WANTS & NEEDS

Wants & Needs is a group exhibition featuring the work of eleven recent graduates from the University of Pennsylvania's class of 2020 MFA program presented by the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space and the MFA Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

The exhibition is made possible with generous support from The Sachs Program for Arts Innovation, the Weitzman Graduate Fine Arts department, and the Weitzman Student Council at the University of Pennsylvania.

EFA Project Space, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts
323 West 39th St, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10018

May 15 – 30, 2021

Wants & Needs

Jane Fentress
Austin Fisher
Evan Curtis Charles Hall
Kyuri Jeon
David Johnson
Jessi Ali Lin
Rebecca Naegele
Emmanuela Soria Ruiz
Valentina Soto Illanes
Sonnie Wooden Jr.
Julian Zeidler

Rebecca Naegele, *Mythic Progress* (detail), 2021

Gallery Hours: by appointment only Weds-Sun 12-6pm

Have we established an appropriate sense of closure? Have the forces that structure our political subjectivities and circumscribe our social realities been thoroughly appeased? To what extent will our expressions of dissent and the forms of our acquiescence be legible and legitimized? And to what ends do our creative expression serve beyond our immediate spheres of influence?

These are the questions that animate this group exhibition of moving image, installation, and sculptural works that measure the weight of creative output against contemporary social and political strife, from surveillance capitalism to the racist gestures of white grievance politics, charting in their course the effects of such phenomena on the self and on society at large. From elegiac memorials dedicated to influential figures to material investigations into the hostility of the built environment and the historical echoes of colonial exchanges within the present, the exhibition is at its core concerned with the possibility of negotiating in real terms and real space the structural conditions that remain out of sight but nevertheless bear effects on how we come to understand relationships in the present.

Fundamental to both the development of the individual works in *Wants & Needs* as well as the collective arrangement of the works is an awareness of the limits of gratification: how our responses to the external world are conditioned by and delimited to the set of perceptible and contingent methods we have available to analyze the world. Rather than sidestepping this impasse, these artists—all of whom are 2020 alumni of the University of Pennsylvania MFA interdisciplinary program—take this as a central challenge and have produced responses that move through that chasm between desire and necessity that defines so much of our present condition.

Wants & Needs is co-presented by EFA Project Space and the MFA Department at the University of Pennsylvania with funding from The Sachs Program for Arts Innovation, the Weitzman Graduate Fine Arts department, and the Weitzman Student Council at the University of Pennsylvania.

Wants & Needs
Photography credit: Yann Chashanovski
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Jane Fentress

Jane Fentress is an artist and educator based in Philadelphia who works primarily in drawing and sculpture. She is interested in psychoanalysis, interiority, and the role of materiality in religious experience. She received a BA in Visual Art and English Literature from the University of Chicago and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Art from the University of Pennsylvania.

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A conversation between Ksenia Nouril, Jensen Bryan Curator at The Print Center, and Jane Fentress.

Ksenia Nouril: Can you sum up your practice in no more than three sentences?

Jane Fentress: I'm interested in religious narrative and experience, especially moments of loss, ambivalence, conflict, and contradiction. Much of my work comes out of a primary loss of belief, and the formal and material problems that come out of losing a system of meaning -- meaning constructed through material culture, through ritual, stories, iconography, and architecture. I am interested in the possibility of psychological and emotional healing both in and outside of the sphere of artmaking.

KN: What is the work that you are showing, and how does it relate to your larger oeuvre?

JF: I am showing a wall fountain, a vase of flowers that sits in a basin attached to the wall. The water flows through the interior of the vase and into the stems of the flowers, then drips down through the flowers. The work is a memorial of sorts for my professor Matt Freedman who passed away in October of 2020. Though the piece is different from much of my recent work, which has largely explored religious experience, this piece builds on a group of fountains I have made over the past few years, all of which use the form of the fountain a bit differently. I can't remember exactly what first got me interested in making fountains, but I think it was the way in which they spit things out and take them back in, over and over again. They are vessels, but they also don't really contain things very well. I'm interested in the affect of that sloppy containment.

KN: In regard to your practice in general, I was specifically struck by the last sentence that you're interested in "the possibility of psychological and emotional healing within and outside of the sphere of artmaking." It made me think about the contemporary moment in which we find ourselves, a moment in which there is incredible suffering, incredible pain, and so you clearly were affected by that at the very least, because your semester was interrupted and things like this exhibition were postponed. So how have your ideas around healing changed in this time?

JF: I personally have struggled with being able to maintain a practice during the pandemic. I've slowly been able to get back into that space, but at the beginning of the pandemic, when everything shut down, I felt a really strong desire to not make things, like art was just not the place where I could think through things or where we could go for the kind of healing it felt we all needed. I actually remember having a conversation with Matt Freedman right after everything shut down and we found out we wouldn't be able to return to campus for the rest of the semester. Everyone was divided then, it seemed, about how artists should respond to the moment.

KN: And do you think that changed because of this incident, that you had more faith in art's ability to heal prior to this moment? Or do you think that that's always been your opinion?

JF: I guess I've gained more faith in other ways of healing. I'm interested in psychoanalytic thought and in psychotherapy in general, in that as a place where people can heal and work through things. And I think the more that my interest in that has grown, I've had to look at art and psychotherapy next to each other and try to think about what each is for. And while I personally find that I take a lot of the same things to both spaces, they are different spaces and they allow for different kinds of healing or processes of thinking. So my understanding of the complexity that each space can hold has become deeper and richer for me as I've learned more about the history of psychoanalysis and as I've grown in my own practice.

