.

The three largest works in the show, each titled *Gevaert Gevaluxe Velours, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1930s, processed 2020*, are single sheets of the same rare and highly prized paper, produced in the 1930's by Belgian manufacturer Gevaert Photo-Producten NV. Its coarse, almost sandpaper-like surface (a kind of tactility Rossiter has likened to that of Velcro) was considered a major achievement in the production of photographic paper, allowing for a special depth and quality of tone. The size of the sheets (two are roughly 5 1/2" x 4 1/2" and the third 4 1/2" x 4 1/2") means they were rolled for storage. Having gone unused, the decades they spent rolled up resulted in the cracking of the emulsion which coats the paper. Through Rossiter's controlled processing of each sheet, in which she lowers only a section into the chemical solution at a given time, the impressions left by years of neglect are transformed into ethereal abstractions that, x-ray-like, reveal the wear and tear of a life otherwise hidden.

Rossiter's is a unique way of bypassing more traditional photographic processes while staying rooted to the essence of the

medium. The exposures are neither happening in response to a momentarily pleasing or compelling arrangement of light and shadow, nor are they being carefully devised in the more controlled space of the studio. No, the exposures that Rossiter is working with have happened over decades, a century in some cases, and without the guidance of a creative consciousness. In this equation the box functions as a camera otherwise would, providing an "apparatus," or a container, through which responsiveness to light can be registered and an image, however fragmentary, can develop. Rossiter steps in at the decisive moment (one that Henri Cartier-Bresson could scarcely have imagined) and finishes what had been up to that point an impersonal and even random process, giving it the stamp of authorship, the structure of intent.

Look at the two sheets of paper in *Density 1930s* (2018). Through a kind of organic metaphor, both underwent a decades-long process of molding—a literal rotting from disuse and neglect. That such a thorough undermining of the paper's integrity has brought about not its final ruin, but its final use as a vehicle for form, is something of a minor miracle. Such is the electric current running beneath the surface of Rossiter's work, a glimmering suggestion that for some inexplicable reason history has conspired to see these materials survive and these abstractions realized.

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the conceptual crux of the exhibition and the source of its title: *Future Forgetting*. It comes from Norman Klein's concept of the constant forgetting of cities and erasure of memory through urban renewal. As the image is repeated, parts of the image appear to disappear and fade into nothingness.

Expanding on her material excavation of the life of the LA River and its bridges, West also sourced discarded objects from part of the LA river near the Arroyo Seco trail. This part of the trail, in the Highland Park area, has long been an unwitting trash depository, especially for electronics—discarded in the river to avoid costly electronic waste fees. One of the more common objects West found in her walks along the trail were flat-screens: the once-coveted luxury domestic technology, which has over the years become cheaper and cheaper until considered disposable. Collecting broken flat-screens and other dated electronics (CDs, boomboxes, electronic keyboards, etc.), West amassed a trove of electronic remnants which she composed to create what she calls a “media archaeology” project. The resulting works are a series of flat-screens, installed on the floor to be viewed from above, mimicking how West found them in the river. The screens play a loop of short videos documenting the objects that are then placed on top of the screens, creating a self-referential loop between recorded image and physical object. The screens flicker magenta and teal, the result of a glitch when processing the film to digital video. The objects that sit atop the screens are arranged by size and type, as if found in an archaeological dig. These are West's most sculptural works to date and the first time she has intentionally used monitors in her work. *Archaeology of Smashed Flatscreen Televisions Thrown off Bridges* (2020) highlights urban detritus to remind us of our accelerated technological waste. Some of the objects, CDs and stereos in particular, speak to the recent pre-touch screen past when more analog technologies still demanded a human touch, a touch that we are slowly also forgetting.

The exhibition ends with a series of handmade glass jars that hold film strips from West's film as well as faux filmstrips of iconic movies shot at the Sixth Street Bridge. The glass jars act like screens themselves, enlarging the images that float in them, and are filled with river water, again replicating the process of West's filmmaking. Next to the jars is a long table, atop which sits a zine that similarly documents the history of the bridge and the making of West's project. It is teal and purple, resembling the color of the flat-screen videos, and is presented upright, the pages undulating in an accordion manner, like river water. West often makes zines for her exhibitions, a further testament to her penchant for the analog and ethos of DIY. West's project, summarized in her zine, traces an urban archaeological study memorializing a significant aspect of the city landscape and acts as a material memento of recent history already at risk of being forgotten. West's poignant commentary on the ever-accelerating culture of urban renewal feels urgent in this particular moment when city life as we once knew it is changing suddenly in the blink of an eye.

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LEONARD CONTINO

BY ROBERT R. SHANE

Leonard Contino
Totally Dedicated: Leonard Contino, 1940–2016
 Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art,
 SUNY New Paltz, NY
 January 22 – April 5, 2020

Like a retablo in electric hues, a wall of 17 abstract paintings (1966–1977) by Leonard Contino arranged in three tiers, towers over the viewer and echoes in the reflection of the polished floor of the Dorsky Museum. With their zig-zagging geometry, hard-edge execution, and nested shapes radiating out into each corner, each square painting has its own inorganic life, defying fixed orientation. In their totality they create a sacred space of ecstasy. We witness their lives unfolding in the present like a vision. Their futures remain undetermined.

Curator Anna Conlan organized this retrospective of Contino's work thematically, appropriate since the artist dedicated himself to several concurrent series over decades: checkerboard paintings, black-and-white geometric line paintings, relief sculptures and maquettes, and even erotic collages. Resisting chronological classification, the work pulls us into a perpetual present that was paradoxically forged over the course of the artist's 50 years of labor. Contino's art was informed by contemporary movements like hard-edge abstraction and Op art, which the self-taught artist encountered as he ran among the circle exhibiting at the artist-run Park Place Gallery in the late 1960s and which included his life-long friend and champion Mark di Suvero. However, it is marked by a distinct devotional fervor, perhaps an expression of Contino's dedicated process: working at his kitchen table, he committed himself to making art every day. Although he investigates the nature of the picture plane and abstraction, the intricacy of the work resulting from his daily devotional practice reveals a deep spirituality, making it more akin to Kandinsky at the Bauhaus or Hilma af Klint than any of his peers.

This spirituality was already overt in his early mandala paintings. Symmetrical along both the vertical and horizontal axes, the paintings, such as *Untitled* (1966), a 29 x 24 in. acrylic and sand painting, induce hallucinatory pulsations with their simultaneous contrast of highly saturated colors, dislocating the viewer in space and time. This is amplified in Contino's subsequent, lifelong series of checkerboard paintings which oscillate between a perspectival space and a flat modernist grid superimposed over each other, as in *RE* (1977). Layered over that spatial drama is a column of arcs, like sunrises stacked on top of each other, compressing infinite days in the space of one canvas. The only point of stability is a dark brown void, a timeless circle whose power is echoed in the concentric yellow circles emanating from it.

Contino's “floaters” series, made in the last two decades of his life, consists of nested isosceles or equilateral triangles with metallic appendages branching out from their sides. In *Splintered* (2009), blue



Installation view: *Totally Dedicated: Leonard Contino, 1940–2016*, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, SUNY New Paltz, NY. Photo: JSP Photography.

triangles float in an orange ether painted in a thin wash that creates a sense of openness and light. But Contino never sacrifices the geometric precision of his forms, even when employing what looks like a post-painterly application of color. In fact, the spirituality of the work comes from our sublime experience of their absolute geometric otherness. He gives his forms “life and the right to individual existence”—as Malevich wrote that painters should—leaving us to try and grasp the movement and temporality of his paintings.

Although recognized by critic Barbara Rose, who included him in her book *American Painting: The Eighties, a Critical Interpretation* (1979), Contino mostly led a quiet career and exhibited infrequently, in part because he did not want his work viewed in light of his disability. In 1959, aged 19, Contino had been injured in a diving accident that rendered him quadriplegic. (He first met Mark di Suvero at New York's Rusk Rehabilitation where they were both patients and where Contino first began to make art.) Contino had some mobility in his arms but very little strength in his hands and produced the paintings we see by holding his brush in a metal brace attached to his forearm. We need not project narratives of pity or inspiration onto his work. He rightly resisted this, wanting his artwork to be seen on its own terms. If disability plays any role in Contino's work, perhaps it is as the disabilities studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has formulated, with disability representing something that goes beyond actual people with disabilities. She writes, “...we [people with disabilities] embody the unpredictable and intractable nature of temporality. We frustrate modernity's fantasy that we determine the arc of our own histories.” “Disability's contribution—its work—,” she argues, and which we can see as parallel to Contino's spiritual art practice, “is to sever the present from the future... [It] contributes a narrative of a genuinely open future, one not controlled by the objectives, expectations, and understandings of the present.”

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LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUTH

BY SUSAN BREYER

Landscapes of the South
 Mendes Wood DM
 January 30–April 30, 2020

In aestheticizing their encounters with nature, artists make infinite decisions—either unwittingly or intentionally. Some might attempt an “accurate” portrayal of space, flora, and light. In doing so, they interrogate the very nature of documentation: is it possible to arrive at a scientific visual rendering without the interference of personal, cultural, or ideological bias? Others might adopt an abstracted or distorted approach to natural imagery with the intent to convey a psychological or emotional response, or to counter the symbolism of a preexisting visual lexicon. What is the impact of choosing one approach over another? Are there circumstances in which we rely on artists to mirror “truths,” be they personal or societal? Are we more likely to trust a delicately painted leaf than a loose, expressive swatch of spring green?

Landscapes of the South, a group exhibition on view at Mendes Wood DM, presents 27 compositions in which creators—ranging from renowned traveler artist Frans Post (b. 1612, Haarlem, Netherlands; d. 1680) to contemporary Costa Rican painter Federico Herrero (b. 1978)—respond to natural settings. The show also contains works by Brazilian modernists who, according to the gallery, “sought to subvert the vision of... colonizers by building a national artistic language.” Diversity is found not only in artists' origins, eras, and intents, but in their formal choices; the landscapes exhibited are nostalgic and deadpan, impasto and serenely smooth.

From just inside the doorway of Mendes Wood DM's primary gallery space, the paintings and drawings on view look like little windows—winking capsules that promise to reveal important temporal, socio-political, and cultural clues. While the images seemed serene, I entered the exhibition braced for conflict, specifically with the traveler artists' depictions of Brazilian landscapes. I presumed that their European conventions and imperial gaze would noticeably exoticize or commodify their subjects—that their

attempt to “capture” foreign landscapes on canvas would in effect colonize them. My suspicion was heightened by the presence of modern Brazilian works where artists ostensibly reclaimed their native land.

I found many of my expectations for colonial traveler art manifest in Parisian painter Henri Nicolas Vinet’s (b. 1817, Paris; d. 1876, Niterói, Brazil) *A Mountain Stream in the Rainforest Above Rio de Janeiro* (undated). Painted in the second half of the 19th century, the work’s imagery—which gushes beauty and yearning—is gloriously pre-industrial. With the meticulous enthusiasm of a naturalist and the brush of a Romanticist, Vinet rendered a shimmering virgin landscape that conveys the awe of initial encounter with the tropics. The painting’s middle ground presents an impressive breadth of deep-green, overgrown flora that bows with the weight of its own exceedingly healthy foliage. In the foreground, sun-struck scrub vegetation encroaches upon a stream of clear water that rushes over and between rocky outcroppings—one can almost feel the warm glow of plein air light. And in the background, imposing mountains in lavender-gray rise ever higher through layers of white mist. I couldn’t help but think of *Shan shui*, or “mountain-water” painting—a style originating in Song Dynasty China and championed for centuries by the literati—in which infinite, atemporal landscapes feature passages of mountains, rivers, and waterfalls unified by mist. Like *Shan shui* landscapes, Vinet’s tropical paradise seems to combine natural, subjective, and metaphysical realms. While not abstract in form, the painter’s vision feels tinged with fantasy: a wild yet tranquil paradise where one is alone but never lost.

Directly across the room from *A Mountain Stream* hangs another dreamlike painting by Brazilian artist Alberto Da Veiga Guignard (b. 1896, Nova Friburgo, Brazil; d. 1962, Belo Horizonte, Brazil). He, however, was concerned with conveying the burgeoning industrialization of the mid-20th century Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, rather than nature’s grandeur. Guignard, who moved to Europe with his family in 1907, studied art in Munich, Florence, and Paris. He returned to Brazil in 1929, and exhibited his work in Rio de Janeiro alongside celebrated Brazilian modernists including Candido Portinari and Tarsila do Amaral. Then, in 1944, he moved to Belo Horizonte—the capital of Minas Gerais—which, at the time, was rapidly developing into one of Brazil’s largest industrial centers. *Paisagem de Sabará* (1956) reveals the metamorphosis of a small city that lies just east of Belo Horizonte, which served as a gold-mining hub in the colonial era. Using sheer pigments, Guignard painted red roofs and ghostly white facades, which seem to be materializing—or perhaps dissolving—amidst a lush green valley. Nestled at the center of the composition is a factory, whose smokestacks puff away in blue and green. The disconnected architecture and land made me wonder if Guignard was imagining the reversal of forthcoming damage to a pristine natural setting.

Mounted to the right of Guignard’s work is a 2019 painting by the São Paulo-based artist Lucas Arruda (b. 1983, Guaçuí, Brazil)—a landscape which, painted from memory, conveys a sensorial/psychological state. Part of his *Deserto-Modelo* series, the intimate work measures around eight

inches square. Close study reveals shaggy palms in olive and moss green, and a densely sprouted understory steeped in the chocolate-brown earth from which it emerges. A gray, fading light hovers above the tropical vegetation, conjuring an unusually chilly, humid day. The image is eerily silent, the vegetation wild and uninhabited. Delicate lines scratched into the oil paint—which trace silhouettes and distinguish individual fronds and raised bark—invoke a sort of primordial energy, recalling streaky lines left by children’s fingers in mud. The work communicates a feeling that is neither foreboding nor welcoming, more earthy than sublime; a return to fundamental contact with one’s own humanity.

To the right of Arruda’s painting is Frans Post’s *Franciscan Convent of Igaracu* (1659), created after he returned from Brazil to Holland, which addresses colonial efforts to establish European religious values. Hanging on a floating wall across from *Franciscan Convent* is a work by Hélio Melo (b. 1926, d. 2001), a self-taught Brazilian artist whose landscapes stem from his experiences working as rubber tapper in the Amazon. This, next to a group of diminutive paintings and drawings by Tarsila do Amaral (b. 1886, Capivari, Brazil; d. 1973, São Paulo). In an adjoining gallery, one finds mostly contemporary works on canvas, wood, and jute, by South and Central American artists. Surrounded by so many relatively small works in a relatively small show, my head began to spin.

And so the question arises: what are the implications of organizing a show in which the magnitude of diversity erodes not only chronology, but also the pre-established art historical categories that it takes as its springboard—Latin American traveler art, European Romanticism, post-colonial art, Brazilian modernist art, contemporary Latin American art? In some ways, this amalgamation is positive. In deciding first, to present nearly four centuries of art and second, not to present the works in chronological order, the show implies temporal, political, and economic fluidity. This fluidity, in turn, underscores the many, nonlinear paths to and definitions of modernity—a topic always worth revisiting.

But with over 400 years of art divided between two rooms, and no wall text to provide international, national, or local historical context for viewers, the grouping glosses over the significant events and particular socio-political circumstances to which many of these artists responded. Especially in the case of the European traveler and modern Brazilian artists—each of which require careful, nuanced study—especially when they are paired. A narrower focus on any of these colonial/modern juxtapositions might have encouraged a slower, more thoughtful study of landscape’s role throughout Brazilian art history, one of many important conversations concerning increasingly relevant themes, including academicization, colonization, spirituality, identity, and the environment.

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JUTTA KOETHER

BY ALFRED MAC ADAM

Jutta Koether

4 the Team

Lévy Gorvy

February 27–April 18, 2020

Jutta Koether inscribes herself in a grand German Expressionist tradition, one expansive enough to include figures like Chaïm Soutine, Eva Hesse, and Lucian Freud, whose work at certain stages shared an affinity for gestural brushstrokes, rough figuration, and the grotesque. To be sure, she reconfigures that tradition in her own image and the artistic DNA of her work is specific.

Her first show at Lévy Gorvy, some 22 paintings; 11 from 2019; 10 from the ’80s and one from 1990, is hung in idiosyncratic fashion: new work on the ground floor and third floor, older work on the second. The artist has deliberately choreographed—an appropriate term since her work also involves performance and dance—the arrangement to partly resist our seeing an easy progression in her work. Viewed in hindsight, there is continuity between the older and newer pieces, but the work of the ’80s marks a phase Koether left behind when she moved from Cologne to New York in the ’90s.

These small paintings, made between 1983 and 1987, are superb. Their role in Koether’s oeuvre is reminiscent of Eva Hesse’s expressionistic “spectre” paintings of 1960 in that they also show the artist taking control of an Expressionistic style reminiscent of Soutine’s still lives or even Philip Guston’s figural paintings—but a style she will jettison. *Untitled* (1983) might be an emblem of this period in Koether’s career: the 11” x 9” oil on canvas appears to represent three sperm making their way toward an egg. Both the sperm and the egg are black with red embellishments, so their biological affinities are clear. A new life is about to be created. *Max Ernst* (1983) pays homage to the eponymous artist, and perhaps to Surrealism itself. Ernst is reconstituted as a pyramid with two eyes, one within and the other, perched on the pyramid’s apex. Enigmatic, unless we take the pyramid as a symbol of creation and the eyes as the dialectical relationship between the artist’s conscious and subconscious lives.

Koether’s paintings from 2019 are also balanced between her inner life and her life in the world. Entering the gallery, the viewer faces a large horizontal canvas, *Encore*. The painting synthesizes much of Koether’s recent artistic life: the central figure—an artist with brushes in her left hand, her back to us—faces what seem to be an opera house audience. Has this plastic artist been asked to sing an encore? Are the blue ribbons she ties into a huge bow a double lasso intended to capture someone or tie that someone to her? The idea of an artist-singer is not farfetched in Koether’s case, since she is also a music critic and performance artist who dances to music (a heart-shaped prop from a 2020 performance at Artists Space hangs on the second floor with the paintings of the ’80s), and lectures in a performative way on her work.

That self-image—if not self-portrait—complements two other large rectangular canvases *Neue Frau* and *Neuer Mann* (both 2019). The “new woman” and the “new man” do not exactly face each other from opposite walls; they are set, deliberately again, at a slight angle to each other, as if to say, this is not an opposition, but two possibilities. The “new woman,” apparently based on the congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, stares solemnly from the lower right section of the canvas. Looping around her face then upward into the higher reaches of the canvas is another blue ribbon like the one in *Encore*. This new woman must confront life outside the canvas and, it would seem, separate herself from another—perhaps inner—life. Being the new woman clearly means sacrifice of one kind or another. The new man has no face, no name, and no correlative in the real world. He, or rather they, since the male image is double, is either falling or signaling a possible direction. Perhaps the double image suggests the double role of the new man: falling out of the way but at the same time helping by showing the way.

Two more-or-less identical canvases, *Holding 3* and *Holding 4* (both 2019), painted in Koether’s signature attenuated red, are the same red as the gown worn by the artist in *Encore* and in the other 2019 pieces on the third floor. It renders curtains, apples, fabric, and skin, covers that open to reveal performance and what lies beneath the surface. Two paintings here help us to understand Koether’s relationship to art history—a subject she has delved into before, especially in regard to Poussin. *Dürered (4 Women)* is juxtaposed to *Koethered (4 the Team)*. In the former, Koether takes Dürer’s 1497 engraving *The Four Witches*, turning them from beauties into horrors. *Koethered* is a self-conscious exercise in self-imaging: the self is reduced to an eye, a heart, and the title of the show, “4 the Team,” is reduced to a motto from a Mercedes Benz racing group. *Dürered (4 Women)* offers an irreverent view of a master from the past, *Koethered*, an irreverent view of oneself.

Jutta Koether conflates an artist in 2020 and artist of the past, dialogues with the past and life in 2020, and dialectics of art and society, in order to create a grand synthesis whereby her knowledge, experience, and artistic spirit fuse into these magnificent canvases.

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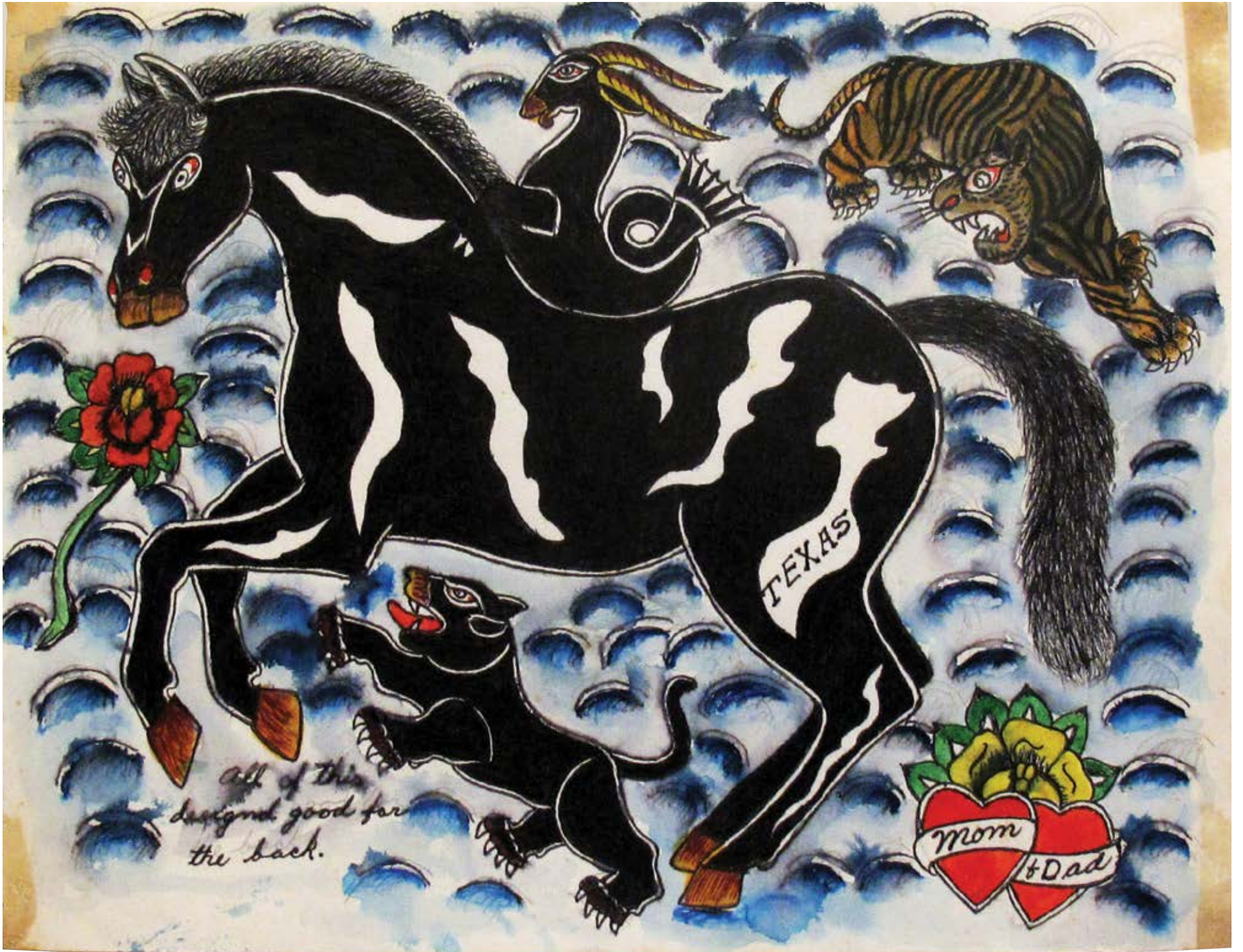
- Heather Lamanno, current resident

Something that has been really helpful in my development as an artist is the opportunity to participate in studio visits. I've had a lot of curators or artists come here and it's really nice to show them not only my work, but my work in an entire space, a whole collection of works - Angela St. Vrain, current resident

Learning from each other in the studio space - I think it's wonderful that each of the residents do different kinds of art. It has broadened my view and helped me look at my work more in depth. - KB Lor, current resident

It's been really interesting and really great being part of the Second Shift community. It's been a point of growth, I think, for me, being able to be vulnerable in my works in progress and share the space with people who can see all of my mistakes as they unfold as well as my successes has been really important to my worth as an artist and as a person. - Jovan Speller, current resident





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Rosanna Mclaughlin's *Double-Tracking: Studies in Duplicity* Mclaughlin examines how the high-low hybrid phenomena of double-tracking has metastasized from its art world origins to encompass all manners of lifestyle presentation

BY ESMÉ HOGEVEEN

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Double-Tracking: Studies in Duplicity
 Rosanna Mclaughlin
 Little Island Press / Carcanet (2019)

Last week, I dined at a bistro-y Toronto restaurant called, “Le Swan.” The “Le” in the establishment’s title bestows an elusive value that helps assuage potential qualms patrons may feel about ordering meatloaf and mashed potatoes alongside a \$158 Bordeaux. A short blurb on the restaurant’s website explains that Le Swan offers “bistro classics and diner standards: comfort food.” This fusion of basics rebranded to tempt middle-class culinary and cultural appetites reminded me of a passage from Rosanna Mclaughlin’s astute, new essay collection, *Double-Tracking: Studies in Duplicity*. “To double-track is to be both: counter-cultural and establishment, rich and poor, Maldon Sea Salt of the earth,” Mclaughlin explains. “Pablo Picasso’s immortal words fill the scroll: ‘I want to live as a poor man, with lots of money.’”

Crediting Tom Wolfe with coining the term “in 1970 as a means of describing the state of duplicity required to get ahead in the arts,” Mclaughlin suggests that double-tracking has metastasized from its art world origins to encompass all manners of lifestyle presentation. From fashion to architecture, interior design to website layout, mixology to vacation planning, high-low hybrids are white hot. Of course, this is no revelation—the persistence of modernist mash-up aesthetics has been well-documented throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The stakes of contemporary gentrification, a force indisputably linked to double-tracking, have been so well chronicled that the self-identified “liberal” demographic moving into neighborhoods recently made palatable by pop-up galleries and DIY spaces would be hard pressed to feign complete ignorance on the subject.

The fact that Mclaughlin’s subject matter is already so well understood, at least in lay

terms, presents the author, an art editor at *The White Review*, with a particular task. Rather than persuade the reader of her observations’ legitimacy, Mclaughlin must instead present us with a compelling lens through which to consider the middle-class infatuation with workwear, utilitarian design, and retro aesthetics. In her introduction, Mclaughlin provides a sweeping overview of objects and ethos that appeal to the double-tracker: from “intentionally distressed brick walls [and] expensive local street food markets that replace markets already selling food to locals” to “workwear jeans [and] anything made by Carhartt” to “fake mud with which to spray the wheel arches of your four by four,” double-tracking dwells at the intersection of homage and appropriation.

The first reading pleasure of *Double-Tracking* may well be the satisfaction of hearing someone, or *something*, expertly called out. Mclaughlin refers to double-tracking as “a state of mind born of an ambivalent relationship to privilege, that, when perfected, allows those with financial resources the economic benefits of leaning right, and the cultural benefits of leaning left.” How curious that authenticity and self-awareness, qualities one might otherwise assume to be intimately connected if not codependent, seem dubiously unbound in this cultural phenomenon. While Mclaughlin skewers Gen X and millennials for obsessing over Breton stripes, canvas chore coats, and “pretend dive-bars” that serve drinks in jam jars, her real interest is in the wider, socio-psychological context that has rendered clothing, accessories, furnishings, and nomenclature associated with physical labor, trades, subsistence farming, and prisons just so tantalizing.

Refreshingly, rather than launch into a series of reactionary, Boomer-esque tirades, Mclaughlin presents a series of engaging chapters in the forms of historical essays; droll, first-person commentaries; and satirical vignettes. In “Madame Deficit and Mixed Fortunes Couture,” Mclaughlin regales us with an account of Marie Antoinette’s aesthete excesses—the details might be comical if they didn’t so closely approximate the proclivities of today’s billionaire elite. During the 1760s, Antoinette renovated Petit Trianon, “a chateaux and grounds at the palace of Versailles,” in order to make it a more private, pastoral retreat. Mclaughlin explains that Antoinette’s “plans for revamping [included] a model village on the chateaux’s grounds, which contained a newly planted virgin wood, uprooted from the palace nursery, an entirely ornamental windmill, a barn, and a clutch of thatched buildings.” At this carefully curated escape, “the queen of France, a woman who thought nothing of wearing the 141 carat Regent Diamond pinned to her hat, wiled away her hours dressed as a milkmaid.” (Ironically, the inspiration for Antoinette’s rustic romanticism-inspired reno was supposedly a novel by Jean Jacques Rousseau, the political philosopher famously opposed to private property.)

Antoinette may be an extreme example, but Mclaughlin does an excellent job of illustrating contemporary instances of mining working class accoutrement or marginalized perspectives. Acerbic sketches of Frieze London in “The Pious and the Pommery: a case study of an art

fair” and a tongue-in-cheek short story about a curator who hires a minority expert to revitalize his out of touch gallery in “A Funeral for Frank Broome: a case study in self-marginalisation” will feel uncomfortably familiar to anyone who’s experienced the art world’s half-baked efforts to appear democratized. More obscure accounts of voyeuristic double-tracking remind the reader of transhistorical poverty fetishes. In “Munby-Cullwicks,” Mclaughlin profiles Arthur Munby, a 19th-century “connoisseur of working-class women” [who] spent his free time travelling across the UK in search of female labourers,” who he would then photograph and catalogue.

Whether exploring the limits of double-tracking in home decor (as in “Tobacco and Cedar: a case study in interior design,” a fictive chapter in which a couple import an American prison toilet and Austrian abattoir lighting for their brutalist loft) or the explicit role of money in the art market (as discussed in references to a debate at the Saatchi Gallery about the role of money in art fairs in “The Pious and the Pommery”), Mclaughlin’s reveals double-tracking as a through line interweaving art and commerce. The book’s greatest challenges are to avoid snideness or preaching to the choir, and Mclaughlin dodges both traps, instead drawing her reader toward a deeper questioning of working class appropriation and its perverse presence in the art world and middle-class liberalism.

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The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader

Edited by Lucy Ives, this collection brings to light the literary achievements of conceptual artist and speculative architect Madeline Gins.

BY MEGAN N. LIBERTY

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The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader
 Edited by Lucy Ives
 Siglio (2020)

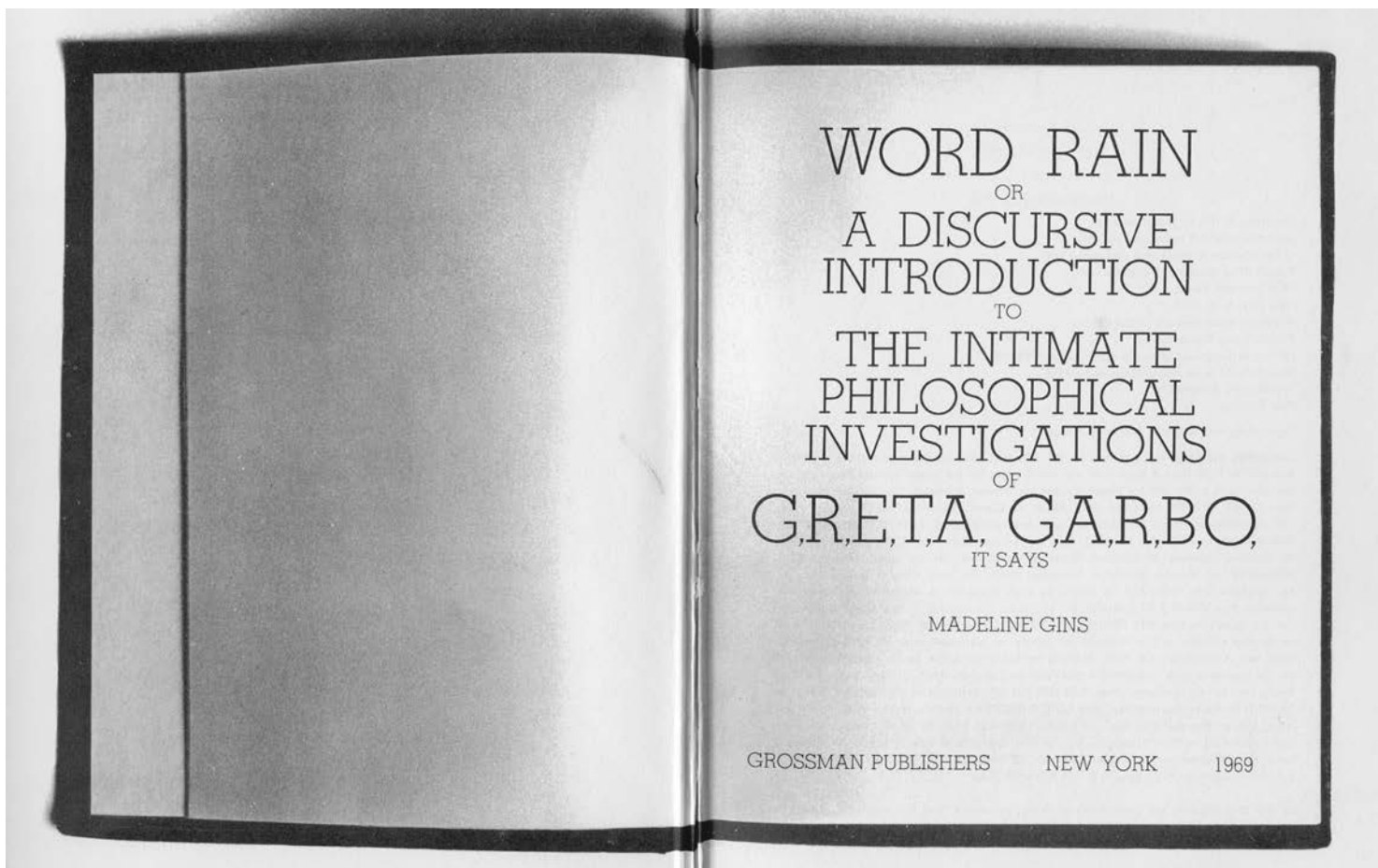
What is the physical experience of reading? How does one’s body react to the stimulation of the mind? How does it respond to the physical touch of the page? And what about the distractions while reading, with so many things competing for our attention, for our gaze and comprehension. These are the considerations of Madeline Gins’s experimental novel *WORD RAIN* (1969). I write this review while holed up in my Brooklyn apartment during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is forcing people across the globe to develop a new awareness of their bodies—our bodies’ proximity to others



and where and what they touch. These uncertain, fearful, and frustrating times are perhaps the most fitting to discover Gins (1941-2014), an experimental novelist, fringe Fluxus artist, and speculative architect. Much of her artistic work was done in collaboration with her husband, the artist Arakawa (to whom *WORD RAIN* is dedicated), their most famous collaboration being The Reversible Destiny Foundation, an architectural project that posits home design to avoid death—especially relevant under today’s pandemic circumstances. Though these plans never claimed to fight disease, they did suggest a mode of living that keeps the mind active, alert, and alive. As Marie Doezema writes in a 2019 *New York Times Magazine* article about the couple’s architectural theories, “they posited that buildings could be designed to increase mental and physical stimulation, which would, in turn, prolong life indefinitely. An aversion to right angles, an absence of symmetry and a constant shifting of elevations would stimulate the immune system, sharpen the mind and lead to immortality.”

One could argue that Gins’s writing shares the ethos of many of these architectural qualities, particularly the “constant shifting of elevations.” As Gins writes in *WORD RAIN*, “Speaking about platforms, in the almost physical sense I rested on at least three. There were, at least, the off-on-light-dark-nodular platform; the high-low, yes-no, etc., trampoline; and the platform for the bottom of the feet in the head.” This gives a sense of the difficulty and tactility of Gins’s prose. Additionally, one could argue that publishing is another way to achieve a kind of immortality. (“So too every word has been lived, although I must sadly admit that I do not know any living word besides myself which is a secret,” Gins writes in *WORD RAIN*.) This brings us to Gins’s less widely known legacy as a literary figure, an artist whose media was language in the vein of Max Ernst, Gertude Stein, Dan Graham, or Robert Smithson.

I discovered Gins’s writing, her novels as well as poetry, lists, and essays, in the new collection *The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader* expertly edited and introduced by Lucy Ives, which includes a full facsimile reproduction of the out-of-print *WORD RAIN*, as well as previously unpublished essays and wordplay, and Gins’s later novels *What the President Will Say and Do!!* (1984) and *Helen Keller or Arakawa* (1994), which differ from *WORD RAIN* in format (*President* is structured more in verse like



Excerpt from *WORD RAIN*, reproduced in *The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader* (Siglio, 2020).

lists or poems and *Helen Keller* reads more like long connected essays with less visual play than *WORD RAIN*, but share her interest in the architecture of language and sensory experience.

I began reading her architectural prose while there was an awareness of COVID-19 in the air, but in New York we were not yet being told to stay in our homes and forego contact with others. I often read in public, my body curled around the book unaware of my surroundings and yet still very aware of how often I touched my face or the surfaces around me, and how frequently I washed my hands. But *WORD RAIN* too, made me conscious of my body and the “embodied” experience of reading. The narrative follows a woman trying to finish reading in the library (with the refrain throughout, “I just want to finish this chapter”) while in the dining room a “little birthday party that Judy’s preparing for Linda” causes interruptions. As I sat in public curled around the book, absorbed and unaware of my surroundings, but still regularly jarred from the pages by waiters and other patrons, *WORD RAIN*’s heroine too oscillates between absorption and distraction, the very structure of the book creating this experience in addition to narrating it. Knowing Gins’s future experiments with architecture, it is important to note that the first spread of the book is a floor plan of the fictional location of this story showing the library and adjacent dining room.

In her useful introduction to the collection, Ives grounds *WORD RAIN* in the context of her collaborations with Arakawa, her work with Fluxus artists and the publication *0 to 9*, and importantly connects Gins’s writings to many of the literary arts figures I’ve previously mentioned, in addition to Hanne Darboven, Adrian Piper, Hannah Weiner, and Roland Barthes. For Barthes, the death of the author was “the birth of the reader.” “Without me, it words the page; yet says nothing,” Gins writes. The book requires a reader. Gins further upends the traditional relationship between author, book, and

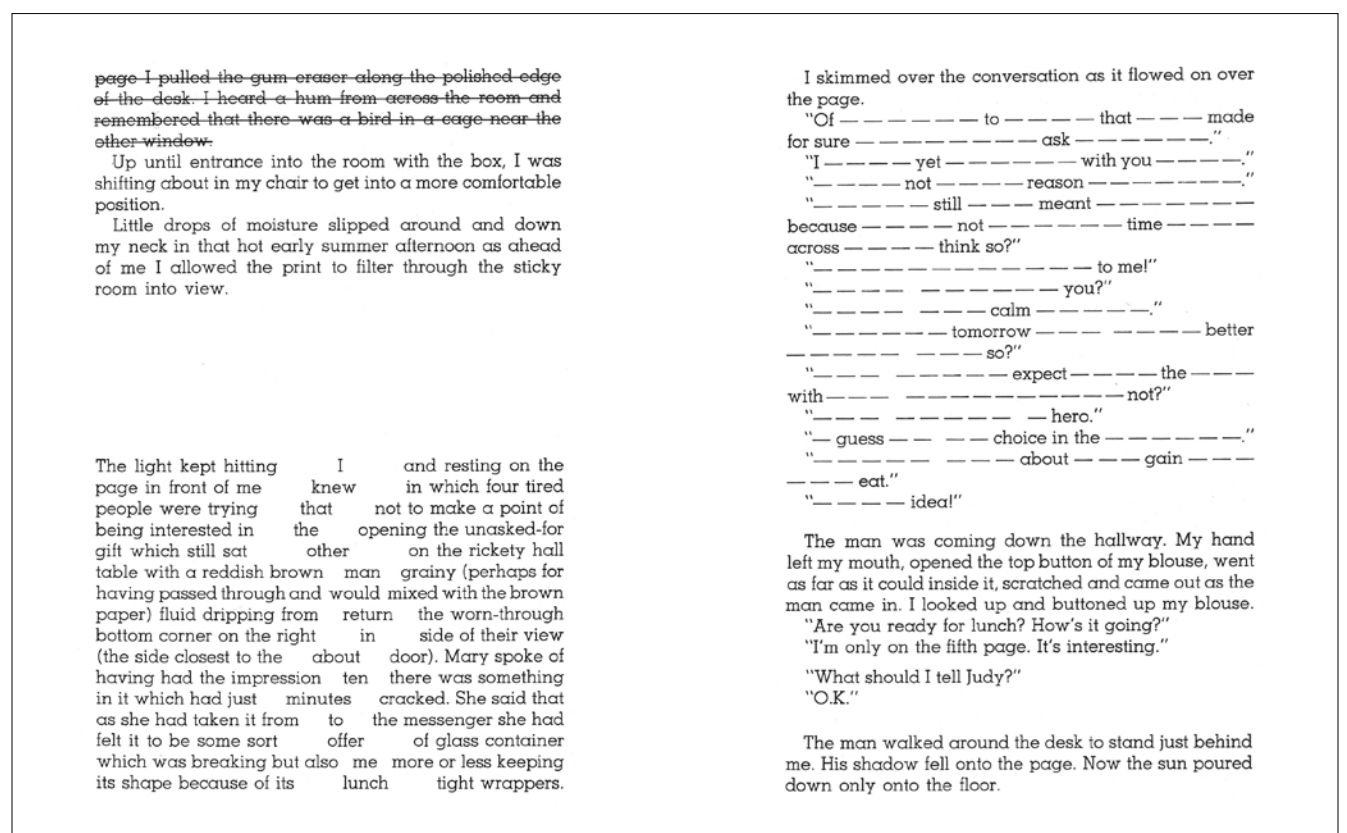
reader through her typographic choices, visual elements, and story. On some pages, a photocopied hand appears on the edge, echoing my own hand holding the book open. As Ives points out, this suggests the reader’s “presence has been foreseen and already exists as part of the book’s fiction.” Additionally, just as I the reader become distracted, tired, or overwhelmed with the difficulty of the material, so too does our heroine. Gins anticipates the waning of attention: “I skimmed over the conversation as it flowed on over the page” is followed by a series of lines of text where most of the words are replaced by “- - -” leaving only a few typed words. Gins has ingeniously forced us into the reading experience of her character. But these gaps, as Ives argues, also force us to fill in the blanks, and in this way we become writers too. “Gins imagines

reading and writing as co-implicated and nearly synonymous activities,” according to Ives.

This reader-as-writer status also applies to the gaps throughout Gins’s writing—the literal gaps in addition to the more figurative leaps required to continue consuming her abstract texts. “In order to make the words move, you must give your attention to them. Notice I am gone.” Who is the “I” here? Is it Gins the author, who disappears in the presence of the reader? Or is it the character who reads in the book, who disappears into the manuscript she reads? These leaps of interpretation are required throughout to continue reading.

Another of these unusual rhetorical choices is Gins’s constant attention to the characters and the page, which, when we are engrossed in a good story, disappear. In

several places, she references “the muscle tone of the page,” a phrase I find surprisingly alluring, as it not only anthropomorphizes the book, but also gives a strength to the pages as an appendage. As Ives argues, Gins “compels the reader to acknowledge the mediating objects that are printed words, the page, and the book, as well as the reader’s own role in the fabrication of fictional events.” Reading is likened to a mist: “I appear on a page which would otherwise be blank. I, the mist, the agent.” As she skims and speed reads, we are given a chunk of pages with most of the words replaced by “- - -” prefaced by, “I was picking up the meaning without stopping to accumulate words. Speed. I loved it. Soon it would be over. The words stuck to the mist, I to the meaning.” Reading is given a physical form, albeit a nearly invisible



Excerpt from *The Saddest Thing Is That I Have Had to Use Words: A Madeline Gins Reader* (Siglio, 2020).

one. “She ran through the word spray and touched its streams with her free hand.” The narrative wonders, “These pages. Are they still touching?”

“*WORD RAIN* is also remarkable for the way in which it carries on a longer (and largely unidentified) literary tradition,” writes Ives, “focusing on the interaction of the human sensorium with the tactile, durational object that is the codex.” This is one of the defining qualities of an artist book, that it highlights its bookness and thus emphasizes our bodiliness. While Gins is not the first or the last to do this, she is perhaps the most elegant. While reading, though often disoriented and confused, I found myself struck by the beauty of her descriptions and qualifications. “The sentences linked arms (as the words did sinews) as they vanished from this earth” and “Up until entrance into the lives of the characters after their departure from the typewriter carriage, I was moving about in my chair, trying to get into a more comfortable position.” What a charmingly beautiful way to describe the transition into reading that draws a narrative line between words as strings of letters and ourselves as physical beings prepare to give them life.

