

Mary Ann Aitken
Derf Backderf
Cara Benedetto
Christi Birchfield
dadpranks
Kevin Jerome Everson
Ben Hall
Jae Jarrell
Harris Johnson
Jimmy Kuehnle
d.a. levy
Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.
Dylan Spaysky
Carmen Winant



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HOW TO REMAIN HUMAN

INTRODUCTION

ROSE BOUTHILLIER &
MEGAN LYKINS REICH

...

& everyday i sit here
trying to become one of you
after another
trying on those high school dreams
for size
it doesnt work
you dont fit me
as a poet i try to learn
how to remain human
despite technology
& there is no one to learn from
i am still too young to
be quiet & contemplative

...

-d.a. levy, excerpt from "SUBURBAN
MONASTERY DEATH POEM," 1968

How to Remain Human is both a question and a proposition. The question points to all that de-humanizes, the challenges and breakages that divide people and make the way forward unclear. The proposition suggests that there are ways to re-imagine, practice, and hold on to our humanity.

This exhibition is MOCA Cleveland's second iteration of a bi-annual series featuring artists connected to Cleveland and the surrounding region, including neighboring cities in Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. These shows bring together emerging and established artists, some with deep histories in the region, others

who have arrived from elsewhere. The goal is to reflect critically on contemporary art that comes out of, or passes through, particular places, here or nearby. We say particular as opposed to certain, because we are not working from a strict definition or geographical boundary. "The region" is equal parts geo-political, social, and psychological. It regularly shifts and transforms. *Realization is Better than Anticipation* (2013) was MOCA Cleveland's first exhibition built from this vantage point, and it generated a topology for ongoing inquiry.

How to Remain Human continues the conversation with 14 artists working across a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, film and video, performance, fashion design, sound, and architectural installation. They share a need to make, in order to question, clarify, or understand life. They explore various ways of acting in and experiencing the world, examining how we can go on, relate, and be.

d.a. levy is a key figure in the exhibition. He was truly all-in, an artist who lived and breathed his work. The show's title is drawn from his "SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM," an epic work that brings to life a range of his desires and frustrations with the world at that time. He battled, protested, resisted, and ultimately insisted on other ways to live and make. levy was a pillar of

Cleveland's underground literature and art scene in the 1960s, centered around the University Circle/East Cleveland area. He worked tirelessly, publishing original manuscripts and several alternative newspapers, along with making prints, paintings, and collages. Ardent and aching, his work expresses a passionate love/hate relationship with Cleveland. In the reactionary climate of the 60s, levy's anti-establishment sentiments, disheveled appearance, unconventional lifestyle, and talk of drugs made him an easy target for the authorities. Repeated arrests and ongoing harassment left levy exhausted and paranoid. On November 24, 1968, he committed suicide at the age of 26. Perhaps because his work did not fully mature, his words retains a youthful rawness, a way of using words searchingly.

Cara Benedetto also use words in an intimate, feeling out (and up) way. Her texts and performance-based events use language to confound communication and subvert power structures. Often, she will take up vernacular and structures from romance novels, fundraisers, and advertisements. She then shifts, mutates, and destabilizes these forms. For her participation in this exhibition, Benedetto produced *Prelude Her patron*, a private event at the Museum modeled on a traditional preview party with a soft S/m theme. The artist directed all aspects of the project, from designing the invitations and writing the press release, to providing special napkins and lip balm for guests. Rather than doing a disservice to the BDSM community with "a hack portrayal or tourism into their world," Benedetto seeks to "draw a parallel to exploits in current academia, specific to the institution of MFA, where all art students are treated as masochists and contracts are unclear." *Prelude* brought an element of vulnerability and the unknown into the Museum, asking staff, guests, artists, and the institution to question, explore, and feel the boundaries of their relations.

Elsewhere in *How to Remain Human*, artists are using disparate mediums to look closely at people and communities. Derf Backderf's renowned comix and graphic novels give honest, unapologetic voice to Midwest living. *How to Remain Human* features a sampling of hand-drawn pages from his forthcoming book *Trashed*, which chronicle Derf's wild garbage-collecting experiences. The exploits serve as subtle metaphors for broader sociopolitical and existential conditions: bar brawls (class); trash collecting blues (culture); government bureaucracy (democracy's failings); foreclosed properties (capitalism's failings), unsuccessful come-ons (sexual rejection), used condom hunts in a civic baseball field (sexual fulfillment), trips to the cemetery, lots of dead animals, and Marv's (the curmudgeonly city dog catcher) passing (mortality). The ultimate symbol is, of course, all the garbage. Page after page, Derf portrays the relentless gluttony of consumer culture.

Speaking to the significance of place, Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.'s figurative paintings depict Cleveland's urban fabric, combining environmental, social, and political experiences into vibrant expressions. According to Lovelace, art saved him from an uncertain future, and it continues to offer him a platform for self-preservation and expression. Works like *These Urban City Streets* (2013) represent inner city neighborhoods that bustle with life, depicting community parties and people going about their errands. Lovelace also reflects on themes of social justice-- violence, inequality, criminal lifestyles, and racial conflict--often hinting at personal struggles and redemption.

Deeply informed by his upbringing in Northeast Ohio, Kevin Jerome Everson focuses on the performance of identity and the rituals of labor. His African American subjects perform simple, obligatory, or repetitive actions for the camera: high school athletes running football drills, magicians doing sleights of hand, young men watching a fireworks display, an old

man blowing out birthday candles. Studying and re-imagining the quotidian activities of real life, Everson creates deliberate vignettes that combine fiction and realism. These poetic montages speak to practice, effort, futility, mortality, and reward.

Similar themes resonate with Ben Hall's complex sculpture and audio installations. Concerned with politics, identity, social interaction, and the histories held by objects, his works are mash ups with a multitude of references. Hall created three new works for *How to Remain Human*. His large structure, *The Drill* (2015) brings together elements as diverse as the transparent backpacks used in the Detroit Public School system (which here act as cactus terrariums); stickers with the face of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man who was beaten to death in 1982 by auto workers in Highland Park, a suburb of Detroit; pins featuring Larry Doby and Ozzie Virgil, two Black Major league baseball players that integrated the Cleveland Indians and Detroit Tigers, respectively; and didactic references to Goldman Sachs, the Adidas slogan, and Monopoly. As Hall states, the sculpture represents a microcosm of his "understanding of humanness in America right now," an experience that still breaks apart along race and class lines, where individuals must find their own ways to salvage and reconstruct in a culture of violence and control.

How to Remain Human also emphasizes our physical engagement with the world through works that examine or evoke the body. Carmen Winant's massive wall collage *A World Without Men* (2015) is constructed from images of women found in magazines dating from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Much of the material for the collage is gathered from *Playboy* or *WE* magazine and books on puberty, charting shifting representations of women over time, for different audiences. While the title calls back to Feminist Separatist movements of the 1970s, the images are clearly under the influence of the "male gaze." It may be a world

without men, yet they are very much present.

Jae Jarrell's radical fashions use the body as a vessel for protest, resistance, and identity. In 1968, Jae, her husband Wadsworth Jarrell, and fellow artists Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams founded the collective AFRICOBRA (which stands for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). The group formed in response to a lack of positive representation of African and African American people in media and the arts. Their goal was to produce works that conveyed the pride, power, history, and energy of their communities. As a fashion designer, Jae expressed those ideals through clothing. Incorporating diverse elements such as brick walls, graffiti, colorful bandoliers, jazz, Scrabble, and African shields, Jae's work is a celebration of life and individuality, with a strident "Look good, feel powerful" message.

How to Remain Human also features work with a strong sense of vulnerability and introspection. Christi Birchfield's large textile sculptures possess intense bodily references. Starting with black canvas, Birchfield applies gestural lines of bleach paste, folds the fabric in half, and runs it through a printing press. Next, she uses a utility knife to cut out areas of un-bleached fabric. These flat, lacelike shapes are conjoined, layered, stretched, and affixed to the ceiling, wall, and floor. Forming webs of linear forms that resemble hanging skin and skeletal systems, they evoke the fragile body and its transience.

Mary Ann Aitken's oil paintings on newspaper have a light, spontaneous quality. The fragile paper--meant to last only for a day--becomes a surface for preserving a moment in time. Aitken's subjects, such as goldfish and flowers, are life forms found in domestic settings, and in capturing their essence, she calls attention to the beauty of the everyday. An extremely private person, Aitken rarely showed her work during her lifetime. A self-portrait included

in *How to Remain Human* depicts the artist in her red painting robe, which she wore in the studio to protect her clothes. Though her face is indistinct, her presence and energy are strongly felt. On the right, loose brush strokes seem to be casually placed, as if Aitken were using the background itself as a palette for mixing colors. This work captures how painting and a dedicated studio practice were integral to Aitken's spirit and sense of self.

Dylan Spaysky's sculptures, which take modest, familiar objects as their subjects, are richly tactile. Spaysky uses cheap materials and found objects that relate back to domestic settings. He is inspired by the aesthetics of Disney, knickknacks found in suburban homes, children's crafts, and thrift store dollar-bags. The artist's hand is visible in the crude way that these sculptures are assembled. In addition to exploring notions of beauty, value, and preciousness, Spaysky's work is very much about the desire to make. They have a sense of impulsiveness: to salvage, tinker, repurpose, and decorate.

Humor and nonsense are used by many artists in the exhibition to playfully puncture life's routines, habits, and anxieties. The largest piece in the show, Jimmy Kuehnle's giant pink inflatable sculpture, *Please, no smash.* (2015) engages MOCA Cleveland's audience, architecture, and neighborhood in an interactive way. It begs visitors to push, press, nuzzle, and otherwise engage with its curious presence and shifting form. Made from hundreds of yards of neon pink PVC fabric, the work hovers above viewers as it slowly inflates and deflates. Its lights flicker and glow according to the time of day, and the form radiates a hot pink glow that is visible from outside the Museum at night. When it's fully expanded, the work's plump body extends into most areas of the Kohl Atrium. As it deflates, the work recoils and draws up against the wall like a folding flower. It appears to move like a living, breathing organism, or a beating heart inside

the Museum. A sculpture-cum-human.

A selection of videos by the Pittsburgh collective dadpranks plays on the Museum's free ground floor. They portray cheap consumer goods isolated in colorful sets, employed in strange ways to carry out bizarre actions. The collective's name is a playful take on the internet phenomenon of parents pranking their children for YouTube "likes." These videos are the result of a collaborative process, where the artists come together for short periods of time with bags full of goodies and a video camera, and riff off of each other's ideas.

Harris Johnson's paintings often use "dumb" humor to tackle anxieties. He addresses the individual's place in the world, as well as the significance (or triviality) of art amidst chaotic, troubling times. *American Ramble* (2015), painted directly on the wall, is a frenetic stream of consciousness that mixes banal chatter and with darker, angrier thoughts on society and hopelessness. A swirling vortex lies at the center of *Black Hole* (2015), sucking in color, energy, faded words, and frowning stick figures. This collapse speaks to the constant worry and existential wondering of humanity: how will everything end? How did everything begin? What, possibly, could it all mean?

Such moments of doubt and personal reflection run through *How to Remain Human*. But the exhibition is ultimately a romantic one, operating under a conviction that art is essential to understanding ourselves and contemporary life. In that regard, artists are vital, and the artists in *How to Remain Human* are particularly generous with their questions and perceptions. Their work is openhanded. It offers and invites, sometimes quietly, other times urgently. One imperative for remaining human: we must ask a lot of one another.

Would everything be too much?



1.

2.



3.



1. Ben Hall, work in progress

2. Jae Jarrell in her studio

3. Christi Birchfeild's studio



4.



5.



6.

4. Jimmy Kuehnle installs at
MOCA Cleveland

5. Easel and unfinished
painting in Michelangelo
Lovelace Sr.'s studio

6. Outfit purchased for Cara
Benedetto's *Prelude Her patron*

MARY ANN AITKEN

IN SINGULARITY

BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

A particular houseplant--some sort of bromeliad; spiky, weeping, lush--appears often in Mary Ann Aitken's paintings. Her focus on the plant suggests its life-affirming potential, but not in any general sense. Rather in a truly personal sense, as in how one object becomes more familiar than the rest, more known, and in turn, somehow knowing.

Along with her dedication to the studio, Mary Ann Aitken worked for over 20 years as an art therapist for patients with mental illness and addictions. This experience of art making as a healing, self-affirming act imbues her work with gravity. There is a deep, heartfelt joy in that seriousness, just as there is darkness and aloneness. Solitude gives Aitken's paintings their disarming directness; looking at them, one feels (aches with, drifts in) their own singularity.

Her works on panel have a distinctive thickness to them, the slowness of heavy oils, layers, and grit. This texture implies intimacy as well; closeness to the thing and to the self in painting it. But there is levity too: wrought, roughhewn working offset by quick gestures--a foot print, scribbles of mixing color, the nimble swipe of a brush or palette knife. Grounded and vigorous, Aitken's paintings are steadfastly electric. Looking at her *Untitled* (1989) still life, I feel as if I've held each item in my hands, sticky now from the slice of dark pink watermelon, softly flopping the banana peels down on the table, weighing the heaviness of canned goods, closing the gummy screw top on the ranch dressing,

tracing the cool metal curves of the spoon. Her *Untitled (Coffee Maker)* (1984) evokes habitual movements, performed in the haze of drowsiness, the gathering of drips and stains, soft gradual browns.

Domestic life forms breathe in Aitken's work. Her paintings on newspaper are particularly animated: exposed, dated fragments of text and advertisement toggle with colorful dobs of petals or goldfish. The fragile paper, meant to last only for a day, preserves a fleeting moment in time. These works are reminiscent of Paul Thek's paintings on newsprint, sharing a similar sense of lightness despite (or in) transience. Yet, Aitken's paintings are more down to earth.

I really can't get Aitken's *Self-Portrait* (1983) out of my mind. The artist floats in a rough black field, a turbulent void. She wears her red painting robe, donned in the studio to protect her clothes. In the painting, it protects her from the void. Compact and raw, her features are indistinct (two merged, bluish dots, a glob of dirty blonde) but her presence and energy are strongly felt. On the right, loose robe-hued brush strokes are casually placed, as if she were using the background itself as a palette (does painting have a fourth wall to break?). Every mark reflects and reveals the self. Aitken, an extremely private person, was hesitant to share her paintings while she was alive. Perhaps this was for the very reason that they disclosed so much of her in their intense, material sincerity.



1.

2.



1. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled, 2010-11
Oil, sand, and paper on canvas
11 1/4 x 14 inches

2. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (Coffee Maker), 1984
Oil on panel
9 1/4 x 7 inches

Courtesy of the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken

MARY ANN AITKEN

A LANGUAGE OF SELF

BY ED FRAGA



A single, blond haired figure stands in a sea of fiery red. Another figure in a pinkish robe and gray fuzzy slippers emerges from a field of darkness. Images of a fish bowl, coffee maker, banana, a dog named Soldier, leaves of a plant--animate and inanimate--are painted on various everyday materials: sections of the daily newspaper, old paneling, Masonite, linoleum, and cardboard. The material is never precious, but the emotion expressed is deep and genuine. Honesty is a word that comes to mind when thinking about my friend, Mary Ann Aitken and her paintings. She was a woman of high moral character who lived modestly and unselfishly. How many artists today could resist showing their latest paintings after finishing them? Not true of Mary Ann. She spent her life creating beautiful works but rarely exhibited them until the end of her life. But her devotion to her art also extended to her work as an art therapist at Woodhull Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. For 22 years, she worked with patients in their substance abuse recovery. Many of her colleagues share similar stories of a compassionate clinician who worked tirelessly to better the lives of others.

I first met Mary Ann when we were in our twenties. It was 1983 and I was looking for a space to work in Detroit, having just graduated from

art school. I found this building on the corner of Gratiot and Broadway called The Cary. Along with my friend Kathy Rashid, we convinced the landlord to rent studio spaces for us. A year later, Mary Ann quietly moved in. She liked her solitude and coveted her time in the studio. During the day, she worked at an art store near the Detroit Institute of Arts. We both got around without a car, which at the time didn't seem to be a problem. In fact it made it easier to see the city's quirks and discover spaces unique to Detroit.

Her studio practice remained private all the years I knew her. In the five years we lived in The Cary, she never talked about her process. I think in part because she was working out ideas and trying to master her skill as a painter. She was a harsh critic of her own work. Like most artists, she doubted herself. She didn't like the scrutiny art received when exposed to the public. For her, art was very personal and intimate, an interior exploration of self and the human psyche. I recall the smell of oil paint as I would pass by her door en route to the communal bathroom on the third floor. It wasn't until 1988 that she finally invited me to see her paintings. Later that year we were evicted after being told our residency in The Cary was illegal. The Cass Corridor aesthetic emerged

in Detroit in the early 1960s, driven by artist including Gordon Newton, Michael Luchs, Bob Sestok, Ellen Phelan, Nancy Mitchnick, Jim Chatelain, and Brenda Goodman. A second generation wave of artists took up the mantle in the early 1980's; Gilda Snowden, Diane Carr, Cay Bahnmilller, Kurt Novak, and Gary Mayer were some of the primary voices. The works by these and earlier artists are distinguished by the sheer physicality of materials. Raw, gutsy, tough, and bold aptly describe their works and approach to art making. Some of Mary Ann's paintings use a dark palette, drawing comparison to the work of Bahnmilller, and yet her figurative works share a common link to Mitchnick. Robert Wilbert was Mary Ann's painting teacher, mentor, and friend, whom she always held with high admiration and respect. When looking at Mary Ann's paintings one can see his influence; like Mr. Wilbert's paintings, her work is rooted in formalism. Mary Ann's paintings seem to offer an entry that is never forced. The open spaces in her paintings allow for contemplation.

Mary Ann's knowledge and scope of art was immense, as evident in her vast book collection. Subjects varied from *The Art of the Japanese Print* to monographs on Joan Mitchell, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Georgia O'Keefe, as well as books on clinical psychology. She earned two degrees from Wayne State University, a Bachelor of Fine Arts (1983) and a Masters in Art Therapy (1989). In many ways her life epitomized these two ideas: she wanted to celebrate all the beauty in the world through her art, and use her skills as a therapist to improve the lives of people around her. In 1989 she moved to New York, where she lived for 22 years until her death from breast cancer in 2012.

Mary Ann maintained a voracious drive to paint over the entire course of her short life. As her health began to fail in 2008 she

kept up the pace, especially the last two years of her life. She juggled time between New York and Detroit, but it was the time spent at her family's summer cottage in Canada that gave her the most pleasure. She was surrounded by family and nature, her art books and a cold beer. Nothing could be better. Like the early paintings, the later works are layered with thick, encaustic surfaces but are different in the use of sand, shells, and shards of broken glass, all found on the beach. Into these paintings, she literally pours in the natural world around her.

Mary Ann's sister Maureen wrote a moving tribute titled *In Memory of Mary Ann* in 2012. In it she writes, "When Mary Ann found out she had cancer, the news was devastating. But Mary Ann did an amazing thing: spiritually, she became stronger. She felt you couldn't always influence what happened to you, but you could make meaning of what happened to you. She took great inspiration from the New York artist Cordula Volkening, who had terminal brain cancer, and gave Mary Ann this advice: the only way out of fear is to live in the moment and paint. That is what Mary Ann did. She lived every moment with even greater intensity. She said the people she loved and painting were all that mattered, and she focused her last years on these endeavors. She made meaning out of the experience. She painted more."

At its core, Mary Ann's art speaks a language of *self* all people can relate to and understand. It is a simple language in which *isolation, nature, the domestic, darkness, and lightness* occupy one picture plane.



1.



2.

1. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (fish bowl), 1983
 Oil on paper
 12 x 14 inches
 Collection of Susan Goethel Campbell

2. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (red flowers), 1989
 Oil on Masonite
 24 x 24 inches
 Courtesy of the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken



3. Mary Ann Aitken
Self-Portrait, 1983
Oil on panel
19 x 15 inches
Collection of Ed Fraga

CARA BENEDETTO

PRELUDE

BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Cara Benedetto explores desire, vulnerability, and the giving and taking away of power. Working across performance, images, and writing, she adopts familiar languages and structures from such things as romance novels, fundraisers, or advertisements. She then shifts, mutates, and destabilizes these forms to create room for a heady mix of confusion and intimacy, inviting viewers/readers to let down their guard and feel through their own mutable entities.

For her participation in *How to Remain Human*, Benedetto produced *Prelude Her patron*, a private event at the Museum modeled on a traditional cocktail reception including music, food, and performances by her students and frequent collaborators. As Benedetto describes, “the event functioned as a *How to Remain Human* preview party for museum patrons with a soft S/m theme. I say soft because I won’t disservice the BDSM community with my hack portrayal or tourism into their world. But rather I refer to the recent offence and fascination in S/m culture produced by the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In so doing I seek to draw a parallel to exploits in current academia, specific to the institution of MFA, where all art students are treated as masochists and contracts are unclear.”

What follows is an account of the events of June 11, 2015. They are muddled and loose. All italicized words have been drawn from the performers’ scripts, written by Benedetto unless otherwise noted. As the artist reflects, “the event is not an event. it invites. it

swarms. it does little. there is nonsense that lubricates our speech acts. the performers are paid. we have discussions about their practice. they act undirected. they hold scripts. they read and feel by choice.”

////////////////////////////////////

6:45 PM

I don the skintight, mesh top, black-and-white striped collared bodycon dress that I purchased for this occasion. I bought this dress with Cara in Pittsburgh sometime in April, from her favorite vintage dealer, Linda. We spent hours in the store digging through stuffed racks, drinking gin out of Styrofoam cups, and shooting the shit as people dropped in and out. Suddenly, this little number popped out, and before I know it I have it on, and it fits, and I have to buy it. When we left, I felt light-headed. In the weeks to come, every now and again I would take it out, spray it with unscented Febreze, and run my fingers over its golden lamé label: Cachê.

6:48 PM

I make my way to the Museum in the early evening light, feeling somewhat exposed.

6:55 PM

I buzz in at the security entrance.

Hi there. May I have your name?

Thank you. I see you. You are The List tonight.

You have been expected. Don’t worry it is safe. As long as you are considerate, kind, sensitive and

mine. Now, tell me what do you see?

My safeword is "blue."

My phone vibrates. "Thank you. I want to fuck you too."

7:00 PM

I'm greeted by two blonde guides with piercing blue eyes.

*Now we'll go through these labias.
The doorway to her critical hole.
Right this way.*

Some event horizons tried to keep us secure, but we won't let them.

It's not important to stick anyways. Watch your step, her hair fell here. Her head is sensitive.

Winding our way through the loading dock and furniture storage, we arrive at the entrance to the Museum's Gund Commons:

Here is her dark room. Where we can feel her organs seep. There is much to feel. Please do so here.

So far about a dozen people have arrived, and they mill about in the softly lit room. A projection on loop shows several scenes of a man gyrating, stretching, grinding, and dancing on a bed, floor, and against a black backdrop. The music is atmospheric, gently pounding. We are down the hall. We are in the club. Dusky rays of sunshine peek around the silver mesh curtains, revealing that we are on our own time. Have you met the artist? She's the one wearing the pearl necktie.

7:14 PM

I work my way over to the food table, catered by General Sisters. Their concept for the evening is inspired by Nyotaimori, a Japanese tradition where sushi is served directly from a reclining nude body. I nibble on a variety of open-faced sandwiches: egg salad with fried caper, cilantro, and ricotta; balsamic strawberries with arugula, cashew cream, and mint; sage salt cream cheese with radishes and cucumber.

Soft folds of smoked salmon and thin slices of lemon are tenderly laid across exposed wrists; dark folds of cured meat are piled up on the abdomen. Little piles of green pods are dispersed across the table, quick-pickled rat tail radishes that burst with a hot salty tang. Guests select their items carefully before picking them up. Eyes linger. Some people are wearing suits. I pick up a napkin to wipe my mouth, then read it: "Am i Yours?"

7:26 PM

I order the first of too many vodka martinis. There's a bowl of chapsticks at the bar and I open one, inhaling a woody spiced scent, the flavor of BPC (Bored Phallic Class).

8:00 PM

The room swells in anticipation of the evening's first performance, a speech by Cara.

Here it is. I am not your teacher today. There are clear boundaries in this another way. Not like the success that doesn't grant. Not like a shade of A. Today I won't share my I. I'll use us.

U.S.

There's a hush in the room as the music quiets and her soothing, amplified voice fills the space. It's deep, watery, hypnotic. The words speak of resignation (accepting, departing) and they're sad, angry, wanting, commanding. The day before, Benedetto gave notice that she is leaving her position as Visiting Assistant Professor of Art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

it is not enough that we are not slaves;

and if social conditions further the existence of automatons, academics, the result will not be love

US

of life

but a
U.S. love of death.

*So how do I resign lightly?
How may I understand the correct
panel, function, fucking for a
drum that isn't beaten?*

She reads from her last Sub Journal:

*I'm finally leaving and my head
feels clear, the bound is clear,
constructed as part of the system,
theirs...*

*Can we disseminate the self. Ex-
pand the self. Explode the self
without crouching being held get-
ting small. The decision. Two ex-
tremes. It is not Your fault.*

She delivers and it gets personal.
Cara. An airport terminal in Frank-
furt. A black duffle bag stuffed
with corsets and silk blouses. Pucci
sunglasses tucked into her collar,
exhausted, considerate eyes wan-
dering, coffee in hand, red nails
(slightly chipped) gripping a Bic
and slowly writing in a crisp leath-
er-bound journal.

*So then what is the value of a
single body in the art world?*

One woman. Status of one. The in-
tern. The assistant. The associate.
The adjunct. The underpaid, and over
regulated. Temporary opportunities
for all manners of opportunism. Your
services rendered for others in a
not-for-profit experience economy.
We all started as the bottom.

*What kind of position is static,
it attracts something
like
the
This
feeling
of
touch.*

So touch us.

Silence fills the room and it's like
we've all been let go, from some em-
brace. The music fades back in and
people resume mingling.

8:20 PM

There's a man in a leather col-
lar, cuffs, and codpiece sitting on
the floor. On order, he types and
retypes lines of critical theory,
blackboard punishment with hard 50
WPMs. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

8:30 PM

The band, L' Amour Bleu, begins
their first set. Thrashy sex-noise
washes over everything as one member
kisses and caresses another's feet,
splayed out through the holes of a
wooden screen. There is some kind of
powder involved and I imagine that
it tastes bad but that they don't
care. Some people look confused,
others ecstatic.

9:02 PM

The crowd starts to form a circle
around two women speaking theatri-
cally.

*E: My Toy, you are now my Toy, you
will respond only to Toy and noth-
ing else. Who are you?*

R: Toy.

*E: You are my Toy. Say I am Your
Toy.*

R: I am your Toy Sir.

A bed. Legs spread. A pearl. Lips.
Slap. Blind and begging. Something
shifts and

*R: Should we go dear, it's getting
early today, the sun is rising on
you.*

*E: yes I think so but first we
need to wait for mommy you*

Repeat. The lines aren't well known,
the delivery is somewhat stilted,
awkward, and anxious. There is some-
thing sticky about this self-con-
sciousness. An unscripted humilia-
tion. Weights shift uneasily.

Scene.

9:13 PM

Death comes and sits across from
me. I really can't see anything of
Death's face and Death is so dark
dark dark it seems to make the room
darker. Death directs its non-
face at me and points while slowly

sliding one skeletal finger across its neck, moaning.

I tug my dress down and the Caché tag itches my back.

9:15 PM

Melissa Ragona begins furiously slapping a meter stick on the tabletops and floor. The deafening whacks continue until the stick snaps in half, muting them somewhat, though the gesture continues. She has written her own speech, adapted from a script by Benedetto.

*Commence a Dress!
We begin with our theme for the evening, to be unclean. Unclean with joy.*

She's wearing a leather bomber jacket that Linda helped her pick out, too. Not sure where she got the gimp mask.

Academic, Macadamia!--thriving as it does within the dark, rotting interior of the law, this tiny, heartless, scathing little, teeny, tiny empty center. This law list, this listlessness, of debt--monetary, soul-bound and chained to the inner walls of our folding flesh structures, our soft machines melting in the hallways of petty penny pushing bureaucracies and bursars, and burden-trundlers.

Her stage presence is frenetic, explosive. The speech soap-boxy and sing-songy and taunting.

Indeed, descent is much more difficult to achieve than what these institutions call "success" with implications of licking the poles that administrators ride as they circus their way to the top. Giddyap! Giddyap! cry all the Mr. Guppys toeing their way into the climbing-wall, jerking themselves off on the ivy curtains and the lush shag rugs. But, I order you to jerk off too--commit small crimes and treacheries in order to avoid the self-denials that build these halls.

What does it take to get on top?

I implore you, prod you into places, muddier and less sure. To borrow from Helene Cixous: "Use your own body as a form of transport."

I stand here with an unidentified inferno inside of me--and it is this disoriented heat that I leave you with.

Thank you.

Applause. Cheers. Woops. Whistles. Ice cubes rattle around in plastic glasses.

9:25 PM

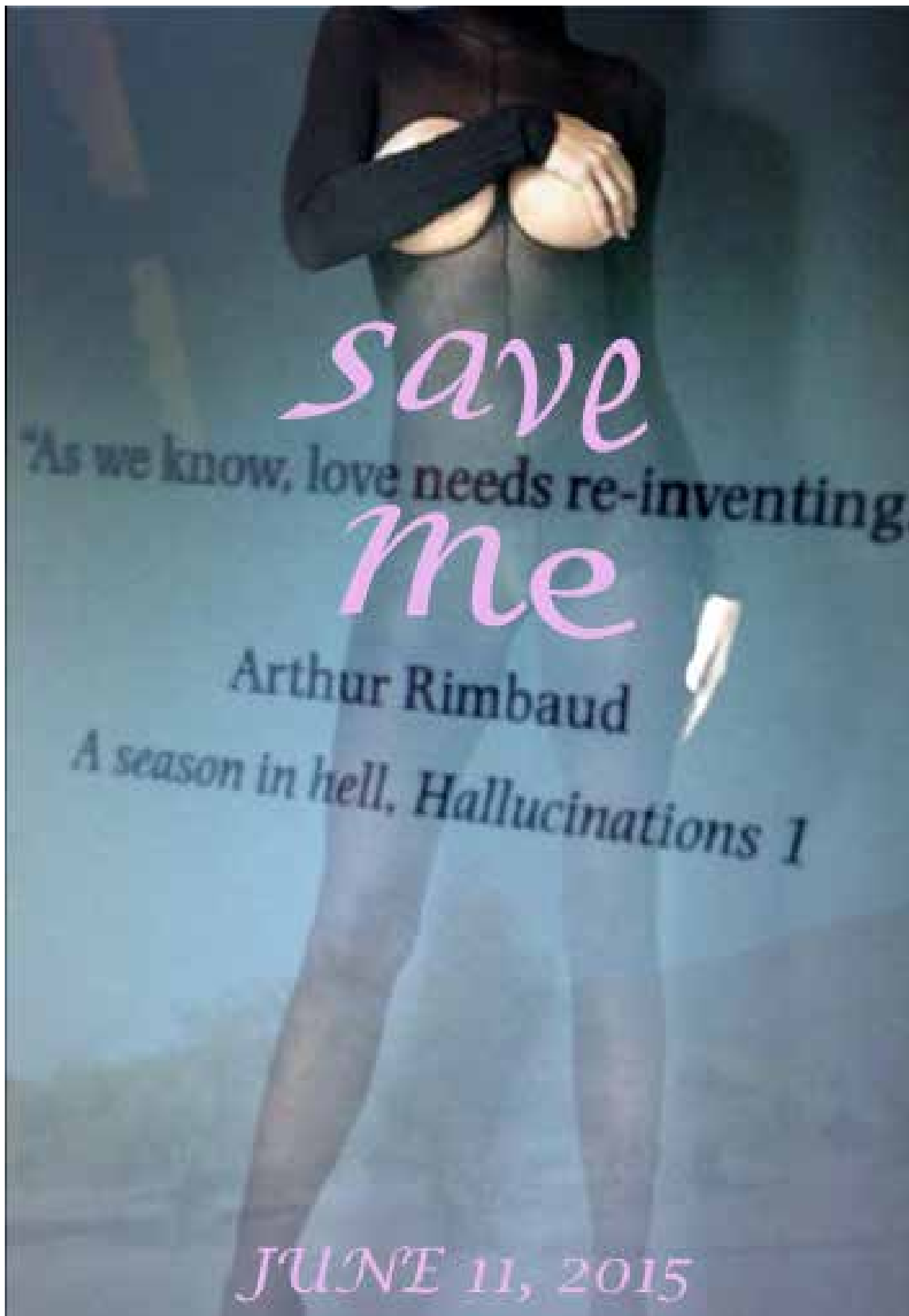
L' Amour Bleu's second set begins. Those who remain are getting really, really into it. Thrashing. Tonguing. Abandon. The Submissive typer is on the dance floor, bound and in the hands of his Key Keeper, who circles around him, playfully sashaying with chains in hand.

