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# State of the Art Scene



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\$8 U.S.

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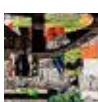
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## New Art Examiner

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## WANTED: WRITERS

The ***New Art Examiner*** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

## EDITORIAL POLICY

As the *New Art Examiner* has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The *New Art Examiner* does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary is welcome. The *New Art Examiner* has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the *New Art Examiner* is well defined in the statement of purpose above.



## Introduction

**W**e can all agree that it has not only been quite a year but quite a decade. Granted, all decades are noteworthy, but it is difficult to deny that the 2010s have been marked by a heightened sense of fear, anxiety, and antagonism, to an extent that many of us feel has been unmatched in our lifetimes. But with this set of challenges comes a more urgent need for reflection, critical engagement, and a passionate pursuit of the greater truths that unite us. That is why we have devoted this issue to looking at the present state of the art scene through ten reviews from seven art centers, large and small.

Art has always been a bastion for truth. Yet it is by no means any kind of a gold standard by which we measure what is purported to be true. Quite the opposite. Art is a bastion in which we can push and prod and the boundaries of truth in order to understand the malleability of our intellect, our identities, of our very nature.

This privilege comes with a great amount of risk. It is why art as a practice and as a discourse is relegated to context of the exhibition, the critique, the theoretical. Much like a friendly board game, art exists in a kind of magic circle in which social rules are not applied the way they are in everyday life. Yet art is not without controversy. Nor is it

without the risk of causing harm. When we push at boundaries, they are bound to push back. It is in those moments that we discover and learn, even when it sometimes hurts to do so.

Art is volatile, which is why it is contained in its own institutions. It is one of the facets by which we observe our humanity and reflect upon who and what we are. It is essential that we step back and do this from time to time. In fact, we should do this as often as we can.

As we step into this next decade, we invite you to join us in our little corner of the art world. We have compiled reviews that cover a wide range of the spectrum of contemporary American art, from artists at the height of their careers like William Pope.L to emerging artists like Nashville's spirit animal taxidermist Merrilee Challiss. We are lucky to have contributions not only from New York and our fair city of Chicago but also from Art Basel Miami Beach, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Nashville, and St. Louis.

As always, we are grateful for your readership and support of our publication. We hope that you continue to explore and grow with us into the new year and the new decade. Here's to 2020!

***The Editors***

# "Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again"

No one will ever review Andy Warhol more harshly than Valerie Solanas. Solanas's 1968 attempt on Warhol's life was poetic in at least one way: though Warhol was her main target, she also managed to shoot an art critic.

The would-be assassination is a dividing line in the Art Institute of Chicago's "Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again," the first big Warhol retrospective in the U.S. since 1989. Warhol, who was declared dead on the operating table of Columbus Hospital, survived the attack but was left physically and psychologically scarred for the remainder of his life. His practice would never be the same. Solanas, however, remains something of a mystery in this show—nothing more than a pair of bulging, wide-set eyes beneath a tabloid headline ("ACTRESS SHOOTS ANDY WARHOL").

Solanas's rage is hard to reconcile with the Warhol we meet in "From A to B." Warhol, we soon discover, was down with every woke piety of 2019—a friend of transwomen and, like a more politically palatable R. Crumb, a prolific scribbler of fetish pics (in his case, drawings of male feet). Yet Solanas, whose *SCUM Manifesto* argued men were only capable of producing "degenerate art," evidently struck a chord among some of her radical feminist peers. Philosopher Ti-Grace Atkinson, who was criticized at the time for praising Solanas's actions, explained her thinking in an interview decades later:

*"When I heard that Valerie had shot Warhol, and she had said something like, 'He had too much control of my life,' the first thing I thought was 'Warhol is not exactly the exemplar you'd choose for male supremacy.' I knew he was asexual [sic] so it wasn't some personal relationship, and the NY Times presented it as if it was somehow connected with feminism. This was right after a big piece on feminism, so everybody was aware of this anger building. All I saw was she had shot Warhol, and I knew he was exploitative. Some woman had done something appropriate to the feelings we were all having. She was fighting back. That's what it felt like."*<sup>1</sup>

Solanas might have been crazy, but by the standards of 1968, she was almost sane. And Atkinson has a point: Warhol clearly was exploitative. In fact, the



Andy Warhol, Mao, 1972. The Art Institute of Chicago. © 2019 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. Photo courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

exploitative dimension of his work may be key to his particular genius.

"From A to B" is more convincing when it links Warhol to one of our foremost contemporary narcissisms—namely, our collective submersion in social media. Andy was almost right when he predicted that everyone in the future would have fifteen minutes of fame. It's just that Twitter moves on in more like five.

Entering the exhibition, we pass the black-and-white video *Factory Diary: Andy on the Phone*. This Warhol—childlike, image-obsessed, and compulsively consumable—feels like a forerunner of today's Instagram influencers. Like Andy, many of us are engaged in the mass production of ourselves. Unlike Andy, few of us are canny enough to profit from it. More prosaically, the placement of *Factory Diary* could also refer to Andy's peerless skills as a networker. In any event, it works. Warhol was wise enough not to say too much, so we can read it any way we want.



Warhol's early commercial illustrations are also instructive, particularly when encountered alongside his later work. Expressive, superficially intimate, and seemingly personal, the sketches ultimately register as derivative and unchallenging. For all their verve and wit, they are totally in step with American popular culture and advertising at mid-century. Ironically, it was through direct but imperfect replication that Warhol revealed himself as a brilliant original and vaulted into the pantheon of Great Art—at least for now.

Just as the Green Bay Packers have become America's Team, Andy Warhol has become America's Artist. He achieved this coveted status by portraying America to itself in big, blunt images. *Gun*, for example, hangs near *Cross*, which in turn hangs near two *Hammer and Sickle* paintings. Nothing about this is particularly subtle. That's fine—Americans aren't into subtlety.

Of course, it's been more than thirty years since Andy Warhol died—and Americans move on quickly. Why, then, is he still America's Artist? Well, for one thing, because he still packs 'em in.

The joyful, hateful, spectacle-seeking American public was particularly thick and hearty in the "Portraits" room. They'd come from every walk of life—these retirees, businesspeople, parents pushing strollers, sullen teens, and, at one point, a whole squad of soldiers on leave. Above them, a portrait of Iranian autocrat Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who hosted Warhol in Tehran in 1976, hung near images of Man Ray and Liza Minelli. How many of the viewers stopped to ponder the ethics of Warhol's portraiture? The answer is, who cares? Celebrity is its own justification.

Andy Warhol, *Gun*, 1981-82. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © 2019 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. Photo courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Perhaps it's best not to think too hard about the politics of an exhibition cosponsored by controversial hedge fund manager Kenneth Griffin. (Griffin, incidentally, is becoming the Michael Bloomberg of Chicago museum workers; any number of so-called progressives will suddenly abandon their values to go work for him). Warhol's *tarted up Mao* hangs near a ghoul-ish Nixon (*Vote McGovern*). Do Warhol's pieces express a coherent political stance? If you think they do, you misunderstand Saint Andy, who genuflected to fame and fame alone. Are *Mao* or *Vote McGovern* particularly dangerous? Maybe once upon a time. Today, not so much.

Indeed, many pieces in the exhibition elicit a markedly different response today than they might have sixty years ago. *Brillo Boxes*, for example, plays off a commercial design that would once have been ubiquitous. Today, however, it looks antiquated; the shock of familiarity has faded. In the big picture, however, Warhol's obsession with consumer ephemera has not ceased to be relevant. In fact, Americans find it so hard to part with their stuff that they turn to the likes of Marie Kondo for Shinto lite decluttering advice. (Unsurprisingly, Warhol himself was a hoarder).

The experiential core of "From A to B" is a small, darkened screening room for Warhol's films. While some of his pieces have lost their immediacy, his movies remain agelessly transgressive—in part because of their, yes, baldly exploitative nature. It isn't easy watching *Factory Girl* and heiress Edie Sedgwick struggle to maintain a neutral facial expression for minutes on end. (Thankfully, the giggling security guards outside the screening room cut the tension). It feels like a boundary violation. Here again, Warhol proved to be a prophet of the social media epoch.

"From A to B" is not entirely dishonest in updating Warhol for 2019. It is, however, more truthful and interesting when it shows us how he remains difficult.

**Nathan Worcester**

"Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again" is on view through January 26, 2020 at the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Nathan Worcester is a writer and acting managing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. All comments welcome via [nworcester@gmail.com](mailto:nworcester@gmail.com) or on Twitter @theworcesterest.**

<sup>1</sup> Breanne Fahs, "Ti-Grace Atkinson and the Legacy of Radical Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3, *Feminist Histories and Institutional Practices* (Fall 2011), pp. 576.

## Silver Clouds: Playing with God?

Lawrence & Clark hosted the *Silver Clouds* installation by Andy Warhol during November and December of 2019. First shown at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1966, Warhol's famous installation has been on view all over the world almost continuously since its inception. It was last seen in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the "Merce Cunningham: Common Time" exhibition in 2017. I was told that the Art Institute of Chicago declined to show it in conjunction with its Warhol retrospective, "Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again," partly because of security concerns. But Jason Pickleman, Lawrence & Clark's gallerist, got permission from the Warhol Foundation to mount it in his gallery.

The rectangular mylar balloons, which are filled with a special helium/air mixture, float whimsically in

Andy Warhol, *Silver Clouds*, 1966. Installation view at Lawrence & Clark Gallery. Courtesy of Lawrence & Clark Gallery. Photo by Raul Nino.