KN: Art has always been a way for people to find solace, but I think this year of all years, at least in our lifetimes, it has laid bare its fissures and its problematics in a way that we've never seen before. And so we've had to question its validity, question its role in our lives. So to be shook as you seem to be, I think we're all sort of that way right now and I'm not surprised, but to just hear about that evolution within the context of your work longer term is very interesting. And it will be interesting also to see how that shifts as we move through this pandemic and sort of into this new phase, arguably of our human existence.

It's also very personal. You talk about the loss of your professor, which I did hear about here in the Philadelphia/

Jane Fentress, *Fountain for Matt Freedman* (detail), 2021
Polystyrene, silicone caulk, cornstarch, acrylic paint, paper mache clay (flour, toilet paper, glue, joint compound), aluminum mesh, wire, painter's tape, Flex Seal, polyurethane, expanding spray foam, plastic bag, showerhead, vinyl tubing, fountain pump, epoxy putty, wall shelf, brackets, water

Penn community, and I sympathize with that. Could you talk a little bit more about the formal characteristics of these works and how you worked on translating these feelings around the loss of this influential figure in your life, how you came about to make this sculpture?

JF: I've been wanting to make this since Matt died back in October. I had barely made a single thing since Covid, apart from some drawings and some writing here and there, but definitely not any sculptural work. Matt's family broadcast his graveside service, and one thing that really broke me was seeing this garland of his drawings that had been strung around his casket. I love his drawings, they're so full of joy and humor and warmth. And then a couple days later there was a virtual gathering of his former students and colleagues from UPenn, and everyone shared stories of their time with Matt, what he had meant to them. It was beautiful, and I came away from both of those events with a desire to make something that embodied that joy and humor and warmth that Matt radiated and that he inspired. And I thought of making a bouquet of paper mache flowers. I think I was moving very much from a place of grief, not having the energy or desire to over-intellectualize, just to make a beautiful offering.

Then as I began to develop the idea more, I started seeing it as a fountain of droopy, weeping flowers. Other fountains I've made have included a peeing human figure, overflowing toilets and chalices, leaking holy water fonts. With this, I wanted to make weeping flowers that would perform the act of grieving for Matt.

I also wanted to make something that would name the loss of Matt in the space of the exhibition. I wanted there to be a physical place in the show for people who visit and for my classmates, for all of us who have experienced the loss of Matt to mark and remember that loss.

KN: If you could just talk a little bit about the way you approached material, chose material, used your hands.

JF: The paper mache is something I've been working with for the past couple of years and I think it's often a very inelegant material. There is something very compelling about its tactility for me, I love the way it feels in my hands and I love working with it. And there's something about the roughness and the texture of it that's very appealing to me on a visceral level that I don't quite know how to explain, but I feel that same kind of textural presence or almost sound is also present in a lot of the drawings that I've made. When I've been making these sculptures, the fountains, I've been thinking about a kind of personal devotion, about the activity of devotion and what it looks like when it's brought out of a space of belief or religious practice and into a space of making. For me, using my hands is part of that. So the other materials apart from the paper mache that I used in this sculpture were also chosen because of their tactile qualities and the way they respond to touch. I want the evidence of touch to create a sense of intimacy, of longing.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity

Jane Fentress, *Fountain for Matt Freedman*, 2021
Polystyrene, silicone caulk, cornstarch, acrylic paint, paper mache clay (flour, toilet paper, glue, joint compound), aluminum mesh, wire, painter's tape, Flex Seal, polyurethane, expanding spray foam, plastic bag, showerhead, vinyl tubing, fountain pump, epoxy putty, wall shelf, brackets, water.
50 x 31 x 17 inches.

Austin Fisher

Austin Fisher is a musician and artist currently based in Providence, Rhode Island who works primarily with sound and video. His scores have been included in exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the 2019 Venice Biennale, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the 2018 Carnegie International.

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A conversation between Ksenia Nouril, Jensen Bryan Curator at The Print Center, and Austin Fisher.

Ksenia Nouril: Can you sum up your practice in no more than three sentences?

Austin Fisher: My background is in music and sound, so I tend to see the world through that lens. My work is particularly engaged in thinking about the ways in which music and sound comes into being—from systems of production and distribution, to sound creation technologies, scoring, and also pop culture representations and the ways in which sound shapes everyday life—including the visual landscape. I'm currently working with collaborators on a project about the history of sound design for commercial products.

KN: What is the work that you are showing in your thesis exhibition, and how does it relate to your larger oeuvre?

AF: I'm making an installation that echoes and abstracts the forms and ideas of a band's "merch stand," an area you find in music venues where performers (or, when they're more successful, employees of the band) sell their merchandise (tee shirts, records, posters, etc). I've taken some of the non-audience facing elements of participating in a music group and put them in this public facing context including a series of individual tee-shirts using "musician wanted" flyers I've collected from practice spaces, and a small series of photographs of rehearsal space interiors that manifest as posters. These are subcultural relics or artifacts, often unintentionally humorous, and a genre unto themselves that is ephemeral and rarely fixed in time and space.

