

An abstract painting in warm, yellowish-orange tones. It depicts a person from the chest up, with a face that has some dark, expressive brushstrokes. The person's hands are visible at the bottom, one holding a typewriter. The background is filled with various textures and colors, including some green and blue accents. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

NEW ART examiner

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LIVE/WORK

\$20 U.S.

COVER IMAGES
Jenniver Packer, *April-Restless* (front); *Say Her Name* (back). © Jennifer Packer, photos courtesy of Sikke-
ma Jenkins & Co., New York; Corvi-Mora, London.

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NEW ART EXAMINER
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.

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Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

Michel Ségard
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Introduction: “Live/Work”

As we continue our inquiry into contemporary art and what it can tell us about the world we live in, we have found ourselves on a path. It is one that has been busy with signs and symbols that call our attention to so many ideas, beliefs, aesthetics, moral positions, ideologies, virtues, and values. To engage with art sometimes feels not all that different from engaging with other types of dominant media that inundate us every day. The “social” or “news” varieties are the most obvious examples. But it is also on this path, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, that we have seen how the most creative in our communities are the ones who are concerning themselves with how to retain our sense of human connection and engagement in a period of cultural division and social alienation.

Live/work is a simple idea for artists. It commonly describes a place in which an artist can live and produce artwork under the same roof. For many artists it is an economy of means to eat, sleep, bathe, and relax in the same space where you create. It can also be quite the luxury if the space is large enough and has clean air and good plumbing. But the notion of work-life-balance has become so much more a part of the public discourse that the concerns of archetypal ‘starving artist’ now occupy a place in the consciousness of the professional class.

In this issue we are taking a leap to redefine “live/work” and showcase the ways in which artists are not only grappling with the intersection of their lives as citizens and their lives as artists, but also those who are thriving in this liminal space. A kind of humanistic renaissance is underway in contemporary art, and we want to take a closer look into how it is playing out. In ‘Realms of Refuge’ editor-in-chief Michel Ségard gives analysis into how identity driven artwork connects to audiences differently across a generational divide. Sara Rouse engages the paintings of Jennifer Packer and the deep connections her process and subjects have to her personal life and contemporary culture. Connor Maley and Victoria DeBlassie take a deep dive into the complexities of site-specific residencies and the social fabric that is woven within them. With “Duck Feet” and “Illuminating Constraint” we consider the artwork of the marginalized and how it is valued differently.

These, and the other entries in this iteration of our journal, represent the critical depth we love bringing to all of our readers and that we will continue to endeavor in advancing. Thank you for being one of those readers. We hope you enjoy and find meaning in this issue of New Art Examiner.

The Editors

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Peripateticism, Radical Social Interaction, and Poetic Acts of Social Cohesion

by Connor Maley and Victoria DeBlassie

There is a certain explosive energy and productivity that results from residing and creating in a place outside of one’s normal life. The endemics of site-specific residencies inspire practices and experiences unlikely, or impossible, to occur in other creative contexts. After engaging with a number of cohabitational, socially engaged art residencies in Italy during the past years, it is abundantly clear that such opportunities offer new perceptions and perspectives for both the artists and the public combined. Place, sociopolitical context, and local history interweave in the process of collectively conceptualizing the site and fostering originative investigations that reconceptualize the lived work of art.

Hidden away inside a world that ironically insists on negating its entire existence, is Molise. *Molise non esiste*, (Molise doesn’t exist), one of the “forgotten” regions of Italy, has now regained some notoriety due to the bargain 1-euro-home offers flooding the front pages of prominent journals that have attracted flocks of potential homeowners to the region. The misunderstood area has suffered great economic upheaval alongside massive waves of depopulation, and the enticement of real estate affords an incomplete solution. Local cultural initiatives instead aim at generating a deeper dialogue and understanding of the territory that announces Molise to the world without compromising what it is.

One of these said projects is called *Vis à Vis Fuoriluogo*, an artist residency program that dates back to 1997, which was founded by artists Paolo Borrelli and Fausto Colavecchia, the directors of the cultural association Limiti Inchiusi in Limosano, Campobasso in Molise. Their manifesto is to bring contemporary art into the rural villages in Molise to revalorize and bring forth new perspectives that reveal the history, social and global context, and politics of the region. All the artists that have participated in their residency have always come back to visit, reinforcing bonds among place, artists, and the locals.

We had the opportunity, thanks to the directors and the current curator of the project, Matteo Innocenti, to



Aisha Gianna Müller. *Legarsi a una Stella Futura di Tentativi di Alterare la Giornata (Tie oneself to a Future Star from Attempts to Alter the Day)*. 2020. Video still. Video Art. Courtesy of Limiti Inchiusi Arte Contemporanea, Limosano (CB).

Il Collettivo Intrecci Castelbottaccio-Lupara (The Knitting Collective of Castelbottaccio-Lupara). *Intrecci Castelbottaccio Lupara: un filo lungo oltre 3000 metri* (Knitting Castelbottaccio-Lupara: over 3000 meters of woven links). 2020. Yarn and wooden poles. Land Art Installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Victoria DeBlassie.



participate in last year's *Vis à Vis Fuoriluogo 23* in the town Castelbottaccio simultaneously with artist Aisha Gianna Müller, who developed her video project in the neighboring rural town of Lucito, using its agricultural context to influence her work made at the residency. Müller's then ongoing project, *Legarsi a una Stella Futura di Tentativi di Alterare la Giornata* (Tie Oneself to a Future Star from Attempts to Alter the Day), explored various agricultural regions of Italy. She and invited local farmers dug into the ground to alter the horizon line, a purposeful act of absurdity to try to prolong the day and the sunset and question humankind's longing to control nature.

Upon arrival to Castelbotaccio, we were struck by the rustic beauty and landscape of the town. As we ventured out to explore our village with a range of Arabic and Nordic origins, we were struck by the swaying back-and forth motion of delicate crocheted strips of yarn that were draped along elegantly placed wooden poles that proudly held up



3000 meters of this handmade creation that connected Castelbottaccio to the nearby town of Lupara. Inspired by Maria Lai's *Legarsi a una montagna* (Tie Oneself to a Mountain), the installation was called *Intrecci Castelbottaccio Lupara: un filo lungo oltre 3000 metri* (Knitting Castelbottaccio-Lupara: over 3000 meters of woven links), and was created by Il Collettivo Intrecci Castelbottaccio-Lupara (The Knitting Collective of Castelbottaccio-Lupara), a group of women, including Pina Di Cienzio, Malfada Di Doddo, and Giannini De Oto to name a few, and with shared values from the aforementioned towns who collaborate to create large-scale installations.

In a world that was struck down by a pandemic, which included a strong lockdown in Italy and feelings of isolation especially in elders who make up a large population in this area, it was vital to create a sense of community in these trying times. Even a year later upon visiting

Antonietta Di Vito, *Abbiamo Sconfitto Coronavirus* (We Conquered Coronavirus), 2020. Yarn, iron, cardboard, polystyrene, 16x16x20cm. Courtesy of Victoria DeBlassie.

Victoria DeBlassie, "Sfrangi Pani, Sfrangi Panni," (You Break Bread(s), You Rip Cloth/Clothes), 2020. Scrap cloth, clothes, and thread. Installation. Dimensions Variable. Courtesy of Victoria DeBlassie.



the town again, a prominent group member, Antonietta Di Vito, turned her pent-up frustration into a knitted sculpture that promoted a sense of hope with the onset of the vaccine in her *Abbiamo Sconfitto Coronavirus* (We Conquered Coronavirus) wherein the virus is put in jail and is holding the flags from the countries of the aggressive variants. On top of recreating interpersonal connections, the collective's work from 2020 explored how living above all in a world that even pre-pandemic seemed increasingly complex and difficult, one that dampened synergistic possibilities and a culture of solidarity, it was essential for the collective to create links between these two towns that are so close yet far away. This ever-stretching handcrafted artwork "threaded" all the possibilities of union that the people who live in that territory explored to support acceptance, respect, and an unveiling of local talent.

Their belief is that only if they start from small communities can the threads of humanity be re-tied to intertwine histories and continue regenerating the weft and warp of a regenerated social fabric that is energetic, attentive, supportive, and colored with hope for a shared happiness. This message of hopefulness and humanity is also a deeply feminist approach to coming together to display traditional craftwork by women that is most commonly a private skill used in a domestic sphere but in this context is displayed in public, similar to how the artists of this project had previously, and with a rebellious streak, crocheted their work in the town piazzas, an area typically dominated by men.

Inspired by their message, Victoria asked them to collaborate with her by creating a type of floor mat from old clothes and cloth, a process that harkens back to American frontier rag-rug crafts, combining their interest in learning new skills along with her art ethos of using recycled materials. "Sfrangi Pani, Sfrangi Panni," (You Break Bread(s), You Rip Cloth/Clothes), the name of this project is a play on words in Italian to denote community, the act of making the work, along with referencing part of the

last name, Frangipane, of Donna Olimpia, an important avant-garde woman from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment who questioned the role of the monarchy. Frangipane disobeyed the Baron who owned the only oven in the village and demanded half of the bread residents made when they used it. She advocated for everyone to each have an oven in their house to render the inhabitants independent. Victoria envisioned consumerism as a type of modern-day baron: only by being resourceful can we break the rule of materialism. Ergo, the final mat-inspired collective installation came from traditionally feminine crafts that defied their domestic use and were proudly displayed in public on the entrance wall to Frangipane's house. This was done to call attention to feminist and environmental issues both in micro and macro politics.

We learned about the town's history thanks to the president, Maria Francesca De Lisio of the Circolo Donna Olimpia Frangipane, a literary community center, who told us that Castelbottaccio was created by dismantling part of a mountain and was built from those pieces, or how lightning struck the bust of the church's Madonna twice in different years, once saving people, once saving the children playing there. Using both legends and stories as a point of departure, Connor's creative writing, *Fiori, fantasmi, e piccioli che vedono più di quel che si pensasse persino più di quel che si pensassero loro, i fiori e i fantasmi e i piccioli che vedono tutto incluso il non visibile* (Flowers, ghosts, and petioles, all of whom see more than you thought and even more than they thought themselves, the flowers, ghosts, and petioles that see everything including the nonvisible) used both of the local legends and studies as points of departure to reflect upon the environment. Similarly galvanized, Victoria created two art cover editions made from local unwanted objects, including one from a wooden first aid kit and one from an old painting and plastic spiral door curtains as if to invite one to enter a book as if it were a house. Along with Victoria's collaboration with the collective, she learned from De Lisio about how the land wasn't cultiva-



Connor Maley and Victoria DeBlassie. *Flowers, ghosts, and petioles, all of whom see more than you thought and even more than they thought themselves, the flowers, ghosts, and petioles that see everything including the non visible*, 2020. Paper and local unwanted objects to form 2 separate books. Sculpture and Literature. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Victoria DeBlassie.



ble. For this reason, the inhabitants were forced to master different trades, thus enabling forgers and artisans who made farming tools and architectural elements to thrive by selling their products to neighboring agricultural towns who depended on their ingenuity. Inspired to take rust imprints in cotton from the tools of Fabio Niro's great grandfather's old forge that were destined to one day become part of their material culture museum, Victoria made Ferro Bacchiato, with the last word referring to shaking and hitting a tree with a stick for its fruit or nuts, which is used as a metaphor for how the area once prospered.

With an intense focus on how connecting and observing local communities can influence the artwork produced, previous years' *Vis à Vis Fuoriluogo* residencies explored various themes including immigration both to and from Italy as seen in Alessandra Brown's touching photog-

raphy work in Lucito, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. There, she blew up selected old family photos of relatives that the families didn't recognize anymore after they had left Italy so long ago and placed them in their previous domiciles. In Roccavivara, Marina Arienzale made the photographic installation *In Germania il Pane non Esiste (In Germany Bread Doesn't Exist)* displayed in the town's viewpoint square that highlighted the tensions and divide of the two sides of the village: the side of the immigrants (new Italians), and the one of the locals. Maria Chiara Calvani's *Home Away from Home* took place in Limosano and she set up a listening office in the town square to hear and record locals' stories. She created an audio track that mixed the stories together and was displayed on her movable office construction. Creating the multifaced work *Confini* in Castelbottaccio and concentrating on the one entitled *Confini*



Marina Arienzale, *In Germania il pane non esiste (In Germany Bread doesn't Exist)*, 2019. Photographic prints on glass, 121.5x82c. Courtesy of Limiti Inchiusi Arte Contemporanea, Limosano (CB).

Identità (Boundaries Identity), artist Federica Gonelli took double-exposed photos and superimposed the inhabitants' portraits with various border areas of the town to highlight the link between people and place and physical and spatial boundaries.

Another residency, called AltoFest, which is based in the south as well in Naples but having recently begun to operate in other locations, flows and pumps with the same lifeblood and direction as Vis à Vis but organizes itself in a slightly different amalgamation. AltoFest relies on a heavily participatory relationship between the public and the artist, with the community and the guests staying, living, and working in the city. Founded and managed by Anna Gesualdi and Giovanni Trono, both coming from a theater background as well as the performing arts in general, the brief residency reflects the performative, theatrical

nature of its origins with an emphasis on erasing the divisions between work and play, labor and art, living and creating, character and actor, and performance and identity. As an exhibition or performance space, performance artists (along with writers and video-makers in the 2015 edition Connor participated in) are assigned a venue in the city that is, in theory, not an exhibition space, but rather a live/work space, a vintage clothing store for example. Artists are tasked with arriving, residing, and composing their work in the first period of the residency, typically the first ten days, followed by three-to-five days of exhibition and performance in their specified venues at the end of the residency. The culmination generates a truly immersive and holistic experience in which living spaces, working spaces, and exhibitory spaces are fused into one.



Alessandro Brown, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, 2019. Photographic prints on plexi glass. Various dimensions. Courtesy of Limiti Inchiusi Arte Contemporanea, Limosano (CB).



Federica Gonelli, *Confini Identità (Boundaries Identity)*, 2016. Double exposure photographs superimposed on paper. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Federica Gonelli.



Maria Chiara Calvani, *Home Away from Home*, 2014. Audio recordings, various found wooden planks, objects, and chairs. Installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Limiti Inchiusi Arte Contemporanea, Limosano (CB).

The objective here is to spread and widen connections between people, places, and activities that compose the social fabric by quite literally expanding said fabric of the social textile itself, dismantling all previous upheld boundaries separating all these entities. Connor’s writing in this period reflected all the personal encounters he had whether it be a street walk or talking with the locals. “This place is confused, and you never feel alone,” one Neapolitan said about their city, which represents only mere seconds of the documentary video *In-Contro* in which filmmaker Sara De Jesus Bento collected stories and feelings from the inhabitants in parallel with movement images of the city. Filmmaking team Katia Viscogliosi and Francis Magnenot set out to AltoFest with a different idea in mind, but the with tide of Naples’ energy and volcanic element of volatility being fierce and indomitable, everything shifted. They were living on the roof of a six-floor apartment building, editing the scenes they’d shot the previous day from the streets just out front of their door and below

the terrace balcony at which they were working, essentially filming, sleeping, interviewing, eating, and editing in the same locations, and in this way the film became a living study of the people making life happen in that area. It exposed metaphysical contrasts: sky and street, intimacy and loneliness, silence and noise, past and present, and life and work, transforming along with it the filmmakers’ approach to dealing with immediate reality on film.

From the vibrancy of metropolitan Naples to being surrounded completely by Tuscan nature, we are currently artists in residence at Castagno di Piteccio, taking its eponymous name from the village itself, a town of 80 people that moonlights as a legitimate outdoor museum about a 20-minute train ride away from Pistoia hiding 600 meters-high in the mountainous shade of centuries-old chestnut trees and their less numerous oak and beech counterparts. Thanks to the late Florentine art historian and critic Tommaso Paloscia and currently to the Pro Loco and CCT See City, artists have been invited to live and

Katia Viscogliosi & Francis Magnenot aka Cinéma Fragile, *Cercando Napoli*, 2015. Video still. Film shot in HD 1920x1080. Courtesy of Cinéma Fragile.



Sara De Jesus Bento, *In-Contro*, documentary essay, 2015. Video still. Sound post-post production: Nelson Almeida. Courtesy of Sara De Jesus Bento.

make work in Castagno’s Borgo Museo since the mid-70s. The artists were originally asked to focus on the village; however, artists are currently asked to work beyond the peripheral limits of the town.