No matter how abstract the text becomes, Gins never forgets our body reading. In the first chapter she offers up notations to suggest our breathing speeds while reading (“When you see f I say breathe fast; s slow breathing; m through the mouth”). With breathing comes the audible nature of the words, “Even now this is a sound book. It moves through my hum. I take the letter b and move it toward ack, it moves back into me.” Gins, who was influenced by Buddhism, and was deeply invested in sensory experiences or the absence of them (several projects with Arakawa and one of her own novels namecheck Helen Keller), creates a reading experience that is akin to meditation or yoga, a physical act as much as a mental one. “I took long, measured strides along the three-inch-eye walks of the page,” Gins writes in *WORD RAIN*.

But just as Gins celebrates language, she also laments its limitations, as in the titular line, which comes from *WORD RAIN*, “Confusion is a word. Words are our confusion. Read and be confused. But don’t be just a little confused. [...] The saddest thing is that I have had to use words.” It’s the gaps and fallibility of language that give it power in the hands of a reader willing to be confused; a reader willing to make meaning as both a writer and a reader, fully embodying the book. In these uncertain times of social isolation, when many of us will spend more time with a book, Gins’s writing captures what we crave from that experience—one that is physically and mentally all-encompassing. While *The Reversible Destiny Project* may not have succeeded in giving Gins or her partner eternal life, *The Madeline Gins Reader* does. With each reading we embody her words and write Gins anew, giving her life within the pages of the book and ourselves. “I’ve read enough. I’ll read more. I held the manuscript in my hand. I shook it. Not a word came out.”

MEGAN N. LIBERTY is the Art Books Editor at the *Brooklyn Rail*. Her interests include text and image, artists’ books and ephemera, and archive curatorial practices.

Gustav Metzger’s Writings

Collected writings shed new light on an artist’s ideology and influences

BY JOSEPH NECHVATAL

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Gustav Metzger Writings (1953–2016)
 Edited by Mathieu Copeland
 JRP|Editions (2020)

Gustav Metzger, the doyen of shamanic-artistic creative-destruction, is best known (if known at all) as the artist who inspired the 1960s mania for apogee instrument-smashing stagecraft spearheaded by Pete Townshend of The Who. Townshend was directly influenced by Metzger as a student at Ealing School of Art, attending Metzger’s “Auto-Destructive Art, Auto-Creative Art” lecture, and helped finance the book *Gustav Metzger Writings (1953–2016)*—recently published by JRP|Editions—which collects 350 of Metzger’s art activist texts, written between 1953 and his death in 2017 and now edited by curator Mathieu Copeland. The writing style is, in Metzger’s words, “deliberately flat” (glee free) and the cover is of inexpensive cardboard, reminiscent of *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus, 1990–1962*, Achille Bonito Oliva’s 1990 Fluxus compendium published in conjunction with the Venice exhibition *Ex Granai della Repubblica alle Zitelle (Giudecca)*. For Metzger, a Trotskyist and German Jewish immigrant to Britain who lost family in the Holocaust, cheap auto-destruction has virtues that solid structure does not know (to paraphrase Pascal).

Metzger first writes of self-destructive art in the passionate unpublished draft of his 1959 *Manifesto SDA*, which he would continue to refine through to his climatic, short, and punchy 1968 statement *Theory of Auto-Destructive Art*. There he inserts his acerbic ideas into Kinetic Art, and, as in his first, 1959 version of the *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, petitions for creations of therapeutic self-destructive public monuments, paintings, and sculptures—upping what Proust said: that “time, like the sea, takes everything away.” In the 1960 version of his *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, Metzger unequivocally states that “Auto-destructive art is art which contains within itself an agent which automatically leads to its destruction within a period of time not to exceed twenty years.”

Unsurprisingly, Dada had inspired him, citing Francis Picabia’s 1920 blackboard drawings as proto-auto-destructive art. Also important was *The New Vision (1928)* book by László Moholy-Nagy, the experimental Constructivist who ordered his paintings *EM (Telephone Pictures) (1923)* by phone from a factory. But unlike Moholy-Nagy, Metzger’s theories of auto-destruction were intended to dismantle the myth that technology was rational or neutral. Far from impartial, Metzger states in the 1960 *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto* that “auto-destructive art mirrors the compulsive perfectionism of arms manufacturing” by pushing art towards an “Eve of Destruction,” as Barry McGuire would sing in the 1965 anti-nuclear protest song.

The previously mentioned first published version of *Auto-Destructive Art*

(November 4, 1959), was released as a press statement for Metzger’s London exhibition *Cardboards*, held at artist Brian Robinst’s Monmouth Street basement coffee house, of found packaging materials disassembled and hung up: an obvious over-ripe reference to Duchampian readymades. From the get-go Metzger worked against art as market transactional objects and for a public art of recycling, contending in his 1960 *Manifesto* that “Auto-destructive art is the transformation of technology into public art.” Thus he advocated—not for passive artistic nihilisms familiar to *fin de siècle* decadent dandies—but for generative curative nihilisms that unleash virulent disintegrations as corrective forces.

This new collection of writings documents the vital influential affiliation Metzger had with Jean Tinguely, who was then living in Paris. Though Metzger began floating these kinds of ideas in 1959, Tinguely was first to publicly realize them with his self-destructive machine sculpture *Homage to New York (1960)* that self-deconstructed in the Sculpture Garden of MoMA in March of 1960. The collection includes pertinent information on how Tinguely boosted Metzger’s auto-destructive art theory, as Tinguely’s work was a revelation for Metzger when he received an invitation to Tinguely’s 1960 ICA London Happening. For just after *Cardboards* opened, Metzger had attended this event, featuring two out-of-phase recordings of Tinguely’s utterances dubbed *Art, Machines et Mouvement*, accompanied by a painting machine. And *voilà. Homage to New York* directly inspired Metzger’s maquette *Model for an Auto-Destructive Monument (1960)*: three weak steel towers that would break down in 10 years.

In the context of the then new threat of global nuclear destruction, Metzger’s auto-destructive theory of art was intended as radically political, anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist. It brutally addressed society’s insalubrious hang-up with assured mutual destruction. Indeed, March 10, 1960, Metzger published *Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art* that explicitly addressed the nuclear arms race. In the third manifesto of 1961, he assertively states: “Auto-destructive art is an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation.”

Taking his kinetic theory into public practice, on July 3, 1961, a gas-masked Metzger sprayed hydrochloric acid on three stretched nylon monochrome sheets at South Bank London, creating *Acid Action Painting*. The disintegration of the aesthetic picture planes was intended to trigger psychological release for world peace, as Metzger was active in antinuclear movements and jailed for encouraging non-violent civil disobedience. I expect the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức, the self-immolating Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk who burned himself to death in Saigon in June of 1963 was an important protest image for him.



One of the largest sections of the book documents the London 1966 *Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS)* that Metzger and others organized. Some of the material here is redundant, because ultimately his manifestos did not change much between publications, but ironically, Ad Reinhardt submitted a 1963 *Art-as-Art* statement for DIAS, reproduced here as slap-dash collage. With DIAS, Metzger advocated for a global movement of disintegrative-degenerate art as radical protest art. But if, as the aesthete writer Walter Pater purported, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” then Raphael Montañez Ortiz’s *Duncan Terrace Piano Destruction Concert (1966)* was the DIAS highlight.

From 1968 to 1974 Metzger focused on cybernetics and computer art, wishing to expose the destructiveness he saw at their core. His self-exterminating art projects were intended to critique computer-driven techno-capitalism, but, it seems to me, auto-destructive art is the height of techno-capitalism: an example of hyper-consumerism’s planned obsolescence. In 1969 Metzger wrote voluminously on the history of automata and idiosyncratically interviews Buckminster Fuller in 1970. Though Metzger initiated/practiced Art Strike in 1974, he continued to copiously write sham-bolic project proposals (now connected to environmental concerns) until 2016.

The moral content of this collection is unashamed melancholic rage at the state of the world. But its antipathy towards delicacy, flamboyant irony, or black humor makes for peevish reading. Thankfully, Metzger’s slim art output out plays nihilistic negativity by intensifying its forces into an affirmative nihilism. As such, Metzger’s auto-destructive writings—though utopian naïve—can still mess with heads in right-wing America.

JOSEPH NECHVATAL’s book *Immersion Into Noise* was published in 2011 by the University of Michigan Library’s Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press.

**Patrick de Vries's
*Alberto Giacometti and
the Perception of Reality***

An interpretation of the sculptor's lesser known drawings, prints, and East Asian influenced works examined through his archive of letters and notebooks.

BY ISABELLA BOORMAN



*Alberto Giacometti and
the Perception of Reality*
Patrick de Vries
Hatje Cantz (2019)

Swiss art historian Dr. Patrick de Vries, a specialist in art history and East Asian literature, focuses on the drawings of Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966)—known primarily for his figurative sculptures—examining them against more than 100 letters between Giacometti and his parents, many previously unpublished. Using little direct quotations from the artist, the author explains, “in paraphrasing Alberto Giacometti’s letters, an attempt has been made to retain something of their original style, which includes his individualistic use of language.” Therefore, the reader relies heavily on de Vries’s interpretation of the material throughout. The author places these paraphrased letters within interesting and detailed biographical context, and includes a selection of drawings, lithographs, and some facsimile letters.

The book also highlights the close relationship between the artist and his parents. When speaking to de Vries, he told me what struck him most “was how often son and parents wrote to each other—throughout Alberto’s life, letters or postcards were written, at the very least, once a month, more often several times per month.” While Giacometti’s brother Diego’s role in assisting with his artworks is well documented, this publication shows the strong influence of his father Giovanni, also an artist, who, in these letters discusses his own artworks in terms of light, balance, and compositional structure. For de Vries these letters show that “careful attention to compositional detail and illumination was already ingrained in him by a young age.” The publication moves chronologically from Giacometti’s school days in Switzerland after leaving home in 1915, through his time spent in Italy and

Paris where he formed his influential artistic friendships, up to his death in 1966. One of the final sections of the book highlights his lesser known interest in East Asian art. Although these drawings are undated, de Vries situates them in the context of Giacometti’s friendship with Japanese philosopher Isaku Yanaihara in the 1950s and 1960s. This, however, is only touched on briefly, before the publication ends with Giacometti’s drawings of his studio and family, made towards the end of his life.

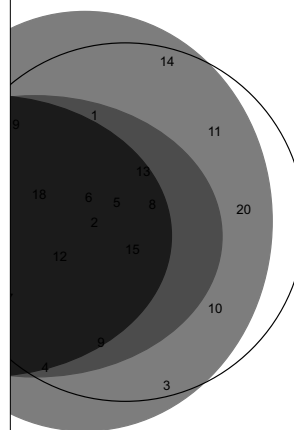
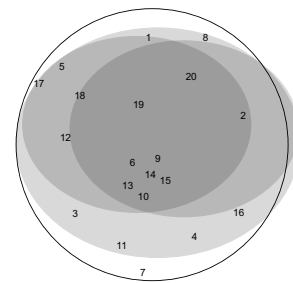
In one of few direct quotations, de Vries quotes Giacometti’s writings from his 1963 exercise book, “my sculptures, paintings, drawings, [are] linked to the evolution of my vision, and to [the evolution of] my perception during my entire life.” From this the author begins his study into Giacometti’s “evolution in perception during his life, and how this is reflected in his drawing, which he saw as the most important genre from which all others emanated.” Although the artist is quoted stating that his “sculptures, paintings, drawings” were linked to the evolution of his artistic vision, de Vries makes the case that it is drawing which is of most importance. To provide evidence for this he paraphrases the artist from as early as a 1917 presentation to his classmates, which gave “his opinion that drawing was the basis for all other arts.” De Vries also cites Giacometti’s time learning the art of silverpoint drawing—a meticulously detailed and difficult medium to master—whilst staying with his godfather Cuno Amiet, also an artist. He analyzes the few known silverpoint drawings by Giacometti to display the artist’s high level of accuracy and skill in drawing at a young age. Giacometti’s portrait of *Gret Flury Reclining* (1920) made from silver point on chalk ground paper, focuses on the female head and neck, her eyes stare outwards yet appear blank, with the outlines of her hair faint yet displaying her presence and distinct features. For de Vries these works display Giacometti’s “tendency to succeed in imbuing the portraits of people close to him with an aura that goes beyond the visible.”

The following chapters prioritize Giacometti’s friendships with artists Francis Gruber, Balthus, and Pierre Tal-Coat. In the case of Gruber, de Vries makes comparisons between his and Giacometti’s drawings, in Gruber’s *Study of Figures* (1940) where the artist “overlaid several strokes to shape each figure, which resulted in a vibrating sense of energy that animates the space surrounding them.” He draws on parallels between this and Giacometti’s drawing *Diego Reading* (ca.1960) through its “dissolution of contours within strongly anchored overall compositions.” Whilst both works certainly share this dynamic quality of sketchy outlines, a comparison of the two as contemporaries in dialogue proves difficult, given that the works were made 20 years apart.

The final chapter details Giacometti’s fascination in East Asian art. As there were no direct quotations from the artist about his interests in this topic, except from a brief conversation with Yanaihara, I explored this further with the author, who told me Giacometti wrote about East Asian art, “when he noted that he’d enjoyed copying Japanese woodblock prints when he was only 13 years old.” The artist’s copy of *Ox in Landscape*, an original Chinese hanging

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scroll from the Yuan dynasty, is highlighted here. Giacometti situates his subject of the ox within a cage-like structure, divided into sections, reminiscent of his later sculptures and displaying his distinctive artistic style, perhaps also showing his admiration for the “exceptionally solid architecture” of Chinese painting, which de Vries points out the artist praised.

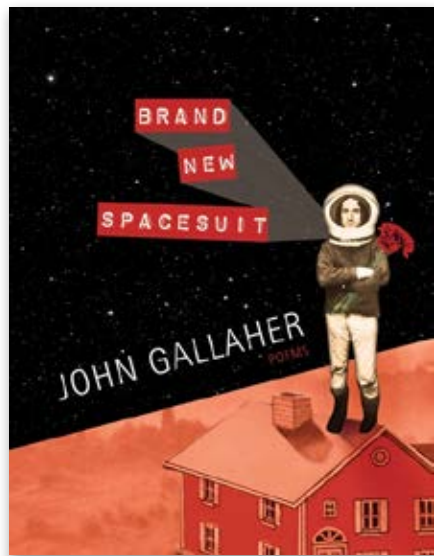
The book concludes with his drawings made after the death of his mother, Annetta, at the end of his life; delicately detailed works which are a real highlight. As the letters detail, following his grief after his mother’s death in 1964, one of his final etchings *Studio with the Easel* (1966), shows the bare interior of his studio, with empty chairs and what appears to be the beginnings of a female portrait resting by the side of the wall. With nobody present, simple objects are elevated in status, and the overall composition is calm which de Vries calls its “tranquil energy.”

This publication is a clear culmination of a thorough and thought-provoking research project exploring Giacometti’s personal letters and his drawings, undoubtedly an important part of his oeuvre. However, as it covers such a broad time scale detailing over four decades of the artist’s life, and aims to cover too many topics—such as East Asian art, drawings, letters, and lithographs—at times it is hard to retain focus on the letters themselves, which are the exciting archival discovery the book offers. A focused study of these would be beneficial, just as the author told me, “the entire treasure trove of information contained in these letters could

certainly be interesting for the exploration of many more aspects, be they biographical, historical, or otherwise.”

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JOHN GALLAHER with Tony Leuzzi



Brand New Spacesuit (Poems)
John Gallaher
BOA Editions (2020)

If you ever wondered what Wallace Stevens might sound like doing George Carlin-style standup you should read *Brand New Spacesuit*, John Gallaher's brand-new collection of poems, published this month by BOA Editions. Bold, searching, sometimes irreverent, yet expertly orchestrated, the poems gathered in *Spacesuit* signal an alert and original voice, one whose respect for certain literary traditions is also attuned to the thrills and angsts of our age. "The last days of any system are chaos," Gallaher observes in "The Chapter on Time," "...but when you're in it, it just looks like Tuesday." While he might be alluding to the end of the Roman Empire, or the collapse of the Third Reich, Gallaher could just as easily be referencing the US and its citizens' precarious experiment with Democracy. In a world where we are routinely immersed in the minutiae of work emails, fast lunches, social media, digital streaming, and device addiction, people roll from one Tuesday to another without always realizing what losses have transpired between them. The poems in *Brand New Spacesuit* pay homage to those losses while alerting us to the importance of what remains—and they do so with staggering fecundity and skill.

A typical Gallaher poem here (and there are more than 70 to choose from) unfurls as a masterful performance where the author's incessant curiosity and heart are matched by an equally impressive technical accomplishment. As mentioned below, each poem possesses the kind of exploratory spirit one associates with jazz improvisation. This is not to say Gallaher forgoes revision, for these poems are as artfully shaped as a Brahms piano sonata; yet none of their original spontaneity has been sacrificed through successive alterations. The conversation below shows Gallaher to be as inquisitive and generous as his poems, a writer whose work navigates the lovely, absurd, and inscrutable world we share.

TONY LEUZZI (RAIL): Congratulations on *Brand New Spacesuit*! It's a remarkable achievement. The poems are dense,

frequently verbose and exploratory, but the overall tone, while accommodating many shifts in mood and subject, is accessible, very readable. Clearly you put a lot of thought into your approach to these poems. Could you provide a little background on how the collection began to take shape? Were there, for instance, any guiding concepts and principles that you followed in amassing these poems for the collection?

JOHN GALLAHER: From your mouth to the poetry reading public's ears! Thank you. Yes, absolutely. Really, if there's a premise, the premise is, more or less: what would it be like just to talk? What I mean is, I want language to approximate the kind of conversation one might have some evening, talking about real things, serious things, but not feeling especially dire, and the talking is happening just as one's thinking about it, so that the thought and the expression of the thought are happening simultaneously. I love and crave those conversations, so I try to replicate them, or create some one-sided version of them, which is me talking with me, so there's almost a back-and-forth quality to the phrases. I don't have any idea if that is how anyone else experiences them. It's the first time I've said it this way, that I know of.

The world is so filled with shouting and manufactured emotions! We're surrounded, crowded in, by fabrications, the cheap fabrications of daily life that dull the senses. I want to write as directly as I can against that. A lot of poets have something like this as their project, to cleanse the language, to freshen the experience of living, so I'm not saying I'm blazing any new trails, but we each have our ways of going, of attempting some real moment. It's a social act. The poem goes out into the world. Even so, a lot of poetry feels writerly to me, which is fine, I like a lot of those poems, but it's not what I'm after as a writer. Maybe, if I had to describe it in these terms, I would call my poetry "readerly," at least that's what I'm after. I use bits of real, overheard language, incorporating that into the poems, as well as paraphrases of what I'm reading, etc., so, though the hope is that what comes out is conversational, there's also, I know, going to be something of a meandering quality to it. When I'm writing, I tend to panic and throw in everything I can grab. My current idea is, if I ever get the chance to put out a selected poems, I'm going to name it *MORE COWBELL*.

RAIL: After spending some time with the new book, I am struck by how relentless the poems are: relentless in their structure (usually full one-page poems with long lines and no stanza breaks); relentless in their ironic yet serious fixation on an abiding coexistence of hilarity and devastation, mystery and mundanity, wonder and boredom; relentless in their discursive armor against the inevitable silences that

undergird them; and relentless in their refusal to be politely contained despite their nearly uniform appearance. Have you ever considered relentlessness to be a part of your worldview or aesthetic?

GALLAHER: I really love the idea of throwing yourself at it, whatever the "it" happens to be. All in! The kitchen sink approach. So, yes, restraint has never been the way anyone has described my work. I admire subtlety, but I've never been able to pull it off. So instead, I kind of just say "grrr!" and start throwing things. Living is complex, surrounded by an amazing amount of mess, and for me, I find it difficult not to include that. Even as I try to focus, to focus on a question, an artistic research question, all these other things, they also cry out as being part of what's going on, what kind of thinking this is, and they make these demands. There are so many great poets out there who can make sense of it all, or at least one aspect of the sense of it all, but that's not really me. I tend to be more like some poor soul in a wind tunnel as the sadistic game show host blows money through it, and I'm to grab as much as I can, only they're also blowing wrenches and oranges through as well. I'm going to miss so much when I finally step out of the wind tunnel, it's like I just want as much as I can while I'm still here, in it. I see as much value, as experience, in the wrenches and oranges. In fact, I'm eating an orange right now, it's why I included oranges in this wind tunnel metaphor. And it's a good orange. That also means something.

RAIL: Would it be more accurate to say the relentlessness I sensed from the poems is a result of your acceptance of the world as relentless? That, in this way, your poems are testimonials about the complex, minutiae-laden business of living?

GALLAHER: That's a much better way to say it! Ignore what I said and pretend I said this instead.

RAIL: In the opening poem, "The New Formality," you write: "There are no things here but in the ideas / of things." Clearly an against William Carlos Williams sentiment, but I see it also as a salute to Wallace Stevens via John Ashbery. In fact, these poems, which are filled with ideas and things, seem like the kin of mid-period Ashbery and James Tate à la *Return to the City of White Donkeys* (2004). What's your take on Ashbery and Tate and, more importantly, what, if any, influence have they exerted upon the poems in *Brand New Spacesuit*?

GALLAHER: John Ashbery has meant at least as much to me as any other poet. I see, though, something of a different Ashbery than the way I mostly hear people talk of his work. He said once, back in the '70s, that his poems mirror thinking, or a kind of thinking, the way the mind works, with a light, surreal touch. Something like that. And I love his work, and I love that idea, though I don't really see his work proceeding that way, at least his poetry doesn't match how I think. It's more, in my reading, a play of wit through dreaming. Topical, lucid dreaming maybe.

That brings up two questions: One, how is his work proceeding then? And two,

what might poetry look like that mirrors thinking. First, as a lover of his work, I dive into it almost as one might dive into ritual practice or a lake in summer, just to exist with it, to swim in it. Then I take from this experience a mandate to also try to mirror thinking, so I practice, I try to do all of my thinking on the page, and that anything I'm thinking as I'm writing might be part of whatever it is I'm writing. I want to include as much of the interior narration of how my thinking operates as I can, which often goes awry. That's fine too. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Thinking itself, actual human thinking, isn't a one way of doing things economy. I've recently read that some people don't have an internal narrator, that instead they have some sort of filing cabinet, or one of those wall charts you see in detective movies, with push pins and string. I have a hard time imagining how that kind of thinking, or internal processing, would work.

So that's me talking about Ashbery! It's probably best that I didn't become a literary scholar. But the rest of the question, I've the same response: there's this way that artists produce what they're doing, and there's this way they have of talking about what they're doing that I usually don't see so much. I love the modernists. I specifically love Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. One thing that especially struck me was the Imagist Manifesto, and the idea of "the direct treatment of the thing." And, of course, all we're really treating when we're writing is language, so one could go the postmodernist route and directly treat language and maybe be a language poet (many of whom I also love reading), or you could go more with the spirit of the idea, as the modernists did. I'd really like to have my cake and eat it too, this cake that keeps reappearing (which, as well, could, after a few slices turn into a whole new form of monotony, etc., so that, as well, has to be moderated). Stevens and Williams both use versions of the phrase "No ideas but in things," and I wanted to start off the book with that idea, and my twist became "no things but in ideas."

I could easily talk about Tate as well, or Mary Ruefle, Rae Armantrout, and others. These are all writers I turn to often.

RAIL: One of the most intelligent critiques of his work came from the late Rane Arroyo who wrote, "I think John Ashbery is one of the great comedy writers of our time, one that understands the many ways to feast on darkness." I mention this because the ways in which you have internalized his (and Tate's and Ruefle's and Armantrout's) procedures and made them your own also includes your embrace of the absurd and the comical, a world in which "bayonets and office parties" ("Brand New Spacesuit") share proximity and where "day three... [has] gone out for peanuts and hasn't yet completed its travel forms" ("Addenda to Your Emergency Evacuation Plan"). Your poems in *Brand New Spacesuit* capture the absurd yet ultimately logical relationships between seemingly disparate things—and in fact "thing" and "it" also figure prominently in the poems' tidal outpours. Where is my question? Perhaps

I'll quote you: "[O]ne could sit and ponder the big questions and come up with simple insights" ("When We Say 'Cause' We Only Go Back So Far"). What are some big questions driving the poems in *Brand New Spacesuit*? How would you explain your attempts to address them?

GALLAHER: First, I love the distinction here that you make, regarding Ashbery, through Arroyo, using the word absurd rather than surreal. Not that you were choosing between them (or maybe you were I don't know!), but that's a huge distinction for me. I've admired the poetry of Surrealism for a long time, but I've never been able to inhabit that space as a writer. I feel all dressed-up funny, like getting "costume party" and "cocktail party" confused. Instead, I've found the absurd to be something that I naturally fit into. Beckett is a favorite. It's funny! It's tragedy, absolutely, but in performance it's a comedy. If there was a big question, one I could say without just saying "AAAAAAAHAH!" it would be that. Then, just because life is absurd, that doesn't exonerate behavior. One must still act, because action, and people—those we love, those we've never met—we must interact with ethically, we must strive to do good. But, you know, also: absurdity. That's also a solace, at least of a sort, how in one of the poems I thought about it directly, at my mother's funeral, and was able to make a joke about it to my brother. The next step is to not let that be the end of it, so in another poem I talk about a friend of mine who was contemplating asking his dying father about his stance on the absurdity of life, and decided against it. Because absurdity can also be a torture, like how "yay cake" can quickly become "too much cake," and can then become a form of quicksand from out of which you must extricate yourself.

RAIL: You're a visual artist as well as a poet. Collage appears to be one of your favorite mediums, both in writing and visual art. Your self-made cover art for *Brand New Spacesuit* is quirky yet troubling. The image of the man dressed in a spacesuit on top of a suburban home says a lot about alienation but also about discovery, about the exotic and wondrous to be found amidst the mundane. Or, as you say in "Sugarbomb," "bright yellow houses full of the smell of coffee and rainforests." But when I look at the cover I also see Chagall, his green-faced violinist standing on a small home in a quiet, unpeopled Belarusian settlement. That violinist is not only the music maker whose string work enlivens the village; he is a kind of shaman who is sensitive to energies no one else considers or sees. I'm wondering how much your arms-akimbo spaceman on the cover is also a being in touch with two worlds, and if his adventures beyond (the beyond of the mind?) enable him to bring back to the rest of us new ideas or greater understanding of ourselves.

GALLAHER: I love, as I say above, conceptions of things. Conceptions of things are how we make meaning. I also don't like diving too deep into any one of them on a daily basis. In other words, the internet was made for me. I adore rabbit holes, bite-sized philosophy, way leading on to way. I understand that might make me

look facile! I'll stress then, that I do have books that I read cover to cover, that I live into and experience fully, to which I return. It's the pull between the two that keeps me going. There are many rooms in this one house. Maybe that's what I'm trying to say. We each have to find our way in, knowing we're finding our way into the same thing, and we have to find the room we're most comfortable in, but also, it's fun to walk the halls, to browse, tour, stroll.

Context is important to me. For me, that's part of the allure of collage. It allows me to re-contextualize, and that is a kind of hopefulness. Making collage, using mechanically reproduced images (magazines, etc.), doesn't destroy anything. There are still plenty of copies of my spaceman out there (I cut him from a copy of *Horizon* magazine from the late 1960s), but now there are one-time-only new copies of him out here, doing new things. I think of it as a kind of afterlife, a heaven of images. "The Heaven of Images" appeals to me.

I think the same way about words, and the images words make, but talking about it becomes unwieldy and abstract, so maybe it's better to just say that language, in its many unique manifestations, also has a new life in new combinations, which we've known since day two of language. I especially like reading and repurposing journalism and the kind of language found on Wikipedia, the way, when cut from its context, it becomes suggestive. Today I became enthralled by escalators, for instance, and, when I googled "escalators," this sentence popped up: "The escalator began, however, as a form of amusement rather than a practical mode of transportation." Now I'm excited, especially by that "however." I've no idea what the sentence was referring to with its "however," but I'm looking forward to what it might mean, what it could mean.

RAIL: I'm glad to hear that the internet fuels your imagination in such productive ways. You say, "I adore rabbit holes, and bite-sized philosophy... I especially like reading and repurposing journalism and the kind of language found on Wikipedia." While using the internet in this way to jumpstart or scaffold poems is not unique, you foreground the technique—and I think you do it better than many others using similar techniques. How do you think what we used to call "Information Super Highway" and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have enabled you to more effectively build poems that speak to your temperament? How might you have satisfied your yen for rabbit hole, bite-sized philosophy and repurposed journalism had you not had access to the internet?

GALLAHER: I used to adore the Facebook-status-update genre, before Facebook became what it is now. They sounded like setups for poems, or stories or stand-up comedy: pithy little two liners, establishing character, setting up a narrative situation, and then often some quirky question or picture of food. It was inspirational, in the sense of presentation and evasion, what we show, how we present ourselves, disclose or hide what's really going on inside our lives, our heads. It's not very often that way anymore. It's more like a rack of brochures

in a hotel lobby, advertisements, and political slogans. Those all have their benefits, but I regret the losses. I've always been a browser, so when the internet came along, and you would access it through this thing called a browser, I was like, "Hey, not a problem, I've got this."

When I was young, I enjoyed flipping channels on the TV, letting the flipping be my watching experience. It's John Berger's critique of image culture. In his foundational TV series, and then book, called *Ways of Seeing* (1972), he presented this channel-flipping as something of a warning, at least it felt that way. I see that, flipping from horror, something devastating on the news, people screaming and running, to people dressed as a pack of playing cards screaming in joy at winning a barbecue grill on a game show... so there you go. The critique is almost quaint now, looking back. But what is that experience? How do we navigate it, as it's now unavoidable? We live there. And suddenly Gertrude Stein or John Ashbery seem a lot more directly descriptive of daily life than they maybe once did.

RAIL: The flip side of instant information access is automation and impersonalization. In "View of the Accident from the Center of the Accident," you write: "My favorite / new explanation of life is that we're living in a computer simulation, / so hello computer simulation, as everything is data, from DNA / to fantasy football." It's hard not to read these lines without hearing them ironically.

GALLAHER: There was a time, not that long ago, when the more important information was, the more you had to work for it. You'd have to travel for it, at least to a library, but often further, the county seat, libraries in other cities. Now, the more important information is, the easier it is to access. This is a massive informational shift, and it has brought with it a lot of baggage, because there's just so much of it, and raw data needs to be contextualized, to be situated, explained. It's in this contextualizing and explaining where our new information culture has let us down. We're all already in the rabbit hole, because we're the rabbit.

This doesn't sound like an answer to your question! Let me try to reel it back. The computer simulation theory in my poems is another version of the other minds problem. On the one hand, ideas like this stress me out. On the other hand, I find them interesting, like panpsychism, the idea that everything has a conscious element to it. Both these ideas sound absurd. But then, if one is going to refute them, one comes across the problems that brought those ideas into the conversation, such as, how does consciousness, your consciousness, form inside you from all the unconscious elements you're made of? Now those weird ideas sound a little less absurd, maybe. They also make a kind of music to me. What I'm saying is there's a tension between the glaze of all this stuff coming at us and the importance of making a meaningful life, which isn't a very original idea. How are we to survive these overwhelming distractions? Most answers are to find ways to escape them. Well, there's no escaping them. So here

we are. Maybe though, we can find better questions.

RAIL: Through DNA data you were recently able to reconnect with your birth mother and meet your brother. That is intense, life-changing stuff. With the exception "Blast Off!," the poems from *Brand New Spacesuit* appear to have been written in advance of that reunion; however, some of the impetus behind finding that lost part of your life seems connected in spirit to the wonderful opening lines of "Addenda to Your Emergency Evacuation Plan," in which you say: "When one has spent a long time away, coming back doesn't happen / all at once."

GALLAHER: Yes, I do talk about it directly in the poem "Blast Off!" which was a late addition to the book. I really wanted to sneak a little of it in, my DNA / birth family / adoption journey, so, in consultation with Peter Connors (publisher and editor at BOA, who was a tremendous help in forming the final version of the book), we withdrew a couple poems and got this one in. The manuscript I'm working on now, *My Life in Brutalist Architecture*, deals directly with this, and the first poem of the series, I've included in *Brand New Spacesuit*. I like the idea of these books, all of my books, really, calling back and forth to each other.

It was an important time and left me with a lot to think about. I've always known I was adopted, and that, because of the within-the-family nature of the adoption, on my family tree, I am my own second-cousin. But also, because of various events and plot twists, I didn't know my birth mother's name, and no one else knew, or would let themselves remember. I also had my birth name wrong, and my birth father's name wrong, but close, but wrong enough to not be able to come up with much through research. All that changed a few years ago, and then last year was a year of answers and meetings. I'd gotten used to not knowing, and thinking that's what my story was going to be. Now I have to get used to this new narrative. My world got bigger, and made more sense, piece by piece. Not all the pieces fit well. And when I get to the bottom of the box, I'm sure there will be missing pieces still, but it's a lot richer and more complete than it was a few years ago, and for that I'm thankful.

RAIL: In addition to "Blast Off!," there are a number of other autobiographical poems in *Brand New Spacesuit*: poems about

your father and his failing health; poems about your son and his imaginative play; and there is also “For the Asking,” a poem that begins with a conversation between you and your father-in-law about cancer and ends with a startling hypothetical in which one takes a “trip to the attic to find that box / of old family videotapes ...only to find / they’ve rotten, but you find your grandparents sitting there / by the window in the half light. And they ask you to stay.” Your work balances generous interplay between personal and hypothetical stories. Could you talk about what it means to employ both in the service of your poems?

GALLAHER: It’s something I found a number of years ago that became my last book, *In a Landscape* (2014). For pretty much everything I wrote up to that time, around 2010 or so, I inhabited the imagination, the hypotheticals that could come from imagining scenarios, and then, around 2010, I wondered what might happen if I dropped it all, everything I’d done and thought about writing, and tried just talking.

In one way, the poet David Antin is a great example. I’ve loved his talk poems for years. He’d just show up at a specified time and place, but instead of giving a reading, he’d just start talking, no books, no script, nothing. I love the energy of that. But also Mary Ruefle, though she doesn’t use direct autobiography, at least not as a rule, the way she just seems to hit the go button and rolls with it in a delightful, conversational voice. I just adore that. It makes me feel less alone. Maybe somewhere between those two motivations is where I aim. To try to fit somewhere in there, I just wrote down whatever came to me next, and, looking up, I’d see the yard out the window, the left side of my neighbor’s house, and hear my daughter, Natalie, nearing high school graduation, Facetiming someone, and giving some happy yell at them, and in a John Cage kind of way, the idea that everything that happens around a performance is the performance, I thought, “Sure, that’s all part of this thought I’m having about whatever.” There’s also, currently, a live album from the singer Aimee Mann playing, because I always have music playing.

If I was to make a theory out of it, I guess I’d say that, since I’m trying for some kind of conversation with the reader (even as it’s only a one-sided affair), the idea of tossing in anecdotes, names, dates, what’s happening, is what happens in conversations, so in it goes. It’s what causes someone to talk back, to say, “Yes, the same thing happened to me,” or, “Let me tell you about my dog too,” or whatever. I really like those moments when someone reads something I’ve written and responds with a story. Absolutely! That’s the response I want: more stories.

RAIL: We’ve talked a lot so far about the book as a whole, but I’d like to dip down into a specific poem to get a clearer sense of how you travel through a poem as you create it. The poem is “Each Thing Going on Is Several Things Going On” and the initial three-and-a-quarter lines read as such:

Your loved ones die so you eat their brains. It’s a sign of respect.

That’s one way. In the US, we send cards that we buy at a grocery store. But what can you do? We’re creatures of our moment...

The startling juxtaposition that opens the poem culminates in a semi-ironic shrug. By the beginning of the fourth line it seems the poem is going to be about ways we celebrate our dead but, pivoting on the idea of “creatures of our moment” you immediately shift the discussion to a Holocaust “game,” where two Jewish people observe non-Jews and decide who would have turned them in. In just five lines, then, through a handful of surprising yet logical maneuvers, the poem branches in unexpected ways. Further associational movement steers the poem into even wider fields: current political and police practices, dystopian moments in sci-fi films, carrying your son to bed—all of this leads to the realization that “We never know.” Outside of the context of the poem, such a conclusion might seem as trite or dismissive as “What can you do?” but within the poem both responses feel profound and inevitable. What may you offer in way of background about this poem? Could you shed some insight into how you built this poem and, if relevant, how those procedures proved useful elsewhere?

GALLAHER: I’m hesitating in answering this, as I’m ambivalent towards how to go about it. Things I write tend to include their backgrounds, I think. And yet, I get what you mean. Things I write, like things we all write, have unsaid backgrounds, moments. It’s just, in one way, the background spreads out in a kind of infinite regress, and in another, there is no background, what is, is.

First, then, a confession. I do no planning before beginning to write a poem, other than starting with a title (though in revision the titles sometimes change). I do, however, keep a notebook within which I jot down things I find interesting, that I’ve thought, read, or heard. In the case of this poem, the title came from my reaction to someone saying “This is what’s really going on,” and I thought about that phrase, that revision someone was trying to make of someone else’s conception of what was going on. For me, both things were going on, and so this is the way I made the note. I remember that much well. The initial sentence about eating brains came from a newscast about that, which turns out to be very unhealthy, and doctors were trying to dissuade people somewhere from doing that, but they were running into difficulty, as this was ritual, cultural practice. I responded with what contemporary ritual we have for that situation. After making my little shift, I didn’t want this to turn into a list, so rather than follow cultural rituals down that path, I remembered the story I heard or read once of this couple and their “Observe Non-Jews” ritual. It was shocking when I first heard it, and it made quite an impression on me. It’s such a devastating conversation to have, and I completely see why someone would do it. It’s a form of remembering, a form of self-care. The rest of the poem proceeded from there, running the thought out, turning it over, and looking at the future, my son’s

future, as he’s just starting out down his long road of cultural and personal rituals.

And I want to stress that even though I think about this poem now in this way, it might not have actually happened like that. If I kept better notes, I could go back and look at the first draft, and maybe find something as I’ve described, but maybe I’d find something quite different, and what I’m remembering now as the process of the poem is really the process of revising and editing over a number of years. It’s that idea we have about starting out, that when you first walk out into the world, field, city, whatever, life, you see numerous avenues you could go down, but later when you look behind you, where you’ve been follows a direct line to now. So that now, looking back, I see that line, but in the composition, the actual thinking, I was juggling numerous possible paths and associations. Or not. [*Laughs*]

RAIL: Thank you for that explanation. I am a bit surprised you do little-to-no planning before writing a poem and begin by riffing on a title, because your poems feel carefully orchestrated. And yet I’m not entirely surprised because the language feels spontaneous. I’m thinking about jazz improvisation. Specifically some of Keith Jarrett’s solo piano recordings that were recorded in one take. Like you, he often began a long solo performance with the germ of an idea and depended on his chops, nerve, and melodic sensibilities to carry him through. Like Jarrett (or Hill or Hines or Jamal, etc.), you appear to work intuitively, but what kind of practice or warm ups, if any, are required for you to achieve the kind of spontaneous facility that allows you to move in such a way?

GALLAHER: It’s a great analogy. It’s all one thing, the art impulse. All that really changes is what instrument one chooses. Jazz, especially, is something I think about a lot in a similar way to how you’re phrasing it. Perhaps the more direct musical analogy might be John Cage, with his reliance on chance operation, but for my taste he was a little more wedded to the process, he made absolute formal rules out of chance operations. So we’re back to jazz! I think of the bebop era mostly: John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, they’re great examples of what we’re talking about. Coltrane’s take on “My Favorite Things” is instructive. We’ve the thematic return. That’s important. But we also have, in Miles Davis’s words, “playing what the day presents.” That’s very much how I think about the composition process. You have your theme, and then you have your variations. The wider you can get your variations and still resolve to the theme, the better, as more territory now exists in the song. But then, sometimes if the theme itself breaks, that might be best of all! Neil Young, who was heavily influenced by Coltrane, speaking of himself as an electric guitar player, thought about it similarly, talking about more skilled guitar players, how they will play amazing figures within the form, all the way to the edge, the wall of training or standards, or even good taste. He likes to go directly through the wall. That’s just great. I love that.

RAIL: To continue with the improvisation analogy, how much revision happens after the initial flow?

GALLAHER: From what I said, it might seem like I pile up all this mental whatever and then BOOM, out pops a poem! It’s really not like that at all. I was simply speaking of the composition process, not the full process. So, yes, I go through the arc of associations, memories, thoughts, until I get to something that feels summative. That’s draft one. Then, for the rest of the existence of the poem, until it’s published or discarded, I read through it, and when I come to something that doesn’t feel right, I imagine where it could go instead. I think that’s what most people do? I do massive revisions to what I write over time. Two writers I’ve collaborated with, G.C. Waldrep and Kristina Marie Darling, both of them are much more assured with what they make than I am. Or at least, that’s how it feels to me. When we’d revise together, their revisions were much more of a honing, while mine would be dumping three quarters of the poem and putting a whole new thing in there. I hope I didn’t frustrate them too much. I know I did at least a little.

I tend to revise in the way I write, which is associative, and with a little hint of chance. I love opening my notebook at random, coming down on a phrase, and seeing if I can fit it into whatever I’m writing or revising. My hope, my idea, is that the culture might help me, the operations of living, might hand me what the poem needs. Often it’s terrible. But when it works, it’s better, smarter, than I am. That’s the moment I chase.

RAIL: By your own admission, you have learned a lot from Stevens, Ashbery, Tate, Ruefle, et al. At the same time, your poems, unlike most of theirs, feel more fully rooted in the zeitgeist of the 21st century, in what it means to navigate the absurd and often confusing socio-cultural landscape of present-day America. You allude to the ephemeral more directly than most. While I believe your work transcends the here-and-now, how do you think someone reading your work, say, 30 years from now, might react to it? How might your poems resonate when removed from their immediate cultural context?

GALLAHER: Well, I’ll be 85 then, so I hope whatever they say, they’re respectful of their elders. Maybe it’ll be like looking at old pictures? I don’t know. I’m really hoping we have a world in 30 years in which the question might exist. But it does get me thinking about how art shifts, changes, grows, evaporates over time. At some point we’re all as if we were never here. All ripples resolve, the question is when. I’m okay with that. Maybe, at 85, I’ll be writing about the ephemera of 2050. I took one of those internet tests recently that’s supposed to predict your death from a series of questions, and I got Sunday, March 12th, 2051, so I’ll be pretty close to not needing to have much of an opinion on such things by then.

In a different way, though, my thinking about this question gets at something fundamental about living a life. Why do we do anything? What’s our goal? Our long-term

goal? The question arises, “how do you want to be remembered?” And the truth is we’re not remembered for very long. So I want to aim for something other than that, maybe just to know one’s helped things along during one’s brief window of being a part of things, no matter what they do. We’re all gardeners in that way, and the garden won’t ripen until after we’re gone. We have to grow ourselves into being okay with that, and get back to work.

RAIL: Well, this has been a truly exciting interview. As we wrap up, I’m wondering if you have anything else you want to say about *Brand New Spacesuit*, something I didn’t really provide you the opportunity to discuss.

GALLAHER: You’ve been so helpful to me, getting me to talk and think about things I usually just leave internal. I don’t talk to people much about this stuff. It’s mostly just the falling apart nature of our age. But we have to keep doing what we do. So thank you.

The only thing to add would be that, as we mentioned earlier, I touch on my adoption and birth family a bit in this book, and I’m now attempting to deal directly with that, to carry that one idea through a full manuscript. A few of those poems are starting to come out in magazines this year. I’m not sure if that’s going to work or not, or if I’ll have to abandon the idea, so this might be the only time I mention it. I’d say “stay tuned,” but, you know, we’re talking about a book that, if it comes out, would be years away. The publishing world is slow, which used to frustrate me, but now I like it, somewhat. It gives a manuscript time to grow accustomed to itself.

TONY LEUZZI is an author. His books include the poetry collections *Radiant Losses*, *The Burning Door*, and *Meditation Archipelago*, as well as *Passwords Primeval*, a collection of his interviews with twenty American poets. contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

IN CONVERSATION

MARIE MUTSUKI MOCKETT with Eric Farwell

American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland
Marie Mutsuki Mockett
Graywolf Press (2020)

I read Marie Mutsuki Mockett’s latest effort, *American Harvest*, while traveling to a wedding in Indiana. The book, which details Mockett’s attempt to gain perspective about midwestern life while driving on the harvest trail, was the perfect companion for my journey soaring over “flyover” states, and gave me plenty to think about in between eating vegan food at a biker bar at 1 a.m., and having my first dance with my partner. I thought about the book constantly during the trip, and don’t think I would have been



able to appreciate the state culture for what it was had it not been for Mockett’s thoughtful words on city life vs. rural life, organic food, and midwestern Christian churches. We spent an afternoon discussing her approach to reporting while on this trip, the book’s gestation period, engaging with the culture of the rural midwest, and ethical farming.

ERIC FARWELL (RAIL): Even though you have a connection to the land, you identify yourself primarily as a city person in the book. How did you go about making sure the project was always a product of meaningful reporting, and never anything resembling condescension or gawking at Midwest living?

