

# NEW ART examiner

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## COVER IMAGES

Keith Haring, *Altarpiece: The Life of Christ*.  
Bronze with white gold leaf patina. © Keith  
Haring Foundation. Courtesy of Nakamura  
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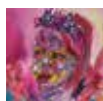
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## NEW ART EXAMINER

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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.

## WANTED: WRITERS

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# Introduction: The Power of Art

In Western as well as other civilizations, art had its origins as religious iconography and persuasion and, by extension, propaganda for social control. By the time of the Roman Empire, if not before, it found its way into the villas of the wealthy for what are believed to be mostly decorative purposes. After the fall of the Roman Empire and until the Renaissance, art in Europe was again used mostly as religious or political propaganda. During the Renaissance, a merchant class emerged whose members could afford to buy art that was secular in nature. This art was, again, mostly for decorative purposes and to show off the financial and social status of the owner (yes, *nouveau riche* is an old concept). This shift in the function of art happened much earlier in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907), or before.

So, what is the power of art today? It is a symbol of class distinction; the wealthy collect “old masters” and popular contemporary or recently deceased modern superstars (Cindy Sherman, Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, Banksy, Jean Michel Basquiat, etc.) Contemporary artists use their art today to promote current social and political causes. Their subject matter must have a moral imperative to be considered relevant. The problem with this approach is that the art risks, and often ends up, devolving more deeply than before into mere political propaganda. In that dynamic, the millennia-old notion of an aesthetic often gets lost.

But it needn't. The works of painter Jennifer Packer focus on the intimacy of everyday life with a universal appeal. Nick Cave's soundsuits celebrate the mysticism of non-European or Asian religions, as well as the role of African Americans in American society. The late Wayne

Thiebaud spent the last part of his career celebrating the landscape of Southern California in some of the most deliciously colored paintings in recent times.

During this summer quarter, the *New Art Examiner* strove to feature essays that not only address the issue of moral imperative but elements of art history. “All That Glows in the Dark of Democracy” at Weinberg/Newton Gallery in Chicago addresses voter inequality. Evan Carter's “Inundation and Alienation” is about the changes in TV entertainment brought on by distribution changes and shifting politics. “Clay as Soft Power,” by K.A. Letts, previews this exhibition on Shigaraki ware and its influence on Japanese-American relations, opening in November at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. In addition, Letts surveys “Mighty Real/Queer Detroit” in her essay “The Power of Persistence,” an event that featured more than 700 pieces in 17 galleries. Also, “Welcome to the Dollhouse,” by Annette LePique, looks at the aesthetics and social economics of feminism. Our New York correspondent Paul Moreno reviews “Survey” an exhibit of the work of William E. Jones, a contemporary cinematographer whose *modus operandi* can be described as destruction as a form of creation. In a mostly political and sociological essay, Leandré D'Souza examines the interplay between the everyday culture of the Kolis of Mumbai, a group of fishermen and their families and the art they produce from the detritus of their labor.

In this issue, we also include essays that are more about aesthetics. Diane Thodos's review of “Cézanne” at the Art Institute of Chicago recounts how Cézanne has had a strong influence on twentieth century art from Cubism all the

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## Introduction, continued from page 3.

way to Abstraction. Phillip Barcio shares with us his fascination with the portraits of women done by Wendy Kveck and how their grotesqueness has its own beauty. In "EYEHAND," Neil Goodman interviews fellow sculptor Peter Shelton, revealing some of Shelton's aesthetic evolution. Finally, a work that bridges both sides of this art dichotomy, is Andrew Peart's essay on the work of cinematographer Haskell Wexler, the cinematographer of such films as *Medium Cool* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Peart not only discusses the social significance of Wexler's films but the major contributions that he made to the art of cinematography.

Lastly, a word about our cover image. It is a photo of Keith Haring's *Altarpiece: The Life*

*of Christ*. It is his last major work, completed a few weeks before his death on February 16, 1990, from AIDS. In an edition of nine, one is displayed on the altar of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Another is at the Denver Art Museum, and one is located in Paris's Saint-Eustache Church. This work takes us full circle, all the way back to when art's role was religious instruction. Here, we are instructed in a new form of Christian faith that is all inclusive—as it was originally intended.

We hope that this issue will stimulate you into thinking deeply about the role of art in our contemporary society, how it works, and why it matters. In a world where meaning is tenuous we must strive to seek it out.

*The Editors*

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# Inundation and Alienation:

## The rise and decline of narrative power in television

by Evan Carter

Art is a big tent. It encompasses so many things that arouse the senses and stimulate the intellect: music, food, painting, film, and so on. And while many would roll their eyes at the mention of “the art world,” fine art seems to be doing better than ever—at least within its insulated world of academics and wealthy collectors. Is there an art for the people anymore? The answer is surely yes, and it can be found in a variety of places and forms. But what seems to be the most popular artform, by far, is television.

On occasion I have found myself looking for something to watch on television. I do not have cable, just streaming. I may turn on Netflix or start scouring my ReelGood app in search of something to match my mood, if not augment it in some way. As I scroll, I find myself reading synopses, watching looped clips, and adding any potentially interesting content to an ever-growing list of things to watch at a later date. Soon, enough time has passed in which I could

have enjoyed an episode of a show or started a film. There is so much entertainment available that we now find ourselves laboring over it without even being entertained.

It would not be preposterous to say that we are living in a world where we have access to peak television or what some call the “new golden age of television.” This began in the late '90s, at the cusp of the millennium, and was marked mostly by the episodic television series developed and aired by HBO during this time. Series such as *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, and *Deadwood* were groundbreaking, even controversial, given the maturity of the themes and juxtaposition of graphic sex and violence against complex plotting, intelligent drama, dark humor, and compelling performances by actors either well known, plucked from obscurity, or just beginning their star-making careers.

Other networks also got in on the action, despite still being subject to a ratings system that did not apply to HBO. One interesting specimen was 2003's *Battlestar*

Television as a form of family entertainment in the mid 20th Century.  
Photo: Evert F. Baumgardner, National Archives and Records Administration.



Tricia Helfer and James Callis in *Battlestar Galactica*, 2004. Photo by Alan Zenuk for SCI FI Channel. © 2003 Sci Fi Channel. All Rights Reserved.



*Galactica*, an early example of the “reimagined reboot.” This 21st-century adaptation of the campy 1978 classic stretched over 76 episodes and beat out its predecessor, which was cancelled after 24. It also featured a talented cast headed by respected actors like Mary McDonnell and Edward James Olmos. Its narrative dealt with complex themes ranging from artificial intelligence and posthumanism to classism, identity, cancer, trauma, and suicide. Some of the actors were even invited to the United Nations to discuss human rights.

Less serious but still interesting was the circumvention of censorship by replacing the “F” word with the word “frack.” Clever as this was, it also allowed the show to depict its characters as relatable, flawed adults existing in a world that, despite its fantastical futurism, is still much like ours. The writers were not only working within the show’s constraints but also adapting to them to tell as full a story as they possibly could.

Other critics writing about this new golden age of television debate its point of origin, suggesting it goes as far back as the ’80s or starts with ’90s shows like *Friends* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Those examples pushed boundaries, depicting things like lesbian relationships, counter-normative familial structures, and young women grappling

with internal and external struggles. But those shows still clung to familiar serial formats like the sitcom, even if they threaded stories around an overarching plotline.

Regardless of the starting point, a distinct moment in television history made clear that things would no longer be the same: the ushering in of the “mockumentary.” If you are reading this and have been living in the woods for the past 30 years, “mockumentary” refers to an entirely or mostly scripted and/or fictional story shot with a hand-held camera and thereby gaining a sense of the credibility and realism often associated with documentaries. These shows often feature quick edits and swings of the camera with sudden jumps to “confessional” interviews in which characters actually comment on events depicted in the show.

This presented a complete upending of the traditional sitcom, typically shot in front of a live studio audience on an artificial set with limited camera angles and accompanied by a laugh track. This format, with origins in radio, had been a television staple since its deployment there in the 1950s. The mockumentary itself could also be traced back to radio with Orson Wells’s notorious 1938 *War of the Worlds* broadcast. It continued on in the music world with the Beatles *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *This is Spinal Tap*

Richard Hatch, Anne Lockhart and Dirk Benedict in *Battlestar Galactica* 1978, Photo from NBC







Various cast members in a scene from *The Office* (U.S. Version).jpg, [nbc.com/the-office/photos/season-9/finale-behind-the-scenes/694526](http://nbc.com/the-office/photos/season-9/finale-behind-the-scenes/694526).

(1984). But it would not be until 2001 that the television sitcom would be transformed for a global audience by *The Office*.

Created by Ricki Gervais and Steven Merchant, the British comedy launched Gervais to comedic stardom and elevated Merchant to a respectable career as a showrunner and actor (his dramatic performance in 2017's *Logan* is worth noting) and was adapted for the United States in 2005. Though the UK version of the show was intentionally brief, spanning only 14 episodes, it was a hit abroad. American showrunner Greg Daniels was placed at the creative helm of what still seems to be the most successful show of all time. As of 2020, according to the "Hollywood Reporter," the nine-season-long American version of *The Office* has been streamed for a whopping 57.13 billion minutes, putting it in first place for most viewed television show and dominating its runner-up, *Grey's Anatomy*, which clocks in at 39.41 billion minutes.

There are many reasons this show is so rewatchable. I am one of many people who have lost count of how many times I have viewed the series in full. The wonder of the show is not just in the humor, which ranges from cute to cringe, or the well-defined characters and their variety of quirks, but also in how the narrative is driven by visuals as well as dialogue. The mockumentary format opens the door for so much possibility, not only freeing the cast and crew from the sound stage and live studio audience but also giving the actors free rein to deliver nuanced performances in which a quick flash of the camera to a split-second view of a facial expression can speak volumes. These tiny details are easy to miss, providing repeat viewers with a richly textured narrative in which to notice things they might have missed on initial viewings.

There is no denying that much of the viewing done today is also driven by nostalgia for this particular moment in television history. What happened that made this mo-

ment so special, and what does it tell us about our cultural moment then versus that of the present day?

When the US *Office* first aired in 2005, Netflix was still a service that mailed DVDs to your house. Only two years later would they launch their streaming platform, featuring mostly films and reruns of select television shows with completed seasons already available on DVD. In other words, the shared experience of watching television at a set date—a staple of American culture—was still intact. It was important to people to catch the latest episode of something so they could talk about it with coworkers, friends, or family the next day. Art does many things, but at its most basic level, it connects us to one another and, in giving us something to discuss, defines how we relate to one another. When it comes to the nostalgia factor that may be driving the lasting popularity of these recently by-gone shows, perhaps this was a special era in which we not only shared in pop-culture experiences but shared in ones that felt innovative and new.

*The Office* was one part of a trifecta of early-2000s comedies often lovingly referred to as the Big Three, the other two being *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*. The former was the Tina Fey-led meta-absurdist comedy show on NBC about the inner workings of a—wait for it—comedy show on NBC. Though it did not follow the mockumentary format of *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*, it shed itself of the live studio audience and laugh track, opting instead for narrative devices like rapid-fire flashbacks and familiar television tropes found in variety shows, music videos, news broadcasts, reality television, Spanish-language telenovelas, and more. In the way that mockumentary upended the sitcom, *30 Rock* also defied norms by puncturing the fourth wall of television production and the various aesthetics that had come to define it. It also both captured and repelled audiences through its aggressive “no one is safe” approach to mockery, cri-

tiquing not only celebrity and corporate bureaucracy but also reductive feminism, racism, and heteronormativity. The show itself has since been deemed racist and had episodes pulled from streaming services for ironic depictions of blackface.

*Parks and Recreation* is a safer and cuter, albeit beloved, mockumentary about public service by the same show-runners as *The Office*, Greg Daniels and Michael Schur. While *The Office* is narratively grounded in reality (it's set in the real city of Scranton, PA, and adheres to the laws of physics), *Parks and Recreation* takes a few cues from *30 Rock* by flirting with the fantastical (it's set in the fictional town of Pawnee, IN, and features occasional visual gags that defy reason).

An interesting marker of this moment in television is the political attitudes of the shows. *The Office* pretty much avoids politics altogether (perhaps that's why it remains the most popular), whereas *30 Rock* aims some of its mockery directly at the second Bush administration while clearly expressing more liberal attitudes. *Parks and Recreation* is by far though the most political of the three, in spite of never actually using the words Republican or Democrat. Instead, the story often focuses on the absurdity of local government and dishes out veiled critiques of the Republican Party by lambasting their policies and practices without overtly naming them. Notably, since the characters themselves are government employees, the show features several cameos by actual people in government playing themselves. This includes John McCain, Barbara Boxer, Olympia Snow, Orrin Hatch, Joe Biden, and Michelle Obama.

Perhaps some of our nostalgia is attached to this moment when politics was not the defining feature of every aspect of our cultural experience. It seems that so much of the art we interact with today is performing a kind of political posture across a spectrum of sincerity. These three shows are not exempt from this quality, but something has changed. Our political and cultural world has con-

verged and become so contentious that all the media we consume, even many advertisements, can be tied to a political tribe. But there is so much more to this shift. It may even be considered a cultural dilemma given its fractious nature and bloated use of resources.

Narrative art is more popular than ever, so much so that it increasingly consumes our time and energy and ultimately shapes our identities. Children now argue in the classroom over which is the better anime while reciting popular catch phrases that have gone viral on TikTok and YouTube. Children born in the age of streaming do not have a frame of reference for the shared collective experience of knowing your friends are just a few streets or many miles away doing the same thing you are doing. Instead, an ever-expanding library of streaming content, often uncensored, is at their fingertips.

It is not news that television is a gold mine. And the serialized sitcom was a perfect model for generating revenue. Get the right talent both behind and in front of the cameras to make a 22-minute episode, broken up by ads in a 30-minute time slot, and you could rake in the dough for years to come. But as television shows started to look more and more like blockbuster or arthouse films and the buy-in to watch them moved from cable packages to streaming, our attention became a greater commodity than ever before. Competition in markets is a good thing overall, but is that true when it comes to art? Artists, filmmakers, and critics do not necessarily agree. Martin Scorsese famously articulated his lamentation for the decline of film as a bastion for artistry after backlash to his comment that Marvel movies are not cinema. Film critic Amy Nicholson often points to the fact that superhero films have prevented film studios from greenlighting big budgets for original scripts, preventing directors from taking big creative risks. Studios are more averse than ever to miss a return on investment.

We are now seeing an almost inverse effect in the world of television. The age of COVID-19 ushered in a practice

Tina Fey, Keith Powell, Anthony Atamanuik, Katrina Bowden, Bethany Hall in still from *30 Rock*, *30 Rock/Hogcock!/Last Lunch*, Photo by NBC. © 2012 NBCUniversal Media, LLC.





Aubrey Plaza and Amy Poehler in *Parks and Recreation*. [amypoebler.org/photos/display-image.php?pid=18779](http://amypoebler.org/photos/display-image.php?pid=18779).

of simultaneously releasing some films in theaters and on streaming platforms. Meanwhile, we have seen an overwhelming number of big-budget movie-like television shows reach narrative stagnation for the sake of prolonging viewership. Marvel movies are not the only thing to blame for the decline of cinema as art. It is streaming television that consumes our time and intellect with the repetitious and familiar. It seems everyone I talk to about the popular shows of the day share similar feelings of either giving up on a boring and repetitive show or staying committed only to realize at the end that nothing happened.

Some of these shows start off strong before going nowhere. Amazon's *The Boys*, based on a notoriously exploitive comic of the same name written by Garth Ennis, presents a world filled with superheroes who abuse their power and do more harm to the world than good while generating massive amounts of money for the corporation that manages them. Despite gratuitous violence, the show still has an intelligible critique of the media industry, corporate control over politics, and their adverse effects on the lives of everyday people. But it does not take long for the story to fall into the trap of becoming the thing it seems to be against. While the show mocks the Marvel empire, it too becomes a superhero soap opera punctuated with nods to a liberal audience that wants to affirm a liberal worldview.

Everyone has their own shows that they either scrap or commit to, thus contributing to the fracturing of our once shared cultural experience. Up for debate is the degree to which we still need to be hanging on to such a thing, but, if we are not experiencing this level of shared cultural experience while also still trying to find meaning in this bloated world of content, what are we really doing here?

Hundreds of millions of dollars are now being pumped into single productions like Netflix's film *The Grey Man* (\$200 million) and Amazon's series *The Rings of Power* (\$462 million) to attempt to recreate phenomena

like Marvel's *Avengers: Endgame*, which earned \$2.7 billion internationally at the box office, or HBO's *Game of Thrones*, which might have been the last series to get its audience in front of a television at the same time and place. This search for the next big thing by studios is perfectly aligned with the search for the next big thing by audiences. We long for opportunity to feel what we felt in 2005 with *The Office* or in 2011 with *Game of Thrones*. Both felt like reinventions of the narrative form; to watch a new episode was an electrifying thrill. The creators had captured lightning in a bottle, and now the major studios are trying to manufacture it.