KN: One thing I miss deeply in this pandemic is working with people in person, having studio visits, going to shows, and just being a part of development processes in creative projects. So I was really excited to read your responses that you sent me, the ones above, which felt to me like they were speaking to your larger practice more than the very specific project that you are presenting. I have two questions, maybe three, that speak to both macro and micro registers of your work.

I'm really struck—and fascinated—by your work as a sound artist. Sound art is unfamiliar to me. I immediately thought about attention spans and the relational experience of the viewer in a work of yours (or a sound installation in general), especially at this time of the pandemic. I can only speak from my own experience, which has been of great fatigue and attention deficit as I sit on so many Zoom meetings. So how do you build relationships with audiences in your works, in your spaces, and with the sounds that surround them so that they become invested and immersed in your work, and aren't just passing in and out?

AF: It's a great question. I think coming from the music world first and performing in rock music or experimental music spaces, that gave me lots of opportunities in real-time to learn about capturing an audience's attention quickly and then holding it. And I've also experienced and witnessed how that attention can be lost, and the potential for discomfort in that moment, which is something I really like to explore. In the context of a gallery, you can't perform sound in the same way but I think the lessons from the club are still valuable. Of course, in both settings there is the same reality of never being able to control somebody's behavior or reaction. There will always be people who pass through sound rather than sit with it.

I found for myself as a listener and viewer, that I have the same fatigue you're talking about. But in this world of sound, I think it does ask something different of you as a participant if you're drawn in enough to engage with it. It asks you to slow down a little bit and be present.

I think it's also a media that doesn't always necessitate the same kind of attention as narrative video or film. If you drift off and start thinking about something else, it's okay. I think what I like about it is that it provides a space where you can operate at a different pace. And I think that's why I like to involve myself in it because it gives me that space as an artist, too.

I studied with a professor called Ernst Karel who operates in the field of audio ethnography. That was really new to me and important as a way of thinking about sound. When you make field recordings, you're acting as a listener and you have to be present in this way that just takes time. That feels good to do right now, especially during the pandemic when time and attention feel unstable.

Austin Fisher, *Wanted and Needed, Looking and Seeking*, 2020
Tee shirts, silkscreen, hangers, gridwall display rack, brackets, shelf, plastic bin
48 x 72 x 10 in.

KN: I love your response. It brought up so many important keywords for me. I'm glad you brought up film because that's the perspective I am coming from. There's a very well-known text called "Comrades of Time" (2009) by cultural critic Boris Groys that talks about attention in the black box and how the black box can or cannot captivate a viewer as they see a film. And you rightfully state that if you are watching a film and you kind of zone out, you're probably going to miss some key aspects of it even if there's no sound, even if there's some narrative or so forth, you're going to miss something.

Whereas sound lends itself to another world of experience. The notion of time is really interesting too, and how one slows time or speeds up time and how music or sound broadly conceived can mimic that and even gesture towards that for a viewer. I often find myself, just in my generic listening to a pop song, moving very quickly. If I'm listening to something at a bit slower tempo, I'm usually much calmer and slower. Your body subconsciously takes a lot of cues from the sounds around you.

The project you described for the thesis show sounds very exciting and brought me back a little bit to the old times, and I'm not even talking about pre-COVID times but way before that. I used to go to so many live music shows when I was in high school and college. I was invested in that scene. It seems to me like what you're doing is in the work you're showing in the thesis exhibition is building a dichotomy between the public and the private. You're trying to expose for us, the viewers, a look behind the scenes.

Can you talk a little bit about whether those borders exist ... are they shifting, has anything recently changed them for you? Is this part of a longer-term engagement with this debate for you? Of course, ideas around publicness and privacy are also very cultural, right?

AF: I'm someone who has spent a lot of time in the sorts of buildings that house music rehearsal spaces. The musician wanted flyers that I'm using are often pinned on a bulletin board or taped to the wall in these places. They are only intended to be seen by other musicians. And they're in this space that is ... it's kind of a liminal place. Rehearsal spaces are usually in terrible buildings with really disgusting carpeting with as many rooms as can be crammed in using subdividers and partitions. They're not always safe. They're like warrens. And, at least in my experience, they are mostly filled groups of men drinking beer and smoking cigarettes.

There's a great description of the rehearsal space by punk musician Ian Svenonius in his 2012 book, *Supernatural Strategies for Making a Rock 'n' Roll Group.* He writes:
The practice space will be a place that occasionally fills with water or car exhaust or is infested with termites or vermin. This is okay. The space shouldn't be absolutely nice and comfortable, but instead a sort of dehumanizing dungeon to spur on your desire to transcend it.

It's that struggle to transcend the space, which almost no one ever does, that really grips me. It's so futile, and yet so formative. People just starting a music group want to recruit others to join in this collaboration. So they have to advertise with musician-wanted flyers. These are handmade advertisements for a targeted group of people. I always found them unintentionally humorous. There is an inherent contradiction within the flyer exacerbated by the context of the place where it is distributed. Usually the formula is that the ideal new band member is a wannabe rock star on the surface, but the job advertisement states that the band hiring won't tolerate lateness, or needs someone who is financially stable enough to have a working vehicle. These flyers attempt to maintain a public persona while exposing the unflashy reality of the private side. It doesn't really add up, which is why I find it so funny. And kind of perfect in its sadness. It's a masculinity which, when performed, falls flat.