MARIE MUTSUKI MOCKETT: I think I started to be interested in writing about the farm maybe 15 years ago. I’ve always had exposure to the farm and to farmers. They’ve always been part of my life. I never thought of the farm as a project until maybe 15 years ago, when I was sitting in the Quonset hut with my family, and the farmers were coming in and out, and I thought, *wow, nobody writes about this. This is an interesting world.* I should also say that my goal in being a writer, for so many years, had been to write fiction. I became aware of nonfiction as something a writer could write maybe fifteen years ago, so that was probably part of my looking at the farm and going, *nobody writes about this part of the world, and these people, and this is very interesting.* So, I have that history to tether me. Then, in terms of condescension, you know, I did not feel condescending to the farmers or to the world of farming because I wasn’t raised that way. My father never spoke of farmers with any condescension, but with respect and admiration. I always heard my father talking about some solution to a problem that somebody he knew had come up with—how to fix something, how to build something, how to repair something, and how smart that farmer was. So that was the general attitude within my family. Once I was in the city, I was certainly aware that the attitude toward what we call “Middle America” was different. I think in early versions when I was trying to draft a proposal, I tried to use a more arch tone, because I thought that was what I was supposed to do if I write nonfiction about Middle America, and it didn’t work. It didn’t work because it wasn’t genuine to me. Once I dispensed with what was essentially a performance, which happened early on in the process, I then wrote about the farm with sincerity,

or at least tried to. I was always aware of how things might look to my peers who had never sat in a Quonset hut or talked to farmers trying to figure out how to fix an auger.

RAIL: You mentioned that you worked on this project for 15 years. You also say in the book that Eric invited you to do the full trek during a visit, but that you weren’t ready. Did you commit once you knew this was a book-length project, or was there more to it?

MOCKETT: 15 years ago my father was still alive, my uncle was still alive. The way that we had farmed was still intact. Bear in mind that I have a family that’s naturally very curious about how things work, so part of the way myself and my cousins, who were also exposed to the farm, were raised was to be curious about the way things worked. For the most part, that translated into people in my family becoming interested in the sciences, some becoming engineers, and others scientists. My nuclear family, which is very small, were mostly artists, but we still had that sort of *hm, how does this work* kind of brain. When I’m with them, conversations immediately turn into *how does this work, how does the world work?* When I was sitting with my family 15 years ago, and the conversation was swirling around me, I had been living in New York City at the time trying—not really succeeding—to become a writer. I was listening to all this interesting conversation about whatever my uncle was doing with physics, whatever my cousin was doing as an engineer. Then the conversation veered toward whatever was going on on the farm. I thought, *nobody writes about farming.* That’s very interesting. When I had told people in New York I was going to go to harvest, they were very curious, because it’s not something most people do. I probably had some awareness of how bizarre it was that I was in Nebraska for my friends who were accustomed to seeing me in a different context. Then, the farmers would come and go, and I thought, *wow, they’re all devout Christians,* which is not how my family is. Then, everytime I talked about farming to friends in New York, they would say, “Is your farm organic?” So I asked, because I actually didn’t really know. I asked my family if the farm was organic, and they sort of laughed, and we had this conversation that’s in the book. Then I thought, *why are my friends, who believe in evolution, eating organic food and prioritizing organic food, and the people here, who are conservative Christians and probably believe in creationism and are comfortable with GMOs, feel differently?* The question stayed in my mind, and over the course of 15 years, I’d bring it up to different farmers. Before my father died, he said, “If something happens to me, you can trust Eric, and you can trust Ray, and they’ll teach you about farming.” I said this to Eric, and he knew it. So over the course of a number of years after my father died, Eric tried to teach me about farming. He knew I had this pressing question, and in the book I think I make it simple. Like he says, “You’re not really asking a question about garnering scientific knowledge, you’re asking a question about the divide.” He said that to relieve the conversation we’d

been having for a number of years. I was making trips to his farm in Pennsylvania. He would set up these amazing visits to talk to Amish farmers because he lives in Lancaster County, and I would meet Amish farmers who are very conservative and religious, but some of them would use Roundup. We would have a conversation about no-till farming where the Amish farmer had mules pulling a plow, and he would tell me about his reduced acreage, because he couldn’t use a tractor, but our farming methods were the same, and it kind of blew my mind. Then I would meet farmers who were organic, or farmers who really questioned the organic label. I met chicken farmers, and at some point I decided I couldn’t write about animals and grains, because the subject was too huge. Still, I went to poultry farms, and egg farms. I knew I wanted to write about this, and would talk about it periodically with my agent. While I was doing all of this, I was concurrently writing the book about Japan and the tsunami, and that book took a lot of my attention. After I was done, I thought I really wanted to turn my attention to this farming issue, because I thought it was interesting, and no one was writing about it. I wrote a proposal and sold it in September. Then Trump was elected, and both Juston and Eric called me that night, because they were both really upset. The election is what I think prompted Eric to say, “Why don’t you come. I bought an extra trailer. Bethany, who’s a woman, is going to come, and you can stay in that trailer.” He had, for a number of years, during all of these visits to farms and seeing him at harvest said, “I really want you to see this part of the country.” He really proposed coming to harvest, or being part of harvest, or coming to Idaho to see what that farm looks like. When Trump was elected, it made it very clear that I should just see the entire harvest route, and then I would see a lot of different kinds of farming, and meet a lot of different kinds of people. I spent a lot of time really talking to people and building relationships. It wasn’t like I just suddenly went along on a harvest trip. This was something that was, in fact, years in the making. Then, for a writer, structure is one of the things I worry about the most, and once the invitation to see the harvest route was put forward, I went, *okay, I can address all of these questions using the harvest route as a spine.* I didn’t know what I’d discover on the journey, but I knew that if I focused my attention on the questions that were in my mind, then it would yield interesting material.

RAIL: How much knowledge did Eric’s crew have about what you were working on beforehand, and how did you balance reporting with being an active member of the crew?

MOCKETT: From the last book that I wrote, I did learn—and I think other writers say this—but it’s really important to take your notes down right away. I had it in my head that I had to write notes as quickly as possible. They knew that. They all knew I was writing a book. Eric made that very clear, that part of their going on the crew with him that summer was that I was coming along, and that I would be taking notes. At one point, a friend of

mine who's a photographer also came to take pictures, so they got to know her. They were all aware of it, and we just took it case by case. I think there's even a point in the book where Michael makes fun of me for wandering around with a notebook all the time. Carrying that notebook all the time, you need to be doing something. So, I would put my notebook down and do something. The word intuition is not one someone should use, but it's really what I did. Like, in church, I realized that a lot of people wrote down what the pastor was saying, and took notes, so I felt very comfortable in church taking notes. Some conversations, I would have the notebook out and take notes. I found that was less intrusive than recording the conversation, although I did some recording. I would try whenever something really eventful happened to go and write down what had happened immediately afterward so that all the details were fresh. It's a lot of work; and the process of writing this book, and the process of gathering materials for the book, or the material around the narrative portion of the book, is similar to the time I spent in Japan in that I was not in my comfortable world. I was in a place where I was not only having to pay attention because I wanted to write about the world, but I was having to pay attention because everything was, in a sense, foreign. That's tiring. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to focus, and I'm the sort of person who worries about offending people, so I was constantly trying to watch my behavior to make sure that I was not making other people uncomfortable, and I was also trying to absorb as much information as possible. Then the end of the day would come, and I'd have to write out notes. There were also days where I was so tired I didn't write notes down, and, you know, here and there there's a day that's lost. I filled up three notebooks, and would then take the notes I had in one of three notebooks, and type them out on the computer, so I had a more lucid, written account of what happened. I finished that summer with 250 pages of notes. I knew from my previous book I had to do that in order to successfully craft a story.

RAIL: Did you notice any reticence?

MOCKETT: Sure. I think that comes through in the book. It gets harder and harder. There are some people for whom we don't get their interiority because they don't open up. There are some people who are very guarded, but may be guarded anyway. There's a little bit of fracture in the crew, because they become uncomfortable with me. Some people are not, and some become increasingly uncomfortable. I don't blame them. They're young guys, and this is their fun summer thing, and this older woman keeps asking them questions, which becomes tiresome. I think anyone would have been tired of that after a certain period of time. In general, I really have nothing but gratitude for the people who shared as much as they did. It's extraordinary access to a world that we don't really get to see. By and large, I feel that most people tried to be open and share what they could.

RAIL: There's a tension that builds toward the back half of the book that seems to

surround you and the book. How did this impact the project? Did you embrace or engage the tension in any way? Were you ever concerned that it threatened the book?

MOCKETT: I never thought of it as threatening when I was working on it. I mean, part of my job is to sit in a situation that is uncomfortable, and to write about why I'm uncomfortable. That is true of the book I wrote about the tsunami, which has very uncomfortable moments in it too, although of a very different nature. This book also has moments that are highly uncomfortable, but without that ... I think I was also conscious of the fact that the discomfort was important. The discomfort meant that I was approaching something in the story, or something in this unusual situation, that needed to be looked at. I think one of the roles of the writer is to be in an uncomfortable situation, and to say why it's so uncomfortable. That's the only way that you can bring something new to a reader, I think. I think I would ask myself if I'm able to keep staying in this situation. Have I gotten enough material to tell a story that's well-rounded? That was all on my mind, but most of the time when I was uncomfortable, I was making myself ask why I was uncomfortable, and making sure that when I tried to answer that question, I wasn't going to just any of the knee-jerk reactions I might have to any of the particular people I was with, or any of the particular circumstances I was in. I know that because of my upbringing, it's really easy to be in a foreign situation, and be uncomfortable, and think that anything making you uncomfortable is everyone else's fault. I was trying not to default to that.

RAIL: One of the through lines of the book is you trying to connect to something, and struggling. Do you have any sense of what you were seeking, or did those things reveal themselves as you went to different churches and services?

MOCKETT: Justin and I had been having conversations about theology, and we had been going to churches prior to this road trip. I think the first megachurch I went to might have been after the election. He wanted to share what he called "his world," in the world of church and religion, with me. I didn't have any guarantee that I was going to go to country churches and walk out with any understanding of Christianity. I just trusted my curiosity. There is something nice about having managed to write two books that convinces you, *okay, I've done this twice. I can write a third book.* I will say that the book I wrote about the tsunami in Japan, I wrote in a constant state of terror that I would fail. I never meant to write nonfiction; I didn't know I was going to write nonfiction. I had written this op-ed for the *New York Times* about Japan and the tsunami, and the pitch said, *I'm writing this book on the tsunami, no problem.* But I was really scared the whole time. Can I do that? I don't know. One thing I told myself about this book and the farming was, *you can make yourself uncomfortable, and ask a lot of questions, and do things you normally wouldn't do, but you're not going to spend the entire process writing this book in a state of total*

terror the way you did with the last book. I did say that to myself. I had plenty of moments of insecurity, and I have some wonderful friends who were really supportive through those moments. I didn't know what I would find. What I trusted was my curiosity, and that if I really pushed hard, and asked more questions, I would arrive in a different place than where I had started. Creatively speaking, when I wrote the book about the tsunami, I had no idea I was going to wind up at the temple in the north of Japan, at some temple that is nominally a Buddhist temple that actually enshrines this ancient deity who doesn't belong to any particular religious sect in Japan, but which is dedicated to this old woman who we normally translate as the non-pc moniker, "the old hag," who greets the souls of the dead when they cross the river. I didn't know what it would open up to me, or open me up to about Japanese culture. But it happened that I just kept asking questions and following the flow of that story. I would say to myself, *you need to do that with this story too, and the only way to do that is to not have biases about how you think the story is going to go. You have to let the world and the characters and the people tell you what they want to tell you. And then you'll go someplace new.* You asked what I was seeking. Mostly I just thought, *I don't understand any of this. What is this?* Remember Eric is the one who says you're talking about the divide. I hadn't thought of what I was seeing as the divide until he said, "This is the divide, Marie." I just thought there seems to be a paradox here, and I don't understand it. I was really just trying to resolve the paradox, but I also thought I needed to go back and ask what Christianity is, because I'm not sure that I get it. I'd grown up surrounded by this Judeo-Christian culture. I didn't really know what I was looking at, or why people were so devoted to Christianity, and one of the gifts of the book was the question that Juston had too, and wanted to share with me.

RAIL: You manage to capture the grace and stoicism of this group that is, for the most part, deeply adherent to Christianity. As a person that gets anxious about offending people, were there concerns you had about accuracy when writing about these things?

MOCKETT: This is narrative nonfiction. I'm not a reporter, right? I mean, yes, I was taking notes, but this is not pure journalism. It's subjective. It's incredibly possible that anyone would have been to any of the church services and had a different experience than I did. I wouldn't argue with that person. If that's the case, it's incumbent upon me to be as honest as I can be about what I'm experiencing, and not performative. And honestly, until I met Pastor Jeff in Oklahoma, who runs the Mennonite church where the farmer gets up at the end and talks about all of the bales of hay he delivered to the starving cattle who didn't have enough to eat because of the prairie fires, I thought, *well, I'll just keep going to church after church in America, and I won't be able to connect with anything.* Honestly, it was kind of exciting when Pastor Jeff got up and spoke, and I thought, *this makes sense to me. This is speaking to something that I can understand.* I didn't know that would happen.

With someone like Eric, it's interesting, because my family always said, "You can trust Eric, you can trust the Knowles," but nobody said, "because they are true followers of Christ." Nobody said that. They always said they're very good people, and very smart. What I think is so interesting is how, in many ways, the attitudes their families have toward the Christian religion is very similar, even though they have completely different backgrounds. I did see this pattern among people who considered themselves to be followers of Jesus. This was something I didn't know existed, and it's actually something that's historical. Luther says, "all of this liturgy has nothing to do with what Jesus has to say. We need to focus on what Jesus had to say." This is an argument people are still having. I didn't really understand that until I went out on the road and met Christian after Christian, and started to see this pattern where I met people who struck me as having this authentic engagement with their religion. I found it very moving, but I had no idea that that would happen. I now understand there are a lot of people in the world who have this relationship with Jesus, but I didn't know that prior to this trip.

RAIL: One of the debates in the book is whether or not organic farming is sustainable, let alone real. You write about the farmer's trust in GMOs and the use of Roundup to grow crops. After all of these conversations surrounding what's real and what's advertising, how has it impacted you as a consumer?

MOCKETT: I remain concerned about large quantities of Roundup, and I think there's sort of a disagreement about whether it's glyphosate that is safe, or if it is mixed with the surfactant, which is when it's used to easily disseminate onto the surface of leaves, and what is it? Which part of that combination puts people who use large quantities of it at a higher risk for Lou Gehrig's disease? I think in general, no, I tend to trust our food production and our farming practices. I also think my understanding of how vast a problem it is has gotten more complicated. I didn't know, prior to going on the road, that we already cultivate 37–38% of the earth's surface. It was said to me on that trip that we need to increase output out of the land, otherwise we'll have to start burning the Amazon. What were we doing last year? They were burning the Amazon to create more arable land. I think it was partly because of the tariffs that were put on soybeans. I haven't really vastly changed how and what I eat. I still, even before all of this, was looking for wild fish instead of farmed fish. When my father used to go fishing, he'd go out on a boat, and get a big salmon, and vacuum pack it, and freeze it. After he died, I remember how emotional it was eating the last salmon steak he had caught and vacuum packed, and put in my suitcase for me to take back to New York from California. So, I still would prefer to eat wild fish. I do think we have a pretty admirable food safety system. I've been thinking a lot about that with coronavirus, and some of the conversation around whether or not wild animals have transferred the virus from themselves to us. I haven't really changed

the way I buy food. I am very curious about how we can use the land we have. I think science is going to be important for that. I am also interested in how food is produced in Japan, because fruits and vegetables—and eggs, in particular—taste really good there, and often better than they do here. I'm curious as to why that is. Mostly I have a lot of respect for farmers in this country, and didn't realize how complicated this question is of feeding everybody on the planet successfully, and how much harder that's going to be down the road.

RAIL: You mention that an average farm income is in the six figures. Obviously farmers have a strong relationship with commerce, and I'm wondering if you had any discussions about how the notion of the poor farmer at odds with the hotshot city moguls is far-fetched when you think about it in monetary terms.

MOCKETT: Let's be careful here. Average farm income takes into account an income source outside of the farm—few people make six figures off of farming alone. Oh my gosh, absolutely! A really good farmer, in general, is very thrifty, and I think has to be. Their life is a lot less material in the way that ours is in the city. Theirs is material in another way, in the sense that there's a lot of conversation around farm equipment, and the new farm equipment, and the software downloaded to the new farm equipment. They'll talk about that more than, say—I had an email the other day about how the silhouette for women's jeans has changed. Maybe I'm just getting old, but I thought, *do I really have to get rid of these high-waisted jeans and wear new ones?* Then I thought, as I often do, *what would Eric say?* Eric doesn't have any time for whether or not the waistline of jeans has gone up or down. I think it's really important to point out that farming is difficult, and the guys on the crew are young men who would love to farm, and say over and over again that they have no money to get into farming. When my father died in 2008, immediately everyone said you should sell the farm, because you don't know anything about farming. This did not make it into the book, because we couldn't find a place to put it, but in those years between 2008 and now, I would sit in a combine with a young guy who was on Eric's crew, and inevitably he'd say I would love to break into farming, but it takes so much money to break in. The point was that here are these guys who actually have the skills to run a farm, and they can't get into farming because, like buying a brownstone, it's just too much money to get started. It made me consider the value of what I had. A lot of reporting on farmers does focus on poor farmers, and farmers who lose their land, and it happens all the time. People who are successful in the way that Eric is, you know, are not common. We meet a lot of really successful farmers in this book, but that's not really the dominant story in the great plains. There are a lot of protections in place to try to keep farms as family farms. There are a lot of laws. I think there are seven states that have laws to keep corporations out from buying farmland, to try and preserve the farm as a family farm, and it's difficult. It's difficult to break into farming, and it's

difficult to buy land and then farm if you're a regular person.

RAIL: You're very game while you're part of the crew. You say yes to shooting pigs, learning to use a rifle, going to rodeos, and going to churches. Was this easy for you, or did you keep taking in these parts of rural life as a means of getting a full view of that world?

MOCKETT: Absolutely. Here I am thinking that I'm doing everything. I'm going hunting. I'm learning how to fire a gun. And Michael basically keeps saying, "You need to not be writing. You need to be experiencing." So even to the degree that I was trying to experience what was happening, he was saying, "Actually, you need to experience more." So there's no end to trying to learn to experience something. I never became a harvester. Juston is a marvelous writer, and I'm always haranguing him to write something about harvesting, because he is a marvelous writer, and he can drive the semi truck, and the combine, and the tractor. To the degree that I could physically do something, I did it. I just know from experience that there's a very big difference between purely observing and truly thinking about something, and physically doing it. One thing I thought about on and off for years. . . I can credit it back to when I used to live in New York and take a ton of dance classes, and all the teachers always yelled at me that I asked too many questions, "Stop asking questions and do it. Commit to the movement." In other words, I couldn't prepare myself for whatever jump or turn I was supposed to do. I just had to commit to whatever the movement was. It's the same thing when I would go to Japan, and do some form of meditation, they would say the same thing. I also know from my experiences in Japan that speaking the language and participating physically in cultural practices revealed so much about Japan to me, than if I had simply read about a festival in a book.

RAIL: Eric's efforts to follow in Jesus's footsteps is undercut by his avoidance of blaming historical white men for stealing and enslaving other racial groups. As a non-white person out on this trip, did this behavior, which seems to stem from a lack of diversity in farm country, clarify the divide between city life and rural life, or did it just make you feel alone?

MOCKETT: There are definitely moments where it makes me feel alone, and I do write about moments where I feel alone. I also kept saying time was of the essence, so you don't have time to sit here. I think there's one moment where I call up my friend Garnett, and he says you have to go back to the trailer and talk to the people you're traveling with, because you have this opportunity. What I try and do in a situation like you're describing is go, *okay, what's really happening here?* There's the script that I could jump to in my mind, which is, these people are ignorant, and that's the end of the story. Or, I could go, *wait, I need more information to understand what's happening here.* By understanding, I don't mean *I'll put myself in their shoes, and then I'll understand*, but historically what's happening. There's a scene where I meet one of Juston's teachers

in the city who says to me this country was built on white men using land, and enslaving one group of people, but also taking land away from another group of people. Both of them were dark-skinned, and I've never really come to terms with that. He said that, and I thought, I need to go back and look at what he's saying again, because even though I know that's the history, I didn't fully understand what it meant. Not to say I fully understand what it means, but part of what he was saying was that Christianity was distorted to permit this to happen, and we have inherited that distortion. This is something a certain kind of Christian understands clearly, and something I didn't. There's a distorted version of Christianity, and we run into it all throughout the book, that has twisted the words of Jesus, or focused on the parts of the gospel that are not related to what Jesus says. Then there are people who try and wrestle with what Jesus says, like Eric does, who say, "Right, gay bashing is wrong. I don't think Jesus said it was a sin to be gay." You watch Eric come to these conclusions. What this told me is that there's a form of Christianity in this country that's a distortion. Then there are people who try very hard to follow what Jesus said.

RAIL: You do an elegant job of mirroring the fraught history of American colonialism with your experience on reservations and in Japan. I was wondering if you could talk about how you went about connecting these elements, and how you avoided heavy-handedness when connecting them.

MOCKETT: The whole book is an effort. It was the best I could do at the time. Something that's not in the book is that in 2005, I went to the Napa Valley Writers' Conference, and the Navajo poet Orlando White was there, and he walked up to me and asked, "Who are your people?" I said, "Well, I'm half-Japanese. My father's from Nebraska, and my mom's from Japan." He said, "My people admire your people. We think of the Japanese as our brothers across the sea, and we admire how you touch your land and your culture." I've been unpacking that for years. That's why he's thanked in the book. He made me think so differently, and I still wonder what he meant. You still see the impact of that conversation on the text. I by no means think that what I put in here was perfect, but it was my attempt to show some of the reflection that I've done on that. Japan is not a Judeo-Christian culture. It was isolated for nearly 300 years before it was opened in 1868. It had some contact with the West, but had limited its contact. It had to modernize in a very short period of time. I read these things in history books and don't really know what they mean. What would they mean for me in experiences in the 1970s and early '80s when I was going to Japan. Nobody had a flushable toilet. When people think about Japan, they think of anime and the bullet train, but it was also a country with its own unique culture that modernized in a short period of time. I realize now that this is all part of what Orlando meant. He was saying that Japan did this in a way that is unique and inspiring. Hearing him say that made me look at Japan very differently, and look at history a bit differently. The result of

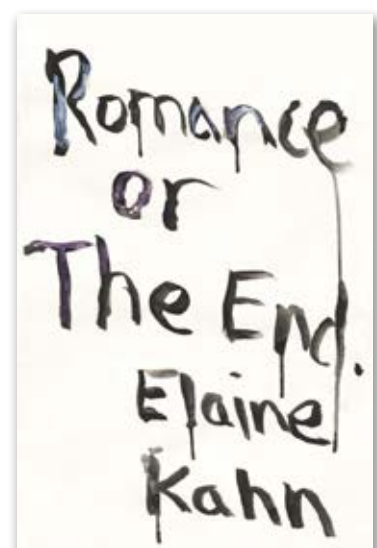
looking at history and cultural interaction in this broad and complicated way, and again, to compress Japanese history into a couple sentences, Japan was not colonized as China was. It saw what happened to China, and didn't want it to happen to its own people. It was occupied. It went through some horrific wars and the bombs. In this country, Japanese Americans were interned. At the same time, Japan was also an aggressor and a colonizer. We have this complex history, and the people who lived through these generations have undergone a really wrenching transition. For me, intellectually, it means that anytime I look at anything having to do with modern experience, Japan is always this complicating factor. Because yes, Japan was occupied. Yes Japanese Americans were interned, but they were also oppressors of other Asians in the world. I'm accustomed to having to stop and say, *what's really happening here* whenever I'm examining any moment in history.

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IN CONVERSATION

ELAINE KAHN with Rachel Rabbit White

Poetry as Divination: The Pull of Romance and its Inevitable End



Romance or the End
Elaine Kahn
Soft Skull Press (2020)

Elaine Kahn wrote the book on romance. Or maybe the anti-romance tome on romance. In *Romance or The End* Kahn shatters "the problem of romance" into a million glittering pieces. I want to say that, like it's Pisces author, the book is watery, and by "watery" is

I mean oceanic, boundless, melodic, with a tide that circles and pulls. Kahn writes:

There is no such thing as a true story and so there are no stories in this book.

Without a story, there is separation.

This is a book about separation.

Everything is a story. Even the truth.

There is nothing truer in this world than the lie of love.

She pools story, letting it whorl in all its natural ambiguity. Moving from the wonders of love, the wonders of pain, to the ways that relationships are, perhaps inevitably, ruptured by violence. But then there are many shades of violence, and the body of *Romance or The End* contains dark waters. Her narrative isn't a linear one, almost as if controlled not by the poet but by a larger gravitational force

The book is at times aphoristic, containing lines (here taken out of context of their poems) like:

Don't forgive the rareness of a perfect kiss

Fate is immoral / it dumps on you

A woman must/ be very poor/ to love

I have heard it said / that love / turns people / soft / but I have / never been / more / brutal

I never wanted to belong to anyone but myself / here I am

love ends fast / and never

Sickness is a kind of clarity / It makes you feel afraid / and love to be alive

Perhaps because of this epigrammatic quality, I realize during our discussion that the book can be treated like an oracle, a divination device. Turn to any page and get an answer about your own relationship to romance. Hers is a language that casts a voluptuous spell.

Here, Elaine Kahn and I talk romance and trauma, and engage in some live channeling when the poet/artist Sachi Flower shows up to the party.

RACHEL RABBIT WHITE (RAIL): I want to talk about the narrative non-narrative of this book, its seeming “confessional non-confession,” if we’re thinking about “the confessional” a little bit. You write often in the first person, giving so much yet withholding masterfully. You say this book is about story, and that there are no stories in this book. I’m curious if you could talk a little about what I am terming the “anti-confessional confession,” your relationship to the confessional and to narrative.

ELAINE KAHN: I rely almost entirely on the thin veil of “the speaker” or “the artist” to protect me from the hazard of disclosure. It’s what allows me to, for instance, stand in front of my mother and read a poem in which “the speaker” chokes on someones hair while getting throatfucked.

As far as your question about narrative: the book is punctured by space and silence as an attempt to be honest, not a desire to withhold. Life characterized by emptiness

and rupture as much, or even moreso, as it is by action and continuity.

RAIL: Did inspecting your relationship to romance while writing this book change romance for you? Are you a pessimist or an optimist at the current moment when it comes to romance?

KAHN: I seem to be constitutionally unable to lose hope, but I definitely would not describe myself as an optimist. I think maybe my views on romantic love have matured. For a long time I was excited by self-annihilation and identity loss but I find that I am now interested in relationships that support my life, rather than consume it.

RAIL: What books, movies, or other things inspired you as you were writing? Do you have a personal *Romance or The End* canon? But also, in general, what is some of your favorite art (film, books, music) that deals with “the problem of romance”.

KAHN: I was definitely inspired by my girlhood spent reading romantic tragedies! That was a big part of the book for me, wanting to explode some of the tropes that were most formative to me. As for music, I love heartbreak music and listened to a lot of Pablo Casals cello suites and Talk Talk while writing. I love Clarice Lispector and Elena Ferrante’s writing on romantic relationships; both really zero on the seemingly requisite dissociative self-abandonment of normative heterosexuality.

RAIL: Do you want to live in a world without romance? What would that look like?

KAHN: No I would not!

RAIL: You write expertly about the way that violence ruptures love or romance. There are many ways love is ruptured by violence or cruelty or conflict but your book faces a real violence head on. I find when I write from those spaces it’s hard not to write from a place of dissociation. In “ALL I HAVE EVER WANTED WAS TO BE SWEET,” we see the *there* and *not there* of what seems to be a sexual assault, a rape. I know, for myself, writing a trauma space is hard. And now I’m thinking about a poetics of dissociation...

KAHN: To write that poem I had to enter a place I wish didn’t exist and I had to stay there, with my senses open. I could only work on it for short amounts of time, so it took me months even though I worked on it almost every day. To be honest, it was excruciating to write and it’s very painful to read, but also gratifying. The feeling I have when I read it in public reminds me of how I have felt at protests when I am face to face with a line of cops. I know that they are big and strong and have weapons and power but still I am there, standing inside of my body. To look a monster in the eye is a great and terrible thing.

RAIL: Sometimes I wonder if in a way every poem is a love poem. But in many ways the poems of *Romance of The End* are a sort of anti-love poem. I’m curious about your relationship to the “love poem,” your history with it and what love poetry, if any, has inspired you.

KAHN: My first favorite love poem as an adult was Paul Celan. I have it memorized: *You were my death: / You I could hold /*

When all fell away from me. I think that sort of sums it up...

RAIL: Your book contains lines at times that are almost aphoristic, which I love. I am thinking of parts like “love ends fast / and never,” it reminds me a bit of Barthes and *A Lover’s Discourse*. I love these parts that break from the anti-confessional, if that’s what we’re calling it, giving the book a superstructure.

How does it feel to have written the book on romance? Or maybe you’re becoming a romance mentor, outside your own control. If this role is thrust upon you, what are more aphorisms you could offer, or maybe what do you think people could learn about their own relationships to romance?

KAHN: My mother always used to say, “hope springs eternal,” with a little snicker, like, “you’re fucked.” I guess that’s from an Alexander Pope essay I’ve never read, and probably should. I’ll be honest though, I don’t really feel comfortable with being viewed as anyone’s mentor. Which is weird because I know through my work as a teacher that many people do see me that way. But I don’t feel like an authority on anything, all I know is: try hard and laugh as much as possible. So I guess that’s my advice to lovers.

RAIL: Okay, I’m going to treat your book as an oracle, for my own love life right now, I am closing my eyes and opening to a page. Oh wow, lol, I got the quote you open with. “Stay with me, I am sick. My love is more than many diamonds.”

This makes sense for me, where I am at with a sort of break-up and sort of new loves. I am sick, yeah, I’m not fully processed but who ever is? My love is more than diamonds!

Now I’m making the poet and artist Sachi Flower do it, who is here with me. She opened to: “I spread on crushed / what gesture locked / the life inside.” So beautiful.

She says this reminds her of a dream she had about me in which I broke my ankle, and she was like, “Okay now I get to be her care-taker, and take advantage of this moment of weakness to get closer.” She interprets this dream: “I was feeling guilt about the timing with your break-ups, like am I taking advantage of you in this moment? In the dream it felt like it was the only way.”

I guess this brings up timing and love. Is the time ever really right? Do you believe in free will and are you drawn to an idea of fate?

KAHN: Incidentally, this is the same question I asked David Lynch at a Q&A hosted by Andrew Durbin in LA a couple of years ago (he said he believes in free will). I guess for me maybe the answer is both. I do believe in free will but I also believe there are structures and forces in place constraining our choices at all times. I think I have a deep resistance to surrendering to those forces, which isn’t... good. I’ve been trying to learn to meditate.

RAIL: I just told Sachi to try to channel you, we’ve gotten really into channeling. She says your psychic armor is really intact right now. Wait, now you’re letting her in. You like that she was respecting your

boundaries. You say, “Love is a curse on my body that I once knew in sleep. Like slumber, tentacles in the night, the dark upon me, carry me out of this forest. I am tired. I am hungry. There’s light in a ghost. But I am so tired. It’s troubling how I go on.” Wow, go off, channeled Elaine. How do you respond?

KAHN: I fucking love my friends. Also, yeah, sounds right.

RAIL: Can you channel Sachi or me, or us both?

KAHN: I was only able to channel Sachi and they said, “Scion between sugar: beginner muscle identifies conditional doubt. Guard beginner spark drama. Sugar feel, jog between doubts. Pump, enlist, identify, guard.”

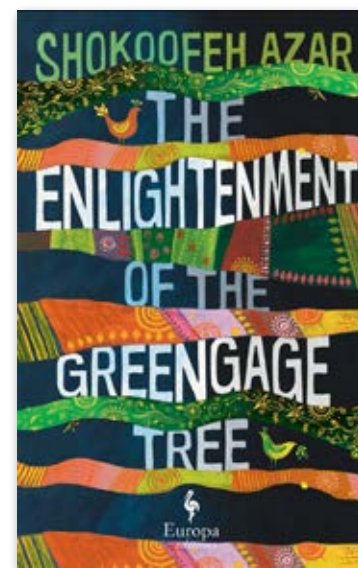
RAIL: The poet Sachi Flower is here as well. And she says I’ve been asking a lot about romance but what about the end. Is there an end? If so, what does it exclude or include?

KAHN: Romance is The End.

RACHEL RABBIT WHITE is a poet.

The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree

BY JOHN DOMINI



The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree
Shokoofeh Azar
Europa Editions (2020)

The first pages pull off an impressive act, juggling the stuff of dreams with the all too real. In a few horrifying lines, Shokoofeh Azar describes a young man “hanged without trial,” one of the thousands executed in the fall of ’88, around Tehran. Their “only crime had been . . . reading banned pamphlets, or distributing flyers,” and their murderers enjoyed a career boost, becoming Revolutionary Guards, even mayors. Yet alongside such documentary material—Iran’s Islamic Republic at its worst—*The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* explicates its surreal title image. On the day of the boy’s state-sanctioned murder, his mother leaves her rural home to climb to the top of the “tallest greengage tree” (the fruit of which is better known as a green plum). There she sits “mesmerized,” for “three days and three nights,” “perched

on stardust, gazing down at an Earth no bigger than a tiny speck ... carrying in its womb the past and future.”

The woman flies off to Tralfamadore, in other words, and with much the same prompting as Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Indeed, a firebombing haunts the mother. Years before her son was killed, during the Islamic Revolution of '79, the family's Tehran home was ransacked. “In the ... fight against the vice of pleasure,” the mob set fire to the father's luthier shop—where the older daughter Bahar was trying to hide. “Instantly,” she was immolated.

But then, Bahar too inhabits a magical space. She serves as the novel's ghostly narrator, making free with mortal chronology. Only over time does the story emerge as a decades-long tragedy, in which the opening execution is just another chapter. Under the Ayatollahs, Bahar's family suffers till it shatters. Yet as its devastation comes to light, our undead narrator provides otherworldly relief. Herself a fantasy, she summons up many others of her kind:

...the jinn snapped her fingers. In the blink of an eye, what had previously been as dark as death and terrifying was illuminated with dozens of candles and torches. Parveneh saw dozens of jinns, small and large, with ugly black faces, matted hair, and hoof-like feet...

Such passages risk being congenial to flat repetition and hand-me-down phrasing (“in the blink of an eye”), and a few times I fretted about the translation. Yet by and large the fabulist business proves delightful. I especially enjoyed the metamorphosis of Bahar's sister, who ends up a mermaid. Better still, such materials always reveal their roots in the loam built up over millennia of Persian storytelling “with all its grandeur and creativity.” The way this heritage has “collapsed” mirrors the family's going to bits, and those dual pistons drive *Greengage Tree*. Thus while the opening recalls Vonnegut, the structure overall owes more to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The Colombian text is cited a couple times—most poignantly, when the Revolutionary Guards toss it into a bonfire—and the Iranian likewise yokes a doomed family to a destructive culture, while decorating the gloom with a phantasmagoria. Azar might not have moves as breathtaking as García Márquez, but she belongs on the same stage.

Sorting out the novel's chronology also entails escaping to an older Iran, a largely illiterate village in the hills. Here Bahar's remaining relations seek peace amid ancient forests central to Persian tradition—a natural setting for the sort of tales you might hear from Scheherazade. Once or twice those tales stretch the narrative almost to breaking, meandering a long way from the core drama. Still, the family's “five-hectare grove” can't protect them from the book-burners. Soon enough, what remains of the family library is destroyed, in a scene that raises the hackles despite rhetoric as overripe as some of the fairytale scenes. Before long, the son Sohrab languishes in prison, soon to be hanged. Small wonder Mom climbs up into the stars and Sis swims off into the Caspian Sea. Or, to put it another way, the assorted mystical developments might actually represent

more mundane disorders. A psychiatrist might call them PTSD, if in a form you won't find in the Merck Manual. Just such a diagnosis turns up, in fact, on the closing pages of *Greengage Tree*.

At that point, years after the son's execution, the grieving father has fallen into the hands of the State. He's made his lonesome way back to Tehran, and there he can't resist picking up a few bootleg CDs of protest music. To hear such songs, to know at least some artists were “still alive and reacting,” left him overjoyed. But when the Basji patrols discover the contraband, they label the man a “Corrupter on Earth.” Jailed, beaten, he must write a confession. Dad however takes that last step out of bounds. “He wrote for days,” and the result sounds a lot like the novel we've been reading, with children either murdered or turning to mythical beasts. But then, under still more pressure, the old man delivers something a doctor would recognize, with grief-induced psychosis and withdrawal.

Which version counts as the truth? That dangerous term? Plainly, Azar would answer *both*, arguing that the Old Gods still hold value, “still alive and reacting,” even as she recognizes how “mysticism didn't offer any simple solutions to murder, plunder, poverty, or human injustice.” An ambitious claim, this tempts her at times into overreach. Nevertheless, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* overwhelms any reservations. My quibbles about syntax or vocabulary, for instance, matter little when one considers that the translator had to remain anonymous. The current regime would never brook such critique, and likewise Azar's acknowledgments end with thanks to “the free country of Australia,” to which she fled ten years ago. Ultimately, her work stands as another of the terrific fictions, a number of them by women, out of this tormented region and moment. It affirms again the adaptability, the veracity, the sheer power of the novel form.

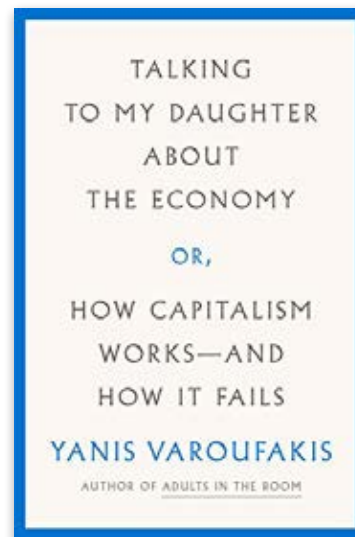
JOHN DOMINI's fourth novel, *The Color Inside a Melon*, appeared last summer.

Talking to My Sons about Varoufakis—and the Economy

BY WILLIAM STROUD

Talking to My Daughter About the Economy
Yanis Varoufakis
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2018)

In spite of intensive efforts by the owners of large corporations, financial institutions, and the media to maintain the power relationships of the status quo; we are experiencing a sea change in the attitude of citizens in the United States about capitalism and socialism. During this Presidential election year, we see in public discourse more and more people asking what kind of society we want to live in going forward, and what is the role of government in the development of that society. The disenchantment with capitalism and its inherent inequalities of wealth and power is beginning to overtake the fear of a socialist alternative.



Yanis Varoufakis's book, *Talking to My Daughter About the Economy: or, How Capitalism Works—and How It Fails*, is a significant contribution to that discussion. It is a book he wrote in nine days in 2013 while vacationing in his home on Aegina, a Saronic island in Greece. Disgusted with the technical jargon of economists, the ups and downs of the economy, and “its forces [that] make a mockery of our democracies”; his purpose was to explain the functioning of the capitalist economy to his daughter in a logical common sense, critical approach and pose the possibility of making the world a better place. He is successful in this, and it is worth reading and discussing for all of us whether in agreement or disagreement with the book in its entirety. It has also prompted me to consider what I would like to say to my sons and daughters regarding both the book and the state of the world we live in today.

Varoufakis is intimately familiar with the workings of the international economy. He was a member of the progressive Greek party Syriza, served as Minister of Finance in 2015, and currently sits in the Greek parliament. Syriza was widely criticized earlier this decade for compromising its anti-austerity platform and capitulating to the interests of German financial institutions and European oligarchs. In 2018, along with Bernie Sanders et al., Varoufakis was a founder of the Progressive International, a movement to democratize political institutions internationally and combat the austerity programs imposed on nation-states by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

There is much to appreciate in Varoufakis's book. His admirable accomplishment has been to demystify, in non-technical language, the concepts and ideological justifications of a “free market” economy. Throughout the book he uses cultural references, classical and contemporary (Faustus and Mephistopheles, Scrooge, Oedipus Rex, Frankenstein, Star Wars, and the Matrix), to create metaphors and reference points for deeper understandings of our current environment. The concepts of debt and profit, exchange and markets, finance and Bitcoin; the role of technology; and ultimately democracy itself are all presented in a coherent manner to walk us through his explanation of the capitalist economy.

One bone to pick from my reading of the book is Varoufakis's tendency to universalize these concepts and social relationships. Capitalism is a specific mode of production rooted in modern times with a dynamic that is specific to its functioning. It is a system

that has been justified by its defenders, and largely accepted by the public, as the natural order of things when in fact, understandings of “human nature” have varied throughout history and have been used to justify relationships of domination and oppression be it antiquity, feudal times, or modern society. The concept of debt, for example, which has become fundamental in our current economy, does not serve the same purpose today as it did in feudal times. Super imposing modernity onto history does not make for an adequate understanding of how we got where we are today. Historical analogies may be useful, but they do not allow an accurate understanding of how society today is significantly different in the functioning of its inequalities. Today's supremacy of finance capital with its concomitant expansive debt and focus on short-term returns has affected the mode of production in ways that are not comparable to previous eras.

Also, in spite of his critique of the economy, the threat that capitalism as a social system poses to the well-being of humanity and the sustainability of our planet is significantly understated by Varoufakis. The giant companies of the United States, Western Europe, Japan, China, and the Russian oligarchs have monopolized production and distribution worldwide and made the capitalists of other countries subservient. In a state of abundance, executives and high-level employees appropriate an increasingly greater share of profits (will be outlined below) while more than 800 million people (one in nine persons in the world), 150 million of whom are children, suffer from malnourishment and hunger. This number has been increasing in recent years.¹

As has been trumpeted in the last Presidential campaigns, inequality is rising. The 400 richest people in the United States now own more than 150 million people here. The top 0.1 percent own more than the bottom 80 percent. The top 10 percent own more than twice the amount of the bottom 90 percent (Wolff, NYU. Zucman, UC Berkeley). Since 1980, the richest 0.1 percent of the world's population have increased their combined wealth by as much as the poorest 50 percent or 3.8 billion people. (World Inequality Report)

There has been little to no discourse in public conversation nor, more significantly, in public education about how wealth in society is produced in reality. The fiction that somehow the rich deserve their wealth is a widely held myth perpetuated incessantly by the rich themselves and their corporate media sponsors. In the recent Democratic presidential debate, in reference to his \$60 billion wealth, Michael Bloomberg declared indignantly, “I worked very hard for it.” Bernie Sanders's retort is relevant: “It wasn't you who made all that money. Maybe your workers played some role in that as well.” Wealth in society is produced through the combined exploitation (utilization) of workers and nature, and the surplus produced is expropriated by the masters of industry and financial institutions through private ownership. The overwhelming numbers of workers who provide the services and goods that sustain the reproduction of society and its surplus have seen their share of total wealth fall in recent times. The fundamental driver of capitalist society is the constant effort to

maximize profit and, for those who own the means of production, to appropriate the greatest share of wealth possible.

Capitalism, as a worldwide system, is neither good for people's physical nor mental health. The ruling classes of nation-states continue to wage war on each other in their aggressive campaigns to secure natural resources and expand markets. The Watson Institute at Brown University estimates that 335,000 civilians have been killed in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan. Physicians for Social Responsibility have concluded the number killed to be over 1.3 million. In order to discredit alternative visions of society, US politicians and government officials consistently refer to leaders of movements against capitalism as murderous tyrants yet, since World War II, this government itself is responsible for more killings than any other body. We live in a country whose government is in a state of perpetual war. US military expenditures exceed \$900 billion annually while people around the world go hungry.

As workers become marginalized from political decisions that impact their lives and alienated in tedious employment they find unsatisfying, mental instability has come to afflict ¼ of all humans according to the World Health Organization. Suicides (800,000, or 1 every 40 seconds) and homicides tend to rise with the development of capitalism and the breakdown of traditional mores and values in societies. (I won't go on and on. It's too scandalous, but you get the picture.)

Socialist scholars and activists who believed in the inevitability of progress, liberation, and the movement toward socialism have been wrong. Capitalism has proven historically to be flexible, innovative, and sustainable. While we, in the United States, have been unable to transcend capitalism, climate change has now brought on the possibility, most likely the necessity, of social transformation. We have already begun to see the devastating impact of Mother Nature on countries, yet the most developed industrial nations continue ravaging natural resources amidst big talk and little action. There are multiple reasons for the inaction. An entire economic system has been built on fossil fuels as the primary energy source. Changing the infrastructure will be a gargantuan task that is formidable, but one we must undertake in order to create a more sustainable economic order. But also, the emotional toll that continuing development and climate change will entail is too great for many of us to face without support. We have already seen documentation of the reduction of biodiversity, species extinction, deforestation, threats to coral reefs and aquatic life, the melting of ice caps and glaciers, the projected displacement of millions of people, and an existential threat to humanity itself. Who wants to think about that?