Art is more a laboratory than a factory, a place for taking calculated risks and experimenting with the materials and resources that allow us to pursue a deeper understanding of the world and ourselves. This was the ethos of the 20th century's great filmmakers, who operated at the scale of the Renaissance masters, overseeing teams and developing new technology to execute their visions. This quality is not lost in the fine art or film and television worlds, but it is quickly slipping away, drowned out by the immediate gratification of content designed to satisfy our most basic urges and affirm our predetermined beliefs. However, there is hope. As long as there are creators in the world who are willing to take risks and work outside the system, things can change, and the system will follow. It is up to us, the audience, to stop desperately searching for something we already have and step back out into the world to search for our own meaning. The people who want our attention so badly will eventually catch on and follow.

**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.



# The Politics of Collective Remembering: An Archive of Mumbai's Kolis

by Leandr  D'Souza

Thirteen women are seated along the water's edge at their village. In front of them lies a table filled with shiny crab heads, crustaceans, dried prawns, and fish coated in salt. A patch of gauze is handed over to them. Picking up the seafood, they begin to wrap the white bandage tightly over each specimen. Cocooned inside and resembling tombs, the fish is wound with a string and hung over a bamboo column. Mummification is an ancient technique, and, for an indigenous fishing community in the metropolis of Mumbai known as the *Kolis*,<sup>1</sup> it has been a customary practice to preserve food passed on from the Paleolithic period.<sup>2</sup> With great pride, the women show off their embalming skills. The action, interlaced with secrets of the ocean, is their story and forms the setting for this piece.

Contemporary artists Parag Tandel and Kadambari Koli belong to the Tandel family of the Chendani *Koliwada* ("village that opens to the sea") in the district of Thane, Greater Mumbai. As part of their respective practices, each began chronicling how their surroundings were being altered—through reckless urbanization, the invasion of industry, the seepage of pollutants into the sea, and the effects on marine life and the *Kolis* who depend on it for sustenance. They observed how these intrusions affected the sociocultural and economic well-being of their community and how they had to cope and adapt to survive. With many young *Kolis* abandoning fishing altogether, and with major infrastructural projects threatening to displace entire settlements that have existed at the tip of Mumbai's shoreline from the precolonial era, the Tandels feared their ancestral way of life was in danger of vanishing.

As witnesses to this transition who aim to reverse the process of decay, Tandel and Koli reinstated an existing fund from the 14th century that was once used to support families in times of need<sup>3</sup> and launched the Tandel Fund of Archives (TFA).<sup>4</sup> Operating as an interface between

the community and the city, TFA positions itself as a pop-up museum. It is a repository and the voice of 500,000 *Kolis* inhabiting over 240 *Koliwadas* in Mumbai. Memories once forgotten that now exist as fables are being reconstructed. Personal stories can find shelter. The *Kolis* themselves are both subjects and protagonists of the archive, which mirrors the matriarchal nature of the community. Placed at the forefront of that archive, women steer the city's fishing industry, supplying fish and running the markets and their households.

## A Waning Culture of Ancient Seafarers

A visit to the Tandel home is like stepping into a portal where time drifts to a stop. With the chaos and cacophony of the city behind us, the Chendani village comprises cottages, one-story dwellings that overlook the Thane creek dotted with stacks of fishing nets, and boats floating on the water. Parag's mother, *Aai*, prepares a simple meal

Women conduct a mummification workshop illustrating techniques of food preservation. Photograph by Abigail D'Souza. Courtesy ArtOxygen.





Contestants from the Chendani village pen recipes that are no longer part of Koli cuisine as they compile their manuscript of lost recipes. *Ek Bagal Mein Chand Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan*. Photograph by Abigail D'Souza. Courtesy ArtOxygen/Tandel Fund of Archives.

from their morning catch. With the aromas of fish and the salty sea all entangled, you are taken on a voyage as Parag, Kadambari and *Aai*, speaking in a dialect known only to *Kolis*. They recount their past, like the story from their childhood about the sea monster *mankaape* ("neck-cutter") who is ready to chop off the heads of naughty children venturing out on the water alone. Or how they depend on the lunar cycles that control the tides to determine their fishing patterns. You'll hear of sea creatures you thought only existed in legends.

For the *Kolis*, the ocean is their forest. Being in close proximity to it is paramount, as it ensures that the village can function independently and in isolation from the rest of the city. Parag provides a visual map of the terrain that encompasses freshwater wells; demarcated sections for socializing, drying fish, making salt, and docking boats; and the ocean. With pride, he narrates the history of the Tandels who were ancient mariners and navigators with acute knowledge of the stars and the ocean's currents. But they faced severe losses under the pressures of industrial development along the coastline, chemical discharge, and later silting rupturing ancient fishing bloodlines. He recalls that they "used to trade dry fish and spices with Kochi, Sri Lanka, Burma, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Africa, and Oman. Kadambari's grandfather used to trade for corporations in Mumbai and my grandfather with the British and Parsis." Today they are fishermen for the city.

The story of the Chendani *Koliwada* is also peculiar. It was the first village to be connected to the main city after the first passenger train in India began running between Bombay's Bori Bunder to Thane on April 16, 1853. Because of Chendani's mercantile nature, its people were wealthy and educated. As a result, they were the first to lose their language. "Culture is protected by illiteracy. Once educated, you move away from your culture, language and customs," states Kadambari. She continues, "Our financially wealthy status meant that different communities like the Shaivites, Brahmins, Portuguese traders, and Christian missionaries started encroaching on our land. [They] built

temples but then banned us from entering them because we were fishermen and, at the time, crossing the sea was forbidden. So even though the temples were funded by us, we were not allowed inside them."

At the end of the meal, *Aai* reminds you not to throw away the fish bones or shells of prawns and crabs as they are all preserved in her collection or turned into crafted objects adorning their home.

### The Archive as a Tool for Empowerment

Working at the intersection of aesthetic and archival practice, the TFA project carves a new fissure in how we represent our past, how memory is revisited, and who tells the story. Encouraging a phenomenological approach, it turns into an instrument for creative and social agency.

Bones, cartilage, vertebrae of fish retrieved from the ocean and part of the Tandel Fund of Archives. Photograph by Abigail D'Souza, courtesy ArtOxygen.







An allegorical twist to the physical and symbolic action of drying of seafood and resources as part of *Ek Bagal Mein Chand Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan*. Photograph by Abigail D'Souza. Courtesy ArtOxygen

People are at its core, their stories, histories, and knowledge its greatest asset.

Parag and Kadambari call it an “autoethnographic project archiving the shifts in the lives of communities living on the peripheries of the ocean. We are interested in what people want in their museum, how they perceive and engage with the archive and how they disrupt existing patterns of knowledge creation. We want to build a living museum of memories.” Favoring a relational approach to

representation not only enriches the collection but also enables a process of revitalization of the community—languages, epistemologies, pedagogies that privilege indigenous expression.<sup>5</sup>

Drawn from oral narration, folk song performances, community gatherings, ceremonial practices, and the daily tasks of fishing and trading, the material in the archive is shared by the community and consists of still and moving images, objects, tools, publications, pedagogical symposia, and crafts. In both tangible and intangible form, it is disseminated through creative projects, public pop-ups, contests, workshops, books, and discussions.

These nonlinear methods challenge processes of collection and cataloguing. The materials generated are vessels of information in which crucial data is encoded. By engaging with the evidence, we gain insights into artisanal fishing methods, tools, and cuisine. We extract information on patterns of thought related to the primordial interactions between humans and territory. In this way, colonial taxonomies—that is, colonial ways of knowing and classifying—are subverted.<sup>6</sup> The archive emphasizes the physical act of making, along with ritualistic practices, gatherings, and discussions that bring our attention to how knowledge is produced, stored, and communicated.

Mapping the dialectics between loss and preservation, the archive traces alterations in language, livelihood, identity, culture, landscape, and home. Recognizing the need to safeguard this accumulated and ancient knowledge, TFA sits on the threshold between honoring memory and addressing the present context. It is the only visual testimony created from within the community. A vital record of imperial and postcolonial history's impact on the fisherfolk, it also leaves space for the possibility of emancipation by initiating a process of decolonization.

Parag Tandel with the participants from the dried seafood contest. Photograph by Abigail D'Souza. Courtesy ArtOxygen.





Septuagenarian Bhoomika Koli prepares rice rotis by hand which she distributes locally to restaurants. As she works she narrates stories of recipes cooked by her ancestors. *Ek Bagal Mein Chand Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan*, photograph by Abigail D'Souza, courtesy ArtOxygen.

Through various process-based initiatives such as *Ek Bagal Mein Chand Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyaan* (2017), *Let There Be Bounty Everyday* (2020), and *Estuaries of Waning Sounds—Cycle 3* (2022), the archive—bound by the geography of place—alters into a performative space of lived experience.

### Knowledge as Collective Experience

In 2017, as part of [en]counters—*Daily Ration*, a public art festival staged by ArtOxygen<sup>7</sup> to interrogate the city's food heritage, Parag—Kadambari and their families gathered the women from Chendani in a participatory project *Ek Bagal Mein Chand Hoga Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan* (One Side Lies The Moon, On The Other Lies The Bread). The title takes a metaphoric glance at the two faces of the moon, referencing two key aspects—the moon and roti (bread). The moon refers to the community's attachment to the lunar calendar for navigation and trawling fish. The roti stands for the community's coping mechanisms during the economic shifts of the 1960s, when fishermen abandoned the trade and women began making and selling rotis for daily wages.

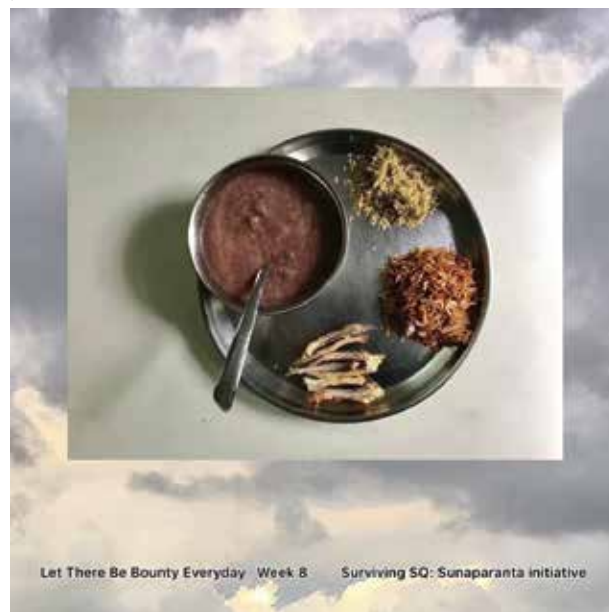
Reflecting on the drying up of trades and ecosystems, the women decided to host a dried seafood cooking contest. It is said that the fishermen used to dry up to 33 species of prawns that were then fried, pickled, or cooked as fast-food meals. This number has decreased to only 13, suggesting that the variety of recipes has also diminished. But the women retraced and revived recipes that had left their homes only to have them return to their kitchens. They resurrected 13 dishes once cooked by their grandmothers. The meals were served at the contest and judged by the entire village.

The occasion was held on November 12, 2017, a day of reverence, according to the *Koli* calendar, when the community remembers something that is no longer present. The women and Parag presented a manuscript documenting the survival of these dishes and carrying personal narratives and illustrations of a landscape that has succumbed

to the pressures of uncontrolled growth. Supported and published by Parag's gallery TARQ<sup>8</sup> and handwritten by the women in Marathi, the text allows us to learn about the contestants from inside this network.

Unlike the others, Kanchan Ganesh Koli uses a machine to make her rice rotis, producing more than 1,000 that she supplies daily to 15 restaurants. Nital has presented a Bombay duck curry in coconut milk, while Bhoomika Koli, aged 73, has a wealth of recipes passed down from her ancestors. These chronicles are interspersed with 13 drawings by Parag. Reflecting both economic and cultural loss, the landscape is unrecognizable, depicted in jet-black lines against a white backdrop. In these drawings, the built

Finger millet porridge and roasted Bombay duck with tiny shrimp curry is a popular breakfast reflective of the diversity in Kolicuisine. It was only with the arrival of the Portuguese that bread and butter was introduced and is today consumed as a staple breakfast. *Let There Be Bounty Everyday*. Courtesy Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts.



Let There Be Bounty Everyday Week 8 Surviving SQ: Sunaparanta initiative



and natural heritage is suspended, inverted, and trapped. Buildings and construction sites are afloat, while trees are uprooted, mountains fragmented, and fish skeletal and bloated. Accompanying the recipes and intimate stories, the drawings stir feelings of alienation and exile.

An exhibition of artifacts was also shown alongside the book and the contest. Showcased here were materials retrieved from the ocean, such as creek silt, bones, salt, terracotta residues, branches from the mangrove forest, shell sculptures, mummified objects made from dried fish, and rice totems (recalling that the fishermen were also rice farmers). The exhibition turned these materials into a dystopian record of the past.

### From the Personal to the Social

March 2020 was an unprecedented time for the *Kolis*. Under a stringent lockdown, fishing activity had ceased altogether. To preserve and store food is a common custom among *Kolis*. Stocked throughout the year, dry fish is only used during the monsoons, which mark the end of the trawling season from June until September. However, with fresh seafood unavailable that March, Parag, Kadambari, and Aai had to open up their reserve of dried seafood.

At the time, Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts<sup>9</sup> initiated an online platform for artists titled *Surviving Self-Quarantine*, inviting cultural practitioners to share strategies on how to survive isolation. As part of this program, Parag began a video series taking over the foundation's Instagram handle every Friday over 11 weeks. Spending the days cooking with Aai, he began sharing recipes using seafood and ingredients consumed only in *Koli* homes. *Let There Be Bounty Everyday* is a compilation of 11 videos shot on a mobile phone and superimposed with folk songs. The recipes are complemented with anecdotes from the archive's reservoir.

In the kitchen, Aai washes the fish, chops the vegetables, and blends coconut, tamarind paste, and the famous *Koli* masala to enhance the flavors. Head, eggs, intestines are all prepared with vegetables. The bones of large fish

are a delicacy from which the marrow is sucked out. Baby shrimp of many varieties is used for cutlets or pancakes. Gravies are often served with rotis, fried dough, or pancakes.

We learn that *davla* is a wild creeper that grows in salt marshes, rich in calcium and known among western coastal communities. Parag picks out the leaves directly from the mangrove forests. The creepers are mostly prepared with crabs or fresh river shrimps, but, during the lockdown, the fishermen were unable to connect with their local crab breeder and used dried shrimp instead. We also discover influences from the Portuguese after the 16th century, such as eating juvenile or pregnant fish, which was once not allowed. There is evidence that Omanis used to live in the *Koliwadas*. The technique of sun-drying fish using salt was adopted from Omanis, and Pir, the Omani saint, is worshipped by *Kolis* every Thursday.

The final video celebrates *Nariyal Purnima* (Coconut Day) on the full moon, which commemorates the moment fishermen across India return to sea. Offerings are made to the sea god as the fishermen embark on their first journey in boats adorned with flowers. On the auspicious occasion, a special recipe from Parag's paternal grandmother (1901–1992) was made. As kippered swordfish and steamed rice were simmering on the stove, we were informed that the food stored at home had finally run out.

### Between the Moon and the Ocean

*Estuaries of Waning Sounds—Cycle 3*, inquires into the community's linguistic heritage. Presented in January 2022 at the exhibition *New Natures* by the Goethe Institut—Max Mueller Bhavan,<sup>10</sup> it aims to create a dictionary of words spoken and written in *Koli* dialect, to trace their origin and to understand the role of language in shaping cognition. Investigated through poetry and folk songs, the project sheds light on the deep interconnection between *Kolis* and the ocean.

How did terms such as *bocharee* for barnacles or *kavla* for oysters find their way into the language? The project

A community gathering to discuss the creation of the *Koliword* bank. *Estuaries of Waning Sounds—Cycle 3*. Courtesy Tandel Fund of Archives.



involved the Chendani, Vitawa, and Machimar Nagar villages in three different sites of the city (Greater Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, and Thane). Workshops were held at meeting grounds used for social events. The community came together to collate words and meanings from traditional songs and narratives of past and contemporary situations into Marathi, Hindi, and English.

We revere the moon and ocean and encounter the legacies of *Dhavla* in a compilation of folk songs titled *Aai Majhi Konala Pavali?* (referring to the goddess Ekvira). A poetry form containing rituals of Koli marriages, the *Dhavarlarines* were said to commemorate weddings and births, and according to Kadambari, “we found a mention of the poetry form in a 12th-century Sanskrit text known as *Manasollasa*.”<sup>11</sup>

### Performing Memory As a Site of Resistance

Memory is frail. It is susceptible to forgetfulness. Within the archive, it is forever protected. But TFA is deliberately impermanent, left open, as if echoing the very histories it contains and acknowledging that they are liable to erasure. Preservation and loss are in perpetual dissent. Change is inevitable. But the trauma from systemic marginalization, the destabilizing of lives (and livelihoods), runs too deep. In an attempt to suture festered wounds, TFA is an act of recovery. In this sense, it is a project of resistance. And a space where the marginalized can find utterance.