KN: The public and the private, the professional musician and then, I don't know, the "bad-ass rock star" or whatever. I see you parsing different dichotomies in this project.

AF: It's a character type to embody or project an image of an independent American Maverick, the rock star archetype, which is contradicted by a need, simmering under the surface of these ads, for everyone to follow the rules and do exactly what they are told.

Austin Fisher, *Wanted and Needed, Looking and Seeking* (detail), 2020
Tee shirts, silkscreen, hangers, gridwall display rack, brackets, shelf, plastic bin
48 x 72 x 10 in.

KN: It's very interesting that you pinpointed these posters, these posters do embody that. That's where the nexus of those two disparate outlooks come together and are exposed, right?

AF: Yeah. Exactly.

KN: If I walk into a building with such a bulletin board, I'm probably not going to pay attention to it because that's not part of my life or culture. It goes over me. You're also investigating language and the lexicon of this subculture and the messaging they trade in through printed matter. It makes me think ... I know artists who have worked in archives, for organizations here in Philadelphia, for instance William Way which is an LBGTQ organization, and they've dug up a lot of posters and things that communities have used over the years and their own messaging and vocabulary and concerns are traceable through this ephemera.

AF: I'm really interested in that. I worked at a museum for a long time, and I am always drawn to archives. I'm also interested in thinking about things on a longer timescale. These musician wanted flyers are trash in the sense they are intended to be discarded. But they are indicative of a very specific time, place, and subculture. So I'm interested in preserving this material in the interest of posterity.

KN: Trash is always someone's treasure.

It's very interesting how the project also touches upon questions or issues around the archive or questions or issues around documentation of a subculture, a group of people that, whether consciously or subconsciously, have developed themselves and their language, their vernacular.

The last thing I wanted to say, which is not really a question, but I like that you also included in your first response that gesture to the more historical project that you're working on, which I realize is not the project of the thesis show. It seems to be something bigger, something more long-term, which I think is really cool.

AF: I was just talking to the Diebold ATM Manufacturer's Senior Industrial Designer about the sounds of the ATM before I hopped on this call, you know, the sound of money shuffling before it's released?

KN: Oh wow. That's quite a type of conversation no one has ever told me they've had.

AF: It's investigating this material culture of product sound that shapes our lives.

KN: Everyday soundtrack, I mean, which now is populated by rings and dings of my Outlook and my Messenger and all of these other sounds that are work from home sounds. Like time to pay attention, get back to your desk.

AF: Yeah, exactly. They're telling us what to do all the time. Even if we try to pass through sound, to ignore it, or work around it, we can't. It undergirds every facet of our lives.

Austin Fisher, *Wanted and Needed, Looking and Seeking* (detail), 2020
Tee shirts, silkscreen, hangers, gridwall display rack, brackets, shelf, plastic bin, 48 x 72 x 10 in.

Evan Curtis Charles Hall

Evan Curtis Charles Hall (b. 1995, Los Angeles, CA) is an interdisciplinary artist who works and thinks through photography, sculpture, and sound. Hall's practice explores the ways that historical materials surge into the present—whether through photographic processes, archaeological excavations, or prophetic utterances. He received a BFA from the Cooper Union and an MFA, CTL Teaching Certificate, and Graduate Certificate of Archaeological Sciences from the University of Pennsylvania. His work has been exhibited at 41 Cooper Gallery, NY; Philomathean Gallery, PA; The Penn Museum, PA; Automat Gallery, PA; A Lab Amsterdam, NL; and the Municipal Archive of Lugo, Italy. Hall lives and works between Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York City.

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A conversation between Jodi Throckmorton, curator of contemporary art at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), and Evan Curtis Charles Hall.

Jodi Throckmorton: Maybe we can start with you talking me through, maybe not specific images, but the kinds of materials, the scale, and also just more broadly, what you're addressing in your work.

Evan Curtis Charles Hall: Well, I am in the very preliminary stages of developing a piece. I'm using the tools that I have on hand, which would be an Epson scanner and some deaccessioned glass plate negatives. Normally my practice weaves in and out of archival spaces, museum spaces, and institutional spaces for building and promoting knowledge—for teaching.

Specifically, what I'm showing [addressing *Gates* (2021)], are photographic glass plate negatives, but I would say that the materials are glass, scanners, imaging technology, lights, dust, tape, residue, fingerprints, things like that.

JT: Wow.

ECCH: So I could say that the material is what's contained in the images, but really that's not the material that I'm interested in. I'm more interested in everything that surrounds what the photographic image contains. So literally the material is the physicality of the images. This is what I'm after, or what I've been after for two years. Maybe four years, actually.

So the scale, they're the standard size of a scanner, which would be about 11 x 17 inches, and glass plates which are 4 x 5 inches.

JT: Got it. I actually really like the way that you're talking about the materials, the dust and the fingerprints and the residue, because those are the things that live on. Those are the things that maybe people don't pay attention to.

Artists have been working with the archive, but I love asking what artists can do in an archive that scholars and academics can't? Now we're seeing academics start to make these leaps and changes. So I'm wondering what that question means to you. What can artists uniquely do in an archive or a museum collection that others cannot?

ECCH: Well, hopefully they can do anything that they want.

JT: I like that.