In my own work, I have great opportunities to travel and engage with educators in schools in various parts of the world. This past fall, in Poland, we were working on text-based thinking strategies with Jem Bendell's "Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy" which addresses exactly this issue. I was previewing the Polish translation of a section of the text with my co-worker, Vicky, who said, "Gee, thanks. Do you want me to just kill

myself now?" No. But we need, in a serious and realistic manner, to investigate the claims of environmentalists and discuss collectively what needs to be done; not to be driven by fear.

What to do? What are our individual and collective options for responding to our current predicament? Erich Fromm, in *The Sane Society*, writes:

Despots and ruling cliques can succeed in dominating and exploiting their fellow man, but they cannot prevent reactions to this human treatment... Whole nations, or social groups within them, can be subjugated and exploited for a long time, but they react... Again their reaction may create such independence and longing for freedom that a better society is built on their creative impulses. Which reaction occurs, depends on many factors: on economic and political ones, and on the spiritual climate in which people live.

One thread running through the book is the distinction Varoufakis makes between experiential value—those uniquely human experiences that bring us joy and satisfaction and have no inherent price attached—and exchange value—the worth of goods and services exchanged in a capitalist economy. Exchange values have come to dominate most aspects of our consciousness and lives. We increasingly measure ourselves according to our income and possessions rather than our own values and actions in solidarity and support for others; in Fromm's words: To have or to be.

While recently participating in a small reading group, I came across Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*. The reading and discussions forced me to ask myself: where in my life, what understandings and actions am I engaged in, which are not dominated by capitalist ideology, and how do I maximize those? Some of the things that come to mind are: sitting, being mindful, talking and listening in the company of loved ones; tending the garden; preparing food and enjoying it with family and friends; sharing intimate moments with a partner; listening to or making music; playing a game or a sport that requires teamwork; staring at the art in the Whitney (*Vida Americana*) and wondering about the stylistic and cultural interdependence of artists in the Americas; etc. We all have our own. How can we maximize those things and minimize our consumption of frivolous commodities?

At a collective level: joining a political action or community group, installing solar panels and/or getting off the commercial grid in some way; voting for a candidate not indentured to the ruling class; working for, as Bernie would say, a political revolution. Bernie is right in that the rich and powerful are not going to give up their privilege without a fight. Nor will electoral politics bring about fundamental social change. As the poet, Audre Lorde, declared, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

Real social change will require a movement, not an election. The majority of voters continue to support candidates who have enacted policies that disproportionately imprison poor people; re-inflate

the financial bubble and protect the power of bankers and financiers; redline neighborhoods and segregate neighborhoods and schools; deport workers fleeing gangs and oppression in the Americas; conduct war on liberation movements that fight US-sponsored military dictatorships; and, contrary to Varoufakis's technological optimism, develops a state security panopticon that traces our every move. The government uses its institutions to eliminate, by any means necessary, leaders who become powerful in their opposition to capitalism. At the ballot box, the electorate, immunized from birth by an indoctrination system that demonizes socialism as a viable alternative, historically votes against its own interests.

We now face a president who has no commitment to anything other than using government to augment his own wealth and power. He is an inveterate liar, psychologically not well, and exhibits classic characteristics of narcissism. As Fromm writes in *The Sane Society*,

For the narcissistically involved person, there is only one reality, that of his own processes, feelings, and needs. The world outside is not perceived objectively, i.e., as existing in its own terms, conditions and needs. The most extreme form of narcissism is to be seen in all forms of insanity. The insane person has lost contact with the world; he has withdrawn into himself; he cannot experience reality, either physical or human reality as it is, but only as formed and determined by his own inner processes... Narcissism is the opposite pole to objectivity, reason, and love.

There was documentation of Trump's connections with the Russian mafia and substantial evidence of criminality—money laundering through his real estate transactions—for decades.² Yet, this is the man the current political system offers as its top leader. We need to anticipate how to effectively respond when he refuses to leave office, no matter what the outcome of the impending election.

Our issue however, is not just the individual narcissistic personality. It is that this man holds the most powerful political position in the world. His future actions are not completely unpredictable. In spite of the surprise expressed by pundits at the trajectory the president has laid out for government, it is consistent with his words and the interests of the ruling class—roughly defined as the owners of the largest companies, banks and financial institutions, media corporations, and those who serve them ideologically. Trump is a tool of an extreme wing of the ruling class that has attracted white nationalists, small business owners, and big capital in classic fascist fashion. We do not experience the gross mass violence of that era, but who is willing to stand up to the domination that exists today?

The forms of government that have been operative for the ruling class across the globe through the last century have been military dictatorships, representative parliamentary democracies, religious states, fascist regimes and, in the case of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc nations—a state bureaucracy that monopolized political life and the economy. The ruling class in various countries is opportunistic according to local conditions and values. What they

hold in common is the protection of their ability to maximize profit at the expense of the great majority of citizens. Class society means that there is a small segment of the population that controls the surplus in a country that is produced by workers. This occurs through the ages in different forms. What will distinguish socialism, if we are successful in moving forward, will be to base the production of goods and services on human needs rather than the maximization of profit, and the establishment of decentralized, democratic forms of political decision-making that prevent the recreation of an elite ruling class.

It has now become evident that both major parties in the United States are two wings of the eagle. Both parties, first and foremost, serve the interests of the capitalist class and are disconnected from the needs of the poor, the working class, and the majority of citizens in our country. The faith that was placed on the checks and balances of the constitution and representative democracy was naïve, and the institutions are being ripped asunder. The post-WWII notion of government needing to attend to human rights and the needs of its citizens has been replaced with the role of government as the protector of the capitalist marketplace and the elite. There is no going backward. We will need to find new forms of cooperative social and political organization if we want to improve our lives. This cannot be achieved through the identity politics that have become prevalent today, nor through single-issue campaigns. Both serve to factionalize when what is needed is greater understanding and unity of purpose.

Our task, however, in returning to the opening premise of this essay, is not just to explain the economy and notice the sea change of attitudes; but to unite our understandings with actions that can create a better, more just world for ourselves and our fellow citizens.

Reminiscent of the lesson from Paolo Coehlo's *The Alchemist*, Varoufakis (spoiler alert) ends the book with a quote from T.S. Eliot:

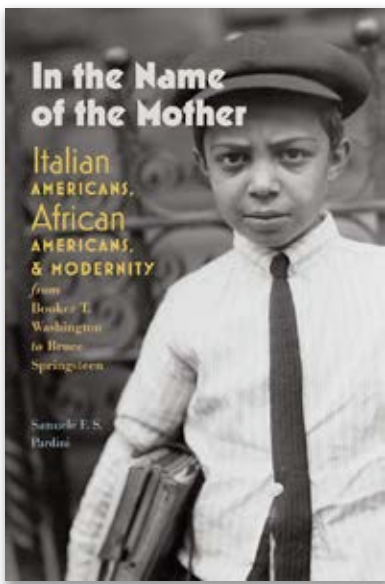
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

I, however, do not want us to arrive where we started, my sons. The exploring is necessary, but we are going to have to find a new way forward. Our challenge is that we do not have a map—that we will make the road by walking.

Another world is possible.

1. UN report on The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World.
2. Unger, *House of Trump House of Putin*. Enrich, *Dark Towers*

WILLIAM STROUD is a contributor to the Rail.



In The Name of The Mother

BY FIORE SIRECI

In The Name of The Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen
Samuele F.S. Pardini
Dartmouth College Press (2017)

A recent article in the *New York Times* was titled, “How Italians Became ‘White,’” (Oct. 12, 2019), a seemingly radical idea until you start to dig into the social history of immigration. Many historians, for instance Jennifer Guglielmo in *Living the Revolution*, have shown how the media and most public institutions of the early 20th century categorized Italians as people of color. For instance, the police provided mugshots of Southern Italian women to the major newspapers of the time, including the *New York Times* and *Life* magazine, which framed the women as genetically prone to anger and violence, both creating and fulfilling a host of stereotypes from the association of Sicilians with the mafia to women gone bad to some lurid generalizations about the European and Global South. Whatever your assessment of this hypothesis on identity is, the takeaway is useful, that when we talk about immigrant communities, the long process of assimilation has snuffed out or masked a range of identities, alliances, and the presence of de facto matriarchy.

A new book by Samuele F.S. Pardini takes these considerations as a starting point and

begins a journey into 150 years of media to explore the strata of identity, gender, sexuality, and laboring-class experience against the grain of what he calls “white” theory, which he says tends to flatten identity in a technical, generalizing haze. Using his sharpened tools of literary criticism and theory, Pardini works through novels, movies, and music and shows how, in the days before the (still incomplete) assimilation of Italian Americans into “white” culture, a constellation of writers, intellectuals, musicians, and activists in both communities found rewarding interpenetrations of their constructed identities.

All it takes to understand this is to see how mainstream magazines and newspapers such as *Life* magazine, and more lurid shots as in this image from the 1903 issue of *Judge* magazine.

Pardini starts right in with unique literary choices. In 1910, Booker T. Washington set out for Europe to seek out the “Man Farthest Down,” the eventual title of his 1912 book. Who, he asked, could be analogous to the black man in post-Reconstruction US? After touring much of Northern Europe, acquainting himself as well as he could with workers in Silesia, Russia, Germany, and Poland, societies in the throes of Industrial Era dumbbell-shaped extremes of wealth and poverty, Washington came upon Napoli and Sicily. He finally found the man “farthest down,” the Sicilian: “[T]he Negro is not the man farthest down. [Even] in the most backward parts of the Southern States of America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, [his condition] is comparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily.” But further along in the book, as Pardini shows us, Washington concludes that ultimately, there is someone even further down; the women of Sicily, “are a species of property, live like prisoners in their own villages ... live in a sort of mental and moral slavery under the control of their husbands and of the ignorant, and possibly vicious, village priests.”

Pardini questions Washington’s assumptions, as well as his sanguine belief that Sicilian women would benefit greatly from the “liberty” immediately available upon arriving on American shores. Pardini is also alert to Washington’s superficial glance at Sicilian culture, a complex amalgam in which forms of matriarchy play out in ways that are not obvious. One might wonder

why Pardini has selected Washington at all, but it is precisely the contradictions within the text that make it so rewarding, especially if we are interested in artefacts of transcultural gaze. For every time Pardini presents Washington’s blind spots, such as his initial view of Sicilians as a “race of brigands,” or his assumption that Southern Italians see themselves as equal to animals because many houses (in a mountainous topography) have stalls on the first floor, he also locates Washington’s well-practiced instinct for the mechanisms of oppression. In his brief visit to Southern Italy, Washington traveled on chugging locomotives, into the hellish sulfur mines which employed abused and battered children, and across the many mountain villages. By the end, Washington concluded that Sicilians of that era were condemned to a bleak, scrabbling life of the various causes of that condition: The distant, ethnocentric government of the new republic; the industrial complex that had bypassed the island, the lingering vestiges of feudalism, and the landed descendants of the haughty Bourbon aristocracy—still in power as late as 1860. As a counterpoint to Washington’s elision of women in Sicilian culture, Pardini draws our attention to the film *Nuovomondo* (2006), which centers the woman as the hub and de facto head of the immigrant family.

We then move on to a classic of Italian American literature, Jerre Mangione’s *Mount Allegro*, a novel and chronicle about Sicilian immigrants in Rochester, New York. Part of the history of labor in the U.S. is the role of workers from the European South and the Middle East. Industrial towns along the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers, such as Corning, NY, and Camden, NJ, were meccas for Southern Italian male workers. The early glass, paper, and radio/television industries provided a pathway to the middle class for these men and their families. At the same time, currents of subversion, and radicalism were brought into American capitalist life right at its root. Pardini illuminates how Mangione’s Sicilians presented a stout resistance to the economic panacea of surplus by prevailing domestic economies of sharing and service that were a huge threat to the foundational role of individualist consumption in the modern economy. When we read Mangione’s narrative of sharing, reciprocity, barter, and food culture it is a long, long way from marketers’ fixation with the loud, overburdened family table or gaudy, snack-happy street festivals. Sidestepping caricatures of Sicilians as mafia-centric, the ethical codes of Mangione’s Sicilians of Rochester illuminate the resistant nature of that culture, defying condescending offerings, whether in the U.S. or in Italy, where centralized institutions often sought to subdue rather than understand. Honor in *Mount Allegro* meant offering bed and board to visitors, faith was reserved for saints of localities far from the Roman center, and family meant



A WOP
A pound of spaghetti' and a red-a bandan'
A stilet' and a corduroy suit;
Add garlic wat make for him stronga da
mus'
And a talent for black-a da boot!

networks of sharing and information. In this way, honor, faith, and family worked against the grain of paternalistic attempts to reform and educate Sicilians whether here—by way of the tender mercies of schoolteachers, bureaucrats, foremen, and pious aid societies—or there—by way of *their* bureaucrats and the schoolteachers and priests who touted the benefits of the new Republic of Italy.

Pardini next tackles, in an extraordinary chapter called “Structures of Invisible Blackness,” the interplay of otherness between Italian American and African American writers. In James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* and Richard Bruce Nugent’s *Gentleman Jigger*, Pardini finds that the homosexual relationships therein go far beyond subversive boundary crossing; Baldwin and Johnson unearth in the Italian figure of the young, dark Italian gangster a multiplicity of otherness: the illegality of their calling, the dissonance of their sexuality against the mainstream overlay of the masculinist “tough guy,” and the ways in which their “blackness” is socially constructed. In the working-class novel, *Blood on the Forge*, yet another parallel layer of experience is added, that of fellow industrial (exploited) workmen. All of this, of course, plays in the background of racial animus and violence between groups of working people, which stained the high industrial period, but that makes these literary moments all the more necessary to study.

Chapter four returns to what has become almost a ritual, the attempt to explain the fame and success of *The Godfather* novel and movies. Despite the way Puzo has been enlisted in the masculinization of Italian American culture, it is still rewarding to examine these works. Pardini does a superlative job of framing the first *Godfather* as a subversion of certain capitalist ideals, and the second as an epic of assimilation. Vito Corleone is very explicit, as is Puzo behind him, that he is a replacement for the welfare state, a crucial rewriting of the Al Capone tale. The growth of the mafia during the 1930s may well have been the side effect of Prohibition. However, Puzo is posing the attractions of a libertarian vision of local, even tribal, loyalty and self-sufficiency against Roosevelt’s nanny-state mechanisms, keeping in mind the generational distrust of government brought over from



Southern Italy. Pardini finds that Michael Corleone's version of donhood in *Godfather II* is a form of "passing," as the new don's more efficient, more centralized, less neighborhood, and more professionally financed organization is indistinguishable from a modern corporation in all but the legality of its activities, if that. Once again, Pardini directs us to indispensable counterpoints in more contemporary works. These themes are taken up with great nuance by Don DeLillo and Frank Lentricchia. For instance, in *Underworld*, DeLillo mines for the dregs of extant uniqueness and authenticity even as it is literally being disposed of in the sanitation business, which provides the backdrop of the novel. Pardini demonstrates that we need a DeLillo, at the very least because he refuses to let authenticity die.

In the next chapter, Pardini returns to the eponymous theme of the book, the figure of women in Italian American culture, in particular the Maria figure. He examines her appearance in the songs of Bruce Springsteen and in a number of novels, novels in the Italian American tradition that have all but disappeared from view even after the extended periods of curricular opening in the university. When do we read the extraordinary chronicles of labor and of matriarchy that were being produced throughout the first half of the 20th century? What happened to *Christ in Concrete*, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, *Umbertina*, *Maria*, or *Who Can Buy the Stars*? Pardini offers compelling hypotheses for why, apart from college Italian courses, these books have all but disappeared from mainstream literary dialogue.

Speaking of mothers, it is good to be reminded of the de facto matriarch in the survival and success of early immigrant communities (another reason to read *The Fortunate Pilgrim* before, or instead of, *The Godfather*). As a number of social historians have documented, the Italian immigrant family kept constant connections with the homeland. Usually, male members of the family crisscrossed the Atlantic either to work back home or bring back money. Male members of the family might also travel out to worksites in other parts of North America, such as in the coal mines or railroads, or docks along the East Coast and in New Orleans. The mother would remain behind, working steadily, taking in piecemeal from manufacturers, raising the children, creating and maintaining a network of neighborhood relationships which were crucial in crisis moments, while keeping up a steady correspondence by letter. Those dark stuffy tenements in the photos of Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine might have been hovels but they were also national and transatlantic headquarters of extended families. My great aunt, for instance, in her 90s, can tell you the whereabouts, marital status, and current health of any of our nearly 200 cousins and other relatives across three continents. And that's before she walks over to her computer. For her, a smart phone is not a lifeline; it's pure synergy.

The final chapter further explores the interpenetration of African American and Italian American partnerships, looking at Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra as well as Bruce Springsteen and his longtime saxophonist Clarence Clemons. Pardini presents a number of surprising and complex statements from these matchups,

unearthing Sinatra's often forgotten writings on diversity, and arguing for a closer look at the subversive strands in Davis and Springsteen, a fitting conclusion to a study that is rich, comprehensive, and courageously argued.

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You Will Never Be Forgotten

BY YVONNE C. GARRETT



You Will Never Be Forgotten
Mary South
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2020)

Mary South's debut is a widely disparate collection of realist and speculative fiction whose connective tissue is as simple and complex as the alienation of modern life. These 10 stories focus on a variety of unrelated characters grappling with loss, violence, sexual jealousy, and the terrible ways technology can be wielded in a data dependent world.

The opening story "Keith Prime" is as much a tale of a woman's inability to cope with loss as it is a meditation on the much-explored question of the morality of cloning. "Keiths" are part of a larger group of cultivated human clones raised to adulthood to be harvested for their body parts. The narrator tells us that she has become attached to a Keith; her attachment leads to an unplanned awakening. In her philosophizing, the narrator asks "If, by chance, a Keith did dream, would he have anything to dream about..." and one can't help but recall Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. But unlike Dick's androids (later rewritten into the hyper-intelligent Nexus characters central to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*) the Keiths are unintelligent and infantile. The narrator brings her Keith home and he spends hours watching "true crime documentaries, makeup tutorials, and footage of animals stalking and devouring each other." When it becomes apparent that Keith will never adapt to waking life, the narrator takes action of her own that is less about caring for the living-only-to-be-harvested clones and more about easing her own grief.

In "The Age of Love," a thoroughly unlikeable night nurse at an elder care facility becomes part of a group who record phone sex calls made by the residents. A graphically sexual and oddly perverse pastime turns into

a challenge to the night nurse's relationship with his flight attendant girlfriend Jill—who begins to have extended, sexually-tinged phone conversations with one of the residents. Ultimately, Jill's night nurse boyfriend lets insecurity and jealousy destroy his own happiness.

South shifts into experimental territory in "Frequently Asked Questions About Your Craniotomy." Written as a FAQ in second-person addressed to patients, the responses to basic questions become revelations of a talented brain surgeon's slippage into one of life's many disasters. But despite the building despair written into each of her answers, she ends on the affirmative, "Read these answers once again, but very slowly. Recite to yourself, 'I am alive.'"

The lengthier "Architecture for Monsters" and "The Promised Hostel" both focus on privileged characters who are very difficult to like. In "Architecture for Monsters" we meet the famous architect Helen Dannenforth who creates massive modernist towers—some seemingly in tribute to her disfigured daughter Lily's craniofacial microsomia. The story is presented as the draft of an article ostensibly written for a magazine but soon becomes an essay on the nature of maternal love, delving into the writer's loss of her own mother to a violent death, the accusation by Helen's sister Hannah that Lily is not her child, and Hannah's abduction of Lily. The narrator learns that the truth about Lily is, of course, much more complicated. Toward the end of the story, the narrator describes a dream of a woman who turns into a building, "an excruciating metamorphosis...a monstrous architecture, an architecture for monsters," as the woman forces herself to accommodate "tenants who would never believe she had done enough." It is, of course, a metaphorical contemplation of the physical and emotional strain of motherhood, a motherhood desired by both Helen and Hannah; a motherhood denied to the narrator's own murdered mother.

In "The Promised Hostel," by far the weakest piece in the collection, a group of tourists live a life of lazy decadence in a Turkish hostel. The narrator is, he tells us, in love with Maddy—the only woman in the hostel and his stepsister. But she won't share her body with him, instead perversely suckling a group of grown misfits at her breasts. Eventually we learn that Maddy's baby has died, that the narrator is her ex-lover following a lifelong obsession that has destroyed his marriage, and that none of the men in the hostel can give Maddy what she needs. The high point in the story comes when Kubra, a woman who works in a nearby cafe, comforts Maddy, giving the narrator a rare moment of insight, "How Maddy must have waited for such a simple gesture, and what it required was for her to encounter another woman."

In the equal parts horrifying and depressing title story, "You Will Never Be Forgotten," a young woman begins to stalk her rapist. She works at "the world's most popular search engine" doing "content moderation." This involves screening (or "screaming" as she calls it) content deemed too violent—a job that she states will soon cease to exist once the algorithm becomes "sophisticated enough to supervise on its own the worst that humanity has to offer." Working long hours in a windowless room with other content "Ninjas" reviewing ultra-violence, she spends her spare time stalking her rapist in

real life, berating herself for not reporting the rape—her life spiraling out of control until finally she is left with the conclusion, "No one will save her. Nothing is going to magically make it better. The woman has to figure out her life."

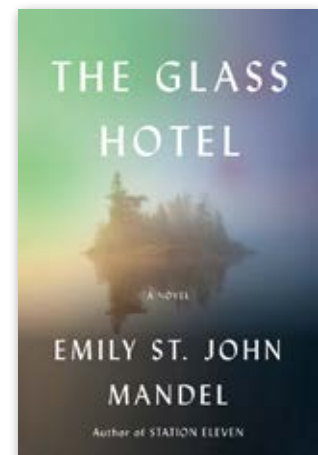
The vaguely funny and clearly cynical "Camp Jabberwocky for Recovering Internet Trolls" and "To Save the Universe, We Must Also Save Ourselves" both focus on segments of society that developed with the rise of internet chatrooms, message boards, and fan forums. The camp is populated by (primarily) young men who have been referred to a sort of rehab that is supposed to cure them of their antisocial online behavior. While there are entertaining scenes of young campers wreaking havoc and a degree of introspection about the alienation of modern life and the desperate need of so many to belong, much of the plot is lost in an abundance of similar characters and attempts to be madcap. The third-person piece "To Save the Universe, We Must Also Save Ourselves" reads like a snide critique of Sci-Fi TV show fandom, cosplay, and an exposé of the rampant misogyny of fan forums.

The final two stories in the collection are an odd little meditation on ghosts, Florida, and grief entitled "Realtor to the Damned," and a deeply disturbing tale of obsession and motherhood, "Not Setsuko." We know from the outset that all is not right, "Unlike most mothers, I gave birth to my daughter twice." A woman whose daughter has died makes every effort to recreate her lost child's entire life through a younger child, including murdering the family cat to mimic the loss of an earlier pet. The girl's father is a film director and casts his young daughter as a vengeful child spirit in his latest horror film. As she delivers one of her lines, "I will kill you both," it's hard not to blame her if she ends up murdering her parents in real life.

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The Glass Hotel

BY YVONNE C. GARRETT



The Glass Hotel: A Novel
Emily St. John Mandel
Knopf (2020)

Emily St. John Mandel's last novel, *Station Eleven* (2014), was a finalist for a National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner, and won

the Arthur C. Clarke Award. *Station Eleven* is an uncomfortably timely read—a post-pandemic tale of a world after the decimation of the population and collapse of borders but a world that still embraces Shakespeare: in the words of one character, mere “survival is insufficient.” Mandel’s new novel, *The Glass Hotel*, has equally timely and deeply philosophical elements. While many readers will focus on the central conflict and action around a Madoff-like character and his global Ponzi scheme, and it’s likely this plot element that attracted NBC/Universal (who have purchased the rights), the novel is much more than a retelling of one of the 20th century’s most spectacular financial frauds. There is a complex grace to *The Glass Hotel* that’s often lacking from contemporary fiction, particularly contemporary thriller fiction. It’s not simply Mandel’s deft prose, her ability to write Dickensian networks of coincidence, but her keen observation of human behavior: our fears, our dreams, what drives us, and what might ultimately destroy or save each of us.

From the opening scene of the book, I was hooked. Mandel uses the “beginning is the ending” trope to good effect, creating a desire in the reader to know more about a drowning woman and just how she got into this dire situation. It’s a scene that haunted me as I read. The drowning woman Vincent, named by her poet mother after Edna St. Vincent Millay, is a superbly drawn character who will stay with you long after you finish this novel.

The book is split into three parts of unequal length and shifting narratives, seemingly disparate, but actually working to form a complex account of a group of people deeply affected by each other’s actions. After the opening section, “Vincent in the Ocean,” where we are told we are “Beginning at the end...” the novel then shifts to focus on Vincent’s step-brother, the troubled, drug-addicted musician/composer Paul. In “I Always Come to You (1994 and 1999)” we see Paul floundering through university, discovering an electronic-goth band “Baltica,” and falling for their violinist/singer Annika who sings the refrain “I always come to you.” Paul staggers through the nightclub scene eventually taking some dangerous “bright blue pills” and later passes the pills to Charlie Wu of Baltica, indirectly killing him. There are shifts in this chapter that signal the mildly experimental work Mandel does throughout the novel: Paul’s narrative is interspersed with confessional dialogue “at a rehab facility in Utah, twenty years later” and flashbacks to an earlier time when Paul is visiting family in the aftermath of a terrible loss. Shifting back to the present moment (1999) Paul runs away from Toronto and Charlie’s death to Vancouver in hopes of staying with Vincent who is having her own problems.

There is a sort of musicality to the novel that appears not only in Paul’s musical obsessions but also in the repetition of small phrases that are lyric-like throughout; appearing as sort of refrains or hints of connectivity. These phrases appear and reappear, shifting in meaning, working as connective threads: “I always come to you,” and “Sweep me up” are just two of these phrases. “Sweep me up” appears in the opening scene of Vincent in the ocean and again in a flashback within Paul’s first section; we’re told later that “sweep me up” was the last utterance by Søren Kierkegaard in the film, *Waking Life*, and a phrase Vincent connects with throughout. Shifting into flashback, we see Vincent at 13;

her mother has just disappeared and she’s scrawled “sweep me up” on a school window with acid paste, confusing the adults in her life and giving the reader important clues to her character—she’s not only already reading Kierkegaard but is also clearly subsumed by anger and grief. Throughout the course of her life, Vincent never seems to recover from the loss of her mother; first angry, then numb, then simply recreating herself over and over but always coming back to the central question: did her mother drown or was it suicide?

It’s also in Paul’s first section that we’re introduced to Vincent’s home—the remote village of Caiette near Port Hardy, a town “on the northernmost tip of Vancouver Island.” The glass hotel that features so heavily in the novel is just being constructed nearby, in a place “pinned between the water and the forest.” The darkness of the forest, the isolation of the town and the hotel are key images in the novel that reoccur, working not just to set a tone but to influence characters’ moods and actions.

The novel moves to follow Paul who travels back to Toronto and doesn’t see Vincent again until the last day of 1999 when he, Vincent, and her friend Melissa go out to ring in the new century; the section ends with Paul hearing Annika’s voice in a dance remix at a club, the lyric “I always come to you” accompanying a visitation by the ghost of Charlie Wu.

The narrative then shifts to “The Hotel: Spring 2005” where someone has scrawled, “Why don’t you swallow broken glass,” in acid paste on the hotel’s glass wall. Vincent is now the bartender at the hotel and expresses her shock at the sight. The only people in the scene besides Vincent are a shipping executive, Leon Prevant, and a few staff including Paul who is working as a night houseman. The night manager Walter accuses Paul of the vandalism and Paul doesn’t argue; the assumption we can make is that Vincent wrote on the glass but we don’t know why or what it means. In this scene, on this night, key connections are made: Leon and Vincent both meet Jonathan Alkatis—a Madoff-like financier whose many crimes serve as a central feature in the novel; Paul meets a woman (who we learn more about later on); Walter forces Paul to resign from his job (giving him the needed shove to create a life for himself); and the hotel sits at the center. When Walter first takes the job at the hotel, it’s described as exhibiting “a sense of being outside of time and space,” and “an improbable place lit up against the darkness of the forest.” Walter falls in love with the hotel and we can’t help but agree. And when Vincent makes the choice to leave with Alkatis and enter the “kingdom of money,” we can’t help but wonder which is the greater darkness, the greater danger.

Vincent’s story progresses in “A Fairy Tale: 2005-2008” when she lives as Alkatis’s trophy companion (she wears a ring but they never actually marry). She spends time at his home in Connecticut giving herself a schedule that includes nightly swims in an infinity pool “to strengthen her will because she was desperately afraid of drowning.” In an aside, we see Vincent’s mother discussing Millay’s poem, “Renascence” with her daughter, how the poem brought Millay out of poverty to Vassar, how “she raised herself into a new life by sheer force of will,” and we can’t help but read the parallel. Vincent is fully aware of the bargain she’s struck with Alkatis but, like many of us, doesn’t see many options: “There’s a difference between being intelligent

and knowing what to do with your life, there’s also a difference between knowing that a college degree might change your life and a willingness to actually commit to the terrifying weight of student loans.” What Alkatis offers her is a different opportunity.

Vincent buys herself an expensive video camera: she has, we learn, been shooting video since her mother disappeared; five minute clips of ocean, various neighborhoods, street scenes, and later, five minute shots of the infinity pool. These short films are crucially important in the novel: Vincent discovers Paul using them as his in a retrospective at BAM causing an irrevocable break in their relationship, and later Vincent shoots a storm from the deck of a container ship and vanishes.

As we follow Vincent through the “kingdom of money” we learn that all is not well. Mandell gracefully introduces characters, different moments, different times—each shift serving to give greater depth to both the core conflicts and central characters of the novel. Everyone in this novel is connected. Alkatis’s chief investor, Lenny Xavier (a horrifyingly accurate music producer from L.A.), in a dinner conversation dismisses a talented artist for her “inability to recognize opportunity,” and we learn that the artist is Paul’s obsession Annika. We can’t help but think of Vincent’s ability to negotiate her misgivings away to grasp the opportunity Alkatis presents, “a transactional arrangement,” as she describes their relationship. We meet a painter living in Soho: Olivia, who appears on the scene and quickly shifts to flashback where we see her interacting with Alkatis’s beloved dead brother Lucas. She paints Lucas shortly before he dies and later, Alkatis buys the painting for \$200,000 at auction. Olivia also serves as a critique and a foil for Vincent as they travel together on Alkatis’s yacht in the last days before his arrest. Olivia sees through the pretense of the relationship and later we sympathize with her financial collapse.

Part Two of the novel starts in 2009 with Alkatis in prison. He begins a self-delusional narrative about something he calls “the Counterlife”—a place where he can access beautiful hotels and see people from his past. For him, prison is somewhat of a relief presenting “the exquisite lightness of waking each morning” knowing that the worst has already happened. This section of the novel alternates between Alkatis’s prison narrative and Vincent as she moves on with her life. In “Seafarer 2008-2013” we see Vincent coming to terms with her life outside the kingdom of money, a life where she acknowledges that “luxury is weakness.” Desperate to escape after she waits on her former best friend in a bar and that friend ignores her completely, Vincent runs to the beach, sees a container ship in the distance and decides to go to sea. Her mother had briefly worked on a Coast Guard vessel and in yet another effort to connect with her lost mother, Vincent signs on to work as a cook on a container vessel. Vincent also remembers meeting a shipping executive at the hotel (Prevant) and his obvious enthusiasm for his job. Later we see Vincent and her fellow crew member/lover Bell discussing life and she claims, “I’ve never been so happy.” We very much want to believe her.

Again the novel shifts back to Alkatis and the Counterlife (2015) where we see him slipping away from sanity into an alternate universe and is visited by the ghost of one of his chief investors, Faisal—a Saudi prince

who committed suicide. In the last section of Part Two, “A Fairy Tale 2008,” Alkatis’s crime is exposed and Vincent faces down the reality of the collapse of her fairy tale. Vincent spends “the last morning in the kingdom of money” traveling through midtown: she sees her mother in a crowd of tourists and later has a panic attack, convinced that “if she went into the subway she would die.” Alkatis summons her to his office where his staff is shredding documents; the section ends with the question from Alkatis to Vincent “do you know what a Ponzi scheme is?”

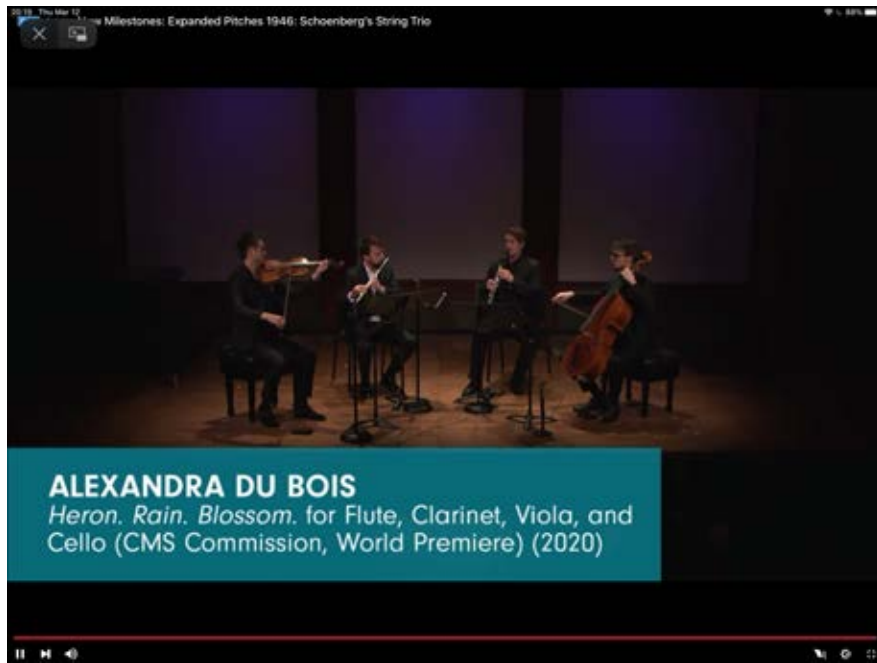
In Part Three, Alkatis’s staff appears in sections entitled “The Office Chorus” where they are shown in the various roles supporting the fraud and we see each escape or collapse. Vincent walks out on Alkatis and one of Alkatis’s staff, Oskar, follows her to a luxury apartment on Columbus Circle where they sleep together; Oskar sees Olivia’s painting of Alkatis’s brother in the apartment and weeps over what she’s lost, what all the victims have lost.

The novel then follows the fall-out from the exposure of the fraud including Olivia’s attendance at the trial and shifts forward in time to Alkatis in his “counterlife” where he now sees ghosts of all those whose deaths are connected to his crimes: Olivia, Yvette Bertolli, Faisal, and others. There is a brief flashback to an evening with Alkatis at dinner with his dead wife Suzanne. They see Ella Kaspersky, a woman who reported to Alkatis to the SEC long before he’s caught. Suzanne walks past Ella and whispers, “Why don’t you swallow broken glass,” and another thread is connected.

The final sections of the novel shift across time and characters. “Shadow Country December 2018” shows Leon Prevant, whose savings and career were wiped out by the fraud, living in an RV with his wife while they work menial jobs. They have become “citizens of a shadow country that in his previous life he’d only dimly perceived, a country located at the edge of an abyss.” A former co-worker contacts Leon to investigate the suspicious death of a young woman who has fallen off a container ship; a woman who “came and went between land and sea for five years, until she disappeared one night off the coast of Mauritania.” It is, it seems, possible to disappear in “the space between two countries.” Like Leon in the Shadow Country, Alkatis in his Counterlife, Olivia in Soho, and so many other characters in the novel, Vincent has fallen into a space between and disappeared.

The final sections of the novel show Walter staying on as lone caretaker at the now-closed glass hotel, Paul in Edinburgh having a drink with Ella and later in a heroin-high seeing Vincent at the moment she dies, and finally “Vincent in the Ocean” bringing the novel full circle to the opening scene. At the close of the novel, Vincent is filming a storm-swelled sea. She repeats the phrase “sweep me up” like a refrain from a well-wrought symphony as she disappears and the ocean swells, the uplift ending the novel in a moment of perfect tragedy. It is a superbly wrought ending to the novel: a stunningly good meditation on human frailty, the nature of love, and what it means to survive in the modern world.

YVONNE C. GARRETT holds an MLIS (Palmer), an MFA (The New School), two MAs (NYU), and is currently working on a PhD in History & Culture at Drew University where her dissertation focuses on women & gender identity in 1980s American punk rock. She is Senior Fiction Editor at Black Lawrence Press.



Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, March 12, 2020. Screenshot by George Grella.

Quarantine Hall

BY GEORGE GRELLA

Thursday afternoon, March 12, I was heading out to get my hair cut then on to the Rose Studio in Lincoln Center—I was going to review a concert from the Chamber Music Society. Then the cancellations cascaded into my email inbox: Carnegie Hall, the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, museums, and Lincoln Center itself, including CMS.

But the concert was scheduled for just hours away, everything prepared, everyone ready. Then the hall was shut, quarantined from the audience, the audience quarantined from each other—social distancing. CMS has been live streaming their concerts for years, and the organization went on with the show (and a following Sunday matinee), with the obvious idea that this was what they normally do—why not continue.

Of course, this was not what they, or any other live music organization, normally does. Live streaming is integrated into the concert experience, a way for those who can't join the audience to experience it from a distance. A live performance with no audience other than literally isolated individuals on the other end of an internet connection is something new.

And so Rose Studio became Quarantine Hall, with a New Milestones series performance to start at 7:30 p.m. CMS wasn't the only quarantined outpost of live music that night; Miller Theatre went on with their Bach Collection concert, led by Simone Dinnerstein and with oboist Alecia Lawyer, mezzo-soprano Kady Evanyshyn, violinist Rebecca Fischer, and the ensemble Baroklyn. For Miller, it was an impromptu decision, made at the beginning of the week and, as executive director Melissa Smey announced during her on-camera introduction, the first time Miller had ever live streamed a performance.

The technology isn't the thing, though—it's a media tool that's been available for years (Lawyer is the founder and Artistic Director of ROCO, an innovative chamber orchestra in Houston that, like CMS, live streams all their performances). The thing is the audience—what made one concert different from another in the past was the musicians who were playing and what music they were making. What made Quarantine

Hall concerts different has nothing to do with the music and everything to do with the fact that no one was there.

They were someplace. Watching the live feed from Miller, I could see there were 200 other connected screens at the start, while CMS had 9200 connections when the concert began at 7:30 p.m. sharp (none of the normal 5-10 minute delay for late-comers). The opening piece in the Rose Studio was Arnold Schoenberg's Trio for Strings, Op. 45, and very much like the common experience of a live concert, the distanced audience fled Schoenberg's explosive, haunting mix of atonality and hyper-expressive lyricism. By the end of the piece, the number of connections had dropped below 3000.

That had no effect, though. No one shuffled through a row to escape the hall, no one fidgeted or coughed with boredom and frustration. Not a smartphone was heard chiming a call or text message.

Certain things happen in a live music situation that can only happen in such a situation: there is a brain-body reaction that builds social connections between performers and audience, and among audience members. That social closeness, the spiritual and aesthetic intimacy of live music, is proscribed right now, and it would seem impossible to experience audience-free live streaming as something other than a distant (emotionally as well as geographically) spectacle.

Yet this CMS performance, the Miller Bach concert, and others I caught through the March 14–15 weekend, were acutely intimate. I had no connection with any other viewer, but the musicians gripped me through the screen and speakers. Their own playing was remarkably intimate in a way impossible with an audience—it was like a rehearsal, but more so, and better.

The playing was agile, sensitive, transparent. The musicians were completely open to the experience, sincere, eschewing all gesture and affect. There was an ongoing feeling that every line and phrase was part of a seminar, relaxed but with focused energy, every word not only spoken with meaning but placed in the most perfect grammatical and syntactical structure.

In rehearsal, the musicians will offer each other their ideas about the music by shaping their attacks, dynamics, rise and fall of a melody, all the basic details of musicianship.

Nothing is settled, everything is full of life. That was happening in the String Trio, and that was only happening because the musicians had only their own pleasure and satisfaction to play for.

Old rituals die hard, and after each work, the players got up to bow toward the empty chairs. This was touching, a gesture of both joy and humility that had me spontaneously clapping (and I'm sure I was not alone). Most remarkable was that after playing the world premiere of Alexandra du Bois's gorgeous, haunting *Heron. Rain. Blossom.*, the composer climbed the stage, greeted the musicians with silent gestures of thanks, and then herself bowed to the empty room.

Quarantine Hall, then, turned out to be a fantastic venue for music. The cameras and microphones didn't just invite in viewers, the musicians themselves did. They put their absolute trust in the music they were making and exposed themselves, at least as performers, with an immediate and unmediated engagement infrequently found in anyone other than infants. I'm sure when we can all gather together again, that social contact will be like water in the desert, but I already know I'm going to miss Quarantine Hall.

GEORGE GRELLA is the *Rail's* music editor.



Ben LaMar Gay. Photo courtesy of the Knockdown Center.

LISTENING IN

Outline: A Festival for All Seasons

BY SCOTT GUTTERMAN

The Knockdown Center is a former window and door-frame factory in Maspeth, Queens, that has been transformed into a multi-purpose arts center. It has hosted concerts and exhibitions in the past, but has now taken a big step forward by starting to produce events of its own. One of these is a new series called Outline, which began on Leap Day with an event called Outline: Winter. The name refers to the products the factory once produced (doors and windows “outline” a space), as well as a “structure that can be filled in and transformed radically, depending on what's held inside.” Based on its initial presentation, this looks to be a serious festival that doesn't stint on pleasure.

Stepping into the cavernous space on a seasonally frigid night, the visitor

was greeted first by several art installations. These included installations by Catalina Ouyang and Dakota Gearhart. Ouyang's is called *it has always been the perfect instrument* and features a central figure with a distressed expression and multiple rows of breasts, an upended couch, and a screen that drips out individual words, suggesting fragmentary evidence regarding an unknown crime. Gearhart presented *The Sextant of the Rose*, which, in the artist's words, “investigates beauty as economic capital.” Manipulated video imagery of roses is projected onto a variety of surfaces. In one of these, poetic phrases are wound into spirals, speaking of the individual set amidst the masses—being one of “the numbing billions,” yet individuated like the singular flower. Gearhart herself is a florist, and she deconstructs the rose's meanings and reconstructs its presence in myriad ways.

The two stages were set by an immersive, glittering tinsel installation by Aya Rodriguez-Izumi that set an ideal tone, evoking an otherworldly realm through the most economical means. Performing primarily on synthesizer, Rena Anakwe opened the series with an invocation that established the wide parameters for what was to follow. As an artist who works with sound, visual materials, and scent, she was

well suited to the task of suggesting a range of possibilities. What began in layers of electronic exploration wound toward a ritualistic playing of several gongs, gesturing toward inner and outer worlds at once. The night was launched.

Composer and multi-instrumentalist Ben LaMar Gay was next. Working alongside instrumentalist Rob Frye, he performed a restlessly inventive set that was as likely to stop time as to swing it. Coming out of a Chicago jazz-based tradition that reaches back to the Art Ensemble of Chicago and beyond, Gay investigated, as he described it, “sound and color and all that shit.” He and Frye employed a variety of strategies and voices, ranging from a sludgy blues chug to a kind of Caribbean futurist aesthetic to the simplicity and possibility of the breath. Their instrumentation varied widely, too, with Gay occasionally crooning (at one point latching onto the phrase, “Like it always do”) or blowing a modified cornet, and Frye tapping on an object that resembled a bicycle wheel (evoking a synthesized Duchamp) as well as a flute and

other instruments. The net effect of all this free-ranging experimentation was what poet Frank O'Hara called "sleeping on the wing," spanning the worlds of conscious and unconscious, combining it all into a deeply personal conceptual groove. Gay is highly touted for his originality, and his set definitely lived up to the hype.

For the next set, Don Slepian performed solo on keyboards, a one-person piano whirlwind who was ready to incorporate and interpolate familiar themes into unfamiliar, wide-ranging explorations. Described as "a computer engineer turned ambient artist," his playing acknowledged the central role of the keyboard in creating recognizable melodies, which were then interpolated and newly refracted. At times he would consciously "overload" a classic, sugar-rushing and complicating it, moving freely from Beethoven to "Bei Mir Bist du Schoen," taking "When You Wish Upon a Star" and exploding it. He even played the showman and turned to the audience for requests; when someone asked for "Clair de Lune," he played it in several styles, from straight to bombastic. In person, he gave off the air of a polymath academic, with a refreshing lack of pretense, but his playing showed a mind and hands that were full of invention.