L&C's small space. The tight quarters make the experience all the more immersive. There is no way to be in the space with the 25 balloons without physically encountering them, prodding them to go ceiling bound, hugging them, sending them wafting across the room, or just gently pushing them out of your way. Adults as well as children love playing with them and putting them into motion.

Warhol first created the clouds in collaboration with engineer Billy Klüver. They are made of what was then a new material, metalized polyester film, which we now call mylar. And they were to be part of Warhol's exit from painting to other media, such as film. However, while he engaged with those other forms for the remainder of his career, he eventually returned to painting in the 1970s with portraits of the rich and famous.

What makes *Silver Clouds* stand out in Warhol's body of work is that it is less susceptible to the commercialization and brand frenzy that engulf his paintings and silkscreens. You can't go out and buy one. (Of course, you *can* go online and buy an "art print" of a photo of the original installation for less than \$20.) It is an immersive installation that is dependent on an audience, so it is unsuitable for a private collection. Yet it may be the longest lasting installation in modern art history. One could even say that *Silver Clouds* is famous as a work of art and not as a brand icon. And it lacks the anti-consumerist tone that critics associate with much of his work. One must remember that the Warhol paintings and prints that we see in museums are as much a product of Leo Castelli's marketing expertise as Warhol's conceptual and artistic talent.

But there is another side to *Silver Clouds*. Warhol was a devout Catholic, and clouds have a number of symbolic meanings within Christianity and Judaism, where clouds can be positive or negative omens. They can be the symbol of divine presence. They can represent something that is transitory. Or they can be a symbol of concealment.

All of these meanings can be applied to *Silver Clouds*. After all, artistic inspiration is often equated with divine inspiration. That is not to say that Warhol thought that he was inspired by God. But it could suggest that the idea for *Silver Clouds* came from non-commercial and more spiritual sources.





Andy Warhol, *Silver Clouds*, 1966. Installation view with children at play with the clouds. Courtesy of Lawrence & Clark Gallery. Photo by Jason Pickleman.

*Silver Clouds* is certainly transitory in nature. It is always changing and never the same. One day it is cold, and the clouds initially hug the floor; a door is opened, and a draft sets the clouds in motion; someone walks through them and pushes some of them to another part of the room. Even the site of the installation is transitory. The installation has been shown all over the world for more than 50 years. It has been shown in Chicago at least three times, all in different locations.

The clouds are opaque and highly reflective. When they cluster in an area, they can conceal what is there, if anything; parting due to a draft or being pushed, they reveal a doorway or entrance to another part of the space, bringing to mind an allegory of clouds parting to reveal the face of God. Their reflectivity makes them like funhouse mirrors. You see your reflection in the clouds, a distorted one to be sure, perhaps making you reflect on your actual reality.

Warhol made a whole body of overtly religious works, the subject of “Andy Warhol: Revelation,” an exhibition currently on display at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh until February 16, 2020. The pieces in that show deal directly with Catholicism and

Warhol’s complicated relationship with the Catholic church—exacerbated by his homosexuality.

*Silver Clouds* is not part of that body of work. Its religious content is subliminal and metaphorical. Nevertheless, the spiritual content makes itself felt after you spend some time with the installation.

An article by Adelaide Mena on the Catholic News Agency website (<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pop-artist-provocateur-catholic-who-was-andy-warhol-28151>) argues that the bulk of Warhol’s art has religious content—that it is more than just a critique of consumerism. *Silver Clouds* is the intermediary—the bridge—between these two aspects of Warhol’s work.

**Michel Ségard**

**Michel Ségard is the Editor in Chief of the New Art Examiner and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.**

Andy Warhol, *Silver Clouds*, 1966. Installation view with gallerist Jason Pickleman. Courtesy of Lawrence & Clark Gallery. Photo by Raul Nino.



# Material: Holes, Emotion, and Water

November New York City, partly cloudy and drizzling; misted in fine water particles, not entirely wet, not entirely dry, just enough for me to change my plan with friends and headed to the Whitney early. When I entered the museum, I immediately heard the dripping sound. It was calming, soothing without the actual water damping my vision: delightful. I went upstairs—Rachel Harrison—but I wasn't here for Harrison. Back to the first floor, where the glass door to the gallery was half opened. A torn-out sheet of drawing paper with one corner missing was halfheartedly taped to the door. It said:

“DO NOT  
CLEAN  
SWEEP  
MOP  
THIS GALLERY”

If I hadn't known Pope.L, I would have had so many questions: who was so frustrated to have to put up a makeshift sign, and who was the intended audience? The custodian team? Did a worker accidentally vacuum an art piece? Why wouldn't the museum just address the issue in an internal meeting? But I recognized that it was Pope.L's handwriting. The room was dark, the walls were painted black, bits of blue taped and blocks of black color poetic riddles camouflaged on the wall. “NGGR WATER...” A copper pipe came down from the exposed ceiling, extended parallel to the wall. It bent upwards at the corner of the room to draw a door about 7–8 feet high, then it led straight to a thousand-gallon milky white tank that sat solemnly on a grey pedestal. An upside down drinking fountain was suspended directly above the tank, gushing water into the tank. Illuminated by spotlights on the center stage, actor tank was wired with mics, well hydrated, ready as ever.

The tank was a third of the way filled when I came in. The gushing water took up the prominent auditory space in the room. Inside the translucent tank, the water bounced around freely like a shadow puppet show. The speakers played a muffled song mixed with the recycled water sound in the background. Together, the performance of the *Choir* gave off a gripping religious ambience, which made me briefly consider appreciating the sound of the mundane, like filling a bathtub or

puking or pissing. Then my phone rang. It was my friend asking me about the dinner hot-pot — fondue for the lactose intolerance.

Soon I was waiting in the lobby to see the ending of the *Choir* that I just missed. I started wondering about the worth of a

Rachel Harrison; I had just witnessed a visitor casually walk into one of her sculptures upstairs, knocking it down and shattering it into pieces. The conclusion was—a lot, but still, a plastic basin, but still.

I remembered my first class with Pope.L. We were asked to each perform a version of George Brecht's *Drip Music* based on the interpretation of another student's written prompt. Fluxus artists cared more about the process than the finished product. As I tilted my head to reminisce. I saw, above my eye level, multiple shelves high on the wall. Each held up a glass of water.

Fifteen minutes later, I returned to the gallery. I noticed the lucky museum staff member who sat on a tall stool, not nervously guarding the Harrisons. Finally, the drinking fountain slowed down and stopped pouring. After the tank was filled, the pump turned on, quickly draining the tank. The segregated water fountain, the racially implied color palette, the singing, the exposed building structure, the endless performance cycle during the museum's opening hour, and the Flint water crisis. I felt the force of water and thought about the rivers that countless civilizations had sprouted next to: the Indus Valley, the Yellow River, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the Nile. To me, the *Choir* was a celebration of life that also called attention to the underlying structures of institutional racism and power.

The day after, I got a free ticket to “*member: Pope.L, 1978-2001*” from a friend's friend who worked at the



Pope.L, *Pope.L: Choir*, 2019, Installation.  
Photo by Chichan Kwong

newly expanded MoMA. At the coat check, the staff asked me if I had an *American* phone number. That was before I opened my mouth. I got passed off all the time because I had an accent coach for acting. My obviously Polish friend who didn't have an accent coach didn't get asked the same question. I realized that despite the US-China trade, MoMA remained a popular destination for Chinese tourists; I felt the daily frustration the staff must have been facing regarding the visitors who obviously have no ability to comply with the museum management's curious new rule.

The name "*member*" was an example of Pope.L's fancy for word play and language abstraction: member as member, a constituent of a group; member as remember, a retrospective exhibition; member as penis, male sexuality. The show mainly featured the documentations of performances and props: a superman costume with a skateboard, a plastic cow, a blue suit, a bra, a dress, a white jumpsuit with the crotch lit up by an incandescent light bulb from the inside, two drawings of penises, big and small, a stuffed animal rabbit with long tube attached to its rear end, a toilet bowl, and more. A backpack with Pope.L's name embroidered on the front was hung by the exit door. The label said if the backpack was missing that meant that Pope.L was in the room haunting the exhibition. The tiny drawings of ghosts were peppered throughout the room chatting and commenting on the exhibitions. "—What is an exhibition?" "—It's a bunch of things that talk to each other." On the walls, there were janky openings here and there, revealing the backstage of the museum—piping, electrical wiring, studs, and security cameras.

Pope.L is a great teacher to many, but Pope.L's works aren't just here to teach. They do things to the viewer; they drop the viewer into unfamiliar situations. The



Pope.L souvenirs, MoMA gift shop. Photo by Chichan Kwong.

viewer then has to independently confront the harshness of the human condition, the strangeness of human interaction, and the absurdity of human existence.

To sum up the spirit of Pope.L's trio exhibitions, using his own performance titled *ATM Piece* (1997): A half-naked black man wearing a skirt made out of dollar bills, chained himself to a bank's door at midday with sausages and then performed a reverse panhandling by giving out money to passersby. My last time seeing holes in MoMA was for Robert Gober's retrospective, and they were much better looking holes.

**Chichan Kwong**

**Chichan Kwong is an artist and a writer, currently lives in Chicago, thinking about moving to Los Angeles.**

Pope.L is an artist and a professor at the University of Chicago. "Pope.L: Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration" is a trio of complementary exhibitions of Pope.L's work in New York organized by the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Public Art Fund to occur concurrently in the fall of 2019. The three-part exhibition features a retrospective, "member Pope.L, 1978-2001," at MoMA (through February 1, 2020), a brand new installation, "Pope.L: Choir," at the Whitney (through March 8, 2020), and a public group crawl performance, *Conquest*, which took place on September 21. More than a hundred and forty volunteers participated in *Conquest*, crawling 1.5 miles through downtown Manhattan from Greenwich Village to Union Square.