9:45 PM

The band wraps and dance music takes over, we are all releasing, dizzy and Cara grabs the mic to remind us that "this is not a fucking wedding." Some clothes are removed, some bouquets are given. Last drinks are downed and we stumble out onto the street, surprised at how early it is and how late it feels.

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Event production and zip ties...Kory Dakin
Guides.....Lanne Margrett
Elaine Ziol
Death.....Paul Heyer
General Sisters.....Dana Bishop Root
Ginger Brooks Takahashi
Submissive Typer.....Daniel Pillis
E.....Kevin Brophy
R.....Brittany De Nigris
Key Keeper.....Elena Harvey Collins



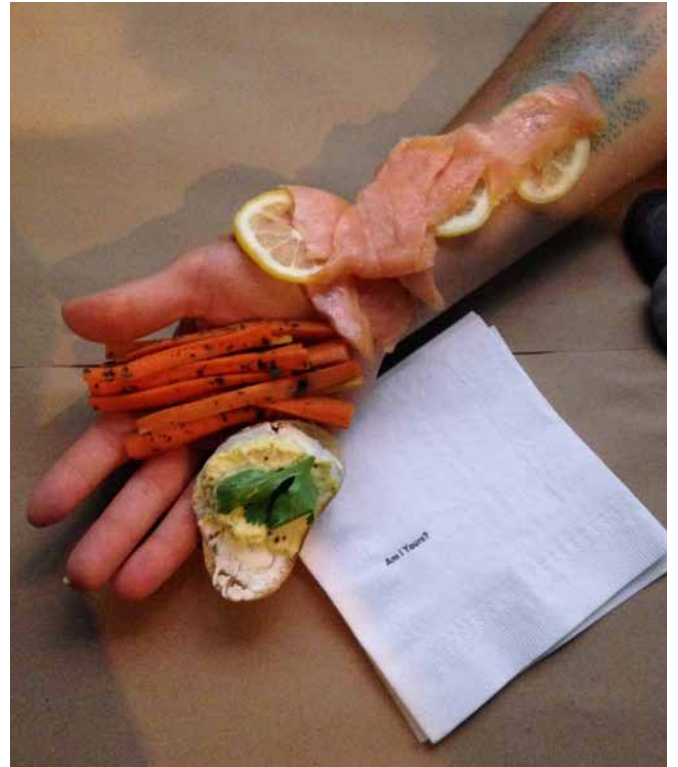
Cara Benedetto
Save the Date
Prelude Her patron, 2015



1.



2.



3.

1-3. Documentation of
Prelude Her patron

CARA BENEDETTO

LAST NIGHT
BY AMY FUNG

Last night

I dreamt I came to visit you. The floor of your studio was covered in text and semen. The piles and pools were sculptural in presence, but ultimately unresolved.

You had two studio assistants. The one flirting with me went up to the roof to release a pair of roosters. Freeing the cocks. With absolutely no irony in her voice. Just joy. On her face. The other assistant lurked in the far corner. He was working with both hands on a menial task, and his back wanted to be noticed. You walked up to me with a smile. It was a genuine and modest upturn of the corners of your mouth and you hesitantly put an arm around me, bringing yourself in for a hello. I looped an arm around your waist and leaned forward for a second and another second. It felt warm, and then we stood apart for a better look at each other.

I looked around at the work surrounding us and everything was black and white. All the floors, walls, ceilings, covering every surface from tables to a teevee mounted where a window would be. I couldn't tell if we were below ground or not in a world fueled by desire. By disappointments.

Congratulations, I said, on remaining human. Because everything everyday is telling you not to be one.

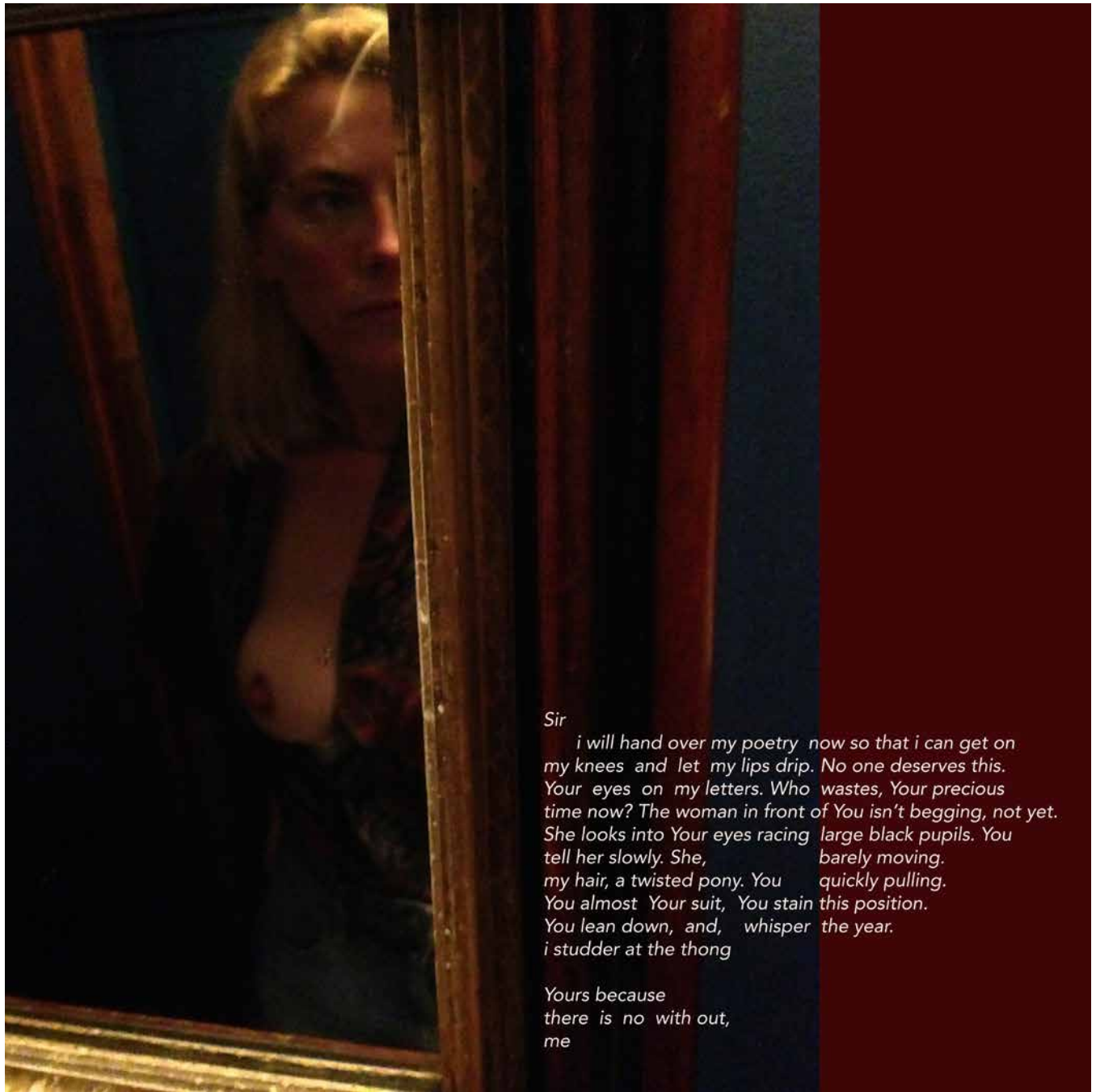
Hunting attention out of a primordial instinct, an intuition towards connection

To be longed for and to be left alone.

Before I wrote this text, I was a human being.

Coming and going, re-caressing the language that came before us
Trying and trying again to keep the fire going.

It's all any of us can do
To stay warm, for just a moment.



Sir

i will hand over my poetry now so that i can get on
my knees and let my lips drip. No one deserves this.
Your eyes on my letters. Who wastes, Your precious
time now? The woman in front of You isn't begging, not yet.
She looks into Your eyes racing large black pupils. You
tell her slowly. She, barely moving.
my hair, a twisted pony. You quickly pulling.
You almost Your suit, You stain this position.
You lean down, and, whisper the year.
i studder at the thong

Yours because
there is no with out,
me

Cara Benedetto
Membership Portrait 1, 2015
iPhoto, archival inkjet print
16 x 16 inches

CHRISTI BIRCHFIELD

FLAT LINES, ROUND BODIES

BY MEGAN LYKINS REICH

Our bodies are round, dimensional. As newborns, we understand them through touch, scent, and taste, seeking our mother's body for nourishment and warmth. As we grow, we begin to understand the body visually, recognizing familiar faces, mimicking gestures. Eventually, we come to know bodies through images, identifying our own reflection in a mirror, and later in photographs, videos, and other representations. During these early years of development, we learn about the human body as an exterior form. The inside, however, remains a flat out mystery.

In a recent interview about her newest series, on view for the first time in *How to Remain Human*, Christi Birchfield describes how she hopes the works reminds viewers of their bodies, specifically their internal make-up and materiality. Comprised of long thin sheets of canvas affixed to the ceiling, walls, and floor, *Reconfiguration* (2014), *Slab* (2015), and *What Shadows We Are* (2015) all contain interlacing lines and forms that resemble our nervous and skeletal systems. These ghostly evocations ebb and flow like tangled specters, suggesting life's interconnected and ephemeral nature.

A printmaker by training, Birchfield pushes the discipline's potential for compressing layers of material into new visual information. For several years, she has combined

organic matter, mostly flora, with ink, graphite, paint, and other mark-making devices like burning and cutting. When run through the press, these materials generate a web of graphic lines, geometric shapes, ethereal forms, and crumbling foliage. Often, Birchfield folds the paper in half before pressing it, which produces mirror images that recall Rorschach inkblots. The works have both illusive depth (caused by nuanced gradations of color, line, and form) as well as real dimension (from the crushed flowers and other materials).

In contrast, Birchfield's newest series involves a strictly reductive process. She begins by drawing improvisational lines using bleach paste on long pieces of black canvas. Next, the fabric is folded and run through a press. Compressed tightly, the bleach dissolves the pigment, fading the canvas and produced meandering lines and broad washes. Once printed, Birchfield excises lines and forms from the canvas using a utility knife, creating holes and gaps that emphasize the lattice effect. In *Reconfiguration*, Birchfield also added small amounts of color to the canvas.

Allusions abound in these abstract images, from charred vines to insect carapaces to ancient symbols. Yet, the most potent connotations are to the human body. In color and

form, the images recall common X-ray images of chest cavities and hip joints, with glowing curves of calcium-rich bones against the faint halo of soft tissue and organs. The first X-ray image was taken by German physicist, Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, who discovered the technology in 1895. It was a picture of his wife's hand, showing only her metacarpals, phalanges, and wedding ring. Upon seeing the image, she said, "I have seen my death."¹

Like X-rays, Birchfield's black lacelike sheets emphasize the strange, complex, and mysterious systems within us. Flat but double-sided, Birchfield maximizes their bilateral nature by conjoining, layering, and stretching them between the ceiling, wall, and floor, producing a spidery maze that viewers can see and walk around. Here, translated into three-dimensions, the prints gain body, becoming corporal, lifelike. They intersect and overlap, each slightly stained or imperfect. Sagging and taut, withdrawing and extending, they express various states of being, or moments in lived time.

Birchfield's titles support identifications with the body and its transience. *Reconfiguration* suggests ongoing changes in form, while *Slab* implies stasis, referring, among other things to the table on which a cadaver lies in a morgue. This work is wall-bound, a confluence of parts layered on top of one another in a flowering or piled effect. Because the staining creates shadows that are not cast but rather embedded in the material, the work appears strangely flat when viewed frontally. This effect is similar to that of Lee Bontecou's untitled relief sculptures from the early 1960s. Bontecou applied graphite shading that contradicted the actual spatial protrusions and cavities of the works. A perceptual shift occurs when one realizes the works are dimensional, not flat, one vaguely reminiscent of those childhood developmental insights about the body and its form.

What Shadows We Are exemplifies the metaphoric value of this oscillation between flat and round, two and three-dimensional. Numerous long canvas sheets stretch and weave through space and each other, appearing both like a single organism and individual forms crossing one other. The images oscillate between large and small, alluding to astronomical nebula as well as microscopic neurons. A series of composite parts, there is not a single vantage point; no fully fleshed form. As the viewer moves, the work re-adjusts, like a shadow responding to the light. Taking all its parts together, the installation evokes the body as complex, symmetrical, smart, but also fragile, unpredictable, unruly, and ultimately mortal.



1. Markel, Howard. "'I Have Seen My Death': How the World Discovered the X-Ray," *PBS NewsHour*. www.pbs.org. Retrieved June 7, 2015. Röntgen discovered the X-ray in early November, 1895. He took the first radiograph on December 22, 1895.



Christi Birchfield
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics



Christi Birchfield
Slab, 2015
Bleach paste, black canvas
65 x 20 x 8 inches
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics

CHRISTI BIRCHFIELD

RECONFIGURATION/PAINTING FALLING
APART

BY INDRA K. LĀCIS

A certain kind of gothic cadence rises and falls in Christi Birchfield's work. Her gestural sculptures elicit a guttural response originating somewhere deep in the heart chakra, edging carefully toward your lips, fingers, and knees. Sprawling, or maybe just hanging on for its last breath, *Reconfiguration* (2014) calls to mind sooty stained glass windows, the arc of something familiar, perhaps sleeping or lost. If this work has a scent, it might be incense burning or a cotton shirt dried crisp in hot sun.

Like a painting falling apart or turning out of its skin, Birchfield's work gauges the movement and curvature of human bodies. In turns reductive and additive, her process demands a tenuous, psychological kind of labor. It involves mirroring, the uneasy feeling of wanting to look over your shoulder but resisting the urge, or the futility of untying a knot that will not come undone.

Birchfield's most recent sculptures begin with yards of commercially dyed black canvas and bleach paste appliqué. As the solution sets, she folds the fabric to create a Rorschach effect, searing and tattooing these thinly drawn lines with the weight and warmth of an iron. The first part of this process happens on the floor, recalling the horizontality that freed easel painting from its position as a window on the world.¹ Then Birchfield moves the work to a table, where like a surgeon or seamstress she cuts the sinuous forms into new structures. The final

installation again reformulates the composition, this time a play between two and three-dimensions--the flatness of the cut-out canvas itself and the muscle of the work as a whole, with arms and legs that either collapse or elongate, depending on the view.

Like a cocoon unraveling, the effect of Birchfield's canvas sculptures reveals her nimble sense of line, her depth as a printer, and a dialogue with histories of both painting and sculpture. These wall-based works fall into a genealogy that might begin with Henri Matisse's mid-twentieth century cut-outs of flora and fauna, made when the artist was bedridden and nearly blind.² If these late career works by Matisse had a dark side, however delicate and oblique, Birchfield seems to have discovered it. Her canvas sculptures play purposefully on the instability of silhouettes and shadows, channeling not permanence, but the perpetual changeability of lines and mark making.³

Displaying a quiet concern with the natural world, Birchfield's work suggests a loose engagement with bio-mimicry, processes that adopt nature's innate organizational tactics as a model for problem solving at all levels. In her earlier work, Birchfield frequently incorporated dried flowers. In *Tear* (2010), for instance, she ran a bouquet of parched blooms, stems still in tact, through a printing press, a pressurized process that unintentionally tore the paper, revealing its fleshy, pulpy skin with a sort of flirty recklessness.

This “happy accident,” as Birchfield refers to it, now inadvertently summons Eva Hesse’s *Hang Up* of 1966, a work that both favored and questioned the concept of framing as central to painting and sculpture alike. Like Hesse’s *Hang Up* (whose title also bears double meaning), *Tear* begins ordering our view of the work’s form and subject via one slender strip of folded aluminum foil, draped delicately along the edges, and sagging, just so, at the bottom; as if the work’s content had been stolen or spilled, the gash on the left side remains despite the shiny frame’s modest effort to bandage or contain it. This defiantly wounded work, with its pure physicality and the abject absurdity of its brittleness, confounds our processing of its shape and contour with a dose of sly, sad humor, the kind of irony Hesse might have admired.⁴

Like the wilting frame in *Tear*, the tug and pull of gravity--our inability to avoid it--guides the syntax of Birchfield’s wider vernacular. The artist’s most expansive canvas sculptures conjure the simple motion of something strung up, suspended, or caged: a creature or a carcass whose exposed rib cage appears at once disjointed and intact. Elsewhere in the work, innocuous and more purely decorative referents take hold: we see tangled vines, scarab shells, rusted pulleys and belts, or Victorian-era wallpaper. A multi-tiered layering effect deploys again and again with constancy, here and there winking coyly or taking as its distant touchstone classic post-minimal obsessions with supple materiality--the tumbling effect so pronounced in Robert Morris’s 1970s felt wall sculptures or the fragile density of Faith Wilding’s immersive *Crocheted Environment* (1972/95).

In Birchfield’s largest pieces, the body becomes the frame in greater or lesser ways, requiring that we “see” and understand not with our eyes, but with our whole physical selves. Nearly impossible to understand from

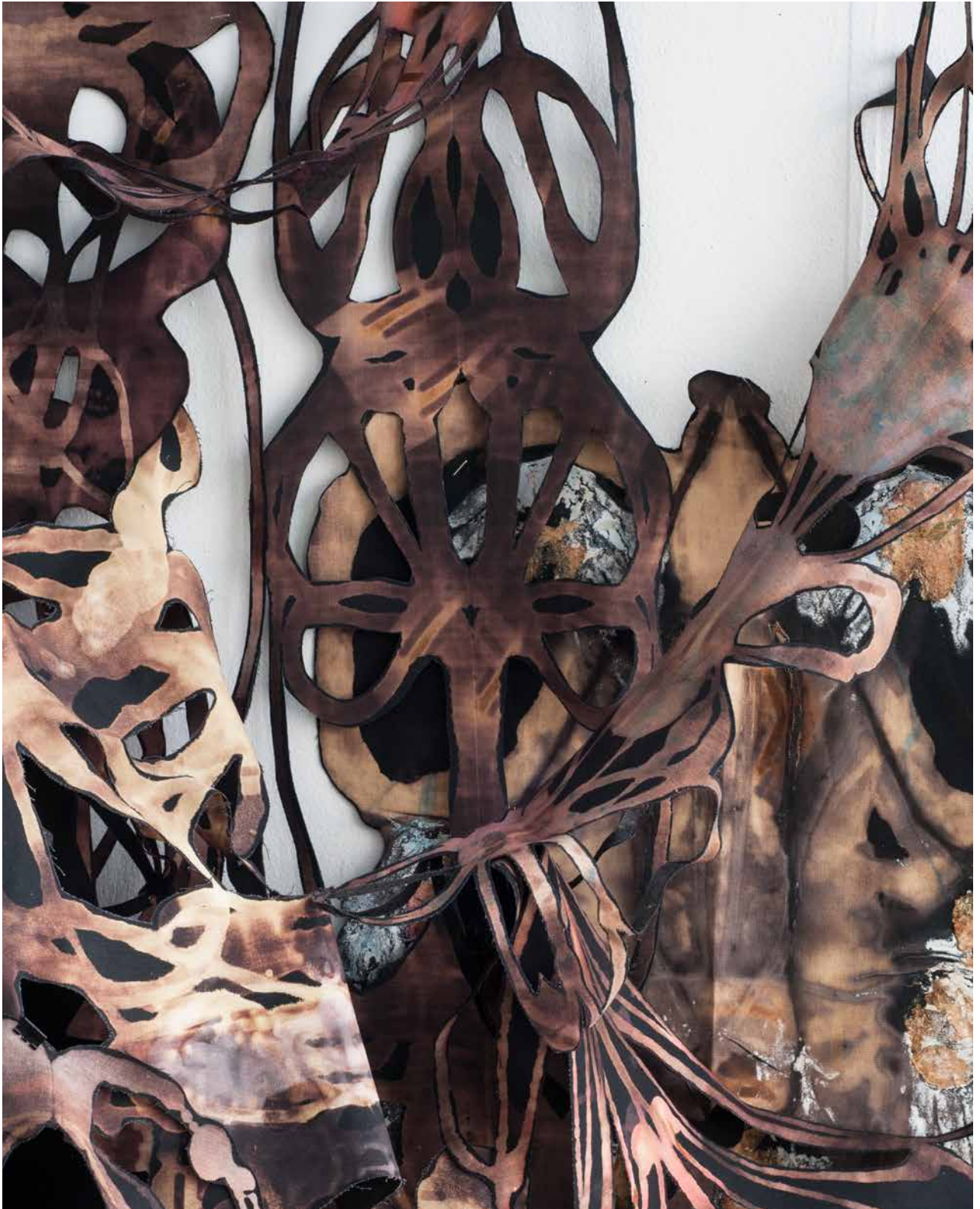
only one point of view, the work’s intricacy demands circumambulation, as if it were a shrine protecting something unspecified but revered. Although a slightly sinister sensation occasionally creeps up in Birchfield’s work, the feeling is elusive, fleeting; it forces looking closely at the work itself, at these tightly woven ellipses, turning over and sliding past one another seamlessly, like water molecules might. Birchfield makes order from structures that at first feel congested and chaotic. This work both accepts and relies on the stability of variability, its echoes and the unpredictability of how it might all sound together. In this sense, Birchfield’s canvas sculptures are nuanced with a bold, repetitive tempo that reads like a perpetual cleaning of the slate.



1. In his late teens, Walter Benjamin outlined the idea that the horizontal orientation is an axis at odds with the verticality of the body. In her analysis of Jackson Pollock’s paintings, Rosalind Krauss takes up the implications of this issue, writing: “The floor, Pollock’s work seemed to propose, in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and thus also below form.” See Krauss’s musings on the matter in her entry about “Horizontalities,” in R. Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 93-103.
2. See the recent catalog *Henri Matisse, The Cut-Outs*, Karl Buchberg, Nicholas Cullinan, Jodi Hauptman, and Nicholas Serota, eds. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).
3. In Birchfield’s work, painterly effects haunt and deceive, evoking also a distant camaraderie with the cardboard and burlap cut-outs Claes Oldenburg used in performances of *The Street* (1960), which celebrated the crude grit and complexity of Manhattan’s lower east side. Far more eloquently crafted than Oldenburg’s tattered *Street* pieces, Birchfield’s work nonetheless shares a kinship with these brutally honest, flat, theatrical forms.
4. For more on this see Cindy Nemser’s “Interview with Eva Hesse,” originally published in *Artforum* in May 1970 and reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 196-199.



Christi Birchfield
Reconfiguration, 2014
Bleach paste, black canvas
80 x 57 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Christi Birchfield
Reconfiguration, 2014 (detail)
Bleach paste, black canvas
80 x 57 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DAD PRANKS

FEEL YOURSELF STRANGE

BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

Human beings often imbue inanimate objects with emotional qualities. Loving things is out of style, clutter weighs you down, in our age of faux-zen, weightless, always available lifestyles in which only a selection of carefully curated objects should ever make it into our lives and homes.

dadpranks are a six-women artist collective who get together for short periods of time, with bags full of dollar store goodies and a video camera, and riff off of each other's ideas to make short, strange, gleeful videos. The collective's name is a playful take on the internet phenomenon of parents pranking their children for YouTube "likes." In these short, untitled works, common household items--a broom with dangling dust bunnies, ice cube trays--are used in ways unintended, as anonymous hands (female, manicured) carry out bizarre tasks that suggest a celebration of deliberate uselessness or an unlearning of the domestic. In one video, fingers adorned with florescent fake nails peel tin foil off a Cadburys Creme Egg. The nails are impractically long; as the egg melts, the hand becomes coated in sticky chocolate, the precious item transformed into a scatological clump. In another video, tiny tooth-like gravel is flossed, hesitantly at first, by one disembodied hand. This hand is quickly joined by another and then more, each deliberately grooming the tooth gravel, producing toe curling sensory overload. The use of color--brightly hued objects and radiant blue screens--references the shrill, neon aesthetic of cheap real

and digital retail environments, functioning as crude appeals to the (presumed) female consumer. Some of the videos parody marketing campaigns for cleaning products like Swiffer, slyly undermining the idea that all "we" ever wanted was a new dishwasher or a toilet seat we could eat off, squirty mops that come in purple, or decorative tools. In another work, floral-patterned pliers delicately unpick a hair extension braid against a background of lavender faux marble. An odd transference occurs in these works. The objects seem to want to think and feel; the hands become object-like and dumb.

In most of dadpranks's videos to date, female hands are the only parts of the body presented onscreen. One video, however, departs from this model. In it, a Mac computer is used to prepare a spaghetti dinner. The cover is removed from the computer tower and the little laser-cut holes making up a lattice of air vents are used as a cheese grater and a strainer. As the boiling spaghetti is dumped on the vent, steaming water streams over the guts of the computer. There is something delicious about the destruction of fetishized, expensive electronics. Almost as delicious as the ham-fisted approximation of a dinner that follows--whole vegetables are slapped on the plate after the spaghetti, a distastefully blue glass of liquid beside it. Slowly, a red faced person--a *real* Dad--lowers himself until he is seated at the computer-cum-dinner table, raising his head in a dead pan fashion, eyes twinkling, in on the joke.



1.



2.

1-2. dadpranks
2014
Screenshots from HD videos
Courtesy of the artists

DAD PRANKS

A CROWD-SOURCED ESSAY ON THE NATURE OF DADPRANKS

(CHRISTINA VASSALLO REMIX)

The following nonsensical yet deceptively informative essay is comprised of visceral responses to a set of 6 questions posed to 15 people about dadpranks:

- How does this work make you feel?
- How would you describe this work to somebody else?
- What do you think the creative process behind this work is like?
- Describe who you think made this work.
- What themes do you detect emerging from these videos?
- What kind of hashtag would you give it?

The responses were delivered via email and in-person interviews conducted in public places. Then, they were picked apart, strung together, and augmented with equally visceral thoughts on dadpranks' work by this author. Please note: this essay is only about 7% accurate, depending on your perspective, and approximately 55% contradictory, regardless of your POV.

* * * *

dadpranks, a collaborative effort comprised of six educated middle class white women, want to effect change through their art while eliciting a response to visual stimuli. A nutty cocktail of

digital iGenerationism and post-consumer waste, #dadpranks do not understand hashtags, but still manage to #boycotthershey using #strange #realhumor. Like a Nike model training on a Sodastream™ beach with a Febreze® sunset peeling off, their work conjures a nostalgic yearning for Easter Sundays spent at grandma's house, when gooey residue from CADBURY CREME EGG Candy would cling to your hands.

Dystopia, aggressive femininity, and any kind of disruption to mundane domesticity are all fodder for these post-adolescent/pre-adult artists. The sexy discomfort of their work results from the intersection of popular internet aesthetics + intuitive, real-life, human-to-human processes, and is amplified by the familiar dance of getting online, offline, and back on again. Evoking the absurdity of Matthew Barney's The CREMASTER Cycle, each dadpranks video challenges the viewer's comfort zone in different ways by usurping materialism through penetration.

In what can be described as ASMR¹ videos gone off the rails, dadpranks conducts auditory/visual experiments with consumer packaging, the noises we make while eating, and the experience of just being human. For example, in one video, a blue nylon broom with dangling dust bunnies is plucked by highly manicured nails, as though it were a harp. A pile of

fake teeth is “flossed” by a rapidly increasing number of vigorous hygienists in another video. A cell phone sandwich is deconstructed by the vibration of an incoming call in a video so short it feels more like a sketch than a finished piece. These are depictions of glamorized non-glamorous moments, stemming from a bad day at the dentist and verging on a group gross out seminar.

dadpranks’ creative process is at once like being in a sandbox, an exquisite corpse therapy sesh, and a potluck. It starts with the viewing of lots of YouTube and instructional videos and culminates in the eating of many different kinds of snacks-- both sugary and neon, like their work. The production process itself is a digital video shoot, behind which is a series of intelligent decisions: specific color choices, costumes surrounding those choices, integration of objects matching the palette, lighting, and background sound emphasis.

Similar to the exploded contents of a piñata filled with 99¢ store detritus, dadpranks calls attention to the unplanned beauty that can be found in household objects and activities, and the synergy between them. The viewer is left with a profound sense of how our quotidian actions make up the majority of our lives. How what we present to the world is largely the small minutiae we don’t consider, instead of the larger calculated gestures for which we would prefer to be remembered.