Inside the archive, the Kolis articulate their struggle and unrest. Using a language that is soaked in the ritualistic, TFA mutates into a powerful ideological field, the imagery and gestures that impact identity, a sense of belonging, and social reality. The body, as symbolic and physical, is situated at the heart of the archive, from which multiple narratives erupt.

Drawing on embodied knowledge and relying on performative gesture, women share their experiences, memories, and knowledge through the actions of *roti* preparation. They restore ancestral dishes to Koli cuisine, inscribing those dishes into a manual of lost recipes (*Ek Bagal Mein Chand Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan*). We witness how memory is brought to life and transferred from the personal to the social, functioning as an archaeological site from where subjects on food insecurities, artisanal fishing practices are excavated (*Let there be Bounty Everyday*). Our senses are intensified as the word bank evokes memories pertaining to questions of habitat, labor, and their ties with the ocean (*Estuaries of Waning Sounds—Cycle 3*).

With the contributions of multiple authors, the archive morphs into a space for reciprocity and co-creation, enabling a state of constant enrichment and renewal.<sup>12</sup> In perpetual flux, this porosity provides space for both dialogue and contestation, encouraging different perspectives and producing new reflections.

Thus, what TFA builds is a counternarrative, a reconfiguration of power relations.<sup>13</sup> Questioning the validity and meaning of existing authoritarian and hierarchical struc-

tures, it puts forward methodologies and approaches that are concerned with notions of emancipation, empathy, and equality. It is precisely this level of emancipated creativity that provides an empowering model encountered through collective memory.

Parag remarks, “Since independence we have contested the State’s manipulations as [when] our homes were demarcated as slums and our people classified under categories like “Special Backward Class.” What will be left of our identity if the fishermen are extracted from the oceanfront?”

Mumbai’s present urban policies continue to be detrimental to its original inhabitants, who have until now remained the main custodians of its waterways. Once the ocean’s caretakers are erased, their lineage and legacy will cease to exist.

Parag, Kadambari, *Aai*, and the *Kolis* assert their presence. The archive is their guardian.<sup>14</sup> As we revisit their histories, we learn new lessons from them. As they share their memories, we become part of their experience. Emotions are aroused as we celebrate with them. The archive beats and continues to live.

**Leandré D’Souza is the curator and program director at Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts. She is the founder of ArtOxygen, a collective aimed at curating and producing art projects in open spaces. From 2010 to 2018, she organized [en] counters, a festival dealing with issues affecting the everyday life of Mumbai. She was invited to curate the participation of Indian and international artists at the biennial Haein Art Project in South Korea in 2013 and curated the 2015/16 & 2018 editions of Sensorium at Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts. In 2014, she received an award for Culture and Change from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development**

### Footnotes

1. The Kolis of Mumbai are an indigenous population of Maharashtra occupying the western region of India. They are a traditional fishing community, whose name derived from their occupation as fishermen in both sweet and salt water bodies. It is said that before Bombay (now Mumbai) became a colonial city, it was a fishing village of seven islands inhabited by Kolis, the city’s natives. They named the main island Mumbai after their patron goddess Mumbadevi. Their traditions and culture are closely connected with the ocean, their entire socio-economic system dependent on it for food, habitat and survival. Before the British reclaimed and connected the islands, they were estuarine lands formed by the Dahisar, Mithi, Oshiwara, Poisar, Tansa, Tasso and Ulhas rivers. “The estuaries are not just meeting points between rivers and oceans, they are thriving forests of flora, fauna and breeding grounds for marine species. But, rising pollution and reclamation has resulted in deserted water bodies,” explains Parag Tandel.
2. S M Edwardes wrote: “But older than the cocoa-nut palm, older than the Bhandari palm-tapper, are the Koli fishing folk of Bombay.” According to him, among them one could find “the blood of the men of the Stone Age,” in the Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island, Vol II, The Times Press, 1909.
3. The Tandel Fund in Chendani Koliwada, Thane (a central suburb of Mumbai) was founded by the Tandel families at the be-

ginning of the 14th century to economically safeguard the community whilst the men were at sea.

4. Tandel Fund of Archives (TFA) is a “socially engaged archive and ethnographic pop-up museum of the Koli tribes (fisherfolk) of Mumbai. We are an open artist collective, the co-founders of this collective are Parag Kamal Kashinath Tandel and Kadambari Anjali Mahesh Koli.” <https://tandelfundofarchives.org>.
5. Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?,” in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed George E Marcus and Fred R Myers, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p 304.
6. Kristin Ross, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Rancière’s, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, vii–xxiii, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991, p xi.
7. Founded in 2009, ArtOxygen (ArtO2) is a Mumbai-based art initiative curating and producing art projects in urban spaces. From 2010-2018, it organized [en]counters, a yearly art project in public spaces exploring issues related to Mumbai’s urban landscape and encouraging creative ideas & actions that transform the city’s everyday life. Daily Ration was the 8th edition of its festival, examining the city’s food culture. On the occasion, Parag Tandel was invited to develop Ek Bagal Mein Chand Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyaan, reflecting both his ongoing research as well as the deep knowledge that Kolis in the city possess. Given the symbiotic relationship to their natural environment, we wanted to develop a project not just in close association with them but where they would actually determine the shape and final form of the work. [https://youtu.be/1\\_DvggiWres](https://youtu.be/1_DvggiWres).
8. TARQ, Sanskrit for “discussion, abstract reasoning, logic and cause,” is a contemporary art gallery in Mumbai dedicated to nurturing a conversation around art and its multiple contexts. Founded in 2014 by Hena Kapadia, it was envisioned as an incubator for young contemporary artists pushing the boundaries of how contemporary art in India is exhibited and perceived. Parag Tandel has been part of several solo and group exhibitions namely, *Chronicle* (2016), *Resurgence* (2020), *Event, Memory, Metaphor* (2022). <https://www.tarq.in>.
9. Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts was founded in 2009 as a not-for-profit, process-based arts foundation by Dipti and Dattaraj V. Salgaocar—today with the patronage of Isheta Salgaocar—with the vision to nurture, promote and encourage growth of the cultural ecosystem in the State of Goa and India at large. It was started with the aim to preserve the artistic and creative legacies of Goa, to encourage and promote innovative work in the visual arts, to serve as a bridge between the Goan art community and the national and international art communities. The Foundation has emerged as a premier cultural institution in India and abroad that harnesses excellence in cultural research and production; nurtures collaborations with arts professionals from the entire spectrum of creative fields; builds creative knowledge and capacities through pedagogy and aims at enhancing community engagement and participation. Sunaparanta is a leading cultural body dedicated to building sustainable partnerships in the region, nation and globally to promote cultural innovation and to develop the creative industries.  
  
In 2020, in an effort to remain connected to its community, it announced #SurvivingSQ (Self-Quarantine) an open call inviting artists to share strategies on how to cope with isolation. The initiative was aimed at actively engaging with the community and to encourage a more participatory, thought-provoking and introspective dialogue. As part of the campaign, Parag Tandel launched Let There be Bounty Everyday. <https://youtu.be/QNtiFhWGIQg>, <https://www.sgca.org>.
10. In 2018, the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai initiated a lecture series titled State of Nature with interdisciplinary artist Ravi Agarwal that addressed the current ecological crisis. *New Natures: A Terrible Beauty is Born* is the second chapter of the project, curated by Agarwal in the form of an exhibition. Bringing together seventeen artists, it is a “conversation between different artistic positions and reflections on the worlds they inhabit and to invoke an ethics of healing, care, and responsibility.” <https://www.goethe.de/ins/in/en/sta/mum/ueb/hmm/ex22/sn2022.html>.
11. Written the Kalyani Chalukya king Someshvara III who ruled present day Karnataka. It contains details on the socio-cultural life of 11th and 12th century India.
12. Umberto Eco borrows from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard, Paris, 1945), where he reveals: ‘Consciousness, which is commonly taken as an extremely enlightened region, is, on the contrary, the very region of indetermination.’ ... ‘We might see these poetical systems’,... ‘as expressing the positive possibility of thought and action made available to an individual who is open to the continuous renewal of his life patterns and cognitive processes. Such an individual is productively committed to the development of his own mental faculties and experiential horizons’. ... ‘Our main intent has been to pick out a number of analogies which reveal a reciprocal play of problems in the most disparate areas of contemporary culture and which point to the common elements in a new way of looking at the world.’ Umberto Eco, ‘The Poetics of the Open Work’, in *The Open Work*, Anna Cancogni, trans, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, pgs. 17 & 18.
13. Chantal Mouffe stresses the importance and urgency of cultural and artistic practice to challenge the present dormancy of the capitalistic system of production. She refers to the public space as constituting ‘the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted without any possibility of final reconciliation.’ Chantal Mouffe, ‘Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,’ vol 1, no 2, in *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, STUDIO 55, Centre for Research in Fine Art Practice, [www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html](http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html), 2007.  
  
Mouffe puts forward the agnostic approach in critical artistic practice that “engages critically with political reality,” ... “explores subject positions defined by” ... “marginality,” ... “investigates its own mode of production and circulation,” ... experiments and “imagines alternative ways of living: societies or communities built around values” that question “capitalism.” Mouffe, “Art and Democracy: Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space,” no. 14, in *Cahier on Art and the Public Domain: How Art and its Institutions Reinvent the Public Dimension*, NAI Publishers SKOR, 2008, pgs. 12 & 13.
14. Citing Suzanne Lacy, Suzy Gablik writes: “Like a subjective anthropologist,” ... “[the artist enters] the territory of the other, and... becomes a conduit for [their] experience. The work becomes a metaphor for relationship—which has a healing power.” ... “This feelingness is a service that artists offer to the world.” Suzy Gablik, “Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism,” in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed Suzanne Lacy, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1995, p 82.



# The Power of Wendy Kveck's Mediated Portraits

by Phillip Barcio

There's food in Wendy Kveck's portraits of women—but it's the women who are being consumed. Consumed by the viewer's gaze; consumed by time; consumed by judgment and expectations; consumed by a culture ravenous for the souls of the vulnerable.

The women Kveck paints have the look and feel of people melting, succumbing to physical and metaphysical gravity. Kveck's gloopy, painterly brushstrokes, radioactive color palette, and frenetic scrawled lines conjure depictions of femininity rarely represented in fine art—women confidently, powerfully coming undone.

"I'm thinking about states of vulnerability and exhaustion, feeling out of control by design or through the circumstances of one's life," Kveck says. "Against the backdrops of this current moment when feminists are fighting for bodily autonomy and social justice and an art historical canon in which women were depicted predominantly by male painters working in the Western European tradition,

I'm interested in artists having agency to revisit specific art historical and contemporary tropes and insert their own lived experiences through a feminist lens."

Kveck's portraits begin with performance. She doesn't use her own body; she enlists other women who are interested in having these conversations, in subverting female representations from the media and art history and invites them to collaborate with her in a private, intimate space. The women cover their faces with foodstuff like frosting or meat and then reenact or re-pose images from the internet, art history, or children's coloring books—images that relate to different female clichés such as the princess, the martyr, the party girl, the pageant queen, or other characters that Kveck and the women cocreate. The food masks start off fresh and beautiful, then quickly become messy as they begin disassembling.

"There is a relationship to aging, to evolving or devolving, and the impact of the environment on our bodies and



(Left) Wendy Kveck, *Consciousness Raising*, 2021. Oil, paint pen on canvas on panel 54 x 40 inches. © Wendy Kveck. Photo by Sampsel Preston.

(Right) *Wounder Woman*, 2018. Oil, paint pen on canvas on panel 54 x 40 inches. © Wendy Kveck. Photo by Sampsel Preston.



Wendy Kveck (Left), *Hildegarde*, 2021. Oil, paint pen on canvas on panel. © Wendy Kveck. Photo by Sampsel Preston. (Right) *Munch, Good Eaters (beer and twinkies)*, 2021. Oil, paint pen on canvas on panel 46 x 56 inches. © Wendy Kveck. Photo by Sampsel Preston.

psyches,” Kveck says. “I think about these as messy interiorities spilling out, in over-the-top form.”

Kveck photographs the performances, then creates sketches from that documentation through a technique known as blind contour drawing, in which an artist draws a subject using a single, unbroken line without ever looking at the paper, with the goal of learning to look more closely at your subject. Pulling from these drawings, as well as from other found images and the performance photographs, she develops an exquisite corpse of sorts, then paints that amalgam on canvas with impasto oil paints—a visceral, medium-specific call and response with the performer’s liquescent culinary veil.

Kveck’s portraits are defined by their excesses. They undermine something simplistic by using a messy approach. They’re unlike what people are used to looking at, which, by definition, means they expand the visual literacy of viewers.

“Images shape perception,” Kveck says. “People are shaped, communities are shaped, culture is shaped by language and the language of images.”

Kveck has experienced the negative consequences of image consumption firsthand.

“I just stopped looking at fashion magazines in my 20s,” Kveck says. “I definitely consider what it means to put more images out in the world, as painted objects. I don’t really want my portraits to have a fixed meaning or message or even interpretation. They’re not traditional presentations of beauty in my mind. It’s more about asking questions about our relationship to images, and subverting certain kinds of representations of women, or even the idea of representing women.”

Kveck was raised in a traditional middle-class Catholic household in the suburbs of Chicago. Both visually, and in

terms of what roles were modeled for women, the suburban landscape was, she describes, “very homogenous.” When she went away to study art at the University of Iowa, she was immersed in a community of visual artists, writers, musicians, and performers that fostered a diversity of new ideas.

That’s where Kveck first became aware of feminist art. Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta is among the University of Iowa’s many influential alumni. For her *Rape Scene* performance in 1973, Mendieta challenged community indifference towards campus sexual

Wendy Kveck, *Munch*. Oil, paint pen on Arches oil paper, 48 x 39 inches. © Wendy Kveck. Photo credit: Lori Ryan.





violence by inviting fellow students to her apartment, where they found her half naked, bent over a table, and covered in blood.

Kveck also studied the work of Adrian Piper, Hannah Wilke, and Faith Ringgold, along with the writing and curation of Lucy Lippard. Her collaborative portraiture process continues the feminist legacy these luminaries helped establish—of mobilizing the female body as both the object and the subject of the work.

“I pull from Feminism, the value of community, of being in dialogue with other women, and the idea of consciousness raising in conversations we have before and during the sessions,” Kveck says.

Like her feminist forebearers, Kveck is creating aesthetic phenomena that have the power to transmit cultural signifiers that can undermine codified attitudes and behaviors.

She thinks about how the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood represented female bodies—what those representations say about that time in history, and what they continue to assert about gender roles today. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the founder of that aptly named brotherhood, is still revered within contemporary institutions for his depictions of such tropes as the fallen woman (Persephone); the sinless, perfect mother (Virgin Mary); women as objects of men’s sexual desire (Bocca Baciata); and women as fertile, nurturing, docile creatures (Monna Primavera).

What values do we endorse when we celebrate depictions of women borrowed from pagan myths and ancient religious texts that served mostly to maintain systems of social hierarchy and control?

Kveck highlights another dehumanizing representation of women from art history that continues to resonate

through visual culture today: that of women as hysterical and sinful, a trope embodied by the Expressionist painter Chaïm Soutine in his painting *Mad Woman*. Kveck borrowed Soutine’s title for a portrait in a series she made based on found paparazzi images of drunken celebrities. Such depictions of feminine vulnerability play into toxic masculine fantasies of the foolish, helpless victim in need of a hero; they conspire with puritanical value systems to pressure women to be whole, and then exploit them when they fall short.

“I’m interested in how those images are circulated and consumed in the media as a way of capitalizing on women’s real struggles with substance abuse, mental health, extremely personal challenges commodified for the public,” Kveck says. “How do our encounters with images shape our perceptions of ourselves and others, and our relationships?”

Kveck’s portraiture practice wrestles with these questions, unraveling obsolete visual legacies so something constructive can come into being. Her portraits and the women who perform for them are helping to manifest a new paradigm that reframes vulnerability as confidence; that mobilizes indulgence as a creative force; that reveals exhaustion as a space of potential; and that exalts the strange beauty of coming undone.

“That’s the power of art,” Kveck says. “It can reflect or reimagine in ways that make us question what we’ve seen before.”

**Phillip Barcio is an author, journalist, art historian, radio host, filmmaker, public speaker, social media skeptic, degrowth proponent, animal protector, maker of antiracist choices, and member of the executive team at Kavi Gupta in Chicago. You can read his writing and stare into his steely eyes at [philbarcio.com](http://philbarcio.com).**



(Left) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Beloved*. 1865-66. Support: 32.5 x 4 inches, frame: 48 x 43.7 x 4 inches. Tate Britain, © JarektUpload Bot/ WikiCommons.