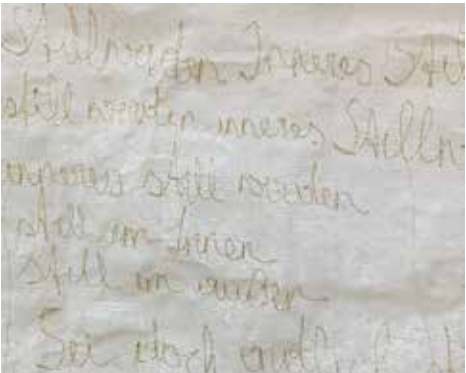
The intimacy of the village yields an immediate bond of connection between the residents and the artists, and the art generated seems like it belongs innately to the village. Fellow artists in residence are working on their in-progress art projects. Davide Tagliabue’s work comments on how humankind’s parasitic relationship to nature has criminal connotations, and his “forensic sculpture” aims to investigate the corporeal pieces of a dead tree and to reconstruct it, along with the backstory of the events that led up to the tree’s death. He goes so far as to add bits of plastic in a failed attempt to preserve parts of the tree and comment on anthropocene dependency on it. Nina Urlichs

has been taken by the centuries-old chestnut trees in the area and is creating prints on paper of the tree’s texture as a form of preservation. Christina Gschwanter wants to embellish parts of architectural elements with gold leaf to highlight Castagno’s subtle grandeur. And Bianca Lugmayr is embroidering the inner sentiments of her experience with the pervasive silence.

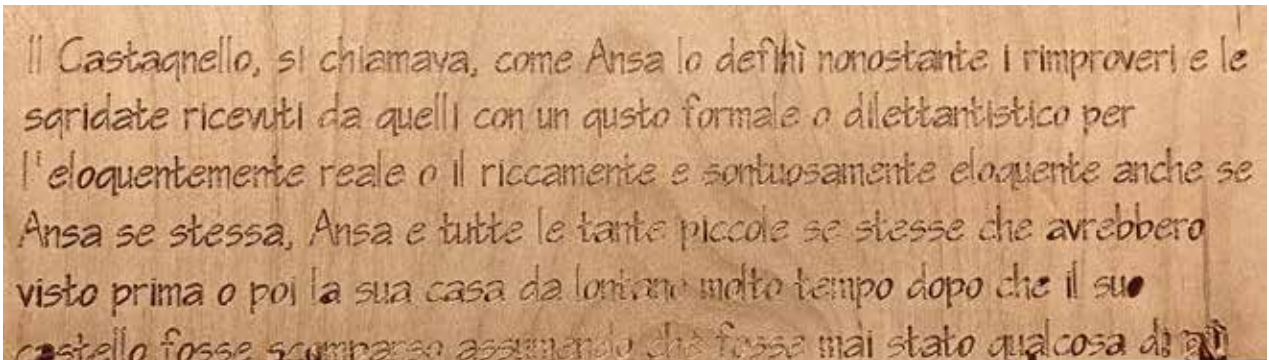
With the idea of de-institutionalizing and democratizing art by rendering it available for everyone, the Borgo Museo seemed to preemptively interpret the creative direction of the Uffizi and other major Italian museums now seeking to extend away from the main galleries. Using the ‘musei diffusi’ model of ‘diffusing,’ they disperse the museum experience amongst other locations more geographically or culturally ‘precise’ in terms of seeing and understanding said works. The place in which a work was made

Left: Nina Urlichs, (*Title to be determined*), 2021. Paper and natural pigments. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Nina Urlichs.

Center: Christina Gschwanter, (*Title to be determined*), 2021. Gold leaf and fixative on rocks and architectural features. Dimensions variable. **Right:** Bianca Lugmayr, (*Title to be determined*), 2021. Cloth and thread. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Bianca Lugmayr.



Davide Tagliabue, *(Title to be determined)*, 2021. Dead tree fragments, black zip ties, plastic, plastic tubes, cement. Sculpture. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Victoria DeBlassie.



Victoria DeBlassie and Connor Maley, *(Title to be determined)*, 2021. CNC written trail signs, chicken wire, dried leaves, cement, wire. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Victoria DeBlassie.

or set is constitutionally vital for understanding an individual work. In this way, by situating artists within a place wherein their art would be made and then subsequently where those selfsame works would be on permanent display for generations, Castagno di Piteccio has presciently stayed ahead of the eventual progression of curatorial thought.

What complicates the work in Castagno di Piteccio is what complicates quotidian life in the village. The normal work rhythms preferred by the artist left to their own devices get frequently interrupted with the happenings of daily life's business within the village, and these ruptures in the flow of the work being conceived are not just part of the process, but the entire point of the process. Predictions artists may have had face sudden and drastic potential revisions upon arrival after realizing that certain characteristics hypothesized about the village or its surroundings don't correspond to those previously supposed. The work must transform and adjust according to the unshakeable realities of the location, the tools and resources available, the studio space at one's disposition, just to name a few factors. Our work, for example, was going to be about local oral legends and basing contemporary stories on them, letting the narrative unravel on hiking trail posts throughout the paths. However, upon talking to the locals and finding an absence of codified myth, Connor instead used local interpretations of contested, gap-filled historical origin stories mixed with daily life to create me-

ta-histories. Since the trails weren't as safely demarcated as hoped, we are using the two most important hiking entrances on opposite sides of the town and installing various signages with fragments of narratives placed in the direction of where the stories' genesis derived from leading to and from the village. Victoria is making two installations on those sites responding to those stories by creating pseudo-stones from chicken wire structures filled with dried leaves collected from the trails to comment on change over time, simultaneously referencing the stone walls and ruins found in narratives about how the town was built, using the stones from the castle to create a new village.

A commonality held across all three residencies despite their ontogenic differences is a certain balance and blend of control and looseness. Artists are left with the freedom to create, although this freedom is circumscribed and conditioned at all times by the natural restraints of the living and working conditions. The directorial staff or the curators are charged with the duty of a kind of psychotherapeutic mediation, fixers of the problems or difficul-

ties that may arise in the installation and finalization of the work rather than governing the theoretical or conceptual underpinnings. The town, the village, the city, the long lunches with families, the bickering over ingredients, the coffee breaks, the discussions and debates while creating the work all become an extended family version of the curatorial staff, helping shape and complicate the works previously envisioned and now taking form in a sort of creative tradeoff and unburdening that requires a significant amount of porousness and malleability. What comes from the intersection of work and life in these residencies is both staggeringly different from expectations past and yet unflaggingly generative of what must come. ■

Victoria DeBlassie is a Florence-based multidisciplinary artist who recontextualizes discarded objects and materials to suggest the excessiveness of material culture and the human impact on the environment. After receiving her BFA from the University of New Mexico in 2009 and MFA at the California College of the Arts in 2011, DeBlassie was awarded a Fulbright Grant to Italy. DeBlassie has participated in numerous residencies, shows, and is currently teaching art at Florence Institute of Design International.

Connor Maley is a writer and translator from Washington, DC, USA now based in Florence, Italy. Connor graduated in 2007 with a BA from Mount Saint Mary's University in Iberian Literature, Philosophy and Theology. In 2011, he graduated with an MFA from California College of the Arts in Creative Writing. He has published, shown, and performed his works or participated in a number of journals/residencies/festivals throughout the recent years. His writings, short stories, and excerpts from novels in progress have been published in various magazines both nationally and internationally.

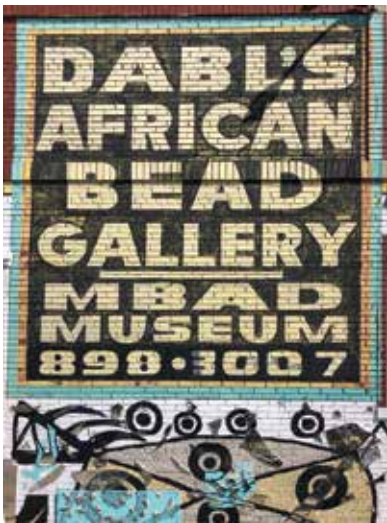
Singular Visions: Detroit's Independent Art Venues

by K.A. Letts

As of the most recent census in 2020, Detroit's population was 639,111, a count that represents a 10.5% decline since 2010. While those numbers are being actively disputed, it is a fact that Detroit is a pretty roomy place these days. In spite of the purported decline in population, the price of properties in Detroit have been going up precipitously after hitting their lowest point in the early aughts as the city careened toward bankruptcy. Around that time, enterprising artists with a vision could acquire property to make their ambitious dreams a reality, and many of them did just that. Some succeeded in their projects, and some found that even low prices couldn't overcome the challenging facts on the ground in a city with substantial financial and social problems. A few of the most successful have founded ongoing art projects that reflect their unique idea of what art is for outside of

the more conventional capitalist gallery system. The flagship community art project in Detroit has been Tyree Guyton's open-air public art installation, the Heidelberg Project. After 34 years, though, the project is showing its age and is in the process of being re-imagined as Heidelberg 3.0. What that means remains unclear as of this writing, but the aim is to put the project on a more established footing and to render it less vulnerable to the elements and vandalism, including numerous fires that destroyed one building. The city abounds, though, with newer, equally original and creative projects that express the energy and originality of Detroit's artists. These projects reflect the visions of their founders in ways that would be impossible in the more stable and expensive real estate markets on the coasts.

N'kisi House façade, installation, southeastern corner of the site. Photo by K.A. Letts.



Left: Olayami Dabls's MBAD Bead Museum sign, exterior on the wall of the building that houses the bead gallery and non-profit art space. Right: Olayami Dabls, *Iron Teaching Rocks Table Manners*, outdoor installation. Photos by K.A. Letts.



Dabls MBAD Bead Museum

Foremost among these is Dabls MBAD Bead Museum, two city blocks of handmade outdoor art installations, anchored at one corner by an encyclopedic collection of antique and modern beads from every part of the world and by a newly opened non-profit art gallery. Located at the intersection of Grand River and West Grand Blvd. and sitting—perhaps not coincidentally—between two large churches, the 18 installations on the property express the spiritual and artistic vision of Olayami Dabls, a genial and charismatic advocate for the African spirit in America. His ever-expanding glass and found object-encrusted constructions are intended to speak not only to his fellow African Americans, but to the human family at large. The site, which is open to the public at all hours and year-round, is a destination for a broad public, from young suburban families to biker gangs. In a recent interview for this article, Dabls expressed surprise at the popularity of the site for high school graduation pictures. Dabls's well-developed and idiosyncratic personal cosmology revolves around what he describes as four foundational elements: iron, rock, wood, and mirrors. In his telling, these four substances symbolize the foundation of the world (rocks), western civilization (iron), wood (the ancestors) and mirrors (the spirit world). He defines iron as representative of western civilization, in which technology and language dominate the terms of the cultural conversation. When he talked to me about the project recently, Dabls expressed his profound distrust of (European) language as a primary vehicle for meaning, citing it as a distorting influence in setting the terms for any thoughtful exchange of ideas. He prefers instead to convey his spiritual, even mystical, world view in purely visual terms. Exemplative of the fluid way in which he wields rock, iron,

wood, and mirrors into a narrative is one of his smaller open-air installations, *Iron Teaching Rocks Table Manners*. A large, salvaged plaster bakery display cake, painted in purple and blue speckles, sits in the middle of a table, surrounded by folding chairs, each one holding a chunk of painted cement. Ranged around the cake on the table are prim china teacups and plates of rusty iron artifacts. By combining and rearranging these four elements, Dabls finds he can express the broad range of his thoughts through formal abstraction.

Bead Gallery entrance, installation. Photo by K.A. Letts.





Left: Hamtramck Disneyland installation view from back alley. Right: Hamtramck Disneyland installation detail. Photos by Chris Schneider.



Hamtramck Disneyland installation view of roof from inside the yard. Photo by Chris Schneider.

At the other end of the property from the bead collection and gallery stands *N’Kisi House*, more wall than edifice, and in a constant state of evolution. A recent visit revealed the main wall of the installation had been revised and adapted to incorporate more expansive use of mirrors, giving the visitor an illusion of looking through a window in the building to the other side, while all the while reflecting the reality behind.

It appears that substantial financial support for MBAD Bead Museum comes through sales from the artist’s extensive bead collection. Dabls, a lifelong Detroiter, became interested in beads as a metaphor for human commonalities during his college studies at Wayne State, when he discovered *The History of Beads: from 30,000 B.C. to the Present*, a seminal book by Lois Sherr Dubin. He began to collect in the 1980’s, beginning at the African World Festival in 1983 (the 38th iteration of which was held recently at the Charles Wright Museum of African American History). There, traders educated the public on the importance of beads as traditional signifiers of history, identity and status. And as Dabls notes, no one in the world has used beads so pervasively as Africans to indicate gender, social position, prestige, and rites of passage.

Interestingly, Dabls has never traveled to Africa and professes no interest in doing so. From his perspective, the true spirit of Africa can no longer be found in a continent that has suffered colonization by Europeans. His metaphysical idea of Africa exists within the boundaries of the permanent environment he has created here in Detroit, at once an expression of an Africa that possibly never was and a means of connection with peoples of all cultures.

Hamtramck Disneyland

Like the MBAD Bead Museum, Hamtramck Disneyland reflects the unique vision of an individual using the raw material of Detroit’s detritus to express his personal worldview. Dmytro Szylak fled political turbulence in Ukraine in the 1950’s, settling in Hamtramck, a municipal enclave surrounded by the city of Detroit with a large eastern Eu-



Hamtramck Disneyland Installation detail of soldier plywood cutout with silk flowers and gun, typical of the figures created by Dmytro Szylak. Photo by Chris Schneider.

ropean population. He worked for 30 years at the nearby GM auto plant, retiring in the mid-80’s.

After his retirement, Szylak began working on his eccentric backyard art project, Hamtramck Disneyland. Built mostly on a scaffolding between the one-car garages in the back yard of his two modest houses, the installation featured an array of kinetic sculptures, whirligigs and the like, all of which were brightly painted in stripes and patterns. Many of the objects were wired for electricity in ways that ranged from eccentric to hazardous. The imagery was often patriotic, with cutout figures of soldiers carrying guns interspersed with images of cats, airplanes, hand-painted toy ponies, flag-wielding dinosaurs and other fanciful creatures. In addition to artworks that he created himself, Szylak included photographs, paintings and posters he found in the neighborhood. The eclectic project developed and changed over the last thirty years of Szylak’s life; he constantly updated and modified the installation until his death in 2015. The full effect of Hamtramck Disneyland is of a kaleidoscopic reflection on Szylak’s European-American immigrant life history. Over the years of its development this idiosyncratic amusement park has become an impromptu tourist destination.

As Dmytro Szylak neared the end of his life, he became concerned about the survival of his unconventional art project. He left the structures and the two adjacent properties to a family member who seemed amenable to its preservation. Predictably, a legal dispute over the estate ensued, but in May of 2016, the property was sold to HatchArt, a Hamtramck non-profit artists’ collective with studios and a gallery located in the former Hamtramck

police station. In order to render Hamtramck Disneyland sustainable, artist volunteers, led by Hatch board members Chris Schneider and Sean Bieri, have worked tirelessly on the property, replacing and refurbishing objects, and occasionally judiciously adding artifacts in order to maintain the vibrancy of the artist’s original vision. Efforts to shore up the installation are ongoing; a substantial grant from the state of Michigan has helped in repairing elements that had begun to deteriorate. The artists restoring Hamtramck Disneyland are planning a crowd-sourced fundraising effort to continue the restoration and will use income from renting the two houses on the property to defray the costs of preservation.

Over time, the population of Hamtramck has changed; Polish and Ukrainian residents have been replaced by new immigrants of Yemeni and Bangladeshi descent. In 2015, Hamtramck’s citizens elected the first Muslim majority city council in the U.S. Despite the changing ethnicity of Hamtramck, the city government is broadly supportive of Hamtramck Disneyland as an important piece of the neighborhood’s history and has been relatively cooperative as the Hatch artists work to shore up the rickety structures, rewire the electrical components and render the installation sustainable. Along with Hamtramck Disneyland, the Ukrainian Archives and Museum and the Immaculate Conception Ukrainian Catholic Church remain and represent the historical importance of previous immigrants, even as new arrivals of various ethnicities—and now a substantial population of young artists—change the character of the neighborhood.



Left: Anders Ruhwald, *Unit 1:3583 DuBois*, entry hall with 400 suspended lead sash weights. Photo by Field Studio.
Right: Anders Ruhwald, *Unit 1:3583 DuBois*, bathroom, installation. Photo by Field Studio.



Unit 1: 3583 DuBois

Unit 1: 3583 DuBois, the site-specific art installation that embodies the vision of Danish ceramicist Anders Ruhwald, is as eccentric in its way as Hamtramck Disneyland and the MBAD Bead Museum, but the effect is more hipster fun house than racial-cultural manifesto or antic folk-art playground. Ruhwald is an established artist—he teaches ceramics at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan—but he has responded creatively, all the same, to the imperative of the deserted landscape that characterizes many of Detroit’s formerly crowded neighborhoods. The original name and number of the street where the building is located, 3583 DuBois, no longer exists, having disappeared along with many of the inhabitants who once lived there.