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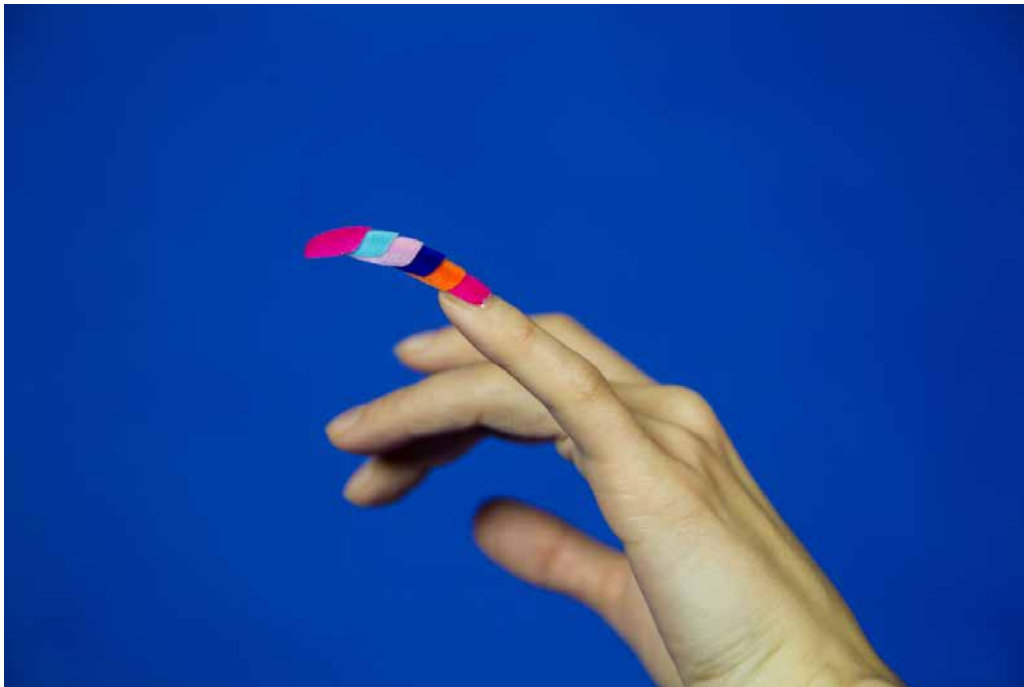
Special thanks to co-authors: Amber J. Anderson, Chloë Bass, Hilary Bertisch, Aliya Bonar, Maureen Dixon, Bruce Edwards, Kirsten Goddard, Vitus Pelsey, Iris Rozman, the 3 men standing outside of Edison’s, the two women standing outside of Civilization, and the daddies.

1. Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is a perceptual phenomenon characterized by a pleasurable tingling sensation felt in the head, scalp, or extremities, in response to visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or cognitive stimuli. See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomous_sensory_meridian_response

1.



2.



1-2. dadpranks
2014
Screenshots from HD videos
Courtesy of the artists



dadpranks
2015
Screenshot from HD video
Courtesy of the artists

DERF BACKDERF

MAGGOTS, METAPHORS, AND MAGEE
BY MEGAN LYKINS REICH

In the first pages of *Derf Backderf's* new graphic novel, *Trashed* (2015), J.B.--the 21 year-old protagonist based on Derf--has a memorable rookie experience as a garbage man. While gingerly attempting to dispatch a maggot-infested trashcan (a "cooker"), J.B. is sprayed by the back splash of rank garbage "soup" that he pours too quickly into the truck. Derf skillfully portrays J.B.'s classic reaction. Vibrating words like "SCHUP!," "SLOSH!," and "SPLAT!" evoke the thick, gelatinous muck that drips out of the can, hits the truck, and catapults back into J.B.'s face. Emphatic hash marks around J.B. tell us he is shivering in utter disgust as he sweats, rips off his shirt, and frantically wipes maggots off his body. Nearby stands Curt, a tenured garbage man whose solid, sturdy demeanor balances J.B.'s frenzy. The scene ends with a close-up image of the filthy steel garbage can lying on its side, flies buzzing above; in the upper right, the word "CHOKE!" notes that J.B.'s revulsion continues.

Weeks later, J.B. encounters another "cooker" and handles it with ease. It is simple but potent statement about time, perspective, and experience, but one that resonates with the themes of *How to Remain Human*. The book ends with J.B. introducing "Betty," their truck, to two newbies who soon whimper at the site of maggot-covered garbage bags.

The life cycle continues. *Trashed* is a twentieth-century coming-of-age story that is, in many ways, ageless. The book is organized by seasons, tracking a year's worth of J.B.'s experiences. Some, like harvesting "yellow torpedoes" (pee-filled water bottles that truckers throw out their windows) give unique flavor to the story. Many serve as subtle metaphors for broader sociopolitical and existential conditions: bar brawls (class); trash collecting blues (culture); government bureaucracy (democracy's failings); foreclosed properties (capitalism's failings), unsuccessful come-ons (sexual rejection), used condom hunts in a civic baseball field (sexual fulfillment), trips to the cemetery, lots of dead animals, and Marv's (the curmudgeonly city dog catcher) passing (mortality).

The ultimate symbol is, of course, all the garbage. Page after page, Derf portrays the relentless gluttony of consumer culture. He even offers a CliffsNotes-esque brief history on garbage, tracking the human production and management of trash from Ancient Greece to current day. At the end, he cautions our disposable predilections, representing a world literally buried in trash.

Trying to dig one's self out is a framing device in many of Derf's graphic novels. His work examines

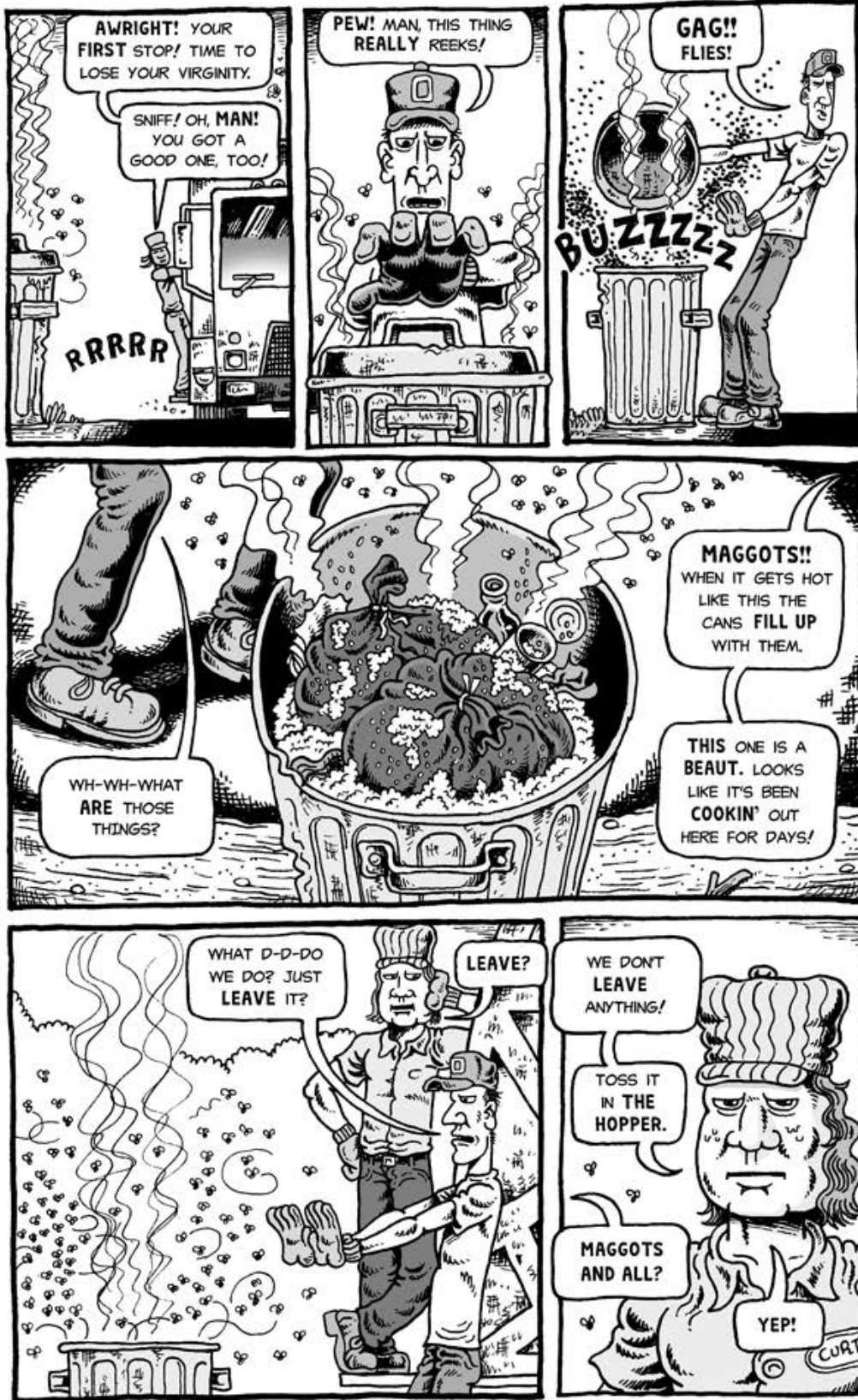
poverty, ignorance, bigotry, apathy, entitlement, psychosis, anger, disappointment, and other unsavory conditions. Derf's characters tend to embody, in look and spirit, the core aspects or consequences of these ailments. He gives no leeway to his subjects, unapologetically depicting, even amplifying, their essence, even if repugnant. In *True Stories*, there is no shortage of crazy homeless guys speaking nonsense or nasty, tasteless women casting judgment without regard for their own flaws. Like the maggots, Derf portrays vile characters so vividly that your fingers feel dirty turning the pages.

Derf has a unique talent for translating personality through line and gesture. In *Trashed*, this technique is most palpable in the eccentric character, Magee, J.B.'s roommate and occasional co-worker. Magee is introduced early in the book as the crazy cemetery lawnmower, and is the only character that regularly gets full-spread portraits. The first of these gives life to Magee's unconventional personality: seated on a thin pad in Sukhasana (a cross-legged yoga position), Magee wears sunglasses, pants, striped socks, and a CREEM t-shirt (a monthly rock magazine out of Detroit). Burning cigarette in hand, he is meditating in the dark by simultaneously watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and listening to a Sun Ra 8-track tape. A plate of nearly finished Chinese food sits beside him. J.B. offers Magee a mid-century lamp that he found while trash collecting, to which Magee replies, "Bertrand Russell said 'It is the preoccupation with possession that prevents men from living nobly and freely.'" Moments later, he recants this ideology when J.B. offers him free 8-track tapes.

Throughout the book, Magee provides flamboyant commentary that is at once forceful, educated, contradictory, and ruthless. His actions are as bizarre as his words: defecating behind a private bus shelter, getting in unwinnable bar

fights, and leaving town suddenly with four months of J.B.'s rent money. Just before this final event, Derf includes a third portrait of Magee, this time after his clothes have been soaked by a drenching trash haul. He stands in the service lockers reading a porn magazine, still dripping wet, wearing only saggy men's briefs, cowboy boots, striped athletic socks, and a bug-spraying hat. The mayor and other officials enter to get coffee, but stop short, aghast at Magee's appearance. His indifferent expression is the cherry on his "screw the system" outlook.

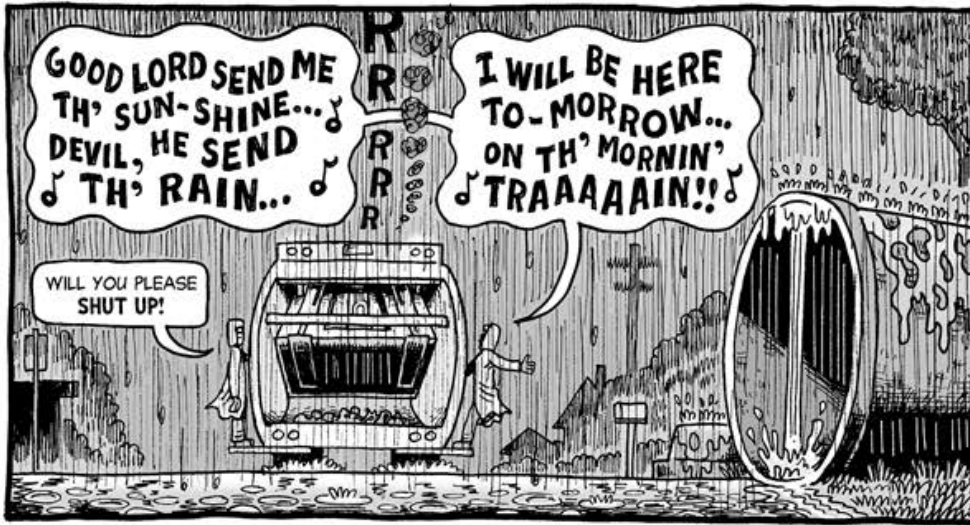
The last time Derf portrays Magee, he is wearing a "Half-Cleveland" t-shirt. The shirt could be interpreted many ways: Magee's partial association with the city, a nod to its strange East/West divide, a glass-half-full (or empty) metaphor. Yet, it also suggests how Magee plays yang to J.B.'s yin throughout the book. If J.B. is the down-to-earth, astute, industrious side of Cleveland, Magee is its cultured, crazy, crooked counterpoint. And both are garbage men. Like so many other special nuances in *Trashed*, this small detail grounds the story in our complex, strange city. The book offers innumerable allusions to Cleveland's strengths, weaknesses, and enduring realities. At its core, though, is trash, which as J.B. notes in his final line, "never fucking stops coming."



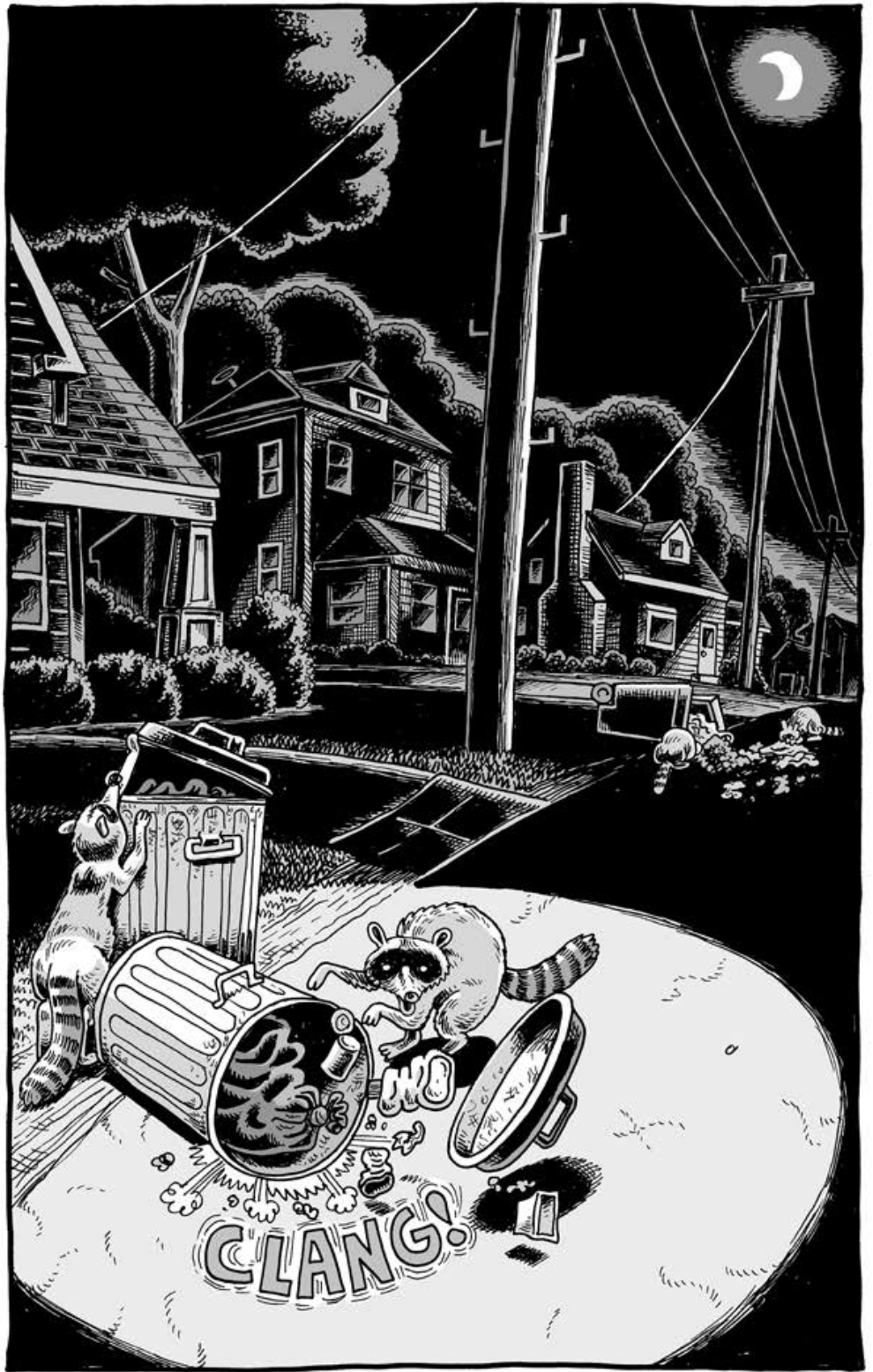
Derf Backderf
Excerpt from *Trashed*, 2015
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Derf Backderf
Excerpt from *Trashed*, 2015 (detail)
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Derf Backderf
Excerpt from *Trashed*, 2015
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Derf Backderf
Excerpt from *Trashed*, 2015
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DERF BACKDERF

DEAR MISGUIDED IVORY TOWER DWELLING
DILETTANTE

BY KEN EPPSTEIN

June 12, 2015

Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland Management
11400 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH
44106

Dear Misguided Ivory Tower Dwelling Dilettante:

I am shocked and dismayed that despite my previous eight letters of protest and petition with OVER a dozen signatures of concerned citizens that you are still intent on displaying work by "Derf." As if that's a real name! I've heard that Facebook banned his account upon learning that this dubious individual was using an alias. I assume that the museum is publically funded; Don't my taxes buy some due diligence? Do some research or at least background test!!!

Aside from his craven use of a bizarre and nonsensical pen name, I wonder if the curatorial team has even looked at this guy's body of work, as it is offensive to the core.

For years, the liberal media foisted Derf's hipster observational humor on us with his weekly cartoon strip "The City." The strip was laden with supposedly true stories that are, in fact, just concocted potshots aimed at wounding the pride of white middle class America. If we are the 1%, as the media is so proud of pointing out, aren't we worthy of protection from being brutalized as a minority!? I'm sure you could imagine the uproar if you featured artwork taking similar pokes at women or the African American community, and would take pause before offering it up for public consumption. Clearly this exhibition is a case of double-reverse discrimination and I hope you are prepared for the repercussions.

By the artist's own admission, for a significant run of "The City," he was in a "brutalist" phase wherein normal people were drawn with popping bloodshot eyes, bulging veins and splattering bodily fluids...like some damn Big Daddy Roth Rat Fink Monster. That brutalist phase prepared him well for what was to come...the tyranny of his career as a comic book creator. (Oh... excuse me, I forgot to translate that into your own high faluting jargon... Graphic Novelist)

While The City was the longest running of Derf's offenses, I suspect that his graphic novels will make up the bulk of your exhibit.

When I was growing up, comics were a wholesome form of entertainment featuring morality plays that reinforced good old fashioned American values.

When Superman saw a wrong, he righted it. Superman had integrity and a strong moral core. Derf's comic books are about trash, both literally and metaphorically. Is that what the kids are reading today? The integrity and morality of GARBAGE!?

Just look at his recurring "Otto Pizcock" character. For the sake of propriety, I'll skip a discussion on the juvenile genitalia joke inherent to the character's name in favor of a more adult conversation about what this character represents symbolically, namely Derf's heroically trashy alter ego. Otto is a seven foot tall band geek who spouts Tolkien references, befriends sleazy punk rock icons, works in grungy bars and dirty bookstores, beats up "rednecks" (Read: young men with conventional and clean taste) and still somehow manages to have premarital sex with numerous women of questionable character. Otto refers to himself as the Baron, a royal designation flying in the face of our democratic values. The endless paganistic Tolkien quotes spewed by Otto represent his disdain for Christian values. Your fantasy life is showing Mr. Backderf, if that is indeed your real name.

It's not even a particularly original idea. Derf's hero, Jack Kirby, created test pilot and football star Ben Grimm as his own alter ego in the pages of the Fantastic Four. There are significant differences between the two alter egos. Kirby's Grimm rises from his destitute beginnings in the squalor of Yancy Street in New York City like a true blue American hero, while Derf's Pizcock remains mired in filth. Where the noble Ben Grimm pays karmically for trusting an eggheaded scientist by being transformed into the monstrous Thing, Otto Pizcock revels in his sinful lifestyle and monstrous form. Instead of being a proper handwringing and apoplectic hero, Otto swims in the pool of garbage in Derf's Twilight Zone world of topsy turby amorality and dirt.

I suppose you think I'm exaggerating about the filth. The man's first graphic novel was titled TRASHED and it was about GARBAGE MEN.

I remember when comic book characters were secretly military officers, lawyers, and corporate CEOs. You know...college boys. Who wants to read about characters who labor all day in garbage? Apparently the artsy-fartsies at Abrams Arts, who have ordered up a brand new edition of these sanitorial chronicles. Everyone has had embarrassing summer jobs. It teaches us the value of a dollar. But most of us have sufficient etiquette not to talk about our hard labor. One year father made me work at the country club, I had to wait tables because all of the caddy positions were filled. You don't see me glorifying that miserable experience!

In summation, I have skimmed through Derf's work and see nothing of value. I hope that your institution will reconsider inclusion of this controversial figure and perhaps add a more acceptable cartoonist to the exhibit. Is the guy who does Marmaduke from Ohio? I love those cartoons...That dog is SO DARN BIG!!!!

Sincerely,



Ken Eppstein
A "White Middle Class Suburban Man"
5783 Eagle Nest Dr.
Bentleyville, OH, 44022

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON

PRACTICE MAKES PERFORMANCE
BY MEGAN LYKINS REICH

“Practice makes perfect” is a false euphemism. Practice makes something, but it’s never perfection since humans are intrinsically imperfect. At most, practice creates exceptional or extraordinary ability, the best of the best-- think Olympians, Nobel prize-winning scientists, or master chefs. More often, practice makes competent, cohesive, or effective. In certain industries or disciplines, practice is a behind-the-scenes activity that leads to on-stage success, something that informs but is not displayed or celebrated. In other areas, like law, medicine, and art, practice is (philosophically) the focus; the process of repeating acts to deepen and sharpen skill is revealed because it is the purpose, the point.

Practice is a central focus in the work of Kevin Jerome Everson. In general, his films and videos consider the performance of identity and the rituals of labor. Everson’s African American subjects execute simple, obligatory, or repetitious actions for the camera: in *How to Remain Human*, this includes magicians doing sleights of hand, watching a fireworks display, blowing out birthday candles, and trying to fold a map. Everson’s artwork is strongly informed by his upbringing in Mansfield, Ohio. He began his artistic career in Cleveland in the 1990s, first exhibiting at MOCA Cleveland in 1991.

Although his imagery is familiar and direct, Everson is not a documentary filmmaker. He creates deliberate vignettes that combine fiction and realism. Some feature actors and objects the artist makes, like the manhole covers in *Fe26* (2014). Others chronicle precise, framed moments in Everson’s personal life, like *Vanilla Cake with Strawberry Filling* (2014), which records a memorial for the artist’s son. With reference to practice, all of Everson’s films can be seen as his ongoing practice of being an artist, honing his craft one work at a time. He states: “Procedure is the formal quality I am exploring with the work. The process is the execution of the formal quality. Once I have a grasp of procedure, the process becomes a discipline.”¹

Several films in *How to Remain Human* portray practice, but *Tygers* (2014) is the most obvious example. A short film depicting football drills for a group of high school athletes at Mansfield High School in Mansfield, Ohio, it literally portrays practice. Players execute moves two, maybe three times each, making subtle adjustments with every attempt. Some come at the camera, others run away, all in set patterns. Everson intersperses their movements with close-up portraits wherein helmeted players practice looking “the part”: stoic, fierce, confident.

Throughout the film, the players drill directly in front of the camera, as if it were a linesman or coach. In showing different students executing the same drills/movements, Everson demonstrates the nuances of practice, the ways in which individuals performing the same tasks are intrinsically different (better or worse, advanced or beginner, etc.). Although training to create a cohesive team, each player shows degrees of promise and growth. Like in a play, the empty stadium behind them is a stage, used now for rehearsal, but soon for the main "performance." The camera flits and focuses at times, reinforcing the in-progress, working-on-it nature of this subject.

Tygers is silent. We never hear the quarterback's count, the football's smack against his gloved hand, the panting and heaving of speedy transitions, the taunting from opposing players, the coach's direction and feedback. This silence, coupled with the film's grainy black-and-white palette and tight, frontal vantage point, removes all distractions from the singular task at hand. Ultimate focus--a core element of practice.

Practice requires time; they are necessary bedfellows. How much time is endlessly variable depending on the task. At just two minutes, *Tygers* doesn't depict a "full" football practice. Moreover, we never see the game, never know the payoff. We assume that the athletes repeat these actions often, for hours, several times a week, over the course of many months, even years. Long time is insinuated both in the repetitive nature of the action and in its lack of narrative.

Everson's deliberate application of (brief) time, (no) color, and sound(lessness) in *Tygers* connects notions of practice and performance. Although we are watching a football practice, the film is not just about practicing football. In just two minutes, Everson swiftly and deftly captures the expressions,

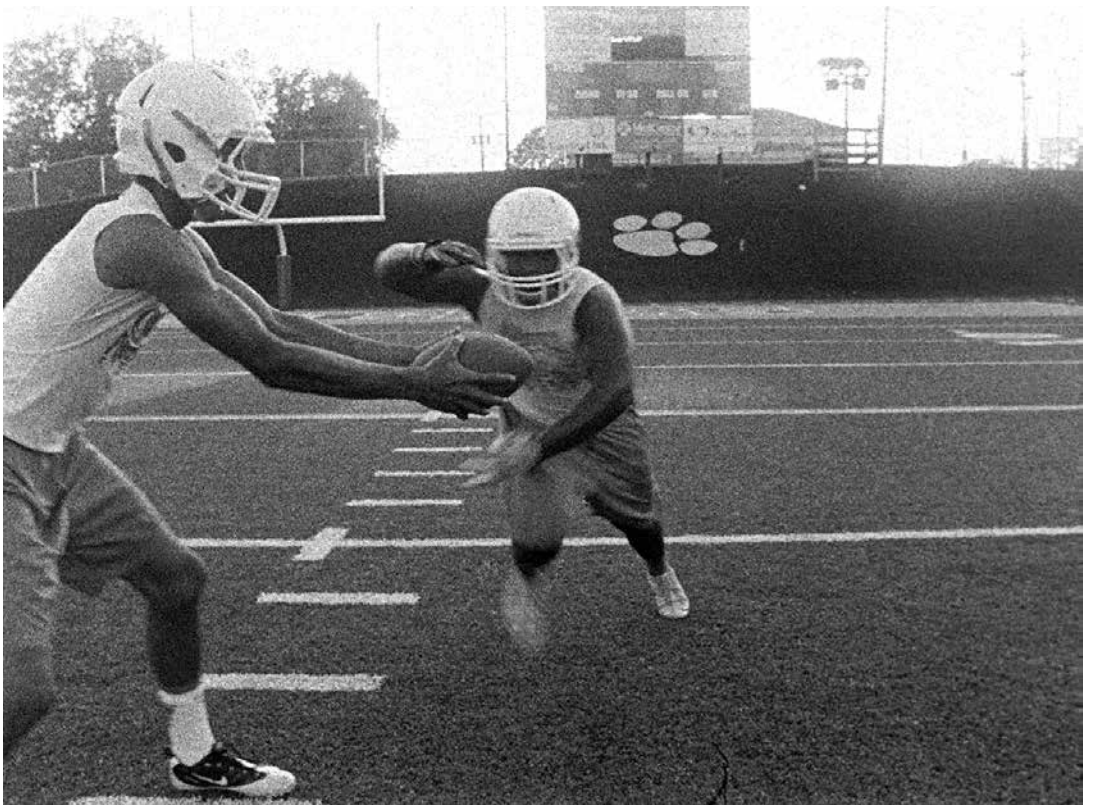
gestures, poses, movements, interactions, and environment that these players employ to perform a particular identity, one deeply significant in the Midwest. This identity is more than just playing football--it's also about playing masculine, playing teammate, playing submissive, playing fearless, playing consistent, playing tough. And playing "perfectly," of course, a performance best realized through lots and lots of practice.

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1. Kevin Jerome Everson, "Kevin Jerome Everson," *Drain: black*, drainmag.com, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2013.



Kevin Jerome Everson
Tygers, 2014
stills from 16mm film, 00:02:00
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite
Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson



KEVIN JEROME EVERSON

GRACE AND GRIND: NOTES ON THE WORK OF KEVIN JEROME EVERSON

BY MICHAEL B. GILLESPIE

Growing up people thought we were rich because both of my parents worked. My mom was a bank teller and my dad was an auto mechanic. Also, people thought we were rich because we had two cars. The illusion of art is that it is of the leisure class. But, that's a projection in a weird way. When I was doing street photography and considering how to frame things, the subject matter I was concentrated on was people of african descent performing or posing. In this way, the job site for me became a performance piece of a craft. I don't pretend to be working class anymore but I respect it and appreciate it.

—Kevin Jerome Everson¹

Kevin Jerome Everson's work represents a distinct processing of materials, craft, and blackness.

Having worked in various mediums (e.g., photography, printmaking, sculpture, painting) for over twenty years, Everson has shifted significantly since the late 1990s to primarily film and video. His growing catalog of film and video work includes over one hundred shorts and six feature films. This work has shown at film festivals, museums, galleries, and other exhibition sites throughout Europe and America. Everson's film and video work deliberately defies easy categorical claims. It gives the impression of a scripted documentary that is mediated by experimental/avant-garde gestures and yet there is a refined insistence on the everyday, black people, history, and repetition. Everson's film and video work always functions as a distinct in-

itation for contemplation, not simply a passive spectatorial practice of watching. His work never proffers anything resembling an essence or definitive answer. Instead, it demonstrates a devotion to quotidian occurrences and tasks. As Ed Halter notes:

Everson rejects the role of cultural explainer in his work, opting instead to place the burden of understanding on the audience and its own labor. In this way, he has carved a place for himself outside both the typical expectations of documentary and the conventions of representational fiction, attempting to work from the materials of the worlds he encounters to create something else.

This short essay focuses on Everson's work by way of conversations we had over the years and offers a glimpse of an artist continuing to push his craft and grow. Furthermore, this piece speculates on how his work might be considered to engage with the exhibition's query of *How to Remain Human*.

* * * * *

MICHAEL B. GILLESPIE: When did you first start making art or identify as an artist?

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON: I began when I was getting my BFA in Photography at the University of Akron. I continued growing as an artist while getting my MFA in Photography at Ohio University. I was doing a lot of street photography, people like Roy DeCarava, Robert Frank,

Garry Winogrand. But really I was always dealing with multiple media. I was doing sculpture, printmaking, and painting. I did some films in school but mostly for me it was all about the influence of my undergraduate teachers. They all came from Kent State, Ohio, and Iowa where it was all about material, process, and/or procedure. So for me, the work always has to project its material, process, and/or procedure. Even the film and video.

MBG: One of the ways I continue to identify with your work involves the way it defies the expectations of black art, experimental art, and the meeting between the two. Why do you primarily work with film and video? What does film and video do for you more so than sculpture, painting, or photography?

KJE: Well, I haven't stopped working with multiple media. I finished my last large body of serious photography when I was in Rome at the American Academy back in 2001. Beyond the fact that I've been teaching film more, my move to working more with film and video has a lot to do with the things I'm trying to say about gestures, tasks, and conditions. I'm interested in duration and time-based media works best for that.

MBG: How has Ohio informed your work?