(Right) Chiam Soutine, *Mad Woman*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 37.8 x 23.6 inches. The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

# Mr. Verité

Cinematographer Haskell Wexler (1922–2015) comes in for a close-up in a centennial retrospective at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

by Andrew Peart

A woman in a yellow dress moves through Grant Park and the streets of downtown Chicago in search of her young son. It's August 1968. The camera follows this incongruous figure, a recent transplant from West Virginia, as she glides deeper into the unrest gripping the city. As the Democratic National Convention unfolds and party leaders hole up in the nearby Conrad Hilton hotel, the camera captures the outbreak of real riots even as it tracks the storyline of its fictive heroine. Suddenly tear gas plumes up. "Look out, Haskell, it's real!" yells an unknown voice to the man in charge of the camera.

The film is *Medium Cool* (1969). The story of how the man who made it came to be shooting it this way is the stuff of legend. By 1968, Haskell Wexler was a leading Hollywood cinematographer. He had already won an Oscar for his photography on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). He had a reputation for working closely and hands-on with his directors—whether they liked it or not. A studio executive at Paramount Pictures gave him an assignment to direct a film of his own: an adaption of the 1967 novel

*Concrete Wilderness*, the story of a country boy in the big city by zoologist and cameraman Jack Couffer. Wexler went back to his native Chicago for the production in 1968 and found a city on the brink of boiling over: Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had both been assassinated, and national elections loomed. As writer, director, and cinematographer on the project, Wexler kept *Concrete Wilderness* as a loose framework but set out with a new purpose: in his words, to see what was going on in Chicago, in the style of cinema verité. The film Wexler put together would become famous for getting entangled in the politics of the moment it sought to represent. "The result is a film of tremendous visual impact," said critic Vincent Canby in 1969, "a kind of cinematic Guernica, a picture of America in the process of exploding into fragmented bits of hostility, suspicion, fear and violence."

For all its national implications, *Medium Cool* is still a distinctly Chicago film, and Wexler himself deserves to be as much of a household name in his hometown as contemporaneous local stars like Studs Terkel, the Staples

Film still from *Medium Cool* (1969). Source credit: Paramount Pictures Corporation, H&J Pictures, Inc., and the Criterion Collection.





Film still from *Medium Cool* (1969). Source credit: Paramount Pictures Corporation, H&J Pictures, Inc., and the Criterion Collection.

Singers, and Mike Royko. With a centennial film series honoring the late cinematographer this May, the city's Gene Siskel Film Center did its part to elevate Wexler's status in the cultural record. Like those other stars, Wexler honed supreme artistic craft and a unique style to speak truth to power.

The month-long series screened eight films spanning a 20-year period in Wexler's career (1967–1987), putting the focus on his achievements as a leading director of photography on feature films. During *Medium Cool*, the only directorial effort of Wexler's included in the series, audience members laughed during a scene in which the Illinois National Guard drills a riot-defense squad under the bullhorn-booming supervision of a Mayor Richard J. Daley soundalike. More than 50 years later, Wexler's major outing as an auteur still had satiric bite for the local crowd.

Beyond his Chicago bona fides, Wexler also deserves to be remembered as a cameraman who successfully managed a double career as Hollywood journeyman and indie legend. Before and after the release of *Medium Cool*, Wexler was in high demand as a cinematographer who could take a camera crew into the streets and give the drama an authentic look and feel. Wexler famously moonlighted as a visual consultant on his onetime protégé George Lucas's

*American Graffiti* (1973). He was brought in as the master craftsman who could ensure the film's daring in-the-streets color photography came out right. If you wanted a stylish flick with more than a touch of the guerrilla filmmaking of the 1960s, Wexler was your man.

By the time he was shooting *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), the film that kicked off the Siskel Center series, Wexler's political bent was just as well known in Hollywood as his realistic shooting style. He was monitored by FBI agents on the set of this Miloš Forman film. It would become the second Hollywood picture in a row, following Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), from which he was fired. In both instances, the reasons likely involved turf battles between powerful directors and their equally headstrong cameraman, but it's not hard to imagine how the aura of political controversy could have worked against Wexler's standing in Tinseltown.

It wasn't always that way. The Siskel Center series featured two films on which Wexler worked with Norman Jewison, a big-studio director interested in making socially conscious films. *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) stars Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs, a Philadelphia homicide detective wrongfully implicated in a murder case as he's passing through a small Mississippi town. *In the Heat of the*



*In the Heat of the Night*, (1967). Tibbs examines murder victim's body. Source credit: Twentieth Century Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, and the Criterion Collection.



Film still from *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). Source credit: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios and Kino Lorber.



*Night* would go on to win a handful of Academy Awards, including the best picture prize. Wexler's most celebrated contribution was in how he shot Poitier as Tibbs. The photographer went to great lengths not to wash out the nuances of Poitier's skin tones with either too much light or too much darkness—no small feat in a film whose color palette makes a motif of the eponymous “night.” For the police station scenes, Wexler borrowed a technique from silent cinema, filtering his light sources through silk draped over the top of the set, which softened the glow on the actors. Wexler's sensitivity carried political force. When Tibbs examines the murder victim's body, Wexler uses closeups to underscore the gravity of a Black detective's hands laid upon a white man's in a room full of southern whites. We understand later, when Tibbs examines the hands of a jailed white suspect, just how incendiary that kind of touch can be in the 1960s Deep South.

At other moments in the film, Wexler proves how far his resourcefulness could go in sharpening the story's dark and menacing edge. During the scene in which we first meet Tibbs, Wexler lights the establishing shot with just the police car headlights and the train station's overhead lamps. Indeed, many of the film's exterior shots are lit only by the headlights and taillights of automobiles. Combined with an occasional shaky handheld camera, this technique makes palpable the underlying terror of police patrol and vigilante pursuit in an unfamiliar state. That effect didn't come easy: to make the practical lighting show up on film, Wexler swapped out the cars' lights with airplane landing lights. His efforts paid off. During the film's violent climax, Tibbs faces off against a vigilante gang that pulls up to him in a car with a pronounced Confederate plate. Wexler's camera positioning puts us in Tibbs's spot; caught in the headlights, we can feel the converging threats of this southern night closing in.

Wexler's follow-up collaboration with Jewison, 1968's *The Thomas Crown Affair*, largely replaces social commentary with sex. The sumptuously photographed heist picture pairs the titular Boston banker (Steve McQueen) with Vicki Anderson (Faye Dunaway), the insurance fraud

investigator assigned to crack open the case of his would-be perfect crime. As the affair turns romantic, Crown and Anderson sit down for a fireside game of chess that's a little bit more than intellectual sport. In fact, Wexler shoots the scene as though two games are happening: one on the board and another in the couple's looks. Progressing into tighter and tighter frames, the sequence intercuts chess moves with Anderson's innuendo-rich gestures and Crown's hard-swallowing reaction shots, until Wexler tops off the moment with a kaleidoscopic 360-degree camera rotation on the couple's kiss. The scene demonstrates why Wexler could be so bankable for directors and producers looking for a hip aesthetic: wordless for much of its seven minutes, the erotic game of chess relies on Wexler's camerawork to do the talking. In the beautiful 35-mm. print shown at the Siskel Center, the scene's vibrant colors and deeply saturated darks practically oozed off the screen.

*The Thomas Crown Affair*, though, is not all long stares and luscious lips. Wexler also lent his adroit photography to the film's innovative multiscreen heist sequence, which follows several disparate robbers as an aloof intelligence coordinates their movements. Wexler's mobile camera comes in for great effect here, taking the viewer into the streets as Crown's hired criminals work against the clock and the rhythms of city life. Wexler pushes this documentary device into new territory for Crown's second big heist, the film's finale. When the pickup car arrives for the loot, Wexler's shots work like security camera footage, with multiple angles allowing a forensic piecing together of evidence. For Wexler, crime and suspense seem to have been just another occasion to stretch his imagination for involving viewers in the perception of film as reality.

In *the Heat of the Night* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* were high points in Wexler's Hollywood career, yet it's no surprise that the Siskel Center led with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the most canonical piece in Wexler's filmography. Box-office considerations aside, the Siskel Center programmers made a smart curatorial decision. *Cuckoo's Nest* solidified Wexler's reputation, already confirmed on *American Graffiti*, for bringing an authentic look to period



Film still from *Bound for Glory* (1976). Source credit: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.

pieces. For much of the film, Wexler achieves this effect by bouncing what viewers take for ambient light off the interior of the psychiatric hospital where R. P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson), on transfer from confinement at a nearby Oregon prison farm, battles the tyrannical Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher). Wexler's naturalistic lighting gives the aged institution and the slightly dated dress of its inmates and workers a stark but warm appearance. Yet Wexler goes further, taking a playful approach to the film's barely historical 1963 setting. When Nurse Ratched refuses to let the patients watch that year's World Series on television, McMurphy stages an act of defiance. Sitting in front of the pictureless television set as the other men cheer him on, he starts giving a make-believe play-by-play of the contest between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. "Koufax looks down. He's looking at the great Mickey Mantle now. Here comes the pitch. Mantle swings. It's a fucking home run!" Wexler shoots the fictive ball game as a reflection of the men's faces in the television screen. His distancing effect for this scene within a scene casts history as not just the events that happened but also the aura surrounding them.

In effect, Wexler was branching out from a realism rooted in documentary style to one based on atmosphere, a direction he continued to take in the two other period pieces screened at the Siskel Center. As the cinematographer on *Bound for Glory* (1976), director Hal Ashby's adaptation of folksinger Woody Guthrie's autobiography, Wexler would earn himself a second Oscar win by accurately capturing the look and feel of a time and place. The film begins in the Texas panhandle, where Guthrie (David Carradine) paints signs and works other odd jobs during the Great Depression to support his wife (Melinda Dillon) and their kids. Joining the desperate Dust Bowl migration to California and landing in a fruit pickers' camp, Guthrie teams up with fellow songster Ozark Bule (Ronny Cox), who gets him involved in two occupations that prove not to mix well—performing live on Los Angeles radio and organizing farm workers. Wexler's photography of the film's southwestern locations is at once realistic and dreamlike: his technical choices give the world of the film a distressed look, as though we're viewing the hardscrabble 1930s in an aged photograph album.

To recreate Dust Bowl-era Texas, Wexler got creative



*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), imaginary World Series scene. Source credit: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

with lighting. “I tried to keep as much garbage in the air as possible,” he said. By putting layers of smoke and dust around the actors and sets, Wexler could diffuse the light in front of the camera, which helped give the film its gauzy look. So too did sunlight-softening silks—a strategy adapted from *In the Heat of the Night*—and bead-board reflectors. Wexler also used camera lens filters and a process known as flashing, which lightly exposes the film stock, to augment the ethereal depth of his images. Wexler described the overall effect as “translucency,” and the visual experience was a deeply moving one thanks to the Siskel Center’s resplendent 35-mm. print. As Guthrie sits painting outside his shack and tells his children a fairy tale, viewers can feel both the warmth of family and the tired desperation of unemployment in the scene’s muted sunlight.

Wexler got hired for the independent film *Matewan* (1987) because director John Sayles liked the cinematographer’s work on *Bound for Glory*. There was one caveat: Sayles said he wanted a less “nostalgic” look from Wexler for this film about a 1920 battle in the West Virginia mine wars. Wexler delivered. The film follows labor organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) into the town of Matewan, where he hopes to convince the local coal miners to form a union and maintain the picket line when they strike. Kenehan, a firm idealist and a former Wobbly who also comes up against the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency’s efforts to thwart a peaceful strike, a conflict that leads to the film’s climactic shootout. Sayles has said that he wanted to combine the labor film with the western in *Matewan*. Wexler, for his part, helped him attain a gritty texture and epic scope appropriate to that fusion.

For *Matewan*, Wexler used fewer lens filters than he had for *Bound for Glory*, but he did repeat the trick of filming through smoke and dust to diffuse image sharpness. Wexler made the most of what was around him to achieve the director’s intended look of a world in which everything seems “used.” To adequately light the film’s opening scene, shot inside Beckley, WV’s Exhibition Coal Mine,

Wexler spread aluminum on the interior walls of coal so that “highlights,” as he called them, would reflect into the camera lens. The scene, lit only by unnoticed supplements to dynamite fuses and miners’ headlamps, has the visual intensity of chiaroscuro painting. Wexler had a great canvas in *Matewan* for expressing his penchant for such practical lighting, for letting the world of the film supply the bright spots on screen—if only in the viewer’s imagination.

For the Siskel Center’s Wexler centennial, Sayles pre-recorded a video introduction to *Matewan*. According to Sayles, Wexler was extremely sensitive to the resources of light around him on location. He’d say of a particular composition, “This isn’t going to look good until four o’clock in the afternoon,” advising the crew about the perfect time to shoot a scene. Wexler brought that same sensitivity to interior shots, making them seem just as naturalistic as location shots. When Kenehan sits down for his first dinner with the family who run his boarding house, Wexler shoots the scene with low lighting, keeping the center of the table illuminated but the surrounding walls in shadow. This lighting profile, Wexler once noted, simulates what an Appalachian dining room scene would have looked like in 1920, with electric lamps scarce and gas lighting much more common. It’s a look that, as so often happens in Wexler’s shots, draws the viewer into the perceived immediacy of what’s unfolding on screen: our eyes can’t leave that table, where a communal drama is unfolding, and everything else for the moment falls outside our attention. *Matewan*, as much as any Wexler-shot film, brings the audience into the center of its world and holds them there until it ends. At the Siskel Center screening, audience members gasped as the final frames faded and the credits started to roll. They had just been released from the film’s spell.

In addition to spotlighting his artistry, the Siskel Center series highlighted a curious feature of Wexler’s career. The illustrious lineup had a bittersweet undertone, as Wexler didn’t always receive the credit he was due for the films he helped make successful. Wexler said he shot all but a

*Matewan* (1987), boarding house dinner table scene. Source credit: Twentieth Century Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, Red Dog Films, Inc., and the Criterion Collection.





Film still of a close-up during the Whiskey a Go Go scene in *Faces* (1968). Source credit: Faces Distribution Corporation, Home Vision Entertainment, and the Criterion Collection.

couple of minutes of *Cuckoo's Nest*. Still, he had to share an Oscar nomination for the film's cinematography with the cameraman who replaced him. The Siskel Center series also featured two films for which Wexler received no credit at all—a pointed curatorial decision. As an uncredited contributor to the John Cassavetes indie classic *Faces* (1968), Wexler loaned the director equipment to properly light a difficult nightclub scene and actually worked as one of the camera operators shooting a complex sequence on location at the famous Whiskey a Go Go. As the original cinematographer for Coppola's *The Conversation*, Wexler successfully pulled off the film's stunning opening surveillance sequence, which involved nine cameras covering San Francisco's Union Square in the manner of a professional spy operation. Though the nine-minute scene's mock-surveillance style is pure Wexler, his name is glaringly absent from the credit roll over his own opening shot.

Credited or not, Wexler's contributions to *Faces* and *The Conversation* reflect two equally important parts of his legacy. One of film history's greatest cinematographers,

he should be remembered as a consummate professional charitable enough to lend his services to indie filmmakers he judged to have serious vision. At the same time, Wexler was uncompromising in his own vision, and when hired by directors to help realize the elaborate movie magic they knew he could deliver, he took a point of view and was not quick to be moved from it. As a result, his fortunes in the industry could swing high and low. The Siskel Center's programmers, in their decision to include Wexler's uncredited camerawork, helped restore the balance. By showcasing work for which Wexler hasn't gotten his due, they signaled it's time his whole body of work got a reevaluation. When the score is settled, the master lenser should come out looking like the jobber who'd roll up his sleeves and the virtuoso who could shoot film like no other.

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Film still of opening sequence from *The Conversation* (1974). Source credit: Paramount Pictures Corporation, American Zoetrope, and Lions Gate Entertainment.



# EYEHAND: The sculpture of Peter Shelton

by Neil Goodman

Over the past four decades, Peter Shelton (born 1951) has shown his work nationally and internationally, and his work has been the subject of numerous museum and gallery exhibitions as well as the recipient of public and private commissions. For many years he has also been represented by Los Angeles's premier gallery, L.A. Louver in Venice, California. His work was the subject of a one-person exhibition at the Arts Club in Chicago, and he received a large-scale public commission for the City of Indianapolis.

As the tides and valleys of the artworld shift quickly, Peter has persistently and consistently maintained his vision as well as challenged himself in both scale and subject. He is also a consummate craftsman, working in wood, concrete, iron, bronze, glass, and fiberglass. Peter's work varies from large-scale installations to more succinct individual objects. In an overview of his work over the years, there is an amazing variation in style and a sensibility distinctively his that is at the core of his sculpture.

