SHIRLEY FITERMAN ART CENTER

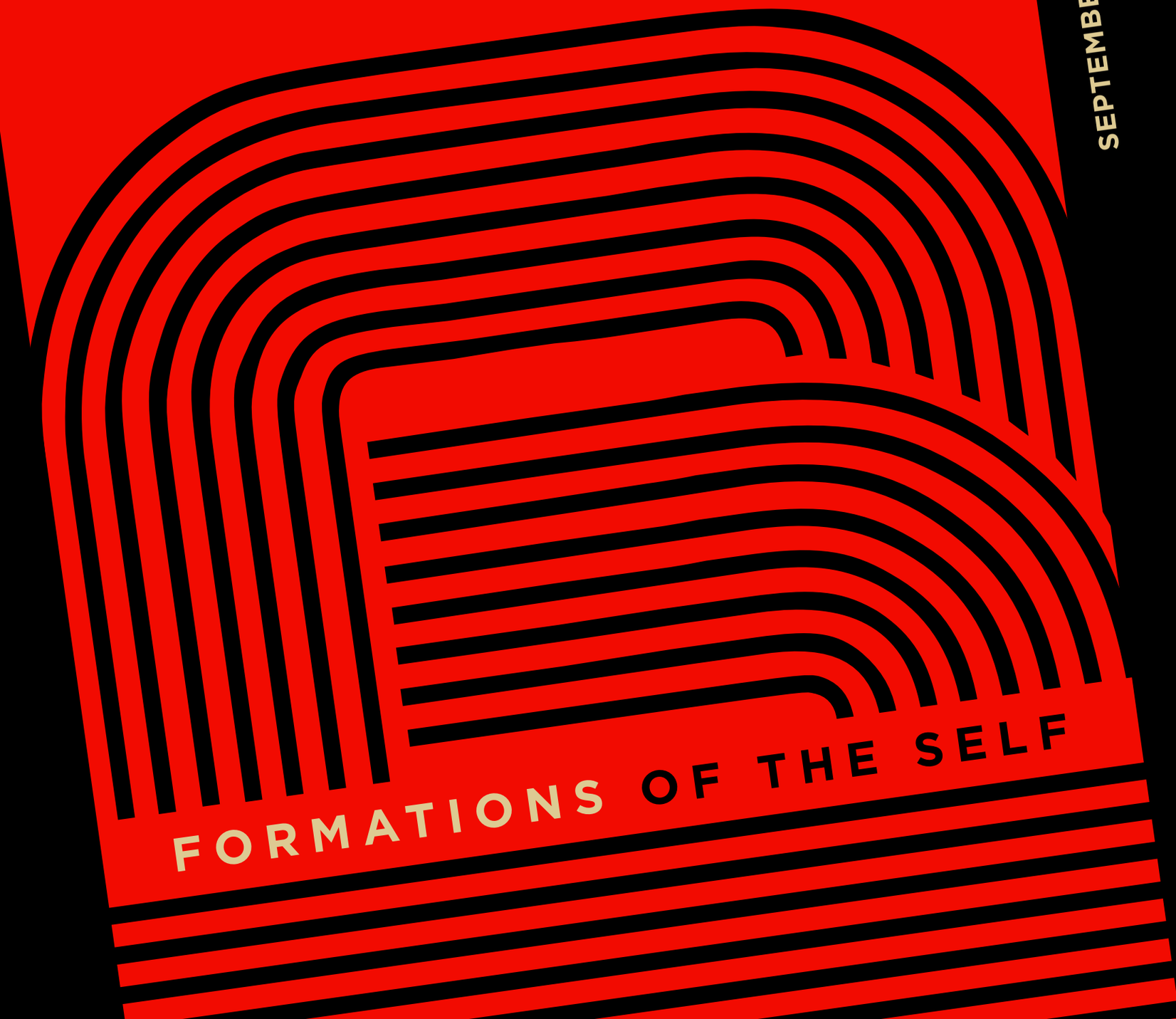
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CUNY

LAKELA BROWN RACHELLE DANG JESSE HARROD

ATHENA LATOCHA EMILY VELEZ NELMS ANNA PLESSET

JOAN SEMMEL CHRISTIE NEPTUNE

SEPTEMBER 16, 2020 – JANUARY 15, 2021



FORMATIONS OF THE SELF

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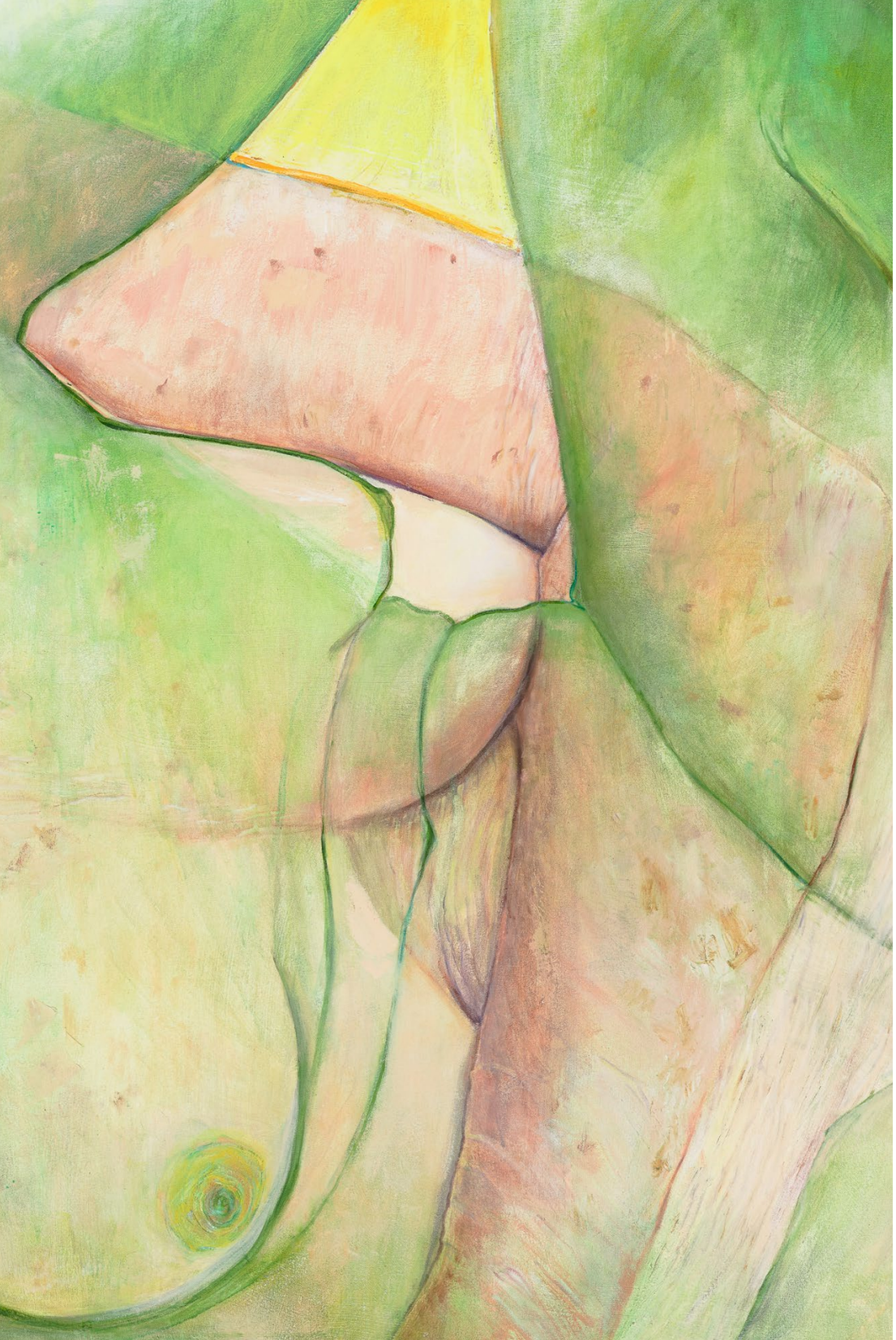


WHILE **ID: FORMATIONS OF THE SELF** OSTENSIBLY BEGINS WITH the core idea of "self," the works on view are concerned with multiple issues that radiate out in widening concentric circles. Topics range from the body, sexuality, and gender to James Baldwin, nationalism, race, and ethnicity to invisibility, politics, commerce, and concepts of originality. These are explored through a broad range of artistic approaches, including painted portraits and landscapes, sculptural projects, large-scale abstract painting, and conceptual installations investigating personal and social histories.

I first began conceptualizing this exhibition in what now feels like another lifetime. After a series of studio and gallery visits the idea of a show centered on aspects of identity, which had already long been in my thoughts, began to take shape. The show was scheduled to open in May 2020; however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, things virtually came to a stop in New York City at that time. Given the need to work remotely, we modified the shape of the show and postponed it to open in September 2020. Several of the artists had to totally pivot and create entirely new works. Others reconfigured their installations, and all were understanding, collaborative, and generous in response to the unprecedented uncertainties and difficulties posed by the constraints of the moment.

From the beginning, the work of Joan Semmel, which I have long admired, seemed an ideal lynch pin to the show—both a beginning and an end—given her position as a groundbreaking Feminist artist, who first embraced self-portraiture in the 70s and who continues to create work that unapologetically focuses on the aging female body. Semmel's work is positioned prominently in the North Gallery, in close proximity to the four newly created, exquisite plaster reliefs that LaKela Brown created for this exhibition, that celebrate African American culture, style, and aspiration.

The dramatic site-specific work created by Athena LaTocha for the same gallery is informed by place, site, landscape and her place within them—conveying the beauty, vastness, and even the terror (to paraphrase Edmund Burke on the concept of the Sublime) of the immensity of the individual in the face of both the natural and the man-made worlds. On the floor nearby is the intricate installation by Rachelle Dang that took many months to complete, a work that interweaves the fascinating history of her home state of Hawaii, and its intersection with that of the colonialist history of botany and its relationship to slavery.

In the South Gallery, facing Park Place, Anna Plesset has created an installation that mimics a section of her studio wall on which we see a painting that she has painstakingly recreated from an 1848 original. Plesset combines her refined painting technique with a conceptual approach that examines the overlooked and the invisible. Christie Neptune reconfigured her project *Unpacking Sameness* on the wall opposite. Through photography, performance, video and sculpture, Neptune examines issues of race and challenges histories of supremacy and oppression.