ECCH: But, it becomes a little bit difficult and it can be fraught when people's cultural identities are at stake and when people feel like there's a sacredness to those spaces that shouldn't be touched. So, I would like to say that artists should be able to do whatever they want in those spaces, but there's also a lot of space for pushback. You can't touch the African objects, you can't touch the Native American idols. You can't touch these things.

So, it's been difficult for me to work through those spaces without explicitly representing any one culture. I'm not really interested in the cultures. I'm interested in the culture of the archive and the archivists and the construction of history over the past 100 to 200 years. So, I've had to find ways of removing the specificity of what's represented. I often zoom in really close, beyond being able to see which statue it is or which geography it's depicting. I really just look at the glass or the crack or whatever it may be.

It's tough. But I think that it's a good place to be because there is tension. There's tension between the public and the scholars and the artists. Somehow artists have to navigate those spaces.

JT: That's great. I actually like how you're thinking about the archivists, because there's something about the presumption of their invisible labor. Right?

ECCH: Yeah.

JT: They have such a huge impact actually on what gets shown, how it's protected, what gets protected. It's a powerful position in the world and yet we don't really talk about it or think about it in that way.

ECCH: I think the conversation about the archive and the archivist is becoming a more popular topic, at least within the last 30 or 40 years. But it's still new. People often take the position of being really skeptical of the archivist and being very critical of their role. I was for a while. I was very anti-archivist. Like, how can you choose to discard this

Evan Curtis Charles Hall, *Burning*, 2021
Glass, collodion, silver nitrate, iron sulfate developer, fixer concentrate, stainless steel photograph hooks, tri-light cluster socket, stranded lamp wire, twister wire connectors, 7.5 watt clear incandescent light bulbs, steel flat bar, stainless steel link chain, stainless steel quick links, 4 x 6 feet

and not discard that? But they have to. Somebody has to.

I'm interested in looking for and finding something really beautiful in their work—unintentional ways that paintings surface or images, other images, ghost images, non-representational images. These can surface amidst everything that they're trying to preserve. There's a merging of old material and new material, and it can create something much more rich. I like using the word superintelligence to describe something that is beyond their intelligence. There's something that's beyond the ability of an archaeologist, or an academic, to pinpoint that exists within all of this material that is supposed to represent the highest forms of knowledge.

It's like looking for more, yeah. Looking for more. It's like trying to break the barriers of the historical record, looking for something invisible and maybe a new sensorial type of experience within that space.

JT: Makes sense... spiritual is not the word, but what's between the lines. There's something actually larger to be found in all that material.

ECCH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JT: That's interesting and beautifully said actually. The other thing that I thought was really interesting that you said concerns the structures of protection that these archives and museums put on objects to protect them. Recently I've started thinking about how we spend so much time protecting objects and how little time we spend thinking about people in these spaces. But maybe that's the peace of being in an archive? There's this sole focus on the objects by caring for these things. It has a lot to do with accessibility as well, who feels welcome visiting an archive or a museum. I think there's a lot to be said about those structures that we put in place and those barriers.

ECCH: Totally. They're very exclusive spaces. You don't go to the archive unless you have the credentials and unless you're wearing the right gloves and unless your hair is pulled back. There's protocol, which is, I don't want to say bad. I think it's interesting. There's so many barriers to entry for looking at things that essentially define culture and preserve culture and determine culture. So as an artist, going into those spaces or being given access to those spaces is, I think, a privilege.

It's a luxury to be able to say, "I'm working on a project and I would like to have access to this material." I've worked with the Penn Museum Archives. I've worked with the municipal archive of Lugo, Italy. I've worked with library archives around the city. They're all pretty open in a way that they may not be to a scholar. Most of the time I go in and say, "Oh, I just want to look, or I want to see your glass plates. I don't know which year." And if they ask me for a year, I'll just make up a year. It's a different type of loose browsing that can be allotted to artists, as opposed to scholars.

JT: Right. As opposed to saying, "I want to look at this from 1945 and study this and this."

I just had one other quick question for you, which relates to time being built into these places and the idea of forever. I find myself, as a museum curator, bringing things in. There's this idea that there's going to be a forever and that we're going to keep these objects forever, which more and more I've started to not believe in. But there's something about that in relationship to the objects that you're making too?

Maybe it's what you were talking about with that other sort of superintelligence in the work? There's something that I think you're getting at concerning preservation and time and forever in these spaces. But also what you're deciding to rescue them from, in a way.

ECCH: Yes, totally. Somehow, somewhere. Yeah, forever...

One thing that I am really interested in is the way that the objects evolve over time. There is an artificial sense of permanence. The objects that we have in museums have already undergone many transformations, many revisions, so they have a life. They have a life that they're living. They're active being things, getting touch-ups here and getting an arm put on there, getting their pictures taken. Right? They're like celebrities.

JT: Yeah, that's true. I love that.

Evan Curtis Charles Hall, *Burning*, 2021
Glass, collodion, silver nitrate, iron sulfate developer, fixer concentrate, stainless steel photograph hooks, tri-light cluster socket, stranded lamp wire, twister wire connectors, 7.5 watt clear incandescent light bulbs, steel flat bar, stainless steel link chain, stainless steel quick links, 4 x 6 feet

ECCH: So, we have to think about how imaging technology affects the life of these objects. Just like human beings, we have a virtual presence, they also have a virtual presence. Most people will see the images of King Tut's burial rather than actually seeing the physical thing. So I am interested in the way that technology changes the objects over time. That completely breaks down the notion of permanence.