Pope.L, *Tiny Ghosts Drawing*. Photo by Chichan Kwong.





# Lacking for Pope.L

*member: Pope.L, 1978–2001* helps us remember and reconsider the legacy of an artist. In this case, MoMA's catalogue for its eponymous Pope.L retrospective invites a re-examination of several decades' worth of performance work from one of our most inventive and socially conscious contemporary artists. The thirteen performances it examines call into question the prerequisites and stakes of "membership," poking at the knotty fabric of capitalism, race, and gender. From his crawl endurance pieces to absurdist body-driven power plays with white-colored everyday objects like milk or mayonnaise turned into props for race play, Pope.L's ruses and situations alternatively expose and provoke. Who is below? Who is without?

Performance, whose medium is disappearance, poses a problem for retrospectives. How are we to remember without what was live?—video clips, props, costumes, sketches, or other traces of the ephemeral?—or, a step removed, contemporary viewers' testimony or critics' recollections? The archival gesture confronts the very problem of "not-having-ness" that Pope.L performances circle around; yet while Pope.L's *arte povera* makes "the lack in black" a mother of invention, MoMA's approach comes up short of the artist's high mark.

Curator Stuart Comer attempts to locate a consistent, underlying theme in Pope.L's body of work. His

Installation view of "*member: Pope.L, 1978–2001*." © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.



introduction suggests the exhibition catalogue might establish "a lexicon of actions and gestures that lay bare structures and behaviors that regulate difference in our society." But such a rubric fails to apprehend the aporias inherent in Pope.L's oeuvre, let alone the interruptions and interpolations.

An interview between the curators and Pope.L is revealing on this front. Throughout, Pope.L comes across wary, on the defensive. To paraphrase: "Wellllllll—I know that the curatorial head feels these thirteen works mean something key—for example, that they highlight core concerns. I'm not sure I have core concerns. But let's say I do—let's say I do, then it's all projection, perambulation, and performance anyhow, which is HOW it should be. I mean, how could it be otherwise? The seam of the puzzle is the core of the puzzle and so on..."

The book's structure echoes Pope.L's puzzle metaphor with short critical essays commissioned to respond to the thirteen featured performances. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Pope.L," if you would. But despite the notable cast of artists, scholars, and curators enlisted, including Malik Gaines, Naomi Beckwith, Martha Wilson, Andre Lepecki, Martine Syms, and EJ Hill, a strict space cap confines each of the essays to two pages apiece, hardly enough room for the sustained critical attention these pieces deserve. While occasional glimmers of insight penetrate through, for the most part, these essays can only scratch the surface.

Emerging performance artist EJ Hill makes the most of this condensed space in "Human with a Capital B," an exhumation of Pope.L's *Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece*. Where other writers in the book register Pope.L's debased horizontality strictly on the level of the symbolic, Hill connects the physical aspect of Pope.L's crawls with the history of slave labor: "The relationship between our [Black] bodies and this land is not lost on someone like Pope.L, whose signature *Crawl* works anchor him sweating and purposeful onto the very grounds upon which our ancestors toiled." History crawls into the present, exposing buried roots of systemic oppression. In the piece *Sweet Desire*, Pope.L lies in the ground buried for eight hours, with vanilla ice cream tantalizingly placed inches away from his face above ground. It's hardly a stretch to reckon with this scene as the death of the American dream, forever

out of reach. Yet even at this site of death, EJ Hill finds a compelling counter-thread: “There are the obvious associations with death for *Sweet Desire*, but I also think of the promise of life—one that is intertwined with an endless chain of desires. As Pope.L has noted, bodies do stuff. But above all, bodies desire.” Desire is a function of lack; its underbelly—fantasy—suggests its potentiality.

When one has nothing, or very little for that matter, it can be startling to realize the radical choices still at one’s disposal. After all, one can always renounce more, descend even lower. In his most canonical crawl performances, Pope.L strategically “gives up verticality.” Drop to the ground in a punishing, serpentine bodily position. An artist’s toolbox made of lean prepositions: under, athwart, despite, without... As Martha Wilson, an early champion of Pope.L’s work at Brooklyn artist-run space Franklin Furnace in the ‘70s, explains, crawling “takes him out of the upright posture representing power and places him in the position of the destitute, forcing the audience to directly engage with a disenfranchised black body that mirrors those others that have been rendered invisible.”

I want to be careful as I relate Pope.L’s work not to reduce the layered multivalence of his art and writing. When MoMA curatorial assistant Danielle A. Johnson asks him about symbolism, he shuts her down: “SYMBOLISM? HMMM. I prefer to think LANGUAGE and REFERENCE. COWARDLY? I am not comfortable with the popular usage of the word symbolism, a usage WHICH suggests, for many, a one-to-one strict protective meaning relation such that one thing must mean or equal ONE thing. I’m not comfortable with DAT.” Pope.L is a trickster artist, versed in poststructuralism’s strategies of deconstruction and capacious signification (a critical position further grounded in Marxism, Afro-pessimism, and queer theory). Symbolism doesn’t do justice to Pope.L’s carefully considered eccentric worlds.

Let’s probe a single prop—say, the book and exhibit’s titular “member”: the euphemistic long, white cardboard tube Pope.L carried on a stroll through Harlem in *Member a.k.a. Schlong Journey* (1996). More than a suggestion of a white phallus (in and of itself, a chain of signifiers inches long: an instrument of pornocapitalist power, a spewing source of virile “creative genius,” a weapon of phallogocentrism, a peeping white voyeur “slumming” in Harlem, an inversion of the fetishization of black cocks, a pants-down exposure, a vertical display, a sexual invitation (“I’ll show you mine...”)),



Installation view of “member: Pope.L, 1978–2001.” © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.

it is an upending of deeply entangled racial and sexual orders. Pope.L’s member is materially fungible and substitutable, a transgressive undoing of psychoanalytic fantasy. “I have a COCK which is a pussy and it’s filled with DOUBT.” Parading in the heart of Harlem, Pope.L invokes an involuntary involution—a convoluting chase for America’s impossible originary “father’s vagina.” Who wants to be/who gets to be a member of US (“we the people” = a disturbed interracial family romance)? It’s all the above and more.

Then there are interruptions—yet another way Pope.L performances resist closure. So serial they almost seem plotted, or at least predictable: the nosying interference of security guards and policemen. Even when permissions are procured in advance, a number of performances end prematurely, just as they are getting underway. Pope.L comes to a head with authority figures as a black man acting out of the norm. See *ATM Piece* (1997), for which Pope.L, clad in a skirt made of detachable dollar bills, tied himself to the doors of Chase Bank with a link of sausages, with the intent of giving away his cash to passerby until he was physically exposed. But a security guard cuts short Pope.L’s intended “reverse panhandling”-cum-strip-tease performance within the first minute, reporting “I got an EDP [emotionally disturbed person] over here.”

These unmistakably racially-charged clashes with authority become part of the performances. Pope.L’s imaginative acts of worldmaking cannot escape the law’s Althusserian hail. (“Hey, you there!”) It seems to me, however, that Pope.L anticipates such responses within the frame of his own piece’s script of exposure: his own acts of deviance predict the puppet response of a white supremacist surveillance state. So, a lack of completion is not necessarily a failure, since it has

still revealed in the potentiality of rupture as a system or language. “A police semantics is revealed,” writes André Lepecki in response to the interrupted *The Great White Way*, “one that articulates that even with a permit, even with proper paperwork, even under the guise of art, on Liberty Island a black man cannot and will not perform an ‘aberrant movement.’” The repetitive stress of Lepecki’s “even with” clauses (preconditional hurdles jumped) draws attention to a fundamental *unevenness*, a lack of horizontal equivalence for the black subject under the law.

As I consider these acts of interference, I am realizing parallels with gate-keeping in the art world. A retrospective at the MoMA risks sanitizing the raunchy edges of Pope.L’s antisocial black performance. I am thinking about the systems of control, surveillance, and commodification at play in the upholding of an institution necessitated with pleasing its moneyed members. Yes, the very type of Ideological State Apparatus a street theater guerilla artist like Pope.L gives the slip...

Complicit in this project of curtailment is the curator, a regulating authority who closes the escape hatch of Pope.L’s variable signification. Even in this supplemental catalogue, Comer cites the language of “lexicon” to foreclose the artist’s oeuvre as a system of one-to-one meaning. I’ll flag a few ways the curator’s work to institutionalize reels in and cordons Pope.L’s trickster meaning-making:

- **Misunderstanding iterations:** Rather than engaging with the implications of iterability itself, curators try to frame multiple performances of the “same” work as evolving drafts toward a final version that

can be pinned down and claimed as the authorized form. In contrast, Pope.L emphasizes his own fungibility, adapting a continuous theme in a work to each performance’s specificity of site and context. In prioritizing linearity in place of non-linear, process-oriented, or cyclical understandings, the curator constructs a false regime of order.