Two large vinyl panels created by Emily Velez Nelms specifically for the Fiterman Art Center occupy window bays that also look out onto Park Place. Each pictures a close-up view—one of oddly manicured fingernails, the other a peculiar tattoo—that explores aspects of beauty, race, and the history of Florida. Nearby, in the windows facing West Broadway, Jesse Harrod's trio of oversized, neon-colored macramé hangings, which were also created for the gallery bays, speak to issues of craft and sexuality, while exuberantly engaging with viewers beyond the glass.

Finding ways to bring this exhibition to fruition and gathering together these eight artists and their expansive embrace of mediums and philosophical and artistic considerations has allowed for, and hopefully encourages many more, conversations that might not otherwise take place.

—Lisa Panzera
Director, Shirley Fiterman Art Center

(previous page)
Joan Semmel, *Yellow Sky*, 2015 (detail). Oil on canvas, 51 x 71 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Christie Neptune, *Exposing My Limits behind America's Curtain,* 2018. Digital chromogenic print, 24 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.


EXIT
Shirley Fiterman Art Center
Entrance at 81 Barclay Street
Open to the Public Tue–Sat 1–6PM

LaKela Brown, *Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings, Gold Teeth, and Egyptian Royalty***,** 2020.
Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood, 33 x 45 x 3 inches. Courtesy of 56 Henry, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

LaKela Brown, *Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings of Varies Colors and Chickenheads, With Nefertiti Profiles,*
2020. Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood, 33 x 45 x 3 inches. Courtesy of 56 Henry, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

LaKela Brown creates works that celebrate aspects of early hip hop culture and Black identity. Recalling relics from ancient civilizations, Brown's plaster reliefs appear to contain abstract formal elements. Closer inspection reveals that these reliefs are impressions of gold door-knocker earrings in oversize bamboo hoops and hearts, and lengthy rope chain necklaces, status symbols of the artist's youth that directly reference the lyrics of early hip hop artists such as LL Cool J. In these works, that are at once self-referential and also broad cultural markers of wealth and aspiration, personal style converges with music, art, and politics. Brown was born and raised in Detroit, MI, and lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Lisa Panzera: *Your work recalls Egyptian and Greco-Roman artifacts and I love the way you similarly employ the artistic format of the relief but use it to express a very contemporary sense of identity. How did you first develop this body of work?*

LaKela Brown: I was walking through the Egyptian and then Greco-Roman galleries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, looking at the sculpture reliefs and coins and thinking about motifs, and the ubiquity of these ancient cultures in our contemporary world. That led me to wonder about images and objects that could serve as motifs to represent some aesthetic aspect of the culture in which I was raised, and I settled on the doorknocker earring.

LP: *There is a kind of tension that unfolds in your work—you bring together the ancient and the contemporary; abstraction and realism; support and object. I love the intertwined relationships you are creating.*

LB: The materials and processes I use to create this work are an essential part of creating the meaning for me, otherwise I would use less messy and technical ways of presenting these images. Tension is useful in bringing a certain energy to the work, and moving the eye around the composition, and provoking questions about relevance, value, and ubiquity; but I'm not sure if it is central. I think of the cultural reference as the thing I would like to center.

An important aspect of my work is in the materials and processes of making which is still gendered as a masculine activity. The art world in general is still racialized by too many as a white community. All of my experiences have taught me that art is expansive enough to include subjects that are important and of interest to the community in which I was raised, and that you shouldn't have to look and behave one particular way in order to participate.

LP: *While your repetition of shapes cast in white plaster are evocative of cuneiform tablets or hieroglyphic wall carvings, from a distance, they read as an abstract visual language.*

LB: It makes sense to me that this connection was made with my work, as my practice began with these ancient pictorial language-based works as its reference, and my compositions tend to be arranged in a kind of linear format that is similar to written language broadly used across cultures.

LP: *You have said, "In LL Cool J's 1990 song 'Around the Way Girl,' he describes his ideal mate as 'a girl with extensions in her hair / bamboo earrings / at least two pair.' This aesthetic was embodied by artists like Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah, as well as the women that I lived with and around. Growing up it felt intrinsically understood that this style belonged to me, to Black people. Door knocker earrings, rope chains, Egyptian royal pendants, gold teeth, and chicken heads are the motifs for this body of work because they are able to represent the desire, preference, aspiration, and presence of a particular Blackness, without the body." Could you elaborate on the affect and the resonance that these hip hop artists in particular and African American popular culture in general have had on you?*

LB: These musical artists were and, in some ways, remain close to the culture that they reference. They are highly visible and influential, but they are also influenced by the cultures from which they come. So they reflect, and come to represent, the desires, aspirations, and struggles/solutions for the focuses of the community. The culture influences them and vice versa. It can seem like the influence is mainly coming from them because of their access and visibility, but it definitely goes both ways.

It is the possession of an aesthetic and the ability to define value and beauty that I am claiming with the word "belongs." It's less about defining myself or Black people by this one representation of Blackness, as we can present ourselves however we choose. It's more about acknowledging and supporting oneself without external approval.

LP: *Would you talk a bit more about the idea that these things "are able to represent the desire, preference, aspiration, and presence of a particular Blackness, without the body"?*

LB: I chose these objects as my current subject for many reasons, I wanted to celebrate and acknowledge the creativity and cultural contributions of the Black women that grew up as hip hop was forming. These objects are so bound with Black American

feminine aesthetics that they have become an easily recognizable artifact of this important subculture of America, which has contributed widely to American style and identity. I was searching for objects and images that could serve as a symbol, motif, and indicator of the presence of Blackness and Black influence and I wanted to do it without using the Black body, partly to challenge myself to expand my visual repertoire which often centers the human body as subject. Also, I wanted to challenge the notion that Black Americans do not have a culture by highlighting a small yet iconic cultural artifact.

Black people understand that we are not a monolith and that we don't need to be in order to sustain our communities. Hip hop culture is a medium for expressing and exploring how our Blackness (all the history that has lead us to this moment), and our Americanness (capitalism, individualistic thinking, white beauty standards and so on), affects what we desire, prefer, and to what we aspire, which is not all or even mostly defined through hip hop.

LP: *What role does sexuality play in your work?*

LB: Sexuality does not figure into this series of work for me much. There may be a connection to attraction in that the earrings are objects of adornment, and people adorn themselves to add allure. When I speak of desire in this series, I'm actually referring to the desire for the door knocker earrings and other luxury materials that communicate heightened status for the one who possesses them.

LP: *I recently read a really interesting passage by James Baldwin that refers to the notion of the American Dream and I wonder if these ideas play a role in your work: "This has everything to do, of course, with the nature of that [American] dream and with the fact that we Americans, of whatever color, do not dare examine it and are far from having made it a reality. There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves. People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior. And this human truth has an especially grinding force here, where identity is almost impossible to achieve and people are perpetually attempting to find their feet on the shifting sands of status." [James Baldwin, "Reflections: Letter from a Region in My Mind,"* New Yorker Magazine*, November 17, 1962]*

LB: Yes! James Baldwin's words are perfect for pointing to some of the questions I am asking in this series of work, particularly when I think about the resonance of these objects beyond their initial purpose of adornment, and consider how they can be used as signifiers of material success and status, which is to say of having achieved the American Dream.
LP: *Would you characterize your work as investigating/working against traditional power structures?*

LB: I would absolutely characterize my work as investigating/working against traditional power structures. I have had the privilege of showing my work in places where it is highly visible. I'm making work centered on Black aesthetics, that is often seen in white spaces, and often in stark contrast to the building it is in, and which attempts to challenge and examine the worthiness of capitalism, and proposes new visual language for and ideas of value and beauty.

Brown received a BFA from the College for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI. She has participated in exhibitions at numerous venues, including Foxy Production, New York, NY; 56 HENRY, New York, NY; MOCADA, Brooklyn, NY; Swiss Institute, New York, NY; Reyes Projects, Detroit, MI; Lars Friedrich Gallery, Berlin, Germany; Paul Robeson Gallery, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ; and Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY.

LaKela Brown, *Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings, Gold Teeth, and Egyptian Royalty*, 2020 (detail). Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood, 33 x 45 x 3 inches. Courtesy of 56 Henry, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Rachelle Dang, *House on Cannonball Street, 2020 (detail).* Wood, glass, air-dry clay, metal, foam, epoxy, paint, Approx. 96 x 96 x 39 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo (this page and previous): Etienne Frossard.

Rachelle Dang is an installation artist and sculptor whose work engages with the complexities of colonial legacies. She examines interwoven histories and complex environmental connections, bringing together historical facts, botanical research, personal memories, and poetic allusion. Dang's work is informed by her family's six-generation history in Hawaii, including migration from southern China and plantation labor, as well as personal reckoning with diasporic experiences in a settler colonial space. Born in Honolulu, Dang is currently based in Brooklyn, NY.

Lisa Panzera: *I first saw an installation work of yours at Spring Break art fair and then months later saw some of your beautifully glazed breadfruit sculptures. One of the things I found most interesting was the relationship between these individually crafted sculptures of natural objects and your use of them within much larger installations that investigate the history of exploration and colonialism. How did you first become interested in the history of botany and its relationship to colonialism—and to the history of Hawaii more specifically?*

Rachelle Dang: I came to this work and research gradually, indirectly. When I began my MFA studies in 2015, I researched a panoramic wallpaper from 1805 which depicted Pacific islands and people from the perspective of its French designer, Jean-Gabriel Charvet. The manufacturer, Joseph Dufour, supplied an accompanying 'educational' pamphlet to buyers, presenting *Les Sauvages* as a work of science—although in actuality it was an ideological construction: a two-dimensional diorama of human 'types' that provided pleasure, yet also guided viewers in comparing, classifying, and inspecting the bodies on display. In his text, Dufour references a breadfruit tree prominently placed in the composition, indicating that plants and trees were integral to the imperial and 'scientific' project of *Les Sauvages*. Charvet's visual style simulated naturalistic, observational depiction similar to botanical illustration, topographic coastal drawings, and field sketches by artist-naturalists. The 'science' in *Les Sauvages* cloaks and justifies subjugation.