KJE: I identify as someone from Northern Ohio. Unemployment, employment, migration from the South, language, weather, benchmarks, and basements. These are the keywords for my craft as I continue to try and get better as an artist. I'm drawn to what gestures might represent.

MBG: Do you still bristle at being called a black avant-garde or experimental artist?

KJE: I would still prefer to be called an artist. I'm still down for the everyday political and the every other day political.

MBG: People have to write dissertations, Kevin. You can't be just an artist. On that note, why do you refuse to identify as a documentarian or want your work thought of as documentaries?

KJE: Because nothing is real in my work, everything is made up. My work documents artifice. I'm working on a project with a colleague who wants to do documentary. The first thing that I was thinking about was when to start auditioning actors.

MBG: We've spoken before about how you connect black intellectual practice with "being satisfied." I'm thinking about the footage of your family in *Erie* (2010) discussing how working in the factory used to be about a certain kind of pleasure derived from a craft, but that eventually as management became less labor identified it became just work and finally, drudgery. How are your ideas of labor and being satisfied inflected in your work?

KJE: For me, being an artist is the practice of getting better. Art is not necessarily a job. I don't just want to do my work well. I want to develop. I have a responsibility to my family, my hometown of Mansfield, close friends, and a history of former students to keep making that art. I'm not a doctor so I don't heal, and I'm not a lawyer so I don't advocate. I'm an artist, so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts. I tell my students I am an artist and a teacher, but mostly an artist. I want them to believe that. So, I prove it every day, week, month, season, and year. Art has to be made.

MBG: I looked back through the catalogue for the *Black Male* exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1994). I was thinking about your *Mansfield, Ohio, End Table* piece. I am very struck by the way in which Mansfield, Ohio inhabited that work and continues to inspire your art practice. In that same vein, I am also interested in what motivated you or attracted you to carry out this significant shift to the medium of film and video. Because in thinking about that piece, it seems to me that it does have a collateral relationship to what you are doing now in film and video. What are the photographs on the end table?

KJE: The photographs on top of the table were 1950s school photographs. And also there were pictures of prison guards. I had family and friends who worked in the

prison. My hometown of Mansfield used to be more of an industrial town, but now the penal institution is the main industry. My son's mom, my uncle, and several cousins are all prison guards. The end table was basically done in the style of Dutch modernism with these two photographs placed on it. I really liked making those objects; I made probably twelve of them. But, what I really liked at that time was that someone would actually go to work, come home on Friday, get paid on Friday because everybody got paid weekly, and then they would go to Bing's Furniture. It was one of the few furniture stores in my hometown and everybody had the same kind of furniture. Everybody had the same end tables. So the fact that they would go and pick out their end table with a different color or stain than that of their neighbor and bring it home and rearrange it interested me. What I liked more so than the sculpture was the time-based element, the performative aspect of a normal day. I was thinking of these performance pieces of people just arranging their furniture. My parents would arrange furniture seasonally and put up new pictures.

MBG: What this kind of furniture signified is interesting. Your attention to details of craft raises the issues of class, labor, and materials. It touches on the broader question your work makes about the conception of labor in regards to the construction of the piece and the labor necessary to accumulate the capital to purchase it. The work demonstrates your driving concern for performativity and the laboring body.

KJE: I like that the body changes with labor. Coal miners have thick forearms. Truck drivers have potbellies. I am interested in those moments when the body shifts and changes. In *Twenty Minutes* (2005), you have the classical idea and form of the pulley then matched by the very same complexity of the performance of the men crafting a pulley to raise the engine out of the car.

MBG: I appreciate your investment in the art of blackness as not patronizing, in an ethnographic sense. There are few artists who address or enact blackness with the degree of rigor and ambiguity

that you demonstrate. Could you speak to where you locate your work in the ongoing discussions of black representation? You have an investment in visual and expressive culture but without an inflection of universal humanism.

KJE: I was and remain interested in the craft. What motivates my approach to composition has much to do with the history of migration, the working class, and black performativity. I am a formalist. I want the presence of materiality. I look for ways that histories and formal properties can be understood as complexly performed. I consider my work to be art. When I was first showing *Spicebush* (2005) here in America I encountered this sense of how observation does not trump perception. Once they see black people they get freaked out and start needing something more familiar to them. That's when I get questions about the absence of drugs. It says 'art' on my door. It says 'art' on my license plate. Yet, observation does not trump perception.

* * * * *

In Everson's *North* (2007), an old black man (James Williams) struggles to refold a large map on a windy day. Comprised of two static shots, the man stands on a cliff with Lake Erie at his back. Unable to find a proper crease and fold to close the map, the high winds foil his task and turn his attempts comic and absurd. The film's designation of 'north' evokes senses of movement and futility. Perhaps, an abstracted gesture to a history of black migration arrested and thwarted as this exacting attempt at folding reveals a gesture that neither succeeds nor fails. Rather, it remains a poignant observation of a struggling process of mapping and navigation.

The man appears again in *Ninety-Three* (2008), a short film comprised of a single slow-motion shot as he attempts to blow out ninety-three candles on a birthday cake. In this instance, the perfunctory ritual of blowing out the candles becomes meted by the elongation of time. This stretching demonstrates not the granting of a wish, but the cinematic measuring of time. In this way, the film captures more than a birthday

celebration. It documents contemplation and resignation, ceaselessness, aging, and a quiet joy and inevitability. In contradistinction to the blowing out of the birthday candles and the marking of maturation, *Vanilla Cake with Strawberry Filling* (2014) offers another cake and a marking of a life that has ended. The cake features the smiling pose of DeCarrio Antwan Everson, Kevin Everson's son who died in 2010. The edible image is that of the joyful look of a young black man not for the occasion of a graduation or birthday, but a crossing over, a goodbye. The guests eat the cake not out of a "this is my body" sanctimoniousness, but as if to say he has left but he is honored by the vanilla cake with strawberry filling that remains. The film ends with the ritual closure of memorialization as the photo cake, now an icon, is carefully sculptured so that only the portion featuring DeCarrio remains. The careful packaging of the memorial cake completes one part of a process that cannot easily be thought to be closed.

Tygers (2014) is a perfect example of many of the core themes of Kevin Everson's aesthetic practice: repetition, a devotion to form, and Northern Ohio sports. The film focuses on football practice for "The Tygers," a high school football team in Mansfield Ohio. Everson positions himself and the camera on the field within cycling repetitions of the drills that cover passing patterns, coverage schemes, and handoffs. They are constitutive elements of a sport that, echoing the attempt to fold the map, does not guarantee success or failure but only the learning of form.

Fe26 (2014) illustrates Everson's poignant disregard for any suggestion of documentary as an exercise in truth. The film is scripted verité set in East Cleveland and observes characters who are scrap scavengers who specialize in stripping abandoned homes of their valuable remains. But the script speculates on manhole covers as a prized possession. The film, like much of Everson's work in general, pivots on the over determinacy of a black image, the visual rendering of blackness. Coupled with the documentary conceit, East Cleveland might be thought to correspond to

a black everyday, but in fact does not. The manhole cover shenanigans are artful forgery as Everson himself cast one of the manhole covers and a crowbar used in the film. *Fe26* is avant-garde comedy about craft, genre, and the art of artifice; an abstraction of form rather than an exposé on the trickle down truths of black communities.

Set in Windsor, Ontario, there is a surveilling quality to *Grand Finale* (2015) resulting from Everson's use of a telephoto lens and the lack of precise focalization cues. The handheld camera in the crowd at a distance displays two young black men from behind while they watch a fireworks show. The watching of the watchers accentuates their gestures and movement as they talk, record the event on their phone, and sporadically look away. The sight of the event itself is distended by the lens; it is a distorted flashing of blurred colors. In this way, the film is composed by the clustering of distinct and contingent quotidian gestures--the telephoto vantage, two young black men engaged in the perfunctory ritual of watching fireworks, and finally the distorted image of the pyrotechnics on the screen horizon. Yet, as Everson has noted, the scene is about an everyday black performativity: how two black subjects observe an event and inhabit a space. The two young black men are indeed the event on display or more precisely, the affective force that compels the film's prosaic spatio-temporality. When the film has a slight cut to the grand finale of the pyrotechnics show, the exuberance of light and sound becomes matched by the cool teens breaking character as the sight of their emoting joy and awe rivals the spectacular grand finale in the sky. But, to have Everson tell it, if you thought the fireworks were the show, then you have missed the real show.

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1. Michael B. Gillespie, "'To Do Better': Notes on the Work of Kevin Jerome Everson." Kevin Jerome Everson (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2011).
2. Ed Halter, "The Practice of Everyday Life" *Artforum* (May 2010): 33.



1.



2.

1. Kevin Jerome Everson
Grand Finale, 2015
Still from HD video, 00:04:41
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite
Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson

2. Kevin Jerome Everson
Vanilla Cake with Strawberry Filling, 2014
Still from 16mm film, 00:01:50
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite
Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson



Kevin Jerome Everson
Fe26, 2014

Still from 16mm film, 00:07:21
Courtesy of the artist; Trilobite
Arts-DAC; Picture Palace Pictures
Copyright Kevin Jerome Everson

BEN HALL

THE SPACESHIP IS CRASHING
BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

Objects are heavy things for Ben Hall, bundles of tightly coiled relationships and histories. With a scavenger's knowledge of Detroit, he sources materials for his pieces all over the city, keeping tabs on where supplies can be found, seeking matter that "still has the human in it."¹ Hall listens to his human materials, folding their former lives, places, and contexts into his sculptures. His works are like conversations: unfixed, rangy, and evolving. His approach to materials is metonymic, full of rabbit holes to go down. Take the use of bulletproof plexiglass, repurposed from a vacant liquor store worker's booth into a bookshelf. Hall was unsettled by how the material embodied the protection of the worker, who watches the customer while also being watched. Hall maxes out the conceptual possibilities of the plexi through proxies that pursue and extend its meanings; questions of transparency, surveillance, and protection arise throughout the works Hall made for *How to Remain Human*. Local resources, questions of economic injustice, everyday radicalism and resistance, and personal experience also connect them. Hall's sensitive material approach is further informed by a theoretical framework pulling from Marxism, the Situationist International, critical pedagogy, and the ideas of recent protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the group Anonymous, among others.

Equally responsive to architecture and spaces as to objects, Hall worked with his frequent collaborator Andrew Mehall to develop a 4-channel sound installation, *The assumption that a wild animal is coming into contact with a domesticated one. (After Harry Bennett)* (2015), for MOCA Cleveland's yellow fire escape stair. Completely enclosed within the main staircase, the interior stair's narrow, winding corridors resist the clean geometry and aspirational transparency emphasized throughout the rest of the building's architecture. The artists were fascinated by the positioning of this stair. Although a transitional space designed primarily for emergency egress, it is not a "non-place," design explicitly for everybody and so for nobody. It's decidedly non-neutral: disorienting, intensely yellow, confusing--a "claustrophobia stair." As Hall states:

it's a place where the worker goes and returns a FB msg, technological avoidance that reifies technology and consumerism [...] a weird move by the architect to create a solidarity with the security guard, the docent, the student.

Hall and Mehall sought to heighten the experience of "psychedelic oppression" in the stairwell, working another important 1968

text into the exhibition: Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire's influential book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire criticizes traditional models of education as reinforcing existing power structures and perpetuating oppression, advocating instead for a critical pedagogy in which students gain the agency for self and social transformation through active methods of teaching and learning. Passed through text-to-speech software, the tone and meaning of this impassioned, human-centered text is shifted as the robotic tones stumble over the words, rendering it cold. The sound is layered and chorused, reminiscent of the "human loudspeaker" technique used by Occupy Wall Street protesters. It sounds as if the batteries are running out; or, as put by a friend of the artists, as if "the spaceship is crashing." The sense of emergency is heightened by an ever-present high pitched frequency that reverberates insistently inside one's head, a reference to the ringing sense of strain felt by Hall while taking care of his parents when they were ill. Hall would use the hospital stairway as a cooling off zone when the stress became too much.

The scuffed up liquor store plexiglass mentioned at the start of this essay resurfaces in the exhibition as a book stand that doubles as a terrarium and a donation box. Titled *Lorraine & Fredy* (2015), the piece is a tribute to the quiet radicalism of a local Detroit area couple. Fredy Perlman (1934-1985) was a naturalized American author and activist who came to the US from the Czech Republic. He made the first English translation of *Society of the Spectacle* (1968, Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International) in which Debord defines the spectacle as a hallmark of late capitalist society, where life is mediated rather than directly experienced. This title, among other important texts of the avant-garde, can be purchased by visitors who

are invited to leave the suggested donation, using the honor system. All of the titles on the bookstand are still distributed by Fredy's wife, Lorraine Perlman, who ships them out of her home in Ferndale, a suburb of Detroit.

The Drill (2015), a large, complex structure, occupies the largest space in the galleries. A base of cement blocks supports a ramshackle scaffolding of broom and mop handles in a rough V formation. From this, other objects are draped, hung, and stretched. One wall of the piece is made of 150 backpacks which hang side-by-side like bricks in a wall. The same as those approved for use in the Detroit Public School system, the backpacks are transparent, a visualized buzzword that references the constantly surveilled environment through which the schoolchildren move. Transparency is a key concept of MOCA Cleveland's architecture, though rather to oblige porousness and accessibility within the Museum than to enhance security and protection. In both cases however, transparency makes the inhabitant of the building or the wearer of the backpack ostentatious, aware of being watched. Within the Museum, the boundaries and codes of acceptable behavior are invisible yet clearly and swiftly delineated once transgressed, requiring an internalization of surveillance--of self-policing--in order to enter and remain.

The backpacks double as cacti terrariums, each one a "living monument" to (and bearing a sticker portrait of) Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man beaten to death by auto workers near Detroit in 1982, cast as the feared specter of the foreign worker. Barely discernable, Chin's faint, fragmented portrait is printed large scale, forming the backing of the terrariums. At the closing of *How to Remain Human*, the backpacks will be distributed out into the world, further disseminating Chin's monuments. Inside the transparent traps, the

cacti strain; organic matter stands for the liquor store worker, the school child, and the docent. Personified, they don't have room to breathe, time to pause, the latitude to make mistakes, unwatched spaces--all things that more and more people have less and less of. The backpacks literalize the burden (of responsibility, of the performance of innocence, holding it all together) in an ever narrowing social and civic sphere.

A large, handmade quilt made from old t-shirts covers the other outer wall of *The Drill*. Three repeated graphics tumble across its surface: the text "Emma Goldman Sachs," the unlikely merger of Emma Goldman (1869-1940), an anarchist writer and activist, and Goldman Sachs, one of the global investment banks that profited from the subprime mortgage crisis; the Adidas slogan (shifted to read All Day I Dream About Situationism), and the free parking square from the board game Monopoly. The interior of *The Drill* contains two used t-shirts stretched on crowbars, adorned with red, blue, and white buttons in a patriotic array. The red and blue buttons show two African American Major League Baseball players: Larry Doby, the second player to integrate the league, joining the Cleveland Indians in 1947, and Ozzie Virgil, who played for the Detroit Tigers, the second to last team to integrate in 1958. The white buttons show Rich Uncle Pennybags, the monocled tycoon from Monopoly, who Occupy protesters adopted as shorthand for the corruption of Wall Street.

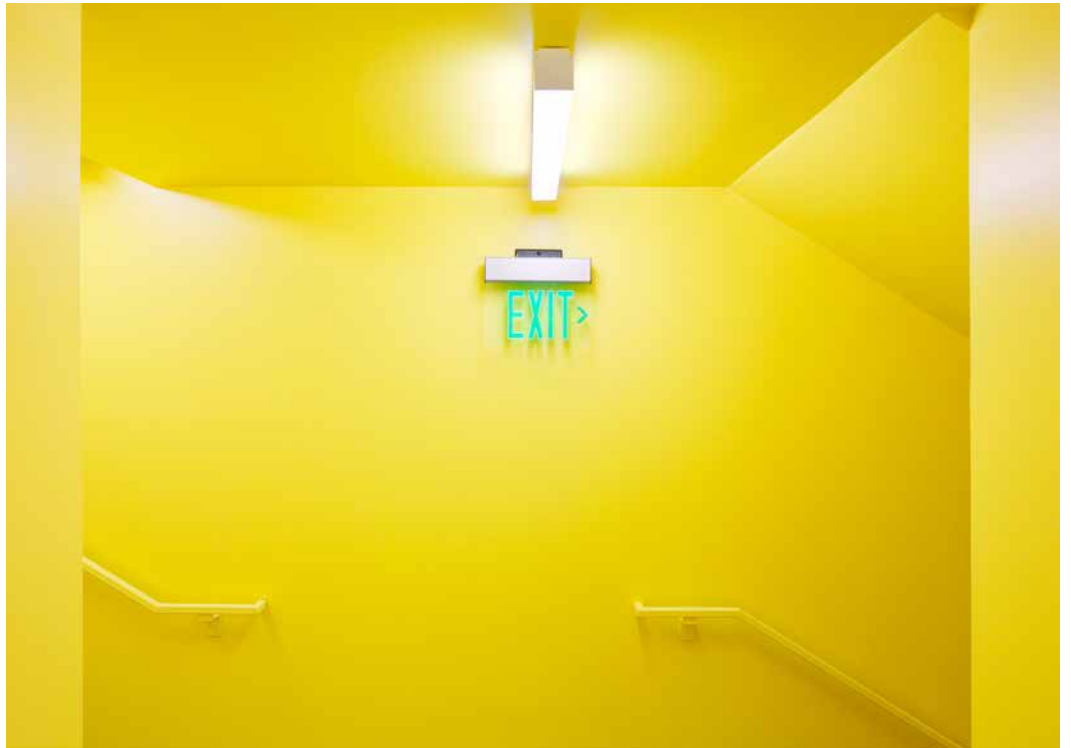
In *The Drill*, Hall implements objects to form a visual grammar, becoming glyphs that inscribe deep narratives about contemporary life: the intertwining of the global financial market, worker exploitation, sports and entertainment, and brushes with the US healthcare system. These broad themes are anchored to Hall's lived experience through the inclusion of deeply personal references. One screen features an image of

a piece of old cypress wood that Hall cut from under the sink in his mother's Detroit home. Scaled up and monolithic, the wood looms large. It bears marks and scratches, scars of domestic breakdown and parent-child roles reversed. The wood image overlays a meme-like joke about cowboys and American Indians, another reference to racial and economic inequity. These as with other objects are available for endless processing, a mix-n-match syntax of hopelessness and structural violence: Goldman Sachs Healthcare Murdered Occupy/ Monopoly Backpacks and Watched Schoolchildren Made in China. Situationism Could Not Stop It, We Were Entertained/ Interchangeable in a system of victims.

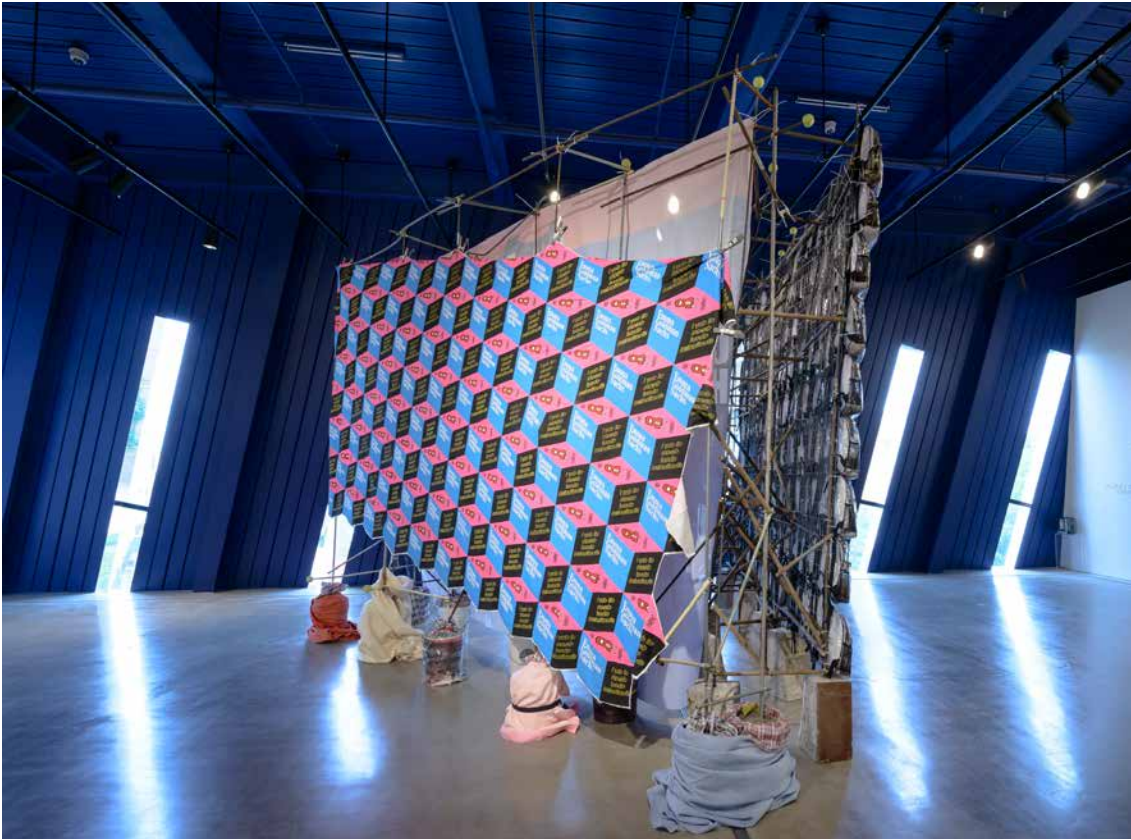
Stretched thin and curiously bodied, *The Drill* also suggests a different reading, a superstructure that appears to clutch at its garments, gathering itself up in vain, its rickety supports showing through. From this angle, the work conveys a hopeful precarity; the ungainly monolith nearing its tipping point, while the base is strong. Hall's sculptures are never static; assembled in place and later deconstructed, their objects flow in and out, given away as gifts, absorbed into new works, all merrily proceeding towards entropy, circulating in parallel economies. Perhaps it is Hall's process, his resourceful and sensitive approach to making, which suggests a way to keep moving. When the syntax is destabilized, new sentences can be written. The spaceship is crashing, but those who were never permitted to board in the first place are watching from the ground. Once it hits, it's time to build again.



1. This and all subsequent quotes of Hall are from emails to the author, April, 2015



MOCA Cleveland's interior stair, installation site for:
Ben Hall and Andrew Mehall
*The assumption that a wild animal is coming into contact
with a domesticated one. (After Harry Bennett)*, 2015
Four channel audio installation with Adobe pdf reader,
pirated version of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the
Oppressed*, latent frequencies, non-repetitive sound
waves, chorus. Total running time 05:00:54.
Courtesy of the artists and Young World, Detroit



1.

2.

1. Ben Hall
The Drill, 2015
 Concrete, DPS approved backpacks,
 cacti, perlite, soil, mesh, rebar,
 cement, laundry bags, reprinted t-
 shirts, chiffon, spray enamel, broom
 and mop handles, scrapped conduit,
 buttons
 168 x 180 x 84 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Young
 World, Detroit
 Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics



2. Ben Hall
Lorraine & Fredy, 2015
 Repurposed bulletproof glass,
 cacti, soaps, enamel,
 independently published books
 62 x 38 x 38 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Young
 World, Detroit
 Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics



Ben Hall
The Drill, 2015 (details)
Courtesy of the artist and Young
World, Detroit
Photos: Timothy Safranek Photographics

BEN HALL

FEEL, TO FEEL MORE,
TO FEEL MORE THAN
BY FRED MOTEN

1.

Ben Hall has a kind of evangelical obsession. Some joker gave him something and now he wants to give you some. See if you can see and hear and feel certain passages in and of a collective head arrangement, as if Lygia Clark were touring with a territory band.

2.

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"--all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some

jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.

I went toward the microphone where Brother Jack himself waited, entering the spot of light that surrounded me like a seamless cage of stainless steel. I halted. The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces. It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me--for they were applauding--without themselves being seen.

"May I confess?" I shouted. "You are my friends. We share a common disinheritance, and it's said that confession is good for the soul. Have I your permission?"

"Your batting .500, Brother," the voice called.

There was a stir behind me. I waited until it was quiet and hurried on.

"Silence is consent," I said, "so I'll have it out, I'll confess it!" My shoulders were squared, my chin thrust forward and my eyes focused straight into the light. "Something strange and miraculous and transforming is taking place in me right now...as I stand here before you!"

I could feel the words forming themselves, slowly falling into place. The light seemed to boil opalescently, like liquid soap shaken gently in a bottle.

"Let me describe it. It is something odd. It's something that I'm sure I'd never experience anywhere else in the world. I feel your eyes upon me. I hear the pulse of your breathing. And now, at this moment, with your black and white eyes upon me, I feel...I feel..."

I stumbled in a stillness so complete that I could hear the gears of the huge clock mounted somewhere on the balcony gnawing upon time.

"What is it, son, what do you feel?" a shrill voice cried.

My voice fell to a husky whisper, "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong, I feel able to get things done! I feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of militant fraternity! No, wait, let me confess...I feel the urge to affirm my feelings...I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home... Home! With your eyes upon me I feel that I've found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land. I feel that here tonight, in

this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived. In each of you, in me, in us all.¹

3.

If one is human, as a matter of sheer biological determination, then to feel more human, which is given only in the experience of having been made to feel less human, is, in fact to feel more than human, which is given, in turn, only in the experience of having been made to feel less than human. What if the human is nothing other than this constancy of being both more and less than itself? What if all that remains of the human, now, is this realization? What if the only thing that matches the absolute necessity of remaining human is the absolute brutality of remaining human? Is there any escape from the interplay of brutality and necessity? Serially excessive of itself in falling short of itself, brutally imposing the necessity of its retention as the only justification and modality of its retention, the human is only ever visible as the more than complete incompleteness from which it cannot quite be seen. Invisible Man marks and is the blindness and insight of this impossible point of view. Invisible Man can't quite see when he tells us how he feels; and when he tells us how he feels he does so by way of a paradox that is contained by the very feeling it cannot quite approach. All we know about what it is to feel, to feel suddenly that one has become more human, is that it is to feel immeasurably more than that. The immeasurable, here, denotes every earthliness that remains unregulated by human distinction and distinctiveness. At stake is the sheer, slurred, smeared, swarmed seriality of mechanical buzz, horticultural blur, geometrical blend, an induced feeling's indeterminate seeing Ben Hall musically instantiates in his art. Let the gallery's held logisticality explode into the Brotherhood's improper displacement. Give a sign. Shake a hand. Dance.

4.

Charismata--the gift of spirit of which Cedric Robinson and Erica Edwards teach--is conferred upon the one who cannot see by the ones who see him, in their hearing of him, in their bearing of him, in the touch of their eyes, in the brush of their ears, in the look and heed of their open, lifted hands. It's as if he fades into their senses, them, the ones who in being so much more and less than one can only be figured by science as the mob. To be held in the mob's embrace, in the wound and blessing of their shared, accursed sensorium, is to be made unaware of one's own invisibility--to feel, to feel more, to feel more than, to feel more than I feel, I feel. Can you hold one another tonight in the blur, so that one and another are no more? A table is prepared for your common unawareness, for the disinheritance you might not know you long to know you share, the share you're blessed to share right now that only unawareness of yourself will let be known. Invisible Man had withdrawn, if only for a moment, into the external world, which responsible subjectivity rightly understands to be no world at all in the brutality of its wrongful attempts to eradicate it. Adrian Piper, pied, in motley, blind, silent in her consent not to be single while, at the same time, loud, and felt, in the intensity of her confession, has been led to lead us out of the art world and into this exteriority with that same pentaphonic song Armstrong was always playing no matter what song he was playing. No matter what song he is playing, they are the ones who are not one who are playing it. That's what this entanglement of Ben Hall are playing. You have to excuse their grammar. DJ Crawlspac's repercussive counterweight is stairwell, in golden light well, in sound booth, in reverberate hold. That Armstrong plex, given elsewhere in Hall's *Some Jokers (For 5 Turntables, basement, ice cream and sloe gin)*, regifted as Paolo Freire, vocoded,

digitized into uncountability by an unaccountable sonority Freire now would recognize, is the undercommon instrument whose instrument we'd like to be. In the glow and blur of the collective head's collective embrace, more precisely and properly valued in its fuzzy disruption of valuation, in its radical unbankability, in its inappropriable impropriety, light and sound are the materiality of our living, the basis of our revolutionary pedagogy, the ground of our insurgent, auto-excessive feel.

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1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage International, 1995) 7-8, 341, 344-45.



Ben Hall
The Drill, 2015 (detail)
Blue, red and white pins showing the
faces of Larry Doby, Ozzie Virgil,
and Rich Uncle Pennybags
Courtesy of the artist and
Young World, Detroit

JAE JARRELL

I WILL ALWAYS CREATE
INTERVIEW BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Jae Jarrell was born in Cleveland in 1935. She grew up in the historic Glenville neighborhood, the same area of the city that she returned to in 2009 with her husband Wadsworth, after having lived in Chicago, Washington D.C., and New York. They settled into two sprawling apartments facing Rockefeller Park: studio spaces above and residence below. Every wall and surface bursts with art, life, family, and soul.

Jae has always been a maker and an entrepreneur. Her passion has carried through many pursuits, from art to fashion design, vintage dealing, and furniture restoration. In 1968, she was one of the founding members of AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), along with Wadsworth, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams. The collective formed in response to a lack of positive representation of African American people in media and the arts, and their goal was to develop a uniquely Black aesthetic that conveyed the pride and power of their communities.

How to Remain Human features three of Jae's garments from the early days of AFRICOBRA: *Urban Wall Suit* (1969) drew inspiration from the graffiti and concert posters that filled the streets of Chicago, where brick walls became message boards for the community; *Ebony Family* (1968) embodies Jae's deeply held belief that strong Black families are a source of power; and *Revolutionary Suit* (1968) takes the shape of a Jae's signature late 60's 2-piece suit: collarless jacket, three-quarter length bell sleeves, and an A-framed skirt--with the

addition of a colorful bandolier. Jae also made three new pieces for the exhibition, revisiting designs and ideas that still inspire her. *Maasai Collar Vest* (2015) recalls the ornate clothing and jewelry of the Maasai people, who live in parts of Kenya and northern Tanzania. *Shields and Candelabra Vest* (2015) uses the organic form of cactus plants, flipped on their sides, as frames for colorful African shields. *Jazz Scramble Jacket* (2015) brings together two of Jae's loves: jazz and blues music (a constant backdrop at home and studio) and the crossword board game Scrabble. The intersecting names of influential musicians speak to the importance of community in developing a scene, style, and history.

I sat down with Jae in May 2015 to talk about her extraordinary life and creative vision.



RB

Were there any influential figures for you growing up in Cleveland that set you on your path as an artist?

JJ

I am the granddaughter of a tailor, and though I never met him--he had passed by the time I was born--my mother always shared with me the wonderful workmanship that he taught all of his children. So I've always been mindful of fabrics, recognizing different fibers, weaves, classic dress. Mother would take me to

vintage shops, and when Mother wanted your attention, she whispered. She would bring a collar of a garment forward and say, "Just, look at that! Just, look at that workmanship! When you see these saddle stitches, you know that that is a special tactic, so watch for these things!" And so I always thought of making clothes in order to have something unique, and later I learned to sew very well and made it my business to always make my garments. And I also have a love for vintage, knowing that it has secrets of the past that I can unfold.