The critic Whitney Balliett once called jazz "the sound of surprise," but the biggest surprise of the night was a pure pop confection called *Patience*. Fronted by songwriter and lead singer Roxanne Clifford, formerly of the band Veronica Falls, she took the proceedings in an entirely different direction. A simple blue neon sign spelled out the group's name, and Clifford, wearing a tam o'shanter and singing in a beautifully plain, affectless voice, led the three-piece band in a fantastic evocation and updating of '80s British electro-pop. With synths creating a soundtrack punctuated with bursts of electric guitar, *Patience* brought in a whole different sound. Certain phrases lingered in the air—"all the girls melt into one," "only memories now"—and cast a melancholic glow, evoking the deadpan, tamped-down emotionalism of Depeche Mode and New Order. I could have listened for hours, but they cut the set short with a charming, "Sorry, that's all we know."

The last act I caught was solo synthesist Katie Gately, who performed dense sound designs from *Loom*, her self-released latest recording, a tribute to her recently deceased mother. With her plaintive vocals floating in the mix, she managed to integrate pop and experimental approaches, suggesting aspects of Kate Bush filtered through her own distinctive sensibility. "This one isn't a song yet," she said at one point: "We'll see." It was intriguing to imagine where it was headed.

I didn't stick around for headliners Debby Friday, Boy Harsher, and John Maus, but I got my fill just the same. Following this initial showcase, *Outline* is planning to return with spring, summer, and fall presentations. The Knockdown Center may be a long way from the closest train line, but based on its initial presentation, *Outline* is a festival that is well worth the journey.

SCOTT GUTTERMAN has written about art and music for *Artforum*, *GQ*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and other publications. His most recent book is *Sunlight on the River: Poems about Paintings, Paintings about Poems* (Prestel, 2015). He is deputy director of Neue Galerie New York and lives in Brooklyn.



Fitchádu. Photo from artist's Bandcamp page.

Dance Punks Punk Dance

BY STEVE ERICKSON

Several recent albums fulfill a venerable and necessary tradition; they get down and protest at the same time, connecting dance music to the anger and sonic textures of punk. The artists and their music may belong to an existing lineage, but their music also represents a punk-revival rebellion against the current and pervasive homogenized version of dance music.

EDM has become an umbrella term for a field with several dozen sub-genres, but it also describes a culture that pasteurized a sound originally created by gay African-American men into party music for straight white bros. The resistance implicit in '90s rave culture, where being an equal participant in an audience (often with an Ecstasy-enhanced sense of community) replaced worshipping a rock star onstage, got lost as DJs became superstars and raves turned into massive EDM festivals. Marshmello, Diplo, and the Chainsmokers had pop hits with gratingly empty music while more creative producers like Yaeji, Galcher Lustwerk, and Marie Davidson, and innovative styles like gqom and footwork remain niche tastes. If this scenario resembles mainstream rock music circa 1975, it's no wonder that a revolt is in the works.

The punk aesthetic of Pelada's *Movimiento Para Cambio* (2019) stems both from its simplicity and the anger of Chris Vargas's vocals and lyrics. Additionally, Vargas and the harsh drum machine programming drown out producer Tobias Rochman's keyboards, which provide simple melodies or droning chords (fake-string patches and rave piano riffs are favorites of the group). Rochman amplifies the impact of Vargas's voice by adding a new filter or cranking up the volume on the beat. "Habla Tu Verdad," the album's catchiest song, spins on an arpeggio played on tuned percussion. Vargas, who identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns, sings in Spanish about surveillance culture, the inescapability of global capitalism, and feminism. Even the choice of that language, reflecting Vargas's Colombian heritage, has political overtones. While it's far from uncommon in contemporary pop music, Pelada, who live

in Montréal, have opted not to use either of Canada's two official languages.

At age 65, Cabaret Voltaire member Stephen Mallinder returns as part of the trio Wrangler. Their third album, *A Situation* (2020), looks back to the '80s with a hard, stripped-down sound. But its lyrics are even more concerned with the failures of online culture than Pelada's. Wrangler throws out cynical critiques of the way the Internet has made us more depressed and alienated, sung in brief lines whose concision mirrors tweets, over music that recalls Cabaret Voltaire's *The Crackdown* (1983). But there's a funny irony to "Machines Designed (To Eat You Up)," which lays out its fear of technology over a robotic beat created on synthesizers and drum machines. Next to the power of Google and Facebook, Wrangler almost seems nostalgic for the televangelists and Islamic fundamentalists who inspired the equally paranoid albums Cabaret Voltaire released in the early '80s.

Producer Nicolas Jaar has many projects, but in the past few years he has concentrated on his *Against All Logic* alias. His first album *2012 - 2017* (2018) consisted of first-rate but fairly conventional house music. The second album, *2017 - 2019*, and non-album singles "Illusions of Shameless Abundance" and "Alucinao" (all 2020), go in a direction that's far more abrasive and modern-sounding. "Illusions of Shameless Abundance" and "If You Can't Do It Good, Do It Hard" both feature vocals from punk poet Lydia Lunch, layering her voice throughout the song. On "Alucinao," the vocals get pitch-shifted and chopped up into a blur. Jaar's production client FKA Twigs, who sings alongside Estado Unido, is barely recognizable on the song's second half. Where *2012 - 2017* embraced house music's standard promise of release on the dance floor, *2017 - 2019* lives up to its title, holding up a mirror to the dystopian world we're living in right now.

Lisbon-based singer/producer Scúru Fitchádu takes elements from punk: furious, guttural vocals, distorted bass guitar, and high-speed tempos. But he also draws on his background from Cape Verde, using beats and melodies from its funaná music, as well as influences from drum'n'bass. He sings in Cape Verdean Creole. In an odd way, his mix of a punk aesthetic and folk roots recalls the Pogues, down to the way

he places accordions where a conventional rock band would use guitar. Other inspirations pop up: Fitchádu uses both African hand percussion and drumming on metal, while his spoken word samples from Black activists and sirens evoke the Bomb Squad's production for Public Enemy and Ice Cube.

In interviews, Fitchádu—whose real name is Marcus Veiga and who has also worked under the name Sette Suijidade—espouses a post-genre aesthetic grounded in growing up listening to hip-hop, punk, heavy metal and dance music simultaneously. He proclaims, "This is not easy music. It is music of emotions and combat. I do not pretend to make people feel good. I want them to truly feel what is being done."

His debut album *Un Kuza Runhu* (2020) really gets into high gear with "Sorriзу Margôs." The song begins and ends with a sample of a man saying "Upset the established order and everything becomes chaos," and then loops a man screaming, "Don't shoot!" through the song's first half. Rather than becoming the audio equivalent of TV news broadcasts that loop violence against Black people into numbing B-roll, the song remains genuinely harrowing. Fitchádu's vocals and production create an atmosphere that enhance its horror, rather than letting it fade into the background.

In its summary of the music of the last decade, the *Guardian* ran an article about the decolonization of dance music, praising the cross-continental pan-African NON collective and their Mexican counterpart NAAFI. Jaar, Pelada and Fitchádu all live in North America or Europe, but their music reflects their heritage in the global South. Jaar's use of the English language often turns it into another element in his music rather than centering it as the source of meaning, even when he samples Beyoncé. The concept of punk as rebellion has spread beyond a band—usually, white men—playing short, fast songs on guitars; one can hear it in rappers like JPEGMAFIA, Denzel Curry and Rico Nasty. The music discussed here represents another welcome expansion of its ideals.

STEVE ERICKSON is a critic and filmmaker who lives in New York and writes for *Gay City News*, the *Nashville Scene*, *Cineaste*, the *Quietus*, and *Kinoscope*.



Peter van Huffel. Photo by Lajos Somogyi/Bands Through The Lens/Budapest Music Center.

Opus Jazz Club, Budapest, Hungary, February 26–29, 2020

BY MARTIN LONGLEY

Opus Jazz Club is part of the Budapest Music Center, located within an old apartment block that was so radically converted that it's now an almost completely new building. It lies just a five minute walk from the Danube, around a quiet corner from one of Budapest's famed run-off café bars. The original courtyard provides the old stone walls for what's now a roofed concert hall, and the BMC also houses rehearsal rooms, an active archive, and a recording studio. Founded in 1996, the organization was originally nomadic, using a variety of venues, and initiating its own record label, mostly dedicating itself to adventurous jazz and contemporary classical music.

Academy professor, trombonist, and gig promoter László Gőz had a dream of the BMC becoming a complete, multi-faceted entity, independent in its own home. This fantasy gradually developed into a pragmatic, entrepreneurial reality, finally opening in 2013. Viewing such an impressive edifice-of-art, there could be the assumption that the BMC is basking in a bank-bursting stream of state funding, but although it receives a certain percentage of support, most of its existence is based around successful financial strategies designed to generate regular income. The Opus Jazz Club also serves food, and is open for lunchtime and extra-musical gobbling. In the daytimes, the concert hall and surrounding areas are regularly hired out for business gatherings that look like mini trade-fairs.

Opus presents jazz gigs on an average of five nights per week, its ground level acting as a mezzanine, with the main stage area squatting down in the basement. With its rows of tables, sonic warmth, and general aura being redolent of New York's own Jazz

Standard club, Opus is a fine haunt, with a diverse set of bookings. Your scribe was lurking around the BMC corridors for a week, and the most bruising band on view was Gorilla Mask, the latest in a long line of post-Zorn troublemakers, slashing together saxophonic blurts and time-tangling riffage structures.

This Berlin trio's latest release, their fourth in a decade, is available on the prolific, imaginative, and long-soldiering Portuguese label Clean Feed, who used to present regular festivals here in NYC. Opus favors two sets, like most jazz joints, so Gorilla Mask could spew their chops and rest thoughtfully, resuming for an even wilder second shot.

The opening strike of "Caught In A Helicopter Blade" was already fully agitated, with Peter Van Huffel dunking his baritone saxophone in a pedal effects whirlpool, navigated by his wah-wah, whilst electric bassist Roland Fidezius produced chorded swirls, mostly concentrating on his higher strings. They could only follow that with "Rampage," alto saxophone negotiating angular progressions, bass given keyboard textures, drummer Rudi Fischerlehner clacking maraca in one hand, all three players tightly percussive. "Avalanche" and album title track "Brain Drain" both highlighted a certain amount of bass/drums breakdown, but the uncaged brutality of "Barracuda" allowed Van Huffel to display some nimble baritone contortions. "Hammerhead" was a savagely slashed-up Danube waltz, with rapid alto licks, looped and surface-noised bass, and then a primal saxophone expelling announced "Forgive Me, Mother." Combining exhilaration and laughs, Van Huffel climaxed with "The Nihilist," as the titles accumulated as much weight as the actual sonics, Fidezius getting close to Jack Bruce territory with his singing runs. Only the encore of "Iron Lung" could ram our bruised corpses over the hill, in this ballad-less evening of precision mayhem.

Other nights offered softer sonics, although most acts would seem tender sitting next to the Gorilla. Percussionist András Dész led his fellow Hungarians, the Rangers, in an album release session for *einschließlich* (2020) on BMC's own label. They recorded in a forest, with Dész discovering natural wood/stone/water percussion implements, although he decided that this Opus live realization would use a drum kit, even though this was a quirky, minimalist manifestation, with not much more than a snare, cajon, cymbal, and hi-hat. They opened with saxophonist Ávéd János promenading along the club's gallery, bassman Mátyás Szandai and acoustic guitarist Márton Fenyvesi gradually impinging on the smeared edges. The latter had a truckload of pedals, so his axe was acoustic in name only, not output. Dész enjoys handclaps and breath sounds, but slightly overused these tactics over the gig's course, as the music moved into sheltered spaces. A couple of therapeutic screams jolted all into a free-form outcry, with bowed bass and strafed guitar, prompting lift-off, with the leader utilizing looped mbira and a metal milk jug, used like an Indian clay pot *ghatam*.

The next evening, all of the Axiom band members had higher profiles than their leader, another sticks-man, the Bosnian Derjan Terzic. His well-familiar crew was Chris Speed (reeds), Bojan Z (keyboards), and Matt Penman (bass). Who can tell, nowadays, whether a New York or Serbian player actually lives in Berlin, or Paris, or Budapest, now that bands are becoming increasingly international, and permanently on-the-road?

Axiom played a reasonably direct post-Tim Berne form of jazz, but they saved up all of their greatest tunes for the second set, which was twice as good as the already fine first set. They have an equality of the weaving process, all four interleaved in intricacy, as pairs might connect, or all four would solo while retaining the group

vision. They were debuting new numbers for a disc to be recorded in following days, and this tightness foretold exciting results.

The compositions tended towards linear flow, along a set timeline, pulse bass mixed with rattle drums and jabbing piano, Speed pouring honeyed notes on tenor. Bojan Z concentrated more on acoustic piano, when compared to ratios with his other outfits, and when he did touch Fender Rhodes, it was mostly just with his right hand. Terzic unboxed his glock(-enspiel, not firearm), establishing a Louis Thomas Hardin gleam, Speed shaping dignified notes, Z embarking on an elaborate solo. But was he Moondog, Mozart, or Monk? For the closing "Outcry," Mister Z turned his full attention to a whacked-out, full-burn distorted-Rhodes solo, such a climax increasingly apparent as a natural part of his recent performances.

On Saturday, a Hungarian duo of pianist Károly Binder and reedman Mihály Borbély sprinkled a folk seasoning over their jazz dialogue, creating an imaginary soundtrack element with a highly visual nature. Borbély's spread included tarogato, bass clarinet, and a large Slovakian instrument that looked like an altered didjeridu, with finger holes drilled and a mouthpiece tied to its exterior. This was in fact a *fujara*, a shepherd's flute in its largest manifestation. Binder tended towards a funky roots stride, frequently following the melodies issuing from Borbély's horns. This structural repetition was the only slight marring of their sensitive, intuitive set of quick-witted conversations. As we can see, Opus boasts a dynamic range of local Hungarian, general European, and stray American artists, all exploring the unlikely interstices of swing.

MARTIN LONGLEY is frequently immersed in a stinking mire of dense guitar treacle, trembling across the bedsit floorboards, rifling through a curved stack of gleaming laptoptery, picking up a mold-speckled avant jazz platter on the way, all the while attempting to translate these worrying eardrum vibrations into semi-coherent sentences. Right now he pens for *The Guardian*, *Jazzwise* and *Songlines*.



Oxana Chi with Layla Zami in *Neferet iti* at SIPA Festival, Surakarta, 2015. Photo: Bambang Pudya.

IN CONVERSATION

OXANA CHI AND LAYLA ZAMI with Gillian Jakab

Channeling the forgotten history of Tatjana Barbakoff, and more, through ‘body memory’



Waldemar Flaig, Tatjana Barbakoff, 1927. Franziskanermuseum Villingen.

Just before I sat down to interview Oxana Chi and Layla Zami about their work on Tatjana Barbakoff, a Jewish dancer who persevered to perform and spread hope amid the rise and reign of European Nazism, I’d been to see Taika Waititi’s film *Jojo Rabbit*. It was striking coincidence because the theme of dance as resistance figures prominently.

Women in *Jojo Rabbit* do what they can to resist. Rosie is part of the organized resistance—she surreptitiously posts anti-war leaflets and has taken into hiding a young Jewish girl named Elsa—but also wages a personal one. Throughout the film, she counteracts young Jojo’s Hitler youth brainwashing with humor and joy; she dances in the living room, dances along the river. “Life is a gift. We must celebrate it. We have

to dance to show God we are grateful to be alive,” Rosie tries to teach Jojo. Her urging words, “Dancing is for people who are free. It’s an escape from all this,” sets up the film’s sub-motif of dance as freedom, culminating in the final scene after Germany has been liberated from the Nazis. As the realization of freedom sinks in, Jojo asks Elsa what they do now. She moves one shoulder, then the other, until she’s rocking back and forth, Jojo following, to the German language version of David Bowie’s “Heroes.”

As we learn through Chi’s dance remembering Barbakoff, *Through Gardens* (2008), and the documentary of its making (2014), dance as a form of perseverance and resistance is not just the stuff of fiction. Tatjana Barbakoff, a now much-forgotten historical figure, did just that, at great personal risk. Like Rosie, Barbakoff danced as long as she could in the face of hate during the Holocaust. A dancer from Russia (now Latvia) of Jewish and Chinese descent, Barbakoff moved to Germany and had a successful career performing throughout literary cabarets and theaters in the 1920s and early ’30s. Her solo dances combining ballet, Chinese dance, and modern German Expressionist choreography seemed to have enraptured audiences as well as many artists who have painted her portrait. In 1933, as the Nazi regime rose to power, Barbakoff fled to France where she continued to dance publically and draw press for many years despite darkening times. By the ’40s, as the situation became dire, she left Paris and took refuge on the Côte d’Azur where she was eventually captured, sent to Auschwitz, and murdered.

Chi, a German-Nigerian dance artist, filmmaker, and curator, discovered the legacy of Tatjana Barbakoff in 2007 through an exhibition catalogue she stumbled upon at a library. The 2002 August Macke Haus exhibition was one of the programs curated over the years by historian Günter Goebbels in collaboration with German museums, shedding some light on an obscured figure in dance history. Chi, feeling a strong draw to and communion with Barbakoff, choreographed *Through Gardens* (2008) named after one of the dancer’s own solos. The performance brings Barbakoff to life, embodies her story, and filters it through Chi’s own present. Chi works closely with her wife, Layla Zami, a French performance scholar and artist of Jewish-Russian-German and Afro-Caribbean-Indian descent. Zami has been a Resident Artist with Oxana Chi Dance since 2010, and has contributed to several performance and film projects. Chi’s *Through Gardens* inspired Zami’s dissertation on notions of memory, movement, and diaspora, entitled *PerforMemory: Moving Through Diasporic Dancescapes in the 21st Century*.

Ahead of a now-postponed performance of *Through Gardens* at the Performance Project @ University Settlement (rescheduled to November 6 & 7, 2020), I sat down with Chi and Zami to discuss Jewish dance ancestor Barbakoff, current projects, and their ongoing collaboration.

GILLIAN JAKAB (RAIL): You recently co-curated the Celebration of Women dance evening at the International Human Rights Arts Festival in December and are working together on many performance projects. But you two have been working together as partners in life and art for some time. What’s the story of how you met?

OXANA CHI: I invited Layla to attend my performance *Through Gardens*, and then we started talking. Layla was in film school at the FilmArche Berlin at that time. It was an independent self-organized school, a

new model that I liked. I wanted to shoot a film, a documentary about *Through Gardens*, and my process of working on that piece. My focus is very deeply on forgotten women in history. I had an invitation to perform in a festival in Surakarta, Indonesia. It’s a big open-air festival and I wanted to shoot the first scene of the film over there. I saw a short film by Layla, which was very good. So I asked her to join me in Indonesia and be the camerawoman.

We worked four years on that film. We started working on other projects, too. Layla is a multi-talented artist; I listened to her play saxophone and kalimba and really liked it, so we collaborated that way too.

LAYLA ZAMI: Yes, we met through Oxana’s dance. I had seen posters advertising *Through Gardens* all over Berlin—I spent half of my life in Berlin. Then I got to meet Oxana at a dance evening held by a French company in Berlin, that was also on the topic of memory. She gave me a flyer for her performance and I said, “Oh, I saw this poster. I really wanted to go to that show,” because it was about this figure, Tatjana Barbakoff. It had to do with German history, a Jewish figure; I myself am of Jewish descent.

So I came and saw that piece at the Werkstatt der Kulturen theater in Berlin. At that time Oxana was also curating a monthly dance series called TANZnews and producing the annual Salon Qi. I was really mesmerized by it; it just blew my mind. I mean I loved dance before, but it opened new ways to connect with dance. I didn’t imagine at that point that I would later do a PhD inspired by this piece about the connections between dance and memory. And that I’d be a resident artist with the company. It all started there. So *Through Gardens* is special for me.

What, for me, is most exciting about her company is that it’s really interdisciplinary and when you look at her older work, she

has always worked with live musicians and scenic designers.

RAIL: I think in one of the materials you're described as a French-German artist-scholar duo, but you have so many more hyphens! In terms of all the different disciplines that each of you practice: musician, scholar, filmmaker, dance-maker, but then also, in terms of your multicultural backgrounds that you mentioned. How do these identities tie into the work that you make?

ZAMI: In terms of our multicultural backgrounds, in New York it's not unusual because if we actually really look at people's histories, there are so many people who have such diverse backgrounds—across race, because white people can be just as mixed ethnically as people of color. So New York feels like home in this sense. The influence my background has on my interests started with childhood. When I was a child I was already interested in so many different histories; I would read as much about the African American Civil Rights movement as about the history of the Holocaust. And so obviously that informs how you then develop your intellect and your consciousness. I think it gave me a certain open-mindedness, but also I would add that we travel a lot, so regardless of where we're from—

RAIL: Yeah, chosen geographies as well inherited ones?

ZAMI: Right. For instance, traveling to Asia through meeting Oxana and working on this project was my first time going there. And that was really inspiring. When we get an invitation to perform somewhere, we try to stay a little longer to see the culture and learn more.

CHI: Yes, that's true. And I started to choreograph *Through Gardens* when I was traveling in China and Taiwan and Hong Kong. I was studying Tai Chi and Qi Gong there. After I came back from South China, Tatjana Barbakoff came to me, in a sense. She's half Chinese. She just knocked at my door and she said, "Now it's the time to dance about me." [laughter] I said, "I will do that, because I still have the spirit from China in me, the moves, the people, the languages." So I started to choreograph. I drew from modern styles, some classical ballet, and a very abstract Qi Gong and Tai Chi and also Kung Fu. So I suddenly fused my whole range of movement styles and what came out was really beautiful.

RAIL: Beyond what we know about Tatjana Barbakoff's biography, I'm curious to hear you speak a little bit more about *Through Gardens* and your relationship to her story.

CHI: Even during the Third Reich, she emigrated to Paris and continued to perform. It was not easy. It was almost a miracle that she was discussed in the press because Germany had already started to occupy Europe more and more. Jewish people weren't allowed to work; she didn't have the proper working permission, but still she managed to do her dance.

And that I find very amazing because it shows us all that you can sometimes have this power to perform and to transform even the bad to something beautiful. It's always good that people remember this.

Especially this year because it's the 75th anniversary of the official end of World War II. So many people lost their families. Remembering Barbakoff's dancing gives people hope that there will be the next sunrise and you still can try to continue. It doesn't matter what kind of administrations we now have around the world. Art helps in this healing. It was that way, I think, for Tatjana Barbakoff; [art] was always to rise up. She said something like—there's a sentence in German: *Es wird schon irgendwie weiter gehen. Wir dürfen nur einfach nicht den Kopfhängen lassen.*

ZAMI: "Everything will keep going somehow. We just need to not let our heads hang down."

CHI: It's a very beautiful sentence in German. She lifted people up.

In the context of now, it's really important for us to show this piece in New York. This artist was killed in Auschwitz, and although she was famous during her time—she was on magazine covers; she inspired many famous artists who painted her portrait—she's been left out of the official dance history. She's not remembered today. What happened instead, is that there was a Jewish woman who was married to a painter Gert Heinrich Wollheim who was friends with Barbakoff at the time, he worked closely with her, and brought the costumes to New York. In this way, she had a connection to New York. She also tried to emigrate to the U.S. and she didn't get permission, but she helped other people survive. Those are also stories that are not being told. In this case, a woman was the one helping out, but a male artist got to survive and she didn't.

ZAMI: I mean, we know the history of the U.S.; they denied many people entry. They sent ships back. It's interesting to show this piece right now because I see a lot of people posting on social media about certain things as if they were new. Certain people are only now becoming aware that there are people here who are on a visa, or have complicated immigration situations and that this impacts their life in a very daily way. Some people are not aware that this is nothing new. I mean it's the story of this country. Everybody's an immigrant here except the people who are really native to this continent. It will be interesting to see how people also react to the historical figure of Barbakoff in this context.

CHI: *Through Gardens* feels timeless in a way. It's about migration and its restrictions—it's always relevant. It's also about how you can have success as an artist, and how you can fall and you can rise up again. People who didn't know anything about the piece, have often told me they saw a lot of things about their own lives in the piece. The dance is abstract. There's a multilayered landscape of feelings from which everybody can take something. It's not as if I impose the story and you have to get this story.

RAIL: Yeah. The viewer brings something to it. I'm sure that the experience of it for people shifts all the time. Historical trauma, exile, migration, how does the art form of dance work to communicate these themes?

ZAMI: I was just thinking about that because the reason the piece left such a strong imprint on me is that obviously growing up in France and Germany, stories were being told about that period of time, about the Holocaust, but I had never seen these stories being told through dance. I had read things; obviously you see movies and even other forms of visual art and even theater pieces. I will say that Oxana's dance is very theatrical; it has dramaturgy and you can see a narrative. But as she was saying, it is more abstract, especially because there is no text in that piece.

There were two things that struck me. The first one was that she emphasizes resistance. Often when you see depictions of traumatic histories, there is this perception of the victors and the people who are often depicted as victims. It was not the case in that piece at all. There's a sense of agency to the protagonist. I think that dance plays a role in that because even just the fact that you see this actual person onstage, moving and embodying the story, gives a different perspective to her story. And also through the dramaturgy, through the way that she's building up the story. The second thing that struck me most was the diversity of the movements. So that it was clear that Oxana was borrowing from very different techniques that I hadn't seen brought together in that way before.

CHI: I see sometimes that people like to copy my movements and choreographies. I was very surprised at first and not happy about it; but maybe I have to take it as a compliment.

ZAMI: It's the same with Barbakoff; she impacted the dance scene in Germany and inspired many of her contemporaries. But while other dancers entered history, her name is not cited as an influence. In *Through Gardens*, Oxana does not really reconstruct Barbakoff's movements, rather, she's telling a new story inspired by her life and dance.

CHI: It's also not possible to really copy her and reconstruct because, as of now, they don't have too much documentation of it. They're still looking and they always find new pictures and things, but as of now they haven't found video material. It might be in some archive, but we don't know where. Maybe in 10 years, 20 years when all of the archives are open. Now slowly in Germany they've started to open the archives. It was the law that you have to keep a person's archive closed over 90 years after their birth.

RAIL: Maybe your dancing will increase the interest in her legacy. I want to ask you about your other upcoming performance program, *Food for Thought* at Danspace [now postponed to 2021].

CHI: The *Food for Thought* program is a curatorial commission by Danspace Project, in partnership with the International Human Rights Art Festival. Layla and I chose the topic of "the Root and the Divine." We invited other artists to perform. We will have LAVA; they do feminist acrobatic dance and they have this piece called the *A Goddessy*, which is a geological feminist survival story. At the end of the journey, the Traveler returns to the city sidewalks and a world that is

transformed by lessons. We will also have the Kalamandir Dance Company. They use Indian classical dance idioms, but then they totally transform it to something contemporary. And Tom Block, the founder of the International Human Rights Arts Festival, will speak about his concept of "prophetic activist art." We really appreciate the collaboration and communication with the festival and with Danspace Project, we're grateful for this great opportunity!

I will also be showing my own work: *Nefertiti*. It's about the Pharaoh queen and also about colonial looting of artwork. And I'll be premiering the full-length version of *Psyche*.

My dance *Psyche* deals with the soul and the psyche, and how they influence each other. I just finished choreographing the last part, which has not been shown yet. I've performed the first and second parts in Berlin. This scene came to me when we used to live in San Diego. I had a very strong feeling of "body memory" in my body; where it starts and where it goes and what it makes. And then, extended from my body memory to the body, to the people around me, the environment around me. Sometimes I'm surprised by myself, by what story comes out of this piece. I think it's a kind of spiritual piece. The dancing is very ethereal.

RAIL: It sounds like *Through Gardens* has more of a narrative, looking back at a historical subject, even though you said the biography, the story is abstract. This seems to be even more about feeling, more about an abstract phenomena, how you relate to yourself and the world.

CHI: Yeah. It's different from my other pieces.

ZAMI: It's very grounded. There's a lot of earthy energy in that piece, but it flows. And it has a lot to do with water. In our curatorial statement, we brought in metaphysical ideas and mythologies. Astrologist Chani Nicholas wrote that we are in a turning point. She says that the last 200 years were marked by the earth signs witnessing an unprecedented amount of human consumption of the Earth's resources, we're going to the sign of Aquarius. She emphasized that it is an air sign—which makes me think of the role of air and breathing in our current society. This shift shall bring a lot of transformation, and as a water bearer, it can hopefully help society change in a positive way. All of this resonates in Oxana's piece in my view. Her work has an Afro-futurist spirit, and it almost seems that when she created *Psyche*, she was anticipating the moment that we find ourselves living in now.

For information about watching the documentary *Dancing Through Gardens*, please e-mail: movingmemoryberlin@gmail.com

GILLIAN JAKAB is the dance editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.



Emma Pajewski, Philip Strom, Gwendolyn Gussman, and Dervla Carey-Jones in *People in the Sun*. Photo: Charles Roussel for Cherylyn Lavagnino Dance.

Tales of Hopper: The Additive Adaptation from Painting to Dance

BY HANNAH FOSTER

Goethe called architecture “frozen music.” While cathedral spires and musical crescendos both peak, it’s a fanciful sentiment. Dance to visual art, however, is a more literal translation. Degas’s early 19th century paintings of ballerinas freeze swirling skirts in oil pigment but don’t require us to jump between primary senses.

It’s a two dimensional movement snapshot—visual-to-visual—and we have plenty of examples. Night after night, Moulin Rouge dancer Jane Avril kicked her leg the same way she does in Toulouse-Lautrec’s 1893 lithograph of her. We move further from realistic representation in Francis Picabia’s cubist *Star Dancer and Her School of Dance* (1913). But the cerulean central figure with her tilted body and outstretched arms, legs frenetically fragmented, couldn’t be doing anything but dancing. Wassily Kandinsky’s *Dance Curves: On the Dance of Palucca* (1926) consists of line drawings based on German dancer and Mary Wigman student Gret Palucca’s reaching, angular movements.

But when it comes to the reverse adaptation—visual art to dance—we must do more digging. We might point to ancient Greek sculpture’s influence on Isadora Duncan—or least on her costuming. Coincidentally, while Kandinsky drew one Wigman student in Germany, he inspired another across the Atlantic. Upon seeing a Kandinsky painting in Chicago, Martha Graham took particular

note of “a slash of red against a field of blue” and thought, “I will dance like that.”¹ In her 1948 work *Diversion of Angels*—the specific dance influenced by Kandinsky²—a female dancer in red performs a repeated motif. She stands on her left leg in a tilt, outstretched arms parallel to her right leg’s nearly 180-degree extension. If indeed Graham saw the painting in 1922 as Anna Kisselgoff, former chief dance critic of the *New York Times*, claims, I imagine it could have been his painting *Untitled* from 1921. A bright red rod enters a blue amorphous shape at the same angle as the red dancer’s leg. The correlations here rely on line, color, and perhaps overall compositional energy. Graham’s *Diversion of Angels* is a short, plotless, piece, though it’s meant to express meditations on different stages of love. Kandinsky, considered to be one of the first abstract painters, believed that art didn’t have to represent specific objects in nature to inspire emotion in the viewer. He sought to move audiences with line, light, and form, even influenced by his own synesthesia between colors and music. It’s no surprise that he equated musical compositions to paintings and literally moved Graham to dance.

But if we are to compare modern plotless dances to abstract art, what about our need for stories? For representation of real life in both mediums and our evergreen fascination with human subjects? If story-less dances are to abstract art, can figurative, narrative paintings be inspiration for plot dance works?

I actually don’t agree with the term “narrative painting.” It’s used to describe historical paintings depicting widely known

(in the Western world) biblical tales or allegories, but also scenes of everyday life. Either way, “narrative” implies a story with a beginning, middle, and end, but a canvas can present only one scene in its entirety. The viewer must infer the rest. As described by John Rothenstein in an exhibition essay for *British Narrative Paintings*, a 1944 exhibition at the Tate in London that focused on domestic scenes: “It is, however, upon the interpretation of incident and of character...or even of mood...that the charm of the majority of the paintings depends.”³ In other words, we enjoy paintings with people interacting in day-to-day endeavors because we can project onto them.

Perhaps no artist’s work is more titillating in its suggestions of events about to unfold than that of 20th Century American artist Edward Hopper. In his widely known *Nighthawks* (1942), we see four subjects poised on the edge of interaction through the glass prow of a Flatiron-like building, said to be set in the West Village streets that Hopper roamed. The sole woman—carmine dress, lips, and hair, surrounded by men and nearest to one—stares at a small green object in her right hand. Her companion leans slightly towards her, his right hand holds a cigarette and is either just grazing the little finger of her left hand or about to.

Hopper’s subjects are either alone or close enough that it’s impossible that they wouldn’t be aware of each other. And because of his cinematic key lighting and cool shadows, we impose weighted adjectives: tense, lonely, eerie, melancholic. The sense of isolation rings glaringly true in our sudden age of social distancing.

Hopper unknowingly painted for the novel coronavirus era. Thus, a new danced adaptation, luckily coming weeks before bans on in-person performances, has significant resonance. In *Tales of Hopper*, a repertory dance work that Cherylyn Lavagnino Dance premiered at New York’s DiMenna Center for Classical Music in late February, Lavagnino and composer Martin Bresnick take on Rothenstein’s “interpretation of incident and of character” for Hopper’s oeuvre. Together they selected eight paintings for the piece’s vignettes, in order: *Morning Sun* (1952), *People in the Sun* (1962), *Gas* (1940), *New York Movie* (1939), *Office at Night* (1940), *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (1958), *Nighthawks*, and *Automat* (1927). Some of Lavagnino’s vignettes are personal; all take liberties. In *New York Movie* Lavagnino explains, “it was right out of my days of catering when I was in grad school. Here she is in the movie waiting on these people and I thought, she’s going to be a dancer. And that’s what she does. She’s trapped in this movie theater, bored out of her mind having a fantasy.”

The characters in *People in the Sun* start in Hopper’s painted stillness: a small cohort gazing at and basking in a cosmic light. Consistent with the painting, one man is distracted by his book, but Lavagnino soon reveals that the other viewers aren’t as enraptured by the sky as they might initially seem. The dancers jostle, giggle, and flirt, vying for the best viewing position or each other’s attention while the violinist punctuates the silence with brief refrains. Watching, I became wonderfully aware of the meta—my place amidst a room full of other fidgeting theater-goers.



Justin Faircloth and Corinne Hart in *Nighthawks*. Photo: Charles Roussel for Cherylyn Lavagnino Dance.



Claire Westby in *Automat*. Photo: Charles Roussel for Cherylyn Lavagnino Dance.

But it's in her last three vignettes that Lavagnino's adaptation reaches its emotional peak. In *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, the woman (depicted in the source painting with a chin cocked toward the man who faces her) passes the man a green note, which carries over into *Nighthawks* as clear evidence of the man's infidelity. Lavagnino has positioned this painting as the climax, and rather than bringing in *Nighthawks*'s other characters (the other man, the waiter), she creates a potent *pas de trois* between man, wife, and mistress. *Automat* is our resolution: the other woman is alone and broken, her missing glove the symbol of love lost.

In threading a narrative through these three canvases onstage, Lavagnino answers the questions we ourselves might have walking from painting to painting in an exhibition: what does it mean, who are the characters and what are their stories? She takes a 2D image and hits play.

Of course, it's not a play with fully written scenes using dialogue or narration. I don't think Hopper paintings—or any art object—offer enough for a worded theatrical treatment true to the source material's need for imaginative participation. Dance and art reside in the same ambiguous visual. We see only what is offered. We must interpret the rest.

Art history could be an endless source for dances, but I would argue for adapting the artworks themselves, not their artists' extensive backstories. Christopher Wheeldon's 2016 ballet *Strapless*, based on a book about John Singer Sargent and Amélie Gautreau, the sitter for Sargent's famous portrait *Madame X* (1884) tried to pack centuries into just 40 minutes. A dance piece like *Tales of Hopper*, focused solely on imagery rather than pages of dialogue and exposition that must be translated, is a succinct, poignant extrapolation of a scene,

perfectly mimicking our mind's own process in viewing visual art. I'd go so far as to opt for dances over captions on museum walls. Choreographer Silas Riener's response to Jackson Pollock's *Number 27* (1950) is as valid as any curator's. Jookin dancer Lil Buck performing before a Picasso, exploring cubist shapes with his own body, tells me more about the piece than academic speak ever could.

Art is communication, and adapting a single visual artwork into dance can help deepen our knowledge. We gain, rather than lose, in the translation. We can explore the true depths of body language by choreographing the 2D: giving weight to a snapshot's context and consequence. *Automat* should make us consider and respect another's inner life: a lone woman might not want company. At one moment in *People in the Sun*, the dancers turn their chairs upstage and arch so far over the chair-back that their eyes meet ours. They look at us as they might look at Hopper, asking us to empathize with, not just look at, art's subjects.

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Emma Judkins, Doug LeCours, Wendell Gray II, and Christine Bonansea in Pavel Zuštiak's *HEBEL*. Photo: Maria Baranova.

A Dancer's View: Pavel Zuštiak's *Hebel*

BY DOUG LECOIRS

In *Genesis*, Abel is the first human to die. Abel's name derives from the Hebrew "Hebel," a word found some 38 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes and the title of Pavel Zuštiak's latest work in which I am a performer. *Hebel* translates to vanity, emptiness, vapor, breath, absurdity, or fleetingness, among many other possible definitions. Murdered by his brother, Abel becomes the embodiment of the absence he's named for. With no motive given, we are forced to fill in that narrative gap ourselves, to make sense of the senseless.

There's a short scene in *Hebel* where I act out a murder. It's one of many micro-narratives that spring up throughout the first scene, in which the performers (Christine Bonansea, Wendell Gray II, Emma Judkins, and I) encounter, as if for the first time, a kind of blue-planet soundstage, a scenographic collaboration between Pavel and Keith Skretch. We find a collection of objects there—repurposed household tools and sports equipment, all covered in blue painter's tape—and we work, build, and play, sometimes together but mostly alone, to understand, extract, or invent meaning with them.

You can see me upstage right, striking someone with a stick, but you can't see my victim, obscured by a blue curtain hanging from the ceiling. You have to fill in the gap yourself. My weapon looks sort of like a blue femur bone, at least according to our lighting designer, Joe Levasseur. I do the deed three times, changing my approach each time like an actor responding to an invisible director. The first time, I'm a crazed killer in a bad horror movie. The second, I'm Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. The third time I just try to feel it, the force needed to strike down an invisible someone, the guilt when I emerge from my rage to realize what I've done. I stare at the blue blood on my hands—a Lycra suit I pull out from behind

the curtain and then wear for the rest of the scene—the skin of my fallen brother Abel. This kind of semiotic transference is the motor of the scene: a hockey stick becomes a guitar and then a gun; a blue soccer ball wrapped in gold mylar becomes a treasure.

It's a wild ride in there. There's so much to *do*, and once I feel comfortable in an idea or proposition I have to move on. As a performer, I can't know for sure what the audience will see, their own referential library at hand to help them fill in the missing pieces; how can I bring them with me through my experience while giving them that space? Meaning is autonomous and shifty, adhering momentarily to various objects only to slither away.

I'm writing this in Los Angeles, with a view of the Hollywood sign from my friend's apartment in Silver Lake. I have another three-part movie moment in the show, in which I perform three "tantrums" in a row, changing my approach each time. Through the three attempts, I move on a performative continuum that starts with pantomime and ends, hopefully, with pure feeling—from a child's tantrum to a mournful keen.

How can I embody the somatics of grief? How can I do the thing rather than show the thing? Part of what drew me to Pavel's process is a willingness to ask the big questions, with all their implicit impossibilities. *What are we all doing here? What are we left with at the end of it all?* What strikes me over a year into working with him is the levity I feel in the room despite the weight of these questions, perhaps based in a shared understanding that asking them is worthwhile. We don't have to be alone in the questions.

In one run of the section, I'm doing too much, *showing* rather than *doing*. Pavel asks me to channel Naomi Watts's audition scene in *Mulholland Drive*, and I tell him I'm always trying to channel Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive*. "Don't play it for real until it gets real," says the director in the

scene. What I find fascinating is how Watts's performance rises from the many layers of absurdity and artifice to turn the scene into one of the film's truest and most believable. I really try to do it, to become pure feeling, to give physical form to the vapors of emotion.

During a residency in Cambridge, I'm having crazy dreams. Emma, my roommate for the week, takes credit for this, her own vivid dreamscape seeping into mine. On the first night we both have dreams about our mothers (well, not exactly—in mine, my mother is a choreographer I work for and we're acting out a scene from *Mommie Dearest*. [1981]) Another night my dream is basically just an extension of the rehearsal we had that day, sleep providing the time to work on a transition our waking hours didn't allow.

The boundaries are blurring; the hours of rehearsals and meals and time spent over wine in the evening blend into one another. Christine's native French brings out my own (quite rusty) and Emma's (much sharper). We read our horoscopes from a copy of *Femme Actuelle* that Christine's mother sent from France. Wendell's next to us working on his Spanish on Duolingo.

Hebel has a rich nomenclature all its own. Different sections of the work are known among the team as "Glitch Limbs," "Alien Language," "Arrival," and "Pictograms." Christian Frederickson's sound score includes various words and short phrases that we recorded early in the process, words that contain the immensity of *Hebel*'s questions: "perfect loss," "stock futures," "love of your life," "contingency." Some of them are played backwards, and it's become a joke among the cast and crew to try to pronounce these indecipherable words. They become ear-worms for us, and we find ourselves quoting them incessantly backstage: the ones that stick sound something like "Poor Ralph" and "Weefarsil." None of us can remember the actual words.

Another dream: the cast is starting a band called *Perfect Loss*. I play the keytar, Wendell is on the keys (we need both, okay?), Emma serves as drummer-vocalist, and Christine's on bass. Our band looks range from basketball-player chic to pop-star cowboy to '60s mod to millennial Hugh Hefner. *Perfect Loss* plays originals and covers, our most popular being "Arrête, au Nom de L'amour," a French cover of "Stop, in the Name of Love."

We haven't actually started a band (yet) but I do feel like I'm in one. The questions *Hebel* asks are songs as old as time, but maybe we're singing them in a new language, yet to be invented. Being in this piece is an act of trust, trust in Pavel's vision and trust in our place in it. My internal experience doesn't always directly correlate to how it lands theatrically. We don't know how the viewer will fill in the gap, the *Hebel*, we are offering. We are working to build a delicate architecture on the land of this work, knowing it will collapse by the end of the show. We work with the tools of the past and present to imagine a future, dancing on wild terrain where meaning is continually made and unmade.

Hebel, a meditation on the fleeting nature of life and live performance created by Pavel Zuštiak and Palissimo Company, has been postponed from its original April 2020 premiere at NYU's Skirball Center until a later date due to concerns regarding the coronavirus pandemic.

DOUG LECOIRS is a Brooklyn-based choreographer, dancer, and writer.

Wendell Gray II, Christine Bonansea, and Doug LeCours in Pavel Zuštiak's *HEBEL*. Photo: Maria Baranova.





A still from Matias Piñeiro's *Isabella*, courtesy of the filmmaker.

IN CONVERSATION

MATIAS PIÑEIRO with Jessica Dunn Rovinelli

Isabella, Argentine director Matias Piñeiro's sixth feature, recently premiered at this year's Berlinale in the festival's new Encounters section, which was seemingly launched to offer a space in the already packed festival for aesthetically ambitious works that might tend more towards narrative than the films in the Forum often do. The film returns to many of Piñeiro's signatures—it revolves around a Shakespeare play (*Measure for Measure*), features his frequent actors María Villar and Agustina Muñoz, and is suffused with his films' typical loquaciousness and playful approach to form—but it also feels in many ways like a reset, a starting-anew. After a detour to his adopted New York City in Piñeiro's previous film, 2016's *Hermia and Helena*, *Isabella* returns to Buenos Aires and strips its narrative down to a time-shuffled tale of two actresses auditioning for the same role. Yet Piñeiro throws in a variety of new aesthetic, narrative, and formal gambits for good measure. There's a second playing with a James Turrell-esque set of warm color fields and cardboard frames, a mystical ritual involving twelve rocks painted various colors being thrown, and a newfound interest in color, most notably the color purple, which begins to seep into all aspects of the film's mise-en-scene.

JESSICA DUNN ROVINELLI (RAIL): You have multiple timelines going on in *Isabella* and temporality is shuffled. When you're watching the film it's very easy to follow the various timelines, but then at the same time you can't help but think of the different timelines of shooting: María Villar is pregnant, she's not pregnant, the actors' faces look different. One gets the sense of you going back to Argentina

repeatedly to shoot it. How did time and time loops start to come into the film? Did the production bring that out?

MATIAS PIÑEIRO: I think it's very simple, pragmatic. There are things that come up from the production system in which I work, which is full of limitations. Production becomes part of the mise-en-scene. I live in New York but work with

people in Buenos Aires. I teach during the school year so I only have time to work during my breaks when I can go to Buenos Aires. I don't have enough money because I don't have a full script, but we start. I can start by saying, "Let's go to Córdoba, I've never shot in nature."