Charvet's almost invented breadfruit tree was unrecognizable to me though I know the tree well—it is common in Hawaii where I grew up and indigenous to the southern Pacific and southeast Asia. I studied breadfruit's complex colonial history which links Polynesia, the Caribbean, and Europe. The British considered breadfruit the most 'useful' plant in the world: a cheap tropical food source to bolster profits on Caribbean plantations. Deforestation and monocropping sugar had led to food shortages and famine. Between 1778 and 1780, the Royal Society offered fifty pounds or a gold medal to anyone who could bring three breadfruit saplings in a "growing state" from Tahiti or the southern Pacific to London for research. In 1774, John Ellis, a British naturalist, designed a cage-like structure with wired windows and wood shutters to protect the vulnerable breadfruit saplings over a one-year ocean journey. Ellis's cage design resonated with me; it resembled a small prison or animal hutch. The form evoked captivity, restraint, and display, while paradoxically suggesting care and protection. In building these transport containers from the original schematic drawings, I altered scale, material, and context, so that viewers relate to the work with their own bodies. There is an immediate sense of one's own bodily entrapment. I felt I could approach very difficult subject matter—dispossession, environmental destruction, subjugation, colonialism—by speaking through forms of nature and creating installations and sculptural works that offer poetic, psychological, tactile experiences for the viewer.

LP: *You have pointed to the ways in which the shipping containers used to transport plants to the UK mimicked the transport of slaves. Exploitation, as well as enslavement, appear to be overarching themes for you.*

RD: After researching, building, and exhibiting these botanical transport cages over a three- to four-year period, I was able to explain my project in a few words—a single sentence—only very recently. I figured out a way to say that my work addresses forms of control over nature while probing human control over other humans. Exploitation is a major theme in my work, as it pertains to individuals or nature, particularly as a legacy of colonialism. I have discussed slavery in relation to my work for several reasons. European exploratory voyages in Polynesia and the Pacific in the mid- to late-1700s were missions of both imperial expansion and science; these costly expeditions to survey and exercise control over the "second new world" were paid for by wealth generated from slavery. Science, botany, and slavery were interconnected through a demand for cash crops, and through competition amongst rival nations for control over high-stakes plants, whether for medicine, industry, or food, and this includes tea, rubber, cinchona (for the anti-malarial quinine), and spices of all kinds. I came across this definition recently in a book edited by Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan: "Colonial botany—the study, naming, cultivation, and marketing of plants in colonial contexts—was born of and supported European voyages, conquests, global trade, and scientific exploration."

LP: *How does having grown up in Hawaii, a place that despite being a part of the United States is still seen as "exotic," affect your sense of identity or belonging? Does your personal family history play a role in your explorations and the works you create?*

RD: With the exception of my grandfather and his parents, no one in my family immigrated to America. Most of my relatives immigrated to the Kingdom of Hawaii in the decades

prior to the 1893 overthrow, from the villages of Canton (now Guangzhou), and my father's side is Chinese and part-Native Hawaiian. White sugar planters in the Hawaiian Kingdom began recruiting laborers from China, Japan, and Portugal, and after annexation and the expansion of American imperial conquests in 1898, laborers were also brought from the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Korea. A white minority ensured their own political and economic dominance by subjugating, dividing, and exploiting immigrant and Native Hawaiian communities. I find it interesting that in the 1860s, planters sought expertise and help in recruiting Chinese laborers from a German botanist and physician in Hawaii, who was already active in importing Chinese plants for propagation in Hawaii. He could import people and plants on the same ships. The last of my family to migrate to Hawaii—my grandfather and his parents—were recruited as laborers for the pineapple plantations, and they arrived in the early 1900s when Hawaii was a territory. The family history of agricultural labor was reinforced in two ways when I was a child—I saw the fields and I was disciplined by older relatives with stern reminders of the bitter, recent past. I am part-Native Hawaiian on my birth certificate, but I was raised as though I were only Asian American. I feel that women generally, but particularly Native Hawaiian women, lost their identities through marriage into patriarchal Chinese (diasporic) families, especially at that time, several generations ago.

My family's home is near Diamond Head crater on Oahu. Volcanic areas are sacred to Native Hawaiians, and there was at least one major *heiau*, a place of worship, near the crater that was dismantled as Christian missionaries and foreigners exerted control over the Kingdom. After the overthrow and annexation, the first American fort was built in and around the crater. The street I grew up on is named for the cannonballs fired by artillery batteries staged in the area. There is still a guard house built from lava rock and coral mortar nearby, along with the foundations of the old military buildings, and pillbox bunkers on the beach.

I attended a large Catholic mission school comprised almost entirely of Asian and Pacific Islander students. With the exception of a few classmates who were descended from Portuguese families who traced their history through the plantations (similar to my own family) I had almost no interaction with white children until I changed schools at the age of 11. The new school I attended had been founded by the earliest missionaries, Protestants from New England, whose descendants exercised control over the Kingdom and were responsible for its overthrow. They had established the sugar and pineapple plantations, and they ensured political and economic power for a white minority within the territory and up through statehood. I received an Americanized education at this school, and also was exposed for the first time to generational wealth and privilege. Our classes did not cover colonialism or Hawaii's modern, post-contact history, and we were not taught to see Hawaii interconnected with anywhere else in the world except the U.S., even within the rest of the Pacific, despite that Native Hawaiians and Polynesians share common ancestry and heritage. I was socialized to feel—consciously and also in a very deep subconscious way—my inferiority and difference.

LP: *Most the artists in the show are investigating power structures in one way or another. Would you characterize your work in that way?*

RD: It took me a long time to recognize and accept the poetic shape of my voice. The work I do examines power, but it requires an active viewer, someone of any age or background who will spend a few moments looking, contemplating, using their imagination, asking questions. I want viewers to sense there is more than one way to experience the work, there are open doors and layers of access. There are different strategies I use for installation and sculpture that are different from other media. The work may seem beautiful when it is first encountered, but then suddenly that sensation doesn't feel right, so why does a feeling of discomfort set in? Objects which seem precious and cherished under closer inspection appear damaged, distressed, and mishandled. Expectations and assumptions are overturned: familiar forms feel strange; there is a sinking feeling that the forms in the work relate to the body and some kind of bodily harm or threat. I feel I don't need to show bodies for viewers to have this experience—I believe they can get there on their own, and that realization stays with them in a powerful way.

Dang has exhibited her work in New York at Socrates Sculpture Park; Fergus McCaffrey; Nathalie Karg Gallery; Lesley Heller Gallery; Motel; and mh PROJECT nyc; as well as at Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu, HI; Hawaii Pacific University, Honolulu, HI; and the Haverford College Art Galleries, Haverford, PA. Dang has been an artist-in-residence at Shandaken: Storm King Art Center, Shandanken, NY; the Studios at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; Cooper Union, New York, NY; Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT; and Sculpture Space, New York, NY, where she received an Emerging Sculptor Fellowship. She was awarded a 2019-2020 Fellowship with A.I.R. Gallery, a 2019-2020 residency with the Smack Mellon Artist Studio Program, and a 2019 Emerging Artist Fellowship with Socrates Sculpture Park. Dang received her MFA from Hunter College and her BA from Wellesley College.

Jesse Harrod, *For the love of Danny, For the love of Daniel, For the love of Dan,* 2020. Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal, 126 x 48 inches each. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Jesse Harrod, *For the love of Daniel,* 2020 (detail). Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal, 126 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Jesse Harrod is a Philadelphia based artist, originally from Canada, who explores themes of politics and personal identity as they pertain to gender, queerness, and sexuality. Harrod's practice contributes to a broader collective effort to redefine the meaning of queer aesthetic form. Their work transforms the qualities of everyday objects into sexual and sensual animations of material. The use of rope and knot-making is integral to their work and Harrod uses the material as a linear element to consider the relationship and dual identity of the rope itself: both an element of support and an object of familiarity in queer sexuality.

Lisa Panzera: *We first met when I visited your studio in Philadelphia about a year and half ago. It wasn't until afterward that I learned more about your background. Given that your parents are from South Africa and you were raised in Canada, but now have lived in the US for many years, I wonder how you identify in terms of nationality?*

Jesse Harrod: Wow, that's a complicated question! I came to the US in 2008 to attend graduate school with every intention of returning to Canada afterwards. But due to a number of unexpected events, I ended up staying. I thought at first it would be for just a year, but then after two years I realized that starting all over again in Canada as an artist didn't seem like a good idea at that time. Now I have been here almost 12 years! But I don't feel at all American; I feel very much like a Canadian/South African who lives in yet another country. I can be very romantic about both places and I am very connected to and influenced by both places; my siblings live in South Africa, as does any extended family, and most of my friends are in Canada and my partner is extremely Canadian.

LP: *The use of rope and knot-tying is central your practice. How did you first come to start working with macramé?*

JH: After graduate school I got a fulltime job that meant a green-card and health care at a school in rural Virginia. In my teaching I had to start with the basics to familiarize my students with the feminist art movement, anti-oppression, post-colonial theory, decolonization of craft, queer theory, while also learning as much as I could about American history, Jim Crow, redlining, and the Civil War—that was just the tip of the iceberg. Through preparing lectures on early fiber artists, I started to experiment with macramé, a technique I hadn't used for many years. I have always been hesitant to use macramé, as it so completely references my mother's 70s aesthetic, which in the US was largely white, middle class, and straight. Neither my mother nor I grew up in the context of American feminism, and her visual world was a combination of radical Black communist South African politics and colonial European aesthetics. I realized that the technique of using a visual language of the 70s does *something*: it brings a layer of meaning that can enrich my work.

By playing with scale, color, and materials I can make macramé contemporary, while also remaining in conversation with formative Second Wave feminist art that, although it had many blind spots, was important. I see this as a way in which I can bring components of my mother's generation of feminist theory into my current experience and ideas of intersectional and queer feminism.