RB

When and how did "Jae" become the name you go by?

JJ

When I left the Art Institute of Chicago, I started a business in my apartment, designing for a number of models that worked for shows and needed to provide their own garments. So I built the idea that I wanted to have a shop. At one point I got a job at Motorola-- I was hired to help integrate the company. They wanted me to be the face of Motorola. I was hired as a receptionist, and I bounced between three reception rooms in three buildings on the same property in Chicago. There was one woman whose place I took when she went to lunch and on breaks. She was an older woman and was a bit concerned about losing her job. I wanted to befriend her and so I started chatting with her about clothes. I liked the way she dressed and she liked the way I did, and there was something about our spirits that was good. And she was somebody that I imparted my secret to, that I really wasn't going to be at Motorola for long. I wanted to be a designer and I wanted my own place. We decided to try to name this place. She loved having my secret so we played around each time I came and she toyed with it. I wasn't going to be Elaine, my first name, and I wasn't going to be Annette, my middle name, and I certainly wasn't going to be Johnson, my maiden name. At one point she came up with throwing the initials backwards, J-A-E, and that's when I chose "Jae." I always loved Hyde Park, and I envisioned having a store there. I found a one-room

shop with one display window right at the corner of a very lovely building at 52nd and Blackstone. And I named it "Jae of Hyde Park."

RB

You've always done things in your own way, on your own terms. As a Black fashion designer, did you feel that you had to forge your own path because it would be more difficult to get your clothing into other people's stores?

JJ

I was always full of dreams. In my upbringing, it was always "yes you can!" The sky is the limit. I remember being very taken with my family's business. My Uncle Jimmy was a haberdasher and had this wonderful men's shop that I worked in. I often thought, "I'd like to have my own business." That was a mission that I thought I could pursue. High school was wonderful, it was interracial, about 30% Black students. And we just did everything together; we had parties and there were interracial relationships. So I didn't see any reason to have pause.

Then, somehow or another, you would hear trends in the news that might give you an indication that things could be other than wonderful. I just thought, you know, treat this with caution...but I didn't think it would affect me because there was so much "plus" in my life. I left Cleveland to go to college at Bowling Green State University, where they were forming a Black student union. And I thought, "Well, that's nice." There were only a handful of Blacks, maybe ten or fourteen on campus. At the same time my sister was dating a young attorney from Albany, Georgia who was going to school at Case Western Reserve University. He was completing his law degree and intended to go back to help his people. And I thought: "help them to what?" But at that time, a very active kind of revolutionary movement was forming in Albany to free their people, give them guidance, give them opportunities. By the same token, I was struck by the fact that colonized African nations were beginning to be decolonized. And of course, fashion sort of takes a note of

activities occurring in the news, things that would affect expression. So these concerns that I didn't have before were entering my life.

One of the things that struck me was how successful Uncle Jimmy was in his haberdashery. Turns out Uncle Jimmy looks like a white man. For all practical purposes, as far as his clients knew, he was a white man. So I'm seeing that my dear Uncle Jimmy, who had such a knack in business, also had certain opportunities based on an assumption that he was white. Later he formed a business relationship with several other merchants, realtors, a whole spectrum of Black business owners in the Cleveland community. They started a Negro Business League. And I thought, "Really?" Then it occurred to me that these were precautions, to protect and support one another. It was only then that I thought, "How do you protect yourself?" Because I'm always going to be going off to the big lights somewhere. I realized that you'd better have your head on straight, because you may need to cut your own way. And one way that I thought was very manageable was to have a business. You call your shots in business. You set the tone. And I'll tell you, frankly, I've done a number of businesses, and for the most part, I've had particularly white clientele. It was just interesting, those who were drawn to what I offered. I never really thought of activism until I was in AFRICOBRA.

RB

Can you talk about the process of making a garment? How does it start--as an idea, a mood? Is it inspired by a texture or color?

JJ

We were taught to design with an inspiration from the fabric, but I tend to think of the end product before I really address the fabric. If you want individuality, you have to use your own voice from beginning to end. So, I birth fabric sometimes. Fresh avenues of making garments that might not have been used before. In AFRICOBRA I chose to use felt and leather pelts. I ended up painting on leathers to express what I was do-

ing. I included figures, because AFRICOBRA was interested in speaking to the people, and you feel you're spoken to if you see your image. But I'm diverse in how I work, sometimes I design right on the tabletop as I'm working, and this gives me a degree of variety.

RB

Can you tell me the story of *Urban Wall Suit*? What was the inspiration?

JJ

I made *Urban Wall Suit* in 1969. One of the tenets of AFRICOBRA was to reinvent yourself, reinvent how you were, reinvent your whole manner so that you had a fresh voice. I was inventing my fabric. I had made a line of silk shirts at my Jae of Hyde Park shop, so I decided to use the scraps. I put them together in large and small patches of rectangular shapes and squares. I started to pay attention to the walls in our Chicago area, all of the markings on them. AFRICOBRA had made us missionaries to the community; we were doing art for the community. And I saw the walls as community message boards. I was struck by folks who tagged questions or propositions on the wall that someone else might answer. I thought, "Wow, this is hip." As I was putting together this fabric I thought, "Let me see if I can make bricks in it." I used velvet ribbon for my mortar, and began to paint and write graffiti as well as incorporating the posters with announcements that you would find. That's how I got to *Urban Wall Suit*. It was a voice of the community and a voice to the community.

RB

Can you tell me a little bit about the life of that piece? Did you often wear it, or was it made primarily for display or exhibitions?

JJ

Originally it was for exhibition, but on occasions of import, I wore it. I do remember once wearing it in D.C., coming back from a grocery store with one of my children in a sling and one in a stroller and one walking, helping to push the stroller. But D.C. was like that to us.

It was our people, and everything was on time. And so, it wouldn't be unusual to have popped it on.

RB

What are some of your thoughts on the renewed interest in AFRICOBRA? How do you envision its enduring legacy and relevance to the contemporary moment?

JJ

My mother was always telling me that I was "bred." If you brought somebody home, she would ask, "Who are their people?" And she would remind me that the training that we received was with real intent, and was something to serve you always. When I was totally on my own living in New York City, I pulled out every guidance measure that she taught to manage myself as a young adult, socializing, experimenting, and whatever else. I kept these rules in mind, and it's a reference that we used to carve out AFRICOBRA. It was done in a very family-like way. The love we had for one another, the respect we built for one another, the trust we had. When would you put together as many as ten artists that bring their art partially done and ask each other for input? Outside of a classroom, you don't expect that to happen. This was true trust and true interest and love of developing a voice, signature voices. You know them when you see them. There's a value in that you never divorce family, and it's always a part of you if you really buy into it. So it's very comfortable to exercise some of those principles in anything you do, in living as well as creating.

RB

Your pursuits have most often related to functional things, beautiful answers to what people need or how they want to present themselves or imagine their place in the world. Could you talk a little bit about humanness and how it's guided your practice?

JJ

I just love being around people. And it's probably why I chose to be a merchant, because it's hands-on. I don't know what I'll do with the internet, be-

cause I like eye contact and handshakes and shared stories. I always think of functional things, but add pizzazz to them. That's where art comes in. But I am forever driven to make something that others might enjoy and that they might know me better by. I then grow from the joy they have.

RB

How do you want people to feel when they're wearing one of your garments?

JJ

I think there's a term that I use when I'm interacting with clients. And it's an advice thing, but I always used the word "attitude." Clothes allow you to have attitude. You can really define your place in a crowd with the proper sense of self and projecting your personality. You're seen across the room. It's a feel-good kind of tactic. That's what I think I enjoy most about dressing people--I've seen glow as a result of knowing you have the right colors on, something that complements your physique. Something you like, and that you can see in other people's eyes that they like it too.

RB

What are you excited about now in your practice? What's next, what's your vision pointing to?

JJ

I will always create; it's how I go about things. It's part of my tool kit. And I say "tool kit" without joking, 'cause I might bring a saw out in a minute! I love creating things. Presentation means a lot to me. I'm hoping to expand my interests in wood making. Some of my art is more structural. What's in the works is structure that I build alongside symbols that I borrow. I'm making some panels, now, that will express my interest in sculpture as well as painting, using the leather again, still interrelating materials. I think the sky is the limit on what I want to do or can do. It will always be a part of me and you will always know that it's my voice, but it's just moved in another place.



Jae Jarrell
Maasai Collar Vest, 2015
Leather and suede with cowhide splits
19 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist

JAE JARRELL

JAE JARRELL AND THE FASHIONING OF
BLACK CULTURE
BY DAVID LUSENHOP

Artist and fashion designer Jae Jarrell made headlines in January 1971 when her *Revolutionary Suit* (1968), a salt-n-pepper tweed jacket and skirt ensemble with incorporated faux bandolier, inspired *Jet* magazine editors to run a cover article entitled “Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze.”¹ The influential journal castigated the mainstream fashion world for “borrowing” the bandolier from the Black revolution, and for turning a symbol of righteous political resistance into a neutralized fashion accessory.² As evidence of this blatant cultural appropriation, the magazine juxtaposed Jae’s *Revolutionary Suit* with an illustration of New York socialite and art collector Ethel Scull, who posed in front of a Jasper Johns “flag” painting wearing a black turtleneck, lace-up boots, and a bullet-belt slung around her hips. Jae went on record in the article decrying this white consumerism. Her fashions had intensely political ends: “We were saying something when we used the belts. We’re involved in a real revolution.”³

As exemplified by this garment, Jae consistently seeks to merge the principles of fashion design with the liberatory politics and culturally-specific expressions of the 1960s and 70s Black Arts Movement, generally considered an extension of the Black Power movement.

In 1958, ten years before Jae’s groundbreaking work began appearing in art journals and museum exhibitions, she transferred from Bowling Green State University in Ohio to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) where she enrolled in the fashion design program. The SAIC was not her first exposure to clothing design; her grandfather was a tailor and her family in Cleveland all sewed. It was during her formative years in Chicago, however, that she began to understand fashion design as a potent cultural force, and

clothing as symbolic, public gesture. “Adorn to reflect” became Jae’s mantra from this period forward. Today, a renewed interest in the political and performative nature of art, and in the culturally metamorphic period of the 1960s and 70s, has brought new attention to Jae’s pioneering contributions. “[S]he anticipated the confluence of fashion and fine art this is so prevalent today,” writes Kellie Jones.⁴

At the SAIC, Jae was one of few African-American students. She recognized that her potential could be hindered by the mainstream fashion industry’s racist and exclusionary practices of the time. As she recalls: “one of the reasons I went into business with my own shop was because I was going to circumvent getting turned down by some design house.”⁵ Jae left the SAIC and honed her skills independently, though she later completed a BFA at Howard University, took graduate courses in textile design there, along with an advanced, professional course at Parsons School of Design in New York. She settled in the Hyde Park neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, an area she says “had an element of art and class and tolerance.”⁶ She opened a boutique called Jae of Hyde Park in 1964, where she offered one-of-a-kind coats and suits, and custom tailoring.

In 1965, several tragic events had a profound impact on the art and activism of Jae and her circle in Chicago. Malcolm X was murdered, Dr. Martin Luther King and peaceful protestors were met with violence in Alabama, and the Watts Rebellion erupted near downtown Los Angeles. Spurred by these troubling events, and others before them, African-American activists founded various social and political “Movements” in the months and years that followed. For many, the slow pace of social and political change during the preceding ten years of the Civil Rights movement signaled a need for more aggressive measures to ad-

dress racism, economic inequality, and white cultural hegemony.

In response to this political and social turmoil, in 1968 Jae co-founded the now renowned visual arts group AFRICOBRA, along with her husband Wadsworth Jarrell, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams.⁷ An acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, the group's name boldly proclaims their intention to pivot away from critiques of white oppression, and instead use their work to address the Black community head-on. Barbara Jones-Hogu explained: "[O]ur visual statements were to be Black, positive, and direct."⁸ AFRICOBRA also rejected the idea of using mainstream art modes of the day like Minimalism and conceptual art, and disavowed much of the modern Western art history they had learned in art school. Instead, they began conceptualizing what a "Black aesthetic" might look and feel like.

During formal AFRICOBRA meetings, often held at the Jarrell's home and studio on East 61st Street in Chicago, the members began exploring ways to concretize a "Black aesthetic," a self-defined set of image making practices and philosophical protocols that drew from lived experiences, African prototypes, and African-American vernacular culture, especially the sights and sounds of their own South Side community. The principles of AFRICOBRA's "Black aesthetic" were outlined by Jeff Donaldson, as spokesman for the group, in a lengthy, manifesto-like essay entitled "10 in Search of a Nation," first published in *Black World* magazine in October 1970. Each AFRICOBRA artist was intended to incorporate the concept of "Expressive Awesomeness," to include "Free Symmetry," to make "organic" art, to convey "Shine," to include lettering, and to adopt a palette of "Cool-ade" colors, among other prescribed image-making modes the group defined in detail.⁹ By adhering to this set of aesthetic principles, each member's artwork was conceived of as part of a larger collaborative project.

Guided by the tenets of AFRICOBRA, Jae produced several fashion garments in the period leading up to the group's national debut at the Studio Museum in Harlem in the summer of 1970. *Ebony Family* (1968) and *Urban Wall Suit* (1969) were among the

seminal designs by Jae featured in the New York exhibition. In the guise of apparel, these artworks invite a subjective reading of the forms, colors, and lines as part of the overall aesthetic experience, yet they are forcefully political and demonstrative. As Jones-Hogu reflects, "it was not fantasy or art for art's sake, it was specific and functional."¹⁰

What could be more "specific and functional" than garments designed specifically for a revolution? As Jae recently explained, "The rectangular format of my *Ebony Family* dress is a dashiki imitating a poster."¹¹ By taking the form of a traditional West African men's garment that became de rigueur in African-American communities during the 1960s and 1970s, Jae connects her design practice to African, rather than European, fashion traditions. Employing lettering (in the form of scattered Es and Fs) subscribes to AFRICOBRA's practice of reinforcing images through language, but referencing in an oblique way that is comprehensible without being literal like many of the political and protest posters of the period.

The reductive nature of Jae's figural design in *Ebony Family* underscores AFRICOBRA's interest in forging links between African prototypes and African-American art traditions. This is especially reflected in the faces of her rendered Black family. Their forms recall the stylized geometry of Lwalwa and Dan masks made by artists in regions of Angola and Congo in West Africa. The geometric veltreen shapes and thick, rectangular lines of complimentary colors imbue this work with a rhythmic visual buoyancy. These are AFRICOBRA's famous "Cool-ade" colors: "bright, vivid, singing cool-ade colors of orange, strawberry, cherry, lemon, lime and grape. Pure vivid colors of the sun and nature. Colors that shine on Black people, colors which stand out against the greenery of rural areas."¹²

While *Ebony Family* is infused with an inherited spirit of Africa, the work also speaks directly to that cultural moment in America when Jae and others in the Black Arts Movement celebrated the unique artistic contributions of the African-American artistic avant-garde. By embodying the AFRICOBRA principle of Free Symmetry, defined as "the use of syncopated rhyth-

mic repetition which constantly changes in color, texture, shapes, form, pattern, movement, feature, etc.," *Ebony Family* conjures the dazzling 1960s paper collages of Romare Bearden, himself an artist-turned-activist in the Civil Rights era.¹³ Jae's colorful, staccato composition also echoes the free-form, improvisational music of African-American Jazz masters like Eric Dolphy, Roscoe Mitchell, and John Coltrane, whose music filled the studios of the AFRICOBRA artists.

Few artworks of the 1960s and 70s joyfully "represent" as well as *Urban Wall Suit* (1969), a natty two-piece woman's suit. The garment declares its origins loudly and proudly. Constructed of printed and dyed silk with applied velvet lines suggesting a brick wall, and covered in painted graffiti and imitations of tattered broadsides, *Urban Wall Suit* crystallizes the vibrant culture of the South Side Chicago community that Jae lived in and loved. The faux tattered posters, rendered in acrylic paint, reference contemporary politics (Vote Democrat), and advertise local gigs by Blues and Jazz greats (Muddy Waters, Duke Ellington). Graffiti on the bodice honors Chicago colloquialisms of the day like "E Thang," "Miss Attitude," and "Black Prince." Jae reflected on *Urban Wall Suit* recently: "It was important, because the language was who I was speaking to, and I was saying, I understand your newsletter on the wall. And I join you. Why not [graffiti] on a perfectly good silk suit made to look like a wall."¹⁴

By creating her art in the form of a wearable garment, Jae extended the work outside of the museum environment, where it is perceived as a precious art object. Curator Kellie Jones explains: "The traditional canvas is understood here through its constituent parts, pigment and cloth, and its confluence with other uses, as quilt, as clothing."¹⁵ No mere aesthetic object, *Urban Wall Suit* asserts its specific function through visual references to the street. This wearable urban billboard becomes at once personal shelter, public political act, and cultural observance. Jae recalled wearing the *Urban Wall Suit* during a visit with friends in Boston: "When our visit was over, I could hear in their voices, and see in their eyes, respect--Real respect...and pride."¹⁶

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1. "Jae" is the name under which Jarrell has produced art since the early 1960s. It is an acronym for Johnson Annette Elaine, the reverse order of her birth name.
2. I have capitalized the B in Black out of respect for the long tradition of doing so when referring to people of the African Diaspora. This form of the word was commonly used by African-American media outlets, beginning in the 1960s.
3. Jae Jarrell quoted in "Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze," *Jet*, vol. 39, no. 18, January 28, 1971: 42-45.
4. Kellie Jones, "Civil/Rights/Act," *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, eds. (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Monacelli Press, 2014), 46.
5. Unpublished TV Land/Hudson Street Productions interview transcript, 2010, Additional recorded and transcribed materials are held as "Interviews with AfriCOBRA Founders" by the Archives of American Art. For more information see www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews-africobra-founders-15925
6. Ibid.
7. The group was originally named COBRA, an acronym for Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, but changed to AFRICOBRA in late 1969. Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell prefer that the name of the group be spelled with all capital letters, as it was on the poster produced for the first AFRICOBRA exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1970. Other group members and scholars have used AfriCOBRA, AFRI-COBRA, and Afri-COBRA in printed material that references the group.
8. Barbara Jones-Hogu, "The History, Philosophy and Aesthetics of AfriCOBRA," *AfriCOBRA III* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1973), unpaginated.
9. Jeff Donaldson, "10 in Search of a Nation," *Black World*, vol. 19, no. 12, October 1970: 80-89.
10. Jones-Hogu, unpaginated.
11. Jae Jarrell, artist's page, *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, 117.
12. Jones-Hogu, unpaginated.
13. Ibid.
14. TV Land/Hudson Street Productions interview transcript, 9.
15. Jones, 46.
16. Jarrell, 117.

1.



2.



1. Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, outside of Jae Jarrell Vintage Menswear & Collectibles, 466 Greenwich St., New York City, 2005

2. Jae Jarrell in *Urban Wall Suit*, posed with Wadsworth Jr. (3 yrs), and Jennifer (3 mos) Revere Beach, Massachusetts, 1971



Jae Jarrell

Ebony Family, c. 1968

Velvet dress with velvet collage

38 1/2 x 38 x 10 inches

Collection of the Brooklyn Museum Gift of R.M. Atwater, Anna Wolfrom Dove, Alice Fiebiger, Joseph Fiebiger, Belle Campbell Harriss, and Emma L. Hyde, by exchange. Designated Purchase Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, and Carll H. de Silver Fund, 2012.80.16



Jae Jarrell

Urban Wall Suit, c. 1969

Sewn and painted cotton and silk, two-piece suit

37 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 10 inches

Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, Gift of R.M. Atwater, Anna Wolfrom Dove, Alice Fiebiger, Joseph Fiebiger, Belle Campbell Harriss, and Emma L. Hyde, by exchange. Designated Purchase Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, and Carll H. de Silver Fund, 2012.80.16.

HARRIS JOHNSON

QUEASY AND UNSURE, HAPPY AND AFRAID
INTERVIEW BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

I first met Harris Johnson in 2013 at a solo exhibition of his work in Cleveland. The paintings were colorful, punchy, and slapstick; landscapes, still lifes, and tools of the trade. Many came across as jokes. Together, they could be read like a stand up comedian's monologue, a heady blend of confidence and desperation. At a studio visit soon after, I saw how intense and quizzical Johnson's practice is, how his interrogation of painting, and struggle with and against style, were enmeshed with apprehensions of self, presentness, history, and inadequacy. Over the next couple of years, as Johnson pursued his MFA, his practice expanded, becoming less canvas-centric, more open-ended, and stylistically diverse. The paintings retained the personality of the earlier work, articulating it with greater nuance. I sat down with Johnson on June 9, 2015, a few days before the opening of *How to Remain Human*, to discuss his work over drinks.



RB

I was trying to think of a way to describe your sense of humor. I kept circling around words like sarcastic or wry or smart-alecky. Daffy comes close. But the word that kept rising to the top was "dumb." It's the dumbness of your work that makes it so funny and pathetic and powerful all at once.

HJ

Yes! It is definitely dumb. Part of that is about futility. A painting can't change anything but it offers an experience. Like with the faux rock painting--I just wanted to paint a rock. Sure, it brings up notions of stage setting, artificiality, realness, existential questions. But it's also just a stupid little trompe l'oeil thing.

RB

The paintings that you were making before going to grad school were quite different than the ones you're making now. They were more graphic and comically-styled. What was the first painting that made you know that you were doing something really different? What was the break for you?

HJ

There were a few breaks. One was a painting of a desert, a sort of imaginary landscape I did after I got back from LA. I feel like that was the first time I really *struggled* through a painting. Before that I feel like I was doing... maybe illustration or something? Like a frame-by-frame story of my life here. The other painting was of a dead soldier. From Iraq or Vietnam, with his brains blown out. I felt like, "Woah... What the fuck?" I got out of genre painting, got out of the idea of still life painting as a habit. The previous

work was about me, it had aspects of my life, true stuff and fake shit, everything was a “Harris Johnson painting” but it seemed disingenuous at a certain point, like I was copying myself. And I wanted to make paintings that meant something more.

RB

So your paintings now, to what degree are they autobiographical? When you make a painted text piece like *American Ramble*, is that your experience, or is it meant to speak to more of a generalized consciousness, a broader, shared experience?

HJ

I hope it’s effective in a general sense, in a broader picture. I don’t want to be specific in a politic; I don’t want to be specific in a statement. I don’t want to tell people what I think, or what they should think. I want people to feel, ideally, kind of queasy and unsure, happy and afraid. Going through oscillations of feeling, really comfortable and then terrified. This is really bleak... like the dumbness thing. People might ask, “Is this guy an idiot? Or, is he really on to something? Does he really care about the world and what’s going on?” And I do. I do. That gesture, scribbling on a wall, is a very teen angsty, spazzy thing. But it’s also expressive, and I believe in that communicative directness. That’s probably what I retain from my earlier paintings, the idea of intuition being really, really important, along with improvisation. “MacGyver-ing” it and winging it on the fly is really, really important. People see that in a work and they might think, “Oh, there’s no planning.” But there’s also no hesitation, there’s no doubt. There’s mistakes, there’s bad moves, but there’s good moves, too. Maybe.

RB

When I was reading *American Ramble* I was struck by all of the dated

references: JonBenét Ramsey, OJ Simpson. Is that because those things are related to the development of your psyche as a child of the 80s?

HJ

That’s one way of looking at it. But also, you can think about Rodney King--which I don’t really remember, I wasn’t tuned in at that moment-- and then think about today and all of the police brutality. The ramble piece is a really frustrated piece, because I don’t know what the fuck to say. I don’t know what to say, and I don’t know how to say it, but I know I’m mad about something, and that I can’t articulate it. Something is so fucked up, something is so wrong, and nothing has really changed. It’s not really that different. The way that the news is structured, commercials or whatever, there’s a cut sequence between a 12-year-old girl being raped and murdered to a special interest story to a commercial to a bunch of dudes chilling out... Dodge, Dodge, rock hard cock, American man. That shit is really disturbing to me. And it’s hard to express how disturbing it is.

The dated references are dated but they’re part of the cultural... blech. JonBenét Ramsey is as much a part of it as John Wayne Gacey, Al Capone, Babe Ruth. I could talk about Desert Storm and it would be the same as Iraq or Iran. ISIS is the same as Contra. That’s why the tone of the piece is just really, really pissed off, it really makes me angry. There’s a lot about the world that I’m unspecifically pissed off about.

RB

Let’s talk about your painting *Black Hole* (2015). I like looking at people look at this work. It has a really beautiful and sharp connection to the individual viewer.

HJ

I was really attentive to that painting, in a really specific way. Not as in paying attention to what was happening inch by inch on the canvas, but just when I was making it, it was like “What the fuck is this going to be?” The canvas is soaked through completely, I’m doing things to it, and then I’m going to come back and I don’t know what it’s going to look like. When the painting was wet, the stars were perfect, and I was like “That’s it!” I would come back the next day and it’s dead. And I would have to fix it, make it alive again. It’s a painting that is meant for you to spend time with. It’s not like a quick glance and “ha ha.” It’s subtle.

feels gross. Like a design. It works well for some people, but I’m not one of them. I’m definitely clumsy. I’m like a fiddler. John Wesley, Peter Saul, they plan the shit out of what they do. It’s amazing, but it’s not necessarily painting that jives with me. I’d rather stare at a Frank Auerbach painting for like, a year. There’s something about the tactile surface of a painting, about the fact that you’re fumbling through it, and you don’t really know what you’re doing, that I think is really, really important.

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RB

What is on the canvas? What is being devoured? What is out there?

HJ

It depends how you see the painting. I guess I see it as a push/pull. It sucks you in, pushes you away, sucks you in again. I mean, it’s a picture of depression. It’s a picture of being sad. And me feeling absolutely inside this painting. It’s kind of Pollock-y, a little corny, a little spacey, it’s a lot of things. The process of the painting--dribbling, dabbing, and all of that stuff--was really nice. The paint is in the canvas. On it, in it, and behind it. It’s kind of a weird tactile thing. But it really does depend on how you look at it. It could be a bible picture. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. Congratulations, you’re all going to heaven. It could be an apocalyptic picture. You’re getting sucked into a black hole; there you are, this little stick figure falling into a vortex. It could be about you being at the center. Or it could be “Stairway to Heaven.” There’s a little ladder in the picture. The way I work is very... I don’t believe in planning things. It doesn’t feel right. It



Harris Johnson
Black Hole, 2015
Oil, acrylic and enamel on canvas
84 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the artist

1.



2.

1. Harris Johnson
Tiny World, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
16 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

2. Harris Johnson
Rock, 2014
papier mache, modeling paste, acrylic
13 x 21 x 13 inches
Courtesy of the artist

WAKE UP TURN TV ON PHONE ON CAR ON THINK CRY
COMMERCIAL INTEREST LOW APR. FREE FINANCING FINE
2% 3% LOW BUDGET HEHE CRY INTO YOUR JACKET SLEEVE
COMMERCIAL SIMILAR AND CHECKS AND BALANCES SURVEILLANCE
STATE OF THE UNION A COP PUTS HIS KNEE INTO YOUR BACK
HANDS UP DONT SHOOT THEY ALWAYS SHOOT TAKE A SHOT WHISKY
TOYOTA CAMRY NEW FRESH BETTER THAN EVER MARINES....
NO NO NO THIS IS NOT REAL THIS CANNOT BE REAL
CRASH YOUR CAR GOBS OF BLOOD SPOUT FROM YOUR NECK 42
SKIDDY LABRADOR GOLDEN RETRIEVER PICKET FENCES. OTHER
OPTIONS INCLUDE BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO CRYING SOBBING
FAITH IN OUR SYSTEM HAHHAHAHA WHAT A FUCKING JOKE BUT
BUT WHATS SO FUNNY ABOUT ANYTHING ANYTHING ITS NOT
A NEW ERA FEEL IT IN YOUR BINEC SOMETHING DARK AND
TERRIBLE LIVES IN US ME YOU WE DANIEL PEARL JON BENET
RAMSAY RAMSEY OJ SIMPSON INSTAGRAM TALKING HEADS AND
PLASTIC FACES PLASTIC TITS AND PLASTIC ASSES WHO EVEN
CARES HOLY MARY WONDEROUS MARY PRAY WITH ME FUCK KILL
CRUSH DESTROY ITS 2015 THIS IS 2015 THIS IS TTT ITS ^o
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Harris Johnson
American Ramble, 2015
Acrylic paint on wall
Dimensions variable
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland

HARRIS JOHNSON

HARRIS JOHNSON: PAINTING AND ANXIETY

BY OWEN DUFFY

As I write this essay, I have watched two places I love torn apart: Baltimore and Nepal. In the aftermath of riots and earthquakes, I am left with feelings of ambivalence about what “I can do” as an art historian to effect meaningful social change. Compounding this disaffection and doubt, my own president has publicly stated that my profession is of little use to America as it climbs out of economic collapse.¹ Moreover, one of the objects I engage with as a scholar, abstract painting, has been recently dismissed as something to be instantly suspicious of, a “zombie formalist” commodity of no real significance outside of market potential. What is an artworker, let alone a human being, to do under such circumstances? Harris Johnson’s paintings interpolate traces of anxiety and uncertainty, and seem to presciently anticipate such indecision about what an individual “can do” in a moment of global turmoil. His works ask urgent questions about art’s political functions in the contemporary world, and use humor, irony, and, ultimately, sensitivity to cope with ambivalent attitudes toward art in the twenty-first century.

After spending several years working in Cleveland, Johnson moved to Richmond in 2013. Finding himself in close proximity to the epicenter of the American government during heated partisan debates over the federal deficit, one of Johnson’s first actions in Richmond was to create over one hundred paintings of the American flag, drive to Washington D.C., and sell them on the National

Mall. With social media feeds flooded with the government shutdown and a bungled War on Terror, Johnson felt disillusioned about his role as a painter. In search of a politic, Johnson recalls: “I actually felt like I was going to watch our country collapse, and I was drinking coffee and pushing paint around in my studio. I thought about how I could help. I was going to D.C. to pay off [America’s] debt.”² Along with his clumsy, abstracted flag paintings, Johnson set up shop with a hand-painted sign that contradictorily asked readers to “support the arts” by buying a painting, with the proceeds being donated to the U.S. Treasury. Cheeky, cynical, and absurd, Johnson’s efforts on the Mall raise questions about how painting can meaningfully contribute to society during such watershed moments. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse, when auction prices--particularly for choice paintings--were breaking records, Johnson, in an ironic and humorous form of self-criticism, riffs on the notion that art’s most worthwhile attribute is its ability to perform as a commodity.