- **Insistent placing in lineages:** The curators’ taxonomizing urge to relate the artist’s work to existing lineages and thereby establish significance in an art history context (e.g.: Viennese actionism + Fluxus + black). Here, it comes across as reductionist attempt to pigeon-hole, as they disregard the artist’s own stated influences and intentions. In the interview, Pope.L rejects most of the curators’ reference points and dismisses their assumption of degree of “autobiography” in work. By embracing “out of placeness,” Pope.L resists the normative closure of canonizing gestures.
- **Commodifying the non-material:** making an archive/exhibit of an ephemeral art form. Pope.L eats *The Wall Street Journal* in performances about the absurdity of capitalist fetishism. Commercial galleries and museums eat up (and commodify) the art produced by alternative spaces, such as Pope.L’s performance art, which was created precisely to evade the manic capitalist logic of the art market.

These are but a few ways the exhibition’s companion book misfires. In sum, the project fails to add up to more than its parts. This is astoundingly disappointing, given the arresting figure at the book’s center. What could have been an indispensable authoritative sourcebook for Pope.L enthusiasts and scholars is instead a puzzle box of tantalizing but partial glimpses. There’s enough here to get curious about, but not enough depth to look closer. It is telling that the most engaging parts were Pope.L’s own words, though his voice wasn’t nearly as present as I would have liked. Pope.L’s contributions constitute a serious intervention in performance art and merit deeper engagement.

## Noa/h Fields

Noa/h Fields is a nonbinary poet and teaching artist living in Chicago. Their chapbook *WITH* is out from Ghost City Press, and they are writing a book on the poetics of queer nightlife.

*member: Pope.L, 1978–2001*, edited by Stuart Comer, MoMA Publications, 144 pp., \$40.00

Installation view of “*member: Pope.L, 1978–2001*.” © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.





# Works That Caught Our Eye at Art Basel Miami Beach and NADA



**Above:** Keya Tama, *Love Trap*, at Mana Contemporary in the Wynwood neighborhood. Photo by K.A. Letts.



**Above:** Gladys Nilsson, *Repose*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, at Rhona Hoffman booth, Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo by K.A. Letts.

**Right:** Marianna Olague, *Here Lies Toro*, 2019, oil on canvas, at David Klein booth, Art Miami. Photo by K.A. Letts.

**Bottom Right:** Amoako Boafo, *Perry*, 2019, oil on canvas, at Mariane Ibrahim's booth, Nova, Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo by K.A. Letts.

**Bottom Center:** Wassef Boutros-Ghali, *Shape in the Green*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, at Rhona Hoffman booth, Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo by K.A. Letts.

**Bottom Left:** Iris Eichenberg, *Darker*, in Simone DeSousa Gallery booth at NADA. Photo by K.A. Letts.



# Art Basel Miami Beach 2019: Access and Success for Detroit and Chicago Artists

Art Basel Miami Beach 2019 just ended, and I survived. Since its debut in 2002, this gargantuan art sale, trade convention and cool kids' party in the Miami Convention center has spawned over twenty satellite fairs—PULSE, SCOPE, Untitled, Aqua Art, Spectrum, Red Dot and this year, Pinta, to name just a few. Purely in self-defense against this tidal wave of art, I prioritized Chicago and Detroit galleries for extra attention. Here's what I found.

The main fair, Art Basel Miami Beach, is playground and shopping mall for the top 0.1%, where the haves go to have more. Four galleries—Rhona Hoffman, Richard Gray Gallery, Corbett vs. Dempsey and Kavi Gupta—represented Chicago in the main exhibitors' section.

In Corbett vs. Dempsey's booth, Lui Shtini's lovely painting *Under Water* stood out. I was also happy to see Margot Bergman's small, charismatic picture, *Isabell*. Her paintings, like bumblebees, shouldn't fly—but they do.

Richard Gray Gallery featured one of Jaume Plensa's huge, silvery heads with its characteristic perspectival

Monique Meloche installation in Nova Section at Art Basel Miami Beach. Ebony G. Patterson's "*...as the garden secrets a swarm of monarchs feast.....a john crow awaits a carcass' fall while scavengers gather to feast below, as we did between the cuts...below the leaves...beneath the soil*" (2019), the Miami Beach Purchase Award-winning artwork on right. Photo by K.A. Letts.



distortion, similar to one that currently rests on the front steps of the Toledo Museum of Art. I noticed Gladys Nilsson's painting, *Repose*, outside Rhona Hoffman's booth, as well as a terrific piece, *Shape in the Green*, by Wassef Boutros-Ghali, an artist whose work was new to me. There was relatively little photography at Art Basel Miami Beach this year, but Hoffman had on hand Deana Lawson's intimate posed inkjet prints of African American subjects.

Two Chicago galleries, Monique Meloche and Mariane Ibrahim, found their way into Art Basel Miami Beach this year in the Nova section, one of several special project areas intended to render the main fair more accessible to emerging gallerists and artists.

Monique Meloche brought two Chicago-based artists to Nova: Jamaican-born Ebony G. Patterson and Maia Cruz Palileo. Mariane Ibrahim presented virtuosic, graphically powerful paintings by the Ghanaian artist Amoako Boafo. Both the galleries and their artists got some love from the people of Miami Beach by way of the Legacy Purchase award. Patterson's lyrical, shadowboxed evocation of nature "*...as the garden secrets a swarm of monarchs feast.....a john crow awaits a carcass' fall while scavengers gather to feast below, as we did between the cuts...below the leaves...beneath the soil*" was chosen by an online public vote for purchase by the city. Boafo's *Cobalt Blue Earring* was also purchased by Miami Beach.

There were no Detroit galleries represented at Art Basel in the Miami Beach Convention Center, but I found David Klein Gallery comfortably ensconced nearby at Art Miami, in an enormous light-filled space near the beach. Art Miami predates the whole Art Basel phenomenon, and the gallery has had a booth there each year since 2008. They brought work by several of their best Detroit artists as well as recent paintings from some talented newcomers.

Kelly Reemtsen's monumental *Rise Up* anchored the collection, the billowing taffeta skirt of her genteel but assertive debutante seeming to catch the warm Miami breeze. The light in the heavy white impasto surrounding the figure felt a little different on the beach than it had when I saw the piece in Detroit.

Two large portraits by accomplished figurative painter Mario Moore brought a bit of Motown to





David Klein installation in their booth at Art Miami with Kelly Reemtsen's *Rise Up* in the foreground. Photo by K.A. Letts.

Miami. His confident, casually dressed subjects looked comfortable in their skins and in their environment. Though David Klein Gallery has routinely shown the work of African Americans, the gallery now seems particularly on trend. Images by and of people of color were front and center this year throughout all the fairs.

Rosalind Tallmadge and Marianna Olague, two recent graduates of Cranbrook Art Academy, were represented by David Klein in Miami in 2019. Tallmadge's formal mica, glass bead and metal leaf encrusted artworks seemed to shimmer in the ambient Florida sunshine, while Marianna Olague's self-contained and pensive young women inhabited pictorial space suffused with the warm light of her native El Paso.

Nada Miami ([newartdealers.org](http://newartdealers.org)), located in Miami's Ice Palace Studios, is generally acknowledged as the place to look for up-and-coming talent of the future. That is where I found by far the greatest preponderance of Detroit and Chicago galleries and artists. Many of the Chicago galleries at NADA were new to me, but my encounter with Western Exhibitions felt like running across an old friend. Also showing work from Chicago were Patron, Regards, M. LeBlanc and MICKEY.

Two Detroit galleries found their way to NADA in 2019: Simone DeSousa and Reyes|Finn. (And in the NADA Projects section, a sort of junior NADA, I encountered Detroit Presents, sponsored by Detroit Art Week and showcasing work by Anthony Giannini.)

This was the second year at NADA for DeSousa, and she brought work by two Detroit artists. Neha Vedpathak's ritually-derived, warmly colored freeform artworks contrasted nicely with Iris Eichenberg's light-absorbing, idiosyncratic and subtly humorous objects.

A more conceptual vibe prevailed at Reyes|Finn, under the frosty glow of Detroit-born Maya Stovall's hermetic neon signs, which refer to year dates significant to the artist and reference coincident meaningful cultural touchstones. Co-exhibitor Nick Doyle's scaled-up objects—a giant wall outlet, a huge, discarded coffee cup, a snapshot camera—were rendered in denim blue, a color both common and cool.

The street art aesthetic that is so prevalent in Detroit was noticeably absent from the established fairs, with the exception of SCOPE, where I saw a pair of Chicago galleries, Vertical and Line Dot Editions, that carried the flag for that way of thinking and making. The Wynwood neighborhood was the place to go for rude, risky, vital work. Some of the most impressive artwork that I saw in this vein wasn't in a fair at all, but at Mana Contemporary, where Miami's local art community has a home. There I saw art that hasn't (yet) made it into the mainstream, unless you count a small piece by Karl Wirsum that I glimpsed in the back room at Corbett vs. Dempsey in their Art Basel Miami Beach exhibit.

The week I spent at Art Basel Miami Beach and its satellite fairs was aesthetically exhausting and physically demanding. It was also a great way to see a huge amount of art, much of it excellent. One wonders, though, whether Miami Art Week is environmentally sustainable in the long run; it's a little hard to ignore the perils of climate change while looking at art on a vulnerable beach.

**K.A. Letts**

**K.A. Letts is a working artist ([kalettsart.com](http://kalettsart.com)) and art blogger ([rustbeltarts.com](http://rustbeltarts.com)). She has shown her paintings and drawings in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.**

Orkideh Torabi, *Follow your heart*, 2019, in the Western Exhibitions booth at NADA. Photo by K.A. Letts.