LP: *Macramé is particularly often associated with women's craft hobbies. Did that play a role in why you chose it as a medium and how it intersects with gender/identity issues in your work?*

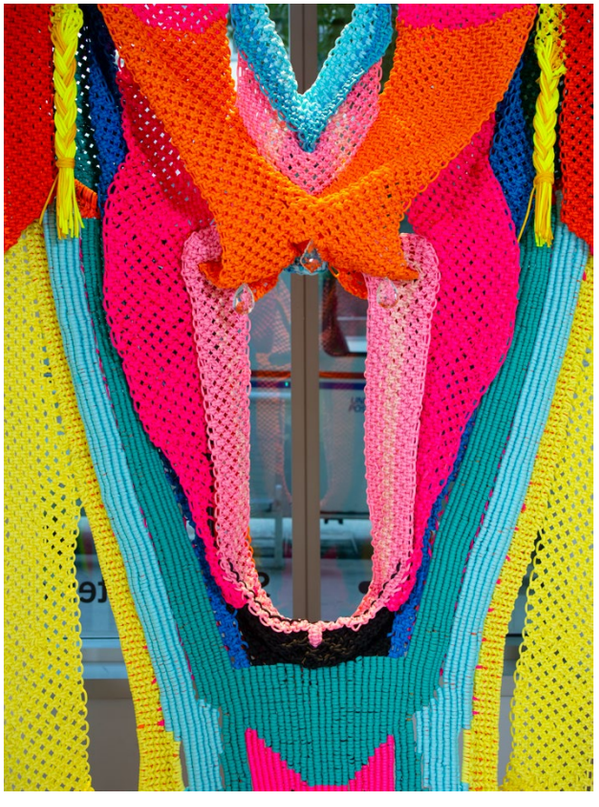
JH: I am particularly interested in utilizing craft processes that were central to earlier feminist artists' efforts to redefine and push the parameters of "fine art." Across my work, I am committed to a rigorous exploration of materiality and the hierarchies embedded in materials and processes, with a particular emphasis on feminized craft processes such as macramé, ceramics, and stained glass. I track the cultural circulation of meaning through particular materials and processes—and the gendered bodies with which they are associated and how they become designated as unimportant or unworthy of value.

LP: *How/why has heightened color (sometimes even bright neon) become central to the work you have been making?*

JH: Color is tied to ideas of taste and I am interested in subversion and disruption. Through color my work can take up and complicate space. I am also very interested in sportswear that is poorly made and poorly designed, like knock-off gear from Target. I take a lot of inspiration from badly designed sports bras! I love it.

LP: *You characterize your work as intending to "redefine the meaning of queer aesthetic form." Could you talk about some of the ways you are trying to do that?*

JH: Queer lives and sexual practices, like craft-making, often rely on do-it-yourself strategies of creativity. I hope to relay the same sense of self-determination, inventiveness, and resourcefulness that I have experienced and witnessed within queer lives and sexual practices within my work—such as the invention of new forms of pleasure,



the arrangement of unconventional family bonds, and the often makeshift development of sex-toys and devices to amplify same-sex experiences of pleasure.

Drawing on the long-standing relation between sculpture and the human body, my work intentionally decenters the normative, neurotypical (abled, cis-gender) body as the assumed form invoked within sculpture. Drawing on the conceptual resources of queer and disability politics, my work explores how physical form is made and remade through perception. This is not only limited to physical manifestations of bodily difference, but also to those non-perceptible or non-visual aspects of embodied identity that often recede from view. In particular, my work aims to experiment with and explore how texture, color, and other sensual aspects of materials and forms can invoke intangible, non-visible modes of identity and experience.

LP: *You have also alluded to ways in which your work builds on a broad base, including the abject and the humorous, and I wonder what works/artists you find influential or if there are examples of specific works that you respond to?*

Jesse Harrod, *For the love of Dan*, 2020 (detail). Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal, 126 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella.

JH: Throughout all my work and interests, I am committed to the idea of unlearning, relearning, and drawing knowledge from non-institutional contexts. I am influenced by a range of artists who work(ed) outside of more traditional spaces, such as the filmmaker John Waters and The Cockettes, a Bay Area performance group in the 1960s and 70s who lived communally and developed DIY approaches to the performance of gender. These lo-fi artists often tested the limits of propriety, while simultaneously building an anti-aesthetic that fortified communities which felt shut-out from mainstream participation in society, let alone the artworld.

Before working full-time as an artist, I was the co-owner of a sex and sexual health store in Canada with my ex-spouse during my BFA years and this experience has brought a deep knowledge of sex, sexuality, pleasure and play to my own self and to my work as an artist, as well as allowing me the privilege of talking to a diverse population of people looking to feel something. This is embedded in all that I do—the desire to talk openly and honestly about pleasure and the constraints we face to achieve pleasure. Part of that conversation includes humor. Being faced with illness and death as a young person, and being in hospitals for a lot of my developmental years, I developed an understanding of humor and absurdity as necessary for survival. I use humor as a way to talk about pleasure and/or the inability to access pleasure. I also see laughter as a political and subversive act that ties into my ongoing commitment to social justice.

Harrod holds a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, as well as an MFA from the department of Fiber & Material Studies from the School of Art Institute of Chicago, and is currently the Head of Fibers & Material Studies at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. They have shown at numerous galleries and museums, including Clockshop, Los Angeles, CA; Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA; Hangaram Art Museum, Seoul Art Center, Seoul Korea; Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan WI; Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art Project Space, New York, NY; NURTUREart, Brooklyn, NY; Socrates Park Site Specific Commission, New York, NY; and Vox Populi, Philadelphia, PA.

Athena LaTocha, *Burning, Sulphuric, Violent*, 2020. Shellac ink, World Trade Center building sand on paper, 132 x 204 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Athena LaTocha is a Hunkpapa Lakota/Ojibwe artist born in Anchorage, AK, and currently based in New York. LaTocha's work is inspired by her place of upbringing and the unyielding forces of nature that she experienced there, which were essential to her formation. She creates large-scale works of art that capture the tensions embedded in the relationship between human-made and natural landscapes. Using the land as a metaphor for change, transformation, and renewal, LaTocha juxtaposes the natural with industrial sites, examining the complex relationships humans have with the world in which we live.

Lisa Panzera: *You work primarily with ink on paper, which we tend to associate with a more intimate scale. However, you move back and forth from small to monumentally sized works, and you don't use traditional tools, such as brushes, but instead use rocks, bricks, and other materials such as shredded tires to disperse ink and sometimes abrade the surfaces of the paper. Can you talk about that process?*

Athena LaTocha: My current practice of using found materials as tools began as looking for another way to get at the painting, to disrupt the way we've been trained as painters. It began as a way to get at the painting from a more rudimentary perspective. I suppose I was looking for something rawer, more direct.

I was painting on 21st Street when I first started looking for another way to work. I was frustrated with using brushes—it felt so removed and distant. I remember walking the streets in this area looking for a rock or stick to use as a painting tool. I was thinking a lot about how Indigenous artists from around the world and through time worked—not only the cave painters from 35,000BP in Europe, but also the rock artists in Australia from over 40,000BP, and the Lakota painters on the Great Plains from the pre-reservation era that used shaped bone fragments to paint on skins. These artists were working with a compulsion to make images that evoke significant things to them, with instruments from their environment.

Further to this, I've been looking a lot at the Earthwork artists of the 60s and 70s and how they challenged conventions—conventions of material and convention of scale and location, as well as tool use. For inspiration, I often go to the untamed wilderness just as often as I go to industrial excavation sites or construction sites.

Life has a certain grit to it. Bodies become scarred by incidents or accidents that have occurred to them. There's a story there. There's a texture to life that doesn't quite often translate in some paintings, sculptures, film. This grit imparts a sense of time, or a life lived. There's beauty in these imperfections. The weathering of an object from time and events.

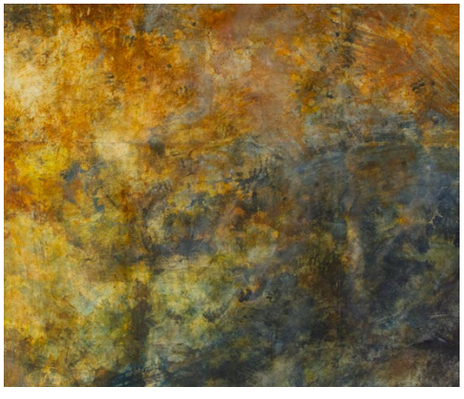
LP: *You have talked about how these industrial materials cut into not just the medium and the support, but also into the "metaphorical landscape." I love that poetic commentary on the uneasy relationship between the man-made and the natural landscape. Is it fair to say that tension is central to your work?*

AL: Yes, and a sense of unease. This is one of the things that is important to me in the tools I select to use as well. Painting with an irregular piece of reclaimed, steel-belted tire shred has an unwieldy nature about it—an unpredictability. I find it much more intriguing to not know or not be so clear in understanding what I'm seeing during the process. The overwhelming compulsion is to find the work—to find the image—after getting lost in it. It reminds me a lot of Philip Guston's process during the 50s and 60s when he was working with abstraction. There's a quote in Musa Mayer's book *Night Studio* when, while painting in the studio, Guston turns to another artist who was waiting for him and says he doesn't know where he is. I think about this in the work. Where is this place? What is this situation? How do I know it?

For years I was looking peripherally along the sides of the roads for what might be there. This might have something to do with growing up in Alaska and looking for moose out the car window to avoid getting into an accident with one. Anyway, I still do this whenever I drive. So for years driving here in New York, I was seeing all this tire shred along the sides of the road. They were evocative forms that stirred my imagination—questioning what it might be, knowing of course that it was tire shred. Nonetheless, my mind played with other imaginings: it could be unrecognizable roadkill, a specter, a demon, a carcass of some sort. It always seemed as though it could have been something that was once animated with life.

Alternately, I was fascinated by the brutality of the exploded tire and the purpose of this industrial material, especially if it was from actual tractor-trailer tire that exploded transporting massive haul loads, thinking about the extent of human industry.

LP: *You have talked about being in the immensity of the landscape of Alaska and feeling the power and strength of nature and the poignant sensation that also creates for you. That stirs up notions of the "Sublime" for me. Is that something you think about in relation to your work?*



Athena LaTocha, *Burning, Sulphuric, Violent*, 2020 (detail). Shellac ink, World Trade Center building sand on paper, 132 x 204 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella.

AL: Absolutely, the immensity of Alaska set up that experience for me and is something that I can never look away from. It teaches you a sense of humility, too, in how we understand ourselves as a species relative to everything around us, known and unknown.