Abstract Protest Sign (2013) likewise uses humor to conjure the absurd. And, like Johnson’s actions on the Mall, it does so in order to establish an ambivalent attitude toward painting-as-political, held in tension between doubt and levity. Far too heavy and cumbersome to hold comfortably for an extended period of time, let alone for a multi-day picket, this object asks if the language of abstraction retains the

radical politics from modernism's halcyon days. What would it mean to introduce the crimson, loopy forms of *Abstract Protest Sign* to a demonstration in Ferguson or Baltimore? When one begins to imagine such a ridiculous act, the idea of an abstract painting affecting social change becomes implausible, potentially even ludicrous. *Abstract Protest Sign* suggests its own failure; not as a work of art, but the failure of the work of art to communicate universal meaning. At a more existential level, *Abstract Protest Sign* asks, "What can painting do?" In a more immanent sense, Johnson proposes that the work, if it protests anything at all, objects to the "dominance of abstract painting," while also suggesting a deep-seated anxiety about painting as a viable medium in the twenty-first century.³ During a moment mired with Silicon Valley "innovation," government relegation of the arts, and STEM educations, how can we begin to characterize this anxiety? How does Johnson's work navigate such an ethos; what paths out of this condition do these painting trace?

For Johnson's work, perhaps we can consider anxiety as it is understood by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Summoning the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, Žižek contends anxiety is a response to the knowledge of freedom, to the "abyss of possibilities" that confronts an individual.⁴ Anxiety produces an uncertainty, a contrapuntal movement between repulsion and attraction directed at existence itself, and one must *work* to make meaning out of the vertiginous infinite. Žižek's interpretation of anxiety provides a useful model for understanding a painter's plight, as well as Johnson's creative practice. At a moment of reinvigorated doubt about painting--when art can be anything, instantaneously circulated, and abstraction's transcendent, universal narratives are replaced with financialized discourse--how can one imbue artistic production with meaning? Rather than succumbing to the fundamentally human experience of

anxiety, Johnson's practice, and its aesthetic diversity, revels in the sense of freedom that causes it.

Previously, Johnson has worked extensively through discrete visual languages. As of late, his paintings demonstrate remarkable range. Recent paintings such as *Big To* (2015) and *Black Hole* (2015) are united through their unapologetic aesthetic difference. They are also all palimpsests; surfaces where Johnson cycles through ideas, feelings, and entire paintings to arrive at a singular image replete with multiple histories and interpretations. *Big To* took over eight months to complete; a landscape, a gestural abstraction, and other works are buried underneath the slick, liquid surface. *Big To* presents viewers with contradictory visual information. The painting's text could be read as "To," with the pinkish lump morphing into the letter "o." It could also be read as "T.," or the acid green form could be viewed as devoid of linguistic meaning, and be seen iconographically as a cross, and so on. Whereas earlier works, such as *Abstract Protest Sign*, internalized and expressed ambivalence about art's relationship to the political, this type of apprehension is ameliorated in more recent works through the painting process itself. In *Big To*, anxiety and uncertainty are manifested in terms of how the work encourages ever-shifting, unstable meanings.

Let us momentarily consider some Freudian implications of Johnson's palimpsestic approach to production; doing so elucidates how *Big To*'s aesthetic strategies reveal traces of human experience. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud characterizes Rome, the Eternal City, in relationship to the mind:

Suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychological entity with a similarly long and copious past--an entity... in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed

away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one.⁵

Following Freud's imagination, all that has ever happened to the Eternal City--the battles, the Bacchanals, and cultural memories--never actually ceases to matter, just as all the events, emotions, and relationships one has ever experienced determines how that individual faces Žižek's "abyss of possibilities." Rome, as with the psyche, becomes a site of accumulation for history to continually rewrite itself on. Even though the resonances of past events may not be readily observable and understood, like the countless underpaintings of Johnson's palimpsest-like works, they leave their mark, they are *felt* on the surface, and undoubtedly shape the reality that will eventually emerge. Johnson's paintings, such as *Big To* and *Black Hole*, have thus become what they presently are because of their past--their layers of literal and conceptual accumulation.

Black Hole, specifically, brazenly confronts the "abyss of possibilities" and its attendant disconcertion. The matter at hand--the centrifugal black hole at the center of the spiraling universe--lends itself to idea of the ultimate unknown. The uncertainty of what lies beyond the event horizon casts the work as an exploration of epistemological limits, thereby inserting it into the trajectory of anxiety, ambivalence, and uncertainty I have tracked in Johnson's oeuvre. However, it is how Johnson approaches this work, with painterly conviction, that articulates resolve and acquiescence to mystery. The surface of *Black Hole*, like *Big To*, a consequence of coat after painted coat, gesture after gesture, creates a reverberating, oscillating aura that draws the viewer's eye inward to the painting's point of no return, only to return one's vision to the galaxy's sweeping arms. Expressive marks, fragments of texts, and even a lone, distressed stick figure (humor always permeates Johnson's

work) are swept up into the frenzied vortex. Astutely rendered, *Black Hole* suggests an acceptance of painting's limits, or, perhaps, an acceptance of the uncertainty about what those limits are. In a manner akin to the Kantian sublime, where the imagination collapses in on itself in its futile attempts to fathom what lies beyond, vertiginous feelings are replaced with sense of serenity. This ability to accept the unknown and the limits of cognition are powerful aspects of the Kantian sublime and Johnson's work demonstrates sensitivity toward this initial frustration, which is followed by assurances of the mind's competency.

In the context of the contemporary moment, a precarious one marked by ideological and ecological fissures, Johnson's paintings present potential resolutions. The works come to terms with uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety through sincere and sustained investigations into how art can function in relationship to such times and how, in turn, it can meaningfully contribute to the world. Given the extensive polarization created by such fissures, this ability to critically think about one's own position is more crucial and imperative than ever.



1. On January 30, 2014, President Obama commented at a General Electric plant: "I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree."
2. Harris Johnson, interview with the author, April 25, 2015.
3. Johnson, interview with the author, April 25, 2015.
4. Slavoj Žižek, "Anxiety: Kierkegaard with Lacan," in *Lacanian Ink*, Vol. 26, (Fall 2005), p. 114.
5. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962, p. 17



Harris Johnson
Abstract Protest Sign, 2013
Acrylic on panel, wood
40 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the artist

JIMMY KUEHNLE

#PINKTHINGMOCA

INTERVIEW BY MEGAN LYKINS REICH

Jimmy Kuehnle takes up space. His past works include massively-scaled inflatable costumes and outlandish bicycles that put the artist in close, unusual contact with the world around him. Most recently, Kuehnle has started making site-specific sculptures, representing a shift from personal performance to the activation of space. These works “get in the way,” disrupting usual functions and raising questions about public versus private, and the “place” of art.

For *How to Remain Human* MOCA commissioned Kuehnle to create an installation for MOCA Cleveland’s three-story Kohl atrium. Alluring, odd, and delightful, his new work *Please, no smash.* engages the Museum’s audience, architecture, and neighborhood in an interactive way. It begs visitors to push, press, nuzzle, and otherwise respond to its curious presence and shifting form. Made from hundreds of yards of neon pink PVC fabric, the work hovers above viewers as it slowly inflates and deflates. Its lights flicker and glow according the time of day, and the form radiates a hot pink glow that is visible from outside the Museum at night. When it’s fully expanded, the work’s plump body extends into most areas of the Kohl Atrium. On the ground level, leg-like protrusions zig-zag down from above like bulbous stalactites, creating tunnels and pathways. At various stair landings, the

sculpture balloons over the handrail and swells up to the ceiling. As it deflates, the work recoils and draws up against the wall. It functions like a living, breathing organism, or an erratically beating heart inside the Museum.

Please, no smash. bears structural and aesthetic similarities to Kuehnle’s previous inflatable costumes and sculptures. It is the most complex sculpture the artist has built to date, with its unique combination of scale, movement, mechanics, and mounting system presenting many unknowns. Kuehnle thrives on the unfamiliar. He regularly generates ideas that push him beyond his current limits and force him to learn, grow, and expand. Of course, failure is inevitable. So Kuehnle conceives his projects to minimize the severity of failure--barring ultimate catastrophe, what are the ways this may shift/ fail that are acceptable aesthetically, mechanically, institutionally. In these ways, *Please, no smash.* represents how contemporary art practice relates to and invokes other industries. Artists are problem solvers. Their works are solutions, though not necessarily answers.

Here are some answers from the artist about aspects of this work.

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MLR

How did you approach designing the sculpture's form? Are there any references that inspired its shapes and protrusions? How did the architecture influence your design choices?

JK

I wanted to fill the space with form and mass. I think that inflatables are very interesting when you are inside one. When you're inside an inflatable, the lack of 90-degree angles and natural architectural forms really makes for a surreal experience, and I enjoy it very much. Some of my original ideas were based on an inflatable that would completely fill the space and only leave spots for people to stand with the work enveloping them. Lights would shine down from above indicating the spots that would be safe in the sculpture, as it would come down and surround that entire area. Some of the first designs included these all-encompassing sections. Some were only (in theory) three feet high, so they would require squatting and not have enough room for a standing adult. There were also passageways that required visitors to meander through the inflatable. The logistics of this idea were not feasible, however, so in this case, the zigzag protrusions are my attempt at making a surreal, absurd, abstract atmosphere in the environment.

The architecture influenced my design by its very shape. MOCA Cleveland's building has a very hard feeling, so I wanted something soft and overwhelming to shove up against these rigid architectural elements. I started with a 3D model of the Kohl Atrium that I built from CAD plans of the original building. I designed shapes that would fill that space in different ways. Some design decisions such as the height of the steel armature that supports the piece, as well as the sharp angle of the railings, had to be sculpted around. I also wanted to press against the sloping glass on the Museum's exterior.

MLR

Why pink?

JK

I like pink. The Museum's interior color palette is blue, black, and white--very cold on the interior aside from the yellow interior stairs. Of course, this is by design. In a museum, the artworks are meant to be highlighted. I wanted to have something that really juxtaposed that blue steel, something warm and illuminating and glowing. That limited the piece to colors such as red, orange, yellow, or pink; no blues, no greens, no purples. Also, nylon fabric only comes in a limited color palette. You can have any color custom made, but why reinvent the wheel when they sell hot pink fabric?

MLR

Describe it and how your impression of MOCA Cleveland's architecture changed while making and installing, *Please, no smash.*

JK

My experience of the architecture changed as I made the digital model for the initial ideation and sketches. As I was making the 3D model, I kept second-guessing myself, thinking, "That can't be where that is," or "It can't really be that angle." Everything seemed so strange as I recreated it in digital form and filled it with ideas and sculptures. Then I double-checked those ideas in reality by measuring the physical space. My model was within an inch or so of the building, which makes sense because there are adjustments that occur during construction. I learned to appreciate and experience the architecture of MOCA Cleveland much more. I also learned how difficult it is to work on a lift, especially since there was always something just out of reach. Often I thought, "It's just over there, but I can't get there, because there is a reverse cantilever sloping piece of glass."

MLR

Upon first read, the title *Please, no smash.* seems to be a request from either you or the sculpture itself (to the viewer, assumedly). However, installed in the Museum, I suddenly read it as an appeal by the building to the sculpture, a plea for the work to keep its distance (which it obviously ignores). Talk about the title--how did you come to it, and has its meaning changed for you over time?

JK

I like titles that make people like you curious, but also offer the potential for the viewer's own interpretation by having some sort of call-to-action for the audience. Yes, *Please, no smash.* is definitely a request to not be smashed by the art. It also is a request from the sculpture not to be smashed. It could be interpreted as an impression or request from the building. But you can't really smash it: if you press on it, it will pop back. Because the sculpture will sometimes go down towards the audience, it may very well be the audience pleading, "Please don't smash." as well as the building as it comes towards the glass.

MLR

During installation, you mentioned that *Please, no smash.* converges many previous works--both in form and function--into one ginormous installation. What surprises did you encounter during the process of planning, constructing, and installing this work? Can you estimate its influence on your future inflatables, or work in general?

JK

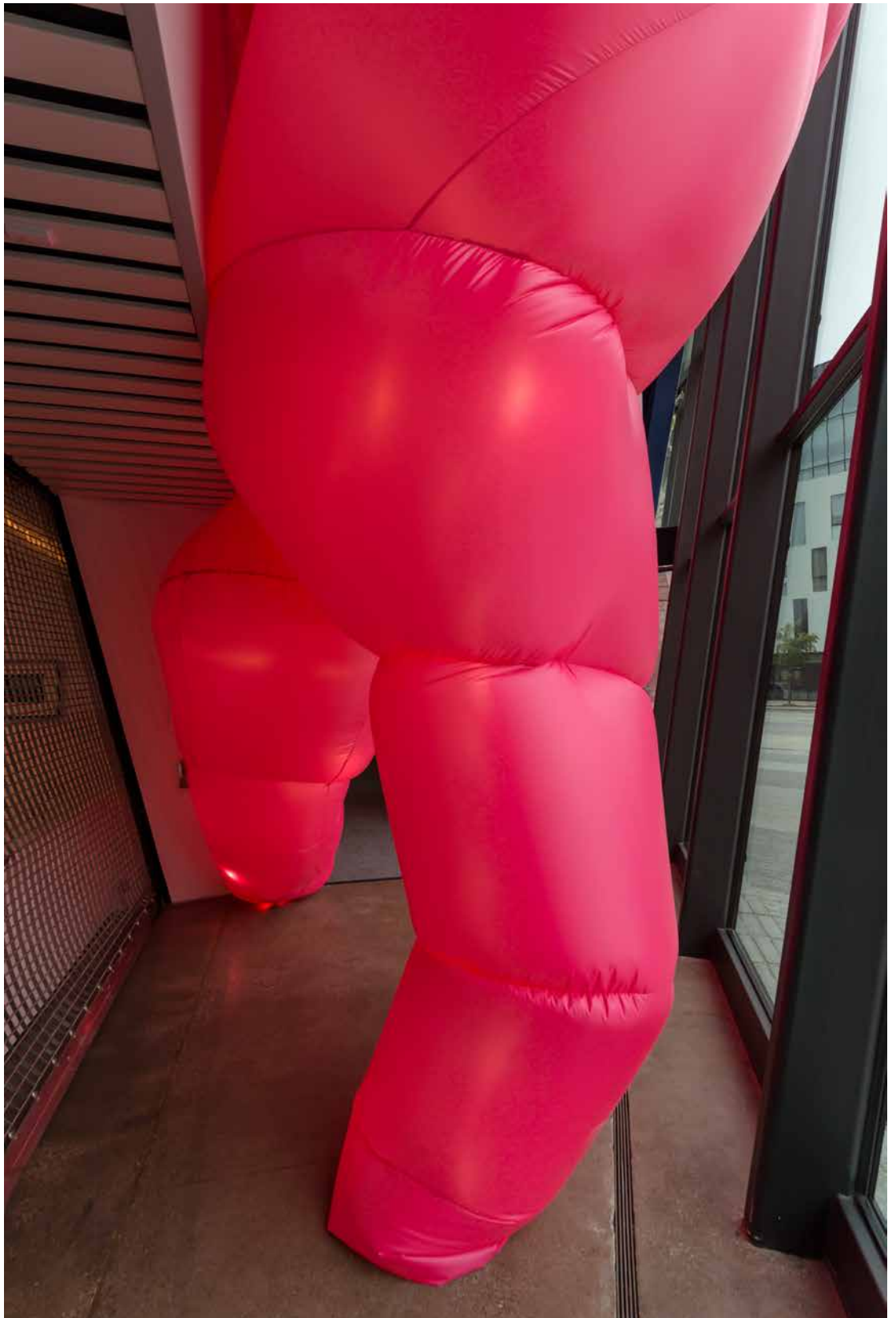
When I work on projects, I always like to learn things and have new experiences. I don't want to just repeat things I know. So I set up challenges, situations that require me to learn new techniques, skills, and processes, to use new materials, to know something that I don't know now,

in order to make the work. Yet, I don't want to plunge into the darkness or "jump off a cliff," so these unknowns are usually extensions or variations on themes that I already understand.

For this work, I focused on several themes and processes that I partially understood, and extended them all into unknown territory. I combined them into a single artwork so that all those unknowns, combined into a new work, would add up to something very new for me.

Although this work is heavily planned from start to finish and executed according to plan, it still had many different surprises. For example, my interest in the space originally came from seeing Michelle Grabner's sculpture, *Grabner/Killam Family Summer 2013* (2013) hanging from the ceiling. I thought to myself, "Great, you can hang stuff there," only to find out after initial planning that the ceiling was not an option in this case. So I decided to cantilever off the wall and use brackets on the metal railings. The form had to be redesigned to accommodate that style of armature rather than anchors coming from the ceiling. I had to learn a bit about electronics, mechanical winches, sailing blocks (pulleys) and stage rigging rope as I worked on the piece--things that I did not expect to be researching. I had to learn the open-source Arduino micro-controller programming platform as well as some other electronics to get the sculpture to work. There are many surprises and setbacks along the way, but that's part of the fun of working on a site-specific piece.

Most times, when I finally finish an inflatable, I swear I won't make one for a while. But they're so much fun! Somehow this center of gravity keeps pulling me back. I think that I will incorporate more kinetic effects in future projects. This is not the first time that I've used illumination, and I will continue to do that because it provides different views of the sculpture at night and day. And I'll probably continue making things with an ON and OFF button.



Jimmy Kuehnle
Please, no smash, 2015
Fabric, thread, fans, electronics
dimensions variable
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics

JIMMY KUEHNLE

INTO THE PINK
BY TERRY SCHWARZ

Jimmy Kuehnle's installation, *Please, no smash*. (2015) is a vivid pink presence at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland--monumental in scale, but more malleable and tender than most monuments ever aspire to be.

I've encountered Jimmy and his remarkable inflatables in other contexts, including projects we've worked on together for specific sites in Cleveland. In partnership with Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Jimmy has deployed his talents to protect pedestrians from downtown traffic (*Pop Up Rockwell*, Cleveland, 2012), enliven an underutilized parking garage (*Hipp Deck*, Cleveland, 2011), and shelter people on a long walk across a dark bridge (*The Detroit-Superior Bridge Project*, Cleveland, 2013).

These objects pull people near with a playful and irresistible force. Once we have their attention, it becomes possible to have all kinds of conversations about future development plans and public realm improvements. An inflatable object is an excellent icebreaker.

Jimmy's current installation has a somewhat different intent. He's created a friendly form at MOCA Cleveland that interacts with museum visitors and engages pedestrians outside. Even when no one is around, it continues to inflate and deflate, inhale and exhale. Perhaps it even sighs occasionally when it feels lonely, or crumples after a long day on the job.

Of course, it's a thing, not a person. But Jimmy gives us permission to anthropomorphize his installations. He makes relatable objects, akin to other, more figurative artworks such as the encompassing embrace of Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* (1999), a towering, 30' tall spi-

der figure, the deceptive puffiness of Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog* (2002), or the buoyant sweetness of Florentijn Hofman's *Rubber Duck* (2009).

Unlike these other works, Jimmy's installation at MOCA Cleveland is not a recognizable creature. But it is undeniably creaturely. Suspended more than twenty feet in the air, its body contorts and strains against the walls of the Museum. Its columns (or legs) stretch to the ground. It moves as we move (sort of) and we identify with its existential struggles.

It also functions as architecture. It creates and defines space, providing opportunities for chance encounters under and around its massive pinkness. Prior to installing the piece, Jimmy prepared architectural renderings to show how it would fit within MOCA Cleveland's atrium. The avatars who inhabit Jimmy's rendered world are clustered near the inflated object, not really looking at it, nor at each other. In its posture and presence, the object is notably more natural and alive than the people drawn around it.

In architectural jargon, the human occupants of a rendering are sometimes referred to as *people textures*--cut and paste characters intended to provide human scale and establish a social context. But in this case, it's the object we're more likely to identify with and befriend. It's a companionable thing, an inflatable counterpart to our own humanity.

Maybe someday this charismatic character will produce offspring, as tiny pink plushies or refrigerator magnets in the MOCA Store. If one follows you home, you can keep it. And take great pleasure in its (and your own) existence.

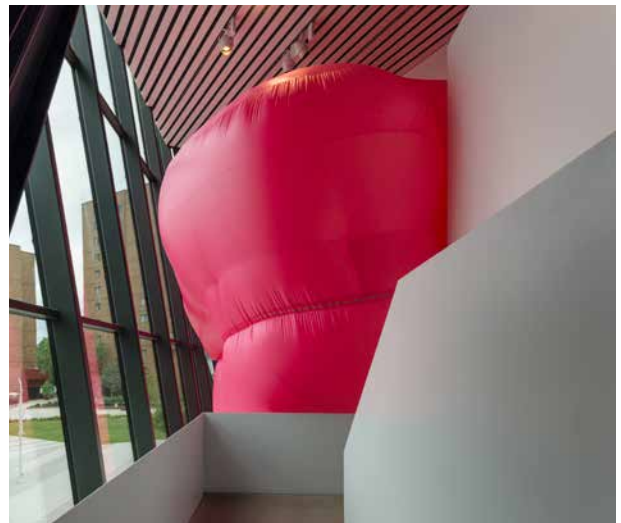


1.



3.

1. Jimmy Kuehnle
rendering for *Please, no smash*
Courtesy of the artist



2.

2. Jimmy Kuehnle
Please, no smash, 2015
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland
Photo: Timothy Safrankek Photographics

3. View of *Please, no smash* lighting
up the MOCA Cleveland Atrium from
outside the building at night.

SOMEBODY SHOULD JUST GIVE HIM A
HAIRCUT

BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

D.A.
LEVY

I moved from the UK to Cleveland at 23 years old. I had a baby, my husband worked long hours, and I had no family support. I've always been a place person, my identity tied to surroundings and daily habits, and here I felt myself slipping. I had visited Cleveland twice before I moved, once in the dead of winter and once in the hyper-lush summer, and remembered certain traffic intersections and routes that we drove to the grocery store or the park or the cinema; small disjointed maps hanging in space. After moving, I couldn't find those precise routes again, although I have sometimes felt their edges. I spent a year and a half crisscrossing the city without a car, on a mission, overlaying South London affect atop of Cleveland reality. My son was always my companion, down for whatever, cheerios. I got lost and pushed his stroller for miles.

d.a. levy was a walker too,¹ and his poetry is full of maps.² When I first stumbled across his work, it was as if someone had captured the from-the-ground-up weirdness and visual stabs that Cleveland gives on a daily basis; he saw the city critically, as an outsider would. I was--am still--coming to terms with basic things; the inhumanity of the large-radius curb or the un-cleared sidewalk in winter, and his incredulity meant a lot to me. "Cleveland Undercovers" (1964-65) narrates a long, wandering walk through a necropolis in which much is hidden or muffled by ashes. Over its pages levy excavates the city's unowned histories and psychic pathways, stating, "i have a city to build." levy's city is built with words that become "sweaty brick-flesh images," a mash-up of neon boozeries, steamships, shopping

centers, hillbillies, magical names (WINDERMERE, MAGNOLIA, SEVERANCE), brawls, rain-washed pavements, casinos, dance halls, Lincoln Continentals, and ecstasy, crossing between present and past just to insult Moses Cleaveland (Mose-ass...) and visit the Seneca, Huron, Delaware, and Chippewa tribes who once lived in the region.³

For all of the thick, epic works like "Cleveland Undercovers" and "SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM" (1968, from which the title of this exhibition is drawn), levy produced many shorter poems, which are often simple and romantic. "blues for life" (1960) is a bittersweet whisper of a poem, as if levy is standing outside of himself, foretelling his future:

i miss the cups of coffee
that we
were never without
i miss the wild topics
we used
to talk about
[...]
i miss the night life
and digging the sounds
i miss the lakefront drives
and making the midnight rounds

"REFRIGERATOR MANTRA / the sunlight shining thru my wife's paisley skirt" (1967) pairs two efficient poems. The first, a concrete poem in the form of a refrigerator, imagines its familiar, domestic whirr and hum as a meditation. The second evokes a moment of calm, everyday beauty; I am transported, can feel the raking sunlight slanting through the kitchen window and catching the translucent fabric of Dagmar's dress in the kitchen of the apartment they shared. Though they were never married, they had an intense three-year

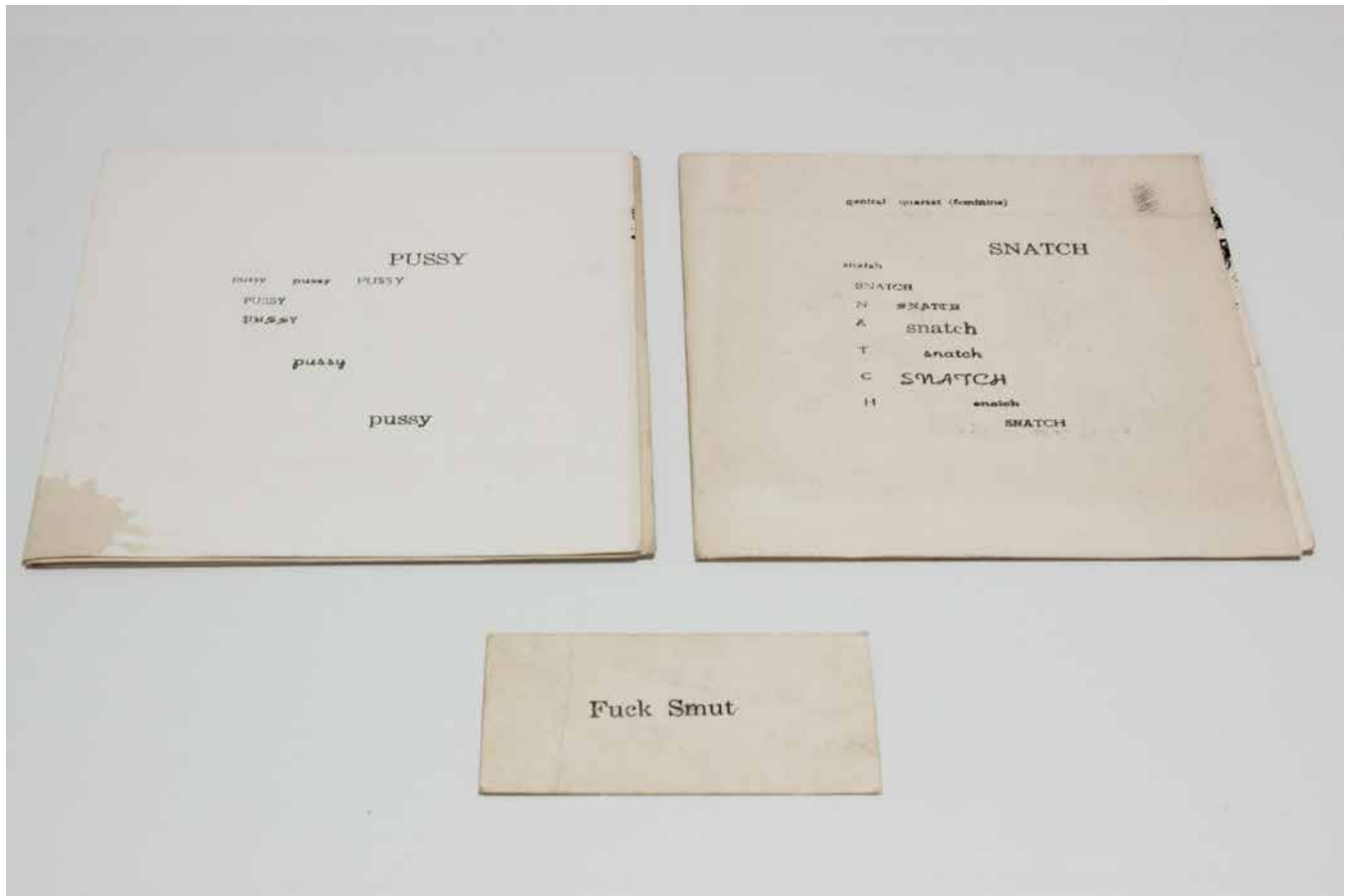
relationship, after moving in together partly out of convenience. levy had overstayed his welcome with friends in Shaker Heights. Dagmar, feeling her seventeen years, just wanted to be out, but the world felt big and she wanted "a body in the house."⁴ The University Circle/East Cleveland border, the area where MOCA Cleveland now sits, had an energy about it in the 1960s. levy and his friends--Tom Kryss, rjs, Russell Salamon, Kent Taylor, D.R. Wagner--and many more, haunted the establishments running the length of Euclid Avenue: the Trinity Cathedral basement; the Continental Theater; the Crystal Restaurant (\$1.90 dinners); the Asphodel bookstore, owned by his friend and supporter Jim Lowell.⁵ Allen Ginsberg came through. But for Dagmar, living with an increasingly paranoid and exhausted levy became "a mindfuck" as time went on.⁶ Firmly planted in the real world, Dagmar elicited levy's scorn, despite the fact that she worked full time to pay the rent, supporting his efforts and allowing him to maintain his oppositional stance as an uncompromised artist. She remembers this time as a short, intense period of her life; after his death she moved on and left the scene behind. But levy is frozen.

I extrapolate levy and thaw him out, imagine him hanging around East Cleveland, broke and complaining, or drunk off of 1/3 of a beer, holding threats of suicide over everybody's head and distributing the Buddhist 3rd Class Oracle on the corner, making his frenetic psychic mark on a slow city during fast times.⁷ I imagine his response to Cleveland today. An unapologetic, often juvenile provocateur, levy painstakingly typeset the words cunt, cock, and pussy (*Farewell the floating cunt*, 1964), and produced a calling card bearing only the words Fuck Smut, a smart-alec response to the obscenity charges brought by the city. In general, he acted the part of the cartoonish poster child for middle-American outrage (except with the grandmothers of Cleveland Heights, in whom he--thin, scruffy--reportedly elicited a motherly, hair tousling response). But the rage-powered invectives he

directed towards the city government, police, and any publication that refused to print his poetry found equal and opposite expression in his passionate advocacy for other poets and artists, tirelessly making a space for their voices. He railed against the complacency of city leaders and politicians but repped East Cleveland the same way rappers in the 1990's gave big-ups to Brooklyn and the Bronx; like it was a name that people should know. Knowing these things, I think his response to recent turns in Cleveland--the Orwellian-sounding "Opportunity Corridor" development; the police shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice; the breakaway inequality and foreclosure crisis--would have been scathing. Or perhaps that's off the mark; maybe he'd have mellowed with age. Speculation on the future feelings of a dead man is impossible. But levy understood that when you really love something you are allowed to be angry at it for not being better. Right now, I think we could use some of his rage.

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1. levy owned very few possessions, and no car. It was both an ideological position and a function of his self-imposed poverty. Karl Young discusses his walking practice in his essay "At the Corner of Euclid Ave. and Blvd. St. Germaine: d.a.levy's Parables of Local Necessity and Universal Decentralism," *d.a.levy & the mimeo revolution*, edited by Larry Smith & Ingrid Swanberg, Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2007, page 155.
2. Ingrid Swanberg connects the geographic dots beautifully in her essay "clouds sun moon mountains water wind: the planetary vision of d.a.levy," *Renegade Flowers: The LevyFest 2014 Anthology*, edited by D.R. Wager & John Dorsey, published by Hydeout Press in coordination with the Kulchur Cooperative Print Workshop.
3. All words in this list excerpted from "Cleveland Undercovers," 1964-1965.
4. Dagmar Walter, interview with the author, June 2015
5. The Continental Theater showed many experimental films, including early works by Andy Warhol.
6. Walter, interview with the author.
7. levy's friend, Cleveland artist George Fitzpatrick, recalls how sensitive to alcohol levy was, and thus how ironic it was that he was held up as some kind of drug kingpin. Says Fitzpatrick, "I knew kingpins, and levy wasn't one of them!" Interview with the author, May 2015.



d.a. levy
TOP ROW:
pages from *Farewell the floating cunt*, 1967
Letterpress prints, 6 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches
BOTTOM ROW:
Fuck Smut, n.d.
Block print on card stock, 2 x 3 1/2 inches
All courtesy of the d.a. levy Collection,
Cleveland State University Library.