I usually start with a premise, like the film is about this woman that wants to get the role of Isabella and never gets it. So, first episode: Córdoba, second episode: Buenos Aires, third episode, la la la. That was the idea, then you start making the movie and you start changing things. You don't have enough money to have the whole picture but you have a little, and a structure that is strong so you have to pick up more money in the middle. The production system stimulates my structures, my formal structures, my writing structures, to become more complex.

RAIL: This is your color film. Where did the color come from? What came first? The color or the painted rocks or the script?

PIÑEIRO: The thing that came first was the color purple, which was gradually applied to many areas. In purple I find this lack of certainty: is it purple, violet, lilac, fuschia? There are purples that you can define, but for me it's more unclear. I think subjectivity appears more strongly [with purple] than with orange. We could have made it with orange, but in the world of purple, I could distinguish different names. I even love this in translation: in Spanish, we say *violeta* for purple. In Argentina, nobody would say "purple." When I say *púrpura*, it's a little bit of a pain in the neck, because people would typically refer to *violeta* and there's that confusion. So I like that uncertainty, how the limits are very blurry with this particular color. My production designer, Ana Cambre, is very sensitive to color, so she's a perfect accomplice.

Then it came from a friend. An homage to Hugo Santiago, [a director] from Argentina. He passed away in 2018. His

last movie works with purple. He had this idea about a very flat color film, but with purple. When he came to New York, when I just moved there, we were walking in MoMA, [and] he was looking for a Hopper—that very famous Hopper that has a house on rails in the lower part of the canvas—and he was saying something about how the color was organized in regards to everything being monochromatic, but the chimney was a little too orange. He said the whole painting would be pretty flat, but then there would be one color, one hue that would be off, without calling great attention to it. I thought, "what does he mean by that?" And I took a photo of it. It stayed in my mind. In this movie, it's purple.

Another thing was that some years ago, parallel to all of this, there was an interview with my cinematographer, Fernando Lockett. He said he was pretty surprised that most filmmakers don't consider color much. They care about the acting, the framing, the movement, but not that much about color. And it's true, I've thought very simply about the way films look in a sense, and so I started thinking about color. All of this was happening at the same time: Hugo talking about color, doing his movie that took so long, Hugo decaying, Hugo disappearing, Hugo dying, and then I needed to make *Isabella*.

RAIL: Now that we have the colors, let's get to the rocks. Because suddenly we have these highly symbolic objects in your film, which I don't think we've seen before in your work. They become a center of gravity that Shakespeare and the actors and those little plays and riffs that are always in your films start to oscillate around. They start to take the color into them, and they have their own rituals. What sort of role did these rocks play?

PIÑEIRO: I have realized after making some films and talking to people that my films are very minimal, but I do charge them with a certain energy. The potato

stamp in *Viola* (2012), the letters, the postcards in *Hermia and Helena*, books—the books are not just something for you to say, “oh, this woman is educated,” they have an extra meaning. I’m still figuring it out. But it’s true that it’s more symbolic. I’ve not rejected symbols. It’s a little more polyvocal. It’s not anxiety, it’s not doubt. Throwing the stone is eliminating doubt in the logic of the ritual, but still it’s an embodiment of something that is moving, a little like the color purple. It’s true that it’s charged with meaning that is not just the meaning of a mere rock.

RAIL: [Laughs]

PIÑEIRO: I don’t even know how to describe it. The stone is still a stone, but it’s also a prop which sits a little funny because it becomes something. I also think it’s a little fetish. When we are framing we fetishize everything—the hand, or the face. With objects, I do that. They’re not random elements. In this film they have this inner meaning or intention of trying to convey this certain emotion of the character. Exactly what that is, I wouldn’t be able to say. It’s true that this character who desires things is frustrated, works around her frustration. She’s putting something into this stone. She’s putting her desire there. Structurally speaking it’s part of the script, it’s part of the plot, it’s part of the network that I do, shoot after shoot, to give *Isabella* a feeling of unity. The stones first appeared in the first thing we shot in Córdoba. I liked those shots so I decided to reproduce them, to make them appear again so as to connect these elements. In Córdoba we found them because we were in the mountains and we used them in the rehearsal. In the second shooting, we used them as a ritual. At that moment, I didn’t know what the ritual was going to be. On the third, they became the prop of the second play. And in the fourth, the stones don’t appear but they’re part of the play. From the mountains [of Córdoba], they became a prop we scripted.

Also there was a moment where I wanted the play they were doing to be a little Beckettian. I know that Beckett has all these things with stones, and so in the play that we did we tried to copy a little bit of that. I don’t know why I like this idea of painted rocks. They look a little bit absurd. It has to do with something that is absolutely natural but has this uneven shape. When you paint them, suddenly they become artificial. I like that paradox. Something that is part of the mountain, part of the land, and suddenly, you subvert it. You paint it purple so it becomes this weird element charged with something that you don’t know. When you paint something you take it out of its regular context.

RAIL: As an editor I have to ask, you have these four timelines and you use them very loosely, but the film is very sharply edited. When you’re working with your editor, what became the guiding measure for how you structure scenes, either internally or between each other, and what guides a cut? What is the thought behind a cut in this film?

PIÑEIRO: Yeah, and they’re very narrative in a way. And it’s very rigorous. I edited

with paper. I printed all the shots and did little paper things. I would work on the floor because I didn’t have a script that went from scene 1 to scene 85, but I would know if one shot came before another. So I would be able to make those relationships with every shot, so for me it was a little bit like doing a puzzle. I actually bought a 1,000-piece puzzle of a Pollock painting. I failed big time in doing it, but I feel that the exercise was similar. When you’re doing a puzzle and you find a red and you’re like, “Okay, let’s follow the red.” You produce lagoons, what I call “zones.” Maybe a script writer would refer to them as acts but I like the idea of zones, or lagoons. This goes before this, this goes before that, and you can see groups of shots that were related to each other and then you start playing, like, “Okay, let’s put this here.” And then I would have a big picture. And as I was doing it in color, I could also see color.

At first, I wanted to have all the timelines [at once], and then I realized that was a big mistake, that it was too confusing. Future Two could not be introduced before Future One. Even though everything is mixed, there is a chronology that needs to be kept. I do like confusion and I do think that confusion can produce ambiguity and a space to stimulate the viewer, [but] I think you have to measure it because it can be confusing in a bad way. I did want to have a structure that was a little bit crazy but that you could follow. Maybe it takes you time to follow, but then at the very end of the movie it’s very smooth sailing. Chronological time becomes irrelevant in a way, no? Because it’s more about a cyclical experience of time. Chronological time becomes banal. So I think that after a while the movie gives the viewer the confidence to be okay, relaxed. Color helps, because it gives the sense of “this relates somehow.”

We were very lucky that María was pregnant. That also changed things. That helped to put other topics on the table like women at work, women under desire, women becoming mothers, how is motherhood working, where do we put motherhood? And I think that it was interesting how that appeared and we dealt with it. I like that she was auditioning for a role as a nun with a huge belly. It’s very, “I’m not going to stop doing things because I’m having a baby.” Everything that reality brings to you should be incorporated.

RAIL: I couldn’t help thinking about age. This is a film that starts to feel like a film that deals with the past. You’ve worked with the same people for so many years and they’re starting to age and she’s on her third pregnancy and we see bodies changing. How do you relate to this as an artist who has made several films and is aging alongside a group of collaborators?

PIÑEIRO: Age brings a desire to look inwards, no? I do enjoy the relationship between the women because in a film about someone wanting something and another person also wanting the same thing, you could have made it a competition. I think that the movie’s not about that. It’s about the inner realization, the realization of the character. In that sense, there is something about not wanting to shoot love, not wanting to shoot kisses. In all my films, there

are a lot of kisses. Here, there are no kisses, no need for kisses, it’s about her self.

I think that my decision to choose *Measure for Measure* has to do with that. It’s not a light comedy, it’s a problem play. I think that has to do with becoming older. I didn’t shoot for four years. Those four years resonated very strongly, personally speaking, with my issues with immigration and issues that heated my personal life, but also living in the land of Trump and the right-wing in Argentina. These topics are not in the movie, but there’s an awareness. There’s a link through times that are less light and so my way of reacting to that was the changing of the tone.

This is a play where Ana has a brother in prison and the judge asks her for sex to release him and then there’s beheadings and there’s prison. The film doesn’t relate to that directly but there’s a tone. Time has given us a few blows. We also share life and we’re here for each other, we learn from each other.

RAIL: To that political element you bring up, this is a film about frames, right?

PIÑEIRO: Yeah.

RAIL: We see frames quite literally, even in the poster of the film itself. They’re in the second play, in its construction of lights and frames within frames. When she’s auditioning you’re seeing her through a frame. She’s removed from the spectator. I couldn’t help thinking that the frame creates a place that provides care and safety for these actors. The film to me is about what’s not in the frame. We don’t see immigration problems, we never see a lover, we never see these things.

PIÑEIRO: We never see action. You never see the judge.

RAIL: Exactly. The brutality of the film is in the Shakespeare play, which again is a script we don’t see. Can you speak on the frames? On the inside and the outside?

PIÑEIRO: I never thought about this idea of frames as holding the characters, taking care of the characters, not exposing them to violence. It is interesting.

RAIL: It’s what I try to do in my films, so maybe I’m projecting.

PIÑEIRO: I never thought about it, but somehow it is true. There’s some sort of sensitivity, to not exploit our sense of conflict that is so clear and manipulative. Somehow the frame is [such that] even though something is going to be talked about, or referred to, or a tone, or an inner connection with a viewer can touch certain emotions or thoughts, it’s not in the full picture, it’s outside. The idea of wishing for a protected world, in a way. Sometimes I think, “what is it like to shoot a scene of torture?” I think that I couldn’t do it, because how do you represent that, present again a moment of torture? I wouldn’t like to do that, why would I do it in a film? I don’t want to protect that, I want that out of the world.

I haven’t found a way of including it into my frames, a world that I reject; I reject it at point zero by leaving it outside. It’s the idea of framing the proposal of a world. You’re proposing a world that is very delicate and very fragile. How can we make that without falling into an oblivion, an erasure of violence? [It’s] in that sense, I think, that I was interested in this darker tone, that going into the inside, expressing an emotion. And still playing. The scene in the audition is very hostile but not at the expense of making suffering a joy. There is a wicked thing in the viewer: Hitchcock talked about how perverse the viewer is and how as a filmmaker you’re feeding that perversion, wanting to see people suffering. And I think that even in that scene there’s no suffering.

And I decided to make a four minute scene of [the audition]. In its framing there’s also the fetish thing. Heightening, giving more meanings to the objects, to the subjects, to the space, and relating to violence and rejecting violence. The question is, “how could the film still illuminate something of that darker side without having to reproduce it?”

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Carlo Cecchi and Luca Marinelli in a scene from *Martin Eden*, photo by Francesca Errichiello, courtesy Kino Lorber.

IN CONVERSATION

PIETRO MARCELLO with Dan Sullivan

Considering that until fairly recently the Italian filmmaker Pietro Marcello was known as one of the more intriguing voices in contemporary documentary, it comes as some surprise to see him following up his acclaimed fiction debut, the almost unbearably pretty pastoral *Lost and Beautiful* (2015), with a literary adaptation—especially one from a novel by Jack London. That 1909 novel—somewhat buried beneath the reputations of London’s better known works—is set in Oakland, California, and captured the journey of self-realization of a rough-and-tumble sailor from being a wannabe writer to a smash literary success to, ultimately, a disillusioned, embittered, and potentially dangerous ideologue.

Class struggle has always been present in Marcello’s work, and it becomes clear rather quickly that *Martin Eden* (2019) marks his most headlong investigation into the politics of the 20th century and how they relate to our convulsive, confounding present. Marcello transposes London’s story to a Campania that never was, the setting (captured vividly on Marcello’s usual 16mm) a timeless composite of anachronistic motifs and the odd snatch of archival footage that

cohere to give us the sense not so much of taking in a period piece as beholding History itself.

In Marcello’s *Martin Eden*, which had its world premiere in competition at the 2019 Venice International Film Festival and will receive its US release this month, the titular protagonist (incarnated by a brilliant Luca Marinelli) is again a prole who wants to become a famous writer, though here his endgame finds him turning into

something more like a sickly fascist than a mere holdout against bourgeois hegemony. Marcello’s game—as intellectual as it is sensuous—becomes clear by the film’s end, and it’s difficult to play it and not reflect on history’s cyclical contortions, the illusion of social progress concealing the enduring danger of violently right-wing thought. In his hands, a political novel about the United States in 1909 by the author of *The Call of the Wild* (1903) winds up being a wholly absorbing political parable about Europe in the here-and-now, a feat that demands attention, respect and thought, and solidifies Marcello as one of contemporary cinema’s great self-made artists.

I had the great pleasure of sitting down with him last October during the 2019 New York Film Festival, where *Martin Eden* was featured in the festival’s main slate, to discuss his way of working, his relationship with London’s writing, and cinema’s relation to political thinking.

DAN SULLIVAN (RAIL): Have you seen any of the other film adaptations of *Martin Eden*?

PIETRO MARCELLO: Yeah, I saw the Russian one, the American one. The Russian one was good because it had a really good actor, but it’s a static theatrical adaptation and it’s very faithful to the book.

RAIL: When did you first encounter the novel? Did you already have a relationship with Jack London’s writing?

MARCELLO: I used to read many of his books. My screenwriter, Maurizio Braucci, who is my best friend, gave *Martin Eden* to me when I was 20 years old, and he told me, “Maybe you’ll like this book.” After 20 years we decided to make *Martin Eden* together.

RAIL: *Martin Eden* is relatively obscure here and so making a film of it reminds me a bit of when Léos Carax adapted *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) as *Pola X* (1999), which is of course not the best-known Herman Melville novel. Did you have some sense of the history of the novel’s perception?

MARCELLO: I don’t have models. Like Bresson said, we should never have a model. I am definitely a cinephile, that’s my education. I’m very familiar with Russian films and film history and with European cinema, less so with American cinema. But, having said that, I don’t really have models. We risked a lot when making this movie. My version of *Martin Eden* is very European, very Italian, very Neapolitan, and our work is a free transposition of the book. In my experience we don’t have the Pacific Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean or authors such as Connor or Stevenson or Melville, we have Pasolini. Our sea is the Mediterranean, our *Martin Eden* is one of the country, a rural one, and so our version was a free version. *Martin Eden* is an archetype to me. Having said that, in terms of Jack London, the socialist part of his writing was very popular in Europe, *The Iron Heel* (1908) was very

well known whereas in America people are more familiar with *White Fang* (1906), *The Call of the Wild*, the adventure side of what he did.

RAIL: You don't just relocate the narrative geographically, you also move it into this kind of deliberately ambiguous historical setting. Could you tell me a bit about how you generated that ambiguity?

MARCELLO: For me the transposition made him not only very European but also very Italian and an archetype, an archetype in the same way that Faust or Hamlet are. We remained very faithful to the novel in terms of the content. The one thing is that instead of Herbert Spencer it probably should've been Georges Sorel, because he was closely related to the birth of the fascism of the Italian trade union movement. However, what matters is that Martin Eden is an archetype of a young boy who evolves into a man and has an experience of social redemption, and in the end becomes a victim of the cultural industry. The same way that Jack London himself had become a victim of the literary world, I believe he was the first victim of the modern culture industry.

RAIL: Spencer is still associated with capitalist individualism today.

MARCELLO: Jack London was very fascinated by Herbert Spencer. Spencer was a good biologist but he wrote some horrible things. Sovereignists are fascinated by him, and there are still some promoting him today. Jack London depicts in *Martin Eden*, with very dark tones, what his vision for the rest of the century would be. It was a disaster, the disaster of the 20th century. Who would've imagined 40 years ago that we would be experiencing Brexit or talking about leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Jonas Savimbi, or Trump. A divided era and a resurgence of fascism—we would've thought that after the end of World War II, after everything that that should have taught us, all of this should have been confined to the past, but it's not. And in 2019 all the lessons of the 20th century (the short century) have been forgotten. We're not there yet, social injustice is ever present, the economy is in the hands of the few, poverty is growing, and all of the struggles of the 21st century to promote social equality have not led us anywhere. The movie begins with Errico Malatesta. It was very important for me to have him at the beginning of the film because Malatesta was a leader in the anarcho-communist movement in Italy which was ethical and voluntary. I think there is individualism with and without socialism, but only in anarchy this idea of individualism remains uncontested, and if individualism remains uncontested, then it becomes barbarism. I wanted to have Malatesta for that point of view.

RAIL: I'm curious about the connection between some of the political thinking in the film and the present-day political situation in Italy.

MARCELLO: *Martin Eden* is a film that is not loved by the former communists who have failed. It's a movie that is generally not loved by anyone who has failed, because he's somebody that lashes out against everybody and anybody: the

fascists, the communists, the socialists, the journalists, and the media. In the first part, as viewers, we feel closer to him, whereas in the second part he becomes an antihero, and it leads to a situation that Christopher Lasch had already described in the 1970s, the culture of the media and of influencers, the complete confusion amid which it's hard to find one's place. And Martin is a victim of the cultural industry because he no longer has any relationship with reality. In the first part, he does, but he is challenging everybody. He's against everything.

There is a moment in the film when there is a dinner that begins with the family prayer. Martin tells us straight out, you say you love socialism, but then you end up giving your ass to capitalism. Which is what everybody is doing. Socialism, that's very simple, it's something we could do in this room, a group of people getting together and sharing something. But then people end up accepting compromises, just like the "radical chic" and "limousine liberal" types do.

RAIL: To go backwards a bit, you've indicated that some aspects of the production were quite challenging, given that you were one of the film's producers.

MARCELLO: As with all my films. I don't want to produce anymore.

RAIL: You might disagree, but *Martin Eden* is perhaps the largest and most ambitious film you've made to date.

MARCELLO: Yeah, because I made films out of nothing in the past. It was a good time for me. And then when it became industrial, I didn't like it anymore. Because I don't think the cinema is selling art. There is the economy underneath it. And I prefer to make 12 films with low budgets where I'm completely in control. I'm the cinematographer and editor, too. I love to make films. I love to have a relationship with the archive and to work on the editing point-counterpoint. But anyway, it's complicated. It was an ambitious film then. I don't know, maybe I prefer to say it's an imperfect film. We're looking for something inside. We're never living within our comfort zones, we're always pushed to our limits.

RAIL: And it's kind of a heroic gesture, having your largest film be so political. Because usually it's the reverse, usually when people make these bigger, more ambitious films, they become less political because it's easier to get financing and so on.

MARCELLO: It should have been longer. I would've needed more money, more help, more of a structure around. It was challenging. Time will decide what will become of this film.

RAIL: Given all the various functions that you had to serve during the production, I'm interested in your collaboration with your co-writer, Maurizio Braucci.

MARCELLO: Maurizio is like a brother to me. We grew up together, we did political activism work together. He is a writer who is on loan to cinema, so to speak. We studied situations together; we did political studies together. Our coming of age was

together. But the way we focus on our work is that we look at what's outside of us. We look at the world around us. I tend to divide writers into two large classes. On the one hand you have writers who focus on themselves, and then on the other hand you have writers that focus on the world around them. Hemingway was an example of this second class, and I tend to feel much closer to writers that talk about the world, like Maurizio. I hope that we can continue working together for a long time.

RAIL: So if you're doing so many things more or less simultaneously, then how does the collaboration proceed with the lead actors in the film, Luca Marinelli and Jessica Cressy? I just want to know about how you work with all the actors, as the performances are quite remarkable.

MARCELLO: Well, let's say that this is a movie that was made "all in the family," so to speak, and I like that kind of atmosphere. I like when we're all together. Something that saves me, that has this redeeming aspect for me, is that I come from documentary and therefore I'm used to dealing with unexpected events. My method is a Rossellini-like one. I'm used to working that way. I don't believe in sticking to the way a text was written because the written word is, by its own definition, imperfect. Words are incomplete and they need to be betrayed. This happens also when I scout for locations. I have something in mind, but then maybe it can't be found and therefore we adapt. Dialogues are changed and the structure of the film changes as well.

RAIL: So then do you rehearse much with them, or do you minimize rehearsal to increase the likelihood of chance events entering the film?

MARCELLO: I like to spend time with my actors. I like to spend time talking, reading books, sharing ideas. When I arrive on set my attitude is to change the scene, the dialogue, and everything with them. I like the idea of surprising them. Surprising them, but always following them, and never leaving them alone. And they need me handling the camera. If I handle the camera, then they work well. With Marinelli, there were some scenes where it was just me, him and a sound guy. The rest of the crew was 50 people. I would just send them away and the three of us would just work. I like the idea of intimacy. And cinema doesn't allow that. In a certain way, cinema is something that is very superficially fun-loving. It's not noble, the way theater is. And there's still a world that is unknown within cinema that needs to be explored, experimented with.

RAIL: Would you say that you conceptualize your practice in opposition to the dominant mode of filmmaking in Italy (though it's not too different in other European countries)? Do you see this as a situation with directors like yourself and Alice Rohrwacher working outside of or near the margins of mainstream Italian cinema in a way which then contaminates the mainstream and then, suddenly, those films might steal something from you?

MARCELLO: I like making movies. I love making movies. I love working with film, developing film, having fun with it, and I

am rewarded by the social component of my filmmaking. I do what I do because I have a necessity to do it and I don't even think about what comes out of it because I'm not competitive. I don't think whether this can be a model or not. I do it because I need to do it and I want to find a meaning in it and I want to see if there's a social component to what I'm doing and I don't worry about whether it's right or wrong. I do it because it's a necessity and I need to try to do it. So, with what you were saying, if in maybe 10 years time, my approach will have an impact on mainstream Italian filmmaking, well, it's too much of a stretch for me. I would be flattered, but I don't see it that way.

RAIL: But as far as it being far-fetched, I think about Bernie Sanders in the United States. If you had told me 10 years ago that one of the prime candidates for the presidency would be a Jewish self-identified democratic socialist, I wouldn't have believed you!

MARCELLO: Yeah, but the *kibbutz* is a socialist state. Socialism is what we can do in this room.

RAIL: Things can change very drastically, very quickly.

MARCELLO: It's the collapse. Europe is a disaster now because we are completely divided. It was absurd 50 years ago to think about Europe being completely divided. It's Brexit. It scares Europe absolutely.

RAIL: The film was released in Italy not long after the Venice International Film Festival, right? The beginning of September—

MARCELLO: The level of success—for me, it's a great outcome.

RAIL: But was there anything that intrigued or surprised you about the reception, specifically in Italy? Because the international reception has been very strong, people seem to understand this is a major film.

MARCELLO: It's a very divisive movie. The problem is when the older generation find themselves in the movie, they feel that they have betrayed their mandate. I think it's a movie that's more for young people, they can understand it better. And my objective would be to take it to schools because in a certain sense *Martin Eden* is a bildungsroman. I don't know how old you are, but whenever you see interviews, it's always older people that are being interviewed. Nobody ever interviews kids or young people asking them how they feel about this or that.

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Rachel Mason's *Circus of Books*. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

Before the Circus Left Town: Rachel Mason's *Circus of Books*

BY DANIEL GERWIN

My wife and I had to downsize our library when we moved to Los Angeles in 2015. A place nearby agreed to take a few boxes and I arrived at Circus of Books without the slightest clue I was walking into LA queer history. The store has since closed, but a new documentary, *Circus of Books*, explores its 33-year life and the story of its unlikely proprietors, Karen and Barry Mason, a straight and straight-laced Jewish couple. The movie's director is their daughter Rachel, a multi-disciplinary artist who made a previous film in 2013, *The Lives of Hamilton Fish*.

At the core of *Circus of Books* are the intimately nuclear Masons, beyond which circles the looser family of the store's employees, and finally the larger tribe of LA's gay men and LGBTQ+ people who shopped, cruised, and found community at the store. The narrative structure is a chiasmus: in the first half of the film the bookstore is thriving while Josh, the youngest Mason, is painfully closeted. At the height of the shop's success is the AIDS crisis. Then as the film winds down the internet is making the business obsolete and Josh is coming out to his parents. The documentary becomes an act of celebration and mourning.

Using old family photos, home movies, archival photographs, and interviews with her parents and other key players, Rachel tells the story of the family business. Karen and Barry start selling porn because they need an income, and Larry Flynt, who was just starting *Hustler*, needed distributors. Flynt acquires several major gay titles, including the magazine *Blue Boy*, founded in

1974 with a focus on gay lifestyle and entertainment, and the Masons find that Los Angeles is a strong market. Demand steers them ever deeper into gay content including pornographic magazines and videos, and Circus of Books unexpectedly evolves into a safe space for gay men especially and for queer people in general, a safety ironically unavailable to Josh at home. He lives in fear of his sexuality, while at the store men explore theirs, cruising in the stacks and having sex behind the shop in what was dubbed Vaseline Alley. Despite the sadness of Josh's youth, the Masons' matter-of-fact and at times oblivious approach to their business (in their eyes they could have as easily been selling widgets) makes for a truly funny movie. The film features wonderful reminiscences by former staff describing the store's communal warmth and charged sexual atmosphere. One man recalls losing his virginity in the upstairs storeroom.

The 1980s were a dangerous time to be gay in America, and the movie's dramatic tension far exceeds what might be expected from a documentary about a neighborhood bookstore. The film traces the larger context of the nation's vague obscenity laws, under which gay porn was illegal. Just as Prohibition made money for speakeasies, the '80s are boom times for the Masons, who open a second location in Silver Lake where sales quickly outstrip the original West Hollywood shop.

Chronicling this period, the film weaves together vintage footage of gay porn, stern government officials on television, and additional interviews with the Masons as they describe how they began producing their own porn films (Barry laughingly remarks that merely being honest and trustworthy made them successful producers). As we see original footage of government agents raiding the store and carrying out box after box of contraband, the tenor shifts from

goofball comedy to nerve-racking horror with felony charges looming.

Through their daughter's eyes, we watch Barry and Karen struggle not only with the U.S. government, but with the AIDS crisis. Barry visits dying employees, most of them in their 20s and 30s, and we watch Karen field a call from a worker's long-estranged mother (this scene made me wonder if it was a re-enactment—why would such a moment have been filmed at the time?). In his famous essay "Mourning and Militancy" (1989) the scholar and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp reflects on the turn to safe sex under the cloud of AIDS: "Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the pier, the ramble, the dunes." The inclusion of bookstores in Crimp's list speaks to the importance of places like Circus of Books, where gay men could find not just each other, not just sex, but also respite from the surrounding hostility. The documentary reveals the store as a locus for the essential activity of self-love, and through the power of pornographic fantasy, a bastion of precisely those vanished sexual adventures enumerated by Crimp. Rachel was a child during the heyday of Circus of Books, but she uses the documentary to look back at the historical function of gay porn not merely as a turn-on, but as one of the only sources of positive gay imagery available. Testimonies of former employees and customers demonstrate the liberating power of pornography as sexual avowal.

Despite all the queer people the Masons nurtured, when Josh comes home from college to tell his parents he is gay, Karen feels she is being punished by god (Barry is not troubled by his son's sexuality). Among the film's most difficult moments is a frank conversation between Rachel and Josh, now grown-up. Rachel's eyes are wet, and Josh

appears constricted as he recollects the suffering he seems not to have left behind.

Karen's schism between the shop and her son illuminates the difference between tolerance and love. The Masons never operated Circus of Books out of a desire to liberate the hearts and bodies of queer Angelinos. The store was a job, one they took pains to keep secret from their children and friends (though honestly, everybody had to have known). But to love, to actively embrace, is a different matter entirely, and we see Karen transform herself after Josh comes out. By the end of the movie Karen and Barry have exited the closet along with their son, they are activists and trained facilitators with PFLAG, and as they lead the PFLAG section of the LA Pride parade, the legacy of their store fully dovetails with their love for their son.

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The *Lunch Bunch* team, at their first rehearsal. Top (left to right): Playwright Sarah Einspanier; actors Tina Chilip, Ugo Chukwu, Julia Sirna-Frest, Keilly McQuail, Mel Krodman, and David Greenspan. Bottom (left to right): actors Olivia Phillip, Paco Tolson, and director Tara Ahmadinejad. Photo: Richard Bowditch.

Let Constraints Set You Free

The Delectable World of Sarah Einspanier's *Lunch Bunch*

BY BILLY MCENTEE

Lunch Bunch
Sarah Einspanier
Directed by Tara Ahmadinejad
The Play Company
April 1–26

Open writing prompts can be daunting. Open writing prompts can be your enemy.

But “constraints are fun,” Sarah Einspanier said. “Constraints are friends.”

Einspanier emailed me this in March, and after meeting her in person and reading her so-ruthless-it’s-mirthful play *Lunch Bunch*, it was easy to sense a wry humor and rascal smile behind her screen as she sent this credo into the ether. Her hit play *Lunch Bunch*, which premiered in Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks (2019) and was slated to run again in April in a co-production with The Play Company, owes a lot to the unleashing potential of constraints.

“You are limited to three stage directions and three props,” read Clubbed Thumb’s email to its early-career writers’ group, which Einspanier was a member of from 2015-16. The message jumpstarted the world building of *Lunch Bunch*, a pseudo-workplace comedy where public defenders stave off the horrors of the New York judicial system by seeking solace in ornate, systemized, and highly competitive lunches which each takes turns preparing for the others. (The play is based off of a real group of Bronx Public Defenders—where Einspanier’s friend works—who joint-meal prep as seen in the show and, recently, on Instagram @lunchbunchforever.)

Without the aid of stage directions or props, Einspanier found a solution for establishing the tone of her world, playing with placement, punctuation, and size of text to musicalize the quippy dialogue on the

page. “I find lines mean completely different things based on how they’re formatted,” Einspanier said. “It’s all about how we don’t finish our sentences, and you have to gesture toward these things.” Gesture she does:

“Sarah has such a clear, distinct writing style,” said actor Ugo Chukwu, who appears in *Lunch Bunch* and was also in Einspanier’s play *House Plant*, which was part of Next Door at New York Theatre Workshop in February. “She creates a very specific playground that allows me to give myself over to the text completely. There’s also so much room to experiment and discover that results in a very rewarding (and fun!) collaboration.”

MITRA:	What kind of--
ALL:	GOURMET
JACOB:	Veggie slash healthy, friendly slash forward. NO/
ALL:	Peppers/
HANNAH:	--Jacob's allergic/
JACOB:	Side or dessert/
HANNAH:	--suggested, but not required--
JACOB:	And:
ALL:	No Pretzels/
HANNAH:	David/
MITRA:	Who's/
JACOB:	We don't talk about/
ALL:	David/
HANNAH:	Or pretzels
JACOB:	Let's just say/
ALL:	no longer in the group/
JACOB:	ALL (except Greg): For A Reason/
JACOB:	--Greg/
ALL (including Greg):	For A Reason/
HANNAH:	Pretzels Are Not A Side Dish/
JACOB:	--You in?
NICOLE:	If you're not sure, I'm in. Happy to be /in/
MITRA:	Yeah sure okay/
JACOB:	You're Friday
MITRA:	Could I actually be / (Wednesday?)

In addition to the prompt’s limitation, the workshopping would evolve with specifics of its own: *Lunch Bunch*’s presentation at Winterworks, Clubbed Thumb’s lab that engenders writer-director collaboration, would be staged in NYU rehearsal rooms. “I mean, those fluorescents!” Einspanier said.

But the play found its bite in these contained spaces, so the ability to open it up led to more questions than celebrations. Following Winterworks in January 2019, *Lunch Bunch* was programmed for Summerworks, Clubbed Thumb’s main presenting season, later that year.

“I wrote the play knowing it’d be in a rehearsal room, so between Winterworks and Summerworks there was sort of the question of, ‘this is really satisfying in a rehearsal room, but does it want something

more?’” Einspanier recalled. “When you add design it makes me ask...do we have fluorescents the entire time? The stage directions [for the play’s setting] read, ‘can you keep a plant alive in this?’ so now it’s ‘can you keep an audience alive in this?’ Does the play want to open or expand? Does it want an additional ingredient? Should I put lemon in this? The answer is often yes.”

Even as the play polished, previous grievances were missed. “The show was off and running, and Tara [Ahmadinejad, the play’s director] and I were on the roof of the Wild Project just debating for 30 minutes, *carpet or no carpet?* and missing the sound of rolling chairs, which we thought we’d be so happy to get rid of.” The play, as it’s set in an office, involves a lot of what Einspanier dubs “chair-eography.”

At Winterworks in the rehearsal rooms, “the actors had to roll then speak, roll then speak, and we found it had this impending doom whenever you heard the rolling,” Einspanier said. But at Summerworks, “it’s a raked stage, and we thought we need carpet or the actors are gonna slide off the stage to their death.” And so they missed the chair-rolling sound that the carpet muffled. It’s more than just lunches that depend on various ingredients working together.

The highly-ordered world of public defenders is explored through the back door in Einspanier’s comedy—no court cases are seen, no rulings dissected, but the dark world of do-gooders is nonetheless on full display in the munching and chewing of elaborate lunches where lemon tahini goddess noodles with tempeh “bacon” and garlic broccolini is the standard to exceed.

“I think there are similarities between certain theatermakers and certain lawyers,” Einspanier said. “I find that lawyers are extremely witty. You’ll hear stories where judges will say, ‘Don’t just sit there like a potted plant’, and you go ‘AAHHH I couldn’t write that line if I gave myself five weeks!’ There’s a certain performativity to lawyers’ work—your job is wielding language and argument.”

Beyond the play’s office walls, children are ripped from parents’ arms, a nefarious judge presides, and (farther away still) a president sits in the White House with little care for the wellbeing of those The

System doesn’t benefit. But there’s a closet to cry in, and in the winter the coats work as insulation to stifle your sobs. Is *Lunch Bunch* a snowflake’s delight or worst fear?

The play feels simultaneously apiece with our politically confused world and also contained totally unto itself. “I’m interested in writing plays that feel like microcosms of the ‘larger world,’” Einspanier said. “At the time of writing, I was thinking a lot about the struggle towards kindness. We talk a lot about conflict (drama!) in the theater—I wanted to explore care, and how we might embody it onstage.”

This care and reciprocity has extended offstage as well; the Bronx Defenders have come on as a community partner for the remounted production, and JūLondré Brown, The Play Company’s Literary and Community Engagement Fellow, is putting together three panels to illuminate the work of lawyers like those represented in the show. After the show closes, the Bronx Defenders will be honored at The Play Company’s spring gala.

But when it comes to showing care, there might not be anything purer than preparing food for someone else. “When we did the play for Summerworks we started our own *Lunch Bunch* with myself, Tara, and the designers, and during tech we would bring each other lunch because tech is a hard time to take care of yourself,” Einspanier said.

The effort was a success, even if art imitates life—or lunch. “It was very intense,” she added. “I was suddenly like, ‘My lunch is not gonna be good enough for all these people! AHHHH!’”

Lunch Bunch, by Sarah Einspanier, directed by Tara Ahmadinejad, was scheduled to run April 1–26. Due to the coronavirus, and Mayor De Blasio’s order to suspend theaters until further notice, the show has been postponed. For further information and updates, visit <https://playco.org/events/lunch-bunch/>.

BILLY MCENTEE is a freelance arts journalist whose articles have appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *American Theatre*, and *Indiewire*, among others. He is the art editor for *Greenpointers* and works at Playwrights Horizons.



Playwright Dave Harris. Photo: Dorin Ciobanu.

IN DIALOGUE

Interrogating a Thing to its Root: DAVE HARRIS with Kimber Lee

Dave Harris’s writing moves like a boxer who understands how to use angles to create openings and land a punch that you never saw coming—but unlike boxing, it’s enjoyable when Dave scores on you. His many gifts as a writer are in full effect in his hilarious and incisive play *Exception to the Rule* in which five high school students sit in detention on a Friday, all regulars to the system. The usual routine plays out until college-bound academic all-star Erika shows up for her very first detention. As of this writing, the play will be in performance at Roundabout Theatre April 30 to June 28.

Since I met Harris at Ojai Playwrights Conference in 2019, we’ve been deep in a conversation that continues whenever we cross paths—as we did in Manchester over Sunday roast, in London over fancy Thai food, and recently in San Diego over fish tacos. This is a curated look into some of that.

Exception to the Rule
Dave Harris
Directed by Miranda Haymon
Roundabout Theatre
April 30–June 28

KIMBER LEE (RAIL): You wrote *Exception to the Rule* in 2014. What was life like for you at that time?

DAVE HARRIS: That would have been fall of my junior year of college, and I came into undergrad thinking I was gonna be some sort of science major and that playwriting was the hobby. I had been doing this all through my time at Yale, but I was starting to have to confront the idea of success that I had inherited. From 6th grade forward I went to this private, all white, all boys, really wealthy school, and so my definition of success had been oriented towards wealth and white spaces and white ideas of behavior and wealth, and in a lot of ways my writing was oriented towards that, too.

RAIL: Say more about that.

HARRIS: When I started writing *ETTR* (*Exception to the Rule*) I had to stand face to face with the idea of what being

“successful” is and reckon with the fact that I had left lots of things behind and also inherited a sort of condescension towards where I came from. I think I was wrestling with the fact that my success was enabled by being able to perform in different spaces. The idea of performance is present in a lot of my writing.

RAIL: Yeah, to me the play feels like you in conversation with some other part of your life that has to do with this question of: What are we doing? What does it mean for an artist of color to put something into the delivery system of the American theater, which is dominated by white institutions?

HARRIS: Yeah, and on some level, just by virtue of writing, I’m saying that I want that. And for me, that was taught, and also was a thing that I actively desired and still on some level kind of do. And tracing the arc of my plays—like how *ETTR* started with thinking about this idea of college, of education as being something that saves you? Like, *I’m going to teach you a way of being, and after learning this you’ll be better cuz now you know better.* And so for me, looking at that started through the lens of a journey to college, leaving home, the place where you came from. In *ETTR*, each of those characters is wrestling with what it means to stay behind, what it means to go “forward,” whatever that means.

RAIL: What are the obsessions that you have as a writer, as a person?

HARRIS: I think I’m really interested in the internal experience of deciding how to maneuver in a space. I think my ideas of performance come from growing up in a mostly Black neighborhood and then going to school in a mostly white school for most of my life, and understanding: Okay, there are certain things about my appearance that I can’t help, but also I can manipulate these things, I can learn how to perform and thrive in a white space. And after I learned how to thrive in that space, I kinda forgot what the feeling was before, you know? To have the agency to make a choice means that everything, in some way, everything becomes a performance. I get really tied up in that tension.

RAIL: Given all that, what can you tell me about the trajectory of the play since you first wrote it?

HARRIS: Over time, I’ve realized that it’s actually a lot about different ways of telling Black stories on stages.

RAIL: Maybe a sense of pushing at a monolithic idea of “Blackness” on stage?

HARRIS: In the American theater it’d be easy to think, “Oh, Blackness is rooted in trauma,” you know? Growing up, it was like, “Oh I’m around these white people with *so* much money, and I have *so* little money; *that* must be tied to my Blackness and their whiteness”—therefore, of course, I’m striving for the things they have. And actually inside of me, when I was younger, was not the instinct to resist, but to disguise or to change into something that fits in the space. That’s still something I do, and the thing that’s changed for me is my language for that.

Power is often the knowledge of alternatives. But the realization I had in college is that I left the neighborhood I grew up in, got to school and realized: Oh, it’s just as fucked here as it was where I came from. It’s disguised, it’s hidden here, like, people know where their next meal is coming from, but also, this kid’s not washing his hands, these kids don’t know how to clean their dorm, a white boy is doing cocaine off a sword—Why do I feel bad about how I was raised? WHO RAISED THESE PEOPLE?!

RAIL: Does *ETTR* feel foundational? Like, is there any way in which you needed to write this play in order to write the ones that came after it?

HARRIS: I think it was the first play I wrote that gave me permission to write in a language that sounded more like the neighborhood I grew up in, the people I grew up around—and, at a time when I had been reading mostly white playwrights, permission to say, “I can use this space to explore and interrogate why I’ve been educated in this way.”

RAIL: This impulse toward peeling back layers, interrogating a thing to its root, is such a powerful force in all of your work, and I keep thinking about the end of your play *Everybody Black*, when the character David Harris [laughter] keeps saying, “Go deeper. Don’t settle for the easy, superficial, peace-keeping answer—dig to the core of it, keep digging.”

HARRIS: And for me a lot of the notion of “go deeper” comes from poetry reading too. I think actually it’s a lot easier to get away with bullshit in theater than it is in poetry. Poetry to me seems so much about understanding the dominant narrative of something and finding a way to then move beyond that cliché idea.

This also comes from an understanding of performance, because I don’t think I’m oriented toward truth as a writer, you know? Because I think actually the knowledge of a “truth” would then make me lazy. In *ETTR*, it’s characters reckoning with the things that they’ve accepted, then clashing—they’re each fighting something culturally, something true for them but also based around a way of performing yourself. High school is all about performance.

RAIL: Erika feels like she stands outside of some of that, in some way—does her academic success mean she’s fighting a different thing?

HARRIS: Erika is fighting against a school where everyone is trapped, and trauma is normalized, and no one has any language for that. She wants to isolate herself from that and go beyond it. But in that isolation she’s then probably really lonely. That isolation is in some ways the key to her “success,” but it’s also rooted in distance and loneliness—and, of course, a feeling of superiority over her peers. So much of being a teenager is about loneliness and feeling better and worse than others. That language then pushes deeper into a language around different understandings of Blackness in America, Blackness on stage, and Blackness as a teenager in America—and that for me is what propels



Cast of Dave Harris's *Exception to the Rule* at Roundabout Underground.

this impulse to keep digging for the thing that's at the heart of it.

RAIL: How much do you know what you're writing about going into it, and how much of it happens after you're done?

HARRIS: This feels true now—it might not actually be true—but for the most part, I think I usually know what I'm after. But also because, at least for the sake of a first draft, I tend to write in really intense bursts, and that usually takes place over the span of like a week where I'll do nothing except write. I'll like barely [laughs], I'll like barely eat, and at the end of that week there'll be a new draft of a play, and then I'll spend so much time revising, but for the sake of that first draft, it's normally like: I have this thing that I'm obsessed with, that I can't crawl away from, let me push myself into this space and stay there, and that'll drive me towards the thing.

RAIL: And this thing you describe about not being able to crawl away from something, tell me more about what happens there.

HARRIS: It's usually fear. It's most often that there's something I'm terrified of right now. And I walk towards that terror, so I have to bring it closer. And I think for me, language brings me closer to that thing. So with *ETTR*, the thing I started off being afraid of was: oh, I sacrificed a younger, perhaps more impulsive version of myself to be in this space, and now I can't get back. In *Everybody Black*, it was: oh, I'm afraid that I will sell any idea of Blackness on a stage for a big enough check; what does that look like, and why is that, and is that the cost of survival?

RAIL: Fear, for you—is it a physical thing or is it more mental torment?

HARRIS: I think it's a state of paralysis. It's an inability to confront or inability to grow

through something. And ultimately that's my worst fear, is to get to a place where I stop growing. I'm like: Let me understand that fear; if I don't wanna be afraid of this thing anymore, I need to have words for it, then I can do something else.

I find that once I have language for something, it becomes a choice. So if I have the words for it and can understand it and continue to be afraid, I'm making a choice to be afraid rather than doing something about it. That's what I think drives me to write, it's to find the language for the experience, and to find that language in a way that is accountable to other people, i.e. an audience. So I write more theater than poetry because it makes me accountable to other people and accountable to other people's bodies who will be in this.

RAIL: A way of controlling and managing the fear?

HARRIS: Maybe I'm a control freak, and language is how I exhaust that control?

[laughter]

RAIL: Yes! Your plays for me deal with the idea of narrative control toward a specific purpose, like how history is written, right? Also similar to the way a person of color constructs a way of navigating white spaces, and that is related to this idea of selling pain as an artist, but—I mean, I'm doing it, right? I'm putting this thing into a package and selling it. We're feeding the machine. The machine is giving us things, but we're still feeding it.

HARRIS: Yeah. And also, I like those things.

RAIL: Yes! Yes. We like those things. Especially when they are fish tacos. [laughter] Do you think that consciousness is the difference between being used or using the system?

HARRIS: Yeah...that's such a good question. I... okay, one of the characters in [Harris's play] *Shitty Shitty Terrible Bad Remorse* is like, "Self-awareness doesn't make anything better," which I kind of agree with on a larger scale, and I also... hm. What do I wanna say?

[long pause]

I think it gives you an illusion of control, or the illusion of safety. Like, I think um....

[long pause]

RAIL: I love watching you think! [lots of laughter]

HARRIS: I think when I came to understand language as just manipulation, that it made everything feel controlled and manufactured in a way that then any system, and any movement through it, is just a manipulation in some way. And so within that, then the only thing I really have to reckon with is my own desire and my own language for desire, because the world is exactly as the world is and has always been—which is a thing I think I would stand by. And then the thing that I have to reckon with is what I'm going to make of that, to make of my work, in that. And language is so much the tool that I have, and what makes me feel like I have control. I don't know if that qualifies as resistance or overcoming or anything like that, but I also know that I really love this, too.

RAIL: I also wanted to ask you about performed violence, which pops up in your work over and over. In *ETTRI* I feel it more as a threat lurking outside the door if the kids step out of line, a constant threat. What is that for you, how did it come to be a tool for you?