Some works stay with you and others leave quickly. My interest in writing about Peter's work dates to 1988 when I first saw his monumental installation *floatinghouse DEADMAN* at the Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art. Whether serendipity or happenstance, I was visiting the center in preparation for an exhibition I was planning there the following year. At the time, Peter and Robert Roman, the curator at the ICCA, had recently relocated from LA. As they had been connected geographically, Robert was both aware of Peter's work and blossoming career and instrumental in arranging both the transportation and installation of *floatinghouse DEADMAN*.

Occupying most of the gallery and the focal point of the exhibition was a large elevated floating house. With its combination of both wood and paper paneled corridors and rotunda, the structure seemed to be equally inspired by early American craftsman architecture and a traditional Japanese tea house. The house was held aloft by a series of cables and pulleys connected to fourteen

*floatinghouse*, 1985–86. Wood and paper, 8.5 x 39 x 35 feet. "floating-house DEADMAN," Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA (catalogue), 1987 and "floatinghouse DEADMAN," Louver Gallery, New York (catalogue), 1990.







*sixtyslippers*, 1997. L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA (1997–98). Travelled: Berkeley Art Museum (1998), Madison Art Center (currently Madison Museum of Contemporary Art), Madison, WI (1999), and Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (1999).

heavy sculptures in the surrounding space. These shapes acted pragmatically in providing the anchored weight for the house's suspension, as well as poetically introducing Peter's rich vocabulary of forms. As the structure was intended for walking through, the elevated and swaying house was both enticing and alarming: we were both viewer and subject. Considering that more than three decades have passed since I first saw *floatinghouseDEADMAN*, the work is still very much alive in both impact and memory.

If several earlier works focused on large installations, the later works seem more singularly composed. Vessel forms mutate into lungs and hearts, and evocatively suggest figures, cocoons, shells, amphorae, inner tubes, and boulders. His sculptures seem equally familiar yet reconfigured as they fluidly cross boundaries and organically evolve and metamorphize. Orifices inhabit the sculptures; they are highly sexualized large bulbous forms with a beguiling intimacy that is at once prurient and evocative. The imposing scale inhabits our physical space inconveniently. The lurking forms are like animals in respite, of which we are equally curious and wary. We both want to touch them and remain at a distance. Like a magician, he reveals the secret life of objects, and through his forms as a sculptor, reinvents a world that we both know and imagine.

**Neil:** Who did you study with at UCLA and were they major influences in the development of your work?

**Peter:** Honestly, I went to UCLA mostly to have space and equipment. Making sculpture of any scale is impossible when you start off. I certainly did receive support there from Gary Lloyd, Lee Mullican, Bill Brice, and a few others, but my undergraduate experience was more important. I started as a premed student at Pomona College but the antiwar moment of 1969–1970 drove most of us out onto the street. In the fall of 1970, I lived in Eastern Kentucky up in the coal mining hollers. I switched to anthropology then, later theater, and finally art after taking art classes all the way through college. There, my teachers were Mowry Baden, Guy Williams, David Gray, Michael Brewster, and Jim Turrell.

**Neil:** Did you ever consider living in NYC?

**Peter:** After college, I went to Hobart School of Welding Technology in the town where I was born, Troy, Ohio. This experience and the work as a welder afterwards in Ohio and Michigan were probably as important as Pomona to my art training. As I was about to leave Ohio, I considered whether to move to New York or back to LA. In 1974, New York, at least in the galleries, was filled with "miniature art" and "photo realism," etc. Making sculptures in New York or at least in Manhattan seemed out of reach logistically.

I had grown up in Los Angeles with the Light and Space guys and artists like Bruce Nauman and Ed Kienholz. They were all hybrid artists where sculpture, painting, theater, and architecture were liberally blended. I had the mistaken impression that Los Angeles was palpably more supportive of these concoctions. When I moved back, I realized that these artists operated in a near vacuum without significant cultural or commercial support, so nobody cared what they did except their fellow artists. In a way there was no art superego in Los Angeles, and at that time at least, everything seemed possible. I think the lack of cultural places for showing their art caused artists to see their own studios as art venues, and, in many cases, the envelope of their studio became the art itself. Without the "cultural mosh pit" like in New York where the sheer density of artists and art institutions could hold certain art content aloft, Los Angeles often simply referred to their own senses, minds, directly physical experience for inspiration. The meaning and significance of their work was verified in their bodies. All that said, it certainly would have been useful to be in New York from a career point of view. Lately, LA is cooking, but in the 70s, LA artists had little commercial success.



*mereubu*, 1996. Bronze, 93 1/2 x 33 x 55 inches. Group exhibition (#10), 13 September–26 October 1996, L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

**Neil:** As the language of sculpture is increasingly computer driven with 3D modeling and printing, is it important that the artist still works with their hands?

**Peter:** My license plate reads “EYEHAND,” which reveals how strongly I feel that an artist’s main contribution to culture is focused on the scale between their body, life in their time, and their manifested object. I think an artist’s work is evidence of a life lived in a particular moment, and the intimacy of their process as expressed in their direct physical and psychic making of their work. Artists can’t compete with the capability of mass media or industry. But they can tell us something about the life of their body and spirit as they make their short passage through time.

I have used computers to some extent when I’ve done some enlargements for work and/or had some patterns cut for me from scans. But generally, I’m not interested in the idea of using a computer to make my work, except to facilitate enlargement or other kinds of issues that may have to do with engineering for public works.

**Neil:** As your works are often large and technically complicated, is the cost of production a consideration in the conception of your work?

**Peter:** Well, certainly complication and expense are a huge problem for me. I have regularly stuck my neck way out beyond what might have been wise. But I’ve always been interested in work that relates to your body and somehow confirms its meaning in the body. So, often the

scale of the work is large enough to literally hold or mirror the body. Early on, I made large works that you could even enter and move around in. Those works were ambitious and difficult to make as well as expensive and very labor intensive. I must always think about the expense of a work and the kind of time that goes into it. At my age, I’m very conscious of the limitations of works that I might want to make. Part of my success has been to balance my extravagant, playful, and experimental nature that wants to extend itself into the world broadly and the reality of what I can afford to make at any one time.

**Neil:** The later works seem to have sublimely incorporated sexual content; can you comment on this? Also, the later works seem to breathe inside of their large volumetric forms, while the earlier works were more linear and solid. Is this a fair assessment?

**Peter:** I don’t know if I would call it sexual content because when you say sexual it usually means genitalia to me or the act of sex. I think of the work probably more in terms of valence, as in the polarities of positive or negative, masculine or feminine, field or ground, and inside or outside. It is probably more related to the idea of yin and yang energy as you would see in eastern religion. I am more interested in how the work relocates the cerebral in our bodies. When people have a kind of visceral somatic response to my sculpture, then I feel it has been successful. Certainly, I do impart some quality of skin and flesh and some bit of anatomy, even if it is nearly submerged, because I want to draw our bodies into the experience of the work.

*redress*, 1998–2011. Mixed media, 63 1/2 x 70 x 50 inches. “eyehand: selected sculpture from 1975–2011,” 19 November–14 January 2012, L.A. Louver, Venice, CA



**Neil:** I have asked you about your artistic influences. Any thoughts on why so many of your forms reference the natural organic world?

**Peter:** Who knows how we get to where we are? I had always been obsessed with anatomy and biology as a child. My grandfather was a small-town general practitioner and surgeon. I was always making things as a kid. I wanted to make spaces to enter, to create a space to get lost in. I have been fascinated with the inside and outside of things. My largely hollow work is filled with holes that focus the threshold between the two. My father was paralyzed on his right side from a WWII sniper head wound. His survival from this mortal hole in his being must have played into my interest in the body. The '60s broke down barriers of all kinds, often seeking wholisms that brought disparate disciplines together in a complete field.

When I was in college, drawing or modeling the human figure in college was largely verboten. The LA artists I admired, who placed the viewer in a perceptual space, were for me inherently figurative. There was a preoccupation with the "new," so anything that opposed the old was elevated. Fabrication replaced modeling, industrial materials replaced bronze or stone, and the figure became you, the viewer, in an actual space with the art, rather than experiencing it through the proscenium of a picture frame, curtained stage, or on a pedestal. So, for years I fabricated everything. I already had such training, anyway, working summers for my Ohio Mennonite Studebaker relatives, who were marvelous inventors, fabricators, and engineers. And my birth town, Troy, Ohio, was the home of Hobart Brothers Welding Company and Trade School where I received my welding trade certifications. All of this was fine until I started trying to bring some aspect of the figure back into my work, not so much for depictive reasons but to draw our bodies into the equation. The problem for artists my age was to get out of the Platonic cul-de-sac of Judd and Andre. While as impeccable and convincing as



*dogstar*, 2007. Bronze, 88 x 76 x 89 inches.

these artists were, short of becoming an acolyte of them, we were forced to reengage the human. It took me a long time to give myself permission to think about an organic form, and initially, I had no idea how to make such work.

As for artistic influences, they ranged from early 20th-century greats Giacometti, particularly Brancusi, Jean Arp, Picasso, Gonzalez, and later David Smith and George Sugarman in mid-century. Then, of course, the LA artists and teachers I mentioned before.

*blackslot*, 2010. Fiberglass and steel, 95 x 29 x 102 inches, and *redpocket*, 2010. Fiberglass and steel, 72-1/2 x 65-1/2 x 85-1/2 inches. "3x3," L. A. Louver, Venice, CA.







*toast*, 2016–20. Fiberglass, resin, fillers, pigments and steel, 70 x 53 x 6 (12" with bracket) inches.

**Neil:** Do you start your ideas with form or drawing? Also, does one work lead to another stylistically?

**Peter:** Yes, I usually start with a crude drawing or two. Drawings can be really useful for thinking about certain kinds of forms. Other times, drawing isn't so useful be-

cause it may be hard to render something because it may not have discreet contours or forms. I may be trying to visualize a subtle surface that does not lend itself to drawing. In this case, I just start directly cutting, clawing, and scraping my materials. Bruce Nauman was a wonderful model for me as a young artist because he worked very broadly and seemed to do whatever he felt like doing. His work might be obdurate or even opaque and very minimal. Or other times, it might be ribald, noisy, and graphic. That made sense to me because I always think of art as a kind of garden with many different life forms, from the tiny blades of grass to mighty trees. And then the ecology of all these forms together can be its own subject. The human body is similarly differentiated between discreet organs and systems of relationships. I like to work broadly and not get stuck in a repetitive caricature of myself. Sometimes I focus on a particular form, then at times try to summarize the broader connections of my work.

**Neil:** Do you have favorite artists that influenced your work?

**Peter:** I loved the perceptual nature of Giacometti's work, where he tried to see his subjects in actual conditions of bright sunlight, dim twilight, walking in the rain, up close, or very distant.

He made every effort not to fill in the erosive, or blurring, distorting nature of seeing a figure in real settings by applying idealized preconceptions to what he observed, i.e., what he actually saw and not what he knew. I loved how David Smith drew on the floor or in space and applied the gesture of his body through his process. I also thought that George Sugarman's work of the late '50s and '60s was really underappreciated. His morphing forms were made intuitively not as some might imagine now by computer. Compositionally, he didn't hang everything on a tradition-

*thinmanlittlebird*, 2004. Graphite on mylar, 18 x 24 inches. Proposal drawing for Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, Indianapolis, IN.





(Left) *thinman*, 2009. Cast bronze, 44 x 4 x 4 feet. (Center) *littlebird*, 2009. Cast bronze, 5.25 x 11 x 11 feet. (Right) *littlebird*, (detail).

al figurative tree. He laid the forms out on the floor like a line of railroad cars. I think he was influential on people like Don Judd, at least in the serial arrangement of forms. And he could have several morphing themes in the same work. The best works played with scale, where the small at your feet would be contrasted with an intimation of architecture in the same sculptural group. I think that my individual and ensemble works owe a lot to George's innovations. There are certainly some of my peers that I feel very close to, like Martin Puryear. He makes really wonderful poetic physical work. It is a bit different than my own, I think, in that he seemingly works a lot with vernacular functional forms—things like baskets, wheels, and other tools. As with my work, I appreciated the artist's touch and the somatic in his work. Generationally, I get compared often to the British sculptors. We all had the same problem of what you do after the likes of Judd or Andre, so we can see our various strategies to reintroduce the body back in the work without devolving into depictions of it. I like much of what they do, but for my taste, there is a bit too much of the academic in their sculpture, which probably comes out of their educational traditions.

**Neil: What was your favorite project or commission?**

**Peter:** While doing many temporary commissions in a gallery or museum context, I have only completed four permanent public works. When I was younger, and because of the enterable scale of my work, I thought that public commissions might be a place to find support. I quickly realized that commissions where I could fully express my interests were going to be rare. No one wanted work you could enter both because of liability reasons and the imagined prospect of antisocial behavior. I was naïve. And because public funds were being spent, there was the idea

that everyone should have a say in what was made by an artist—except maybe the artist. Appropriate public content seemed to arise out of the current use of a site and its history. Generally, this leads to a pretty bland but broadly acceptable work, one that can be explained and forgotten just as easily. So, the opportunity to do a really full-blown Peter Shelton work in public has been scarce. Luckily, a few, well planned public works have managed to sneak through, where I can happily include them in my portfolio. I've completed four powerful public works in Indianapolis, two in Seattle, and one here in LA. Maybe my favorite is the Indianapolis *thinman/littlebird*. It was a real challenge to work with the existing 1917 Greek Revival building by Paul Cret, a Philadelphia-based French architect, and respect his wonderful architecture, and at the same time, to find a way to make a fresh work that would push forward sculpture to our current moment. Modernism, in its search for the essential and the new in the same spirit as science, music, and psychology, has had a great investment in denying the past. I understand this impulse. However, I felt compelled to make work for the Cret building, which only lacked sculpture unrealized at the end of WWI, to complete its whole Beaux Arts program, where a building is a kind of stage set waiting to receive the finishing touch of its sculpture.

**Neil: You mentioned you were related to the Studebaker family—what is the lineage?**

**Peter:** Actually, on both sides of my family, I had engineers, tradesmen, and architects. My father's mother was a Studebaker descended from three Studebaker blacksmith brothers who came from Solingen, Germany, to the United States in 1736. Their heresy in the Reformation was that they were Anabaptists, e.g., Mennonites, Amish,

Church of the Brethren, etc., who, amongst other things, didn't believe in child baptism. My cousins were incredible inventors, engineers, machinists, and fabricators. I worked several summers for them. On my mother's side were the Telfords—my middle name, as it turns out. Thomas Telford, who was an amazing civil and structural engineer, architect, and designer in the late 18th century and first half of the 19th century, was my relative. I was fascinated by this history, probably more than anyone in my family, save for my father. This history gave me an early glimpse of a life of making.

**Neil:** As you have had an amazing career on all levels, has your audience changed to include a younger generation?

**Peter:** That's an interesting question. Having stopped teaching, I don't feel in touch with what younger artists think. I wish I was still teaching and had younger colleagues. I still think of myself as a Modernist. Or as an art historian friend said recently to me, "you don't seem to have a postmodernist bone in your body." Things began to change pretty radically in the mid to late '70s, in my view. Irony became the norm, and often art was put forward only as a didactic dummy or prop for theory. A whole school of non-art art evolved. I wanted to be an artist because of great art I saw, not as a fulcrum for discussion outside of the art. Also, the discussion about art itself got a bit lazy. It seemed that the new motto was "everything is everything" and the more of everything the better. For

me, being a good artist means that you have to make a choice. Here is what I am going to do and try to do it well. From there, you are probably going to feel tinges of being passed over or irrelevant to the current flavor of the day. Art is an organic process, not a paper doll assembled from demographics. You have to have thick skin and risk not being seen, or not taken seriously, and just being misunderstood.

It is a pleasure looking at Peter's work through more than three decades. Objects are inert, yet we are not, and our changing perceptions measure our growth and thoughts. In this way, returning to Peter's work after so many years brings me back to the first time I saw his work. While looking at his sculpture now, the new work propels me forward. In this regard, the questions posed represent an edited version of a longer conversation. I am grateful for the time that Peter spent answering these questions as well as the opportunity to continue a dialogue with an artist whose work I have known and admired over many years.

**Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner*.**



(Left) *bluegate*, 2016–2020. Fiberglass, resin, fillers, pigments and steel, 62 x 59 x 6-1/2 (10" with bracket) inches. (Right) *whitemesa*, 2016–2020. Fiberglass, resin, fillers, pigments and steel, 54 x 54 x 9 (14" with bracket) inches.



# REVIEWS

## The Power of Persistence: Mighty Real/Queer Detroit

by K.A. Letts

One hundred and twenty-six artists and more than 700 pieces of art were displayed across metro Detroit during Pride Month in June 2022 as part of what's being billed as the largest exhibition of LGBTQ+ art ever. "Mighty Real/Queer Detroit" demonstrates both proof of concept and a declaration of intent—to represent, to party, to persist. Organized to celebrate the ins and outs and ups and downs of Detroit's LGBTQ+ artists over the last 77 years, from 1945 to 2022, plans are in the works to make this sprawling celebration of gender fluidity a recurring event.