We think that they're being saved because we're taking pictures, but the pictures are actually changing the objects themselves—depending on the lighting, depending on the camera, depending on the pixels, depending on the approach to the object, and the angles. What's the backside? What's the side? When you flatten a three-dimensional object into two dimensions, you lose the third dimension.

So, over time, these things have been somewhat deracinated from what they were when they were in use, what they were when they were being excavated, what they were when they were being dusted off and polished, what they were when they were on display, what they were when they were photographed, and what they were when they entered the digital museum and the virtual archive and all that. So it's a new type of permanence. It's like, I don't know, a zombie permanence.

JT: Zombie permanence. That's a great term actually. There you go. Yeah, zombie permanence.

ECCH: But there is that desire, right? We want to keep these things.

JT: Absolutely.

ECCH: But by holding onto them so tightly, we're tainting them. It's like, what are we holding on to anymore? But it's beautiful. It's really beautiful to look at, to really look at closely. I think that that's a big part of my practice—looking closely at what these things are that have so much power. What are the mechanisms that give them that power and preserve them, or re-present them?

JT: Wow, this has been really great. Thank you. I think we made it in 15 minutes.

ECCH: Fantastic, fantastic.

JT: It's really great to learn about your work and keep me posted on what you're up to in your shows and everything, if you think of it.

ECCH: Okay. I will. What was your dog's name, by the way?

JT: Her name's Ronnie.

ECCH: Ronnie, okay.

JT: Yep. She goes by Ron quite a bit.

ECCH: Right. Very sweet name. All right, Jodi. Well, thank you so, so much.

JT: Yeah. Take care and have a good weekend.

ECCH: Okay. You too.

*****This interview has been edited for length and clarity***

Evan Curtis Charles Hall. *Gates*. 2021.
Digital c-print. 24 x 30 inches.

*Referenced in conversation

Kyuri Jeon

Kyuri Jeon is an interdisciplinary artist who lives and works in Seoul and New York. Through installation, video, and performance Jeon explores interconnectedness of mobility, language, dislocation, gender, and identity manifested on the body. Jeon's work has been featured at The Institute of Contemporary Art, USA; Artists' Moving Image Festival, UK; Festival Film Dokumenter, Indonesia; and DMZ International Documentary Film Festival, KR. She holds a BFA from Korea National University of Arts, and an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and Seoul National University. She is a recipient of Toby Devan Lewis Fellowship, and Second Prize in Asian Shorts Competition, Seoul International Women's Film Festival.

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A conversation between Michelle Millar Fisher, curator of contemporary decorative arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Kyuri Jeon.

Michelle Millar Fisher: I did want to say, Kyuri, your film is awesome. Like, I really, really enjoyed it. It was so multi-layered. It's so beautiful. You feel like you're generously invited into the story, but you also don't know exactly where it's going. It is not expected. And I just thought it was such a genius way.

So often in the U.S., conversation around abortion is around "second wave, white women" feminism. And your film is very different. I just thought it was an incredibly astute and elegant story that married your personal biography with this much larger conversation that was both given cultural context, but then given this really poignant... Like, cut through with your own particular history. I think audiences will really love it, too. So I hope lots of people come and see the show.

Kyuri Jeon: Thank you, Michelle. It's sad that we can't do public openings and have conversations in person. I had a chance to screen it at some film festivals last year, and it was such a pleasure to meet the audience both in person and online. They were opening up about their own stories in relation to abortion or misogyny after seeing the work which was so inspiring.

MMF: That is a very universal feminist approach. It is very uniquely felt, either through a historical moment, or the cultural context, or somebody's personal history. The idea of sharing one's story, that's really beautiful. I come back to the Adrienne Rich quote again and again, because I love "Of Woman Born." She talks about the necessity of telling our own stories, because that's how we remain seen. The project of women's liberation, across the globe, and across every intersection, is about speaking our stories out loud, because otherwise how do we know of other's experiences, and know that they are shared, and know that there's actually a political project in them. When you share their story, people must immediately open up and feel like they have a place that they can engage, which is great.

I have the two questions just here. In your responses, you mentioned language, including grammar, and in your work, you switch between languages, and plays on language are particularly important as well. And so, I wondered if you could tell me a little bit about how language figures in your practice.

KJ: I used both languages because I wanted to enable an active translation among viewers. I wanted to make people go back and forth, using different head spaces while watching the film. This relocation to the U.S. really made me rethink the border, the idea of time, space, and language also. And it affected how I create works, I guess. And I consider speaking something that is not my mother tongue as an interesting linguistic journey. It's like, almost traveling with our passports. And sometimes it's a liberating experience for me, like a new way of translating myself into another medium. Do you speak another language?

MMF: Very bad German, but yes, it's a part of my brain that when I exercise, it gives me great joy. It feels part of my brain that it also somehow allows me to fly different places, somehow.

KJ: Yeah, I feel like I'm a different person when I speak English, with a different personality. But also, most of the time I feel like it's a constant failure. So I wrote this scenario in a combination of Korean and English from the get-go. It's my first time writing a script in English. It's just like, foreign languages are so slimy. It slips out of my tongue. They become more like, childlike, super-straightforward expressions. In this film, I sometimes narrate really personal things in English intentionally, so it feels distant from what I'm actually feeling. Because it's such a delicate, vulnerable history.