The 1910 building that houses Unit 1 is located on the edge of a mostly empty urban prairie near Eastern Market, it holds within itself memories of the now-vanished built environment through artifacts and materials the artist has salvaged from the building itself and the surrounding neighborhood. Ruhwald purchased the building in 2014 and began restoring it for residential use but kept back one apartment for his private re-examination of a vanished Detroit. Unit 1 now houses Ruhwald’s un-

canny vision, a haunted interior that both remembers and reimagines a building and a neighborhood that was and might be again. It’s a secret space lined with lead shingles, charred wood, lead window sashes and ash collected from the ruined building and re-constituted to re-surface the interior of an apartment-within-an-apartment.

The first impression upon entering Unit 1 is one of foreboding. The smell of charred wood lingers in the air and looking up, a visitor sees hundreds of salvaged lead sash weights looming overhead. A tiny black and white picture of a tropical beach hangs on the entry wall, the light in the picture paradoxically making the room seem darker. The adjoining room is meticulously lined on walls and ceiling with smoke-blackened lath, preserved from the renovation of the building. In the corner is a large, silvery-black vessel with a dish-shaped top, typical of Ruhwald’s ceramic work, and one of several silent effigies that inhabit the apartment. An adjoining room is lined with lead shingles, also silvery-black, and perhaps most mysterious of all, a steel balcony juts out into a dimly lit hexagonal brick tower that extends below ground level.

It’s clear from the installation that Ruhwald is exquisitely attuned to materials and physical perceptions. Throughout the apartment he subtly undermines sensory

input and seems to enjoy disorienting the viewer. He has used petroleum coke, a byproduct of oil refineries, to impregnate the surfaces of a bathroom with the powdery, sooty substance. In the room adjacent to the silo, a large ceramic, pod-shaped vessel emits low-level heat from a concealed 150-watt bulb, and another room holds a collection of his signature vessels, a gathering of uncanny presences. Perhaps most disorienting of all is the room that was once the kitchen. The artist has created a room-inside-a-room, covered with black tiles and tilted on an eight-degree angle toward the doorway. The grout lines create the visual impression that the room is level, but the visitor feels the angled, vertigo-inducing imbalance.

In his use of burned and charred elements, Ruhwald uses fire as a metaphor for both destruction and transformation that reflects the vanished past, tenuous present and hazy future of the structure, the neighborhood, and the city. “Like so many in Detroit and cities like it, this once-abandoned building holds memories waiting to be erased or revived,” says the artist.

Unlike MBAD Bead Museum and Hamtramck Disneyland, Unit 1:3583 DuBois is an interior secured space, which presents its own challenges and opportunities. The installation is open to the public by appointment, and

an admission fee helps cover costs. In addition, Anders Ruhwald has instituted an artist-in-residence program in cooperation with the Danish Art Foundation, although it is now, unfortunately, suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Detroit enters a new and—one hopes—a more stable phase in its civic history, there will be some losses and some gains. With rising real estate prices and gentrification, idiosyncratic art projects by individual artists like the ones profiled here may be crowded out in favor of more commercial initiatives and established entities. The city’s path to renewal is far from steady, with the recent out-migration of many Black residents to the South and the coasts, catastrophic flooding brought on by man-made climate change and a city government that is still bloated and inefficient. What is a sure thing though, is that Detroit, in fits and starts, retains ample cultural vitality and an entrepreneurial creative class that may be short on funding but never on ideas. ■

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Anders Ruhwald, *Unit 1:3583 DuBois*, ceramic vessels, installation. Photo by Field Studio.

Illuminating Constraint: Art Meets Life at the MSU Broad Museum

By Evan Carter

Anyone visiting the MSU Broad museum on the East Lansing campus of Michigan State University could be forgiven for looking at the architectural marvel designed by Zaha Hadid and expect to find the galleries sparsely adorned with the kind of austere works typically bolstered by academic theorists and wealthy patrons. But three exhibitions currently on view at this museum mark a distinct shift in what aspects of the art world are currently being elevated. In three exhibitions currently on view we see selections of artwork in which the creative process and every day survival converge.

It is only in recent years that we have begun to see a conscious redrawing of art historical boundaries through contemporary curatorial practice. Inclusion of artworks by marginalized groups and an expansion of the parameters of what is considered formally and conceptually valuable has come to define the ever more pluralistic field of contemporary art. With the pot of socio-political discourse nearly boiling over, it is only natural that this field is including other demographics such as the working class or incarcerated citizens. We are no longer just dissecting the nuances of gender and racial identities but also the economic lines that continue to divide an already fractured collection of communities.

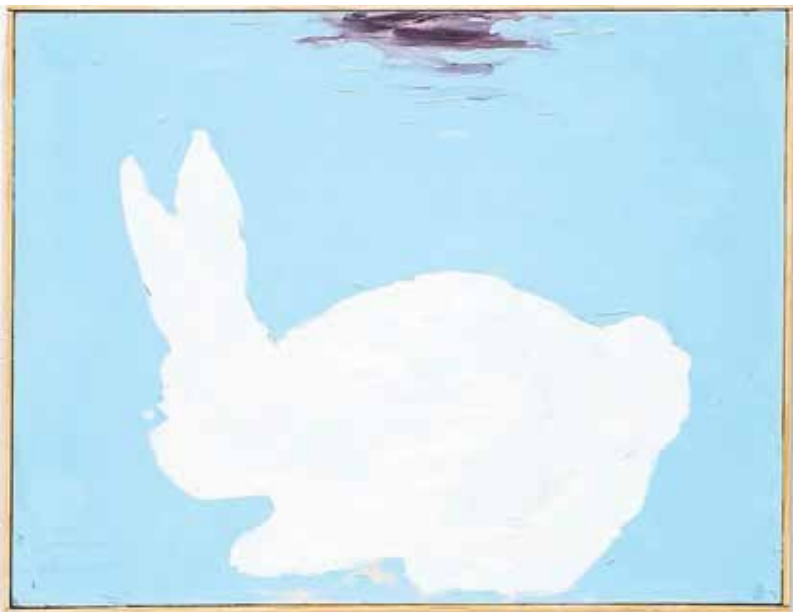
There once was, and very likely still is, a commonly held notion that art is somehow pure. That it is exempt from the social, political, and economic conditions in which it is created. One can recall the Greenbergian theism of transcendence through abstraction and the universality

of minimalist forms. These once lofty ideas have settled more comfortably in the realm of populist aesthetics with each passing year. It is in the galleries and museums that we see a 21st century iteration of social realism that runs the aesthetic gamut, from being tinged with the aesthetics of contemporary conceptualism to leaning heavily into illustrative figuration.

However, this revisitation of artworks dealing with narratives around a contemporary social caste system butts up against the packaging of neoliberal capitalist culture. In today's social critique it is often the audience that is implicated rather than a ruling authority. **Museums and galleries have done a lot of heavy lifting to ensure that viewers and patrons are granted absolution from complicity by simply participating in the valorous act of viewing art.** This is a new kind of illusionism that must not be shied away from but explored and examined. These exhibitions at the MSU Broad Museum provide us with a substantial opportunity to do so, both in collusion with and contradiction to curatorial intention.

David Flaughner

Perhaps it is the breadth of formal and conceptual pluralism that makes gallery wall text so essential to the understanding of contemporary artwork. In what the MSU Broad refers to as its "Artist Project Series," a selection of paintings and sculptures by artist David Flaughner claim to take on the heavy task of conveying abandonment, celebration, and the intersectional narratives of "economic



David Flaughner, *Bunny with Cloud*. Photo from broadmuseum.msu.edu.

struggles and housing insecurity" while also offering a "broader critical perspective on the social, political, and economic structures that frame them." That's quite a lot of baggage to carry.

Unfortunately, this exhibition suffers from what could be called Duchampian error. We have come to a point where the idea of the found object has drifted from something that plays with context and pushes at the boundaries of how art is defined to the contention that the object, just by virtue of it being in a gallery, somehow conveys a collection of complex meanings evoked in the eye of the artist. So many young artists today seem to think that the aesthetics of conceptual art are somehow equivalent to the concepts themselves. **Much like the tree falling in the forest, does art have meaning without words on a wall to explain it?**

This smaller but still substantial gallery in the museum is occupied by three paintings and two sculptures by Flaughner. They are interestingly minimal, while still expressive. His handling of paint is confident and reminiscent of the thick application seen on the exterior of houses. The imagery speaks to an ambiguous sense of loss and alienation but little else. *Bunny with Cloud* treats its subjects like Giorgio Morandi did his bottles, as though the artist were from another world with no knowledge of the thing they are looking at. But Flaughner's images flatten the subjects in two- or three-color abstractions stamped onto the painted surface.

The sculptures are not much different. They both consist of free-standing wardrobes made from plywood, presumably by the artist. One is decorated with painted branches rich with some kind of round fruit or berry. The other, *Untitled* has a small, plug-in LED light inside. These decorations are perhaps what reference "celebration" as stated in the accompanying text. There is a deep kind of sadness in their modesty, and it seems to portray a very impoverished version of decadence.



David Flaughner, *Untitled*. Oak, Pine, LED light, and hardware. Photo from broadmuseum.msu.edu.



David Flaughner, *Fall Harvest*, 2019. Media, Photo from broadmuseum.msu.edu.



Free Your Mind: Art and Incarceration in Michigan, gallery view, 2021. Photo from broadmuseum.msu.edu.

Thanks to the wall text a viewer may be more willing and able to connect the conceptual dots, but it still feels like a stretch to grant this work the power to achieve its purported ambitions. This is not to dismiss David Flaughner as an artist. It may or may not be a work of art, but the most interesting piece of content is a three-paragraph observation written by the artist about his own experiences in Detroit working as a delivery driver, living out of a car, and crashing at a studio space with horrific plumbing.

The strangeness of the work is in the way it turns the gallery into a theater in which poverty is being performed. It is not as if the world has never seen artwork that is made by people who are poor or make a living from underpaid labor. What Flaughner's work seems to embody is someone from that world with inside knowledge of contemporary art and what the academic institutions and market deem worthy of cultural value. There is an odd concoction of artistic ambition and desperation in this exhibit. Desperation to not just "make it" but to survive and live freely from overly exploitive labor practices. There is a sad and ugly truth to Flaughner's work and what makes it even tougher to swallow is the way in which it is presented—as beautiful. As though there are sad, poor souls who cannot conceive of anything greater than these minimal works and need to be coddled by the elites who look down upon them from their ivory towers.

If the work is to represent a working-class sense of loss and abandonment but also celebration, it does so with a reductionist outlook on what kind of depth people within that world are capable of. It almost feels like a kind of shaming to attribute this work to that social space. It is either the artist, curator, or both who would do better to take ownership of these feelings instead of shifting them over to a class of people who have not claimed them. In fact, they have a long history of of artistry regardless of academic training, and have also helped shape art as we know it in spite of their exclusion from certain social spaces. One would only need to go upstairs at the Broad to see what kind of aesthetic ambition and visions of life marginalized and oppressed people are capable of.

Free Your Mind: Art and Incarceration in Michigan

Looking at much of contemporary art, it is easy to forget just how much the very nature of the thing one is looking at is contingent upon the circumstances in which it is produced. We have spent much of recorded history carving out a space and innovating tools and techniques for making art to ensure its "purity"—the studio space, the museum, the blue-chip gallery, the academic institution, all places in which art has the potential to exist without the anchors of social politics and moral righteousness to

weigh it down. Of course, the purest form of art is probably no art at all. So, it is no wonder many institutions including the Broad, have embraced art that is reflective of a moral position. And why shouldn't they? Where else are we going to get to see something so close to the truth of what people experience in their lives, particularly those who are oppressed.?

"Free Your Mind" is the Lead exhibition at MSU Broad, and it has its roots in a reoccurring exhibition known as "Annual Exhibitions of Art by Michigan Prisoners" organized by Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP). It features work by artists and writers who for the most part, are currently or have at some point been incarcerated. Much of the work is in the mediums of drawing and painting, and at a small scale, which makes sense given the constricted access to space and resources on the part of the artists. It is also the more traditional motifs, such as allusion and allegory making their way into this work, that draws a clear line between the insular art world and the sincere translation of life experience onto paper, canvas, etc.

For these artists, catharsis seems to be ubiquitous regardless of subject matter. Some of these images are de-

pictions of spiritual longing or visions of peace and joy, while others illustrate past or current traumas both real and metaphorical, as well as the darker sides of humanity.

A small acrylic painting from 2010 titled *Half Surrender* by an anonymous artist depicts a meditating figure floating on a raft at sea joined by a turtle and a crocodile. The figure is caught between two worlds; one filled with sunshine and warmth on the left while the other on the right is cold and bleak. Symbolism re-enforces the clear duality with birds flying freely through an empty picture frame in the golden sunlight on the left, while on the right, a locked door floats in the sky and a ship sinks in the distance.

In a similar vein, a work on paper by Frankie Davis titled *The Creative Lighthouse* utilizes calmly detailed draftsmanship, a deft use of color, and patterns and figuration akin



Rafael De Jesus, *The Way It Is*, 2014. Courtesy the Prison Creative Arts Project, University of Michigan. Photo from broadmuseum.msu.edu.

Frankie Davis, *The Creative Lighthouse*, 2007. Colored pencil and ink on paper. Collection of Janie Paul.



to folk art, all to create an alluringly surreal image of a colorful lighthouse in a bleak and haunting landscape. Davis's clarity in the title seems to make a statement about the creative process itself being a kind of spiritual practice in which to find solace—one that could save a person's sanity and perhaps even their life in such dire circumstances.

For one artist, the creative process may just have saved his life. Wynn Satterlee was diagnosed with cancer in prison. According to the exhibition notes the prognosis was dire. He began painting with the help of a friend and created for ten hours a day every day of the week for seven years. Eventually his cancer disappeared. I have no idea what kind of treatments he was receiving, but I can't help but believe that finding something to give oneself a sense of not only purpose, but of self-discovery, can have a healing effect. Even on a scientific basis, that is yet to be proven.

The work featured by Satterlee in this exhibition is one that is strange, bold, and evocative. His application of acrylic paint appears confident, as do his color choices and figuration. In *Free My Daddy*, an enlarged figure in a green shirt and white pants balances awkwardly on a table while seeming to grapple with, and attempt to free a group of little boys from cages. The layers of tension and confusion emerge in parsing out the scene being depicted



Wynn Satterlee, *Free My Daddy*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, Collection of Janie Paul.

in contrast with its title. The large figure appears cartoonish with pitch black hands and a face with two sad white squares for eyes like Marvin the Martian. Upon closer examination it would appear to be a mask because we see pink fingertips at the ends of the black hands, as though the figure is a bandit with cut off gloves.

Is the bandit freeing the children? Are the children attempting to block their bandit father from imprisonment? The power of painting is that it could be both, more, or neither. This image could capture all the emotions and desires of the artist and tie them together in one messy package. There is no better expression of one's circumstances and experiences than the one that refuses to omit the inherent contradictions we all feel and grapple with during moments of turmoil.

So much of this work is the kind that has been left out of the privileged art world because of its didacticism, humility, and lack of ambiguity. In the academic degree-to-art fair pipeline, these pieces would raise eyebrows in the critique space and get outshined by neon letter sculptures and fast-ripening fruit taped to walls. That is until they are lent credence by the narrative of their circumstance which is, again, the cultural and material constraints of incarceration. The world seems to have almost wholly embraced the circumstantial



2021 MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design Faculty Triennial —Where We Dwell, installation. Photo from broadmuseum.msu.edu.

value of art, and rightfully so. If art is a reflection of our humanity and how we define our lived experience and existence, it is obvious why a space for artwork that is not “pure” has been carved out. **The moral void that persisted in the artworld at the end of the twentieth century was the “emperor with no clothes” on a mass scale. It is only recently that we have returned to covering up our shame with the brittle fig leaf of shallow morality.**

There is a danger in infantilizing and fetishizing this kind of work in a similar way that has been done for artists with severe mental illness or developmental disabilities. In the case of this exhibition, that fear is somewhat alleviated by the connections drawn between the artwork and the hard facts of life in America for those marginalized by incarceration. Lengthy sentences, incarceration of youth, and the effects of incarceration on women and their families are just some of the topics this exhibition ties to the artwork. Furthermore, it is the collaborative nature of this project that highlights the shared desire to create art that humanizes and gives agency to individuals that have lost theirs. There is still a feeling of partitioning with this exhibition that places the artists and their work into a category. When we start seeing this kind of work incorporated into curatorial efforts that draw from a wider pool of demographics, we will know there has been another step in the right direction.

Author's Note: There is a lot of work to see in ‘Free Your Mind’ as well as another lead exhibition called ‘Per(sister): Incarcerated Women of the United States. This exhibition was still being installed during my visit to the Broad. Both exhibitions are on view until December 12, 2021.