# Porno-Capitalism at Art Basel Miami Beach

The grotesquerie of economic inequality in our current Porno-Capitalism<sup>1</sup> shrieked at a frightening register at this year's 18th edition of Art Basel Miami Beach. It felt a little like the grand banquet at the President's Mansion in *The Hunger Games*—where the ultra-elite, decked out in haute couture, are served crystal flutes of a bulimic elixir to allow them to continue to gorge while the starving masses illegally feed on rodents to survive and are forced to send their children off to a televised battle royal deathmatch for the entertainment of the ruling class—all for a wee bit of extra food.

The global cultural phenomenon of Art Basel Miami Beach is akin to the entirety of the Louvre being installed and deinstalled in a sinking bloated beach resort over a week's span. With nearly 300 Art Basel exhibitors, no fewer than 20 satellite art fairs, and countless museum and gallery openings, performances, events, and parties, it almost seems irrelevant to speak of the specificity of artworks when dealing with the sheer scale and ramifications of the world's premier and most important art fair—even more so in our post-Fordist, alternative fact-based, brand-obsessed, masturbatory, and lonely internet world.

At times, it seems the best an artist can hope for these days is a type of nihilistic humor that might allow for a moment of contemplation of just how utterly mad the world is. The Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan delivered this year's best joke with *Comedian* (2019), a banana that had been duct-taped to a wall of Art Basel.

Maurizio Cattelan, *Comedian*, 2019 at Perrotin booth at Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo by Sarah Cascone. Source: artnet News.



The punchline? *Comedian* sold for \$120,000 to \$150,000 five times over.

Catalan's banana exemplifies Porno-Capitalism—what Paul B. Preciado calls our current hyper-maniac stage of late capitalism. According to Preciado, we are in the third stage of capitalism—the first being slavery, and the second the Industrial Revolution. We currently find ourselves in the “Pharmacopornographic” era, or, more simply, Porno-Capitalism: a world in which we have long moved past the relevance of commerce of actual objects, where sex and sexuality become the main object of political and economic control over the human body carried out through new dynamics of advanced technocapitalism, global media, and biotechnologies. Anything can be art, and everything and nothing are at stake, resulting in a smorgasbord of absurdities. The crux of Cattelan's *Comedian* is the orchestration and channeling of economics. The banana is nothing more than a dumbbell for the bulging flex of capital.

In the normalized lunacy of our times, we need artists who can enact new visions of the world and create things we cannot currently imagine—who offer hope, biting criticism, mirrors that provide actual reflection and contemplation, and hammers that strike at necessary targets. With impending climate crisis and alienation from the natural world, perhaps *Plant Sex Workshop* (2019) is exactly what we need. Its creator, Hong Kong-based artist and professor Zheng Bo, is “committed to human and multispecies equality. He investigates the past and imagines the future from the perspectives of marginalized communities and marginalized plants.”<sup>2</sup> His video *Pteridophilia* (2016-present), depicting young men tenderly making love to ferns, made waves at Art Basel. Zheng reflects on and challenges our current moral outlook that it is “natural” to eat plants but “unnatural” to make love to them.

Local law enforcement made a huge fuss and unsuccessfully attempted to shut down Antonia Wright and Ruben Millares' outdoor kinetic sculpture positioned at the entrance of UNTITLED Art Fair Miami because of disrespect for the American flag. “*It is not down on any map; true places never are*” (2019), in which the flags of the top 16 countries currently involved in the migrant crisis circularly rotate along two flagpoles and sequentially fly upside-down and, at times, drag across



Still from Zheng Bo's *Pteridophyllia 2*, 2018. Video (4K, color, sound), 20 min.

the ground, representing the ever-changing nature of power.

There were a large number of black and latinx artists represented at Art Basel and around town this year. An insert focusing on artists of the African diaspora was to be found in the official Art Basel guide. However, there is still a dearth of black owned galleries. Mariane Ibrahim, who recently relocated to Chicago from Seattle, is rumored to have been the only black owned gallery exhibiting at the official fair. The themes of racial equality along with a number of other pressing social and environmental issues are busy as hell in the art world, but to what end? The art industry believes that by exhibiting or purchasing artworks that deal with social issues, they are fighting to resolve these issues. The art industry is concerned with *appearances* of social progressivism, which is not the same as actual radical representation or inclusion. To quote the late Toni Morrison, "Racism will disappear when it's no longer profitable and no longer psychologically useful. And when that happens, it'll be gone. But at the moment, people make a lot of money off of it, pro and con."<sup>3</sup> An important and often neglected meditation would be on the "pro and con." "Who Owns Black Art?," a three-day group exhibit held at Miami Urban Contemporary Experience that ran alongside Art Basel Miami Beach, poses such a question specifically in regard to the exploitation of black bodies and culture.

Art Basel Miami Beach was a strange return for me. Nearly 10 years ago, at the OG fair in Switzerland, I found myself over the course of an 8 hours span having gone from sipping champagne with a collector of mine who snuck me into the "First Choice VIP" opening with the head of a major multinational pharmaceutical corporation and two Saudi princesses to sleeping with two homeless men at the Basel train station after

peeing off a 19-year-old millionaire heiress for accidentally spilling a cocktail on her dress (she had her bodyguard dispose of my luggage). A lot of bad behavior goes unchecked in the art world.

I am far from being either wealthy or homeless, and so it is hard to hold those two images of myself simultaneously. However, it often seems that, as artists, we are tasked with embracing contradiction and paradox. I'm interested in how artists peddle in the spiritual while navigating the swamps of late capitalism—in how there is still truth there amongst all the shit.

*Order of Importance* by Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich offers something like truth. It transforms the beautiful, sandy, champagne-colored beaches of Miami into a haunting stretch of six-lane highway. Made entirely of sand, more than five dozen life-sized cars of various makes and models are stuck in an eternal traffic jam. "Cars have been a symbol of autonomy and freedom, but we are not necessarily moving forward when we drive," reflects the artist. As the sun set on this year's Art Basel Miami Beach, Erlich's cars were left for the ocean to slowly take back. Perhaps this is a good place to end.

**Stevie Hanley**



Rendering of *Order of Importance*, 2019. Courtesy of Leandro Erlich Studio.

**Stevie Hanley is an artist based in Chicago and an adjunct lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also a founding member of the artists collective Siblings.**

- 1 The concept of the Pharmacopornographic era was laid out by the Spanish theorist Paul B. Preciado and is further discussed later in this article.
- 2 Taken from the artist's website: <http://zhengbo.org/info.html>
- 3 "Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age," NPR interview, December 26, 2008.



# Arturo Herrera at Corbett vs. Dempsey

One of my most firmly held beliefs about painting is that it is the closest thing we have to a visual representation of what goes on in the human mind. It is the relationship between what we see, think, and feel that creates the realm of ambiguity in which painting sits. I believe this in spite of all the technology we have to create imagery. It is the tension between surface and illusion achieved by the relationship between the hand, the eye, and material that is most revelatory of a thought process. The exhibition of new works by Arturo Herrera at Corbett vs. Dempsey is a commanding representation of this conviction.

The exhibition includes four series and two stand-alone works. I did not spend a great deal of time with the two stand-alone works. One is a pattern painted in Latex on the wall of the gallery office titled *Heel to Toe, Toe to Heel*. The other is a fan-folded book of small collages titled *Eds Sweatered*. These two singular pieces are the largest and smallest in the exhibition, and although they did not capture my attention on my first visit, they play a pivotal role in translating Herrera's process and aesthetic to dramatically large and small scales.

It is on the more traditional pictorial scales that Herrera seems to revel in a process of generating abstract compositions through means that feel both rigidly predetermined and vibrantly improvisational. It is thus no wonder that dance is an essential character in the story of this work (more on that later).

Entering the large white cube that is the main gallery at Corbett vs. Dempsey, there is nothing particularly unusual at first glance about framed works hung uniformly on the walls. The power of this work is not fleeting though; each piece is an invitation to decipher seemingly simple gestures that create an ambiguity

in the images' origins, provoking a greater scrutiny of the artist's process. This is ever present in the series of nine untitled works of mixed media on paper which appear to revolve around, and evolve from, a singularly gestural mark. Each of the nine compositions share the same "figure": a thick, sweeping line reminiscent of a Ab-Ex brushstroke. It appears in each untitled collage as an usual shape that is cut away from paper, interacting with other collage materials like photographs or fragments of cut painted canvas or paper. Some of the pieces are rich with color, while others are subdued in a predominantly gray palette.

Repetition plays a key role in this collection of works and Herrera's process. He seems to be mining a unifying element for all possible variations that could exist within his aesthetic mode while also being open to the possibility of what is produced as a result. The



Arturo Herrera, *Untitled 2018*. Collage and mixed media on paper. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey.

Arturo Herrera, installation view of six untitled pieces from 2018. Collage and mixed media on paper. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey.







Arturo Herrera, installation view of *Set Design Studies for Dance/Elements N° 1 - 15*, 2019. Series of 15 elements, collage and mixed media on handmade paper. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey.

untitled series is unified by the repetition of the mark. In another series, *Set Design Studies for Dance N° 1-7*, the reoccurring element is the pink paper that appears in each of the fifteen pieces in the series. The pieces are displayed in five columns of three, lending it a more monumental feel. There is also a rhythm to this series in how the compositions are not as uniform as in the other main series in the exhibitions. They feel less like variations on a theme and more like snapshots of an event unfolding in one space.

It is no wonder that dance is so prevalent in Herrera's output as visual artist. The physicality of the gestural mark and its analogous relationship to the motion of the body are what make this artist's work such a strong testament to the value of painting as the most uniquely capable medium for conveying something of human consciousness. This relationship is more directly addressed in the series in the smaller gallery titled *Body and Feet Positions in Relation to Line of Dance N° 1-9*. This series is the most minimal in the exhibition, as each individual composition is made of just black and transparent glass. The forms in black echo a sense of weight and motion of the body, almost like a mental fingerprint of the body's physical contact with a surface.