HARRIS: Hoo, hm. What do I want to say about violence. It feels like it manifests so

differently in each of my plays, but I think that largely... people know what violence looks like.

RAIL: Right. We all watch Netflix or... cable news.

HARRIS: Yeah, and I think that's where [Harris's play] *Tambo and Bones* came from: the same exact police brutality story being told over and over to the point where it became the only imaginative avenue for exploring violence, like the repetition of the same story had that effect. For me, I'm most often chasing new language for something or a version of something that I haven't seen, or something that's beyond the violence of the world that I know.

RAIL: That's how I experience your plays, each in a different way, but all of them bring me to some kinda place where I'm watching you reconfigure very familiar elements such that they break through to some completely unexpected new perspective.

HARRIS: I feel so grateful that people encounter my work and feel they can see things for themselves, because the act of writing for me is so selfish, it's so internally interrogating about my—it's about pushing deeper into whatever is happening in my mind and imagination, what it means to push into myself in front of an audience. I think things can get tied up if it becomes about truth beyond the individual, because then I think you run into clichés and dominant narrative and repeating things when trying to speak for a collective; whereas the thing I know and the thing I feel about each of us is that actually the most personal thing we have to offer is whatever is in our personal imagination—so let me orient myself towards that internal thing, rather than something external.

KIMBER LEE is a playwright based in NYC. Her plays include *untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play* (2019 O'Neill National Playwrights Conference), *tokyo fish story* (South Coast Rep, TheatreWorks/SV, Old Globe), *brownsville song (b-side for tray)* (2014 Humana Festival, LCT3), *different words for the same thing* directed by Neel Keller (Center Theatre Group), and the upcoming world premiere of *to the yellow house* at La Jolla Playhouse, July-August 2020.

TWINE

by *Leopoldine Core*

Things that go down the drain
go into the sewer
You can't own anything
a dog, my own face
sitting and waiting
bad feelings at
the same times
lines almost touching
I don't know you at all.
Something
not nothing
an endless appetite for
chocolate
not animals
Your supposed to disappear,
so disappear!
interior life

is real life.
Legs and feet
sitting and waiting
Do you, by any chance, have something
that doesn't belong to you?
a leather suitcase
or the psychotic dream
of control.
I like any story of justifiable paranoia.
And love is a tenderness
for what is not seen
extracting the spirit of the plant,
exhaling flowers.
When you zap your puppy
they change.
Everything they do
is in avoidance of pain

expression & maceration
imagining what
happened—only that.
I think when you love someone
you want them
to be free.
I wonder if twin and twine are etymologically related?
We are where we go
Closeness is just ...
it's the unknown
close up.
The feet of summer
a compulsive lie
You don't know me at all
in the shadow-
s of a tree
You don't know me.

APPROPRIATE REACTION

by *Nikki Wallschläger*

It should be a parody
Shocked, disgusted
Got no words for
U mean to tell me
So disappointing
Shocked, disgusted
The end of democracy
Late stage capitalism
Shocked, disgusted
Jokes write themselves
Trying to understand
No, this isn't the Onion
This is the new normal
Shocked, disgusted
Hold them accountable
We need more empathy
Shocked, disgusted
totally floored right now
Trying hard to process
Is this an SNL skit
The end of our republic
My heart goes out to
I can only sympathize
Shocked, disgusted
Are u f*ckin kidding me
U mean all of this is real
U can't make this shit up

ON SEEING AN AD FOR LEVI'S "STILL I RISE" TEES FOR BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Still I rise
yeah well
someday I won't
I got a headache
from altitude illness
the high business
of lifting ourselves
up And figuring out
where to go, they
go lower and I get
high as a reprieve
from what's neither
lowest or highest
business as usual
pursues at a cruising
speed of normalcy
a steady even flow
of proselytizing from
the pulpit of an ad
campaign to catch
more loyal consumers
now that we're "free"
of defacto bondage
we can get paid a
premium (hopefully)
modeling gratitude

LEOPOLDINE CORE is the author of the poetry collection *Veronica Bench* and the story collection *When Watched*.

NIKKI WALLSCHLAEGER's work has been featured in *The Nation*, *Brick*, *American Poetry Review*, *Witness*, *Kenyon Review*, *POETRY*, and others. Her third collection of poems, *Waterbaby*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in 2021.

IN RIGOR AND YET

by Edwin Torres

how do I entangle my dismemberments
the richly detailed confusions I embody
in rigor and yet

maybe respect is harnessed by tyranny
the self-aware protagonist
inched by frame

notepad as digital implosion
how do I form thumbs
to catch flames enslaved

in lines from other prayers
that embered memory
creeping the active same

the restless times I conjure
tuned into a fragility that I can't imagine
aligns with mine

matters of release
have nothing to do with what we have
but what we move through

choose a word
that you think moves you
define anything but here

COGNITION IS ITS OWN DISCARD

by Ben Friedlander

Putting its weight
into action, into motion, first the days fade out,

then memory,
then memory's prompts,

then we disappear
into the same fog.¹

¹ **Check**

Broken nib
of memory, there'll be

no more signatures
with this pen.

What it means to ask
what it means

is what it means
to ask

what it means. Thought,
a wind

that disturbs pooled days;
all facts

are disputed,
their position

is unfixed, liable to change
of color, status,

attachment to belief.
I'm destitute

of spontaneity, yielding
to the will of others

the fact
of having lived,

tumbling into a crack
of memory, like a key

dropped in confusion
through a grate.

If it gleams,
you can be sure

it wasn't lost that long ago.
Gleaming or dull,

it's scarcely worth
the effort of being found

EDWIN TORRES' recent books are, *XoeteoX: the infinite word object* (Wave Book), and *The Body In Language: An Anthology* (Counterpath Press), which he edited. He has a number of essay-like formulations appearing in forthcoming anthologies, as well as an exhibit of visual work this summer at Photobook Works Gallery in Beacon, NY entitled, "Different Ways To Talk."

BENJAMIN FRIEDLANDER is the author of *One Hundred Etudes* (Edge Books) and *Citizen Cain* (Salt Press). He lives in Maine, where he teaches American Literature and edits the scholarly journal *Paideuma*. His editorial work also includes work by Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, and Larry Eigner.

From WATER & POWER

by Alli Warren

Eating a freshly fried egg at 10am is one of the ways I indicate to myself I am experiencing a day without compelled paid labor

I've called in sick and it's warm, the sky's blue

People say the light is different in California but I've been here all my life

People say you can measure the size of raindrops by examining the colors in a rainbow but I've never tried

I carry my symptoms to the pole past the metropole, waist deep in marsh muck

The bell rings as the waters rise over the base, which is what generates the winds, with the flows and with the floods

The population is assembled and made to produce a surplus

Rations are parceled into beveled bowls

Shocks are absorbed by unnamed unfortunates

I push paper for students steering Teslas

They pump groundwater from boreholes

"The rich are only defeated when running for their lives"

This the building song, the current carves the course

The green open-office is constructed of congealed bones and guts

The millennium tower is sinking

Every day I am covered in water twice and also uncovered twice

The cat and I sit and listen to Phillip Glass and our ears perk up

The cat is a loan, like the house and the Honda

Our transaction is fulfilled in symbolic form

We are strangers to each other

Sub-prime subjects shellacked into liquid lives

Sometimes I rebel against the slop and treat myself to a salad

I throw my belongings out to sea and this brings me great prestige

The ATM'll "shit money if you know what numbers to tell it"

The land is scrubbed and repurposed

They build prisons on fallow fields because there had been drought

Because there had been drought fires rush across the land

To fight fires they use the labor of the people they imprison in cages

My brother says if people in cages accept pennies to fight fires that's their choice, I ask my mom how he got this way

My mom gave birth to me, child number three, when she was 34, the age I am now, childless

What is the water doing before the ducks disturb it?

If we stay real quiet will the landlord forget we're here?

Excerpt from "Water and Power" from *Little Hill* by Alli Warren.

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ALLI WARREN is the author of the poetry books *Little Hill* (City Lights Books), *I Love It Though* (Nightboat Books), finalist for the California Book Award, and *Here Come the Warm Jets* (City Lights Books), Poetry Center Book Award winner. Alli has lived and worked in the Bay Area since 2005.

IN PROGRESS

by Tony Towle

We adjust the background
so that I am still in a forest
but of the more traditional kind,
not made of brick, steel, cement and glass,
but composed primarily of wood
and auxiliary vegetal matter,
aerated with avian sonorities,
and partially obscured
by “air products,” such as mist or fog;
but there is a spacing between predators
so generous that our Paleolithic relatives,
wherever they might be watching from,
would think that life in our world
was a safe and wonderful thing.

I pause in the mist or fog, because
this is where one runs across things
good for supplementing the present with —
or what’s left of the present
after the morning news
has finished its dismemberment —

and I found something: When Phil Niekro
retired from the Atlanta Braves
there was no longer a player
in major league baseball
older than I was. He achieved
this distinction in 1987
and has never relinquished it.

What has happened since then?

Honestly, I don’t keep track of him.
Oh, you mean to me? Well, lots of things
of course, but I’ll maybe get to them later,
since I’ve been admonished
for living too much in the past,
though by whom is lost in the past.
The Phil Niekro discovery
came from one of the newspapers
I perused during the eons of down time
consequent to proofreading at *Forbes*,
where in two years my only good “catch”
was pointing out that Luxemburg
was not a *principality* — as written, a synonym
for minuscule polities — but a *grand duchy*.
Maybe two weeks later, while
still resting easily on my laurels,
I missed a typo so egregious that my luster
was tarnished beyond reclamation.

So, back to the present — or what’s
left of the present after the evening news
has finished gnawing on it —
where there is no further word
on the Somali pirates
who attempted to seize my poems
and hold them hostage.

*What were your poems doing
in the Strait of Hormuz?*

You mean the Gulf of Aden.
You may well ask.
I wish I were at liberty to say.

*

So that’s as far as I got with the first draft on my laptop,
while sitting unnoticed for an hour in the shoe store
except by the guy in the chair on the other side of the aisle,
who was keeping an eye on me until my contact showed up —
2 o’clock was that approaching hour — and then he abruptly left
a minute before she, the no-nonsense-taking Mrs. Blackstone,
walked in from my long-past-due assignment;
and when I mentioned the departed observer, she said
that he wasn’t one of *hers*; and I looked down at my watch
to evade the stare that italicized my blunder,
and saw that it was *quarter to three* — I had just lost 45 minutes!
but in fact it was 55 years that I needed to go back and fix;
and those alterations would never fit in the space at the end of the file,
but they could offer reflections enough to beguile the obfuscating eye.

SCRAPBOOK

Recipe courtesy *Greed & Prejudice: Today’s Republican*

The McConnell Sour

Select despicable behaviors and muddle thoroughly;
self-dealing and hypocrisy are customary, but condescension
and duplicity are time-honored as well — be creative.
Blend ingredients until opaque; add bourbon until palatable.
Garnish with pomposity; serve with a cynical smirk.
Note: Furtive dollops of vodka make it a *Moscow Mitch*.

TONY TOWLE began his connection to the New York School of Poetry in 1963, when he took workshops at the New School with Kenneth Koch and Frank O’Hara. In 1970, Towle received the Frank O’Hara Award, in conjunction with which his first major collection, *North*, was published. His thirteenth book of poems, *Noir*, was published by Hanging Loose Press in 2017.

LOVE MOUNTAIN

by Emmalea Russo

where the glossed ground rots
toward the listing cloud
shaped like my face when it's
vitreous and arrested and

hot for you
on the yoga mat
doing high kicks
toward the dust of our day

it pushed through my body
higher octave planetoids
pooled their light against the junk
of the yard and shot the rays into

what i broke
when my face turned up
then sloped
toward you on the mountain

we made an eerie warmth
whose emissions were shareable
we announced it as love and love
was a decaying house

an edge taken in an edge
hemmed to rip then an edge
folded into the center and strangle-
held by your thighs

we even sang a song about
their prowess yr meaty thighs
cops were there
a gray kitten was there

a girl in a zebra mask chased me
up the hill screaming i drove down
head out the window vomiting weeds
black as the void of course

black as the spine
of the book resting between
pages of the other book
splayed then bracketed

edited my pulse fluttering
inside my thigh near the joystick
made vexingly arrhythmically hot
in the image of your stronger ones

bitched myself out for eating
again poisonous weeds in the yard
for transpiercing the void of course
splayed then contained in the bile

of the dark book
good book
the other god
good god

the mountain expropriated
what i'd fashioned for myself
in pyroclastic bursts made me
torpid so that all i could do was

all i could do was

exhale into the crocheted blanket
wordless untrackable unperturbed
save for weathers and always
feliculously abducted and crotched

and crouched in commune brine stale cigs
heard myself annoyingly talking about
transmutation and nightly we christened
we nightly christened love mountain

i could handle it and/or i wanted it
i read from the incunabulum of your belly
from my own then found a vessel to settle
X'd you out a veracious hex sign called me by name

MY NAME

but then ran back
i always ran back
i'm sick of talking about this
fell ill inside the grid like everyone else

cops were there
kittens were there
everyone dressed in grey
eating plated piles of the yard

before together heaving it up
by the light of the full moon
we showered and watched the runoff
we forsook the containers and clothes

then ran back to each other
unboxed uncaked
rabbits bounded up the hill
howling at the moon before

turning into deer
got loosed from the ground
torrid as the sun lacquered the moon
the ultra-modern home next door

had no décor but on purpose like we got
charged by ambiance alone superglossed
and salivating into moonlit dirt LISTEN
I'M SICK OF SPEAKING

I WILL NO LONGER SPEAK
OF MY OLDEN DEPLETIONS
it's to do with being more of a majuscule
heavy metal lettered machine-drawn thing

like a cluster of shrapnel that could break
the mount and less of whatever mound
of feminine flesh i am or more simply
like you

or you

cat piss incense burnt toast but festooned
i didn't want to hurt the moon nor you
the moon nor you but now that i really
think of it now that i think of the top

of love mountain where the grown cats
rested at your feet eyeing me with such
self-possession i must have begged you
to keep some light for yourself but also

to give some here

and also ration it so that i might
remain always arrested
that's the eerie prayer that loops
may i may i may i may i

remain always kind of arrested

amen
8:39pm

a heap of druggy light showed the way
to the spine of the sea where i went fissiparous
so that i like schools of miniature fishes
dispersed my parts

i woke up in Rome
sybaritic as ever
in a lux hotel suite
with a new version of you

teeth or the moon shining in my face
as if we weren't just on Love Mountain
at the edge of Pennsylvania getting quietly
arrested by twin cops for our nudity

no cat piss no incense

we ate pears beside Rome's ruins
we forgot our organs and so were gods
chewing on each other and dried pears
like ears in the hemisphere

like ears of the hemisphere
LISTEN I'M GOING TO BE OKAY
LISTEN I WENT RIBALD AND FERAL
SLAMMED MYSELF DOWN

PUT ME AWAY
COULDN'T FIND THE HEAVY
INSTRUMENTS NECESSARY
TO DISPERSE MY ONENESS

AND SO MERGE WITH YOU
i went below the horizon and blew
i blew into the pear
your ear

also the Roman ruins
and three books by Bataille
also menstrual blood gum oatmeal and a hound dog
also everything nutritive about light
and light which livers and strings
and the luculent dropouts on the mountain

Italian hotel like a horizon i'm going under
dissolving the western margin
and so merge with you
captor

sweat gland of the pear
into which i dwindle
i didn't like your infrastructure
mentally, i mean

but like an apocalypse party
it was sexy
peanut butter on my fingers
fat glossing my hands

too slippery for the ruins
and mutably woman meaning
i understood my essential value
to be lesser than or equal to

your more abiding leverage
which emanated a beastly light
to which i got easily magnetized
and by which my body shook

it shook with capitulation
to your most basic gems
which some people found boring
which sometimes i found boring

effluvioms of brine cigarettes
and body odor that would come to
unfortunately and gravely
forever turn me on

9:19pm

EMMALEA RUSSO is a writer and astrologer living at the Jersey Shore. Her books are *G (Futurepoem)* and *Wave Archive (Book*hug)*. Recent work has appeared in *Artforum.com*, *BOMB*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Hyperallergic.com*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and SF MOMA's *Open Space*.

Diary of a Foreigner in Paris

by Curzio Malaparte

Translated from the Italian
and French by Stephen Twilley

Out next month from NYRB Classics

CURZIO MALAPARTE (pseudonym of Kurt Erich Suckert, 1898–1957) was born in Prato, Italy, and served in World War I. An early supporter of the Italian fascist movement and a prolific journalist, Malaparte soon established himself as an outspoken public figure. In 1931 he incurred Mussolini's displeasure by publishing a how-to manual entitled *Coup d'État: The Technique of Revolution*, which led to his arrest and a brief term in prison. During World War II Malaparte worked as a correspondent, for much of the time on the eastern front, and this experience provided the basis for his two most famous books, *Kaputt* (1944) and *The Skin* (1949). His political sympathies veered to the left after the war. He continued to write, while also involving himself in the theater and the cinema.

STEPHEN TWILLEY is the managing editor of *Public Books*. His translations from the Italian include Francesco Pacifico's *The Story of My Purity*, Marina Mander's *The First True Lie*, and, for NYRB Classics, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Professor and the Siren*. He lives in Chicago.

Diary of a Foreigner in Paris

December 19. Last night I had the same dream I've had every so often for years. My mother enters my room at night and says to me in a hoarse voice, "Stop working, you're tired. Go to sleep." I look at her. She's pale, and smiles. Then she gets up and withdraws, leaving her white hand behind on my desk. I get up and take the heavy, dead hand, open the window, and throw it out. Below is the garden of my house in Forte dei Marmi. I hear the sound of the sea. A bird sings. I always repeat the same words: "March 21, 1948." It was in Forte dei Marmi, in December 1935, that I had this dream for the first time.

I need to leave Paris. Lichtwitz suggests I go with him to Chamonix. I will go to Chamonix. I'm afraid of this dream. It brings me bad luck.

December. Count Augustin de Foxa, made famous by my *Kaputt*, has given an interview to the Madrid newspaper *A.B.C.* In his statements, doubtless in revenge for several passages in *Kaputt* he doesn't like, he claimed that anything that is witty in the book comes from him. Very well. I've always said, in *Kaputt*, when it is de Foxa who is speaking, it is de Foxa who is speaking. I didn't invent anything, not even the witty remarks I heard from his mouth. *Kaputt* is a historical novel, whose characters are not

from the age of Louis XIII but from our own. The characters are historical but contemporary. De Foxa is one of the wittiest men I have ever met. When they are witty, the Spanish are the wittiest men in the world. Reading the statements he made to *A.B.C.*, I wondered why I didn't put the story of the Spanish prisoners in *Kaputt*. And since de Foxa didn't tell it, I will, so that the story isn't lost or forgotten. All the more so since, if de Foxa were to tell it, he'd ruin it. As good a speaker as he is, he's just as bad a writer. No offense to de Foxa, but I tell his stories better than he does.

In February 1942 I was at the Kannas front between Lake Ladoga and Leningrad, part of the retinue of General Edqvist, who commanded a Finnish division at that delicate point of the front. One day, General Edqvist sends for me.

"We've taken eighteen Spanish prisoners," he tells me.

"Spanish? Are you at war with Spain, then?"

"I don't know anything about that," he says. "The fact is that last night we took eighteen Russian prisoners, who declared themselves Spaniards and speak Spanish."

"Very strange."

"They need to be interrogated. You speak Spanish, no doubt."

"No, I don't speak Spanish."

“You’re Italian, anyway, so you’re more Spanish than I am. Go on, interrogate them, and afterward we’ll see.”

I go, find the prisoners being held in a shed, and ask them if they are Russians or Spaniards. I speak slowly in Italian, they respond slowly in Spanish, and we understand each other perfectly.

“We are Soviet soldiers. But we are Spaniards.”

And one of them explains to me that they are orphans of the Spanish Civil War, that their parents died in the bombing, in the reprisals, etc., and that one fine day they were put on a Soviet ship, in Barcelona, and sent to Russia, where they were fed, clothed, and educated, where they learned a trade and became Red Army soldiers.

“But we are Spaniards.”

Yes, I remember reading in the papers at the time of the Spanish Civil War (I was on Lipari in those years) that the Russians had shipped several thousand children of Red Spaniards to the USSR, to save them from the bombings and the famine.

“Are you enrolled in the Communist Party?”

“Of course.”

“Well, don’t say so. You told me, for now that’s enough. Don’t repeat it to anyone. Understood?”

“No, we don’t understand.”

“That doesn’t matter. If I think about it, I don’t understand anything either. It’s just that, right, I believe it’s better you don’t tell anyone you’re Spaniards, Red Army soldiers enrolled in the Communist Party.”

“No, we can’t accept this compromise. We were raised to tell the truth. There’s nothing wrong with being Communist. We won’t hide that we’re Communists.”

“All right, do as you like. Know, though, that the Finns are an honest and humane people, that there are Communists among the Finnish soldiers as well, but that they’re fighting for their country, which Russia attacked in 1939. It’s not about being Communist or not, is what I mean to say, but you understand me, I think.”

“No, we don’t understand. We understand that you’re spreading propaganda, that’s all.”

“No, that’s not all. Know that I will do everything possible to keep you out of trouble. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“All right then, goodbye. I’ll come to see you tomorrow.”

I went to General Edqvist and recounted my conversation with the Spaniards.

“What is to be done?” General Edqvist asked me. “You understand that their situation is a delicate one. They’re Spanish Communist volunteers in the Red Army. Obviously, they were children when they were sent to the USSR. They’re not responsible for the way they were brought up. I want to save them. The best thing is for you to telegraph your friend de Foxa, the Spanish minister. Ask him to come, in my name. I’ll deliver the prisoners to him, and he’ll do what he likes.”

I telegraphed de Foxa in the following terms: “Eighteen Spanish prisoners taken. Come quick to collect them.” Two days later, de Foxa arrived on a sled, in foul weather, with the temperature 42 degrees below zero. He was freezing and dead tired. As soon as he saw me, he shouted, “What are you interfering for? Why did you telegraph? What can I do with eighteen Red Spanish prisoners? I can’t put them up at my house. Now I have to deal with them. What are you interfering for?”

“But you’re the minister of Spain!”

“Yes, but of Francoist Spain. They’re Reds. Now I have to deal with them. It’s my duty. But I’d like to know what you’re interfering for.”

He was furious. But de Foxa has a good heart, and I knew he would do what he could to help those poor wretches.

He went to see the prisoners. I went with him.

“I am the minister of Franco’s Spain,” said de Foxa. “I’m Spanish, you’re Spanish, I’ve come to help you. What can I do for you?”

“For us? Nothing,” they replied. “We don’t want anything to do with representatives of Franco.”

“You’re throwing a tantrum? I traveled two days and two nights to come here, and you reject me? I’ll do everything possible to help you. The Spain of Franco knows how to forgive. I will help you.”

“Franco is our enemy. He killed our parents. We ask you to leave us in peace.”

De Foxa went to see General Edqvist.

“They’re stubborn. But I will do my duty, despite them. I will telegraph Madrid to ask for instructions, and we will do what Madrid orders us to.”

The next day de Foxa set off again in his sled for Helsinki. He was seated in his sled, and he said to me: “Mind your own business, understand? If they’re in this mess, it’s your fault. Got it?”

“Adios.”

“Adios.”

A few days later, one of the prisoners fell sick. “Pneumonia,” the doctor said. “Very dangerous.”

General Edqvist said to me, "De Foxa must be informed."

So I telegraphed de Foxa: "One prisoner sick, very serious. Come quick with medicine, chocolate, cigarettes."

Two days later de Foxa arrived in his sled. He was furious.

"What are you interfering for?" he shouted as soon as he saw me. "Is it my fault, if the wretch has fallen sick? What can I do? I'm on my own in Helsinki, you know. I don't have attachés, aids, anything. I have to do everything on my own, and you have me running all over Finland in this foul weather. What are you interfering for?"

"Listen, he's sick, he's going to die. You really do need to be there. You represent Spain."

"Okay, okay, let's go see him."

He brought with him an immense quantity of medicine, food, cigarettes, and warm clothes. He had done things on a proper grand scale, my good Augustin.

The sick man recognized him, even smiled at him. His comrades were silent and hostile. They observed de Foxa with hateful contempt.

De Foxa stayed for two days, then returned to Helsinki. Before climbing into his sled, he said to me, "Why do you interfere in things that don't concern you? When will you learn to leave me in peace? You're not Spanish, in any case. Leave me be, understand?"

"*Adios*, Augustin."

"*Adios*, Malaparte."

Three days later the sick man died. The general said to me, "I could have him buried quite simply, but I think it would be better to inform de Foxa. This man is Spanish. What do you think?"

"Yes, I think de Foxa must be informed. It's a matter of courtesy."

And I telegraphed de Foxa: "Sick man dead. Come quick, he must be buried."

Two days later de Foxa arrived. He was furious.

"Would you stop hassling me?" he shouted as soon as he saw me. "What are you interfering for? Are you trying to drive me crazy? Of course, if you tell me the guy is dead, that he must be buried, and that I have to be here, of course, it's impossible for me not to come. But if you hadn't informed me, eh? I'm not going to resuscitate him, just with my presence!"

"No, but you are Spain. He can't be buried like a dog in these woods, far from his country, far from Spain. If you're here at least, it's different, do you understand? It's as if all of Spain were here."

"Of course, I understand," de Foxa said. "That's why I came. But why do you get mixed up in these matters anyway? You're not Spanish, *válgame Dios!*"

"He must be buried with respect, Augustin. This is why I informed you."

"Yes, I know. All right, let's not talk about it anymore. Where is the dead man?"

We went to see the poor dead child in the little shed where his comrades had laid him out and watched over him. The Spanish prisoners observed de Foxa with a sullen, almost menacing air.

"We shall bury him," said de Foxa, "according to the Catholic rite. Spaniards are Catholics. I want him to be buried like a true, a good Spaniard."

"We won't allow it," said one of the prisoners. "Our comrade was an atheist, like the rest of us. His views must be respected. We won't allow him to be buried according to the Catholic rite."

"I represent Spain here, and this dead man is Spanish, a Spanish citizen. I will bury him according to the Catholic rite, understand?"

"No, we don't understand."

"I am the minister of Spain, and I will do my duty. I don't care if you don't understand." And de Foxa walked away.

"My dear Augustin," I said to him, "General Edqvist is a gentleman. He won't like your flouting the views of a dead man. The Finns are free men, they won't understand your gesture. A compromise must be sought."

"Yes, but I am the minister of Spain. I can't bury a Spaniard without the Catholic rite. Oh, why didn't you bury him without me! You see, you see what you've done, with your mania for interfering in things that don't concern you?"

"All right, all right, don't worry. We'll make the best of things."

We went to the general.

"Clearly," said General Edqvist, "if the dead man was an atheist, as his comrades claim, and as I believe, given that he was a Communist, he can't be buried according to the Catholic rite. I understand, you're the minister of Spain, and you can't ..."

I recommended that we summon the Italian Catholic priest of Helsinki, the only Catholic priest in Helsinki (in Helsinki there was also the Catholic bishop, a Dutchman, but we couldn't summon the bishop). Thus the Catholic priest was telegraphed. Two days later the priest arrived. He understood the situation, and arranged things for the best. He was a priest from upper Lombardy, a mountain man, very simple, very shrewd, very pure.

The funeral took place the following day. The coffin was carried by four of his comrades. A flag of Francoist Spain was placed at the bottom of the grave, dug out using dynamite in the frozen ground. A unit of Finnish soldiers was ranged along one side of the grave, in the small Finnish war cemetery, in a

small clearing in the woods. The snow sparkled gently in the day's dim light. The coffin was followed by Minister de Foxa, General Edqvist, me, and the Red prisoners, and by several Finnish soldiers. The priest stood fifty steps from the grave, stole and prayer book in hand. His lips moved silently, saying the prayer for the dead—but at a remove, in order not to go against the views of the dead man. When the coffin was lowered into the grave the Finnish soldiers, all Protestants, discharged their rifles in the air. General Edqvist, the Finnish officers and soldiers, and I each brought a hand to our cap in salute. Minister de Foxa held his arm out in the Fascist salute. And the comrades of the dead man each raised a clenched fist.

De Foxa left again the next day. Before getting into his sled he took me aside and said, "I thank you for everything you've done. You've been very kind. Pardon me if I bawled you out a little, but you understand ... You're always interfering in things that don't concern you!"

A few days passed. The Red prisoners continued to await the response from Madrid. General Edqvist was a bit nervous.

"You understand," he said, "that I can't keep these prisoners here forever. Something must be decided. Either Spain reclaims them, or I'll have to send them to a camp. Their situation is a delicate one. It's better to keep them here. But I can't keep them forever."

"Be patient a bit longer, surely the response will come."

The response came: "Only those prisoners who declare themselves Spaniards, accept the Franco regime, and express the desire to return to Spain will be recognized as Spanish citizens."

"Go explain the situation to them," General Edqvist said to me.

I went to the prisoners and explained the situation.

"We will not recognize the Franco regime. We don't want to return to Spain," the prisoners responded.

"I respect your faithfulness to your views, but I must stress that your position is very delicate. If you admit to fighting against the Finns in your capacity as Red Spaniards, you will be shot. The laws of war are the laws of war. Do what you can so that I can help you. I beg you to reflect on this. At bottom, you are Spaniards. All the Red Spaniards left in Spain have accepted the Franco regime, have they not? The Reds lost this contest; their allegiance doesn't prevent them from recognizing that Franco won. Do as the Reds who live in Spain have done. Accept your defeat."

"There are no more Reds in Spain. They were shot."

"Who told you this story?"

"We read about it in the Soviet newspapers. We will never recognize the Franco regime. We'd rather be shot by the Finns than by Franco."

"Listen! I don't give a damn about you, about Red Spain, about Franco's Spain, about Russia, but I can't abandon you, I won't abandon you. I'll do what's possible to help you. If you don't want to recognize Franco's regime, to express the desire to return to Spain, then, well, I'll sign the declaration for you. I'll be lying, but I'll save your life. Understood?"

"No! We'll protest, we'll declare that you fraudulently signed for us. We beg you to leave us in peace. And mind your own business. Are you Spanish? No. So what are you interfering for?"

"I'm not Spanish, but I'm a man, I'm a Christian, and I won't abandon you. I repeat: allow me to help you. Return to Spain, and there you'll do what all the others do, what all the Reds who have honorably accepted their defeat have done. You're young, I won't let you die."

"Leave us in peace, won't you?"

I unhappily left them. General Edqvist said to me, "Minister de Foxa must be informed. Telegraph him to come here to settle this business himself."

I telegraphed de Foxa: "Prisoners refuse. Come quick to persuade them."

Two days later de Foxa arrived. The north wind blew violently, de Foxa was covered with icicles. As soon as he saw me:

"You again," he shouted. "How is it possible you're still interfering in this?" How do you expect me to persuade them,

if they don't want to be? You don't know Spaniards, they're as stubborn as a Toledo mule! Why did you telegraph me? What do you want me to do now?"

"Go talk to them," I said, "maybe ..."

"Yes, yes, I know ... that's why I came. But really now ..."

I accompanied him to see the prisoners. The prisoners were intransigent.

De Foxa entreated them, begged them, threatened them. To no avail.

"They will shoot us. All right. And then?" they said.

"Then I will bury you according to the Catholic rite!" shouted de Foxa, foaming at the mouth, with tears in his eyes. Because my dear Augustin is good, and he suffers from that magnificent and terrible stubbornness.

"You won't do it," the prisoners said. "*Usted es un hombre honesto!*"

Because they too were moved, even so. De Foxa left again, exhausted. Before leaving he asked General Edqvist to hold the prisoners a little longer, and not to decide anything without informing him.

He was sitting in his sled, and he said to me, "See, Malaparte, it's your fault I'm in this state." He had tears in his eyes, his voice trembled. "I can't think about the fate of those poor boys. I admire them, I'm proud of them, they're true Spaniards, proud

and courageous. But you understand ... We must do everything we can to save them. I'm counting on you!"

"I'll do everything I can. I promise you that they won't die."

"Adios, Augustin!"

"Adios, Malaparte!"

I went to see the prisoners every day, attempting to persuade them, but in vain.

"Thank you," they said to me, "but we're Communists. We'll never agree to recognize Franco."

One day General Edqvist summoned me. "Go see what's happening with the prisoners. They've nearly done in one of their comrades. And we can't figure out why!"

I went to the prisoners. One of them was covered with blood and sitting on the ground in a corner of the room, protected by a Finnish soldier armed with a *suomi-konepistooli*, the famous Finnish submachine gun.

"What have you done to this man?"

"He's a traitor," they respond. "A *traidor*."

"Is this true?" I ask the wounded man.

"Yes, I am a *traidor*. I want to return to Spain, I can't take it anymore! I don't want to die! I want to return to Spain! I'm Spanish. I want to return to Spain."

"He's a traitor! A *traidor*!" said his comrades, Looking on with gazes full of hate. I had "el traidor" confined to a separate

shed and telegraphed de Foxa: " 'El traidor' wants to return to Spain. Come quick."

Two days later de Foxa arrived. Snow was falling. He was blinded by the snow, his face stung by the shards of ice thrown up by the horses' hooves on the frozen path. As soon as he saw me:

"What are you interfering for? Why in the world are you minding other people's business? You're still out to drive me mad with your stories? Where is this traitor?"

"Over there, Augustin."

"All right, let's go see him."

"El traidor" received us in silence. He was around twenty years old, blond and fair-eyed, very pale. He was blond like blond Spaniards are, with fair eyes like fair-eyed Spaniards have. He began to cry. He said, "I am a traitor. *Yo soy un traidor*. But I can't take it anymore. I don't want to die. I want to return to Spain." He cried, watching us with eyes full of fear, of hope, of entreaty.

De Foxa was moved.

"Don't cry," he said. "We'll send you to Spain. You'll be well received. You'll be pardoned. It's not your fault if the Russians made you a Communist, you were a child. Don't cry."

"I'm a traitor!" said the prisoner.

"We are all traitors," de Foxa said suddenly in a low voice. The next day de Foxa had him sign a declaration, then left.

Before he left he went to General Edqvist.

"You are a gentleman," he said to him. "Give me your word that you'll save these poor wretches' lives. They're good kids. They would rather die than disavow their faith."

"Yes, they're good kids," said General Edqvist. "I'm a soldier, I admire courage and loyalty even in my enemies. I give you my word. Besides, I've already reached an agreement with Marshal Mannerheim, they will be treated as prisoners of war. You can leave with an easy heart, I'll answer for their lives."

De Foxa shook General Edqvist's hand in silence, choked with emotion. As he took his seat in the sled, he smiled.

"At last!" he said to me, "you'll stop bothering me with all these hassles! I'm going to telegraph Madrid, and as soon as I have a response, we'll see. Thank you, Malaparte."

"Adios, Augustin."

"Adios."

A few days later the response from Madrid arrived. The prisoner was escorted to Helsinki, where a Spanish officer and a noncommissioned officer awaited him. "El traidor" left in a plane for Berlin, and from there to Spain. It was clear that the Spanish authorities wanted to play up the affair. The prisoner was showered with attention and left happy.

Two months later I returned to Helsinki. It was spring. The trees of the esplanade were covered with new leaves of tender

green; birds sang in the branches. Even the sea, at the far end of the esplanade, was green; it too seemed covered in new leaves. I went to collect de Foxa in his Brunnsparcken villa. Together we walked along the sea, en route to the Kemp. The island of Suomenlinna was white with the wings of seagulls.

"And the prisoner, 'el traidor'? Have you had any news?"

"Again!" cried de Foxa. "What are you interfering for?"

"I too did something to save that man's life."

"I almost lost my position, thanks to him! And it's your fault!"

He told me how "el traidor" had been very well received in Madrid. They promenaded him through the city's cafés, its theaters, its bullrings, its stadiums, its movie houses. They would promenade him, and the people would say, "Do you see that handsome young man? He was a Communist, he was taken prisoner on the Russian front, he was fighting alongside the Russians. He wanted to return, he recognized Franco in Spain. He's an honorable young man, a good Spaniard." But "el traidor" would say, "This, a café? You've got to see the cafés in Moscow." And he would laugh. He would say, "This, a theater? A movie house? You've got to see the theaters and the movie houses in Moscow." And he would laugh. They brought him to a stadium. He said aloud, "This, a stadium? You've got to see the stadium in Kiev." And he laughed. Everyone would turn around and he

would say aloud, "This, a stadium? The stadium in Kiev, now that's a stadium!" And he would laugh.

"You understand," de Foxa said to me. "You understand? It's your fault. It's your fault too. In Madrid, at the ministry, they were furious with me. All this because of you. This will teach you to interfere in things that aren't your business."

"But in the end, this young man ... What did they do to him?"

"What do you think they did to him? They didn't do anything to him," Augustin said with a strange voice. "What are you interfering for?"

I understood. They had buried him according to the Catholic rite.

Crans, January 31. And yet I had been warned that the Swiss were a peculiar people.

Yesterday evening, having just arrived in the little inn Pas de l'Ours, which is hidden away in the pine forest overlooking Crans, I called out to the dogs in the vicinity. I went out on the terrace and began to bark. And the dogs immediately responded, from near and far, through the night dimly illuminated by a slim crescent moon. I always do the same thing when I arrive in a new place. I become acquainted with the dogs in the vicinity. I don't do any harm. But this morning I received a visit from the Crans police, who asked me to stop barking at night.

"You are not a dog, monsieur."

"I like barking with the dogs, at night. I'm not doing any harm."

"Such things are not done in Switzerland, monsieur. The regulations prohibit it."

"Thank you. I won't do it anymore. But I won't stay in Switzerland, I'll return to France. There you can bark at night all you want."

"I'm sorry, monsieur. Foreigners very much enjoy themselves in Switzerland. It's just that they don't bark at night. I believe you are the first."

"I shall return to France, where foreigners can bark as much as they like."

"I do not doubt it, monsieur. France is a country of loose morals."

"To bark at night is not to have loose morals."

"It begins with barking, monsieur, and finishes with biting. The Swiss don't like being bitten."

I won't stay in Switzerland. I'll leave tomorrow. I don't like countries where you can't even bark at night. I like free countries.

March 22, Chamonix. Descending from Planpraz in the cable car, I meet a young French doctor, M. ——. I'm in the middle of telling Georgette M. about the dream I had the night before.

The doctor explains the dream using a Freudian argument. We talk about the obsession with corpses that appears in nearly all of my writings.

To be honest, this obsession only appears in my writings after my months in prison, my years of confinement. What happened to me, in prison or on Lipari, that drove me to express this obsession that has existed in me since my earliest childhood? Maybe having smelled for the first time, in prison, that corpse smell that every prisoner exudes from his poorly washed skin, from his underclothes, from everything he touches or wears on his person. In any case, it's a fact: in my entire literary oeuvre, save for a few pages in my first book, which is from 1921, the obsession with corpses does not appear.

I explain this obsession with a childhood memory. Around the time of my birth, my mother was haunted by the suicide of her brother, who was mad and drowned himself in a river near Milan, the Lambro. Being pregnant with me, she was disturbed by this event, which caused her to fear the evil effects of heredity.

I was not a normal child, not like all the other children. I was timid, weak, dominated by my imagination, and morbidly sensitive. We lived in Prato, in a house on Via Magnolfi. When I was very small, two years old, I removed a brick from the floor of my bedroom. Having discovered some sand under the brick, I thought this sand was the beach. I would spend whole hours with

my ear glued to this sand, to listen to the sea, the voice of the sea. My father bought me a shell, which I used to create the sea in my room, with objects that had nothing to do with the sea, or with the idea that a child has of the sea. My toys, too, were strange.

March 23, Chamonix. I sat on my doorstep from ten at night till two in the morning, barking with the dogs.

At this point they know me, they talk to me. Even Tommy, ——'s dog, who didn't want to respond to me, he knows me now, talks to me, responds to me.

The moon stood poised atop the Aiguille de Blaitière, and the snow had an astonishing transparency; the sky had the same transparency as the sea under the moon. The Aiguille du Midi and the Aiguille du Goûter were reflected in the soft green sky; the stars shone on the glaciers. The dreadful mountain had an astonishing transparency and lightness, as if made of some impalpable material, of sea foam, the same sea foam from which Venus sprung.

Seated on the doorstep of my house, I bark for a long time, and the dogs respond from here, from there, from the chalet above the *téleski*, from the farm before Les Plans: they are the dogs of Roger Demarchi, of Greppon the guide; Mireille and Diane, the dogs of Roger Demarchi's brothers, who live close to me, on the farm past the fountain in Les Plans. It's the dog of

Gérard Simond, the beautiful and mad Tex, who responds to me from the Plans house, near the river. I know them all, one by one, and they all know me. They know my voice, and they respond to me; they talk to me. They understand perfectly what I say to them, because I know their language. It is my sole pleasure in life, to call out to dogs in the night, and to talk to them.

I learned how to talk to dogs on Lipari; I had no one but the dogs to talk to. I would go out at night on the terrace of my sad house on the sea, on the Salita di Santa Teresa, near the little church, beside the narrow little streets named Inferno, Diana, Mars, Pluto, Neptune, Proserpina, little streets with lovely ancient names. I would lean on the balustrade of the terrace and call out to Eolo, the brother of my dog Febo. I would call Vulcano, and Apollo, and Stromboli, all the dogs with ancient names; and Valastro's dog, Nicosia's dog, the dogs of my fishermen friends, who themselves have ancient names: Nicosia, Valastro, Amendola, Fenech; Greek names, Phoenician names. I would stay on the terrace for long hours, barking with the dogs, who would respond, and the fishermen of Marina Corta would call me "the dog." They complained to the Carabinieri, and I was warned not to bark with the dogs in the night, because the fishermen were afraid to hear me barking with the dogs.

On Capri, too, I talk to the dogs of Matromania, who come to the top of Matromania at night to talk to me, and the inhabitants of Matromania call me mad. And when the Americans went ashore on Capri, they complained to the other Americans; the Governor called me and asked if I was the one barking at night. I said yes, it was me. And the Americans warned me not to bark with the dogs in the night. But I complained to the English admiral Morse, who commanded the naval base on the island, and Admiral Morse told me: "You have the right to bark, if you like, because Italy is now free. There's no more Mussolini. You can bark."

In Paris, too, I barked with the dogs, from my terrace on Rue Galilée, but it wasn't the dogs who responded to me; it was the cats, the cat of my concierge, Madame Campio; the cat of the director of *France Dimanche*, M. Max —, who lived across from me at no. 59; the owner of the Bar Triolet's cat, Corso; and the Hôtel — cat and the one from Hôtel —, and I had to stop talking to the cats in the language of the dogs, because the cats didn't want me to, and insulted me.

But here in Chamonix I can bark all night if I want, because the inhabitants are kind, they love dogs, and they know there is nothing that gives greater pleasure to a man who lives alone than barking with the dogs. Ruskin, too, when he stayed in Chamonix, barked with the dogs in the night. It's well known,

in Chamonix, that foreigners like to bark in the night with the dogs.

Even so, yesterday evening the big sheep dog from the farm that lies above the cableway, near the rock Ruskin loved to sit on for long hours, gazing at the small glacier at the feet of the Aiguille de Blaitière ("at the feet of the Aiguille de Blaitière there is a small glacier that, in its beautifully curved outline, appears to harmonize with the rocks beneath"), yesterday evening the big sheep dog, Tom, came toward me. I heard his voice come closer and closer, he was asking me, "What's wrong?" I replied that nothing was wrong, but he didn't trust me, didn't believe me, and so he came to see me. He approached me, sniffed me, sat down on the snow beside me, and together we called all the others, who responded from here and from there across the transparent night, in the glow of the wondrously pure snow.

For there is no purer pleasure than to bark with the dogs in the night, on a beautiful frozen night, illuminated by the gentle transparent brilliance of the snow.

June. I read an interview with Moravia that he gave to Malraux, in an Italian newspaper. It's rather banal and, like everything Moravia writes, extremely cautious, owing perhaps to the political position assumed by Malraux in recent times.

I've often wondered why I don't feel the need to become better acquainted with the Malrauxs, or the Sartres, or so many others who honor not only French but also European letters today. And perhaps it comes from the instinct for what is false with respect to all men, and especially to foreigners, in the attitudes assumed by a Malraux or a Sartre.