The idea for the festival was initially sparked in the mind of visual and performance artist Patrick Burton by a conversation with longtime gay activist/writer Charles Alexander at the Scarab Club in 2020. "I just had this kind of surreal idea," Burton said. "I wanted to put a show together to celebrate the experience of others—to reveal the [LGBTQ+] community emerging from a desire for visibility. And to show how real and good that desire is." Burton

organized and curated the multi-venue, multi-media exhibition over the course of the next two years, a process complicated and extended by the pandemic. Oh, and by the way, the number of participating galleries expanded from 5 to 17 and picked up a sponsor: the Ford Foundation.

A curatorial project of this size and scope needs careful structuring—not an easy task for a stylistically diverse group unified by its identity but not by aesthetic outlook. And Burton not only elected to show work by young contemporary artists, he also included work that honors the memory of the many gay artists who were casualties of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early 1990s AND chose to posthumously honor gay artists of historic regional importance. All of this amounts to a pretty tall order.

In each venue, some aspect of gay life was showcased, from LGBTQ+ participation in the Detroit community at large to exhibitions more attuned specifically to the gay lifestyle. Rather than show the work of a given artist in a single gallery, examples of each artist's work were scat-

Matthew Papa (left), *Cluster* (Big Indian, NY), 2020. Pigment print. (Right) *Transmission No. 1* (Bearsville, NY), 2020. Pigment print. Photos by K.A. Letts.





(Left) Cyrah Dardas, *Levon*, 2021. Archival paper, earth pigment.



(Right) James Stephens, *The Utomah Portraits*, 2019. Oil on wood. Photos by K.A. Letts.

tered throughout multiple sites according to theme. So, for example, New York photographer Matthew Papa's artworks were shown at Cass Café, the Center for Creative Studies, Galerie Camille, Hatch Art, and Playground Detroit. Julie Sabit (coincidentally the longest living, working artist in the show at 91) had paintings at Anton Art Center, Collected Detroit, Galerie Camille, and Hatch Art. Leroy Foster (1925–1993), a historically significant Detroit artist, had paintings and photographs at four different galleries. Any effort to form an overview of the work of a particular artist rapidly devolved into a frustrating treasure hunt.

Maura Latty, *Thank you for Being a Friend: The Toll of Isolation on my Social Life*, 2020. Gouache on paper. Photo by K.A. Letts..



Still, the abundance and excellence of the work no doubt ended up being a heart-warming and life-affirming experience for the LGBTQ+ arts community.

Art critics' quibbles aside, the positive energy of Mighty Real/Queer Detroit was pervasive. Future iterations of the event will, as a matter of course, build upon the success of this year's inaugural effort. As Patrick Burton states in his exhibition essay:

*Queer art as a studied aspect of American art (and life) has been a comparatively recent phenomenon—and only recently celebrated. Over the past 77 years, the*

Tom Livo, *The Curlers*, 2021. Oil on matt board. Photo by Tom Livo.







Tom Livo, *Natalie on the Green Couch*, 2021. Oil on matte board. Photo by Tom Livo.

*richness of Detroit Queer life, as expressed in art, has developed in unseen and diverse ways. This exhibition is one of the first to capture the range and breadth of that development—and to give it the public space and curated attention it deserves.*

In 2022, the LGBTQ+ community finds itself at a peculiar societal crossroads. Many Americans—and members of the arts community in particular—have willingly accepted gender non-conformity. But a sizeable minority of the general public seems eager—still—to stuff gay and trans people back in the closet. It is certainly not a time for triumphalism.

But it might be appropriate to be optimistic. Photographer Matthew Papa captures the glass-half-full character of the moment well. “Achieving marriage equality in 2015 was a level of progress I never expected to see in my lifetime, but since then we’ve seen a frightening backlash against the transgender community with the aim of eras-

ing diverse voices and lives,” he says. He continues, “It’s a reminder that we need to stay vigilant and continue to fight until everyone in our community can live with freedom and dignity.”

Public events like “Mighty Real/Queer Detroit” play an important part in supporting the LGBTQ+ community through raising visibility and acceptance. Art and artists keep up the resistance and create progressive and inclusive environments that will open space for future generations.

The artworks pictured in this review are only a fraction of those shown in the exhibit. For a complete list of artists, go to <https://mrqd.org/artists/>.

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

(Left) Leroy Foster, *Martini Marti (Self Portrait)*, 1945. Reproduction, inkjet print on archival matte paper, 2022.  
(Right) Julie Sabit, *Choice*, 2005. Oil on canvas. Photo by K.A. Letts. Photos by K.A. Letts..





# "Survey"

William E. Jones

David Kordansky Gallery, New York

by Paul Moreno

Before seeing "Survey," a selection of films by William E. Jones, at David Kordansky Gallery, the word "survey" conjured a vision in my mind of a warren of small, partitioned spaces, each with a monitor of some sort showing a piece of video art that one would stand and watch, at least in part, before shuffling on to the next nook of the warren. I was rather surprised, then, when I arrived at the gallery and parted the heavy black velvet curtain that shielded the exhibition space from the light and sound of the lobby.

The exhibition took place in one large open space. Three Nelson benches were strategically placed throughout. On the right side of the gallery, a wall-height projection played a silent, black-and-white film that took the entire day to see in its entirety. On the far wall, opposite the velvet curtain, played a programmed series of films, with sound, each about five to 20 minutes in length, taking about an hour. When it was complete, another one-hour series of films began on an adjacent wall. When the second sequence was complete, the whole thing started again. This presentation allowed the viewer to enter at any moment, and, if they were willing, to sit and watch all two

hours of work and leave when they had completed both loops. In all, there were 12 film works in the show.

The daylong video, *Rejected* (2017), consists of a montage of more than 3,000 images commissioned—and later "killed"—by the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. Each image has a visible hole punched in it that the camera zooms into. For a split second there is only darkness, and then we zoom back out to a different image with a black circle where the photo has been punched. The images change, but the black dot maintains its size and position, and immediately the zoom into darkness reoccurs; the visual swooping repeats and repeats, always providing glimpses of new images, sometimes in full, sometimes in part, determined by where the image has been punched.

The grand size of this moving image on the wall, the tension between the viewers' desire to spend time with the images and the images' fleeting quality, and the playground swing movement of the film, all create an exhilarating experience. This video exemplifies two important elements in the show. One is the work's reliance on found material that the artist manipulates in ways that displace

William E. Jones, *Rejected*, 2017 (Stills). High definition video, black and white, silent, 7:47:50 hours. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.





William E. Jones, *Shoot Don't Shoot*, 2012 (Stills), Video, color, sound, 4:33 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and The Modern Institute, Glasgow.

the found material's intents. The other is about how one experiences an art film and how it functions in the art space.

The film work *Shoot Don't Shoot* (2012) is one of the films in one of the one-hour sequences. The film is derived from a law enforcement training film intended to teach officers to determine when to fire a gun at a suspect. A voice-over describes variations on an evolving scenario, involving the observation of a man who fits the description of a "known wanted felon" as he crosses a city street and heads toward a movie theater box office. The voice-over, at moments, asks the viewer if they should shoot the man in question. The man in question, it is important to note, is Black. The suspect moves down a sidewalk through a small crowd of white folks. This was a choice made by the creator of the original film. We are immediately struck by the implicit racism of this choice made some 50 years ago. We know the choice was made some 50 years ago because of a detail the original creator probably didn't consciously choose: the theater across the street is playing *Watermelon Man*, Melvin Van Peebles's 1970 film about a white man who overnight becomes Black and suddenly experi-

ences what his whiteness has protected him from. In one sequence of Jones's *Shoot Don't Shoot*, the suspect does turn and fire a gun at the viewer. It is hard to know if this isn't just a fear fantasy within this make-believe scenario. In the final sequence the suspect just buys a ticket and enters the movie theater. The voice-over never says it is okay to shoot.

It is notable that Jones's *Shoot Don't Shoot* was made the same year as the 2012 Aurora, CO movie theater shooting—one of a long series of mass shootings that fueled the hamster-on-the-wheel discussion about gun control in America. I do not mean to imply that the video was made in reaction to that shooting—I don't know if that is true or false. That context, however, provides an opening for consideration of an important quality of Jones's work. It does not pander to simple ideas but lays out complex cultural phenomena. For example, *Shoot Don't Shoot* does not simply moralize that guns are bad. Rather, *Shoot Don't Shoot* exemplifies how issues of public safety serve only certain members of the public. It does not ask, are you racist? Rather, it asks, what is your relationship to race? It asks us if, in some way, guns in the hands of certain people

William E. Jones, *Model Workers*, 2014 (Stills), High definition video, color, silent, 12:32 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.





William E. Jones, *Psychic Driving*, 2014 (Stills), Video, color, sound, 14:30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

make us feel safe. It presents a discomfiting notion that America's problem with guns is a problem rooted in us, if we are American.

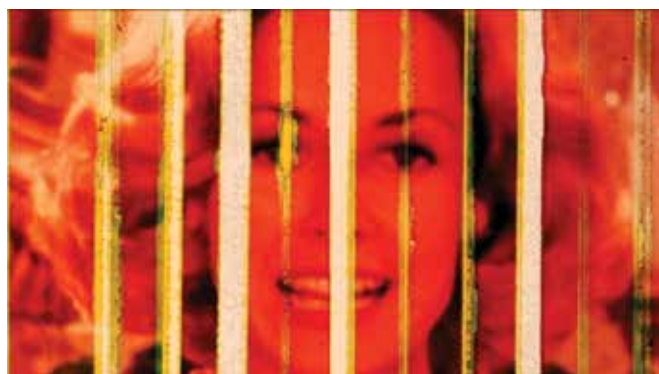
*Shoot Don't Shoot* is one of the shorter films in "Survey." I have taken a deep dive into it because it demonstrates how I feel Jones's films reframe our forgotten or disposable media to provoke thought. It is also a good example of how his work formally activates the art space. This is a distinguishing criterion for video art. We often look at painting or photography without thinking about the space it is in. Sculpture and—even more so—installation ask us to consider the art's environment. I feel that film, in the gallery setting, often has the burden of having to be an event in the space, to fill the space, to not just be an art object but to make the viewer its subject, to entertain you like TV, to swallow you like cinema. In this way, "Survey" was quite successful.

William E. Jones in recent years has been producing a trilogy of novels about the sexual and artistic development of a young guy attending art school in Los Angeles. In the second novel, *I Should Have Known Better*, the young man has a studio visit with a fictionalized version of the

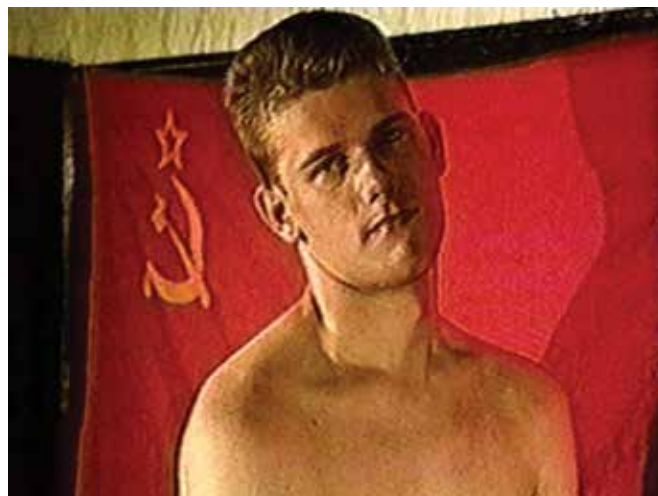
late artist Jack Goldstein, who explains, "I'm a filmmaker and writer, and I did performances. I don't know how to paint, either. I made paintings anyway, and it worked too." The young protagonist asks, "Is being a painter the only way to be an artist?" Jack Goldstein replies, "It's the only way to be the best."

As I stepped back from viewing the individual films and looked at the room, William E. Jones's work quite beautifully filled the space. *Shoot Don't Shoot* casts a warm blush across the room with its dark pink hues, and the composition of these found images are actually quite beautiful at moments, like a William Eggleston photograph come to life. *Model Workers* (2014), which consists of a montage of paper currencies from around the world, is simply quite lovely to look at, as it explores the monetization of labor, the enslavement of indigenous people, and the blind, tone-deaf cruelty of colonialism. *Psychic Driving* (2014), a film about experimental use of hallucinogenic drugs, vacillates between images of floating squares of color and scratchy distorted images that evoke an old, very distressed VHS tape. In a way, these images also evoke the painting of Jack Goldstein but with a calmer, soothing,

William E. Jones, *Midcentury*, 2016 (Stills), High definition video, color, sound, 30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.







William E. Jones, *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, 1998 (Stills). Video, color, sound, 20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

more elegant use of color. At many points throughout the exhibition, the films are just a pleasure to look at—dare I say, painterly. In all, the large projections, outsized images, and singular film works filled the space with washes of color, flickering light, and displaced voices, which made for an exciting experience.

The challenge inherent in “Survey” is that you know William E. Jones does the work. These are researched, informed, and thoughtful films that, even when as short as five minutes, a viewer might only lazily peek in on, stroll through, or abandon. I saw this happen several times as I watched “Survey.” Or worse yet, I saw one viewer sit in front of an image of a billowing American flag in Jones’s film *Midcentury* (2016), a sort of jazz-like visual poem about the American condition in the 20th century. As the viewer sat there looking ponderous, his companion made a video of him watching it, and then split once the proof of the viewer’s viewing was viewed. Jones was giving this guy so much to take in, but, as they say, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him think. I actually felt a little angry on Jones’s behalf and wondered what Jones might think of the current state of art viewing.

What Jones seems to be asking is that we view more carefully. Perhaps this happens especially poignantly in his film, *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998). This twenty minute film is made by carefully selecting and arranging clips from Eastern European gay porn films, which became popular in the '90s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In his voice-over, Jones mentions “consumers who pass over the boring parts.” Jones makes a film from the boring parts that not only exposes

the uncomfortable place where fetishization rubs against exploitation but also implicates the viewers, both of the original porn, and of Jones’s film, in the seedy economic and political power the U.S. and western allies hold over developing nations. It implies that these may in fact be not dissimilar actions. In one snippet, as the hands and forearms of a producer of the original porn reach into the shot to inspect the head and face and mouth of the porn’s young actor, one could assume a prescient point was being made about Ukraine’s omission from NATO. The boy is pretty, valuable, usable, but still, let’s keep an arm’s-length for now.

Lastly, I would like to mention that in a back room of the gallery, Jones installed three examples of a years-long project called *Gutter Collages*. I am not sure they were technically part of the show, but if you knew they were there they were so worth spending time with. Jones starts with full spreads taken from magazines. I am guessing these were from *Artforum*. He then collages an elegant selection of other images onto the spread with noteworthy technical skill. These compositions express a powerful understanding of history, art, semiotics, and emotion. You also know that the source material is, in its own way, precious, but not so much that Jones will not take it apart to give the viewer something truly meaningful. This same trope exists in his film work—destruction as a form of creation.

**Paul Moreno is an artist, designer and writer working in Brooklyn, New York. He is a founder and organizer of the New York Queer Zine Fair. His work can be found on Instagram @bathedinafterthought.**

# "All That Glows in the Dark of Democracy"

## Weinberg/Newton Gallery, Chicago

by Annette LePique

The exhibition "All that Glows in the Dark of Democracy" is a collaboration between the ACLU of Illinois and Weinberg/Newton Gallery, a noncommercial art gallery that connects artists and nonprofit organizations to promote public education and discourse. The group show serves as a landing stage for the ACLU's "Engagement Series on Democracy: We the People." The ACLU describes the series' programming (community storytelling nights, readings and podcasts, and public talks with activists and scholars, in addition to the exhibition) as a way in which to counter and heal the growing divisions in America's political climate. The exhibition asks of viewers, "Do not tell us what you are against; tell us what you are for."

If America shares any collective experience, it is the uneasy and often inexpressible sensation of the slippages between money, culture, race, and sex under "democratic" capitalism. The links between these matters are neither easy nor solid. Under the logic of the market, they are imbued with an uncanny power to become stand-ins for one's humanity. This is a power to turn people into things

to be bought, sold, and commodified. It is difficult then, to understand what it means to talk about democracy and America's democratic institutions in an era of rapacious neoliberalism, as there are major dissonances between those doing the buying and those forced to sell in the American market.