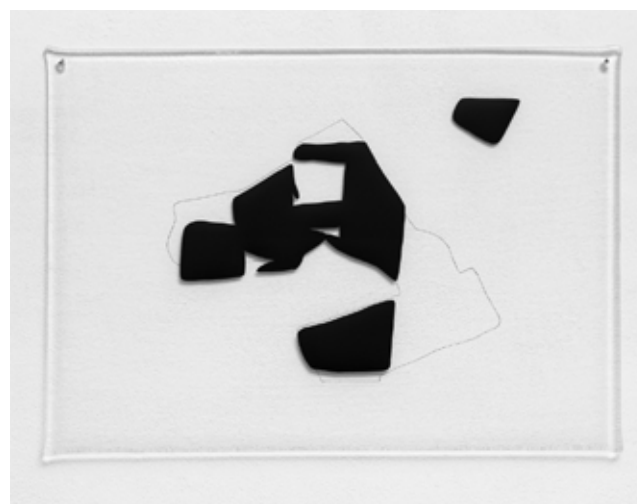
No painter of the 21st century would let themselves get away with omitting the insertion of self-awareness. Herrera seems to do this with a touch of humor only the art history nerds would get. The *Untitled* collage series features wallpaper patterns of monochromatic one-hundred dollar bills or repurposed illustrations

of windows. The *I Heard Them and I Still Hear Them/Elements N° 1-7* series features centralized compositions that echo the traditions of Western Modernism in painting. Black and white photos (origins unclear) overlay color plates of paintings by Pablo Picasso pulled from a book. Painting as a window; images as commodity; Abstraction as Modernity. Herrera plays all the hits all while serving up some deep cuts.

**Evan Carter**

Evan Carter is the assistant editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.

Arturo Herrera, *Body and Feet Positions in Relation to Line of Dance No. 9*. Clear and black glass panel over pencil drawing on wall. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey



# Creativity as an Intellectual Process:

## Nirmal Raja at The Alice Wilds

Patience, focus, time, persistence. These words could describe the artist's practice as is evident in the compelling exhibition, "Nirmal Raja: Wrapping Air in Cloth and Other Seemingly Impossible Acts," at The Alice Wilds in Milwaukee. During a conversation held at the gallery in December 2019, Raja, Jason S. Yi and Max Yela explored many terms and approaches to her work. The artist suggested "discipline," as in a daily preparation for being open, showing up, and being ready and present. All of these terms apply, as hers is a thoughtful process, and a powerful one.

The tiny gallery space hums with this beautifully curated exhibition. One wall is given over to a set of the artist's daily rituals, *Flights of Thought*. These are drawings—walnut ink, gouache, and pen, on wax hanji (Korean paper)—that the artist makes in groups of 101. They are the start of her daily studio experience, setting the tone and focusing body and mind in the midst of turbulence, political or otherwise. Months prior to seeing this show, I had the opportunity, during an evening open studio event, to sort through a stack of these drawings. Each numbered sheet is a unique universe, with intricate lines and varied textures. In the gallery they are hung on thin wires, suspended out from the wall so they sway and bob together in response to breath or the air movement of someone walking by. Installed in this way, the pages are removed from individual appreciation and become communal instead. They lie still or move in unison, responding like sea forms to water and wave action. This move from solitary to grouped is a subtle transformation but a significant one, as the works function both as individual drawings and as an installation. The sheets move easily between both presentations.

The gallery entry is beneath a series of delicate panels that are suspended from the ceiling. Threshold hangings are usually a sign of welcome, but here, they are embroidered with the geographical markings of dangerous border areas from around the globe. The work was inspired by an item in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection.



Nirmal Raja, *Flights of Thought*, 2018, [101 daily studio rituals]. Walnut ink, gouache and pen on hanji (Korean paper) installed with music wire. Approximately 8 3/4 x 6 3/8 inches (each). © Nirmal Raja. Photo by Tyler Jones.

The artist described embroidering the lines during a visit by her geographically distant mother. The two women worked on the pieces together. These delicate works, with their aggressive intellectual foundation, are defined by multiple modes of transgression—even entering the gallery requires moving past these stitched borders. They reference historical material, both in the form of specific items and, more generally, by engaging with the historical use of narrative embroidery, and they are collaboratively constructed in a cross-cultural, trans-global, temporally limited sewing experience shared by mother and daughter.

Needle and thread also make an appearance in a video work, *Thread in Open Waters*. A hand is shown sewing a single red horizon line that bisects changing imagery of water, all projected onto a gold-bordered cloth on the wall. The images are from the artist's international travels over the past 10 years, and the depicted

sewing is an act of gathering all of these experiences together. With repeated imagery and careful, methodical action, the artist creates a resonant metaphor, aptly describing the effort and instability inherent in memory. Across distance and through the passage of time, remembering is a task that requires consistent revisiting and attention.

The titular works, *Wrapping Air in Cloth* from 2019, are bundles of fabric whose shapes are held aloft thanks to a fabric sculpting medium. They are grouped on pedestals and lie unobtrusively in corners or on tabletops, serving to visually guide visitors through the space but also as quiet reminders of the dimensionalities we inhabit and the distance between us and objects that make up our world. Like the plaster-based works that are displayed in groups on tables—*Measuring the Sky* and the many *Contained: A Still Life* pieces—these are material attempts at capturing something intangible. Whether it be the lives and experiences of loved ones who have migrated across great physical and cultural distances, the clouds and stars of the skies above, our memories of the past, or the very air we rely on for life, these are the “other seemingly impossible acts” of the title.

Only one work does not fit into the exhibition’s conceptual grouping. An intense hanging piece, *Blurred Boundaries*, is made of ink and screenprinted paper cut into the shapes that draw out the microscopic structure of hanji, the Korean paper that the artist frequently uses. The map imagery on the paper’s surface may reference the artist’s interest in a global experience, but the work seems to be grappling with bigger issues. Whether highlighting a relationship between the roads

Nirmal Raja, *Fault Lines, North Korea/South Korea, India/Pakistan, Syria/Turkey, Gaza Strip, Mexico/USA*, 2019. Embroidery on silk organza, 21 X 48 inches (each). © Nirmal Raja. Photo by Tyler Jones.



Nirmal Raja, *Wrapping Air in Cloth*, 2019. Fabric and fabric sculpting medium, dimensions variable. © Nirmal Raja. Photo by Tyler Jones.

that crisscross the planet and the minute connections that form the very body of paper or referencing an ever changeable structure in its long sheets twisted and connected with paper clips, the work is slight in its materiality yet substantial and visually impressive. However, it is not necessarily directly related to the impossibility inherent in the accompanying works.

Nirmal Raja commands a rich conceptual vocabulary; the very materials she selects are metaphorically complex and visually engaging. Approaching her studio practice like a lab environment, her experiments with thread, fabric, plaster, watercolor, video, and paper are the beautiful result of patience, discipline, and an active mind. The artist described “keeping hands busy” as one aspect of creating art. A thoughtful and consistent practice, an appreciation of hope, and a desire for greater understanding are the spark and fuel that make Raja’s ongoing process so productive and resonant.

## Ann Sinfield

**Ann Sinfield is an independent curator and writer. She is also Exhibits Lead at the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.**

“Nirmal Raja: *Wrapping Air in Cloth* and *Other Seemingly Impossible Acts*” was on view from November 8th through December 21st at The Alice Wilds in Milwaukee.





# Lari Pittman's Declaration of Independence at the Hammer Museum

I've started to dread painting shows—this despite the fact that I always found it the most seductive medium. I'm forming a hangover from a relentless amount of likable but empty paintings. I myself am guilty of indulging in unmotivated paintings—how they flirt with trend or beauty enough to hold space temporarily but ultimately have the shelf life of an Instagram post before fading into the amalgam of gradients and witty pastiches. I've fallen for many soft gradients, for crisp and consumable one-hitters. Still, I



Lari Pittman, *This Wholesomeness, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless*, 1990. Acrylic and enamel on mahogany. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

often leave an exhibition in a soft haze, the work lacking enough friction to spark any opinion at all. I worry that this amiable but faceless work is rhyming with a larger feeling of political weariness and a renewed desire for escapism. The evaporation rate of these thin works has made me reconsider the difference between seeing a painting I like and one that has real presence.

Hoping to be

revived, I visited the Hammer Museum's retrospective of longtime UCLA faculty member and Angelino painter Lari Pittman. I found that even when it's not pleasurable, "Declaration of Independence" has a sense of purpose that makes the paintings stick to your bones.

Anything but uninspired, the paintings themselves are conceptually and formally propelled by dense compositions and symbolic systems that play on combining delight and disgust. At times, I felt physically disoriented by staring into a single work. My eye kept getting tangled in a maze of graphic forms, bits of language,

and evocative layers of color. Each work reflects the overstimulation of its cultural moment, each heavy with history and tragedy. But I'm relieved that rather than building a cacophony that amounts to nihilism, these works seem deeply invested in living in the now.

Organized chronologically, the retrospective spreads throughout all of the Hammer's main exhibition spaces. Its layout and footprint underscore the considerable length of Pittman's career. Viewers are guided through the highlights and motivations of each moment, distinguishing a new era in the artist's evolution. Every room is packed with paintings while still offering a satisfying amount of space to explore the persistence of Pittman's drawing practice. Even though you will feel the density, the Hammer avoids claustrophobia. You could spend your entire visit in one chapter of Pittman's work; honestly, you could spend hours dissecting and untangling one painting.