LP: *Nineteenth Century American Romantic landscape painting engaged with aspects of the Sublime and some of that work has also been associated with Manifest Destiny. Does being an artist that is Hunkpapa Lakota and Ojibwe complicate your relationship to American Romanticism given those associations?*

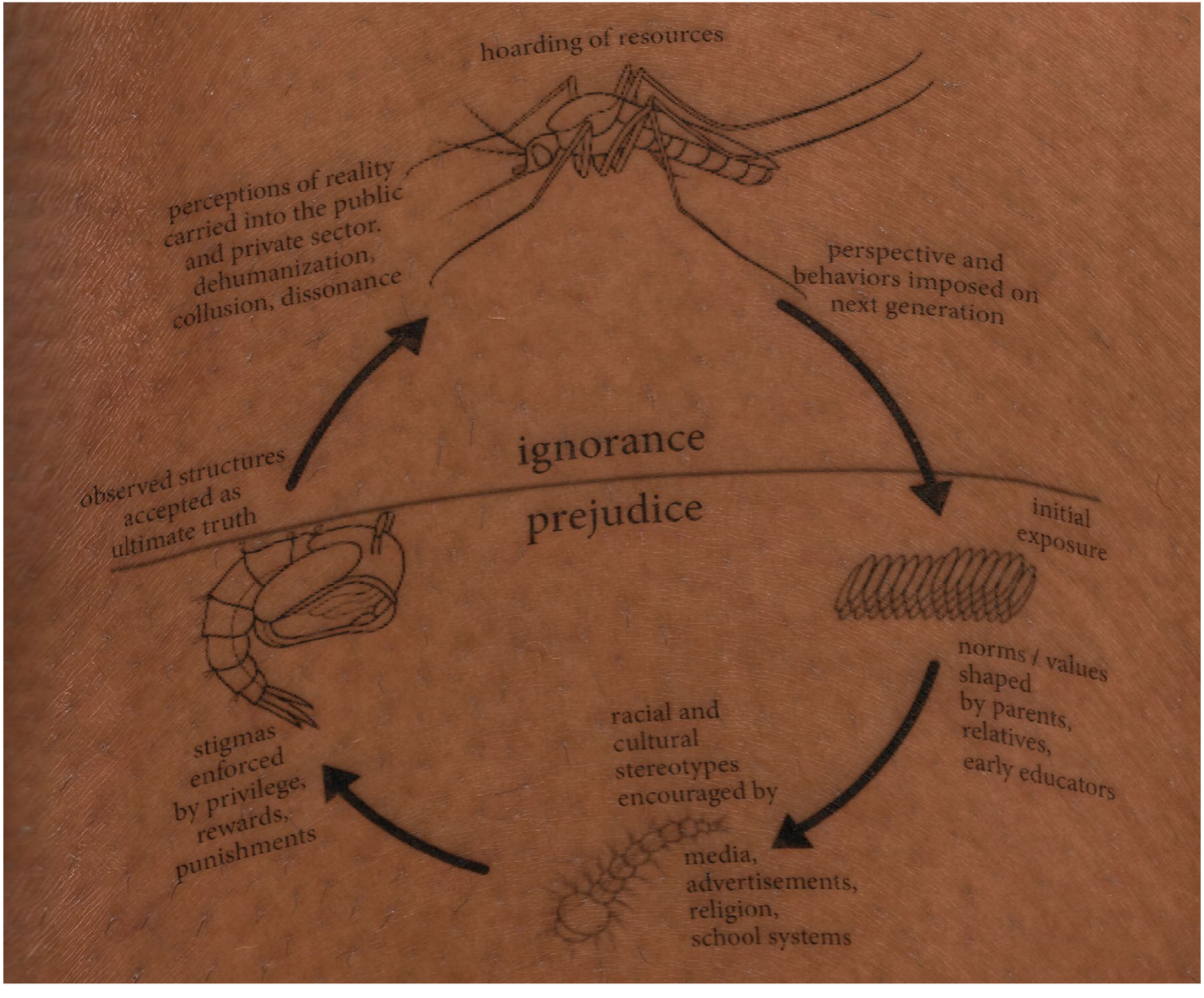
AL: This is a good question and one that I've been grappling with for some time, particularly when I started looking more closely at the Hudson River School painters. Manifest Destiny is one-sided in the same way that much of our education and training in studio art is one sided. Looking at American Romanticism created conflict in my looking at art history because it doesn't take into account the Indigenous Peoples. It leads me to look at other artists like Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and the Surrealists who were looking at the Indigenous artists from North America. Not enough attention is given to this perspective, and this is another intersection I'm intrigued by. The Surrealists were looking at and collecting objects from Indigenous Peoples from the arctic regions. It's incredible and unfortunate that when I was in school this exploration started and stopped with artists such as Picasso looking at African art. I read somewhere that Albrecht Durer was looking at the Indigenous Peoples from Mesoamerica and what the explorers were bringing back from their expeditions there. Barnett Newman recognized the incredible work of the original earthworks artists from the Ohio Valley dating from 1AD to 400AD. Why are we not taught these things in school?

LP: *We have talked about the idea of "place" and how central that is in informing your identity and also about the fact that being Alaskan as well as Native American has deeply affected your work—particularly in relation to the land and the environment.*

AL: I think about this in terms of the stories and histories that are not typically known or taught in the mainstream. I find it troubling that this country forgets the Indigenous Peoples of this continent. There is so much that is left out. Even when traveling to other countries, people have been shocked to learn that I'm Native American, saying they thought we were all dead, that we were all killed off. This country needs to come to terms with its past and how it was founded. It's deeply disturbing that it has not. According to the 2020 census, less than two per cent of Americans self-identify as Native American. Citizens of the many Native Nations in the United States is less than 0.5 per cent. The United States fails to recognize these Nations as the sovereign governments they are. We saw this recently over the past couple months during the COVID-19 pandemic when state governors threatened to sue Native Nations for setting up checkpoints on the roads going through reservation lands when the folks on the reservation were simply protecting their environments that they were legally entitled to. It reminds me of when James Baldwin was asked about being Black in America, and he answered that to be a Negro in this country was to be in rage all the time. I think about this a lot in terms of my own work and the complexity of grappling with this conflict.

Stories of the land, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous narratives, together with learning the atrocities committed by one group of peoples upon another group of peoples—I look for these stories, too, to better understand where we are and what we are experiencing. Learning these fills me with rage and an immense sense of despair. It's overwhelming. It's all-consuming, at times. This is what I work to impart.

LaTocha's work has been shown across the country in places such as the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico; CUE Art Foundation and Artists Space, New York; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Louisiana; South Dakota Art Museum, Brookings, South Dakota; and the International Gallery of Contemporary Art in Anchorage, Alaska. In addition, she had solo exhibitions at JDJ | The Ice house in Garrison, New York; the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, North Dakota; and the MacRostie Art Center in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. LaTocha is the recipient of prestigious artist grants, residencies and awards, among them the Joan Mitchell Foundation, Wave Hill, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. LaTocha received a BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a MFA from Stony Brook University, New York.



Emily Velez Nelms, *Untitled, Process of Socialization,* 2020 (detail). Vinyl panels, 58 x 120 inches each.
Courtesy of the artist.

Emily Velez Nelms' work takes various forms, from compact objects to public art, video, writing, and installation. Her practice primarily interrogates the cycle of internalized narratives, introduced through traditional values made public ideologies, which are absorbed by the self, and then again projected into society. Her aim is to interrupt this physical and psychological cycle through the presentation of specific immersive scenarios—spaces that encourage a moment of reflection. Velez Nelms' work engages with nostalgia, the collective ancestral body, and the tradition of womanist theory. Currently, she is working on a long-term project titled, *Domestic Exotic***, part costume, performance, film, and archive, which will document her grandmother's labor as a cultural producer in Miami between in the late 1960s and 70s. This work is an extension of a body of research on cultural tourist attractions within Florida from the 1950s to the present day. These attractions often displayed people of color for the entertainment of tourists. Velez Nelms is interested in how these sites of "authenticity" have been accepted over time and thus produced the performative reality of the south Florida region.**

Lisa Panzera: *When we first met at your studio last year, we discussed a number of fascinating topics, from tourism and racism to power structures. How would you characterize how some of those issues play out in your work?*

Emily Velez Nelms: While I see my work acknowledging structures, I wouldn't characterize it as actively working against those structures. It functions, at this time, as a mirror. I do believe my work is further nuanced than flatly falling into an identity politics conversation. I have a specific audience in mind, it's close to home, and my most recent work, including the diptych for this exhibition, is addressed to that audience. I am focused on racialized forms of labor that have been overlooked in my state over the past 70 years. I would say at this time that my work functions more in the realm of investigation and the presentation of information. I often struggle with whether my work is active enough and when it falls short I aim to get involved outside of the studio.

LP: *Mining your personal family history is a central aspect in your work. In particular you have explored your relationship to your father and grandmother. What first prompted you to not only investigate but to also incorporate and work directly with your family? What is it that process like and to what degree would you consider them collaborators?*

EVN: I very much view my family as an extension of myself. Each member has worked manual labor jobs, often multiple at a time. I am the first in my immediate family to pursue higher education. For my parents, until recently there was no space for leisure. It is important to me that I honor their years of labor in direct ways and not just on behalf of living relatives. I am my ancestor's advocate.

More recently, I have collaborated with family members. For me, it is a way of implementing their lives into the historic narrative. This is a very direct decision. I am working on a project with my paternal grandmother now that involves a custom garment that she will be wearing during a performance. The final work will exist as a film. In this particular project, she and I have a collaborative relationship. The work is as much hers as it is mine. She is an artist as well and took on the role of co-project manager with ease. In that way, it has been very generative working with her and has placed much less pressure on me as the sole creator.

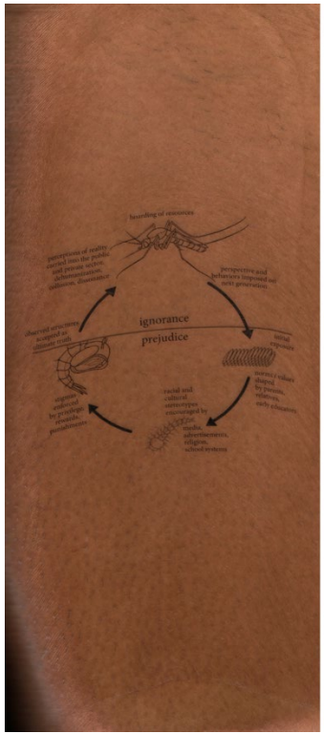
LP: *What role does color—both as an artistic tool and as a racial identifier—play in your work?*

EVN: In terms of color, I am attracted to specific pigments, one of which is deeply embedded into my memory bank of familial experiences. Colors can also indicate a time in history. The most emotionally significant color for me is mauve. The further I work with the color the warmer and darker it has grown.