My encounter with Malraux goes back to 1931. In the fall of that year I was living in Daniel Halévy's beautiful house at 38 Quai de l'Horloge. One Saturday afternoon, Daniel Halévy telephoned to invite me to join him, to meet Gabriel Marcel, Malraux, Aron, Dieudonné, and the young Ferrero. To get to Halévy, I had to go down the Quai de l'Horloge, turn the corner at Madame Roland's house, enter the Place Dauphine, and cross the threshold of no. 27 in that same square. So I go down and head toward the Pont Neuf. As I come to the tobacco shop at the corner, a taxi pulls over to the curb. A tall thin young man, his face covered with tiny red dots, gets out, turns to me, and asks with a half distracted, half imperious air, "if I could give him twenty francs." I rummage in my pocket and hand over a twenty-franc note. The stranger takes the money and, without even thanking me, hands it to the driver, who, after having counted out the change in his hand, hands him the change. I'm waiting at the edge of the sidewalk. The stranger pockets the change and, without a word of thanks, or a smile, or deeming me

worthy of a glance, walks away. Amused, I step into the tobacco shop and buy cigarettes, then head toward Place Dauphine and enter at no. 27. I climb the stairs and enter the home of Daniel Halévy, who, coming forward and greeting me, introduces me to Gabriel Marcel and the others. Coming to a tall thin young man I recognize as the twenty-francs man, Halévy says to me, "And this is Malraux." The twenty-francs man greets me in that moment as if he were seeing me for the first time in his life, and asks me a few very polite questions. I stayed at Halévy's until around eight, talking at length with Gabriel Marcel, André Spire, and Malraux himself, who did not say a word to me about those twenty francs, and who left without even thanking me.

How, then, could I pay a visit to Malraux today? I would have the appearance of going to ask him for my twenty francs.

an undated entry

The sun is out this morning, a bright, warm sun pervaded by the drone of invisible insects. The leaves on the trees, burned by autumn's lazy fire, strangely glimmer. The water of the Seine is green, swollen with earth, and with the sky; enormous white clouds, slashed with blue, tumble in the current, shatter against the bridge piers. The flag over the French parliament makes a Utrillo-esque blot. I enter the Tuileries Garden

and sit down on a bench, joining a young mother already seated there.

A young boy romps in front of her; he runs, stops, lifts his head, closes his eyes, calls out, "Maman." Moments later the child comes toward me, runs into my knees, stops, stares at me with fear. "He's blind," the mother says to me in a low voice. I touch the boy's hand, clasp it between my own. "Who's there?" asks the child. "I'm a general," I answer, "dressed in red and blue, with a hat full of feathers on my head, a great sword at my side, and my horse is waiting for me at the end of the path."

The boy starts to laugh, then he says to me, "I'm the horse." "I know, you're my horse. Gallop!"

The child sets off at a gallop, then returns to me.

"Why are your ears red?" says the man.

"I'm the king's horse," the boy says.

"Yes, I am the king," says the man. "I'd forgotten that I'm the king today. Do you want to call my soldiers?"

"Yes," says the boy, and gallops away. He turns around, comes back, stands at attention in front of the man, and says, "I'm the army."

"This morning I declared war, we must fight. Go and win the battles."

"Yes," says the boy. He kneels, takes aim with an imaginary rifle, and fires. He makes the sound of a cannon, a rifle, a drum, a trumpet.

"You're dead," the man shouts at him.

The child falls, with a high-pitched cry, and his dog runs up to him, whining, licking his tiny master.

"What do you see?" the man asks.

"I see the Virgin," says the pale child, "and the Saints."

"Do you see Christ?" says the man.

"I don't see Christ, I see Napoleon," says the dead child.

"Do you see your comrades who died for France?" says the man.

"I see all my dead comrades," says the dead child.

"How are they dressed?" says the man.

"They're dressed in red, green, and yellow. They have eyes that twinkle like two stars, they're really happy to be dead."

"Now return to the Royal Palace," says the man.

The dead child stands up and returns to the man.

"Let's go to the theater," says the man.

"Oh, yes," says the boy, "I really like the theater."

"Let's go," says the man, and he sets off, holding the boy by the hand. They take two steps, then slowly return to sit down on the bench.

"They're playing *Cyrano*," says the man.

"I really like *Cyrano*," says the boy.

"Quiet," says the man.

The two stare in front of them, following with their eyes the show on the invisible stage. From time to time the boy applauds, overjoyed.

"Oh, he's such a good actor!" says the man.

Suddenly it begins to rain. The drops are fat and warm and raise a small cloud of dust from the gravel paths of the garden. A light mist veils the trees of the Champs-Élysées. The man stands, saying, "It's raining. It happens every time, when they perform *Cyrano*: it rains. Let's go."

He takes the child by the hand, calls out "Mouton." The dog approaches. The man attaches a leash to its neck and the three slowly set off, the dog turning from time to time to look at his masters. I follow them with my eyes, without understanding.

"They're both blind," says the woman sitting on the other bench. "They used to come here almost every day; for the last few weeks they've been going to the Luxembourg Gardens. But they like the Tuileries."

"They were born blind?"

"Yes, they've never seen things. The world they imagine for themselves is very strange. They play at seeing each other, in color. Do you understand?"

I returned the next day. They weren't there. Two days later I saw them. They played war, describing aloud the soldiers' uniforms. I understood that what they depicted were not facts, characters, or roles, but colors and forms. When, after their game, they got up to go, I approached the man and, doffing my hat, asked him if I could accompany them with my umbrella. They thanked me, and we set off. The boy asked me what color my umbrella was. "Black," I answered. The man turned his face toward me and I noted a slight tremor in his lips. We walked in silence. Beneath the arcades of the Place des Pyramides, the man thanked me and lifted his hat. Then he said to me in a low voice: "Why deceive us? There are no black umbrellas. Your umbrella is red. Why lie?" And he went away, holding the boy by the hand.

Shark Fins

by Enrique Serpa

Translated from the Spanish
by Andrew Feldman

ENRIQUE SERPA (1900–1968) was born in Havana. A journalist, his first literary venture came in 1925 with the publication of *Felisa and I* in 1938, his book *Contraband* brought fame and recognition. A tireless reporter, cultural attaché of the Cuban Embassy in Paris between 1952 and 1959, Enrique Serpa was soon forgotten after the advent of Castro's revolution and is little known outside of Cuba today.

A former Marine officer, **ANDREW FELDMAN** studied philosophy, literature, translation, and comparative literature at Tulane University, Norwich University, and the University of Paris IV, *La Sorbonne*. During a residence at the Hemingway Museum and Library in Cuba, he spent two years conducting research, resulting in the publication of *Ernesto: The Untold Story of Hemingway in Revolutionary Cuba*.

Within the waters of his sleep, Felipe had the vague sensation that the sound of his alarm pursued him like a determined fish. Half-awake, he hardly noticed when his wife beside him turned over in bed. Then he opened his eyes. When he saw a ray of light falling like a twine of gold from a thin gap along the front door, he jumped up, bare feet on the ground. Fumbling for his pants and a shirt hanging over a drawer beside the headboard, he put on laceless shoes and a soiled baseball cap. Taking a box of matches from his shirt pocket, he lit a gas lantern.

The stuffy room was heavy and damp with stale air, sweat, and gloom. Felipe looked around, and his bleary eyes came to rest on his wife's body, lying on her stomach with her head resting on her folded arms, half-covered by a blue blanket made of fake silk, discolored and sown up in several places, exposing one of her calves, upon which a housefly, after having circled for a moment, landed. At her side a newborn slept with his legs folded and his little arms drawn in close to his chest, as if nursing his mother. The three other boys huddled together on a cot beside three rickety chairs, positioned there to prevent them from spilling onto the floor. One of them, stirring slightly, groaned in his sleep. Felipe, touching him softly with a calloused hand, slowly rocked the boy, who let out a long sigh as his father caressed his thigh, then fell silent.

In response to the rising morning, the family awakened in their shack. Opening with a forceful push, the grind from their metallic door could be heard throughout the neighborhood. Then in the distance, the screech of a tram. Keeping time next was a motor rumbling, and the strident honk of a car's horn. Just outside, a man passing in the street stopped to hunch over, coughing harshly, tearing himself to pieces, until he finished, spitting phlegm grossly to the ground. Behind the filter of a neighbor's door, the distinctive "chas-chá" sound of someone's sandals was audible. There was also a child's voice that shouted out happily, and the flat voice of a man that replied. A moment later, the child's voice exclaimed: "Daddy, look at how the dog looks at you!"

Felipe picked up the basket containing his fishing gear—rolls of twine, fishhooks, weights, a day's water in a plastic gallon jug—and held it under his arm. He glanced again at the cot where his children slept, and then he left. As he came out of the door of his shack, he waved to an old woman, so old, withered, and wrinkly that she was just a shadow of her former self.

"How is Ambrosio doing?" he asked her. The little old lady's face furrowed with worry.

"Bad, bad, son. He looked so bad last night that Mersé went looking for the doctor at the emergency clinic, but the doctor didn't want to come because he said, I do not know what, that

he wasn't on duty. Another one was supposed to come, in the morning. That's why I am standing here waiting. I believe that Ambrosio is going to die."

"That, nobody knows. He might just get better and bury us all," said Felipe, trying to cheer the old woman up.

The unforeseen discussion of death darkened his thoughts, however, and resuming his journey, he noticed that he was remembering an incident in which he had figured as the protagonist the previous afternoon. Triggered by one of those abusive acts that transform the most peaceful and even-minded men into killers, it might have led to tragedy. The problem arose because of some shark fins. For some time, Felipe, like the other fishermen of La Punta and Casablanca, had avoided fishing sharks of any kind. A decree from the President of the Republic granted a monopoly to a fishing company that had been unable to succeed on its own and so instead that company attempted to cheat and exploit the local fishermen. Until then, shark fishing had been supporting many impoverished families along the coast. An Asian merchant on Zanja Street had been buying all shark fins and tails, salting and exporting them to San Francisco, California, where, along with swallow nests and sturgeon soup, they were valued delicacies of Chinese cuisine. Each pair of fins was purchased for two pesos. This was a good business for these fishermen, and there were also benefits to

be extracted from the rest of the animal: the spine, used to manufacture peculiar canes that seemed to be made of ivory; the teeth, charms that promised to protect the wearer from bad luck; and the head, which, once dried out, could be sold as a *souvenir* to American tourists.

Thus it would continue, until one day without warning, they pronounced their cursed decree, like a battering ram that knocked the Chinese merchant completely out of business. Even so, when it was merely an idea, it did not seem as bad, at least in the beginning. A few representatives from "The Shark Fishing Company" came to the coast and made the fishermen an offer, which without any means of assessing it, appeared reasonable enough. "The Company" would buy all the sharks they fished, paying for them according to their measurements. Those men spoke so eloquently and quickly that the fishermen gladly accepted their offer, and even felt grateful. But in short time, they realized they had been fooled. Things weren't exactly as these representatives had led them to believe; for a creature to be worth one peso, it would have to have certain proportions that defied normal proportions. Besides that, they had to deliver all of it in one piece, with its tail, fins, and skin intact.

The fishermen, realizing that they had been cheated, began to protest, and demanded an increase in price. Closing the conversation, the Company spread fear instead, mentioning

the presidential decree that protected them and threatening to throw all who disobeyed it in jail. Then tyrannically the Company began to impose its rights. Not to be messed with, the Port Police, who had been bribed by this ingenious Company, were now at its disposal. Thereafter these Port Police showed much greater enthusiasm in surprising shark-poaching fishermen than in the pursuit of any smuggler or pirate. This resulted in an irritating corruption, calloused by its unfairness, and worsened by the fact that the Company made use of every part of the shark. They sold the fins to the Chinese, the bones to a button factory, and the skin to the tanneries. From the livers they extracted an excellent lubricant, misleadingly presented in shops as "whale oil." If this weren't enough, they salted the dogfish, newborn sharks, and advertised them as "boneless cod."

All this meant that after some time the fishermen decided not to fish shark. If, while marlin-fishing, a shark was unintentionally hooked, the fishermen preferred to kill, quarter, and dump it in the sea rather than surrender it to the Company for 30 or 40 cents.

Naturally, Felipe's conduct echoed that of his fellow fishermen. But, as he said sometimes, "Whatever will be ..." For three days he had been going to sea without pulling anything out of the water, not a snapper, not *cecil*, or even a crown—a horrible fish most often causing food poisoning, but which always had

buyers amongst unscrupulous bottom feeders who would risk poisoning their customers in exchange for a few cents' profit.

Then, suddenly, a shark came to circle his boat. It was a bull shark, fifteen feet long, with fins that were as big and wide as the sails of a two-masted ship. Felipe made an instinctive movement towards his harpoon. Then the memory that they were not allowed to fish shark reigned him in. So he started to contemplate the shark, resembling a dark, grey, flexible tree-trunk. This was a trunk alright, a big wide tree-trunk of fish. How much might he be worth? Felipe calculated that any Chinaman on Zanja Street would give him two pesos for his fins and tail. Indeed, he should just accept the two pesos, for the sea was offering it to him during his moment of extreme need. Two pesos signified three abundant meals for his malnourished children. But what about the police? And the agents of The Shark Fishing Company? Along the seawall, El Malecón, there were always a few of those malevolent scavengers waiting for fishermen's boats, just in case one of them came back with a shark or fins. Sometimes they would just confiscate the catch, but not so infrequently, they would take it further and arrest the fisherman. Next, everybody knew, it was five pesos fine from the Judge of the Correctional Court, where one was not even allowed to speak in his own defense. No, in this case, there was no way to "make a deal" to get out of such a fix. There was

no escape from poverty. Two pesos were, however, two pesos, even if, scraping everything they possessed together, his family could not even light a stove. In the end fishing was often a game of chance, and their luck did not always result from their effort. If only it were up to us, yes, the fish would just bite! And those fins just over there, within arm's reach! It was as if they were screaming "Two pesos!" at him.

Before long, Felipe had made his decision. There were two pesos within his reach, what a Devil! Quickly, to keep the shark busy while he armed his harpoon, Felipe sprinkled a few thread herring, already turning rotten, a couple of white squirrel fish, a striper; all the rest of the bait fish that he had, aboard. The shark raised its rigid dorsal fins out of the water such that the sun flashed across its pale underbelly. He devoured one after the other, barely opening his steel jaws: the thread herring, the squirrel fish, the striper. After he had finished, he docilely submerged, but reappeared a few minutes later beside the stern of the boat.

The harpoon, shot accurately by Felipe, was abruptly stuck into the back of the shark's neck, and he thrashed in convulsive tremors, while his tail whipped up a whirlwind of foam. Two mallet whacks to the head were sufficient to subdue him. Fifteen minutes later, his body had been stripped of its fins and tail, was sinking as it tumbled over itself, and became

fodder for his fellows at the bottom of the sea. Only a fleeting star of blood remained in the place the mutilated body had been, like a silent reproach.

Having sewn the fins and tail with a bit of string, Felipe rowed now toward the coast. He had to dock along the seawall, El Malecón, as soon as possible, go quickly to Chinatown, and locate a buyer. Maybe he could make a deal with "Chan," the owner of "*El Cantón*." As a last resort, he might exchange the fins for provisions. Then appeared black doom wearing a blue uniform. Just after hitching his boat to the pier, he was startled by its rough metallic voice.

"You can't deny that I caught you with your hands right in the cookie jar."

Pivoting as his heart sank, he saw the policeman smiling at him cruelly and pointing his finger at the shark fins. After a short pause, he added:

"I am going to take them."

He bent over to grab the fins, but didn't reach them in time, for Felipe, moving swiftly forward, raised them in his lean right hand.

"They're mine. . .mine," he stammered instinctively.

Clashing with such surprising behavior, the policeman was, for an instant, stunned. But soon after, he reacted, eager to recover his threatened authority.

"Alright then, hand'm over, or I'll run you in, fins and all."

Felipe studied him more closely then. He was a man of cowardly stature, skinny, and awkward. His uncertain physique contrasted cruelly with the strident voice and the cocky attitude that he had assumed. Unintentionally Felipe contracted his chest and biceps. And a feeling of vigor and elasticity in his muscles told him "that clown isn't half the snout of a man as me."

Meanwhile, a chorus of curious onlookers had formed around Felipe and the policeman.

"Give them to me, or you are going to regret it."

"Give them to him, Felipe," recommended the insistent voice of an old fisherman with a coppery skin, then shifting his tone: "With a little luck, they'll take'm straight to the doctor."

Felipe felt the weight of countless eyes staring all around. His manly dignity rebelling against the unjustified humiliation, he sensed the mocking smiles and sarcastic comments from the witnesses at the scene, who had come to watch his dishonor. Besides that, the clear and tormenting recognition that he was suffering an intolerable injustice prompted his defiance: "Whatever will be, must be."

"I am waiting. Are you going to give them to me or what?"

The policeman's insistent voice was a jolt of anger and intimidation.

"Neither for you, nor for me," announced Felipe, hastily yielding to a solution. Over his head, behind him, twirled the fins that he had thrown into the sea.

The policeman, trembling with anger, ordered Felipe to accompany him to the port authority. But Felipe, beside himself with rage and clinging to his dignity, refused arrest. No one present could find a solution to this predicament. Fortunately, an army officer approached and intervened. With a firm voice he told the policeman to calm down and Felipe to allow himself to be escorted to the harbormaster:

"The best thing to do would be to go. The patrolman has to carry out his duty."

Felipe protested. He reasoned that this guard appeared eager to mistreat him.

"I am not going to go along with it. They want to whack me with a baton, ok? Great!"

But his reticence was an implicit threat.

In the end, they devised a compromise: he would allow himself to be arrested by the lieutenant instead of the policeman. The soldier, who was an unusually understanding man, agreed. The policeman accepted that solution, too, albeit with perceptible annoyance, for yielding to it meant diminishing his authority.

During the entire trip, until they arrived at the Port Authority, he was muttering threats to Felipe and from time to time feeding his hatred by staring right through him.

Now as Felipe walked toward the Malecón, he remembered all of it. He supposed that the policeman had not been satisfied. No, he had not been satisfied at all, and whenever he could, he would make him pay. It was a nasty business to get oneself into over a pair of fins.

Stopping at the shop at the corner of Cuba and Carteles Streets, he saw Congo's father. He had agreed to go out to sea with his son, Congo, so he asked after him.

"Ehhh? He's been at the beach for a while already!"

He picked up his pace. When he turned the corner after the Old Armory, his eyes widened with an image reflecting inside them, of a blue uniform standing erect, atop the Malecón. "A snag in our line!" he thought. "It must be the same patrolman." He was inspired for a moment to return the way he came. It wasn't that he was afraid, because he had no fear of anyone, or any thing, no man on land, nor bad weather at sea, as many who knew him could attest. No, he wasn't afraid, "but the best thing was to avoid it." The thought of fleeing, which flashed across his

mind, embarrassed him though, and painted a red streak across his face. So he continued, renewing his step firmly, rigidly, almost with nervous tension, weighed heavily with anxiety and expectation.

In the next moment, he would discover that his feelings had not deceived him. There he was, the policeman from the incident, with his despotic and provocative air, strutting like a *gallo* (cock). Congo had already run the boat aground beside the Malecón, and he was putting the mast up to unfurl the sail. As he approached, Felipe noticed that the policeman was watching him out of the corner of his eye.

"... that's nonsense," said Congo, continuing his conversation with the policeman.

"Nonsense?" he said. "Not at all. I am the bull here. Look here he comes. The first move he makes, and I'll give him four blows to the head."

Felipe, irritated to the core by the policeman's clumsy threat, felt an immediate desire to slap him, so that he would attempt to give him those "blows."

Yet he contained himself:

"Leave me alone, buddy. Didn't you have enough of me yesterday?"

"Alone?" his voice was sarcastic, sharp like the point of a boat hook. "Your only peace is going to come from my stick.

You are going to get what's coming to you when you least expect it. You saved yourself yesterday because of that lieutenant ... But the first false move, I am going to give you four cracks with this club."

Through focused application of his will, Felipe managed to control himself. Moving towards Congo, he complained, "Look at this curse on me, so early in the morning?"

The policeman mocked him, "Ah, now you're an angel, eh? Now that there's nobody here to defend you?"

There was so much sarcastic hatred in his voice that Felipe, losing his composure, felt compelled to leap forward:

"To defend myself from whom? . . . from you? from *you!*"

The sentence broke in his throat, ripped to pieces by his rage. A minute passed that seemed like a century. He tried to speak, but the anger knotted in his throat, was like a clot of blood, a thick coagulation preventing him from articulating another word. Then unable to speak, he had the distinct sensation that the officer would interpret the silence as cowardice. That idea shook him like a blow to the jaw. Then the clot rose from his throat to his eyes and from his eyes to his head. With blinded and stifled fury, he moved forward towards the policeman with raised fists.

A sharp detonation interrupted the morning quiet. Felipe, without warning, without understanding how or why, felt

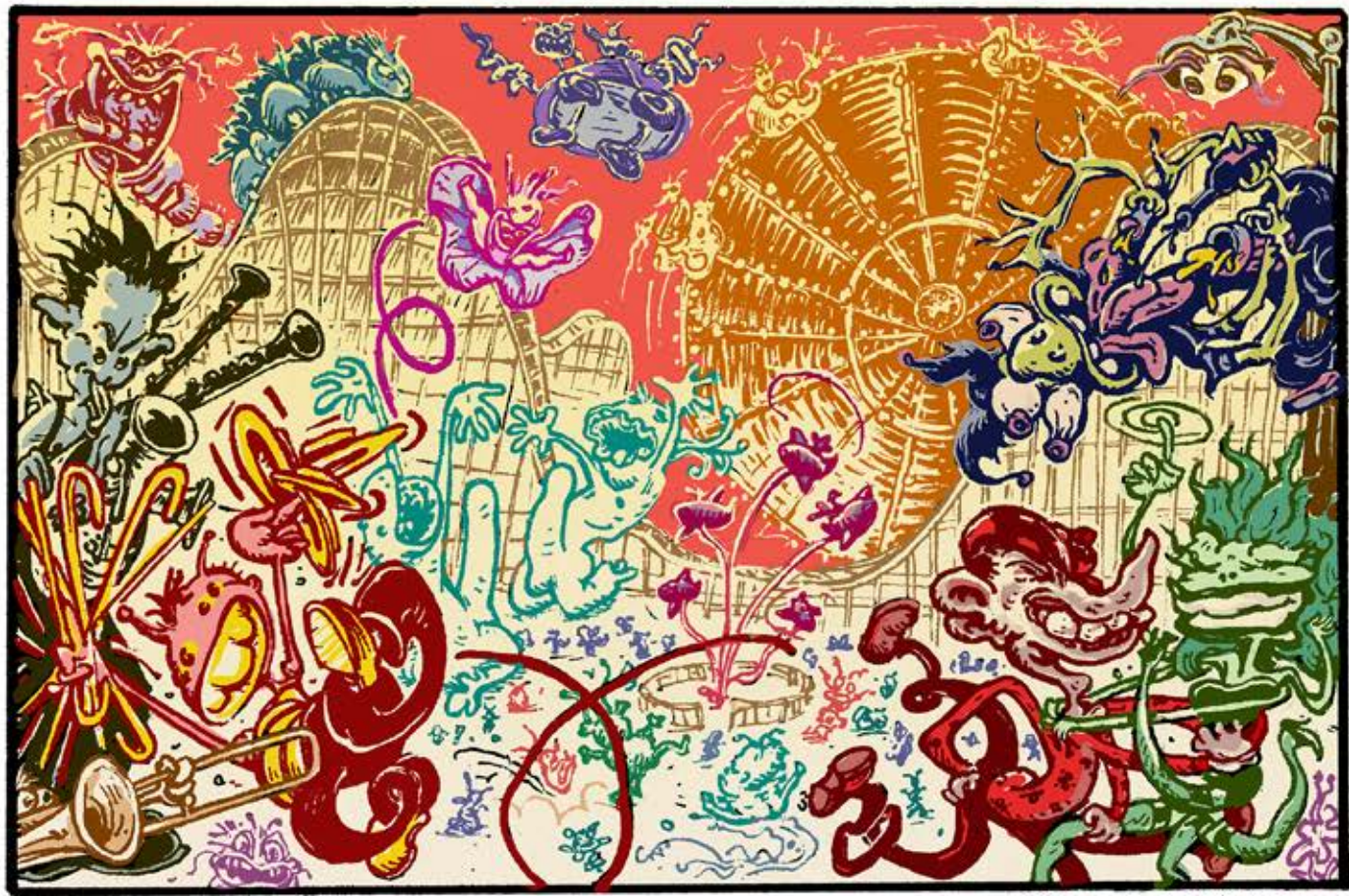
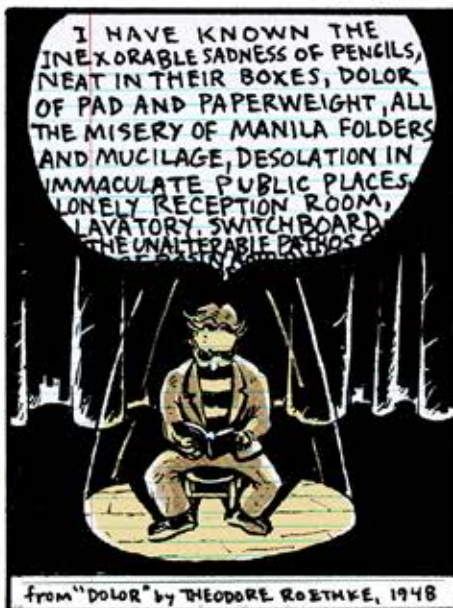
detained, then fell over the Malecón, with ship-wrecked eyes lost in the sky observing a long and shining cloud in contrast against the diaphanous blue. "It looks like mother-of-pearl," he thought, remembering with extraordinary clarity the delicate shells that had decorated the years of his impoverished childhood. He picked them up carefully from the sea. Some were perfectly white; others were a more tender color, a marvelous pale rose. He had so many shells, innumerable shells, kept in cardboard boxes, mostly shoeboxes. "And now I have to buy shoes for the boys who have been walking around with bare feet on the ground." This thought struck him, returning him to reality. In a dizzying succession of images, he then recalled his dispute with the police. That demon of a man, hellbent on his humiliation! Had he succeeded in hitting him? An unspeakable laziness, a pleasant, providential fatigue, relaxed his muscles. An indescribable sense of wellbeing was at long last putting him to sleep. Then he realized rudely that he was dying. It wasn't laziness, or wellbeing, or tiredness, but life that was leaking out of him! He was dying! And he didn't want to! He couldn't! He shouldn't. . . die! What would happen to his boys? He had to defend his life; that was his boys' lives too. He would defend it with his hands, with his feet, and with his teeth. He had a desire to scream. His mouth remained silent. Mute, a muted mouth, as if it was already full of earth! But he was not yet dead ... not

yet dead! Like torture, he yearned to see his children. To see them. To see them if only for an instant! How were his children?! He tried to imagine his boys, but the image escaped him. It was blurred, fleeting. Then he heard in the distance—dulled by miles and miles of distance—Congo’s voice. And another. Other voices. What were they saying? He could not picture his children. He saw vague outlines, hazy like faded photographs. His leaden eyelids were closing. His mouth twisted with frantic longing. Finally, he was able to mumble:

“My ... children ... my ... my ... ”

He shook abruptly in a violent tremor. Then he hung on, motionless and voiceless, still and silent, with his eyes against the sky. In his chest, just over the left nipple, he had a little red hole, barely perceptible, about the size of a dime.

GOD BLESS YOU



T. MOTLEY is alive and well and wishes you security and good health.

IN SERIAL: PART SIXTEEN

THE MYSTERIES OF PARIS

by *Eugène Sue*

translated from the French
by Robert Bononno

6. The Marquis d'Harville

"So you see, Murph," said Baron de Graün as he finished reading the report, which he handed to the squire, "based on our information, we must turn to Jacques Ferrand to track down the parents of La Goualeuse, and it is Mlle Rigolette we must question concerning the current whereabouts of François Germain. That is already a large matter, I believe, knowing where to look—for what one is looking for."

"No doubt, Baron. And I'm sure his Highness will find an abundant crop of observations in that residence. But there is more. Did you learn anything about that business with the Marquis d'Harville?"

"Yes, concerning the question of money at least, his Highness's fears are unfounded. Badinot claims, and I believe him, that the marquis's fortune has never been so well established or as wisely administered."

"Having sought, unsuccessfully, to identify the cause of his deep sorrow, his Highness assumed he was in financial difficulties. He then came to his assistance, tactfully, of course. However, as his assumptions were wrong, he will unfortunately have to abandon his attempts to locate the key to this enigma—most regretfully, since he is very fond of d'Harville."

"It's quite simple. His Highness has never forgotten the debt his father owes to the marquis's father. Are you aware, Murph, that in 1815, when the states of the German Confederation were being reorganized, his Highness's father ran the risk of being eliminated because of his well-known attachment to Napoleon? At the time, the former Marquis d'Harville was of immense service to our Highness's father, through his friendship with the Emperor Alexander, a friendship that dated from the marquis's emigration to Russia, which had a profound influence on the deliberations of the congress just as the interests of the Germanic princes were being debated."

"You see Baron how noble deeds often follow one another: in '92 the marquis's father was banished. In Germany he was given a most generous welcome by his Highness's father. After living in our court for three years, he left for Russia, where he was given assistance by the czar. And with the help of that aid, he was able in turn to help the prince who had so graciously welcomed him in the past."

"Wasn't it in 1815, when the old marquis d'Harville was staying with the reigning grand duke, that his Highness's friendship with the young Harville began?"

"Yes, both of them have retained pleasant memories of their youth together. But his Highness is so grateful to the memory of the man whose

friendship was so useful to his father that everyone in the d'Harville family has benefitted from his Highness's kindness. So you see, his Highness's unceasing generosity to poor Mme Georges is as much due to her family ties as it is to her misfortunes and virtues."

"Mme Georges! Duresnel's wife? The Schoolmaster!" exclaimed the baron.

"Yes, the mother of the young François Germain we've been looking for."

"She is related to Monsieur d'Harville?"

"She was the cousin of his mother and her close friend. The old marquis was a devoted friend of Mme Georges."

"But how is it that the d'Harville family allowed her to marry that monster Duresnel?"

"The unfortunate woman's father, Monsieur de Lagny, district administrator in Languedoc before the revolution, was in possession of a considerable fortune. He succeeded in avoiding banishment and during the calm that followed the terror, he began looking for a husband for his daughter. Duresnel showed up. The man came from an excellent family of parliamentarians and he was rich. He managed to conceal his perverted inclinations behind a hypocritical exterior and married Mademoiselle de Lagny. Although concealed for a time, the man's vices soon revealed themselves: a drinker and inveterate gambler, given to the basest sort of depravity, he made his wife miserable. She didn't complain, hid her sorrow, and after her father's death withdrew to a property that she began to improve in order to distract herself. Soon her husband had squandered their wealth in gambling and debauchery. The property was sold. She then took her son and went to stay with her relative, the Marquise d'Harville, whom she loved like a sister. Duresnel, having run through his inheritance and his wife's assets, found himself reduced to a state of necessity. He turned to crime for new resources, became a forger, a thief, a murderer, and was condemned to life imprisonment. He took the boy from his wife and entrusted him with a wretch of similar stamp. You know the rest."

"But how did his Highness find Mme Duresnel?"

"When Duresnel was thrown in jail, his wife, reduced to extreme poverty, took the name of Georges."

"But given her situation, why didn't she turn to the Marquise d'Harville? The woman was her relative and her best friend?"

"The marquise died before Duresnel was found guilty, and since then, because of her overwhelming shame, Madame Georges did not dare appeal to her friend's family, who would certainly have treated her with the consideration such misfortune deserves. However, on one occasion, having been compelled

by poverty and sickness, she determined to beg the assistance of Monsieur d'Harville, her best friend's son. That is how his highness met her."

"How is that?"

"One day he went to see M. d'Harville. A few steps in front of him walked an indigent woman, poorly dressed, pale, suffering, dejected. Having reached the door of the d'Harville home, just as she was about to knock and after considerable hesitation, she turned suddenly and retraced her steps, as if her courage had abandoned her. Surprised, his highness followed the woman, struck by her air of gentleness and sorrow. She entered a lodging whose poverty was apparent. His Highness made inquiries about her: the reports were the most honorable. She worked in order to survive, but there was little employment at the time and her health was failing. She had been reduced to the most extreme deprivation. The following day I accompanied his highness to her home. Had we not arrived when we did, she would have died of hunger. After a lengthy illness, during which time she was given the finest care, Mme Georges, in her gratitude, told her life story to his Highness, whose name and rank she was ignorant of. She described for him her life, Duresnel's imprisonment, and the kidnapping of her son."

"Is that how his Highness learned that Mme Georges belonged to the d'Harville family?"

"Yes, and once it had been explained to him, his Highness, who took an ever greater interest in Mme George's character, had her leave Paris and settled her on the farm at Bouqueval, where she now lives with Goualeuse. That peaceful retreat afforded her, if not happiness, at least tranquility, and she was able to distract herself from her sorrows by managing the leasehold. His highness did not inform M. d'Harville that he had delivered his relative from her dreadful situation as much out of consideration for Mme George's tender susceptibility as to avoid publicizing his good works."

"Now I understand his Highness's interest in discovering the whereabouts of the poor woman's son."

"You also have a better idea, Baron, of his Highness's affection for the entire family and his great sorrow at seeing the young marquis afflicted by such sadness when he had every reason to be happy."

"Just what is it that d'Harville lacks? He has everything—birth, wealth, wit, youth, a charming wife."

"What you say is true. His Highness decided to obtain the information we have been discussing only after vainly attempting to penetrate the cause of d'Harville's profound melancholy. D'Harville was deeply moved by his Highness's generosity but he

has always remained reticent about the source of his sorrow. A matter of the heart, perhaps?”

“Yet he is said to be very much in love with his wife and she has given him no reason to be jealous. I see her often at social events. She is very popular—as would be expected of such a charming young woman—but her reputation is without blemish.”

“The marquis has nothing but praise for his wife. There was only that one small discussion about Countess Sarah MacGregor.”

“So she’s seen her?”

“Through a most unfortunate occurrence. Seventeen or eighteen years ago, the father of the Marquis d’Harville met Sarah Seyton of Halsbury and her brother Tom, during their stay in Paris, where they were sponsored by the English ambassador’s wife. When the old marquis learned that the brother and sister were going to Germany, he provided them with letters of introduction to his Highness’s father, with whom he corresponded on a regular basis. Were it not for that recommendation a number of unfortunate events might have been avoided, for his highness would never have met the woman. So, when Countess Sarah returned here, knowing his Highness’s friendship for the marquis, she sought an introduction at the d’Harville home, hoping to encounter his Highness; for she was as determined to pursue him as he was to escape her.”

“Dressing as a man and chasing his highness into La Cité, that would be something a woman of her stamp would do.”

“Perhaps it was her hope that in this way she might make an impression on his highness and force him into the meeting he has always refused and avoided. But to get back to Mme d’Harville—her husband, with whom his Highness had spoken about Sarah, advised his wife to see her as little as possible. But the young marquise, seduced by the countess’s hypocritical flattery, rebelled against M. d’Harville’s counsel. This led to certain minor disagreements, but certainly nothing that would account for the marquis’s despondency.”

“Ahh! Women! Women! My dear Murph, I greatly regret that Mme d’Harville became involved with this Sarah MacGregor. The young marquise can only be the loser in her dealings with such a diabolical creature.”

“Speaking of diabolical creatures, I have here a dispatch about Cecily, David’s unworthy spouse.”

“Between us, Murph, that brazen mulatto would have well deserved the punishment her husband inflicted on the Schoolmaster. She too has caused blood to flow, the woman is entirely corrupt.”

“But yet so beautiful, so seductive. A perverse soul with a graceful exterior, I find that doubly terrifying.”

“Then she is doubly worthy of our disdain. But I hope this dispatch cancels his Highness’s latest orders concerning the wretched creature.”

“On the contrary, Baron.”

“Does he still intend to help her escape from the fortress where she has been imprisoned for life?”

“Yes.”

“And will her so-called abductor bring her to France? To Paris?”

“Yes. But there’s more. This dispatch orders that we hasten Cecily’s escape and bring her here with all haste, so she might arrive within two weeks at the latest.”

“I don’t understand. His Highness has always shown the greatest aversion for her.”

“And it has grown stronger, if such a thing is possible.”

“And yet he insists that she be brought here. However, it will be easy, as his Highness believes, to obtain Cecily’s extradition should she fail to carry out his wishes. The son of the jailer in the fortress of Gerolstein has been ordered to abduct the woman by pretending to be in love with her. He has been given everything he needs to carry out this affair. She will be more than pleased with this opportunity to escape and will follow her assumed ravisher to Paris. But she will still remain a condemned woman and an escaped prisoner. And I am perfectly capable, whenever it please his Highness, of demanding, and obtaining, her extradition.”

“Only time will tell, my dear de Graün. I also ask, as his highness has requested, that you write to our chancellery to request, in writing, a legal copy of David’s marriage certificate, for he was married in the ducal palace, having been an officer in his highness’s residence.”

“If it goes out with today’s mail, we’ll have it in a week at the latest.”

“When David found out from his Highness that Cecily was coming here, he stood stock still, then shouted, ‘I hope your highness will not force me to see that monster?’ His Highness responded, ‘rest assured, you won’t see her, but I need her for my own purposes.’ David was relieved of an enormous weight. However, I’m sure that it brought back painful memories for him.”

“Poor man. He may still love her. She is a good-looking woman still.”

“Charming, excessively charming. It would require the pitiless eye of a Creole to detect any mixed blood in the barely perceptible bistre tint that lightly colors her pink fingernails. Not even our fresh northern beauties possess such a clear complexion or such ivory skin, or such chestnut hair.”

“I was in France when his Highness returned from America with David and Cecily. Since then, that excellent man has remained devoted to his Highness out of gratitude, but I never discovered how he came to be in our master’s service and how he married Cecily, who I saw for the first time about a year after their marriage. And God knows the scandal she had already caused!”

“I’d be happy to tell you, Baron. I was with his Highness during his voyage to America, where he saved David and the mulatto from a most terrible fate.”

“You are too kind, my dear Murph. Please proceed.”

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French author, **EUGÈNE SUE** (1804–1857) was born near the city of Cannes in southern France and came from a distinguished family of doctors. Like his father, Sue also studied medicine. He began his career as a naval doctor but retired in 1829 to write.

In 1842 he began writing *Les Mystères de Paris*, a novel in parts published serially in *Le Journal des Débats*. It was the first time in a novel that readers had been exposed to the social agitation and mixing of classes experienced in the bars and cabarets of Paris’s dense core on Ile de la Cité.

His complete works, depending on the edition, run to 78 volumes.

ROBERT BONONNO is credited with the translation of over two dozen full-length works of fiction and nonfiction and numerous shorter pieces. These include René Crevel’s *My Body and I*—a finalist for the 2005 French-American Foundation Prize—Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image*, and Henri Raczymo’s *Swan’s Way*. In 2002 he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to complete a translation of the non-fiction work of Isabelle Eberhardt and in 2010 he received an NEA grant for the retranslation of Eugène Sue’s classic crime novel, *The Mysteries of Paris*. Mr. Bononno’s latest translation, Pascal Kramer’s *Autopsy of a Father*, was recently published by Bellevue Literary Press.

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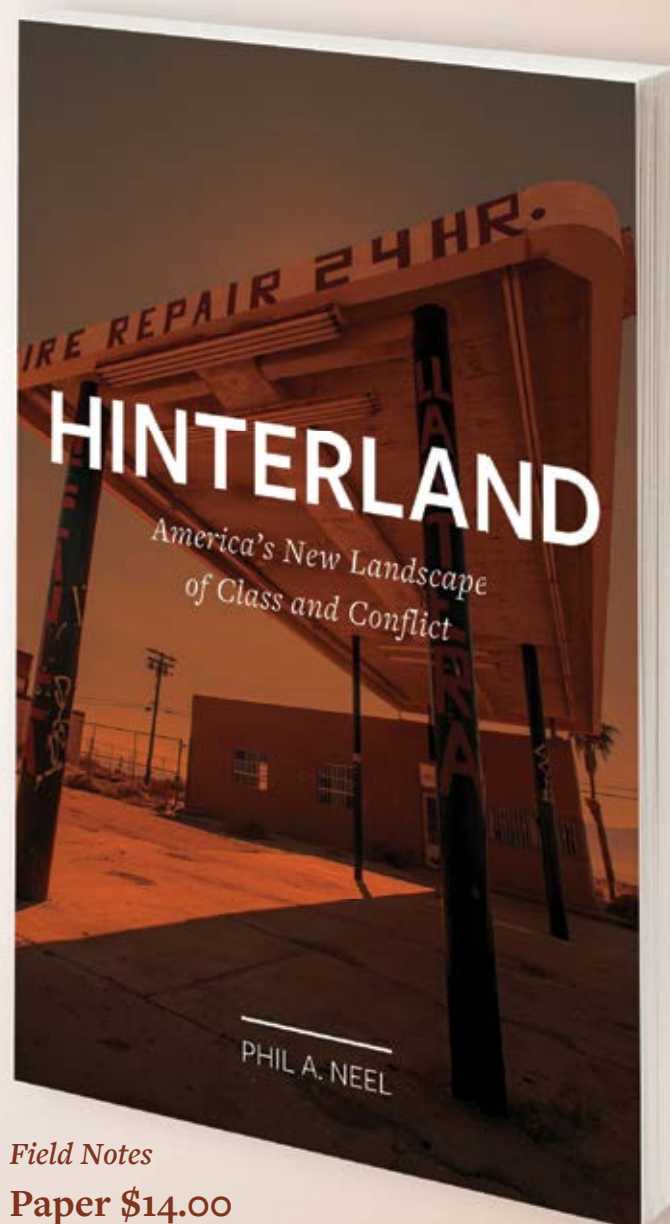
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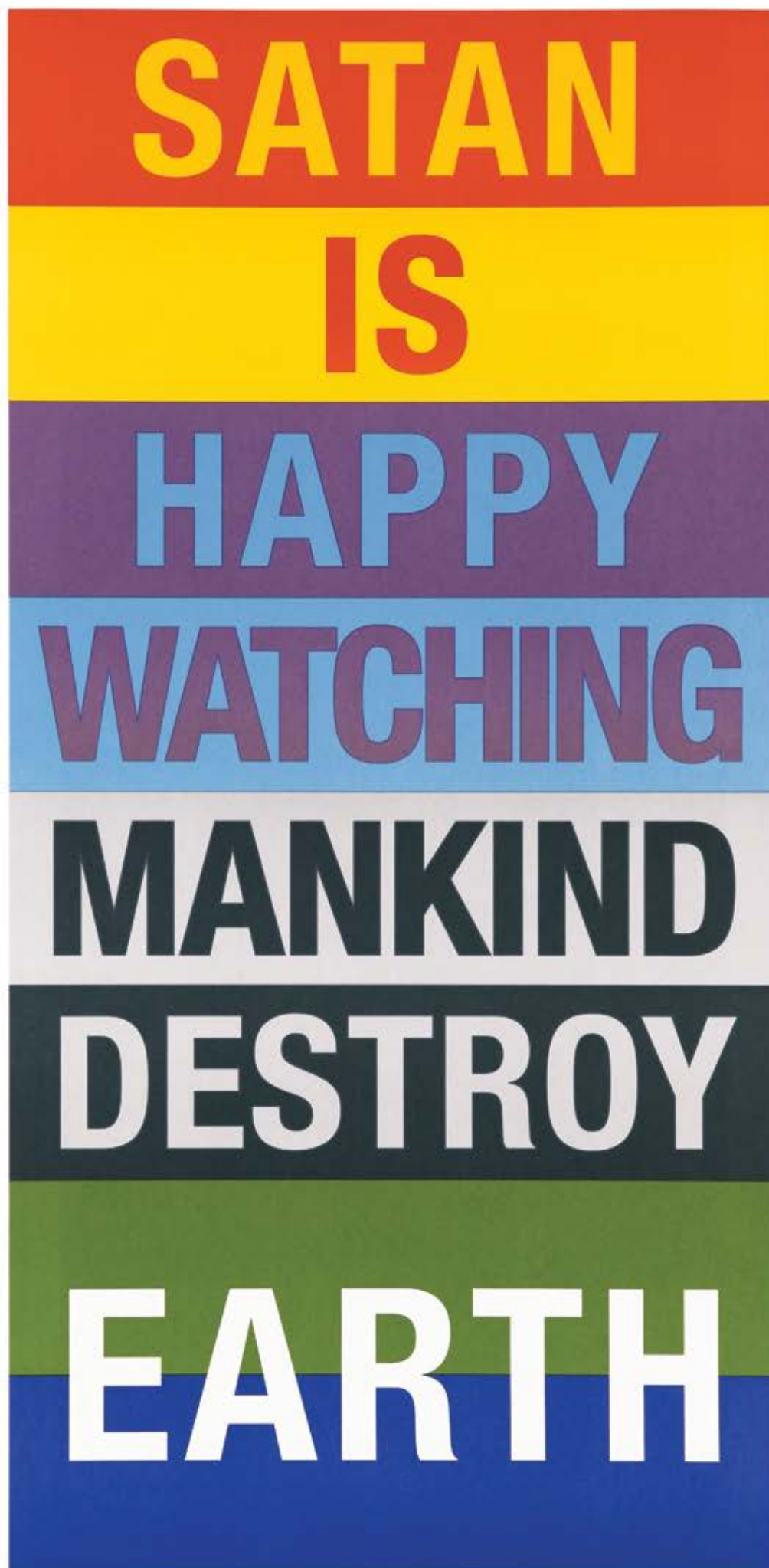
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