Faculty show

If “Free Your Mind” is defined by constraint, then the “2021 Art, Art History, and Design Faculty Triennial: Where We Dwell” would appear to have no constraints at all. The work is across the board in terms of media and content. Traditional paintings appear on walls, as do hacked cell phones, batiked fabrics, wallpaper collages, and glass fragments that glow in black light. There is however constraint within this curatorial endeavor in both the fact that the exhibition features MSU faculty and the work they developed and/or produced during the covid-19 pandemic lockdown.



Robert A. McCann, *Things That Look Like Other Things*, 2019. Oil on linen. Exhibition catalog.

The duality and strangeness of having one foot in the art world and the other in the classroom is exemplified by the breadth of work featured, much of which appears unrelated. If you have ever been to a graduate thesis show of a large Art School like the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, or even an art fair, experiencing this exhibit might feel familiar. And like those types of exhibits there is a lot of eye-catching work here.

There is really no telling what work will resonate with what viewer, and there is likely something here for everyone. A 2019 painting by Robert A. McCann titled *Things That Look Like Other Things* will likely get attention from fans of painters from the Leipzig school while Abhishek Narula's *Sometimes I forget my phone gets lonely* would be right up the alley of Trevor Paglen-esque, high concept technological manipulation.

In addition to featuring artists and work from the visual arts department at MSU this exhibition features work from the departments of Art History and Design as well. It is delightfully unclear what work comes from which department, but a few works are easier to guess than others. Chris Corneal's *Love Harmonizes Life* or Kelly Salchow MacArthur's *Structure of Repudiation* are clearly the works of graphic designers while other projects seem to have footprints across disciplines.

Culture Industry [dot] club seems to be a collective that developed Ozymandias, a piece of software that sends selected writings on the history of totalitarianism to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement tip submission form. Jae Won Lee established another collective which has a connection to the piece *Waste Not #2*. This collaborative project called FROM WASTE TO WANT: UPCYCLING PLASTIC THREADS WITH COMMUNITY utilizes unwanted plastic bags as art and design material, introducing inquiries into our relationship to materials, the environment, and how we interact with them.

This exhibition is described as something along the lines of a meditation on "what it means to dwell" and as presenting works that "extend the boundaries of home beyond the four walls of a physical building." A breadth of ambitious ideas about restructuring notions of space, the body, society, and equity are all wrapped up in this faculty show. The depth of the ideas here are vast, but somehow still feel hidden. We must again turn to the wall

text or the catalog to gain greater insight into the motivations of the work and have our "ah-ha" moment where the work suddenly makes sense.

This role of text in exhibitions is not new, and people in the art world have been poking at it for quite some time. Some love it, some hate it, and most probably don't care all that much. The art world moves fast. But if we stop and try to catch up with it by questioning the form it has taken, things can get interesting.

As with the "Free Your Mind" exhibition, circumstance is crucial to our understanding of the artwork and the value we place on it. But what does that tell us about art more broadly? Has the art object begun to lose its relevance yet again? With a flourishing art market and a revival in the popularity of figurative painting one would think not. But if capital is the driving force in how we value a thing, then it is the circumstantial identity of the thing that defines it, more so than the aesthetic experience we have in engaging with it.

One might ask "who cares" or "what's the difference"? The difference is that when we accept the circumstantial identity of a thing, we don't learn much more than we already know. Art should be challenging. It should push us to question our preconceived notions and not just validate them.

In our contemporary art institutions, MSU Broad included, deep inquiry and complex ideas can get lost to ambiguous white cube formalism. **The desire to be didactic and make social and political statements through curation, is expressed in a language coded with conceptual aesthetics that only a minority of viewers can coherently grasp.**



Abhishek Narula, *Sometimes I forget my phone gets lonely*, 2020. Smartphones, custom electronics. Exhibition Catalog.



Jae Won Lee, *Surface of Years*, 2004. Fabric, thread, hair, h. 24" x w. 72" x d. 2." Photo from art.msu.edu.

The art world is continuing to become a closed loop of esoteric virtue signaling, particularly in academia. We can be grateful that we get to see the otherwise unseeable artwork of incarcerated individuals and learn about the organization that is helping facilitate healing through art. But to pretend that is not much more than a way for wealthy donors to feel good about themselves and for massive academic institutions to pat themselves on the back while they benefit from gentrification is naïve. Of course, this burden does not rest solely on the Broad Museum and these three exhibitions, which, for the most part, are quite good and worth seeing. It was the experience of viewing these exhibitions that engaged me into this critical space. An analysis of the cognitive dissonance between what we see and the way we talk about it has been growing larger on the metaphorical horizon.

We have arrived at a moment of confusion in our art world and culture. We can no longer present, and perhaps even produce art that does not require validation through capital that is simultaneously monetary, cultural, and institutional. It seems that every artist is striving for it. A painting of a white bunny or a wallpaper collage cannot be made without having to make a political statement. This is a reflection of art and life in the 21st century—that we may be in a collective blind spot.

Perhaps, in order to have an audience and a career making art you must first acquire approval from a neo-liberal authority that deems your work just subversive enough to be safe for presentation. Then you just might begin your path toward getting to produce art and talk

about it without having to wait tables or drive a cab until you just give up on the whole art thing. And for most artists, conforming to the conventions of the moment is not a tough pill to swallow. It's a life of getting to create. This fantastical premise that art is a pure form of expression is still a new one in the greater scheme of things and a lie that we tell ourselves so that the fig leaf of "freedom" stays attached to our collective crotch.

To see artwork that transcends institutional conformity while remaining interesting is a rare thing nowadays. But it is not impossible. It is the role of not just the artist, but the curator, and the audience to demand more from art than just easy politics. Art and life are not transactional. You don't get one for the other. They are interconnected. Art is at its best when it pulls us in through form and proceeds to challenge us with weight and gravitas. It should be uncomfortable. We should feel implicated so that we may locate our values and refine our beliefs instead of merely validating the ones we choose to present. We cannot rely on institutions alone to do this. We must do it together. ■

Evan Carter is a visual artist and assistant editor of the New Art Examiner. He joined the team in 2017 while earning an MFA from the University of Chicago and has been covering arts and culture in the city and beyond ever since. He is invested in the creative community and its capacity to make meaning and reveal truth in everyday life.

Editor's Note: After repeated requests, MSU Broad did not respond to provide proper caption information. Therefore we have provided our best guess information that we could find for each photo, even when it is incomplete. M. Ségard, Editor in Chief.

A Question of Audience

“Realms of Refuge” and “Works on Paper by Wadsworth Jarrell and Gerald Williams”

by Michel Ségard

In their Elizabeth Street location, Kavi Gupta gallery is presenting two shows for the summer: “Realms of Refuge” on the first floor and, on the second floor, “Works on Paper by Wadsworth Jarrell and Gerald Williams,” two founding members of AfriCOBRA. These two exhibitions, with works that are separated by half a century, show how the intended audience of a work of art has changed in those 50-plus years raising the question of who are the artists’ audience.

The Jarrell and Williams works on paper demonstrate their inspiration in the Black aesthetic as expressed in Jeff R. Donaldson’s “AfriCOBRA Manifesto ‘Ten in Search of a Nation.’” It is an aesthetic firmly based on cultural traditions, shared ethnic values, and forward-looking, unapologetic politics. AfriCOBRA was formed in Chicago in 1968 and originally consisted of Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams.



Wadsworth Jarrell, *Revolutionary*, 1972. Screen-print printed in color on white wove paper, 33 x 26 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

of Angela Davis titled *Revolutionary*, done in 1972. It has all the vibrancy and energy that Donaldson wrote about in the Manifesto. But predating it by five years is Jarrell’s gouache *Study for Wall of Respect* from 1967. In this piece, all the vibrant street life and music is depicted with a strong primary-color pallet, in contrast to his more muted and tentative *Sketch for Mackin’ the Game*, done in 1959. These three pieces show how he evolved within ongoing mainstream nonabstract aesthetics of the time.

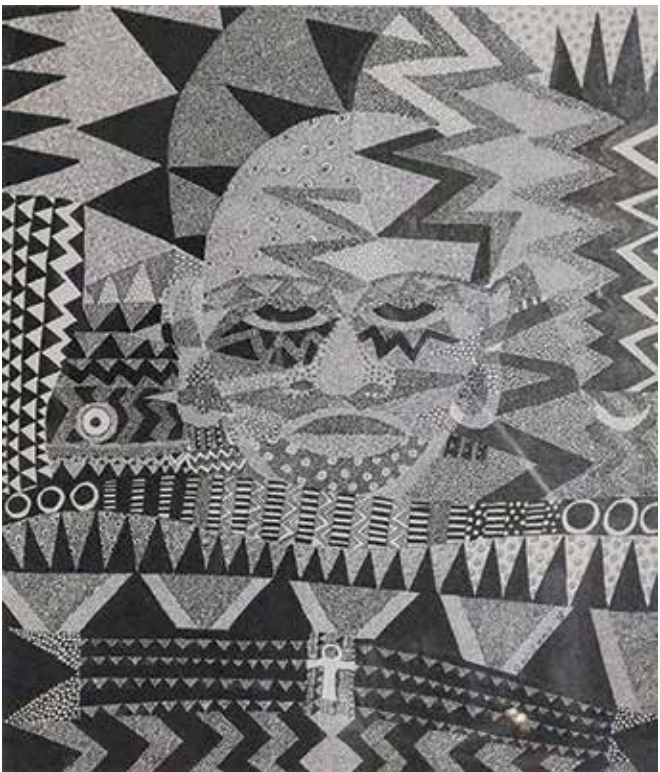
There are also three large graphite and pencil drawings by Jarrell from 1971, which depict the two leaders of the Black Panther Party, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Here, there is no color, no joy, only revolutionary politics and indignation. But in all of his work, Jarrell’s audience is clearly visible—his images speak directly to the eye of the viewer.

Wadsworth Jarrell’s pieces are more directly political, one of his most famous in this show being the portrait

Left to Right: Wadsworth Jarrell, *Sketch for Mackin’ the Game*, Water color and ink on paper, 35 x 28 in. *Study for Wall of Respect*, 1967. Gouache, 44 x 30 in. Photos courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



Left to Right: Gerald Williams, *Emerge*, 1974. Hand-blocked screen-print on paper, approx. 16 x 12 in. *Illumination*, 1978. Ink on paper, 20 x 19 x 1 in. Photos courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.





Gerald Williams, *Power and the Will to Prevail*, 1974. Screenprint on paper, 22 x 30 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Williams’s work from the late 60s is characteristically AfriCOBRA in style and can be hard to distinguish from Jarrell’s at first glance. But for Williams’s works on paper from the middle 70s, the inspiration is African artistic and craft traditions and don’t carry the political urgency of the earlier works. They are intimate and gentle—even domestic—in their tone and controlled color. There are also five works of ink on paper. They all have a “pointillist” quality that has nothing to do with Seurat but is based more on African textile patterns and hand crafts. There is also a strong abstract component to his work that is based on African motifs found, for example, in mask sculpture and African fabric patterns. This is strongly evident in the 1974 pieces *Power and the Will to Prevail* and *Emerge* or the ink on paper drawing *Illumination* from 1978. In all of Williams’ pieces the intended audience, again, is clearly initially the eye of the viewer. He is asking you to appreciate and cele-

brate the beauty of African artistic traditions as an initiation to the underlying politics. The AfriCOBRA group created art that had a significant propaganda and racial politics component. This made their art somewhat didactic on the surface—easily understood by people not educated in or connoisseurs of the visual arts. But closer study shows the profound celebration of historic African cultural and artistic traditions. (Moving up one generation, Nick Cave’s sculptural and wall pieces continues the tradition of using African culture and craft as aesthetic sources that we see in the works of the AfriCOBRA artists.) But in all this art, the primary audience is unambiguous—again, it is the eye of the viewer. Jarrell’s and Williams’s works depict their conceptual inspiration directly in their images in unambiguous ways that are not reliant on external sources.



Michi Meko, *Wishes: A Promise to Send Us into Ourselves. Free to Travel, Adrift From Our Pagan Land*, 2019. Mixed media and found objects on panel, 42 x 58 x 9 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



Michi Meko, *Baggage: Leave Me Better Than you Found Me*, 2021. Acrylic, gold leaf, oil pastel, white prismacolor pencil (pc938), areosol, areosol hologram glitter, India ink, krink, aluminium tent pole, paper bag, black corner store plastic bags, wire, parachord, lantern, LED lights, duct-tape, fringe, red push pen, wood screws, nails, patio planks on panel, 40 x 64 x 8 in. Installation view. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Downstairs in the gallery’s main floor is “Realms of Refuge” exhibition. Here things are different; in this show, ambiguity abounds. Inspiration moves from broad cultural traditions and politics to inner struggles on how to cope with these forces. And that changes the primary audience for many of the works. These eight artists (Dominic Chambers, Allana Clarke, Basil Kincaid, Tomokazu Matsuyama, Suchitra Mattai, Michi Meko Devan Shimoyama, and Alisa Sikelianos-Carter) mostly turn inward for inspiration—individual experiences, social or political conflicts, internal spiritual struggles. Michi Meko put it this way: “I was curious enough to ask myself what it means when we turn ourselves from gazing outward at a mountaintop or a valley, inward towards whatever mountaintop or valley is in ourselves. ...is it the inward reflection that appears to be an outward gaze?”

Meko has three works in the show. *Baggage: Leave Me Better Than You Found Me*, is a multimedia assemblage that takes up all the entrance wall of the gallery. It is a collection of items: lantern, ropes, tent poles, black plastic bags, wood patio planks and more that seems to speak

outwardly to the impact that humans have on our natural environment. The gallery notes suggest that Meko was also wondering if a Black man could personify nature as much as the White males who dominate nature writing: Whitman, Theoreau, Muir. But the work can also be read with a contemporary mindset as an expression of guilt over what we have all done to the environment. This inward focus is also expressed in *Wishes: A Promise to Send Us into Ourselves. Free to Travel, Adrift From Our Pagan Land*, a rectangle of Meko’s signature angled white grid on a black ground framed with black plastic bags, tassels, tin cans, and gold fringe. In the center, there is a silver bowl containing a wishbone with a mass of green-black feathers



Michi Meko, *Baggage: Leave Me Better Than you Found Me*, 2021. closeup view. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Alisa Sikelianos-Carter, *Listen and Behold. A Story/Telling*, 2020. Ink, acrylic gouache, acrylic medium, powdered pigment, gold foil, silver foil, interference pigment, glitter, and collage on archival paper, 120 x 120 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



hanging below it. This piece reads like a Victorian stage proscenium or a portal that invites us to enter an inner world. It feels a little like Dr. Who's Tardis—larger on the inside than on the outside and capable of taking us anywhere and anywhen.

Alisa Sikelianos-Carter embraces a more directly sci-fi like aspect in dealing with tradition. Her *Listen and Behold. A Story/Telling* features a female three-headed creature imparting knowledge into the heads of two seated youngsters. The knowledge is represented by a cloud of gold leaf glyphs that appear to float into the youths' heads. (The multi-headed female creature is a repeating motif in

Sikelianos-Carter's work.) Her website has this short paragraph on her bio page:

Sikelianos-Carter asserts that Black features are a manifestation of a sacred and divine technology that has served as a means of survival, both physically and metaphysically. She envisions a cosmically bountiful world that celebrates and pays homage to ancestral majesty, power, and aesthetics.

In addition, the bio asserts that she is inspired by "traditionally Black hairstyles." This source is inferred in the swirling, tumbling locks of the creature. But the beings in her painting do not appear to have particularly African features. We can only fully realize her meaning by reading her online bio and the gallery notes. No such effort was necessary for Jarrell or Williams.

Dominic Chambers has the same interpretive problem in her *Window Sitter (Daybreak)*. First, the gallery notes



Dominic Chambers, *Window Sitter (Daybreak)*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 66 x 56 x 1.5 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



Allana Clark, *Solace*, 2020. 30-second super hair bonding glue (rubber latex, black carbon dye, ammonium hydroxide), 66 x 114 x 12 in. Photos courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

assert that the woman in the picture is Black. That is not self-evident in the painting. She could be Latinx, or any Caucasian subgroup with darkish skin and thick black hair, like Romanis. The gallery notes do acknowledge the conceptual similarity to Edward Hopper's *Morning Sun* from 1952. But the yellow cloudscape suggests potentialities for the future, as opposed to the melancholy of Hopper's urban rooftops. Nevertheless, Chambers actually succeeds in visualizing the show's theme "Realms of Refuge" as the young woman peer out the window and into tomorrow's possibilities.