Mauve was the color of the carpet from a townhome I lived in during early childhood. The carpet was aged and installed in the 80s. It varied from a muted sun bleached pink, to deeper tones in edges of the home, those areas that received less foot traffic. Mauve for me is an indicator of south Florida in the late 80s and early 90s. A time when money was rare to come by for my family. Additionally, as a whole we understood ourselves to be mixed race and Spanish.

As an aside—this nod to mauve carpeting is no coincidence, I have seen two installations within the past three years made by my contemporaries involving an excess amount of mauve carpet.

I see color less as a racial identifier and more as a signifier of proximity to whiteness. I am not proud to admit that, but for many years, I held great anxiety in regard to my distance to whiteness via skin color. Whiteness is a framework that is frequently expressed during this moment of identity politics in the arts, but for me it is less of a talking point and more a lived experience. My grade school in the early 2000s which had a student body of 53 for my class, was socially segregated. The only students I sat with at lunch were a



few students of color (with the exception of one blonde child, whose family lacked a father figure to be the breadwinner). We were unable to communicate it at the time, but we knew that we were not accepted by the larger majority of students. We were reserved, all sang in the chorus, and did not pass the tryouts for the physical extracurriculars.

LP: *The notion of "passing" also came up in our conversation and I wonder if you could elaborate on that issue?*

EVN: Passing within south Florida is very much tied to economic stability and, furthermore, to financial excess. I have made work that deals with class, colorism, and equity. Whiteness is so dangerous due to its tie to economics and its fluidity. Sure, color plays a large role, but one of the powers of the structure of whiteness is how it imposes otherness, through the hoarding of wealth and resources. Again, it functions differently in different spaces. Those considered white or who function within a realm of whiteness in south Florida, would not be considered white, by let's say, some communities in middle America.

Emily Velez Nelms, *Untitled, Process of Socialization,* 2020. Vinyl panels, 58 x 120 inches each. Courtesy of the artist.

The added level of violence in terms of how whiteness functions is that it always opposes blackness. I've heard more times than I can count, "Well I'm not Black, so I'm White." These expressions make living as a Black person in our country consistently dangerous. It's a sentiment on the one hand that dissociates, isolates, while on the other signals inclusion.

LP: *We had talked a bit about the topic of intersectionality and in reading around the topic, there seems to be a tension between a generalized use of the term in relation to aspects of overlapping identities, versus the original use of the term as a means of analyzing power to reveal political and structural inequalities.*
EVN: In my understanding of Kimberly Crenshaw's seminal text, *Demarginalizing the Intersection*, identity is central. Not, however in the manner it is often shallowly understood. I misused her terminology for a time as relating to racial mixing. But still in that mishap, Crenshaw has given me a sense of ownership of my body and the courage to accept and protect myself from structures which would much rather see me submit to a demure role. I was very much shut down before learning of Crenshaw. Even the misunderstandings of her terminology have proven productive.

If you haven't read the text, it is necessary—but in my understanding, her academic essay exhibits the clear and unique form of discrimination found when race and gender discrimination are coupled, and unacknowledged, in law and politics. The legal system at the time separated one's gender and race, siding with the least marginal of the identities (which can extend beyond these two examples). Her work has exposed how the overlaps of identity produce specific forms of oppression, specifically against Black women and men, whose mistreatment was unseen due to the legal system's disregard of their experiences in terms of both gender and race discrimination. Her logic was applied first in a legal context, but certainly extends beyond.

Velez Nelms was born and raised in southern Florida, studied at Savannah College of Art and Design (BFA), the University of California Los Angeles (MFA), and is currently pursuing a MA in Architecture at the University of Miami. She has participated in numerous exhibitions and was the recipient of the Graduate Opportunity Fellowship Program from UCLA and was awarded a residency at the International Sculpture Center, MANA Contemporary, New Jersey.

Christie Neptune, *Unpacking Sameness,* 2018 (installation view). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Christie Neptune, *Sitting Like Delia With Bare-Front, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand*, 2018.
Digital chromogenic print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Christie Neptune, *Sitting Like Gordon With Bare-Back, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand,* 2018.
Digital chromogenic print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Christie Neptune, born and based in Brooklyn, is an interdisciplinary artist working across film, photography, mixed media and performance arts to inquire into the ways in which constructs of race, gender, and class have historically, and contemporarily, limited the individual and personal experiences of bodies of color. Her practice calls attention to the personal and emotional aftermath of a society that disregards and delegitimizes those that endure the brunt of historically upheld white supremacy.

Lisa Panzera: *You work across multiple mediums, including film, photography, mixed media and performance arts. How and why do you choose to employ these different mediums?*

Christie Neptune: The versatility of working across multiple media provides me space and dimensions needed to explore an idea or concept wholly.

I like to think of myself as an "experimental storyteller." As a Storyteller and Artist, my responsibility is to be reflective of the times that we are in and illuminate our truth. Applying experimentation within that field allows me the ability to go beyond conventional limitations. Within that mode of storytelling, I am consciously developing counternarratives, deconstructing, and wrapping time and space, whether in 2D or 3D. Versatility is essential as it allows me the flexibility to explore and frame the content.

At the beginning of the ideation process, I always start with a question. What am I trying to communicate? The medium, the project's form(s), is more of a tool used to frame the narrative. Beneath each project's trajectory, there is an intense "want" for resolution, and each medium takes me only one step closer. I feel it gives the project nuance in ways that working solely within one dimension or form could not.

LP: *How do you place your self and personal subject position in your work?*

CN: Within my work, I speak from the vantage point of a middle class, African American female operating within the margins of society. I utilize my internalized experiences, as such, to examine, dissect, and challenge historic supremacies and pedagogies of oppression within American culture. Although this element does not dictate the choice of medium, it most certainly controls the stylized aspects of my mediums of choice (i.e., self-portraiture in photography, the role of narrator and performer in video, abstraction in sculpture and an emphasis on conceptualism above all).

The act of telling one's own story is powerful. Through my account, I can provide nuance and dimension to my identity in a culture that marginalizes my experience. To me, that is radical, and in the same instance, liberating. I defy stereotypes. I subvert the gaze. I challenge American myths of identity by providing a multidimensional representation of myself that isn't as binary as black and white.

LP: *You have noted that your work* Unpacking Sameness *takes its inspiration in part from James Baldwin and addresses the ideologies around white supremacy by focusing on an artistic invention called "*The Colorline*," a metal stand and green velvet curtain you created "designed to block out the reality of systematic racism, cultural and racial difference, white supremacy, and aggravated stress caused by interactions with non-white persons." Could you talk a bit more about this work?*

CN: In *Unpacking Sameness*, the social construct of structural racism is given symbolic form in "*The Colorline*," a readymade sculpture composed of a mirror, industrial chrome, and heavy green velvet drapery. "*The Colorline*," a theoretical abstraction given form in empirically real space, provides a false impression of reality for the socially, economically, and politically advantaged white individual.

Dismantling the structure, however, neither reveals a utopian backdrop for equality nor symbolizes a lofty aspiration. It is a reckoning with harsh truths. It brings to light a history of white violence, oppression, and systemic injustice. When I say this, I refer directly to *Exposing My Limits behind America's Curtain, Sitting Like Gordon With Bare-Back, Indigo* and *Shutter Release in Hand,* and *Sugar Cane and Drapery by Trading Warehouse*.

In *Exposing My Limits behind America's Curtain*, I am sitting atop a metal stool, facing an acrylic sheet held in position by industrial chrome. My hands are pressed flat against its surface. Green drapery hung from an unseen rod partially obscures my back and creates a shared space with the viewer.

In the absence of the assembled power structure: "*The Colorline,*" I highlight the dehumanizing and seemingly brutal effects of slavery, capitalism, and western colonialism. *Sitting Like Gordon With Bare-Back, Indigo*, and *Shutter Release in Hand*, is a symbolic gesture that references the carte de visite photographs published in Harper's Weekly revealing Gordon's scarred back, an enslaved Black man who escaped slavery. Positioned under trading signage in *Sugarcane and Drapery by Trading Warehouse*, are sugarcane, an economic cash crop during slavery, and abased green drapery. The message conveyed

visually in both images does not illustrate an ideological representation of equality but a haunting reflection of America's Truth.

Structural racism within American culture is an abstraction reflected across public policy, institutional practices, cultural representations, and behavioral norms. It is a very "real" thing that we live by despite having no corporal form. To me, the act: dismantling "*The Colorline*," is representative of the mental processing one must take to release oneself from the ideological entrapments of historic white capitalist supremacy.

LP: *I find your use of color really effective. Using the green characteristic of 17th century Dutch painting infuses art historical elements in your work, as well as historical references to exploration, colonialism, and slavery. How important are those references to art history for you?*

CN: In *Unpacking Sameness*, I utilized the art historical tradition of "deceiving the eye," trompe l' oeil, within the project's visual form. Trompe l' oeil, a stylized technique in art, was very popular in mid-17th century French and Dutch paintings. In Dutch paintings that made use of this technique, green drapery was often hung to the side of the frame, partially disclosing the object, sitter, or scene. It created a forced perspective that presented the illusion of shared space. It baited the viewer with the idea that one could pull back the curtain and walk directly onto the scene. I was interested in how this technique could be employed in photography to wrap time and space. I wanted to transport my viewer to a contemplative space where they can examine the consequential effects of Western colonialism, imperialism, and transatlantic slave trade on white capitalist supremacy.

However, it was James Baldwin's 1965 essay "*The White Man's Guilt*" that informed the project's content. Baldwin writes, "The American curtain is color. Color. White men have used this word, this concept, to justify unspeakable crimes, not only in the past but in the present. One can measure very neatly the White American's distance from his conscience—from himself—by observing the distance between White America and Black America."

That essay left a great impression upon me. So, I decided to build a platform for discussion around it. I established physicality to an intangible abstraction. I created "*The Colorline*" (one word, not two), a purposeful error in semantics and symbolic representation of structural racism. I created a faux public policy and legal doctrine to justify its existence. And, I created a didactic manual to dismantle it. Disassembling "*The Colorline,*" in many ways, was like pulling back the American curtain. Metaphorically, it eliminated the illusion of "distance" and shed light on a history of white violence and systemic injustice.