For example, I kept falling into the 1990 painting *This Wholesomeness, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless*, as it showcases how the artist's play weaves between complex formal games and an emerging political vocabulary that was already forming at the beginning of his career. A pattern of hot pink arrows pushes and pulls the viewer's eye into the composition. A radiating target zeros in on two androgynous silhouettes, creating a red glow where they touch. The use of profiles here brings to mind a dusty Americana of cameos and formal portraiture, queered by Pittman's use of violence, sex, and dark humor. He employs the form to challenge ideas of American propriety, possibly inspiring the infamous silhouetted figures of Kara Walker. But Pittman uses this reference in a constellation of other elements, complicating them with 69s, decontextualized objects, layers of colorful abstractions, and delicate linework that gives the sense that we have x-ray vision into this world. Pittman never shies away from adornment or decoration, adding filigree to every curve and frame of a composition's central narrative. Arrows, concentric circles, latticework, and organic lines shift your eyes between layers that are interrupted or enhanced by expert color relationships. Pittman is a maestro of primary visual language and uses this power to its fullest extent. Color and line quality are

performing at full capacity here, commanding your attention and creating endless surprising relationships that take time to discover.

From beginning to end, the exhibition digs into overarching themes in Pittman's life and his interest in critiquing civilizations of violence, all while referencing identity, personal trauma, and a fascination with language. *Memento Mori*, a series of painted gourds that bear the delicately scripted virtues Charity, Compassion, Faith, Forgiveness, Hope, and Kindness, stood out to me as a succinct expression of the emotional content of Pittman's work. The organic forms repeat in several paintings as another symbol in a broad repertoire, but as objects, the gourds become phallic, bodily—tired. The carefully painted script uncannily recalls historical penmanship or decorative texts that communicate authority.

Contextual information throughout the exhibition halls points to the influence of Cal Arts and its Feminist Art Program (FAP) on Pittman. Here he developed an interest in incorporating the language of craft into his work, which allowed him to value his personal life as a valid path of political inquiry. Here, you can learn about the contexts in which Pittman began his long career. He has made increasingly queer work under the shadow of the AIDS crisis, hostile presidential administrations, and personally traumatic episodes. The result is Pittman's incomparable ability to encode the depth of contradicting American narratives and a personal relationship to a violent world in each painting.

The most gripping work on view is Pittman's suite from 2013—*The Flying Carpet Series*. The three mural-sized works hang across from one another in an offset gallery. Each one commands attention. Their titles: *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation*, *Flying Carpet with Petri Dishes for a Disturbed Nation*, and *Flying Carpet with Magic Mirrors for a Distorted Nation*. These are at once succinct descriptions but also riddles that folds back into Pittman's visual labyrinth. Each word, mark, or color leads you deeper into

his vocabulary. Each painting prominently features oculi in the center of the composition. They read as gun scopes, the eyes of microscopes, or the reflections of mirrors.

The portals, while depicted in various ways, are mesmerizing, anchoring compositions that feel like they are materializing for just a moment before your eyes but at any moment may fall apart. The standout, *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation*, makes it difficult to remain grounded on any one plane. Five red scopes set blurry focus on a generalized landscape reminiscent of the American West. A moon wanes in the sequential panes. The fading moon and its relationship to the ominous crosshairs are haunted by three nooses that hide in plain sight. Every color and line in this work interrupts and redirects another. Even with a bright red rectangle defining the orientation of the canvas, you feel yourself losing balance. The combination of decoration, diabolical formal relationships, and quotations of America's historical violence make the work vibrate.

"Declaration of Independence" is about America, and it is about Lari Pittman. It delights in the decorative but also in revealing the violence from which decoration distracts. There is unapologetic pleasure in these paintings as well as a psychic, traumatic pain. I can't think of any work that so well depicts simultaneity of the self and the national, the indulgent and the sacrificial, and a political self that looks inward as well as outward.

**Sara Rouse**

"Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence" is at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles through January 5th, 2020.

**Sara Rouse is an artist and writer living and working in Chicago. She received her B.F.A from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in 2012 and her M.F.A. from the University of Chicago in 2015. Follow her work at [www.sararouse.com](http://www.sararouse.com) and on Instagram @sararouse.**

Lari Pittman, *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation*, 2013. Cel-Vinyl and spray paint on canvas over wood. Collection of Maurice and Paul Marciano Art Foundation. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles



# “Real Estate Row,” Downtown St. Louis

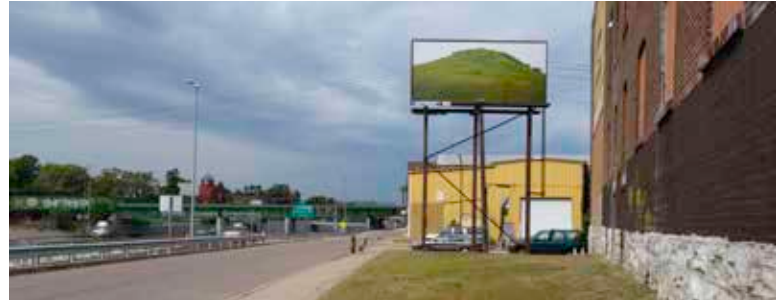
At 7th and Pine in downtown St. Louis, a solitary billboard marks the district with a mysterious photograph of unidentified, almost abstract objects. No words suggest its significance. In its urban setting, surrounded by glass and steel and brick and mortar, the billboard coaxes interest by its curious absence of narrative.

Titled *Real Estate Row*, the billboard photograph is by St. Louis photographer Jennifer Colten. It is a public art commission by the Luminary, an art gallery and incubator. The photograph's subject relates by genealogy to the immediate downtown area in whose shadows it stands. Its image depicts artifacts saved long ago from a demolished building in the area. Real Estate Row earned its nickname from the district's history as a nucleus of wealth-building enterprises in late 19th to early 20th century St. Louis. Subsequent real estate developments slowly removed most of the district's landmark buildings.

The photograph draws attention by means of sheer scale and its seemingly out-of-context image. Clearly not an advertisement, it begs for context. Fortunately, the billboard is accompanied by ten contextual photographs and introduction panel mounted nearby on empty storefront windows.

*Real Estate Row* depicts rows of wire-cage boxes containing salvaged terra cotta tiles from a demolished building. A corrugated wall completes the composition. By analogy, the boxes echo the past and current buildings surrounding the billboard. Inside the boxes is the literal archive of an almost erased history. The photograph establishes, *this was here*. The architectural tiles are in the collections of the National Building Arts Center in Sauget, Illinois, where Colten has been photographing the collections. The difficulty in any quick understanding of the billboard photograph is matched in the difficulty of integrating the overlapping and multiple social, ecological, economic, political, and historical contexts that influence and complicate readings of cultural centers, like downtown St. Louis, and their margins.

Colten's practice has long documented the edges of society where cultural traditions and progressive innovations collide. For Colten, the cultural margin is an event horizon that she brings into focus and dialogue with her photography as she documents relationships



*Big Mound Billboard*, installed near site of the original pre-Columbian Cahokia mound in downtown St. Louis. Photo by Jennifer Colten.

between the differing communities and the lands they live on and use. Colten's aesthetic practice expands socially when her photographs return to the site of origin to be shared with the communities. Marking downtown St. Louis with the billboard photograph may catalyze awareness of the architectural and economic histories of Real Estate Row, particularly with the interpretive materials that accompany Colten's imagery.

An artist and teacher, Colten is a second-generation New Topographics landscape photographer who documents human intervention in nature. Colten distinguishes her practice aesthetically with a nuanced poetry of the interactions between culture and nature. Her photographic methodology is as close as possible faithful rendering of the scene before the camera. Results range from straightforward depictions to abstract lyrical compositions. Site selection plays a key role in establishing content. Colten seeks marginal places marked by earlier urban development now abandoned and where nature has begun to reclaim the site. From her documents, issues of representation, myths, and beliefs with regard to the land may be unfolded. The most fundamentally critical component of her practice reinserts the photographs into the communities they document, encouraging dialogue with the people who live and work there.

Encountering Colten's photographs of the margins, viewers must consider the center for context. In that sense, Colten's works become historical documents—indeed, experiences of her images are a way of knowing. The photographs establish the center's aspirations to provide material sustenance as well as the attendant residue, accidents, and failures. The center's relationships with nature are also established.



Multiple, overlapping stories (economic, political, cultural) may come into view or consideration. A sense of place unfolds.

Related to *Real Estate Row* was Colten's recent project, "Significant & Insignificant Mounds," a joint project with artist and writer Jesse Vogler. It also used billboard photographs for interventions in downtown St. Louis. Two billboards marked the downtown site where an earlier pre-Columbian monument had been completely disassembled and used for backfill and road construction. One billboard presented a historic black and white photograph showing the mound being taken apart. The other was a color photograph from Cahokia Mounds. As the duo explained in an accompanying statement, the point was to look closely at the mound forms of the region and their functions to begin to at least foreground the complexity of human involvement with the land.