The one piece I found unsuccessful was Allana Clarke's *Solace*, a huge wall hanging made from hair bonding glue (a specially formulated latex designed to adhere hair extensions). Its undulating form made it seem to be a very thick fabric. There is no way of knowing what her relationship to the piece is from looking at it. The gallery notes quote her as saying that her first encounters with the products were like a "rituals indoctrinating me into a world that is anti-black." She goes on to explain that Black hair was considered political and radical. There is not the slightest hint of this in the actual work. These ideas were Clarke's internal motivation. In contrast in 2017, the New Museum in New York City had an exhibition "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and as a Weapon." In it, former Chicago artist Diamond Stinglii, who grew up in beauty salons in Chicago's South Side, had a piece titled *Kaas 4C*. It was a braid made from Kanekalon hair, knockers, and barrettes. The association with hair culture and social traditions were visually evident in the piece. One did not have to read gallery notes to understand the work. Clarke, on the other hand, is talking to herself in her work. The audience doesn't really matter. It is the dialogue between her and her past that counts.

Diamond Stinglii, *Kaas 4C*, 2017. Kanekalon hair, knockers, barrettes. Photo courtesy of the artist and Queer Thoughts, New York.



Devan Shimoyama, *Chakra Chart II*, 2021. Oil, colored pencil, glitter, acrylic, rhinestones, and collage on canvas stretched over panel, 72 x 72 x 1 1/4 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



Devan Shimoyama has a painting *Chakra Chart II* that also directly addresses the title of the show. He has created a portrait of a friend in the Siddhasana pose. On it he has positioned the seven chakras. The figure's silhouette is echoed several times and is surrounded by radiating beams of purple, lavender, gold, and red glitter. This meditative state is clearly a state of refuge. What is uncharacteristic of this painting is its symmetry, which also suggests repose and calm. Shimoyama's compositions are usually much more dynamic and even agitated and speak to the trials of being Black and gay today. That theme was very evident in his show "Cry, Baby" at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2018. This painting suggests that one can come to terms with that conflict and achieve some sense of serenity. In this work, Shimoyama explores the refuge of Eastern mysticism as a possible solution to some of his conflicts. (There is also a correspondence between the colors of the chakras and the colors of the original pride flag.)

The last Black artist in the show is Basil Kincaid. He is a quilter of extraordinary sensitivity. Coming from a

very religious family, Kincaid's quilts address this upbringing. In *Order My Steps*, two figures are intertwined over a black and white background. The figure in the back is a Black male and in front is the suggestion of a female figure with a large hat, all outlined in gold thread. They seem to be headed in the same direction with the female figure in front. "Order My Steps" is the title of one of the hymns that his mother would sing while getting ready for church. The work is strongly abstracted; the figure in the back appears to have three arms and the front figure's hands are wildly oversize. Each of the hands have an aura



Basil Kincaid, *Order My Steps*, 2020. Quilt vintage corduroy, donated clothes, clothes from the artist, Ghanaian embroidered fabrics, hand-woven Ghanaian kente, wax block print cotton fabric, and wool, 96 x 85 x 1 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Basil Kincaid, *Wade in the Water*, 2021. Quilt vintage corduroy, donated clothes, clothes from the artist, Ghanaian embroidered fabrics, hand-woven Ghanaian kente, wax block print cotton fabric, and wool, 97 x 72 x 1 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



around them suggesting the sound one makes when snapping one's fingers (while keeping time to the song?). The background figure's feet are also highlighted by "waves" of purple and blue, suggesting the sound of stamping feet. Altogether, the piece is very dynamic.

Kincaid's other work in the show is *Wade in the Water*. The piece is based on the traditional Madonna and Child motif. The black figure holds a lighter infant in two giant hands. Her head is surrounded by a mandala that almost looks like a turban. Her eyes, two black and gold rosettes,

peer down at the infant as a ghostly figure hovers behind the pair, appearing to embrace them. This protective figure is made from a lacy fabric that has holes through which the background can be seen, giving it a spiritual quality. An angel? And above the Madonna's head is a German cross in the background—curious. Finally, one of her hands has crosses painted on its fingernails.

These two pieces illustrate the profound influence that Black religion has had on Kincaid's life, and he shares that influence with the viewer in a profound and direct way. To my mind, he may be the best communicator in this show.

Suchitra Mattai's *Held Still (in a silent echo)* is, perhaps, the most visually seductive piece in the show. This nearly 11 feet wide piece has a core of a Belgium-bought tapestry embellished with three embroidery hoops, feathers, draped chains, an oversized tassel, beaded appliques, and deer horns. Mattai has brightened the colors of sections



Suchitra Mattai, *Held Still (in a silent echo)*, 2021. Embroidery, mixed media, appliqué on vintage tapestry, 85 x 130 x 5 in. Photo courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Tomokazu Matsuyama, *Minimal Celestine*, 2021.
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 54 x 54 x 2 in.
Photos courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.



of the tapestry by over-embroidering. In the center, she has included a galloping white horse with a side-saddle woman rider. This central image is flanked on each side by bright red beaded wing forms, which in turn are flanked by draped white chains and elaborate, scrolled beadwork in the bottom corners. They all frame the central image like curtains. The entire piece is accented at the top by deer antlers attached to each end of the rod that supports the tapestry. But what does it mean? The gallery notes mention Mattai's Guyana Indo-Caribbean heritage and associate the various parts of the work to that heritage. However, to this viewer, the disparate elements don't crystalize into a cohesive narrative; the relationship between the various parts are left up in the air and seem to be strictly in the mind of the artist. So, what is she communicating to the viewer? The frustration to this viewer is that it is formally so beautiful but ultimately without discernable, cohesive meaning. The piece is a little like free association writing, where thoughts are set down in a quazi-random manner and left for the reader to interpret or to invent meaning.

The last artist in this show is Tomokazu Matsuyama a Japanese born artists that lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. His paintings on shaped canvases depict contemporary Japanese young adults in clothing that refers back to Japanese textiles and historic clothing styles and with backgrounds that are very floral and what Westerners would consider typically Japanese. The gallery notes describe them as "evocative of Shogun-era screens and panels." At the same time, the pieces contain anachronistic elements like a modern watch on the wrist of the lithe woman in *Minimal Celestine*, and an automobile tire and

a bag of potato chips in the painting of the young man called *Attitude Adjustment Tonight*. There is also a disquieting sense of androgyny in the figures. A colleague described it to me as prepubescent. One gets the feeling that the two individuals portrayed would rather live in a fantasy land and never grow up—Peter Pan, Japanese style. This dream-like state is enhanced by the splattering of white dots all over the painting except for the faces of the figures. It is like it is snowing cherry blossom petals. (Norbert Bisky the German artist that shows mostly in Europe uses a similar technique, only with black specks all over his paintings.) The white dots, a signature motif of Matsuyama appearing in most of his paintings, are in danger of becoming a "brand" motif. Matsuyama's paintings are ecstasy for the eye. But that may mask the deeper meaning of his work and actually obscure communication



Tomokazu Matsuyama, *Attitude Adjustment Tonight*, 2021, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 70 x 71.5 x 1.5 in. Photos courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery.

with the viewer. Or is it that the viewer is expected to overcome the visual child-like seduction that the subjects in the paintings cannot?

There is one trend in this show that is practiced by six of the eight artists—the inclusion of shiny materials, be they pieces of jewelry, metallic threads, glitter, or other shiny objects. This magpie-like act of decorating their paintings has been a trend with many artists in the contemporary art world for some years now, and, when not judiciously employed, can look like the artists is merely following fashion. The two artists who did not participate in this were Chambers and Clarke, and their work had a noticeably more somber tone than the rest of the show.

Another detail that stood out to this viewer and was a major flaw of this show was that there was not a single Caucasian in the show, male or female. It is as if the curator was of the opinion that White people had no reason to seek refuge from the White cultural hegemony and that their lives were without significant conflict. As a critic, I have met and gotten to know many White and Latinx artists, and they also have their familial conflicts, and/or their experiences with discrimination because they were first generation immigrants or shunned for being of a "different" religion, politics, or sexual orientation. They also need a realm of refuge. To eliminate them was at least insensitive and, in my view, unprofessional.

When comparing these two exhibitions, what stands out is the different times in which the works were created and how that span of half a century from Wadsworth Jarrell and Gerald Williams, the two AfriCOBRA artists, to the artists in "Realms of Refuge" witnessed a dramatic change in artists' motivating content. In the 60s and 70s artists were mainly concerned with issues of social politics and aesthetic style. AfriCOBRA fit into that category. Their early work, as exemplified by Jarrell in this show, was all about the civil rights movement. A little later in the mid 70s, Williams promoted the African pattern aesthetic and its tie to contemporary abstraction—a very 70s focus, especially in New York and California. (In Chicago, abstraction was in perpetual conflict with imagism, a type of surrealism with sources on the street, not the studio.) But

in the 2010s, the concerns of artists had largely shifted to personal influences and internal conflicts. The artists' subject matter became much more personal and internalized.

As a result, the audience changed. The artists of "Realms of Refuge" are not addressing the viewing audience, they are addressing themselves—sometimes to the point of almost looking like psychotherapy. Often, the sources of their images can only be found in gallery notes or online statements, and no hint of their inspiration exists in the work for the viewer to see. Dominic Chambers and Alana Clarke are two prime examples. The subject matter is often autobiographical, as is the case for Basil Kincaid and Suchitra Mattai. Or they escape into a fantasy land that is indirectly critical of our current culture, but only by inference. Alisa Sikelianos and Tomakazu Matsuyama fall into this category. Devan Shimoyama escapes to Eastern mysticism, and Michi Meko adopts an inward-looking interpretation of outward events. These artists are no longer communicating with the viewer, they are communicating with themselves. The pieces are not intentionally or inherently ambiguous, at least to the artists (as was popular several decades back when it was popular to posit that a work of art could mean whatever you wanted it to mean). Here, the inspiring content has remained in many of the artists' minds and many of the images they have created contain nothing to reveal to the viewer what that inspiration might be. As seductively pretty as some of the works in "Realms of Refuge" are, many of the works leave the viewer's eye hungry for more specific and clarifying content.

These two exhibitions show how, in the last half century, the political and social evolution of our artists' culture has evolved from taking a stand for bold ideas to internally struggling to integrate those ideas in order to better understand one's self. To put it in other words, Jarrell and Williams were "singing at Woodstock," while "Realms of Refuge" artists are "singing in the shower." ■

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.

Michael Luchs

May 20, 1938-June 9, 2021

by K.A. Letts

When I can no longer paint it will be time to go.
Michael Luchs, 2021

Michael Luchs, one of Detroit's best known artists and a pivotal figure in the Cass Corridor Movement of the 1960's and 70's, passed into art history on June 9, 2021. As part of a community of unruly young artists that gathered in the wake of the 1967 Rebellion, Luchs responded to the accelerating decline of the city by salvaging materials and inspiration from the wreckage of the struggling but still lively urban environment.

Nancy Mitchnick, a fellow Cass Corridor artist, recalls of the period, "Detroit was alive. The neighborhoods were dangerous. We did not notice...Michael Luchs was invent-

ing a kind of matrix that influenced many of the wilder artists deeply." She continues:

They took risks. They drank and smoked a lot of pot. They played drums in the middle of the night and carried on with the kind of intensity that was real and rare. And they talked, and argued, and disagreed, and pissed each other off. It was great. The late sixties was a time of innocence really. We still believed the world was going to get better and more interesting. Detroit was producing steel and cars. And young people were inventing themselves. We were not imitating anyone. After all, Rock and Roll was new.

Michael Luchs, *Fictitious Character*, Installation view at MOCAD, 2018. Photo courtesy of MOCAD.



Michael Luchs, *Fictitious Character*, Installation view at MOCAD, 2018. Photo courtesy of MOCAD.

The Cass Corridor Movement ended in the early 70's with the departure of many of its artists, though others stayed and remain integral to Detroit's art scene. After a short period living in New York, Luchs, plagued by substance abuse, retreated to rural Michigan where he continued his art practice, supported financially and creatively by his life partner and fellow artist Kathryn Brackett Luchs. After a period of relative obscurity, Luchs enjoyed a late career re-evaluation which included shows at Marlborough (New York, 2014), American Academy of Arts and Letters (New York, 2017), Simone DeSousa Gallery (Detroit, 2017, 2020), Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2018), and Cranbrook Art Museum (Bloomfield Hills, MI, 2019). His work is represented in several museum collections: the Detroit Institute of Arts, Wayne State University James Duffy Collection, the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, as well as in private collections throughout the U.S.

Michael Luchs's artworks have been described as a form of performance, or even ritual. A virtuoso who rejected virtuosity, Luchs built his paintings by accumulation, using materials from the hardware store and the street to achieve effects that range emotionally from the poetic to the fierce. The rich, damaged surfaces are built up by accretions of disparate and unlikely materials such as spray paint, house paint, duct tape and wire. Images were smeared, scraped, smudged; the ground was often pierced or folded or torn.

Throughout his creative life, Luchs returned obsessively to a deeply idiosyncratic lexicon of creative strategies and subjects. Foremost in his iconography was the totemic rabbit. *Untitled (Silver Rabbit)* 1994, currently on view as

a special project at Simone DeSousa Gallery, illustrates this consistency. On an unlikely irregular vinyl ground, the ghostly outline of a hare, rendered in metallic paint, is shot through with holes and folds that are both decorative and expressive. The bumpy and damaged surface hints at vulnerability and peril, yet the painting manages somehow to convey a combination of austerity and opulence.

Luchs returned often, also, to other vulnerable inhabitants of the natural world as subjects—frogs, squirrels, moths. Stylized outlines of these creatures, both sheltered and confined within a dense and highly physical matrix of marks, piercings and folds, provide the underlying compositional structures that hold the compositions in precarious suspension. He obsessively layered one pictorial element on top of another, each addition subtly interacting with the still-visible lines and patterns below. The iconic animals exist within the often irregular boundaries of his artworks as pictograms and constitute a kind of hermetic personal language. Elements of the built environment—electrical plugs, wires, guns—interact on a symbolic and formal level with signifiers of nature in an ambiguous dialectic of obsession and release.

Although Luchs came to prominence as part of an urban art scene, it would be facile to attribute the rough textures and his use of found objects and humble materials solely to the influence of late 20th century Detroit's environment of decay and transience. As Timothy Van Laar wrote in his 2017 monograph, reviews of Luchs's work in 1985, 2004 and 2017 reveal great consistency in their descriptions of the artworks. Based on his obsessive return to these images and materials throughout his career, it appears that Luchs's creative energy was largely generated



Michael Luchs, *Untitled (Silver Rabbit)*, 1994. Mixed media on vinyl. Photo courtesy of Simone DeSousa Gallery.

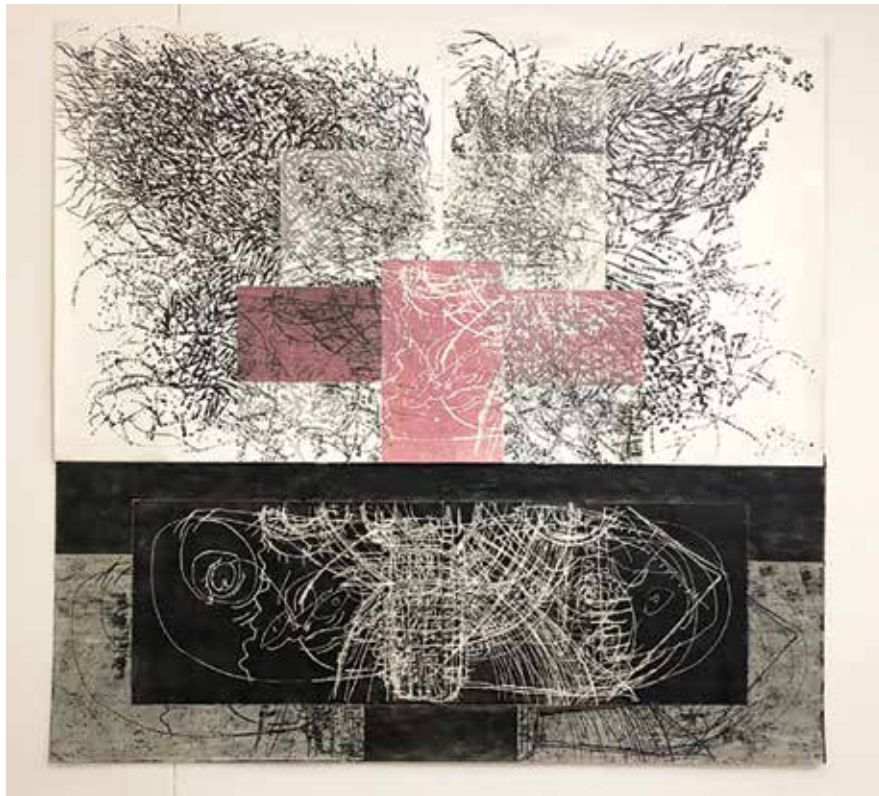
internally from deep within his subconscious. The materials and processes he developed in Detroit merely served as catalysts and tools for the efficient expression of his deeply personal, compulsive vision.