LP: *I find it especially interesting that you are using rich jewel-like colors to explore and highlight issues of racism that seem to me to have traditionally been seen (in the United States) in "monochromatic" terms of black and white. Do you see there being two separate systems represented by color (or the lack thereof)?*

CN: The culture of racism in America is traditionally highlighted through "monochromatic" terms of black and white in visual arts and literature. However, through color, the same subject matter can be equally explored. Gordon Parks and his color photographs of the segregated south throughout the 50s and 60s is a perfect example. Believe it or not, it was Parks' works that showed me the agency of color in photography and its ability to challenge American myths on Black lives.

Although my work is not journalistic, I approach my work from the same lens. I explore the agency of color in photography, sculpture, and the moving image to set my work's tone and mood. The palette is dark/cool, and the content is generally serious or charged with socio-politics.

I don't see two separate systems represented by a color (or the lack thereof) regarding the art. I think the choice between black/white and color as a tool to spotlight systemic racism is preferential. It is essentially a matter of form and content. What elements of "form" will you utilize to frame your content?

Now, are there two separate systems for Black America and White America? Absolutely.

Neptune has a BA in Visual Arts from Fordham University. Her films and photography have been included in shows at BASS Museum, Miami, FL; The University of Massachusetts Boston; Rubber Factory, New York, NY; A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; and Rutgers University. Her work has been featured in publications including Artforum, NY Times, Hyperallergic, and The Washington Post. Neptune has been awarded the Bronx Museum of the Arts: Artist in Marketplace (AIM), Smack Mellon Studio Residency, NYSCA/NYFA Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Arts, and Light Work Artist-in-Residence, among others.

Anna Plesset, *A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848,* 2020. Oil and graphite on canvas, 15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Anna Plesset, *A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848, 2020. Oil and graphite on canvas, 15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches.* Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Anna Plesset is an interdisciplinary installation artist who uses painting, sculpture, and drawing to reframe historical narratives and examine how history, memory, and knowledge are constructed. Plesset's work is driven by her deeply rooted interest in overlooked or lesser-known details of the past and by an interest in what narratives and objects are given significance, value, and visibility–and who has the authority to grant it. While grounded in traditional artistic techniques, Plesset's conceptually driven work uses multiple lenses to focus on particular themes that have classically been ignored, particularly the absence of women from the canon and the relationship between trauma and everyday life.

Lisa Panzera: *When visiting your studio we had the opportunity to discuss many aspects of your work in which you employ various mediums, including painting, drawing, video, and large-scale installation, to examine the physical and psychological relationships between history, visibility, and everyday life. Would you characterize your works as investigating or working against traditional power structures?*

Anna Plesset: Absolutely. I think in some work this is more overt, but all of my work reframes dominant or familiar accounts of the past—a past that has been largely documented, authorized, and written by white men. I'm interested in what narratives and objects are given significance, value and visibility; and who has the authority to grant it. My current project, *American Paradise*, reframes the history of the Hudson River School to give visibility to the many women affiliated with this iconic movement historically associated with men. The history of the Hudson River School is flawed in many ways, not just for this exclusion, but also for its mythologization and misrepresentation of America, Indigenous Peoples, and the environment which was already being industrialized at that time. The title of this project—invoked critically—takes its name from *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, an exhibition catalog published in 1987 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art that perpetuates the mythology of the Hudson River School as being founded by, and exclusively comprised of, men. In fact, as early as 1818—seven years before its ostensible founding in 1825—women were painting scenes of the Catskills and beyond in styles ascribed to the movement's "founding fathers," Asher Durand and Thomas Cole. The only true corrective to this false history and the Met's 345-page tome is *Remember the Ladies*, an exhibition booklet published in 2010 by the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, stapled instead of bound, and 33 pages in total.

One part of *American Paradise* is a series of works that refer to paintings created by Sarah Cole, Louisa Davis Minot, and several other women who hiked and painted alongside—and often apart from—the men affiliated with this movement. Executed in the tradition of copying exemplary paintings, my paintings, in the form of "unfinished" copies, seek to give value and visibility to works created by these women that have been undervalued, under-recognized, and in many cases, lost.

The piece in this show references *A View of the Catskill Mountain House*, an 1848 painting by Sarah Cole that was copied from a painting by Thomas Cole, her brother. Only a handful of works by Sarah Cole have survived and two of those are copies of paintings by Thomas. Like his original painting on canvas, Sarah Cole's painting is around 15 x 23 inches. In keeping with this and the tradition of copying, my painting is a similar size and facture as its two precedents. However, in my version, the copy is in process and is being painted from what looks like a clipped image of the original taped to the upper right corner of the canvas. In fact, this "source material"—the ostensible reference for the "unfinished" painting—is painted in trompe l'oeil, making it the "true copy" of Sarah Cole's original painting. Together, the two approaches in the painting simultaneously point to invisibility, and call into question the tradition of copying, which historically functioned as both a learning process and a process of homage. Both attribute an inherent value to the original as worthy of being copied and disseminated and more significant than the hand and voice of the artist-copier. Ultimately, this painting and the other works in the series make visible the act of historical recovery and acknowledge that act as one that is always in-progress and never finished.

LP: *Your work is conceptual in nature but also interestingly employs a highly accomplished "traditional" painting technique. The use of trompe l'oeil painting, in particular, is central in your practice. Historically trompe l'oeil is used to depict banal objects. What does your depiction of everyday objects reveal? What specific issues do they raise for you?*

AP: Since my work is focused on a reframing of history to bring light to less familiar narratives, using trompe l'oeil is a way for me to create a perceptual experience for the viewer that prompts them to see familiar-looking things in a new light. The illusion in trompe l'oeil is important to me also because of its relationship to history. History is an illusion of fact and truth. It is not a comprehensive record by any means at all and because of history's blind spots, countless lives and events have remained invisible by not being recorded.

The use of trompe l'oeil has persisted throughout art history beginning in ancient Greece. This technique, used to push beyond the flat picture plane so much that the objects

and spaces depicted were thought to be real, presents an altered version of reality. The perceptual and psychological experience of trompe l'oeil implicates the viewer in a heightened way and it's this strength that has enabled it to persist across thousands of years. In my opinion, knowing that you are looking at a painting creates a distance between the viewer and the work. For me, using trompe l'oeil to the degree that I do closes that gap and brings the subject of the work into the same psychological and perceptual space that the viewer occupies.

Like the 19th century American trompe l'oeil painters, I paint 1:1 so that the viewer encounters the painted objects and ephemera the same way they might encounter them in their natural environments. For the American trompe l'oeil painters, because the objects and ephemera depicted were directly linked to the people who possessed them, their paintings could be seen as oblique portraits, not only of people, but of the events and society at the time. My work directly draws on this tradition. So much of what fills our knowledge and memory is shaped by the objects that surround us and often outlive us. I think that's where my interest in everyday objects lies. They are vehicles for talking about the people and times to which they are linked. By using trompe l'oeil, I am able to not just talk about the translation of information and knowledge, but also create a reality in which these objects exist together in a way they may not have otherwise.

LP: *You embrace a broad range of mediums to delve not only into aspects of art history, as well as social histories, but also into personal history. In particular, I am thinking of your work* Travelogue (21st Century Room)*, which creates a partial replica of your studio and reproduces ephemera from your journey in which you followed the footsteps of your grandfather, who traveled through Europe during and after WWII. How do these issues all interact in your work?*

AP: Throughout my work, I am drawn to examine narratives that once discovered, come to life in a way that gives existence and visibility to something that otherwise would remain overlooked. Because my work requires a fair amount of research, I'm always thinking about the different ways we acquire information and knowledge. My use of varied approaches and mediums speaks to this and the way that knowledge accumulates over time—the installations that result capture my research process and my quest for knowledge. I see my traditional and conceptual approaches as symbiotic and linked to my shifts between different media. Material choices are really important in my work and I make those decisions at the same time that I am determining how my work operates conceptually. I've always been interested in what's going on in the studio around the work while it's being made. When I began working on *Travelogue (21st Century Room)* I reread *Studio and Cube: On the Relationship Between Where Art Is Made and Where Art Is Displayed* by Brian O'Doherty in which he discusses the life of an artwork after it leaves the studio, how it can retain the imprint of the artist as it travels from place to place, and how artists have dealt with this throughout art history. I decided to treat the walls of the room as I do the walls of my studio. I don't work at an easel, I always work on the wall and because I work very close, there are always scuff marks and shoe prints at the base of the wall near the floor. If I'm sitting in a chair, my knees rub against the wall making an imprint. There are paint smudges, tape, and reference material all around the work. I wanted to keep all of this, and not have it left behind as the work leaves the studio. No matter where the room is displayed, the room maintains its relationship to the studio, its making, its original context, and therefore, me.

Plesset has exhibited widely; her work was featured in New York in group exhibitions at Jack Barrett and JDJ | The Ice House; and in solo exhibitions at PATRON in Chicago; Hunter Harrison Gallery in London; and The Armory Show 2020 with Jack Barrett in New York. In 2016, Plesset was awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Emerging Artist Grant. Additional awards and residencies include the Terra Foundation for American Art Summer Residency Fellowship in Giverny, France and the AIRspace residency program at Abrons Arts Center in New York City. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Anna Plesset, *A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848*, 2020 (detail). Oil and graphite on canvas, 15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Etienne Frossard.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Joan Semmel, *Four Rings*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 54 x 44 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Joan Semmel, *Revisiting*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 56 x 60 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Joan Semmel has spent the majority of her extensive career focused on a painting practice that addresses issues of identity, desirability, and aging. As a young artist in the 1960s influenced by Abstract Expressionism, Semmel worked abstractly. In the early 1970s, she turned toward figurative painting, and began to use her own body as her subject, shifting the perspective from that of an outside observer to her own personal vantage point. Using a camera to photograph her body, she began creating complex painted images that explore aspects of representation and sexuality, challenging the objectification of the female form. Her intimate self-portraits unflinchingly portray the erotic and the aging female body.

At Joan Semmel's suggestion, her following responses are taken from prior statements and interviews that speak to the questions and observations posed. As she noted, "I get very tired of my own voice in interview after interview. After all, the responses provoked by the work are as essential as the artist's intent. I also have some difficulty in the midst of this dreadful pandemic finding the passion to confront other issues. Perhaps you could use quotes from my catalogues for more formal responses."