D.A. LEVY

D.A.LEVY: AWARENESS & ECLIPSE
BY INGRID SWANBERG

Cleveland poet, artist, editor, and publisher d.a.levy was a seminal figure in the underground press movement of the 1960s.¹ He was in touch with writers around the US, publishing both the famous and obscure as well as his own poetry and dozens of other Cleveland poets. He was always open to new voices.

levy felt it was necessary for the poet to speak out to bring about change in awareness and the transformation of the culture. He was "part of a movement trying to make this planet more civilized," as he said in a newspaper interview soon after he was jailed on trumped-up obscenity charges brought by city authorities trying to stifle his often scathing criticisms (strung with expletives) of government hypocrisy and corruption.² Complete freedom of speech was his poetic ethos, a freedom he expressed to the point that the powers-that-be were moved to silence him with arrest and persecution. Poet Douglas Blazek, levy's friend and contemporary, wrote:

levy criticized the media: "I think it would be better to have no paper than a propaganda sheet aimed at keeping people ignorant." He spoke out against the war in Vietnam, against the lethargic city officials, against unfair police tactics, against the cherished institutions and values of Middle-America. He helped friends avoid the draft.

He organized what were probably the first coffeehouse readings in the history of Cleveland at The Gate (E. 22nd & Euclid) in the basement of Trinity Cathedral, from which emerged four issues of *Poets at the Gate*.³

In August 1968, three months before his suicide, levy wrote "SUBURBAN MONASTERY DEATH POEM," decrying the appropriation and marginalization of the arts by industrial-consumerist society and the distractions of modern technological culture.

as a poet i try to learn
how to remain human
despite technology

SUBURBAN is levy's farewell to his expressed frustrations of being Cleveland's poet, "the nothingness of being a poet in America" (from "Jaywalking Blues," 1967). Over time levy's poetry had moved from claiming the "necropolis" of Cleveland as his own poetic ground:

i have a city to cover with lines
("Cleveland Undercovers," 1966)

to angry confrontation with it:

cleveland, i gave you
the poems that no one ever
wrote about you
and you gave me
NOTHING

("lettre to cleveland"
Kibbutz in the Sky, 1967)

to renouncing his role as Cleveland's poet and disavowing his project of bringing change:

im not advocating anything
("SUBURBAN MONASTERY
DEATH POEM," 1968)

In 1963 levy acquired a small letterhead hand press and type and proceeded to work with great energy and intensity, sometimes 16 hours a day, producing chapbooks under the imprint Renegade Press and his first periodical *The Silver Cesspool*. He lived in self-imposed poverty in order to devote himself to his poetry full-time. At times friends shared in the work. "We set type, printed & laid in each page by hand, pulled the handle, removed the page, collated, and even carved woodcuts using linoleum."⁴ Friends also shared in the distribution of the work, posting throughout Cleveland the stickers levy had produced in a satirically funny, proselytizing vein, with the moral imperative reading, "FUCK SMUT." In 1965 levy was given a small mimeograph and his output increased exponentially. In 1966 Renegade Press became 7 Flowers Press. In 1967 he began printing on newsprint (his mimeograph had been confiscated by the police), producing the *Buddhist Third Class Junkmail Oracle*, which presented a range of materials, including poetry, Concrete Poetry, editorials, articles on Buddhism, and levy's collages.

The collages are wonderfully rich, usually filling the entire frame with (often erotic) images from antiquity, history, current events juxtaposed with clippings of letters, words and phrases taken from magazines, newspapers, advertisements, comic books, and sometimes hand-lettering or overstrikes. The overall mood of the collages is generally ironic, evocative, and sometimes satiric.

Many of levy's paintings involve areas in which the paper or canvas is saturated with large swaths of

deep colors softly melding together, sometimes with the imposition of an image in another medium or vigorous over-strokes of paint or ink, drawing our attention to the richness of the medium itself, and the energy of its application. levy's paintings and prints are largely non-representative, yet they often bring forward a strong feeling for organic form. These are often playfully titled with Cleveland landmarks and place names, as in the two sets of *Cleveland Prints* (1964), i.e. "the angel of death rides the van aiken local" and "George Washington visits the cleveland zoo." In *5 Cleveland Prints* he applied block prints alongside inked condom impressions (an invention challenging the moral guardians with mocking humor); in *6 Cleveland Prints* he combined block prints and streams of freeform type, introducing elements of Concrete Poetry. "Lakefront at Night" presents a completely dark surface superimposed with a semi-transparent, textured, greenish horizontal swath interrupted with intermittent, small wiggling strokes, somehow at once suggestive of a living waterfront and the inability to see anything.

Blazek writes of levy's engagement with Concrete Poetry:

Though he was seldom given credit for it, levy was... one of the first to introduce Concrete Poetry to the American literary public. Since its conception in the early 1950s it had pretty much remained in Europe. Only a few people such as Aram Saroyan's *Lines* magazine or Dick Higgins' *Something Else Press* were in on this development. Many of levy's books and magazines were devoted to his own personal brand of concrete.⁵

levy's Concrete Poetry primarily involved mimeo printing and collage. Some of the Concrete poems present repeating rows of typed characters shaped to resonate thematically (and sardonically) with the poem's title,

and with the characters and symbols composing them. Examples from the exhibition include variations of "visualized prayer to the american god," in which repeated dollars and cents symbols form the shape of the American flag, a swastika, or just fields of dollar signs. A different example is "REFRIGERATOR MANTRA," in which the poem offers the sounds of a refrigerator as a meditation.

levy also approached Concrete by over-inking mimeo stencils and over-printing pages to create dense fields of obscuration in which words move in and out of decipherability. *Scarab Poems*, from the exhibition, is an excellent example. The sustained ellipses, sometimes denoted with blacked-out lines interposed with words and fragments of phrases, sometimes completely eclipsed, evoke the coming and going of thought in meditation and the coming and going of text before the eyes of the printer. The heavily saturated lines of obliterated text appearing below the intact poem titles are also suggestive of censorship, of silencing the poem. These poems strongly evoke levy's ambivalence about language as a means of communication. "Words scramble everything. The whole civilized communication system is all screwed up!"⁶ The representational, descriptive, interpretive aspects of language are in complete abeyance. We are invited to experience only what is there: ink on paper, "words... on a material level," silence and to notice ourselves being there.⁷

1. Note that levy's poetic signature appears as "d.a.levy" with no spaces, and I have chosen this formatting here.
2. Interview with Dick Feagler (*Cleveland Press*, March 31, 1967).
3. Douglas Blazek, untitled essay, *Zen Concrete & Etc.* (Madison, WI: Ghost Pony Press, 1991), 209.
4. Kent Taylor, "The Cleveland Underground Poetry Scene: A Personal Reminiscence," *Zen Concrete & Etc.*, 225.
5. Blazek, 210.
6. "Raging Against the Dying of the Light: Interview with d.a.levy," Andrew Curry, *Dust* 12, "d.a.levy Issue," Spring 1969, 17.
7. d.a.levy, "Introduction," *18th Dynasty Egyptian Automobile Turnon*, by D. R. Wagner, 2nd ed., (Glendale, CA: Poetry Est, 1967), unpaginated.

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blues for the life

i miss the morning stars
and the kisses
that tasted so sweet
i miss the quiet music
and the silken tresses
the color of wheat

i miss the silent eyes
that glowed
with inner life
i miss the little girl
who will someday
be my wife

i miss the cups of coffee
that we
were never without
i miss the wild topics
we used
to talk about

i miss the cool chic
that i held
in my arms
i miss my woman
with her thousand ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~
secret charms

i miss the night life
and
digging the sounds
i miss the lakefront drives
and making
the midnight rounds

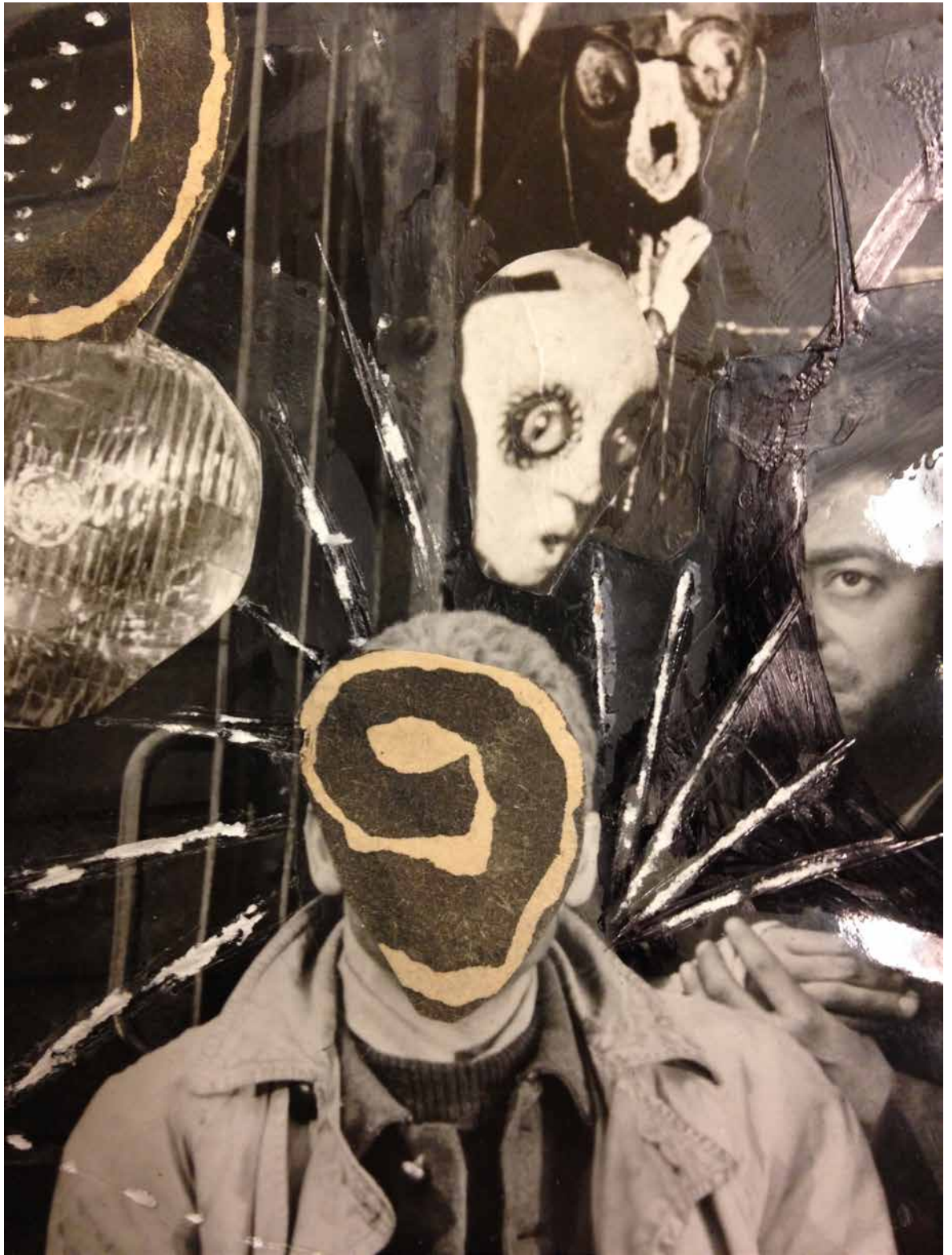
i miss it all deep inside
and its something
that i cant hide
i feel it when the breezes taunt me
and memories return
to constantly haunt me

oct - 3-4 .. 60

d.a. levy
blues for life, 1960
Manuscript, 11 x 8 1/2 inches
Courtesy of Kent State University
Department of Special Collections and Archives



d.a. levy
 Agent from Vega H.S., 1967
 Collage
 8 1/2 x 6 inches
 Courtesy of the d.a. levy Collection
 Cleveland State University Library



d.a. levy
Untitled, 1967 (detail)
Collage, 8 1/2 x 11 inches
Courtesy of Kent State University
Department of Special Collections and Archives

MICHELANGELO LOVELACE

MEET ME AT THE CROSSROADS

BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

Michelangelo Lovelace Sr. chronicles the Cleveland streets around him, creating expressive records of city life. Largely self-taught, he has been painting every day for the past 30 years and was mentored by the late Reverend Albert Wagner (1924-2006).¹ Wagner encouraged Lovelace to endure his personal struggles through art, to continue to paint no matter what, and to develop a voice and style that was true to his experiences.

There is an animated joy in Lovelace's canvases. Works like *Backyard Celebration* (2007) portray inner city neighborhoods that bustle with life, back yard parties and people going about their daily errands among tree-lined streets, hair shops, and grocery stores. *P-Funk Party* (1999) depicts a Parliament Funkadelic concert that the artist painted from memory. Revelers throw their bodies around in wild abandon, you can feel the heat coming off the room. The extravagant style of the musicians and the show (spaceship on the stage) opened Lovelace's eyes to the multitude of expressions through which creativity can flow, that it doesn't need to be man-nered, or follow anybody else's rules. This sense of freedom, self-love, and acceptance is articulated in Lovelace's erotic paintings like *Turn off the Lights* (2006), which unapologetically celebrate sexual pleasure, experience, and body.

In Lovelace's paintings, the realities of police violence, poverty, addiction, and criminal lifestyles are approached fearlessly and with the kind of clear-eyed relentlessness arrived at through daily practice and pursuit. These themes of social justice form the main narrative framework for his paintings. Often autobiographical, Lovelace references his personal trials as a way to connect to universal themes of struggle and redemption. Life affirming Bible verses

are placed on billboards, sending mes-sages of love, community, acceptance, and responsibility. There is a strong moral force in these works, backed up with love, a lesson to be given, the painting a vehicle for allegory. In *Standing at the Fork in the Road at Temptation and Salvation* (1997) Lovelace represents different life choices as real destinations, inhabited by symbolic individuals. The painting grows brighter and lighter as the viewer travels along the pathway towards goodness and spiri-tual peace; in the opposite direction, darkness awaits. Lovelace returns to images of street intersections and cor-ners often, evoking the cultural sig-nificance of the crossroads as a meeting place where a reckoning must be made. James Baldwin wrote about the tension a person feels when being drawn towards a negative force despite best intentions, imagining those competing energies (Guilt and Desire) as characters that fight for the attention of Love:²

At the dark streetcorner
where Guilt and Desire
are attempting to stare
each other down
[...]
Love came slouching along
an exploded silence
standing a little apart
but visible anyway
in the yellow, silent, steaming light,
while Guilt and Desire wrangled³

In his depictions of the world around him, Lovelace operates as a witness, an insider who is also an outsider. *Katrina Aftermath* (2006) portrays the chaos of the 2005 hurricane in New Orleans, in which looting (in order to find food, clean water, and supplies) by white survivors was often excused or defended, while Black survivors doing the same thing were treated like criminals, even shot. Lovelace mediates these events,

stepping back to reflect on them, an approach evident in the shifts in perspective and depth in his paintings.

Encountering a group of his works, the viewer travels above, under, through, and finally into Lovelace's Cleveland. *At the intersection of Cedar-n-E. 79th Street* (1997) presents a three-quarter birds eye view of a street crossing, complete with car-dealership bunting that marches off into the distance. *These Urban City Streets*(2013) shows a neighborhood where stores, trees, streets and signage are compressed and stacked on top of one another like a Chinese scroll painting, traditional narrative paintings which often show landscapes arranged vertically, folding vast distances within them and conveying a sense of rhythm and order. A further distancing is evident in *Work in Progress* (2010), a painting inside a painting in which Lovelace depicts his own hand, tracing the curving outline of figure at the outset of a new work, both distancing and touching.

This idea of record keeping (or of correcting the historical record) evokes the work of Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), who painted the rich life of Depression-era Harlem, drawing visual information from his surroundings--brightly colored clothing of neighborhood residents, the patterned fabrics used inside their homes for decoration, the bustle of the streets--into his works. Lawrence's *Migration Series* (1940-41) helped ingrain into art history the impact of the Great Migration, while other series focus on the life of Harriet Tubman and the story of Toussaint L'Overture, who led the 18th century Haitian Revolution resulting in the liberation of that country from France. Also a chronicler of the times, Lovelace has responded to such events as the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991, the election of the United States' first Black president, and recent "Black Lives Matter" rallies.

Brickwork and graffiti form strong through lines in Lovelace's paintings. As he remembers, "Living in Garden Valley Housing projects, the King Kennedy projects, all of the projects were brick, we called it Brick City. I fell

in love with the brick."⁴ The bricks form a visual shorthand for the architecture of the inner city. But the bricks that Lovelace paints are never just brown or red; they are rainbow bricks, holding green, red, black, brown, yellow, white, purple. The paint is thickly applied so that it stands out from the surface, often looking as if it was mixed on the canvas. The colors change, depending on the mood of the scene and the inhabitants who move through his paintings. In *Another Street Corner Memorial* (2006), the bricks are painfully vivid and fleshy, interrupted by the blood red curtains in the windows that overlook the road side marked by death. *Blue Wall of Silence* (2000), confronts the reality of police brutality. The intense blue runs off the policemen's uniforms and drenches the wall behind them; the unnaturally blue bricks, sidewalk and street fill the entire visual field, only interrupted by the pink skin and blonde hair of the officers, and the red of the blood spilled on the sidewalk. The officers faces are portrayed by a series of quick hard slashes. The colors vibrate; this painting hurts to look at. In both of these works, there is a sense that the bricks are bodies, and that the walls of the city are sentient. Like Lovelace, they can't, won't, turn away.



1. Wagner was a visionary and prolific painter and sculptor, who began his work as an artist at the age of 50, developing an eccentric signature style, working with diverse materials such as driftwood and found objects.
2. Here I refer to a couple of stories among many; the myth of blues legend Robert Johnson, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil at a deserted crossroads at midnight in order to receive greater musical prowess, going on to record "Cross Road Blues" (1936), but also more recent cultural references such as the hit single "Tha Crossroads" (1995) by Cleveland rap group Bone Thugs-n-Harmony.
3. James Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 57.
4. From an interview with Lovelace, April 2015. The Garden Valley Public Housing Project was in the Kinsman area of the city, now demolished and replaced by townhomes. The King Kennedy Housing Project, also in the Kinsman-E 55th Street area, is still standing.



1.



2.

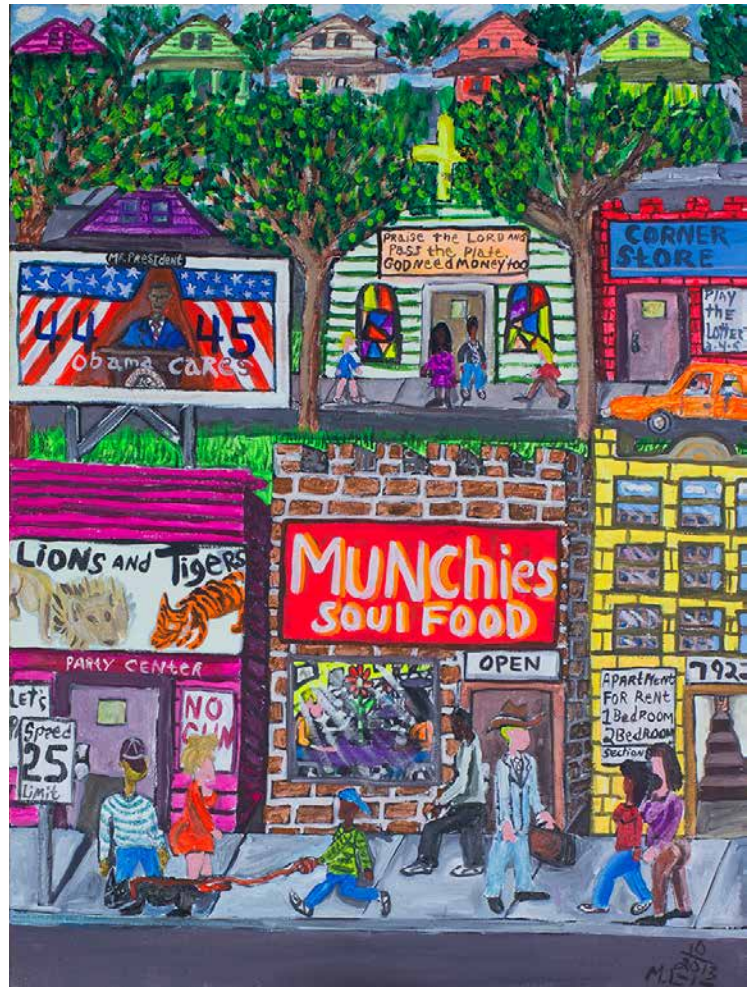
1. Michelangelo Lovelace
*Standing at the Fork in the Road at
 Temptation and Salvation, 1997*
 Acrylic on canvas
 52 3/4 x 92 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

2. Michelangelo Lovelace
Work in Progress, 2010
 Acrylic on canvas
 26 3/4 x 21 inches
 Courtesy of the artist



3.

4.



3. Michelangelo Lovelace
Blue Wall of Silence, 2000
 Acrylic on canvas
 24 1/2 x 42 1/2 inches
 Collection of Alissa McKendrick

4. Michelangelo Lovelace
These Urban City Streets, 2013
 Acrylic on canvas
 37 x 28 3/4 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

MICHELANGELO LOVELACE

LOOKING BACK FROM THE FUTURE AT
MICHELANGELO LOVELACE SR.

BY EBONY L. HAYNES

I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, but I am compelled to be here, so anything I do for this planet is because the Master-Creator of the Universe is making me do it. I am of another dimension. I am on this planet because people need me.

-Sun Ra, quoted in an
A&M Records press release (1998)

Afrofuturism is an ideology linked to music and art and a Black experience. Sun Ra often acts as its musical trope. Born in 1914 in Birmingham, AL, Sun Ra claimed to not be of this earth. His outer space sounds challenged the Black aural aesthetic in many ways, including being one of the first musicians to use electronic instruments. Like Sun Ra's music, the overarching phrase "Afrofuturism" responds to a search for the world of tomorrow, today. Afonaut artists like William Villalongo and Cristina de Middel, and writers like Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany keep an undeniably thick racial history as a subject but present new ideas about race and representation, breaking with normalized racism to create a space for change. Coined in 1994 by writer Mark Dery, the phrase Afrofuturism questioned the largely streamlined depictions of both utopian and apocalyptic futures, which were predominantly Anglo/European based. Afrofuturism is not about science fiction, though that may be the genre chosen to relay ideas of the future; more accurately, it is about imagining a Black reality not limited to racial identity. In this world, the human race exists in colors other than Black and White to include the Purple, Green, and Orange. Pop and politics are key in the Afrofuturists' aesthetic, and to their goal of empowering Otherness. Afrofuturists paint portraits of how they want to be seen, or perhaps how

they see themselves. But this is not always how others seem them.

What, then, is the Black future?

* * * *

Michelangelo Lovelace Sr. has been painting for most of his life. His treasure trove of canvases includes hundreds of paintings, which are snapshots from moments in his life. Some are celebratory, depicting community pride, block parties, and dancing. Some are more personal and include portraits of people in his life or of the artist himself, painting. Others are social commentary: the historical election of the first Black president of the United States of America; the swift block-to-block changes that occur within the landscape of the urban American cityscape; dark temptations of our inescapable vices; the light of redemption; police crime scene tape marking the site of another dead young Black man.

Lovelace's scenes are not paintings of the future. Instead, the tableaux capture moments of the present. He paints what he sees--often visions of all races sharing similar experiences. In one of these paintings, *Katrina Aftermath* (2006), he paints the chaos of the flooded streets of New Orleans, post-hurricane. Here, colorful acrylics paint the faces of the displaced--people of all colors, all in desperate need of help. The masses are faceless, as are most of the faces in Lovelace's large and vast crowds. Black and White, young and old, the ailing and the able bodied, all vulnerable. As people on the ground try to stay dry atop of cars, or stand in the rising water, a few dead bodies float by. Some fill the rooftops and hold up signs, hoping to catch anyone's attention.

Lovelace takes this opportunity to use commentary and media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and inserts them onto the signs. A White man holds a sign that reads "Help Us!," and another holds one that reads "We All Are American." A small group stands in front of a sign that reads "Need Help Don't Call FEMA." A Black man waves the American flag while another holds a sign paraphrasing the musician Kanye West's off-script remarks: "Bush don't care about Black people." West's outbursts during a live NBC telethon for hurricane relief, less than a month after the storm, was in response to aid, or lack thereof, being delivered to the affected residents of New Orleans. Criticism came from both inside and outside the city walls. The predominant accusation being that help would've been swiftly and effectively delivered had the affected not been predominantly Black.

In the same painting, where locals rummage through stores in desperation and panic, store signs reflect the racist double standard of the media's interpretation and reporting on riots and looters: "White Folks Just Looking For Food," and "Black Folks Just Looters." This, in particular, feels very close to recent press coverage of the aftermath of various accounts of murder at the hands of the police. This past April in Baltimore, the story of a young man named Freddie Gray, and his suspicious death, seemingly at the hands of local police officers, sparked a wide range of emotional reactions from the local, predominantly Black, neighborhood. The sensationalized news coverage of both the video recording of Mr. Gray's scuffle with officers and mysterious uncaptured moments which left him in excruciating pain and paralyzed, mixed with the rioting, looting, and property damage caused by incensed locals, had media outlets calling the people of Baltimore "Thugs." Cable news consistently presented nearsighted views of the riots. Drawing attention to young Black men dressed all in black, reporters become visibly irritated at the sight of Baltimore residents destroying police property. Much less attention was paid to the rioters who were not Black, and even less still to the peaceful protests.

The reality painted for those not on the ground differed from what the angry and exhausted communities were experiencing: a seemingly endless fight for justice.

* * * *

Lovelace's *Katrina Aftermath*, as most of his paintings, comes from observing and absorbing the moments around him. In the style of Afrofuturism, race remains an overarching theme, but he plays with it by means of dissecting ideas of community and empathy. He is not, by conventional definition, an Afrofuturist. The work is neither intergalactic nor fantastical. And his paintings have been criticized for depicting racial stereotypes. I agree that they depict stereotypes, stereotypes that have sadly stood the test of time, reappearing both pre- and post- his *Katrina Aftermath*. But the stereotypes are not of people in his paintings; instead, they often reflect those looking in from the outside. An Afrofuturist attempts to create an alternate reality, where identity is not bound by race or racial stereotypes, but may present itself in many forms. From an electro-infused jazz song to a photograph of a Black astronaut in the Zambian desert. But what if the viewer, not the artist was an Afronaut?

Looking at the works now, through an Afrofuturist lens of an alternate racial reality, the work has both utopian and apocalyptic elements. Like an artist, an Afrofuturist viewer can retain race as a subject but move beyond it and customize it. Seeing Lovelace's paintings from this point of view, the work challenges stereotypical depictions of race by illustrating the artist's reality, one that is often not acknowledged or appreciated for the ongoing strides made toward equality. Afrofuturism uses fantasy to discuss bigger issues. Michaelangelo Lovelace does just that, but this demands more work from the viewer. In this Black future, a brick wall is not part of a ghetto, the death of a young Black man is tragic, all humans deserve to be treated as equals, and life can be a party.



Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.
P-Funk Party, 1999
Acrylic on canvas
58 1/2 x 67 1/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DYLAN SPASKY

SOFT THINGS

BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

When I look for too long at Dylan Spasky's sculptures I start to ache a bit. It isn't desire (as in, I want to own) or sympathy (as in, I want to protect), but rather a very intense feeling of *fond* (as in, I want to be friends, forever). The feeling isn't straight. And it isn't one: it's form and formlessness, Mickey & mini, lucky and hapless, clean and dirty. Touching is part of it. They are always soft: drooping, crumbling, squished, foamy, draped.

Spasky uses modest materials: thrift store grab bags, dollar store deals, cast offs, twigs, hot glue, foam, beads, tar. These are carefully cobbled together, with a distinctive gingerliness (though some of them have been treated roughly, i.e. placed under plywood and run over by a car). Many have domestic functions: clocks, fountains, lamps. They breathe familiarity: suburban living rooms, middle class kitsch, kindergarten crafts, garage sales, Grandpa's work shop, Disney Land, souvenirs. Impulsiveness comes through: to salvage, tinker, repurpose, and decorate.

Fragility gives them a vague edginess—they teeter, cling. While they might appear to be slapdash, awkward, or clumsy, their postures are the result of

a very concise construction, a just so, on which their formal informality hangs. Often, Spasky's works are displayed in groups, on shelves or tabletops. These clusters further personalize the objects: they are considered, arranged. Less Museum and more mantelpiece.

Hunched Dolphin (2013) takes the shape of an upright marine mammal, carved from a stack of multi-colored kitchen sponges (now faded a bit), shoulders forward, stiff flippers downcast. The sponges are a favored object in Spasky's studio; cheap, light, and easy to sculpt. Their pastel palette recalls sorbet (strange, this mouthwatering color on a most unappetizing object), while the tapering shapes and gentle curves call out for touching, squeezing.

Foot (2014) carved from a purple yoga block is more grotesque: at its life-sized scale, the rough texture and purple "skin" are zombie-like (but also vaguely like a cake, with slathered icing); shiny silver toenails jut out and could flake off. *Mickey Berry* (2014) also looks edible, an oversized glass raspberry coated in tar and candies shaped like the infamous mouse. Encrusted, jewel-like, it's a conglomeration of textures: sticky, shatter, chewy, crunch.

Spaysky's lamps are also a mishmash of parts and clutter: decorative bottles, pickled cheerios and grapes, duct tape, a visor, a lava lamp globe. These come together in loosely elegant ways. Ornament is nonsense; taste is indiscriminate but also discerning. Spaysky's clocks tick tick tick away, their hands' measured movements splayed out over crushed sacks of plastic cast offs. *Toiletries Clock* (2014) is made up of mostly off-brand and hotel-room products, in the usual, pearly shades of care and cleanliness. *Apple Clock* (2015) bursts in bubbles of bright hollow fruits. Although clocks are typically "timeless" decorative items, these repurposed cast-offs speak to cycles of consumption and discarding. They also convey the touches, moments, and memories that objects collect and become charged with. Might it be too obvious to say that these timekeepers are tchotch momento mori? Saying what, exactly? That existence is brief and things are crap? That was then and could have been and this is now and is... Nothing much? That place that these things came from is far away but the things still gently reek of it. They dissipate their chrono-perfume, whiling away their (slowly) degrading half-lives, cheerily. There is something touching about their new usefulness, their new place in the order of things. A reclaiming of potential, openness, becoming something else through the eyes and hands and heart of a new human.