In spite of his fragile health, including a late diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease, Luchs remained remarkably productive in his last years. Visitors to his rural Michigan studio would find the walls and floors covered with works in progress, his obsession with what he called "searching" undiminished. He always worked in multiples, investigating, painting and repainting, building his surfaces, revising, re-working and discarding.

As recently as spring of 2021, Michael Luchs and Kathryn Brackett Luchs collaborated during the MOCAD show "Dual Vision" with two ambitiously scaled kimono-like wall hangings. The Sumi ink drawings on tissue-like glassine paper, combined with collagraph and woodcut, suggest metamorphosis. The

matching pair, fragile but lively, contain—in retrospect—intimations of mortality, visual metaphors for a creative partnership that enabled a damaged but talented artist to thrive and create. ■

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the New Art Examiner, a working artist (kalettsart.com) and art blogger (rustbeltarts.com). She has shown her paintings and drawing in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.



Michael Luchs and Kathryn Brackett Luchs, *Moth (Pink)*, 2020-2021. Woodcut collagraph sumi on glassine canvas.

REVIEWS

“Every Shut Eye Ain’t Sleep” Jennifer Packer at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles

by Sara Rouse

I haven't been to a museum in a while. I didn't rush back to the first opening days of in-person exhibitions. I haven't made many gallery appointments. The pandemic and its unfolding aftermath have fortified a change in my art viewing that was already tilted toward Instagram and is now based in the purgatory of online viewing rooms. Mediation and fatigue define my looking in the late Covid period. Seeing artwork in person now is a much fussed about treat that must overcome a risk assessment before reserving a check-in window in thirty-minute increments. "Every Shut Eye Ain't Sleep" opens the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles after an extended Covid closure. The museum continues to offer free general admission, a policy adopted in January 2020, just before the pandemic struck. Free admission and the underlying idea that fine art needs to be accessible to everyone is a commendable gesture. In making museums more like libraries and less like country clubs perhaps we could step toward a more relevant, and politically potent art world. I hope other institutions are watching and reorganizing as we begin to define art's new routines.

I first saw Jennifer Packer's paintings at her museum debut—"Tenderheaded" at the Renaissance Society in Chicago. It was 2017, I was a few years out of grad school and the show caught me off guard with its vulnerability and earnest mark-making. The artist, born in Philadelphia, studied at Tyler School of Art, then Yale before a series of prestigious residencies starting with the Studio Museum in Harlem and culminating in her inclusion in the 2019 Whitney Biennial. Most recently, Packer won the 2020-2021 Rome prize. Her career has been made on her enigmatic depictions of friends and family, forefronting the visibility of the Black subject in portraiture. Western painting has long been a medium whose history edits out people of color entirely or uses them as props in canonical pictures made by White artists. Against this context, Packer paints people she knows personally in interior scenes that give way to expressionistic atmospheres, evoking the sitter's interiority and humanity. She's also known



Jennifer Packer, *Say Her Name*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 inches. © Jennifer Packer, photo courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Corvi-Mora, London.

for paintings of floral arrangements made as a practice of grief and personal grounding during this time when killings of Black citizens by the State are horrifically replayed, dissected, and then largely ignored. Each bouquet is conceptually tied to a violent, politicized death. Most famously her painting *Say Her Name* memorializes the life of Sandra Bland, who was found dead in her jail cell in 2015 after a minor traffic violation escalated to a life and death encounter with the police. The heaviness of the words titling Packer's images creates a third element in her work that haunts her exhibitions. I recommend seeking out *An Exercise in Tenderness* and *April, Restless*—other

Jennifer Packer, *April, Restless*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. © Jennifer Packer, photo courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Corvi-Mora, London.



stand-out paintings from “Tenderheaded” that have never quite left me.

In this, the artist’s first exhibition with MOCA and her first major exhibition on the West Coast, Packer continues her work with portraits, interiors and funerary bouquets. The show is given two rooms and samples artwork made between 2016 and 2021, including works exhibited in her 2018 solo exhibition “Quality of Life” at Sikkema Jenkins & Co in New York. While it feels like Packer’s work could have sustained a much larger footprint in the museum, the variation in scale of the chosen works help make the installation feel in balance. It contains both intimate moments and larger knockout paintings that hold the room at a distance. These anchoring works are the most recognizable as they feature prominent figures that gaze outward along with

bright, frond-filled bouquets painted in memory of Laquan McDonald, who was tragically shot to death in Chicago by White police officer Jason Van Dyke in 2014. But it is works like *Tremor of Intent*, *Citizen* and *A Little Life* that feel like the real revelations are to be had. The smallest works are by far the most charming as they require close, one on one inspection to appreciate their economical architecture. It’s a relief to lean into the space of a painting smaller than a sheet of printer paper, its size only truly felt in relation to your body standing before it.

A Little Life embodies many of the larger exhibition’s best qualities. The 22 ½” x 18” oil painting is a divided composition with a foreshortened figure reclining, deep set into the top left of the canvas with their feet stretching forward. The bare feet are offered as the most rendered part of the scene, exposed from under a washy patterned blanket that dissolves into the interlocking blue and sienna fields within the image. It’s difficult to truly see the sitter as they are held in space only by a few crucial and



Jennifer Packer, *An Exercise in Tenderness*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 9.5 x 7 inches. © Jennifer Packer, photo courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Corvi-Mora, London.



Left to Right: Jennifer Packer, *A Little Life*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 22 ½ x 18 in. Photos courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, Corvi-Mora, London. *Citizen* 2018. Oil on canvas, 10 x 8 in. 2018. Collection of Noel E.D. Kirnon. Photo courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, Corvi-Mora, London.

exacting strokes. Everything about this image appears liminal, even the feet seem to have moved since the first sighting, leaving a ghostly path where the blanket’s edge disappears.

Be sure not to overlook *Citizen* at only 10” x 8”. This slight painting is fitted squarely on a figure slouching backward on a couch, staring back at us as if we are a mesmerizing glowing television. What do they see? This is not the only or best example of Packer’s brilliance with color but the quick brushes of red, violet and lantern green create an effortlessly stacked body out of thin air. The direct gaze of the subject is faceless, hidden in plain sight, with only two round points in the underpainting showing that they are watching. This anonymity contrasts with the detailed glint of a bracelet on the sloping wrist.

The title of the exhibition hangs in the air, emotionally familiar in a sticky way that affects the viewing of every image. The phrase “every shut eye ain’t sleep” could be unwound and found to contain a deeply earned distrust, someone looking,

someone deceiving. It isn’t quite safe here. This short bit of language seems to reference the lurking anxiety in the work. The pictures feel intimate and warmly loving. However, the words point toward the unending, exhausted awareness and social suspension of its subjects. In many of the compositions there are couches, armchairs, or the suggestion of a mattress. The painting *Idle Hands* features the sitter with a large dog wrapped comfortably and pro-



Jennifer Packer, *Idle Hands*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 90 x 84 in. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



Jennifer Packer, *Tremor of Intent*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in. Photo courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, Corvi-Mora, London.



Left to Right: Jennifer Packer, *Untitled*, 2021 Charcoal on paper, 13 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. *Untitled*, 2021 13 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. Photos by Sara Rouse.

tectively around their shoulders. These images of repose under the shadow of violence are eerily calibrated to our time where rest and anxiety are bedfellows as both political and ecological fear soaks into our comfortable interiors. Packer's signature style, the finessed rendering of the real meeting an expressive abyss, renders these complex and intertwined emotional states. Even a surface search of the phrase "every shut eye ain't sleep" tellingly recalls, in addition to the blues lyric, a research paper exploring to what extent people of color, and more specifically, Black Americans may suffer health ramifications including sleeplessness from racism-related vigilance. While this exhibition could otherwise feel more broadly about being stuck inside during 2020, it seems to intently depict a truly unending chronic tension.

The inclusion of eight charcoal drawings on paper, mostly untitled, are reason enough to see this exhibition in person and best capture Packer's hand. When her compositions are reduced to the tonal range of charcoal, you can see she carves space like Rodin. Six drawings all framed

in light maple hang in a line. These studies feel focused on capturing the character of the body and how it rests its weight. One sketch feels lighthearted with a cat's tail lingering just behind the shoulders of the sitter. Another is grave and ambiguous depicting just the implication of a shrouded head on a bare bed. Two of the drawings feature hands grasping another's face. One countenance is lovingly held, the face leaning into the palm and another on a moody blue paper shows gloved hands supporting the head in unmistakable sorrow.

Tremor of Intent is, for me, the most emphatic of all. Though modestly sized, it hangs alone. Its intense red orange burns against the void whiteness of the wall behind it. The figure pictured is only represented from the shoulder upward. They are shown with their face twisted away from our view. The shape of the head is turned sideways leaning back in space, mimicking the shape of the ear in a way that makes the body strange. The focal point becomes the highlight on the ear. It begins yellow and sinks into a surprising magenta wash that cradles the

back of the figure's head. The image of their hooded shirt is constructed equally of present and absent brush strokes before vanishing back into the alarming red. This picture is fragile, centered around a taught bared neck.

It feels inherent to every work that recognition and acknowledgment are politically entwined with looking and seeing. The work considers each of us, the viewer along with the depicter and the depicted. We could interpret the disappearing edges of figures and the warm atmospheric voids as attempting to hold space here for everything that can't be painted and for all the viewer is unable to see. That's the push and pull present between the viewer and the painter. It's made visible amid the intimacy of the artist allowing us into these painted spaces and the pictorial dissolution purposefully pushing out.

These paintings are made distinctly beautiful and are inherently collectible, but I am suspicious about the intent of our consumption. It's one thing for Packer to paint her grief and exalt her loved ones into art history—her commitment and influence is inarguable. But when consid-

ering these paintings sitting in collections, being bought, sold, negotiated, crated, and shipped (as any valuable painting is) do we require accountability? Does possession of these works mean collectors first accurately see them prior to acquiring the objects for profit? Do these figures and bouquets quiet the consciences of their buyers? We, the audience, holding these artworks in our eyes are the same participants in the brutal culture that requires them to be made. I don't believe everyone who looks or possesses one of these work lacks compassion to their content—but it is a knotted trade. This looking is complicated. In many of these works, Packer's sitters gaze back. The viewer is acknowledged in a way that asks one to consider why and how we are gazing in the first place and to what end. ■

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Jennifer Packer, *Untitled*, 2021. Charcoal on paper, 19 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches. Photo by Sara Rouse.

“A Permanent Home in the Mouth of the Sun”

Hannah Altman at Filter Photo, Chicago

By Rebecca Memoli

This summer Filter Photo exhibited Hannah Altman’s “A Permanent Home in the Mouth of the Sun,” a photographic project that examines Jewish diaspora through a feminine lens. Altman’s photographs reflect the paradox of place that is ingrained in Jewish history, Yiddish folklore, rituals, and symbolism. The exhibition creates a quiet space, but within that space, a strong feminine power materializes in a myriad of ways ranging from serene to violent. Light and shadow are manipulated and transformed to bring a physical presence and character to both.

Repetition through ritual is how history has been preserved and relived. In her statement Altman writes, “with one hand we tend to ancestral wounds that compel the notion to shield and assimilate, with the other we knead an ancestral resilience that allows us to continually revisit actions, places, and objects as they fit into new spaces of care and translation.” Viewers can follow the gestures and actions of hands throughout the exhibition. In the image *Shabbos Candles*, light floods in through a window onto a woman with a candle melted onto the backs of her hands. Both candles are tipped with a charred black wick like the point of a pen, tiny billows of smoke trailing from each like script suspended in air. Her expression is calm, almost restful, in contrast with the position she is in—forced into stillness by the placement of the candles whose piles of wax indicate this position had been held for a rather long time. This is not the traditional use of Shabbos candles,

but the image speaks to the restraint of work, rest and reflection that is central to the weekly ritual of Shabbos.

The presence of light feels spiritual and Altman’s use of light gives it a character of its own, like an ethereal ghost that seeps in through windows, crawls around forms and gently caresses physical surfaces, illuminating the skin of the people in each photograph. Shadows have a weightier presence that work to carve out the boundaries of the light. In images like *Hamsa* and *Preserving*, the shadow takes human shape and feels like the shadow of ancestors. The hamsa, a symbol for protection, is a hand with an eye at its center. In the photograph, the hamsa is held up by a red string allowing the sunlight to travel through the ornament falling directly in front of a woman’s face.



Hannah Altman, *Shabbos Candles*, 2019.
Archival pigment print, 27 x 22 inches.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Hannah Altman, *Hamsa*, 2021.
Archival pigment print, 18 x 22 inches.
Photo courtesy of the artist.



Light and shadow play against each other mimicking a dichotomy of forces. The shadow from that hand cradles her face, which is marked with reddish bruises. The lightness of the white fabric intensifies the marks on her face and makes this image alarming. *Hamsa* is a complicated image that poses many questions as it hints at an act of violence but doesn’t provide a clear context for it.

In contrast to the themes in *Hamsa*, a seemingly dark photograph in the series is actually quite inspiring. *Old Births, New Deaths* prominently features a dismembered bird that appears to float in front of a pane of textured glass. The bird’s body is broken apart, missing the head which is replaced by that of the human on the other side. Her gaze is facing away from the direction of the bird’s body, creating visual tension between the left and right—past and present. The figure emerges visually from the body of the bird like an anthropomorphic phoenix. Violence in this image, although more graphic, is easier to

digest than in *Hamsa* because it doesn’t leave the viewer with as many questions, and the end of the narrative feels more hopeful.

“A Permanent Home in the Mouth of the Sun” assembles images that are quiet but not meek. Altman builds her tableaux with layers of symbolism. The photographs are contemporary folktales translated into a language of their own, each packed with meaning that reflects the deep connection to history that is embedded in the practices and rituals of Judaism. Objects are pulled from Jewish tradition and reworked with a more contemporary mindset. For an outsider the meaning of the symbolism might be difficult to access but the visual language is powerful enough to grasp any viewer. ■



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Hannah Altman, *Old Births, New Deaths*, 2020.
Archival pigment print, 22 x 27 inches.
Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

“Why Do I Delight”

Shirley Woodson at the Detroit Artists Market

by K.A. Letts

Shirley Woodson, veteran artist, educator, collector and mentor to several generations of young Black artists in Detroit, is having a moment. In January 2021, she was named a Kresge Eminent Artist, the thirteenth award recipient in a distinguished list of musicians, artists, designers and writers who have made important contributions to Detroit’s cultural life in their respective fields. She is being honored with a retrospective of her work, a monograph describing her life and importance as a major figure in the cultural life of the city and a \$50,000 no-strings-attached prize. The exhibit, “Why Do I Delight,” at Detroit Artists Market, is on view from September 24 through October 23. Curated by Detroit collector and arts advocate Leslie Graves, the exhibit features a variety of paintings and works on paper representing Woodson’s studio practice, as well as new work from 2021. Also on display are a selection of artworks by several well-known Detroit artists that she has influenced along the way.

Shirley Woodson claims Detroit as her native city. Her family immigrated from Pulaski, Tennessee, during her infancy, part of the Great Migration that brought many Black families to the industrial Midwest. Woodson recalls, “In those days, everyone wanted the same thing, I think, opportunity, opportunity. We found it in Detroit and never looked back. It’s always been home.”

The family prospered in Detroit. Woodson remembers how important art was to her even in childhood, and how studying art in the Detroit Public Schools and seeing great art at the Detroit Institute of Art shaped her ambition to become an artist herself. She says, “I was in the Art Institute every Saturday from grade 7 through high school. It was sort of my most favorite place to be. Whenever I left home, I wanted to go to the museum.”

She graduated with a B.F.A in Fine Art from Wayne State University in 1958, followed by an M.A. in education in 1965, enabling her to find work with as an art teacher in the Detroit Public schools where she had been introduced to art herself, not so long before.



Shirley Woodson, *Why Do I Delight?*, 2021. Neon signage. Photo courtesy of Detroit Artists Market.

Elizabeth Youngblood, a well-known Detroit multidisciplinary artist whose work is represented in “Why Do I Delight” was one of Woodson’s early middle school art students. She remembers thinking that Woodson couldn’t be very much older than her students. “I remember her looking too close to our age, too young to be the teacher. I also remember how much fun she brought. Shirley believed in me making art before I did.” Youngblood describes Woodson’s influence on many young Black artists as pivotal: “If she didn’t make a piece of art at all and only worked as an arts administrator who’s done everything for so long to make sure other people could make art, and kids could have some real-life idea that there are such people, artists, out there, that would be enough to celebrate Shirley Woodson.”