Why, then, are we here? What are the stakes for an exhibition of art that positions itself as a necessity to the public good, a democratic space? The answer here will dismay some but hearten others: this art will not save you. This art will not save America. No art will save this country. The road to an American society that is just and caring will be paved through painful, incremental progress won through collective organizing and action. This is a progress born of strike lines and protests, not a River West gallery. However, this is art that at its best cultivates a free exchange of knowledge and ideas. These elements are integral to the formation of connection and community, building blocks of material progress. While some work within "Glow" succeeds at this endeavor, the exhibition's frustrating failures are unfortunate distractions—a fitting reflection of the

Hannah Givler, *reverb damping sculpture*, 2022. Installation view. Image courtesy of Weinberg/Newton Gallery; photo by Evan Jenkins.





Aram Han Sifuentes, with Bun Stout, Jon Satrom, and studiothread, *The Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All who Legally Can't*, 2022. Image courtesy of Weinberg/Newton Gallery; photo by Evan Jenkins.

conditions America's institutions have wrought. There is value, then, in understanding how and why such failures occur in the exhibition, as it allows viewers to better glean Glows' moments of inspiration.

Ariana Jacob's *The American Society for Personally Questioning Political Issues*, staged in 2012 and 2022 as a series of public conversations, archived in newsprint and the project's blog, is built upon an uninformed strain of liberal politics. Though Jacob categorizes herself as liberal in the project's framing, she does little to either define the term or situate it within any concrete leftist framework (fitting oversights for this brand of liberalism). The project's primary goal seems to ask the open-ended, unhelpful, and out of touch "can't we all just get along?" For both iterations of *American Society*, Jacob traveled through towns in red states to find people who identify as conservative or libertarian to speak with her about their politics. While Jacob purposefully did not prepare for these conversations in the name of tolerance and neutrality, the project suffers from that lack of foresight. Jacob's conversations routinely lose their focus, with both the artist and her conversation partner struggling to speak to one another. Even the project's ephemera (lawn signs, banners, and fliers designed in the style of political adverts) suffer from vague and contradictory language.

Throughout Jacob's records of each conversation, she states a wish to know more, to have a better grasp of the economics routinely cited by project participants. I wish that Jacob, currently the Chair of

Bargaining for her institution's part time faculty union, would have heeded her own advice and entered the project's conversations in both 2012 and 2022 with greater preparation. Jacob is doing vital work for her university community and could have continued that work in *American Society*, especially when the conversations turned to economic conditions. This is the key takeaway of *American Society*: a conception of broad-mindedness built upon platitudes serving no one. Rather, it is much more useful to think of broad-mindedness as an openness to learning and discomfort in equal measure.

In contrast, Aram Han Sifuentes' *The Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can't* provides the opportunity for gallery visitors to share, learn, and grow from one another's ideas. *Voting Station* makes space

Aram Han Sifuentes, *The Official Unofficial Voting Station*, 2016–present, detail. Image courtesy of Weinberg/Newton Gallery; photo by Evan Jenkins.







Kandis Friesen, *Monuments/Monumental*, 2017. HD video, color, silent, 15 minutes. Image courtesy of Weinberg/Newton Gallery; photo by Evan Jenkins.

for the comfortable and painful in equal turn, all while providing concrete resources for visitors to contribute to the work of protecting collective voting rights. Han Sifuentes's work is activated and enlivened by this democratic exchange; it sparks with hope and possibility. Their artistic practice as a whole is built upon social engagement and active community organizing; their past pieces include work on behalf of those impacted by police brutality and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Created in collaboration with Bun Stout, Jon Satrom, and studiothread, *Voting Station* consists of multiple voting booths constructed by the artist, where gallery visitors can cast their ballots. Ballots are available in both English and Spanish and ask visitors the issues they wish they could vote on within the local, national, and global levels. The ballots are collected with responses projected in the gallery and available to view at <http://officialunofficial.vote>. The resources Han Sifuentes provides on the work to protect state and national voting rights are both insightful and useful. *Voting Station* gives concrete steps to visitors to contribute time, money, and labor to safeguard rights that are regularly under attack by conservative and moderate forces.

A common analogy found throughout democratic political theory is the image of the human body; democracy is imagined as a system of organization built from breath, blood, and electricity. Fragility also finds home in this body. Democracy is delicate: it ages, and degrades; it

must be cared for and rebuilt anew. Democracy is not a guarantee. Kandis Friesen's 2017 *Monuments/Monumental* is a testament to such frailty through the frames of shared memory and public architecture. Shot in HD video across Ukraine in 2016, the fifteen-minute silent film installation features landscapes of empty Leninist monuments across the Ukrainian countryside. These monuments were abandoned after the fall of the Soviet Union and the country's vote for independence. Prior to Russia's invasion, these monuments stood as ghostly sites of public memory. In the 2022 essay *Monumental Memory*, published as a newsprint takeaway with Friesen's project, artist Dmytro Soloviov writes of the monuments' connection to a specific Ukrainian tradition of craft and how the Russian invasion works to erase that shared history.

The toll of democracy is high: it is paid in blood and toil, work, and good trouble. The cost of living and the making of an America that reflects the country's highest ideals will not be paid by a visit to Weinberg/Newton Gallery. Yet perhaps the conversations born of the exhibition and the time and work of artists like Han Sifuentes constitute the sweat and grit of those agonizingly hard first steps of change.

**Annette LePique** is an arts writer. Her interests include the moving image and psychoanalysis. She has written for *Newcity*, *ArtReview*, *Chicago Reader*, *Stillpoint Magazine*, *Spectator Film Journal*, and others.

# Clay as Soft Power

*by K.A. Letts*

In this age of the internet, we are used to getting “a little bit of everything all of the time,” as the comedian Bo Burnham says. In a way, this abundance of available information and imagery dilutes the power of the art we see. Shocking, colorful, transgressive images and novel mediums grab the spotlight, whether they are consequential or not—NFTs, anyone?

Museum curators and administrators have the unenviable task of monitoring contemporary social trends and the artforms that express them, all the while conserving and displaying the art historical holdings represented in their collections.

The University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) is successfully performing this curatorial two-step in 2022

with a couple of ambitious new exhibitions, both created in-house. “Watershed” brings together works by 15 contemporary artists that are intended—as it says in its exhibition description— “to immerse visitors in the interconnected histories, present lives and imagined futures of the Great Lakes region.” This decidedly contemporary show, curated by Jennifer M. Friess and on view until October 23, will be followed in November by a wide-ranging art historical survey, “Soft Power: Shigaraki Ware in Postwar America and Japan.” The exhibition draws upon the museum’s extensive collection of traditional and contemporary ceramics, as well as artworks loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Art, the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park and many private collectors. My



Storage Jar, Muromachi period (1392–1573). Stoneware with natural ash glaze to early Edo period (1615–1868), 17 5/8 x 12 3/16 x 12 3/16 inches. University of Michigan Museum of Art. Museum purchase made possible by the Margaret Watson Parker Art Collection Fund.



(Left) John Stephenson, *Shigaraki Footed Plate*. 1962 Stoneware 8 3/4 x 9 1/2 x 3 inches. Collection of Susanne Stephenson.



(Right) Susan Stephenson, *Orange Wave I*, 1996. Terracotta with slip and glaze, 27.5 x 29 x 8.5 inches. Collection of the artist.

review of this upcoming art historical survey is based on interviews with the Curator of Asian Art at UMMA, Nat-su Oyobe, as well as on information from the exhaustive 91-page catalog. “Soft Power” tells the complex and little-known story of how, in the years following the end of World War II, the governments and cultural institutions of Japan and America used the ancient traditional craft of Shigaraki ware to reintroduce a former enemy in a friendlier light. The exhibition and its accompanying catalog will be the first to focus on the collection and presentation of this Japanese folk art clay tradition during the Cold War era, tracing its origins through cultural exchange between the two nations and into the studio practice of many contemporary Japanese and American ceramic artists.

With their rough surfaces, irregular glazing and hand-built shapes, Shigaraki ware ceramics, at first glance, would seem to be unlikely emissaries for post war Japan’s reintroduction to the world as a reformed post-war geopolitical partner.

The Japanese and American governments—and their allied cultural institutions, working together—chose to promote this austere and modest craft as representative of a new egalitarian and democratic Japan. Shigaraki ware was officially endorsed as an aesthetic rebuttal to the highly sophisticated, industrially produced porcelain of pre-WWII imperial Japan.

The Shigaraki ceramic tradition was born in communities near Kyoto and Nara in the 14th century. One of the Six Ancient Kilns (also including Seto, Echizen, Tokoname, Tanba, and Bizen), Shigaraki ware was originally produced by rural potters who created humble utilitarian vessels for the everyday needs of the region’s farmers. Using rough local clay, artisans formed mortars, water jugs and other useful vessels by hand and fired them in wood-fired tunnel kilns, called anagama, excavated into hillsides. The nat-

Takahashi *Rakusai III* (1898–1976) *Shigaraki Ware Plate*, ca. 1960. Stoneware with natural ash glaze, 1 3/4 x 18 7/8 x 9 1/4 inches. University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase.







Georgette Zirbes, *Hanging Wall Plate #31*, ca. 1985. White stoneware, slips, oxides, and clear glaze, fired cone 6 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 3 inches. Collection of the artist.

ural glazing formed by the wood ash in the firing process gave the ceramics their characteristic warm and irregular surfaces. Later, in the late 15th century, this simple craft became associated with the zen buddhist concept of *wabi sabi*, a world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. Shigaraki ware vessels gradually came to be produced specifically for the tea ceremony and remain closely associated with it.

A 17-piece collection of 20th century Japanese ceramics form the nucleus of the works presented in "Soft Power."

The pieces were acquired in 1963 by UMMA's director Charles Sawyer at the suggestion of John Stephenson, a professor of ceramic art and influential educator who had studied the tradition of wood-fired unglazed ware at Shigaraki and other historic kiln sites in Japan. Stephenson was one of the early participants in the postwar cultural exchange between Japanese and American potters, along with his wife and fellow ceramicist Susan Stephenson. He was convinced that the superb technique and artistic vision they demonstrated would inspire the next genera-

(Left) 6. Koyama Kiyoko, Large Jar, ca. 2000. Stoneware with natural ash glaze, 13 3/8 x 12 3/16 x 12 3/16 inches. University of Michigan Museum of Art, gift of the artist, 2010. (Right) Koyama Kiyoko, Vase, ca. 2000. Stoneware with natural ash glaze, 10 1/16 x 11 5/8 x 5 1/2 inches. University of Michigan Museum of Art, gift of Lori and David London.





Takahashi Yoshiko (b. 1988) Shigaraki Vase, ca. 2010. stoneware, 8 5/8 x 6 1/4 inches. The Robert and Lisa Kessler Collection, Denver, Colorado.

tion of American ceramic artists. His intuition proved to be prescient; what began as a quasi-governmental project in the 1950s has since developed over time into a complex web of cross-cultural exchange. The vessels in the exhibition illustrate this, from medieval Japanese examples of Shigaraki ware to the evolving aesthetics of the tradition as practiced by contemporary ceramic artists.

In the exhibition, examples of traditional Shigaraki jars and vases set the stage for this narrative of global synergy. Vessels from the Muromachi period (1392–1573) into the Edo period of the late 19th century, some belonging to the museum and others on loan, show a consistent appreciation for the humble and everyday. The well-developed aesthetic supplied a solid philosophical foundation for the flowering of innovation that resulted from the postwar exchange of ideas.

Many of the artists who participated in the cultural exchange of the postwar era are represented here. John and Susan Stephenson have several pieces on view in "Soft Power." John Stephenson's *Shigaraki Footed Plate*, from 1962, shows the artist's appreciation for the formal potential of the rough, heavy clay as a material and its significance as a conceptual entrance to a more sculptural appreciation of the medium, moving away from its utilitarian origins. Instead of the traditional ash glazes of Shigaraki ware, Susan Stephenson introduced glazes in the late '60s that expanded the palette of available colors within the Shigaraki tradition. Another ceramicist whose early interest

in Shigaraki ware helped to introduce it to an American audience, Georgette Zirbes, is represented here by three delicate flat plates. Also represented in the exhibition are examples of vessels by significant modern Japanese ceramicists working in the Shigaraki tradition during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as recent works by younger Japanese artists.

Takahashi Rakusai III (1898–1976) whose family of potters was active in Shigaraki since the end of the Edo period (1615–1868) successfully revived traditional Momoyama-style jars and tea wares in the post-WWII period, while also exploring new forms that incorporated ancient techniques. His *Shigaraki Ware Plate* on display in "Soft Power," juxtaposes traditionally produced ash glazes with the modern silhouette of a rectangular plate.

In the postwar period, whether in the normal course of events or because of western influence, Japanese women artists found that barriers to entry in the production of ceramics (traditionally limited to men) had fallen. Koyama Kiyoko, inspired by American women artists, developed her own art practice in the 1960s within the Shigaraki tradition, building her own tunnel kiln in 1971. Her work has been shown internationally and is represented here by two pieces now owned by UMMA.

The young ceramicist Takahashi Yoshiko (b. 1988) represents the history of Shigaraki ceramics and also points the way to its future. The first woman to represent the historically significant family of Takahashi Rakusai, Takahashi is now an independent artist. The angular *Shigaraki Vase* shown in "Soft Power" adds a geometric element to the organic qualities inherent in the art form.

American artists, many of whom are represented in this exhibition, continue to visit and study in the Shiga region at the traditional kilns near Kyoto. The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in Shiga province includes a ceramic museum that houses a distinguished collection of ceramics from around the world and an active artist-in-residence program that preserves the postwar tradition of cultural exchange between Japan and the West. Artists learn to use the materials and methods of Shigaraki ware but also build upon the tradition. As some contemporary ceramic artists add new glazes, alternative methods of firing, and novel forms, others keep the traditional processes alive in an ongoing discourse that shows no signs of waning.

New mediums, political content—even just novelty for its own sake—are fashionable in contemporary art discourse right now, but the ceramicists working within the Shigaraki ware tradition remind us of the importance of aesthetic integrity and respect for art history even as this traditional artform evolves in new directions.

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# Welcome to the Dollhouse: The Labors and Power of Girlhood

## RUSHWOMAN, Chicago

by Annette LePique

**B**onnie Lucas is a New York-based artist whose decades long practice merges her labor activism with explorations of feminine identity and the economics of girlhood. Lucas, a longtime union activist within New York's public schools and universities, is an artist highly in tune to how art is work, work is a bodily act, and that both work and bodies are tightly regulated under the logic of capitalism. Lucas amplifies the power of gendered materials to celebrate the work of femininity and mirror the depth of violence girls face in this world. I use the word "girls" in an expansive sense, as Lucas's work questions what being a girl means within a culture that persistently tries to commodify identities and fantasies. Yet, like Lucas's practice, some elements of our shared humanity

are too free, too messy, and proverbially too much to ever bend to capitalism's rule of thumb.

Lucas's exhibition "Girl With A Purse," up at the Chicago gallery RUSCHWOMAN through August 21, continues the artist's study of what girlhood and femininity can mean within a capitalist culture of buying, selling, and consuming things. To understand Lucas's work in "Girl With A Purse," it is important to first understand the histories and structural conditions of the spaces within which she operates. She is an artist who grounds herself in—who lives—the realities of a woman's work.

In the New York City neighborhood of Greenwich Village, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burned to the ground in 1911. The fire caused the deaths of 146 workers. One hundred and twenty-three of the deceased were women and girls who recently immigrated to the country. The fire stands as one of the deadliest industrial disasters in American history. It spurred a collective awakening to the issues of workplace safety standards and worker rights (catalyzing movements that would lead to the formation of organizations such as OSHA and the Workers United Union). The garment industry, and fashion more broadly, remains a hotbed of labor abuses against its mostly female workforce.

Treacly ribbons, sequins, rhinestones, beads, embroidery, silk, glitter, and sickly-sweet lace—these are the materials of craft long coded as feminine. "Women's work is never done," says the aphorism, but it is pushed to the margins of



Bonnie Lucas, *Girl with Purse*, 2007. Mixed media sculpture, 12h x 13.5w x 6.5d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.





Bonnie Lucas, *Girl with Tiger*, 2007. Mixed media sculpture, 11h x 11w x 5.5d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.

capitalist society where low pay, mechanization, and environmental hazards transform the art of craft into mass produced consumables. Think of lost and tossed plastic beads, broken bracelet chains, sequins, glitter, crumpled whorls of satin, and the flammable threads of a doll's hair.

Yet, even in the face of the realities neoliberalism has hoisted upon feminized making and materials, these objects possess an unassailable joy. These are the materials of girlhood, the idea of girlhood. There is power within these materials and their attendant objects. While "girlhood" as a concept can be bought and sold, girlhood as a stage for unrequited loves, secret desires, and frightening



Bonnie Lucas, *Sweetness*, 2007. Mixed media sculpture, 12h x 12w x 5 1/2d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.

freedoms resists consumption. Girlhood as a zone of feelings, of firsts, is something uncontainable and uncontrollable; you can't put a price tag on anarchy that destabilizes the whole damn shop.