Lisa Panzera: *Your work initially came out of Abstract Expressionism. In the 60s you were working abstractly, but then when you returned to NYC (from Spain) in the 70s you turned to figurative painting. On the one hand, it seems to have been a "risky" decision to shift to figurative painting in a moment in which painting (and particularly figuration) had been critically panned. On the other hand, this is the same time frame in which Feminism was gaining ground. Linda Nochlin's fundamental 1971 article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," laid bare the imbedded white Western male viewpoint at the heart of the central unacknowledged value system at work that dominated the history of art being told. Given your developing interest in and concerns about the representation of the female body, it is perhaps not surprising in hindsight that you turned to figuration.*

Joan Semmel: I was always interested in making a radical intervention in the history of the genre of the nude, but was uncomfortable being described as either a realist or a figure painter. I have avoided the strictly narrative aspects of figuration opting for a more iconic image.

When I came to Madrid in 1963, I was a mainstream Abstract Expressionist....
The seven and a half years that I had spent in Spain made me acutely aware of the differences in culture, especially when it came to the relationships between men and women and the institutional restrictions placed upon women regarding travel, ownership of property, divorce, career expectations and limitations, social rules of behavior and dress, and the overlay of religion on all aspects of human relationships. [*Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades*, Alexander Gray Gallery, 2015]

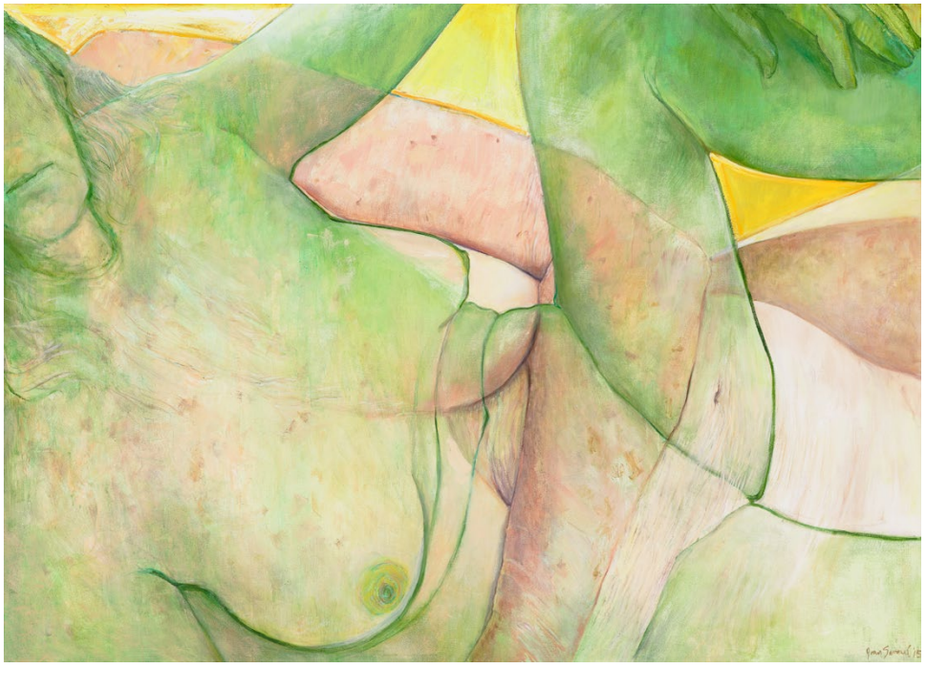
LP: *I think people forget about the backdrop of the political realities for women that you were working in during the 60s and 70s. It is still somewhat shocking to think that US banks required single, widowed, or divorced women, regardless of their income, to have a man cosign any credit application until 1974. It seems to me that it is important to remember that context in light of your insistence on a vision of female autonomy.*

JS: I returned to my native New York in 1970 and found that my way of working and my ideas shifted radically. I wanted my work to directly reflect the issues in which I was involved...I was never focused on self-representation but rather on finding a way of reimagining the nude without objectifying the person, of using a specific body rather than an idealized form. I wanted the body to be seen as a woman experiences herself, rather than through the reflection of the mirror or male eyes.

As I moved away from sexuality as a theme, and began to utilize self-nudes, my palette gradually became more naturalistic, but I continued to use the camera as a tool to locate and structure the image. This allowed for close-in views and cropping, which became almost landscapes or abstractions when blown-up into the scale of my canvases. I positioned the nude lying prone and the viewer seeing the body from the model/artist's 6 7 point of view. The fundamental problem of subject and object was always present, and using my own body was one method of dealing with this. More importantly, it made it clear that the artist was female, and undercut the stereotypes of male artist and female muse. I wanted to subvert this tradition from within. [*Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades*, Alexander Gray Gallery, 2015]

LP: *The use of the photograph is central to your self-imaging, allowing you to play with representing your own gaze, as well as issues of framing, doubling, refraction, overlay, and performativity. You seem to create a deliberately intertwined tension that undercuts ideas about the separation (not to mention privileging) of certain genres and mediums.*

JS: The shift from drawing into photography was a significant departure for me. At that time, the use of photography by a painter was considered not quite legitimate. I appropriated the modeled form and smooth surface of the closely cropped photograph into my paintings which tended to push the image out from the picture plane into the



viewer's space and retained abstract color as a primary element in the work. [*Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades*, Alexander Gray Gallery, 2015]

Background objects are dropped out, and the image is suspended in imaginary baths of color, as in my first representational paintings from the early 70s which were primarily gestural and expressionistic. In these recent paintings both non-naturalistic color and linear overlays of complementary or contrasting images, again recall abstract elements, but also provoke a suggestion of time, motion, or memory. The linear rendering of another female figure superimposed over a three-dimensional body sometimes causes unexpected correlations and disjunctions to occur. [*Joan Semmel: New Work*, Alexander Gray Gallery, 2016]

Joan Semmel *Yellow Sky,* 2015. Oil on canvas, 51 x 71 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

LP: *Your images of the aging female body are unflinching and your portrayals seem to represent a kind of refusal to be apologetic.*

JS: … I'm older now. To deny vulnerability is to deny reality. Vulnerability is there. You can't totally deny it. I mean, I can't insist that I'm as powerful as I was: I'm not, physically. And even just in terms of dismissal, as an older woman, you're dismissed in so many different areas. I try to speak that truth. It's one of the aspects of getting older, that one has to, in some way, adjust to and encompass. I don't think "acceptance" is exactly the word, but perhaps "acknowledge"—you have to acknowledge it. ["Joan Semmel with Laila Pedro," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2016]

"But in terms of where I am as a feminist, I am interested in moving the institutions to include us. I think that's a primary, basic thing that we need to do, and we need to work on it consciously." ["Joan Semmel with Laila Pedro," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2016]

Semmel studied at the Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Student's League of New York, and has exhibited extensively. A retrospective of Semmel's work is planned for 2021 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, and her paintings have been featured in exhibitions at the Jewish Museum, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Dallas Contemporary, TX ; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany; Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY; Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, The Netherlands; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; and Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; among others. She is Professor Emeritus of Painting at Rutgers University.

CHECKLIST

LaKela Brown
Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings, Gold Teeth, and Egyptian Royalty, 2020
Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood
33 x 45 x 3 inches

LaKela Brown
Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings of Varies Colors and Chickenheads, With Nefertiti Profiles, 2020
Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood
33 x 45 x 3 inches

LaKela Brown
Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings with Eleven Gold #2, 2020
Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood
33 x 45 x 3 inches

LaKela Brown
Still Life with Doorknocker Earrings with Fourteen Gold, 2020
Plaster, foam, acrylic, and wood
33 x 45 x 3 inches

Rachelle Dang
House on Cannonball Street, 2020
Wood, glass, air-dry clay, metal, foam, epoxy, paint
Approx. 96 x 96 x 39 inches

Jesse Harrod
For the love of Dan, 2020
Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal
126 x 48 inches

Jesse Harrod
For the love of Daniel, 2020
Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal
126 x 48 inches

Jesse Harrod
For the love of Danny, 2020
Paracord, acrylic prisms, metal
126 x 48 inches

Athena LaTocha
Burning, Sulphuric, Violent, 2020
Shellac ink, World Trade Center building sand on paper
132 x 204 inches

Emily Velez Nelms
Untitled, Process of Socialization, 2020
Vinyl panels
58 x 120 inches each

Christie Neptune
Dismantling Man-Made Constructs, 2018
Single Channel HD Video and Super 8mm Film Transfer
11:19 min.

Christie Neptune
Exposing My Limits behind America's Curtain, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
24 x 36 inches

Christie Neptune
Faux legitimacy, 2018
Text on paper with pin
8.5 x 11 inches

Christie Neptune
Head Bowed in Assembled Construction, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
36 x 24 inches

Christie Neptune
James Baldwin Quote, 2018
Single Channel HD Video
Looped quote on 13inch CRT monitor
35 secs.

Christie Neptune
Sitting Like Delia With Bare-Front, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
20 x 20 inches

Christie Neptune
Sitting Like Gordon With Bare-Back, Indigo and Shutter Release in Hand, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
20 x 20 inches

Christie Neptune
"The Colorline," 2018
Readymade sculpture
36 x 20 x 71 inches

Christie Neptune
Untitled Assembled Man-Made Construct #02, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
24 x 36 inches

Christie Neptune
Untitled Assembled Man-Made Construct, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
24 x 36 inches

Christie Neptune
When The Curtains Open, 2018
Digital chromogenic print
20 x 20 inches

Anna Plesset
A View of the Catskill Mountain House / Copied from a picture by S. Cole copied from a picture by T. Cole / 1848, 2020
Oil and graphite on canvas
15 3/8 x 23 7/16 inches

Joan Semmel
Four Rings, 2003
Oil on canvas
54 x 44 inches

Joan Semmel
Revisiting, 2018
Oil on canvas
56 x 60 inches

Joan Semmel
Yellow Sky, 2015
Oil on canvas
51 x 71 inches

The Shirley Fiterman Art Center of Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY, is dedicated to organizing exhibitions of contemporary art and cultural programming through which it seeks to promote and enrich the educational mission of BMCC and serve as a resource for the college and Lower Manhattan communities. The Fiterman Art Center believes strongly in the role of education and advocacy through art, including matters of identity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, and in the preservation of the artistic and historic legacies of Tribeca and Lower Manhattan.

Installation photography: Jason Mandella
Brochure: Pehrsson Design

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