Woodson held many positions as an arts educator at Wayne State, the Center for Creative Studies, Highland Park Community College, and the Detroit Public Schools. Peter Crow, another artist influenced by Woodson, recalls teaching art under her inspirational leadership at public schools in southwest, midtown and east Detroit. a diverse array of Detroit schools. He says, “It was Shirley who made



“Why Do I Delight,” Kresge Eminent Artist exhibit installation, 2021, at Detroit Artists Market. Photo courtesy of Detroit Artists Market.

you feel that you were part of a community doing difficult and noble work.”

No description of Shirley Woodson’s life would be complete without mentioning her work supporting young Black arts professionals outside of the academy, both as an active member of the Black Arts Movement and as co-founder, in 1974, of the Michigan Chapter of National Conference of Artists, an organization created to mentor and promote minority artists. As a young Black artist, Woodson had found the mainstream white art world to be indifferent, if not hostile. She says about this time, “We were out here expressing ourselves, making great work as Black artists, but no one understood the expression because white gallerists didn’t have to. In their totality, they were it. They hadn’t seen us in the books either, and we really didn’t know how poorly we’d been prepared for the world outside of a studio. Anything about presenting your



work to someone who’s never seen it, we didn’t have that knowledge. I thought art was about truth and beauty. The [art] world quickly showed me, if we wanted to be in it, we’d have to do everything on our own.”

Woodson’s contributions to art education and professional mentorship were important—even critical—to her many students and proteges, but she was—and is—an artist who has maintained an active art practice over 60 years. The current retrospective at Detroit Artists Market serves up a range of work she has created throughout her career, as well as some new artworks in a surprising variety of media.

An early work, *Beach Scene*, sets the scene for themes and subjects Woodson has returned to, again and again, over the years. Painted in 1966, the painting features shrouded female figures that face the viewer in the foreground, setting up a distant spatial relationship with the silhouetted presences on the faraway beach with a roiling sky overhead. Compared to her later work, the palette is fairly monochrome, though specks of gold leaf give a welcome sparkle to the hazy surface. Adjacent to this rather subdued and small-scale piece, *Dreams #3*, from 1995, functions as a declaration of the artist’s intent to follow her own inclinations as a colorist and as a painter of signs and symbols.

The curator of “Why Do I Delight” has included a sizeable collection of oil pastels from the 1990’s in the exhibit, which seems to show the artist moving toward complete abstraction. The stylized and featureless lollipop trees barely nod to their pictorial identity--the interest instead is in the flat circular planes and their relationship with each other. Woodson seems to be using the subject—or at

Shirley Woodson, *Beach Scene*, 1966. Collage, gouache, graphic on board. Photo by K.A. Letts.



Shirley Woodson, *Dream #3*, 1995. Acrylic on canvas. Photo by K.A. Letts.

least the premise of the tree forms—to explore the interaction of the colors within the ovoid shapes.

Three large and lovely paintings from 2021 illustrate Woodson’s mature style, which is characterized by lush color, gestural brushwork and a flattened picture plane, where elements of the background and the foreground meet and mingle. It’s only fair that Fauves like Henri Matisse and Raul Dufy come to mind when looking at these paintings, since they were among the first European avant-garde artists to make a study of African and Oceanic art. Woodson returns the favor here, employing the visual syntax of European painters to suit her own—African American—purposes. *Green Vase Nocturnal for Toni Morrison* is typical of this most recent work, a lyrical composition that suggests a twilight fish pool, outline of a vase super-imposed and refracting wavy images, all surrounded by shadowy figures.

In a somewhat startling departure from her previous work, Woodson has recently begun to explore text-based arts and, in particular, a couple of neon pieces that bear witness to her lively interest in contemporary trends and her ongoing willingness to experiment. The wistful line “Why do I delight?” appears in glowing yellow, taken from a poem that the artist wrote for her late husband Edsel Reid, while nearby, the words “Being Pedestrian,” in basic white, adorn the gallery wall and resonate with her wry humor, precisely describing what she is not.

A Palette for the People, a recent monograph produced by the Kresge Foundation in honor of her Eminent Artist award—and available free in a print edition or for download—provides a more comprehensive picture of Woodson’s life and significance as a cultural figure in Detroit. But Woodson is quite capable of elegantly summarizing it herself:



Shirley Woodson, *Conversation*, 1995. Oil pastel on paper. Photo by K.A. Letts.

All the threads of my life have been about art and its ability to connect and create ways of showing the beauty, the history, and the necessity of all art, but particularly Black art.

This journey has been my life and it continues to move me.

I’m still creating and discovering. ■

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Shirley Woodson, *Green Vase Nocturnal for Toni Morrison*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. Photo by K.A. Letts.



The Struggle to Unite Body and Spirit

“Dancing in Real Life”: Yannis Tsarouchis’s Ordeal with Oppressions of Greek Patriarchy, Religion, and Society

By Diane Thodos

Christianity has succeeded in transforming Eros and Aphrodite—great powers capable of idealization—into diabolical kobolds and phantoms.

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;

As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws the peep of day with steady tread

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*²

Behind all appearances, I divine a struggling essence. I want to merge with it.

I feel that behind appearances this struggling essence is also striving to merge with my heart. But the body stands between us and separates us. The mind stands between us and separates us.

Nikos Kazantzakis³

In the climax scene from the film *Zorba the Greek* we witness a circle of men outside a church in a small Cretan village. They surround a helpless widow as the people of the village, including the women, try to stone her to death. The men grab her, tearing off her clothes and attempt to rape her. In spite of Zorba’s attempt to save her she is seized by the village elder and stabbed to death. The 1945 book written by Nikos Kazantzakis, on which the film is based, portrayed the reality of Greek customs in all their violence, xenophobia and misogyny—stories which correspond to events that occurred in the small Greek villages where my parents lived. Even though I was born in the United States I grew up with the keen consciousness and firsthand experience about the controlling power and potential violence that male patriarchy and religious dogma could assume. Michael Cacoyannis’s film *Zorba* was not an entertainment for me, but a confession of existential truth.



Semi Nude Pianist, 1971. Gouache on paper, 12.1 x 12 inches. Photo: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

My own lived experience of these troubling aspects about Greek society and religion stirred my curiosity about the work of Yannis Tsarouchis who lived from 1910–1989. How did he manage to survive as a homosexual artist and progressive intellectual in a society that I knew firsthand to be conservative, patriarchal, and oppressive? The fact that he painted the truth about his inner life and sexual desires is all the more impressive and courageous, considering much of his work was realized long before the gay liberation movement of the 1960’s and the Western social consciousness about homosexual rights in the decades that followed.

I looked for clues in wall texts and pamphlet that accompanied the exhibition, but aside from an occasional reference to “queerness,” “blurring gender differences,” “latent sexual energy of the male body,” a poem by C.P.



Nude Lying on a Checked Sheet, 1937. Pigments with animal glue on canvas, 19.7 x 59.1 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Wrightwood 659.

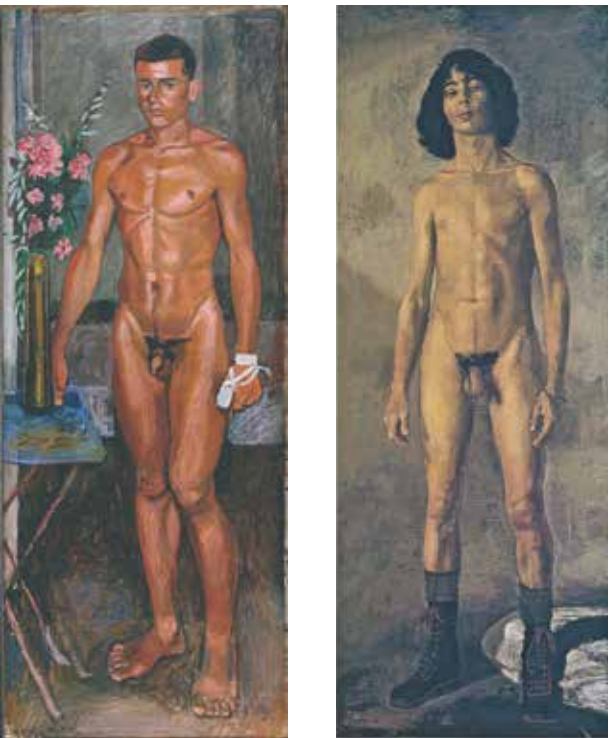
Cavafy, and a confrontation with the military against one of his homoerotic works, most of my questions were not getting answered. Public material discussed the influences of the classical Greek nude, Zeibekiko dance, folk art, Byzantine icons and Tsarouchis' work in stage design and theater with a mostly academic, stylistic and historical analysis. The most audacious fact remained the rendering of the artist's subjects—whether clothed or not—within his erotic gaze. The significance of the Eros that is deeply infused in all his male portraits and nudes struck me as being sidelined within in the official public presentation. After much digging, I found the answers to most of my questions in a single essay buried on p. 271 of the exhibition catalog. After reading *In Search of Divine Lightning* by Evgenious D. Mattiopoulos I recognized that part of this problem had happened before.

*The progressive respected art critics of the time, left-wing and liberal, extolled and analyzed Tsarouchis's work ideologically and stylistically. They did not however dare to interpret depictions of nude men and appeared to be exclusively interested in formal analysis. By not addressing eroticism the critics...were as censorial as the conservative media. In exercising self-censorship, they demoted eroticism conceptually and excluded it from what they deemed moral enough to interpret.*⁴ To what degree did the curators of "Dancing in Real Life" maintain a cautious distance from addressing the erotic power at the core of Tsarouchis work? Was it to avoid conflict with contemporary conservative religious and social forces in both Greece and the U.S.? The public texts presented in the exhibit did not adequately ad-

Left: *Suicide of a Gaul A*, 1936. Pencil on paper. 13.8 x 9.8 inches. **Center:** *Eros Placing a Wreath on the Top Zeibekiko Dancer*, 1977. Watercolor on paper, 11.5 x 9 inches. Photo: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659. **Right:** *First Study for the Excursion*, 1936. Pencil on paper, 10.5 x 8.2 inches. Photos: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



Left: *Naked Youth with Oleanders and Bandage on His Hand* (unfinished), 1940. Oil on canvas, 67.3 x 25.8 inches. Photo: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659. **Right:** *David as Victor*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 33 x 23.3 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Wrightwood 659.



dress how the artist managed to navigate a religiously homophobic and conservative society—and how did the struggle come to surmount that repression express itself in his work over time. I am grateful the Mattiopoulos essay shed light on how the artist attempted to cope with these circumstances.

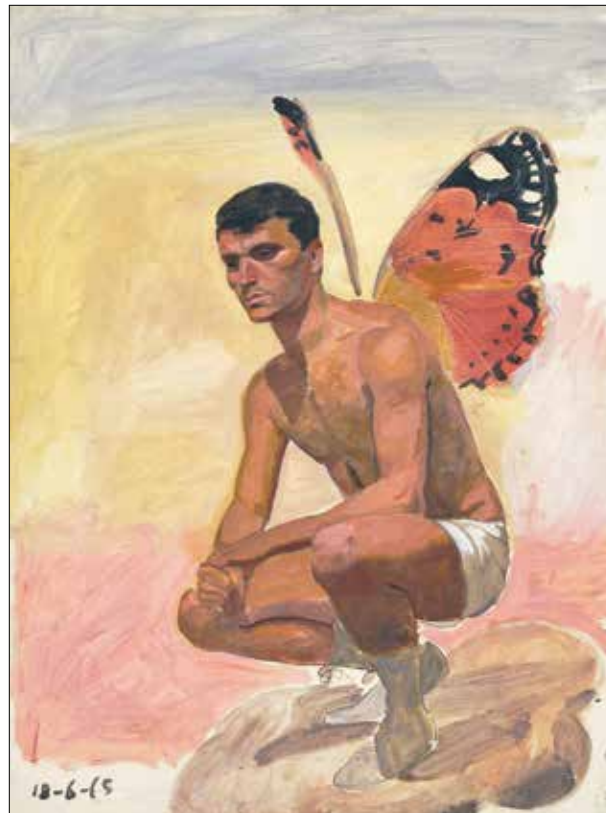
*...he pointed to homosexuality and its significance with great discretion, speaking allusively with rhetorical twists and awkward circumvolutions. He would obscure it with ambiguities, terms and meanings whose significance was opaque and permitted alternative readings. He wrote for example of "that great intoxication that is given by the acceptance of our self—whoever that may be— and by respect without limits for our desires."*⁵

*...there was only one subject on which Tsarouchis was uncommunicative: erotic love. It was apparently impossible for him to either dissemble or reply insincerely on the matter, and he had therefore chosen to conceal it from public view. Even when he was repeatedly provoked...he never gave a clear answer: he always shifted the issue onto indeterminate ground.*⁶



The Forgotten Guard, 1957. Oil on canvas. 82.7 x 57.1 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Wrightwood 659.

Man with Butterfly Wings, in Squat Posture; Study from Life, 1965. Oil on paper, 15.3 x 11.4 inches. Photo: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



Clearly the artist had to hide behind a constructed mask to protect himself from the potential dangers of church, state, and Greek male patriarchy. One person who interviewed him commented that “Seeing your painting, one feels that the force of inspiration is love. Your whole work breathes a pervasive eroticism.”⁷

One of Greek civilization’s lasting achievements was the invention of the nude—the unification of the body with the spirit into an idealized whole. The unity of spirit and flesh was aimed at awakening the mind as much as erotic passions. Admiration of the well-proportioned naked human body became fused with a high idealism that symbolized heroism, beauty, triumph, glory and moral excellence in the human spirit. Sexuality and love, including gay sexuality and love, was considered a normal part of life. The coming of the Christian church signaled the downfall of this classical ideal, nowhere more evident in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. For them the nakedness of the body was considered so negatively by the church that it demanded shame, punishment, and eviction from paradise. The asceticism of the church believed the body and its needs were a distraction from divinity, even going so far as to “mortify the flesh.” It elevated the importance of the spirit, while vilifying and repressing the body and its sexual and instinctual needs. Gone was the naturalistic rendering of the human body, replaced by two-dimensional Byzantine stylization, with its standardization of limbs, faces and forms that attenuate the human body into an abstract expression of spirituality.

This religious split consciousness that condemned Eros as sinful set the stage for the kind of strife that Tsarouchis would face as a homosexual in his struggle to artistically unify the body with spirit. Much of this was not conscious on his part as he had to find a way to “overcome the Christian and bourgeois puritanism of his background that he had internalized.”⁸ Tsarouchis’s many depictions of his male nudes have an undeniable erotic power. Yet the frequent unsmiling faces and melancholy cast of his subjects allude to his own divided state of consciousness. No mat-

ter how great the desire for erotic and spiritual union Tsarouchis’s figurative works made before the 1960’s often exude a sadness and frustration that undeniably grew out of repressive cultural and religious circumstances. To be fair one must also consider the tragic train of Greek historical events that occurred during his lifetime: the Greco-Turkish war or *Asia Minor Disaster* 1919–22, the Second World War 1939–45, the Greek Civil War 1944–49, and coup by the military Junta 1967–74. Greek political instability and WWII made life precarious; death was a constant possibility. In Tsarouchis’ work the life-giving force of Eros is also under the pressure from the Thanatos of war, which is why his works are shadowed by a sense of fatalism about life’s precarity.

Matthiopoulos goes to great lengths in explaining how Tsarouchis’s turn toward mysticism or “divine lightning” was a subconscious way of overcoming his own internalized repressions. Mysticism allowed a space for the co-existence of psychic and erotic truth by shrouding the “love that dare not speak its name” as expressions of spiritual and historical symbolism. Tsarouchis was attracted to the mystical power of Dionysian dance as a form of transcendent spiritual worship and a means of circumventing social approbation. “From Father to son, all these dancers were initiated into divine ecstasy I always saw these dances as sacred rights and I try to convey their exalted character with reverence.”⁹ Whether consciously or not, Tsarouchis idealization of ancient dance was a way to acknowledge its power to transcend the mind/body split as a resistance against homophobia. The contemporary tra-

dition of Zeibekiko dance was a safe way for Tsarouchis to overcome his self-repression—a socially acceptable way to participate in Greek male engagement that fused body and spirit through dance—as a means of emotional catharsis.

For a short time Surrealism provided an outlet for his frustrations. Tsarouchis wrote a number of complex and powerful poems during 1934–37 which were fomented by a disagreement he had with his teacher the Icon painter and devout Christian Orthodox artist Fotios Kontoglou. At the same time, he created Surrealist inspired drawings such as the *Suicide of a Gaul A* (1936)—a biomorphic image of the Gaul stabbing himself while being penetrated by a giant penis. Tsarouchis admired Salvador Dalí’s writings—an artist famous for using subconscious associations and sexual imagery as transgressively against the authoritarianism of his father and Spanish society. Tsarouchis’s poems came to “reflect my mental state at the time, which was a fusion of painful nostalgia for my lost childhood and at the same time an urge to finish it off ruthlessly...writing them was a necessity, so that I could have an outlet for my feelings”¹⁰ Tsarouchis used the Surrealist technique of automatic writing based on the free flow of thoughts, bringing to the surface what lies in the subconscious mind. This created contradictory and surprising juxtapositions that could be raw and sexually transgressive, particularly regarding public morality and the church.