Not only this somatic experience of performing or mimicking the language. What I was interested in the most was how this language forces you to think about time. English is a "future-ed" Germanic language. Unlike Korean, it differentiates and emphasizes future carefully from the present in grammar. I just thought it was really beautiful and compelling, and in this future perfect tense, which does not exist in Korean, it's a curious and poetic place to work with. If I say, "I will have been born," it doesn't make sense, but the future and the past are melted together in one sentence.

Kyuri Jeon, *Born, Unborn, and Born Again (still)*, 12:38, HD Video, Sound, Color & B/W, 2020

And the idea of connecting the function of future perfect tense with the birth narrative came from the word "translate" actually, because I was looking for its etymological origin, and the word "translate" basically means "to give birth to something"... give birth to something into being, and in bearing and carrying across the space. So I thought, the future perfect tense is such a useful tool to navigate this, interesting, unborn state of mine. In the sense, I am unborn as I'm born. I mean, it's such a complicated territory and it's beyond my comprehension, and it's an unanswerable question. I think I'm using language in my work as a container or concept that has not existed in my life to contemplate this new, special state of being. Does this answer your question?

MMF: It more than answers it. It was fantastic. I have another question, actually, that's not on my list, but it made me think of it when you were talking.

What was the conversation you had with your mom when you approached her? Is this something your family talked about growing up? And was your mom open to being part of the piece?

KJ: Yes. She was really open. But I don't know, working with my mom was weird.

MMF: I was going to say! It's really tough, because it's her story, but it's your story. It's a really difficult one. I really wondered how that worked, because there's always such a special relationship between mothers and daughters. Difficult, as well as great. And it depends on each person's relationship.

KJ: It took way too long to have the courage to even ask her some questions on the phone. It took me almost three months to just call her. It was enough for me to hear her saying that she knew I was a girl, even though the doctor said I wasn't. She trusted her gut, and then she was like,

Kyuri Jeon, *Born, Unborn, and Born Again (still)*, 12:38, HD Video, Sound, Color & B/W, 2020

"I knew it. I knew you were a girl." And I was like, "Because you're bearing me."

I wanted to reconcile, understand my mom, because there are so many ways that women participate in the devaluation of women. Thinking about the feeling of guilt my mom must have carried was painful. By not having a son in the family, it's something she's guilty about. It's a really complicated territory and cannot be judged, both tragic and common, right? And this manifests on so many levels, but especially on reproductive bodies. And I wanted to explore that area. Well, I mean, I'm bringing every single double-edged, both personal and sociopolitical, fucked up things on the table, but I don't answer it. Because I can't.

MMF: Apparently. And some of them are too complex to be answered, whether it's because of social or cultural expectations of what women do, and, as you say, women devaluing other women. Or if it's too complex because it's part of a family, and that's too sensitive to touch, to go too far into, because family secrets occur for a reason, because sometimes families just can't say some things. So they have to remain just under the surface, or deeply buried.

Okay, so I know that we're running out of time, but I wanted to get to these questions. There's so much to be said about your work. I've already asked you about your birth story here. Had you been thinking of making a work around this topic for a while? Or was it something that sort of came to you very quickly? Like, had it always been in the back of your mind: "You know, I'd kind of like to explore this somehow"; or was it much more immediate than that in terms of an epiphany?

KJ: I knew my birth story from early on. I think my sister told me once. Then later, I found out that several "masculine" zodiac signs have implicit and specific gender roles and are therefore considered a bad disposition for women. With the introduction of modern technologies, a great number of gender-selective abortions were performed in the 1980s and 1990s. These myths inherited from the Japanese colonial era along with my personal story have been sitting on my mind for a very long time, I guess my whole twenties. And its entanglement with a larger cultural-structural question, which is deep-rooted sexism and patriarchy that is operating across the world. No matter where we're born, wherever we're at, we're all coping with these nation-states that are regulatory.

But I didn't know where and how to start. Not only I was afraid where this story would take me but also that I might not be able to finish what I started. I think I was skeptical about talking about there, Korea, when I'm physically here, in the United States. I guess this comes back to your first question about language and transnationality. I'm talking about it there, but also it is happening here, but with a slightly different disguised face. In the same month, the verdict happened in South Korea, the heartbeat law in Georgia was passed. So when that groundbreaking verdict happened, after a 66 year-long fight over abortion rights, I thought I'd been waiting for that moment to happen. I felt like I finally found the structure, or rather, a force to tell the story.

I made Part One right after the Supreme Court's decision. In two weeks, actually, because it was on my mind for so long. The execution was super-intuitive and quick, whereas Part Two took me almost more than half a year to construct. I think this happens to a lot of artists. You have this space for the subject matter inside your head, and you just wait for the right moment to happen. I hope this answers your question.

MMF: It absolutely did. It reminds me of a canal where you have the water build up, and build up, and build up, until it's the right time to let it out, and you know in which channel that you want it to go.