Turn from Greenwich Village to the markets of New York's Chinatown and the discount stores of the Lower East Side. It is here that you can find the makers and sellers of the wares listed above, it is also where Bonnie Lucas has long sourced the materials for her multidisciplinary practice. I dub Lucas's practice as multidisciplinary, as she has experimented with form and medium for the last five decades. Lucas utilizes collage, assemblage, painting, and

Bonnie Lucas, *Happy Together*, 2006. Mixed media sculpture, 13h x 12w x 5d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.



Bonnie Lucas, *Girl in Green Dress*, 2007. Mixed media sculpture, 13h x 11w x 5d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.





Bonnie Lucas, *Some Friends*, 2007. Mixed media sculpture, 12.5h x 12w x 7d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.



Bonnie Lucas, *Girl with Ducks*, 2006. Mixed media sculpture, 12.5h x 11.5w, 4.5d inches. Photo courtesy RUSCHWOMAN gallery.

sewing to cut, disrupt, retool, and reassemble what a girl is once the cash register turns off and the mall closes.

Bonnie Lucas's "Girl With A Purse" presents a window into the artist's assemblage work. The exhibition features ten pieces composed within picnic baskets, sourced from New York's Chinatown markets, with deconstructed doll parts and dime store ephemera. Each piece features titles such as *Girl with Tiger*, *Sweetness*, *Happy Together*, and the titular *Girl with Purse*. Each doll exists in a state of dismemberment: limbs are splayed and sometimes replaced with children's toys or princess-themed paraphernalia. There's penetration by stuffed animal, beads, ribbons; Lucas's material has a tendency to merge together so it becomes difficult to tell where the girl begins and the thing ends. Excess abounds: within each basket there is a wealth of ribbon, tuille, rhiestone, and glitter. You name it, the girl has bought it.

In a 2020 interview with the *New York Times*, Lucas considers how viewers have read the chaos, the consumption, the penetration and dissection, within her collages and assemblages as violences and traumas. Lucas notes that while her work reflects the violences of our culture, she also sees her practice as one of profound freedom. Lucas states:

*I had new courage to dismantle and cut up things I overvalued. The store-bought object is not meant to be cut up and dismantled. It's highly valued in our culture. Especially by women. We take care of things, we wash things, we store them.*

The courage of which Lucas speaks is a freedom from the constraints, accumulation, and consumption placed upon an individual's personhood. As Lucas expressed, girls, women, the ones who consume—the ones who care, wash,

and store things—are charged with a particular set of gendered duties and behaviors under capitalism.

A perception of friction between Lucas's control of form and the deep vein of sensual pleasure that runs throughout "Girl With A Purse" is intriguing, as it speaks to the tension inherent to the body of the girl in our culture. This is a body that is touted as fantasy, both known and unknown, a zone of contradiction. Lucas's handling of her materials is a celebration of tactility: it allows viewers to feast upon the pleasures of touchin and making. Lucas utilized needlework and methods from weaving and millinery for the creation of each piece instead of glue. These are the ways in which girls' and womens' hands can shape and remake worlds. One experiences the urge to reach out to grasp the elements of each basket: the sheen of a magenta sand scoop, the unyielding orbs of plastic pearl chains, and the delicate wings of silk dove appear fleshy and sweet with colors that meet the eye like wrapped candies. The pieces in the exhibition present a deep appreciation for the artistic traditions that have been traditionally handed down through feminine lines.

There are no easy nor simple conclusions to such a show, as no such answers exist for the work, creation, and bodies of girls, and women in America. Yet, if anything could be said, know that power resides in fantasy, in creating and bringing to life ideas that are hard, messy, and not easily stomachached. A purse, after all, is also a bag of tricks. Never underestimate what work a girl can do.

**Annette LePique** is an arts writer. Her interests include the moving image and psychoanalysis. She has written for *Newcity*, *ArtReview*, *Chicago Reader*, *Stillpoint Magazine*, *Spectator Film Journal*, and others.

# The Enduring Achievement of Cézanne's Struggle

The Art Institute of Chicago's 2022 Retrospective "Cezanne"

by Diane Thodos

*What I am trying to translate to you is more mysterious, it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the implacable source of sensations.*

– Paul Cézanne

*A work of art that did not begin in emotion is not a work of art.*

– Paul Cézanne

*Aesthetic autonomy is a prelude to personal autonomy, even a basic part of it. Human beings are not fully human without aesthetic experience.*

– Donald Kuspit<sup>1</sup>

*The essential precondition for introspection is solitude.*

– William Deresiewicz<sup>2</sup>

Studies have found the average time a person spends looking at a museum artwork is between 15 and 30 seconds. The more contemporary the work is the less time is spent looking at it—if indeed at all. I have frequently noticed the almost completely empty contemporary art exhibition rooms on the first floor of the Renzo Piano wing at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC)—a place to pass up on the way to see more visually satisfying work. The same goes for the majority of the endless train of conceptual art installations at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. Both are signs of the visually entropic boredom that postmodern art has cast upon us. With rare exceptions, conceptualism offers almost nothing to stimulate the eye and mind, much less the senses, in the dead end that the modernist "avant-garde" has become today.

The exact opposite is true about AIC's traveling retrospective of Paul Cézanne's work in the United States—the first in 25 years. The distance of time between the 1996

Paul Cézanne, *The Basket of Apples*, 1890–1894. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 31.4 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.







Paul Cézanne, *The Gulf of Marseille Seen from L'Estaque*, 1878–79. Oil on canvas, 22.8 x 28.3 inches. Musée d'Orsay.

Philadelphia Museum exhibit and now reveals an art world that is even more aesthetically and imaginatively barren—more addicted to technological media and deskilled art techniques—than ever before. By contrast it is uncanny to experience the power of Cézanne's visual vibrancy that remains as compelling and alive for audiences today as it did for artists who made the trip to his studio in Aix-en-Provence 140 years ago.

The impact on viewers is immediate. Cézanne's best works have an expressive intensity and visual concentration that holds the eye and moves the mind to introspection. Throughout his life Cézanne talked about his "sensation" expressed through his linear and planar brushwork and discontinuous lines and contours. The vibrating coloristic tones of his still lifes, portraits, and landscapes were

embedded in rhythmic compositions that his eye "discovered." These revelations came from trips around Provence, finding particular landscapes, and in the growing complexity of his arrangements of fruit and pottery, arranged on rumpled tablecloths and printed fabric. His discovery of this mysterious tension—an abstracted rendition of his subject matter using shifting planes of color—resulted in the contradictory and simultaneous depiction of ambiguity and concreteness. His rendering of both at once makes his subjects look simultaneously dynamic and strangely timeless. They have lost none of their visual intensity and vigor since they were created.

It is hard to miss how the compositional energy in *Basket of Apples* (1893) is increased by a bottle touching the top of the image plane, or how a rumpled cloth and



(Left) Paul Cézanne, *The Sea at L'Estaque Behind Trees*, 1878–79, detail.



(Right) Pablo Picasso, *Houses on the Hill* 1909, detail.



Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplant*, 1890–1894. Oil on canvas, 25.5 x 31.8 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

printed drape serve as abstract rhythmic waves that transport apples and pears across the canvas. They become theatrical devices that construct the expressive potential of the scene, making everyday objects seem almost monumental. Much the same happens with the relationships he “found” in nature, where he subconsciously sought those same abstractly resonant connections. The motifs, shapes, and forms he found in nature—trees, houses, roads, rocks, mountains, bays, and hillsides—skillfully play off each other with an abstract and unifying force. There is an underlying harmony in his 1878 painting *Gulf of Marseille Seen from L’Estaque*, where a projected pier in the distant bay echoes the rhythmic overlay of plank-like roads and ploughed furrows in the lower landscape.

By having the works from different time periods grouped in the same room, the AIC’s Cézanne exhibition displays his will to experiment and change his style over a lifetime. The expressive syrupy strokes of his early still lifes emulating Gustav Courbet give way to the brighter impressionist-influenced palette inspired by his teach-

er and friend Camille Pissarro, who encouraged him to paint *en plein air*. This lighter palette experimented with the bright landscapes of the Midi as much as his luminous fruits on white plates. One comes away noticing how each work is distinctly different, and that each one must have been the result of a unique visual struggle, sometimes recorded over months and years of intense persistent observation. Some apples are rendered in a thickly impacted pastiness, while others are rendered with a thinner decorative luminescence. Over time one sees how the contours and folds of a napkin or tablecloth with apples could relate to boulders and rocky crags of his Bibemus quarry or the blocky mass of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Early approaches to the mountain express a placid solidity that is upended by later works where the shuttling brushstrokes of vertical and horizontal planes nearly dissolve the mountain landscape into pure abstraction. Art historian Meyer Shapiro delves into the dynamic ambiguity of the artist’s drawing process, particularly in his watercolors:

(Left) Paul Cézanne, *Plate of Apples*, 1877, detail.

(Right) Paul Cézanne, *Stoneware Pitcher*, 1893–94, detail







(Left) Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples and Oranges*, 1885, detail.

(Right) Paul Cézanne *Cliffs in L'Estaque*, 1882–85, detail.

*...by multiplying discontinuities and asymmetry it increases the effect of freedom and randomness in the whole...It is as though there is no independent, closed, pre-existing object given once and for all to the painter's eye for representation, but only a multiplicity of successively probed sensations—sources and points of reference for a constructed form which possesses in a remarkable way the object-traits of the thing represented: its local color, weight, solidity, and extension.<sup>3</sup>*

The tensions of the abstract-concrete-reality of his compositions are especially evident in his still lifes, which restlessly compose and rearranged fruit, ceramics, and fabrics into some of the most dynamic and novel compositions of his time. This animating “abstraction,” in addition to the bathers in his last works, had a tremendous impact on the creative discoveries of nearly all the major modernist movements of the 20th century: Cubism, Fauvism, Expressionism, and the development of abstraction in general. The period from 1906 to 1914 was the time of the “big bang” in modern art that exploded into Parisian cultural circles and spread throughout Europe. Cézanne was prescient in saying, “I point the way. Others will come

after.” Picasso acknowledges he was “the father of us all.” Meyer Shapiro rightly claims:

*He produced no school but has given impulse directly or indirectly to almost every new movement since he died. His power to excite artists of different tendency and technique is due, I think, to the fact that he realized with equal fullness so many sides of his art.<sup>4</sup>*

The sheer abundance of suggestive possibilities in his work is why “later artists built on a particular element of his style.”<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see how Cézanne’s painting *The Sea at L'Estaque Behind Trees* (1878–79)—a work Picasso owned—directly inspired Picasso’s and Braque’s rectilinear houses painted only a year or two after Cézanne passed away in 1906. It was only a matter of time before the force of Cézanne’s shifting abstract planes would evolve into the shattered crystalline space of Cubism. Unlike his landscapes, portraits and still lifes, Cézanne’s last works—*The Large Bathers*—were not painted from life but were composed in the studio, synthesized from earlier works inspired by Eugene Delacroix’s romantic themes. They are the culmination of his lifelong struggle with abstraction, synthesizing his bathers and landscape into an

Paul Cézanne *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1887, detail.



Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire from Les Lauves* 1905, detail







Henri Matisse, *Still Life with Blue Tablecloth*, 1909. Oil on canvas. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

imaginary rhythmic whole. Matisse's Fauvism abounds with Cézanne-inspired motifs and compositional discoveries, particularly regarding the female nude and his still lifes on decorative fabrics. Picasso's monstrously distorted nudes were directly inspired by Cézanne's disquieting blocky bathers, whether as studies for his famous *Les Femmes d'Alger* or later as pinheaded dancers on a beach from his Surrealist period. Cézanne's influence extended to the vitality of Gauguin's brushwork, the expressionist figures of Max Beckmann, the landscapes and still lifes of Giorgio Morandi, and even up to the contemporary paintings of Jasper Johns with their shifting encaustic surfaces.

*The contradictory richness of Cézanne's work has made it an essential school for artists. Sometimes it is his doubt, his uneasiness, his mistakes, his eccentricities and his frustrations that have encouraged artists...at other moments by contrast it is the certainty,*

*clarity, and rightness of his painting that appears most striking.*<sup>6</sup>

Thankfully the organizers of the retrospective avoided a blatantly commercial approach to the exhibition, sticking to the historical basis of Cézanne's development without diverting into extra artistic anecdotes, theoretical diatribes, or Thomas Hoving-style sensationalism. Gratefully there was not a lot of drama in Cézanne's life for the media or Hollywood to capitalize on, unlike Van Gogh and Gauguin whose eventful lives became popularly ensconced on the silver screen. Cézanne always emphasized how the importance lay in the will of his effort. "Chatter about art is almost useless," and "The man must remain obscure: the pleasure is found in the work."

To reduce Cézanne to being a hermit driven by the need for artistic purity misses the existential point that drove his work into being. Following his stint studying

Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1894–1905. Oil on Canvas, 50 x 77.2 inches. The National Gallery.





(Left) Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1894–1905, detail. Oil on Canvas, 50 x 77.2 inches. The National Gallery.

(Center) Henri Matisse, *Le Bonheur de vivre*, 1905–1906, detail. Oil on canvas. The Barnes Foundation.

(Right) Henri Matisse, *Bathers by a River* 1909–1917, detail. Oil on Canvas. Art Institute of Chicago.

in Paris, the intensity of his inner artistic life in Aix-en-Provence demonstrates the creative capacity he was able to develop precisely because he was outside that city's cultural and institutional power. It is equally noteworthy that other great painters of that time achieved their most important mature works outside Paris: Van Gogh in Arles and Gauguin in Tahiti. All three had created intensely personal and expressive art driven by self-affirming instincts and a profound sense of agency. For all three, this both tested and opened expressive and cultural boundaries, and for a good reason.

*...the conception of a personal art rested upon a more general idea of individual liberty in the social body and drew from the latter its confidence that an art of personal expression has a universal sense.<sup>7</sup>*

Contemporary philosopher and social critic Noam Chomsky gives a very similar interpretation for the human

need for personal autonomy in expression:

*A fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work or creative inquiry for free creation without the arbitrary limiting effects of coercive institutions. Then of course it will follow that a decent society should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic to be realized...The denial of the existence of the self is the teleological denial of the embodiment of the autonomy and agency of having a self.<sup>8</sup>*

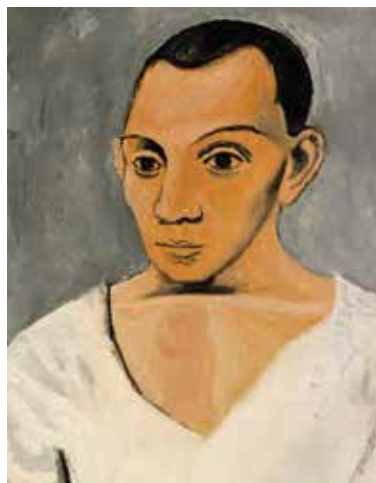
Cézanne's work is a reminder of the degree to which he arduously and tirelessly invented his own course of development, which explains the surprising and rich variety of works within his entire oeuvre. This is also reflected in his character as an act of autonomy and sustained will to pursue his interests outside the need for social or academic approval or having a career. Chomsky's critique



(Left) Paul Cézanne, *Bathers at Rest*, 1875–76, detail.

(Right) Max Beckmann, *Adam and Eve*, 1917, detail.





(Left) Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of the Artist's Son*, 1885, detail.

(Right) Pablo Picasso, *Self Portrait With Palette*, 1906, detail.

reflects the existential truth that the creative core of an artist's work cannot be reduced to poststructuralist analysis or have its significance derailed by the massive and neverending economic institutionalization of a brutal art market. Unlike most conceptual, pop, and minimalist art produced in today's post-art world, Cézanne's work makes a genuine visual connection with all kinds of audiences to lasting effect. The rich evocativeness and variation in his work slows the viewer down to experience a kind of visual meditation and ability to be in the present that post-modern post-art and culture is incapable of giving. Robert Hughes's Emmy award winning documentary *The Mona Lisa Curse* criticizes how so many artists today do not make their work for themselves but for art markets or institutional success. This is why Cézanne's example remains such a remarkable achievement within today's distracting technology-addled environment. His plates of apples and luminescent landscapes still affirm perception as an endless font of innovative possibility while giving much needed creative relief from the dehumanizing banality of our technologically dominated culture today.

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#### Footnotes:

1. Donald Kuspit *The End of Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2005 p. 38.
2. William Deresiewicz *Excellent Sheep: The Disadvantages of an Elite Education*, Free Press 2015.
3. Meyer Schapiro *Paul Cézanne*, Harry Abrams, New York, 1952 p. 19.
4. Meyer Schapiro *Modern Art in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, George Braziller. 1968 P. 39 .
5. bid p. 30.
6. Meyer Schapiro, forward to Loan Exhibition Cézanne, Wildenstein New York 1959.
7. Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, Harry Abrams, New York, 1952. P. 30.
8. Debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault 1971, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wfnI2LOGf8>.

(Left) Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1954. (Right) Jasper Johns, *Map*, 1961. Museum of Modern Art.