Study for Benjamin without Light Contrast, 1979. Oil on paper, 15.75 x 11.4 inches. Photos: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.

*The agriculture of syphilis and gonorrhea, supervised by my mother, in the form of a small cannister coated in bronze with dusty fabric flowers...*¹¹

*A man set up a spirituality close to the sea. It was made of tin, in a wooden crate painted in oils. In the night the wind knocked it down killing a passerby.*¹²

*Indeed, sometime in the afternoon, the huge spirituality fell and killed many, not officials but intellectuals.*¹³

*Where the tram turns near the sea, in the basement, the twelve-year-old Jesus appeared in the form of a girl from Crete or Tsirigo. His mouth smelled of cream cheese.*¹⁴

*When the belly of the Byzantines grew the vagina of faith opened up like a harmonious turd, all the musics alive and warm.... all these musics that fell naturally out of the belly of the Byzantines, began to smile with the innocence of the erect penis....*¹⁵

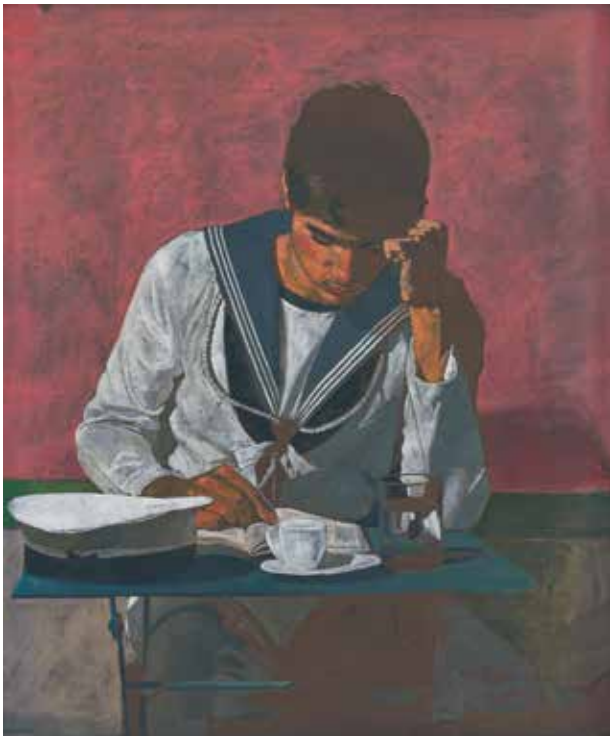
Through Surrealist access to the subconscious Tsarouchis found a temporary outlet to expressing his anger against his repressive Greek environment and history. Though he rarely expressed his disapproval about how he was treated at one time he did confess:

*People never expected anything of me; they considered me an inferior being, beginning from my relatives and ending at my few friends. Perhaps this contempt compelled me to work more intensely than I could.*¹⁶

His forays into the Modernist movements of Surrealism and Matisse-inspired Fauvism did not last. Modernist art often treated the body in a perfunctory and fragmentary, often negative fashion, against his personal need to pursue deeper tradition-based study of his human subjects.

In the 1960’s, the artist’s work starts to become more confident in the positive expression of his erotic identity most evident in his life studies of men with butterfly wings, particularly *Man with Butterfly Wings in Squatting Posture: Study from Life* (1965). In 1967 Tsarouchis moved to Paris, fleeing the repressive Greek military Junta. Though

Sailor Reading, 1980. Oil on paper, 36.6 x 31.5 inches. Photos: Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation. Courtesy of Wrightwood 659.



life remained difficult, he still had escaped into a new environment that left behind many of the social repressions and political instability of Greek society. The city gave him regular access to the Louvre with its wealth of Renaissance paintings that he diligently studied on many visits. He also took a special interest in Dutch art of the 1600's with its realistic portraiture and intimate secular interiors.

The contrast between his work of the 1940's and the 70's is quite striking. *Naked Youth with Oleanders and a Bandage on His Hand* from 1940 has a stiffness in his pose, planar rendering, and an uncomfortable apprehension in his gaze. *David as Victor* from 1974 inspired from Donatello's Renaissance sculpture of David from the 1440's, shows a confident youth expressing homoerotic self-assurance through both his nudity and stance. Most remarkable is how his flesh and muscles are painted with a supple and studied intensity.

The Renaissance art reignited the ancient Greek tradition of the classical figure, which is what the word "Renaissance" means: The *re-naissance* or "rebirth" of the Greek ideal of nude. The nude was an art form that had been lost during the Middle Ages, from the time of the Roman Empire's collapse around 500 A.D to the growth of the Italian city states in the 1400's. Through studying Renaissance art Tsarouchis was able to grow in psychological confidence to achieve the "praxis" he so long sought—theory coming to fruition as lived experience: the transcendental union of body and spirit. The evidence of this shows up in the portraits of Dominique representing *Spring, Summer, Fall*, and *Winter* from 1975. Eros is transmitted through the eyes, evident in the confidence of his gaze expressing his self-assuredness in his identity. In the same way the model of Helga Testorf was for Andrew Wyeth, the intimacy and ease of Dominique's erotic mind-body unity is something Tsarouchis unconsciously comes to identify with, healing his own internal conflict. Throughout the 1970's he painted many haloed male nudes in the style of ancient Roman wall paintings: erotic male sexuality and divinity in co-existence.

Tsarouchis's sense of self confidence and self-acceptance becomes even more apparent in the intimate direct eye contact and supple rendering of *Study for Benjamin Without Light Contrast* (1979). The casual pose of *Sailor Reading* from 1980 also reflects his newfound peace, as does the sleeping nude *Endymion* done in 1979. Both reflect Tsarouchis' Renaissance inspired ease within himself through his subject's closely observed psychological, humanistic and sympathetic rendering. They are enveloped in secular interior spaces of contemplative solitude. *Endymion* even has a shaft of light falling on his body bestowing a state holiness to his erotic form.

Through his new environment, the spirit of Renaissance art, and the psyche of his sitters, Tsarouchis's works shows a healing of his past internalized oppressions, even if he could not articulate this transformation on a conscious level. He reached a place that touched on the mystical transcendence he had so restlessly sought, a transcendence that is simply and directly expressed in the work of the 19th century poet Walt Whitman.

Each of us inevitable,
Each of us limitless—each of us with his or her
right upon the earth,
Each of us allowed the eternal purport of the earth,
*Each of us here as divinely as any is here*¹⁷

Whitman's confident embrace of his homosexuality and his powerful erotic fusion of body with spirit, even against the disapproval of his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, reflects a powerful transcendental strain in American art and culture. Emerson's transcendentalism emphasized the

core goodness of people and connection with nature. His most radical achievement was declaring that connection to the divine was personal, existing outside of the overbearing Christian religious institutions and dogma of his day. This tradition of transcendentalism remains a radical force against today's ever increasing far right patriarchy, toxic masculinity, Christian authoritarianism, homophobia, misogyny, racism and xenophobia. The radical courage embedded in Whitman's all-embracing democratic poetic vision that sees Eros as a positive binding force expressing love for all humankind. This is why Whitman's statement that "Each of us is divinely here as any" brings my original question about the exhibition into renewed focus. I am glad the American public has a chance to become familiar with Tsarouchis's work in his first U.S. exhibit. But I had hoped to find a greater focus on the struggles behind the erotic basis of his work that expose the injustices of the Greek religious and social patriarchy and, by implication, the same toxic masculine forces we see rising in American society today. I was hoping to read something of Whitman's transcendentalist courage as a sub text to the exhibit, giving voice to the reality of Tsarouchis's desiring spirit and the erotic male gaze:

Think of loving and being loved;
I swear to you, whoever you are, you can interfuse your-
self with such things that everybody that sees
*you shall look longingly upon you.*¹⁸ ■



Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic living in Evanston, IL. She is a recipient of the Pollack-Krasner Foundation Grant and exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others.

Footnotes

1. Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality Friedrich Nietzsche, 1881.
2. Song of Myself, Leaves of Grass, the "Death Bed" edition, Walt Whitman Random House 1993. P. 37
3. The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises Nikos Kazantzakis, 1960
4. Yannis Tsarouchis: Dancing in Real Life pp. 259–260
5. Ibid p. 261
6. Ibid p. 257
7. Ibid p. 265
8. Ibid p. 251
9. Ibid p. 254
10. Ibid p. 35
11. Ibid Short Stories 1935 p. 44
12. Ibid The Poems of Spirituality p. 50
13. Ibid An Apotheosis p. 51
14. Ibid p. 76
15. Ibid Ode to Renoir p. 86
16. Ibid p. 258
17. Salut Au Monde!, Leaves of Grass, the "Death Bed" edition, Walt Whitman Random House 1993. P. 182
18. Think of the Soul, Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman, whitmanarchive.org, p. 257

Endymion, 1979. Oil on canvas, 78.7 x 31.5 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Wrightwood 659.

“Duck Feet” at Arts of Life, Chicago (aka Circle Contemporary)

by Michel Ségard

In looking through a local gallery listing, I came across an exhibition called “Duck Feet.” The title intrigued me. It was at a gallery I had never visited, Circle Contemporary, in Chicago’s emerging gallery district on Carroll Street, an area populated with old warehouses. In spite of being hard to get to via public transportation and with no restaurants or bars, many galleries are moving there for more space and cheaper rent.

Circle Contemporary is the gallery component of Arts of Life, a work space for artists with a room in front for periodic exhibitions. A well-funded not-for-profit, it caters to artists with developmental and intellectual disabilities and trains them for jobs in the arts. But it does not appear to be merely a “therapy” resource. The artists, with widely varying skills, appear to be serious about their art. Here, they are able to exhibit their work in the gallery space, and the viewing public can appreciate their commitment and effort. They even receive stipends for participation in the organization’s training program and art sales.

Magazines like the New Art Examiner do not usually cover such exhibitions because many of them turn out to be the end products of therapy sessions where the production of art is secondary. This show had also been delayed a year by the Pandemic. Not knowing about Arts of Life in advance, I entered the gallery and took a brief look at the show of 20 pieces by 18 artists, curated by Ricardo Partida, a Chicago-based painter and a School of the Art Institute of Chicago MFA graduate.

The artistic scope of the work appeared amateurish at first glance. But certain pieces began to stand out. A more

detailed look revealed a certain honesty and freshness in many of the pieces. Some showed refined execution and skill; others were tentative, and the draftsmanship was a little rough. But the skill in composition and color usage seemed to be unimpeded. Of course, this variability may be the result of processes affected by physical and mental disabilities. Overall, there was an almost naïve earnestness in the work that one rarely encounters in the mainstream art world. The artists at Arts of Life are not concerned with being on trend, or solidifying their brand, or satisfying a particular clientele. They are all concerned with the broader, general issues of life—a more poetic rather than political approach to making art.



Stephan Harhaj, *Let Your Eyes Go to the Heart and the Star*, 2019. Mixed media, 7x6 inches. Photo courtesy of Arts of Life.

Kelly Stone, *Man Catching Fish with a Net on a Pier*, 2018. Mixed media on canvas board, 5 x 7 inches. Photo courtesy of Arts of Life.



The first piece that stood out for me was one of the tiniest pieces in the show called *Let Your Eyes Go to the Heart and the Star* by Stephan Harhaj. It was next to the entrance to the gallery above another piece and almost imperceptible. This collage is a gold four-pointed star on a blue background containing a heart and orange circles with more gold lines radiating from the heart. A mere seven by six inches, it is so elegantly charming that I was not surprised to see a red dot below the piece indicating that it had been bought on opening night, the day before. Its child-like, slightly off-kilter execution is perfectly controlled by the well-balanced sense of composition and color. I certainly did not see any disability in this piece.

Another piece that caught my eye was Renata Berdes’s *Night Canoe*. This is a strange piece. Also small, a mere 12 by 12 inches, it is a roughly drawn image of a boat on a dark body of water with a black sky containing crude, x shaped, amber stars. On closer examination, which is what one instinctively does with small works, the piece looks like a young child’s drawing, and its crude draftsmanship dominated. But when you step back, the elements of the composition resolve and provide a thoughtful if somber semi abstraction—in some ways similar to the 50s abstractionists who cultivated child-like forms and compositions.

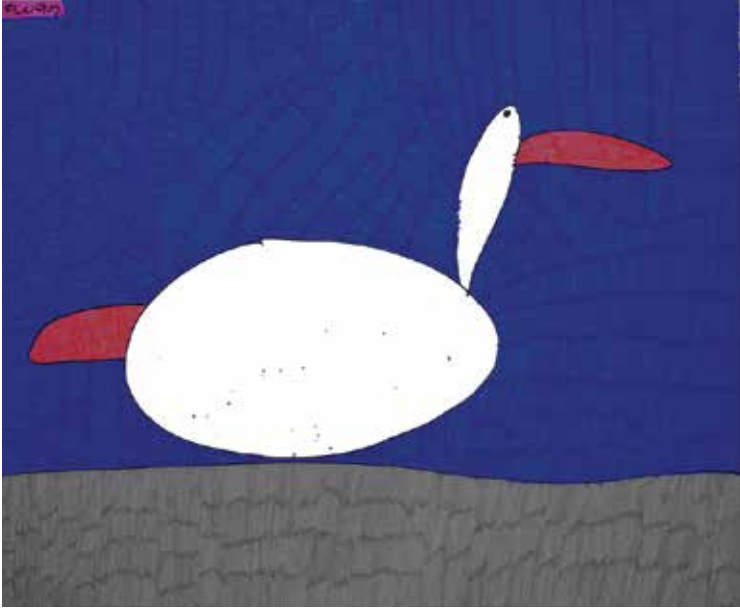
Next to *Night Canoe* was *Swan* by Maria Vanik. It is an image of a bird made with a simple, fat white oval body

and a thin white oval at one end sticking up to form the neck and head. Two red elongated shapes form the beak and tail. The bird floats on deep blue water with a gray shore at the bottom. The entire composition consists of only six forms. Very spare and perfectly proportioned. (It was another piece that was bought at the opening.)

Next to *Night Canoe* and *Swan* was Kelly Stone’s *Man Catching Fish with a Net on a Pier*. Only five by seven inches, it is another small, amiable, child-like execution with a collaged figure and straight-from-the-tube pigment lines. This trio of primitively rendered paintings all have water motifs with dark blue backgrounds. Taken together, they set a tranquil park-like tone—Le Grand Jatte in miniature.

Opposite them in the gallery is a more somber triptych. Ted Gram-Boarini created three 30 by 24 inch panels called *The Unification of Nature*. These pieces stand out because of their colors. Most of the paintings in the show, if they use color, use the primary color triad. Gram-Boa-

Left: Renata Berdes, *Night Canoe*, 2021. Paint, pen on wood, 12 x 12, inches. Photo courtesy of Arts of Life. Right: Maria Vanik, *Swan*, 2021. Marker on paper, 14 x 17 inches. Photo courtesy of Arts of Life.





Ted Gram-Boarini, *The Unification of Nature*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 68 inches. Photo courtesy of Arts of Life.

rini’s paintings use two of the complementary color triad: orange and green, along with a generous amount of cyan. The abstractions are rendered with agitated swirling strokes, all about the same width. The orange and green occasionally merge into a murky brown. These works are uncomfortable to look at and disturbing in their harsh and bleak overtones. Taking the title as a clue, the artist seems to have a view of nature as a tough, grim place where only the strong survive.

An example of exceptional craftsmanship, Kai Pratt has two colored pencil drawings of cats: *Dawn* and *Starlight*. These two pencil drawings are executed with extraordinary precision. At first, they seem rather sentimental renderings of cats, but when one looks closer at *Starlight*, one sees the felines in territorial combat along the bottom of the drawing. Pratt reminds us that all may not be what it seems when looking at your household kitty.

One can burn out from the relentless righteous indignation flooding the art world today. It was refreshing to see an exhibition that did not dwell in one way or another with the current political and/or social issues, no matter how important they are. This show by unknown and, for some, untrained artists looked at the world with a more general perspective. They see the poetry of living in a universal way that can be shared by most viewers—an outlook not colored by contemporary, sometimes divisive, social issues. Even with Gram-Boarini’s and Pratt’s more somber pieces, the show dwelt largely with nature not politics, calm not combat. A restful way to end the Summer. ■

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.

Left to Right: Kai Pratt, *Dawn*, 2020. Colored Pencil on paper, 17 x 10.5 inches. *Starlight*, 2021. Colored Pencil on paper, 17 x 10.5 inches. Photos courtesy of Arts of Life.