*"Our interest in the pairing of text and image, and in the pairing of so-called 'meaning-filled' and 'meaning-less' subjects, is to bring the process of signification itself to the surface, in order to complicate received value judgments that so often attend landscape photography and description. We do not aim for an illustrative description of place. There is nothing in our writing and photography that seeks to provide a tidy orientation or even a neat juxtaposition. Rather, we relish the ambiguities, unknowns, and unknowabilities of this place in its fullest."*

Colten's aesthetic and civic-minded embrace of the Mississippi-Heartland region builds on her multi-year projects, which bring to light hidden, neglected, or erased stories of those people and places ignored by the dominant center. One such project is "Higher Ground: Honoring Washington Park Cemetery Its People and Place." Washington Park Cemetery is a St. Louis African-American cemetery founded in 1920. Over the ensuing decades, much of it was eventually decimated by urban development. Another of Colten's geographically sensitive projects is "Of Place and Non-Place,"

Jennifer Colten, *Real Estate Row*. Contextual photos installed in storefront. Photo by Jennifer Colten.



Jennifer Colten, *Real Estate Row*. Downtown St. Louis at 7th and Pine with billboard of Real Estate Row. Photo by Jennifer Colten.

a specific intention to photograph ambiguous sites, the "edgelands" between nature and the past events of humans. Finally, her project "Wasteland Ecology" documented the resiliency of the land against the damaging effects of industrial progress.

Colten is a member of "The American Bottom," a multi-year, multi-artist, multimedia project to study the diverse disciplines that have defined and redefined the region over time. The American Bottom is a geographic area on the eastern bank of the Mississippi that runs from Alton, Illinois to Kaskaskia, Illinois. From colonial times, the American Bottom has been used in various ways by the occupying cultures. Pre-Columbian Native Americans, French, and other European communities have all utilized the area. Co-directed by Jesse Vogler and Matthew Fluharty, the project portrays the American Bottom as the geographic microcosm reflecting the macro North American settlement ideologies. Cultural histories, sociologies, habitats, and wetland geographies all compete, overlap, and complicate any close reading of the region, yet these histories as assembled by this project may provide future bearings and insights. As the editors note, "The American Bottom is site to the social and spatial aspirations of pre-contact Native Americans, 19th century industrial expansion, 20th century infrastructural consolidation, and 21st century ecological precarity." The success of *Real Estate Row* strengthens my confidence in Colten's work with this collaboration.

**Rusty Freeman**

**Rusty Freeman is the Director of Visual Arts, Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, Mt. Vernon, IL.**

Colten teaches photography at Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington University, St. Louis; [jennifercolten.com](http://jennifercolten.com). The American Bottom is at [theamericanbottom.org](http://theamericanbottom.org). Colten's *Real Estate Row* was commissioned by The Luminary, St. Louis. For their sustainable, just, and considered worldview, see [theluminaryarts.com/about/manifesto](http://theluminaryarts.com/about/manifesto).

# Nashville's Art Compels Recognition

In Nashville, art is as new as it is old, and as old as it is new. These words of once Tennessean and immortal luminary W. E. B. Du Bois permeate the air as local artists aspire to create the Americana he imagined—of color, form, and reality, of music in the Southern South, and of dreams of a more splendid future (Figure 1)<sup>1</sup>.

Avant-garde artists and activists are not only establishing a vibrant environment (and increasingly thriving market) in Nashville. Perhaps more importantly, they are helping to reframe the popular imagination of Music City for residents and visitors alike. Monolithic conceptions of a Southern history comprised of honky-tonks, hot chicken, and the Ryman Auditorium are giving way—sometimes enthusiastically and sometimes with tense reluctance—to stories of a city that is blacker, more aesthetically adventurous, and less enamored of traditional technologies than its conventional portrayal on the national stage often suggests. Such changes seem both inevitable and fitting at a moment when even the famously risk-averse record industry executives on 16th Avenue have had little choice but to embrace an expanding audience for the genre indelibly tied to Nashville's very identity. Thus, Georgia rapper Lil Nas X's viral country-hip hop hybrid *Old Town Road*—drawing on the seemingly irreconcilable talents of Trent Reznor, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Lil Nas X himself—topped the Billboard chart for 19 consecutive weeks.

At historically black Fisk University, an exhibition of eminent alumni and faculty such as Aaron

Figure 1: Brad Wells, *W. E. B. DuBois*, mural at 814 19th Avenue North, 2015. Photo by Kelli Wood.



Figure 2: Installation of "Red Line" by Omari Booker, Channel to Channel gallery, 2019. Photo by Kelli Wood.

Douglas and Du Bois hangs commandingly alongside Music City mavens such as Elisheba Israel Mrozik, who elevates tattooing to high art with her illustrative realism and watercolor designs at One Drop Ink studio. A walk through collegiate greens and past the red brick corbels and gothic spires of Jubilee Hall lands you at Woodcuts Gallery, part frame shop, part showcase for African-American art, and one of the oldest galleries in the city.

Over thirty years ago, Woodcuts owner Nate Harris reclaimed his building in a time when some thought a frame store would not survive in North Nashville because the poverty that afflicted the neighborhood left residents not just with nothing to frame but with no walls on which to hang it. Now the nearby streets are a matrix where art crawls stop at places like eclectic and colorful studio-cum-exhibition space Elephant Gallery and pass by the vestiges of the Jefferson Street clubs that hosted R&B royalty like Etta James and Otis Redding (soon to be commemorated at the National Museum of African American Music). Artist advocates for the area in the Norf Art Collective treat this revitalization as simultaneously an act of community placemaking and a precarious portent of gentrification in many of the murals that illuminate shop exteriors and abandoned buildings. Still, Woodcuts remains a landmark. A haven for serious collectors and amateur shoppers alike, it features museum quality works alongside tasteful lithos of local landmarks. Standout pieces include repoussés by Smyrna, TN native Gregory Ridley, whose copper history of Nashville lines the halls of the public library, and chromatic quilted



narratives of life in the South by octogenarian and retired schoolteacher Ludie Amos.

Elsewhere in Nashville, past meets present in Omari Booker's show "Red Line" at vanguard gallery Channel to Channel. His series explores the legacy of discriminatory lending practices intended to deny mortgages and services to black communities (Figure 2). Red razor wire divides panels painted with luminous textural pink oils, harmonies of visible facture and form, abstraction and figuration, and titles such as *Do You Play Basketball?* (2019).

Many other galleries have popped-up in the formerly industrial Wedgewood-Houston area, where craft distilleries and maker's spaces inhabit erstwhile warehouses. On the 6-year anniversary of her opening, Julia Martin's gallery welcomed visitors with southern hospitality, bourbon punch, and keenly curated sculptural installations by Birmingham artist Merrilee Challiss. Challiss' so-called "spirit animal taxidermy" transforms hunted-deer head mounts with sequins and apotropaic evil eye motifs to project a powerful feminine energy (Figure 3). Over in the soaring ceilings and minimalist interior of Zeitgeist Gallery, Brady Haston's large scale oils on linen use silhouettes and motifs from early prints in his attempt to problematize the colonial legacy of Andrew Jackson.



Figure 3: Installation of "In the Key of the Moon" by Merrilee Challiss at Julia Martin Gallery, 2019. Photo by Kelli Wood.

Downtown next to historic Woolworth on 5th, commercial art spaces abound at the Arcade. Tensions between the analog and digital took center stage this winter in both kitschy pop vendibles and demonstrations of cerebral artistry. At the well-established white-on-white Rymer Gallery, Jeff Grady's *Game On* repurposes retro iPod nanos to create a colorful pixelated Atari logo, melding defunct technology with the memory of 8-bit video games. At the Tinney Contemporary next door, Tiffany Calvert's canvases reimagine early modern Dutch still-life painting by



Figure 4: Detail of LeXander Bryant's *Opportunity Co\$t*, graphic and wheat paste on panel, Frist Museum, 2019. Photo by Kelli Wood.

melding pixelated and glitchy screen printing with painterly oil in thick impasto.

At the Frist, Nashville's premier art museum, current exhibitions include examples of contemporary artists pushing boundaries with unconventional media as well as breaking past the white walls of traditional institutions. A restored 1985 Chevrolet El Camino opens the visiting "Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists" exhibition; innovative artist Rose B. Simpson utilizes motifs from Tewa black on black pottery to bring her community's tradition of customizing cars to public attention. Down the hall, the Frist's "Murals of North Nashville Now" exhibit features commissioned murals by local artists who tackle the serious social and political issues relevant to the city today, such as LeXander Bryant's *Opportunity Co\$t* (2019), which employs poster style graphic design to reorient problematic propaganda to value black lives (Figure 4). The exhibit ends with a map of locations of current murals throughout North Nashville, inviting viewers to return to the streets. Art is ingrained in the living urban fabric of Nashville, with murals serving as signposts guiding residents and visitors through the city's collective memory and history.

**Kelli Wood**

**Dr. Kelli Wood is an Arkansas native, SEC alumna, and Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Tennessee. In addition to her writing and research, she is guest curating a permanent wing of the Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, A Global History of Sport, forthcoming in anticipation of the 2022 World Cup.**

1 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* (October 1926), 290-297: "I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compels [sic] recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compell [sic] recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new."



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# Can You Believe What You've Missed in 20 Months?



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Reviews from Detroit, Milwaukee, and St. Louis



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Changes at this year's Chicago Architecture Biennial  
Tara Donovan creates endless forms with everyday materials  
Virgil Abloh explores the intersection of art and design  
Guggenheim exhibit establishes Mapplethorpe's mastery



## **Volume 34, Issue 2: November/December 2019**

Rebecca Memoli talks to David Travis about origins of the photography dept. at the AIC  
Kelli Wood traces the emergence, development, and acknowledgement of video games as art  
Phillip Barcio chronicles the enactment of a performance piece by the late Lawrence Steger  
Ann Sinfield reviews exhibitions commemorating the fifty-year anniversary of “OBJECTS: USA”

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