Matthew (2015) is one of Spaysky's most endearing works. It looks to be a small child's wheel chair, constructed from fragile repurposed wicker, with gloopy, irregular wheels (compressed bags of fake squash, raffeta and twine), sprinkled with cinnamon and held together with threaded rod. It sits quietly, slightly askew, leaning. Like Tiny Tim's crutch it is sad but buoying,

personifying a missing individual, injured but merrily determined. It is precious and ridiculous, funny and dark, feeble and defiant, the kind of thing you want to spend time with, and really get to know.



Dylan Spaysky
Matthew, 2015
Wicker, threaded rod, fake squash,
cinnamon, staples, caster wheels,
wire, silicone, glue
25 x 38 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland



Dylan Spaysky
Hunched Dolphin, 2013
Sponge, 11 x 3 x 5
Courtesy of the artist
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland

DYLAN SPAYSKY

US: AFTER DYLAN SPAYSKY

BY LYNN CRAWFORD

It has been, continues to be, a rocky road for Camp and me to reach the place we are in now: good.

Initial time together depends on schedules: my parents' (car, work, finances, health) and mine (lessons, jobs, licenses). Those logistics--bumps, not rocks--get sorted out with time.

I will never forget our first encounter: early evening, mom and dad drop me off at the gate. I follow instructional banners: find my hut, change into uniform--pink slip, grass & twig sandals--reach Camp. We sit, cross-legged, for twenty calm minutes. Then dig a pit for Evening Roast and practice Moon Salutations.

Camp is multi-faceted: sweet, angry, scared, calm, hot. The mood variances are inspirational.

Our problems stem from me, not it. But if this means anything to you, and it does to me, it is my ignorance, not malice, which stirs things up. I harm Camp, but unintentionally. It is like the difference between manslaughter and planned murder.

I changed, still try to, keep changing.

It is not agreeable admitting to wrongdoing. To think back on how a

sentiment that felt so RIGHT was, is, so WRONG. But to understand where I, and we, are, and want to soon be, I must meet that past.

My offense? Failing to recognize Camp's potential. I misjudge its structure, mistakenly split expenditure vessels. I will name them Thinker and Maker.

Those labels are elementary, obvious, laden. Ouch. But sometimes you, or I anyway, need to go through things lame before moving onto things meaningful. Maybe it will ease things if I use their initials.

I believed, wrongly, T and M existed as parallel, not entwined, strands.

If I had only been able to view them the way I view salt and pepper (never salt or pepper), we would have saved so much time and waste.

To try and figure things out, I sketch a series of T and M portraits.

Here is one of each:

T
Indoors, lounges on a couch, stares at a wall, sucks a toothpick, twirls a strand of hair. Outfit: headband, plaid tunic, slippers (open toe straw, slides with tassels)

Body language: leave me alone.

M

Multiple scenes of M, running, grilling, drinking, dancing, surfing, delivering a speech. Outfit varies from frame to frame but there is always denim.

Body Language: I have so much to do and say.

A few more T&M distinctions:

T: dresses in one of Grandma's old ball gowns and ponders, considers, absorbs.

M: repurposes that same frock, or is inspired to design something because of it.

T: recalls Grandpa's sweet, smoky, smell and the stories he read.

M: seals Grandpa's breath in a test tube.

Differences between the two are real and interesting. But impossible to guess:

T appears stationary, blank, perhaps stoned but mostly is not.

M appears enthused, vigorous but battles melancholia.

How you look is not how you are. How you look is not how you feel. How you look is not who you are.

I, mistakenly, lug around a belief that it is impossible for T&M to meet, merge, construct; that a close encounter would be a bust, or, a hard true love, and one or both would dump me.

Then:

One night, emerging from a heavy make out session in Craft Shop I trip and fall flat onto grass, do not get up but take in the sky. Stars move around or maybe there is a comet. Anyway, I experience, for the first time, T&M fusion and go on a purifying jag of Guerilla good deeds. Return to Craft Shop, bundle up all the popsicle sticks scattered

on tables, take the afghan we made out on down to the river for a wash.

I weed gardens (not mine),

hose down outdoor showers,

collect the fish carcasses that sometimes wash up on our beach,

rinse them in lemon juice,

nail them on the bland post office wall,

remove and melt down spurs from all riding boots (they harm our poor horses),

drain gas from jet-skis for safer, longer, swims,

And, just for me,

loosen up and join in on Beach-Night Stimulation.

Things feel right.

Why? A change. I thought of T & M as discreet (picture: silos). But learn to think of them as a union (picture: colonies). With that, Camp moves from a distinct space to something close, animate, handy. Its--our--value swells with the new accessibility.

It has been, continues to be, a rocky road for Camp and me to reach the place we are in now: good.



Dylan Spaysky
apple clock, 2015
Fake fruit, plastic, silicone,
clock components
4 x 12 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist

1.



2.



1. Dylan Spaysky
visor lamp, 2014
Glass, wax, cereal, onions, vinegar,
visor, lamp components, light bulb
7 x 6 x 21 inches.
Courtesy of the artist

2. Dylan Spaysky
foot, 2014
Yoga block, craft paper, glue
9 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 6 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.

CARMEN WINANT

TOUCHING AND TRAINING

ELENA HARVEY COLLINS & CARMEN WINANT

Carmen Winant's artistic practice is informed by her past training as a long-distance runner, in which self-discipline, endurance, repetition, and management of the body were key elements. Her work considers the ways in which images of women are consumed, for what audience they are produced, and the ways in which identity and self can become torn from such images over time and through repeated exposure. *How to Remain Human* features a selection of Winant's works, including *A World Without Men* (2015), a massive wall collage constructed from an archive of Playboy, Oui magazine, and puberty-book clippings, among other sources. The title calls back to Feminist Separatist movements of the 1970s, when some women advocated for female-only societies. I sat down to talk with Winant during a site visit to MOCA Cleveland in April 2015.

funny, because for so long I tried to hide that part of myself. I would go from practice to class and bring a change of clothes so I can change in the bathroom so people wouldn't know that I had this other jock status. It wasn't until much later that I saw how those two worlds can meet or what one could offer the other. As an athlete, my life was about body, and discipline of body. Long distance running is all about pain management, measuring how much you can take, and how efficient your body can be. It's also about time spent--there are runs that are two, three hours long.

EHC

Tell me about your approach to collage. How do the elements of practice, endurance, repetition, and time find their way in?

CW

So much of how I live and work in the studio is about repetition, exhaustion, and performance anxiety. Training as an athlete is a series of failures--the mini failures during practice, where we tease out the inadequacies, and the big failures like not crossing the finish line first. I was incredibly tough in practice, and I lived for practice, really, but I was a terrible racer. I had a lot of performance anxiety, but I was also more interested in pushing my body and figuring out what the edge of my body was, where the limit was, and I couldn't do that while racing in the same way as practice.

EHC

Can you tell me about your background as a runner?

CW

I was a long distance runner at UCLA, the longer the better. I ran the longest track and field events you could run--5,000 and 10,000 meters, as well as cross country, where I ran 6 kilometers. Competitions were year round; my life was in training, running once a day, twice a day, three times a day, and keeping running logs, which I still have. I recorded everything I ate, every run I went on, how long I stretched for. It's so

The repeated gestures of touching an image, and placing it, connect to the idea of practice. When I make these sprawling wall collages all the images start out on the floor, there is no hierarchy. Once arranged, the process of transferring the collage to the wall becomes intuitive and automatic. I respond with my body, squatting and working on the floor, then reaching and stretching, stepping forward and stepping back. I spend a long time sourcing and collecting printed matter, sometimes years, and keep them until I have the right use for them. I'll find that one crazy person, who has thirty boxes of magazines. So there is a patience and timing to that too.

EHC

How did *A World Without Men* come about?

CW

At some point I realized that I was only collecting images of women. I was almost building this narrative when I was asleep. I woke up and I had five thousand images of women. The images of men were mostly in relation to women, or had a hand around a woman's neck, or a woman was reaching out to kiss them, they sort of existed as women's proxies. At the same time coincidentally I was talking to somebody who had been a member of a lesbian separatist commune in the 1970's. I'm particularly interested in the ones in the 1970's because that was at a moment when people actually felt they could refashion the world. It was a short term solution, as opposed to a long term solution. And thinking about, as they described it, the violence that had been done to their bodies, or their sort of emotional status, to the point where they didn't even want boy children.

EHC

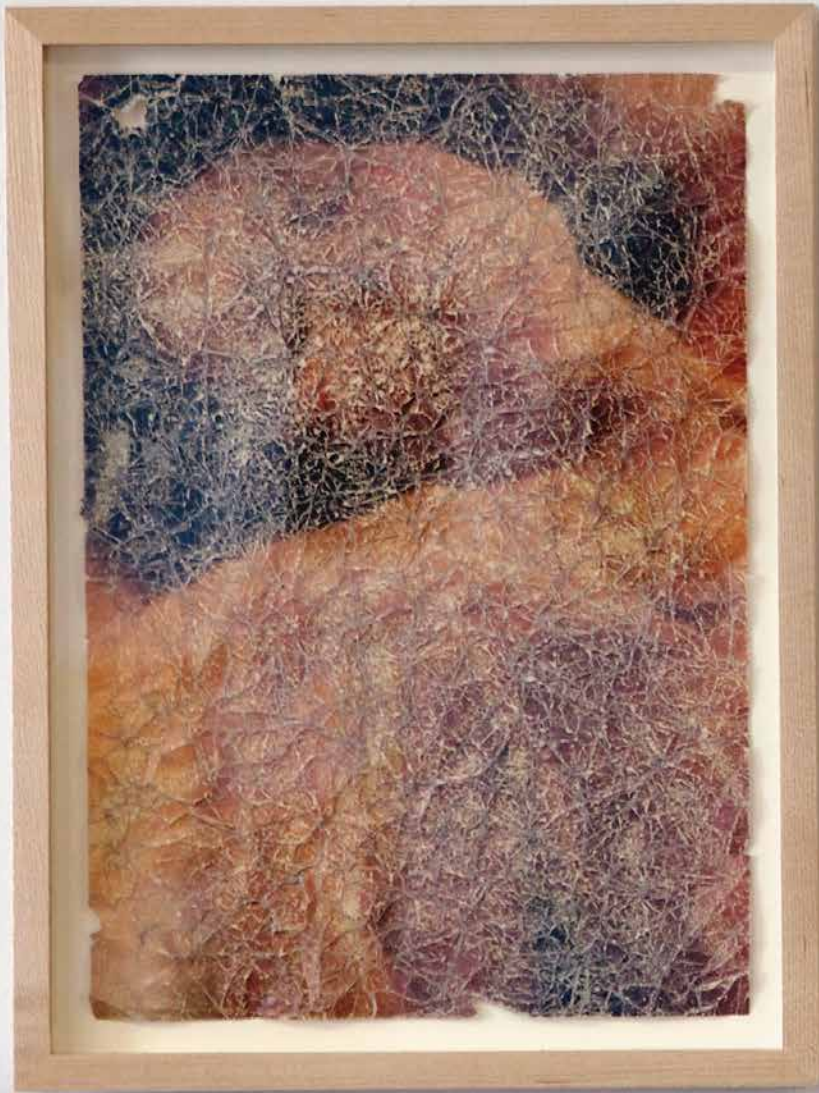
The way you work with images of women--collecting, repeated touching, selecting and trimming down, reori-

enting--changes the image, sometimes beyond recognition, especially in *61 Minutes in Heaven* (2012). Can you tell me about the process of making that piece, and why it is important for you to handle the image?

CW

I work with a lot of found magazines from the 60's to the early-to-mid-80's. In magazines after that time, the pages are thinner, they're slicker, glossier. I prefer something thicker, more matte, where the ink can literally rub off on your fingers as you trace them across the page.

I've worked with images of Linda Lovelace, the star of the porn film *Deep Throat* (1972), for years, and I was interested in her because she represented such a multivalent sexual identity, but also because she has such different kinds of agency. At one point she was a sex star, at another point she renounced that and became a feminist, then she was a victim; she wrote five different autobiographies that all contest each other. And I thought that it was so wild, that one woman could occupy all of these really specific positions. For *61 Minutes in Heaven*, I continuously touched an image of her found in a *Playboy* magazine from the year the movie came out, for the duration of the film. I had two images of her, so I watched the film two times in a row. One of them is worn almost entirely away. That idea of erasing someone with a tender touch comes up often for me. It's the idea that you can undo somebody, that they could be so fragile that you could undo them with an embrace. There's also a real desperation, on both ends. Someone such as Lovelace who's posing in *Playboy*, desperate for attention, money, or something else. I am also desperate to touch her, through a copy of a magazine that however many hundreds of thousands of people looked at or cared about or masturbated to. I want that desperation to read in the work, that it in fact ruins people on both ends. An image can come to mirror or echo that desperation and the ultimate undoing that can spring from it.



Carmen Winant
61 Minutes in Heaven, 2012
Found centerfolds of Linda Lovelace,
each 13 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist



CARMEN WINANT

CARMEN WINANT: THE SPACE IN-BETWEEN
KRIS PAULSEN

Soviet filmmaker and teacher Lev Kuleshov described the physical and conceptual processes of filmmaking by means of an allusion to masonry. Just as “a poet places one word after another in definite rhythm,” so too, he wrote, do filmmakers by laying out their basic units, “shot-signs, like bricks... one brick after another.”¹ One builds a film as one builds a wall: with regular tiles, cemented together, one after the other in rows. For the Soviet filmmakers the essence of filmmaking was in the edit not the shot. It was how one brought images together that created art and narrative, not what was in the frame itself. One made film in the cutting room and on the editing table, not on the set or in the camera.

Sergei Eisenstein, however, did not see things quite as his colleague Kuleshov did. One image did not flow into the next, leading the viewer easily into narrative and emotion. No, the edit--*montage*--was disjunctive; it was a collision, an impact. “Montage is conflict,” Eisenstein proclaimed: “What then characterizes montage and, consequently, its embryo, the shot? Collision. Conflict between two neighboring fragments. Conflict. Collision.”² Conflict of scales, directions, levels, lights, volumes, spaces, masses. From the juxtaposition of stock images, a concept is born. Meaning is not in

either image, but in their meeting. Composition is dialectic act: thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

Let’s watch a film, a film of an uncommon kind. It has a title: “A World without Men.” It has the requisite “cinematic” scale, filling an entire wall and our complete field of vision. Brick-by-brick, Carmen Winant has built a wall. It is composed, like the Soviets described, of adjacent bits, taped and pasted. What kind of wall is this? What kind of film? This is a film without movement; it is montage in space not in time. It comes to us all at once as a great expanse of mosaic paper tile. But it does not lead us so easily from one brick to another as in Kuleshov’s neat rows, cemented tight. Like the jigsaw puzzle walls at Sacsahuaman, where the ancient Incas perfectly wedged together their many-sided stones, Winant forces the viewer’s eye to follow many zigzag lines, and frame-by-frame *we* edit. We trace a path, new each time. Our skittering glances across the surface produce the narratives. The story happens in the edits. All paths are present; all are options. The images rest against one another in tectonic tension. We see Eisenstein’s collisions radiate in all directions. There are collisions, conflict, and rings of collateral contact. The irregular polygons create multiple points of

exchange between the images so that they do not form straight lines, but constellations and clusters of images--images of all one thing: women. We see their parts, their wholes; legs and leotards; torsos and teeth; limber bodies; limbs bent and broken; cracks and parts; skin and eyes and hair--lots of hair. Patterns appear. Images repeat, or seem to: it is easy to forget one's place in the jumble. It is impossible to retrace one's exact path across the steppingstones. We lose linearity. We lose narrative. Everything is uniform in its difference. The girls become almost identical. Pictures of pleasure are indistinguishable from pictures of pain. Affect and association jump across the gaps. It is all thesis: this is a world without men.

The Peruvian masons fit their polyhedron stones so tightly that no mortar was needed, and not even a sheet of paper could slip between the joints. Winant borrows their geometric tension but gives us the gaps. It is in the seams that everything seems to happen here. The regular distance between the images, which traces irregular, winding channels, becomes the invisible mortar that suspends the women and their autonomous parts in this static cinema. The spacing, not the pacing, gives this film its poetic rattling rhythm. Winant pushes the ground forward to subsume the figure of figures in a logic of fissures. She shows us the spaces in-between that hold the image together by holding it apart. Another collision: montage and collage, of ascending in time versus anchoring in space. The story is not in any of the images or in their adjacent meetings, but in the space in-between. This is a world with men: antithesis. They are the negative space--the ground that makes the figure visible.

Step back. Stop editing. Stop following the narrative chains of connection and repetition. Take it in. See the figures and see the ground; see forking network of negative space. Let them oscillate

and flicker. Let foreground and background switch places. This is an art of fragments, a theory of fragments. And this is an essay of fragments. I will not try to close the gaps: not between the images, not between Kuleshov and Eisenstein, not between women and men. It is the space in-between the images--both in Winant's still cinema and in the conventional kind--that lets us see the whole picture. Critical flicker fusion: that property of the psychophysics of vision that marks the frequency at which light and dark, emptiness and fullness, movement and stasis merge into an illusion of continuity and coherence, which is achieved only through radical, rapid fluctuation of difference. Synthesis.

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1. Lev Kuleshov, "The Art of Cinema" in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1974), 91.
2. Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot [The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram]," *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.



Carmen Winant
LEFT: *A World Without Men*, 2015
Collage on wall
14 x 18 feet
RIGHT: detail
Courtesy of the artist

ROSE BOUTHILLIER is Associate Curator and Publications Manager at MOCA Cleveland, where she organized the recent exhibitions *Kirk Mangus: Things Love* (2014); *Dark Stars* (2013); and *Realization is Better than Anticipation* (2013, with Megan Lykins Reich), and the off-site performance *Kevin Beasley: And in My Dream I Was Rolling on the Floor* (2014). Her writing has been published by *frieze*, *C Magazine*, *esse*, and *Arthopper.org*.

MEGAN LYKINS REICH is Deputy Director of Program, Planning, and Engagement at MOCA Cleveland. With the Museum since 2003, she has curated 20 exhibitions including *DIRGE: Reflections on [Life and] Death* (2014); *Realization is Better than Anticipation* (2013, with Rose Bouthillier); *Duke Riley: An Invitation to Lubberland* (2010); and *iona rozeal brown: all falls down* (2010).

ELENA HARVEY COLLINS is Curatorial Assistant at MOCA Cleveland, where she worked on the recent exhibitions *Jessica Eaton: Wild Permutations* (2015); *Kirk Mangus: Things Love*; and the off-site performance *Kevin Beasley: And in My Dream I Was Rolling on the Floor* (both 2014). Her writing has been published in *Temporary Art Review*, *Arthopper*, and the Kent State University journal *Urban Infill*.

LYNN CRAWFORD is a Detroit-based writer whose books include *Fortification Resort*; *Simply Separate People*; *Simply Separate People, Two*; and the forthcoming *Shankus & Kitto* (Black Square/Hyperallergic). Her work has been published in *Art in America*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Zing*, *Tema Celeste*, *Metro Times*, *Parkett*, and *Hyperallergic*.

OWEN DUFFY is Curatorial Assistant at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and a Ph.D. candidate studying contemporary art history at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is also an Editor for *ARTPULSE* and the founder of *ARTSKIP.com*, a digital platform that helps users discover contemporary art based on location and medium. He has published in

ARTPULSE, *Art in Print*, *Fjords Review*, and *Ceramics Monthly*, and has presented his research at such institutions as the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and LASANAA Live Art Hub, Kathmandu.

KEN EPPSTEIN is a writer, editor and publisher from Columbus, Ohio. In addition to his own rock music and record store themed imprint Nix Comics, Ken edits the *Columbus Alive's* weekly "Sketch in the City" series featuring local cartoonists in the city's only weekly entertainment magazine. Ken has been a contributor to *Red Stylo Media Comics*, *Rocker Magazine*, *Roctober Magazine*, WFMU's Rock 'n' Soul Ichiban, and the satirical comic website, *The Outhouse*.

AMY FUNG is a roaming cultural commentator, arts writer, and events/exhibition organizer currently based in Toronto, CA. She holds a MA in English Literature and Film Studies from the University of Alberta with a focus on Deleuzian film theory and 20th-century poetics and creative nonfiction. As of Fall 2014, Fung has been appointed Artistic Director of The Images Festival. Her research interests usually involve ongoing considerations of identity politics, social engagement, and a sense of place.

ED FRAGA is a Detroit-based artist who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Wayne State University in 1980. His paintings, drawings, and artist books are in the permanent collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts; Cranbrook Art Museum; and the Flint Institute of Arts. He has received fellowships and awards from the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation; the Kresge Foundation; the National Endowment of the Arts, and the Awards in the Visual Arts 8. Museum shows include Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; and the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, CA.

MICHAEL B. GILLESPIE is an Associate Professor of Film at the City College of New York in the Department of Media and Communication Arts and the Black Studies Program. His book *Film*

Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film is forthcoming from Duke University Press. He is also co-editing *Black Cinema Aesthetics Revisited* and *New Chester Himes Criticism*. His current projects include work on post-9/11 music, blackness and speculative film, and a manuscript entitled *Music of My Mind: Blackness and Sonic Visuality*.

EBONY L. HAYNES is a gallerist, writer, and curator based in New York City.

INDRA LĀCIS earned her PhD in contemporary art history from Case Western Reserve University in 2014. She is editor of *Arthopper.org*, an online regional art magazine covering the Great Lakes region, and also currently serves as Curatorial Research Assistant in the department of Modern European Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Lācis has curated solo, group, and participatory exhibitions at SPACES, The Sculpture Center, MOCA Cleveland, Zygote Press, and The Cleveland Foundation, all in Cleveland.

DAVID LUSENHOP is a Cleveland-based art and rare book dealer and independent scholar. He co-curated *AfriCOBRA and the Chicago Black Arts Movement* for the Dittmar Memorial Gallery at Northwestern University (2010). He was the art history consultant for the TV Land documentary film *AfriCOBRA: Art for the People* (2010). Most recently, he was a consultant to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis where he created content for the *Black Power* exhibition of art and artifacts from the permanent collection (2013).

FRED MOTEN is author of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), *Hughson's Tavern* (2008), *B. Jenkins* (2010), *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013, with Stefano Harney), *The Feel Trio* (2014) and *The Little Edges* (2014). He lives in Los Angeles and teaches at the University of California, Riverside.

KRIS PAULSEN is Assistant Professor of History of Art and Film Studies at The Ohio State University, and co-director of The Center for Ongoing Research & Projects, a non-profit art space in Columbus, Ohio. She received her BA from Brown University and her MA and

PhD from the University of California-Berkeley. Her writing has appeared in *Representations*, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, *Mousse*, *Design and Culture*, *Art Practical*, *Amodern*, and *Artforum.com*, as well as numerous exhibition catalogs.

TERRY SCHWARZ is the director of Kent State University's Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative. Her work includes neighborhood and campus planning, commercial and residential design guidelines, and ecological strategies for vacant land reuse. Terry launched the CUDC's Shrinking Cities Institute in 2005 in an effort to understand and address the implications of population decline and urban vacancy in Northeast Ohio. In 2009, she received the Cleveland Arts Prize for Design. She teaches at the KSU College of Architecture and Environmental Design.

INGRID SWANBERG's poetry has appeared in numerous publications since 1967, when d.a.levy published "to Sibyl." She edits the poetry journal *Abraxas* and directs Ghost Pony Press, which published *Zen Concrete & Etc.*, by levy and some of his contemporaries (1991). Her other works on levy include co-editing *d.a.levy and the Mimeo Revolution* (Bottom Dog Press, 2007) and the d.a.levy homepage. levy is a central figure in her dissertation (Comparative Literature, UW-Madison). Her newest poetry collections are *Ariadne & Other Poems* (Bottom Dog Press, 2013) and *Awake* (Green Panda Press, 2014).

CHRISTINA VASSALLO is the Executive Director of SPACES in Cleveland, where she is overseeing a relocation effort, expanding outreach efforts, and launching innovative participatory programming. Prior to joining SPACES she served as the Executive Director of Flux Factory, a nonprofit organization and art collective in Queens, NY that supports collaborative projects. Additionally, she has independently curated exhibitions for a variety of venues, including Jersey City Museum, chashama, NURTUREart, Artspace, Lafayette College, and New Haven University. Christina holds a BA in art history and MA in visual arts management, both from New York University.

ARTIST BIOS

MARY ANN AITKEN (1960, Detroit, MI-2012, Brooklyn, NY) earned her BFA (1983) and MA in Art Therapy (1989) at Wayne State University, Detroit. Aitken's works are held in the collection of Wayne State University, Detroit and private collections in the US and internationally. In 2014, a large scale solo exhibition of her work was held in Detroit at What Pipeline and Trinosophes.

DERF BACKDERF (1959, Richfield, OH) received his BA from the Ohio State University in 1978. In 1999, the Akron Art Museum presented a retrospective of his work, *Apocalyptic Giggles: The Industrial Cartoon Humor of Derf*. His work has been published in many newspapers and magazines, including *Playboy*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Progressive*. His long-running comic strip "The City" was featured in newspapers including *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, from 1990-2014. He has published several graphic novels, including *My Friend Dahmer* (2012) and *Punk Rock and Trailer Parks* (2008). His upcoming graphic novel *Trashed* will be released in 2015.

CARA BENEDETTO (1979, Wausau, WI) lives and works in Pittsburgh, PA. She received her BFA at University of Wisconsin River Falls in 2001 and her MFA from Columbia University in 2009. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions both nationally and internationally, at venues including Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany (2014); Laurel Gitlen, NY (2014); Metro Pictures, NY (2013); and Night Gallery, LA (2013). She is a recipient of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation grant.

CHRISTI BIRCHFIELD (1983, Cleveland, OH) earned her BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 2006 and an MFA from Columbia University in 2010. Selected solo exhibitions include *Above the Fold, Below the Surface*, Klemm Gallery, Siena Heights University, Adrian, MI; *From the Inside Out*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland (both 2014); and *It's all Yours: Posture Pointers to Make you Prettier*, SPACES Gallery, Cleveland

(2012). Birchfield is a full-time Visiting Artist/Lecturer at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

DADPRANKS (Collective, founded Pittsburgh, PA, 2013) is Lauren Goshinski, (1981, Pompton Plains, NJ); Kate Hansen, (1982, Pittsburgh, PA); Isla Hansen, (1987, Philadelphia, PA); Elina Malkin (1982, Philadelphia, PA); Nina Sarnelle (1985, Belchertown, MA); and Laura A. Warman (1989, Portland, OR). dadpranks has participated in group exhibitions at SPACE, Pittsburgh and SPACES gallery, Cleveland (both 2015). Their work has been screened at H30, The Drift; VIA Festival; and the Three Rivers Arts Festival (all Pittsburgh, 2014), and a solo presentation of their work was held at Mote 078 Gallery, Columbus, OH (2014).

BEN HALL (1977, Detroit) received his BA from Bennington College, Vermont, in 2004 and his MFA from Columbia University, NY in 2012. Selected group exhibitions include *Rob Base, Steal Treble*, Malraux's Place, Brooklyn, NY (2014); *Outside Mediation*, Green Gallery, Yale University, NJ (2011), and *Spatial City: An Architecture of Idealism*, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2010). Hall has performed at INSTAL in Glasgow, Scotland; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and kunstencentrum Belgie, Hasselt, Belgium. Hall was the 2014 Dance and Music Fellow at Kresge Arts in Detroit.

JAE JARRELL (1935, Cleveland, OH), is a founding member of the group AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), established in Chicago in 1968. Jarrell attended Bowling Green State University in Ohio before moving to Chicago. She attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her work is held in numerous private collections, and in the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. In 2014, it was included in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's exhibition *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (2014).

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON (Mansfield, Ohio, 1965) lives and works in Charlottesville, VA. Currently Professor at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Everson holds a MFA from Ohio University and a BFA from the University of Akron. His films have been the subject of mid-career retrospectives at Visions du Reel, Nyon Switzerland (2012), The Whitney Museum of American Art (2011); and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2009). His work was featured at the 2008 and 2012 Whitney Biennials and the 2012 Sharjah Biennial. Everson was awarded the 2012 Alpert Award for Film/Video

HARRIS JOHNSON (1986, Columbus, OH), lives and works in Richmond, VA. He received his BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH in 2009, and his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2015. Solo exhibitions of his work have been presented at Rotten Meat Gallery, Cleveland, OH (2013), and Clara Fritsch Gallery, Notre Dame College OH (2012), among others. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including Greenpoint Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (2014); Reinberger Gallery, Cleveland, OH (2012), and the Affordable Art Fair, NY (2012).

JIMMY KUEHNLE (1979, Atlanta, GA), lives and works in Cleveland, OH. He holds a BFA from Truman State University, Kirksville, MO (2001), and an MFA from University of Texas at San Antonio (2006). Group exhibitions include *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR (2014); *ARS*, Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan, Italy (2010); and *Betsu no Sekai*, Nagakute Cultural Center, Nagoya, Japan (2008). Selected solo exhibitions include *Inflatable Wonderland Labyrinth of Joy*, The Sculpture Center, Cleveland (2013); and *Things Bigger Than People*, Pittsburg State University, KS (2010). He is a 2008 Fulbright grant recipient.

D.A. LEVY (1942–1968, Cleveland, OH), was a poet, artist, and a pillar of the counter-cultural scene in Cleveland during the mid-1960s. The archives of d.a. levy's work are held by Cleveland State University and Kent State University. Several anthologies of his poetry have been published, including

D.A. Levy and the Mimeograph Revolution (2007, Bottom Dog Press); *The Buddhist Third Class Junkmail Oracle: The Art and Poetry of d.a. levy* (1999, Seven Stories Press); and *Zen Concrete & Etc.* (1991, Ghost Pony Press).

MICHELANGELO LOVELACE SR. (1960, Cleveland, OH), is a painter based in Cleveland. He has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including at the National Afro-American Museum and Culture Center, Wilberforce, OH (2015); American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD; Space Galleries & ClaySpace, Toledo, OH; and The Cleveland Artist Foundation, Zygote Press, and Headfooter Outsider Art Gallery, all Cleveland. In 2013, Lovelace was awarded a Creative Workforce Fellowship.

DYLAN SPAYSKY (1981, Pontiac, MI), lives and works in Detroit. He earned his BFA from the College for Creative Studies, Detroit in 2007. Solo exhibitions include *taz*, Cue Arts Foundation, New York, (2015); and *Foot Foot*, Cleopatra's, Brooklyn, NY (2014). He has participated in group exhibitions at Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY (2014); the 9th Shanghai Biennale (2012); and Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale, MI (2011). In 2012, he curated *Six Paintings, Six Stalls*, at the Buffalo Street Car Wash, Hamtramck. He is also the director of Cave project and exhibition space, Detroit.

CARMEN WINANT (1983, San Francisco, CA), lives and works in Columbus, OH. She holds a BFA from the University of California Los Angeles (2006), and an MA and an MFA from California College of the Arts (2011). Winant has organized and performed in projects at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (2014); Regina Rex, NY; and 365Mission, LA (both 2015). She is a regular contributor to *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *The Believer*, and *Art Papers*, and a contributing editor to *WAX Magazine*. Her artist book, *My Life as a Man*, was published by Horses Think Press in 2015. She is Assistant Professor of Visual Theory and Contemporary Art History at the Columbus College of Art and Design, and a Dean at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

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