*****This interview has been edited for length and clarity***

Kyuri Jeon, *Born, Unborn, and Born Again (still)*, 12:38, HD Video, Sound, Color & B/W, 2020

David Johnson

David Johnson (b. 1993, New York, NY) is an artist and educator who lives and works in New York. His work uses video, photography, found and stolen objects, and architectural intervention to engage with subjects and histories entangled in processes of urban erasure. He received a BFA from The Cooper Union in 2015, a MFA from The University of Pennsylvania in 2020 and will be a participant of the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2021. Recent exhibitions include: Pilot + Projects, Philadelphia, PA; Philomathean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA; The Arnold and Sheila Aronson Galleries, New School, New York, NY; Hosting Projects, New York, NY; La Mama Galleria, New York, NY.

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A conversation between Jodi Throckmorton, curator of contemporary art at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), and David Johnson.

Jodi Throckmorton: One of the things that I was hoping you would do is just to tell me a little bit more about these objects; how you're finding them, how do they exist in the real world versus when you translate them into the gallery space, what happens then?

David Johnson: The works that I'm showing at EFA are a series of removed standpipe spikes taken from different buildings around the city. In New York, buildings that are over six-stories tall are required to install a standpipe on their street so that the fire department has outdoor access to the building's water. Because these vertical pipes encroach upon the space of the sidewalk, people often appropriate them into forms of outdoor seating and/or surfaces to rest things on. As a result, many property owners attempt to regulate this behavior, generally targeting homeless people, street venders, elderly and disabled people who use these standpipes in lieu of scarce forms of public seating. There's no standardization on these spikes so property owners go to different metal workers to have them retrofit their own designs over their building's standpipe.

I live in New York, so all of these spikes are taken from there. The larger project is an ongoing gesture of removal. And it's not specifically just standpipes; it's any type of hostile architecture. I have another work that's made from a number of metal balls that are known as "anti-homeless spikes". They're in some ways more nefarious because they're drilled into ledges and steps as a form of ornament. When these works move into exhibition venues, I'm interested in how their material presence points to their absence from the street. Each sculpture correlates to the opening up of a space where new forms of social life have the possibility of taking place, like loitering. In a perverse way, I think their aestheticization as art objects also highlights the creative labor and decisions on the part of the metal workers who fabricate them and the property owners who commission their creation.

JT: Because it's incredible how they look like chains and collars when you separate them from the pipe. Because I was like "where are those coming from?". But the standpipe things, I know now what you're saying. I knew the spikes that they use to keep birds off things as well. But that, I mean, you look at them in a completely different way in the gallery, which is incredible.

DJ: Yeah, I've been trying to think about the function of aestheticization in these works and how they relate to certain traditions of welded metal sculpture. I've definitely been thinking a lot about Melvin Edwards' *Lynch Fragments* as I've been removing them. I really like how their function as formal sculpture strips them of their active use. I'm interested in framing them both as aesthetic forms that can exist inside of an exhibition space as well as these quiet public works that are scattered throughout the city in the form of empty standpipes. For me it's been more about the gesture of removal than the objects themselves. As artworks I'm interested in the space they inhabit between their presence and absence.

JT: Well, wait, the Rizzo sculpture work was originally made in 2019? I'm sorry. I'm forgetting the date now.

DJ: Yea I originally made it 2018. It was the first thing I made when I moved to Philadelphia.

JT: Wow. Wow. And so, I mean, how incredible actually to have such a transformative year for that. I mean, wonderful is the wrong word, but you know what I'm saying. How fascinating to see how you're talking about something that is now absent, and you can look at the presence and the absence of that monument in that space now in this video piece that you're doing. I mean, what must that have been like to rethink that piece once this monument came down?

DJ: In some ways it's still very speculative because I'm going to Philly in two weeks to actually try to do the reshooting. But when I originally made the piece, I was definitely thinking about the possibility of the monument being removed at some point and then updating the work. The symbolic power of it was something that really struck me when I first moved to Philly. I actually had no idea who Frank Rizzo was when I first saw the statue. It was just the strangeness of a figure like that being surrounded by barricades that caught me so off-guard. When I finally researched the history and legacy of Rizzo, first as a police

David Johnson, *Loiter (Hersel Torkian)*, 2020 - ongoing, Removed standpipe spike

commissioner and then as a mayor, the symbolic and political meaning of the site was compounded for me by the number of police that I saw guarding it. The intense forms of police surveillance that surrounded the sculpture as result of the city's refusal to remove it, literally perpetuated the ideology and militarization Rizzo had enacted on Philadelphia during his time in office.

Now that it's removed, I've been wondering what has actually changed, if anything at all? In my experience, especially in New York in the aftermath of movements like Occupy, once a police installation is brought into a public space it usually stays there in one form or another. I wouldn't be surprised if the police presence isn't any less visible now that the statue is gone. At the very least, something I'm interested in is knowing there'll be images of people walking through a space that was previously occupied by a contested monument. I feel this way about the standpipe spikes too. I can only really speculate on what these different forms of removal mean until more time has passed.

JT: It's quite the time. How long will the people moving through that space continue to feel the presence of that monument even though it's not there? That's something that I think this, especially in imagining what your piece could do, is thinking about how that absence is still a presence in Philadelphia and in our psyche as a city.

DJ: I did a studio visit with Fred Moten during grad school and remember him saying that he felt like they should put a Frank Rizzo monument on every block of the city until Philadelphia was livable. I think there is something to remain skeptical about in relation to the state's symbolic removal of some of these structures. In the case of the Municipal Services Plaza, where the Rizzo monument was installed, again, I wouldn't be surprised if there is just as much police harassment and surveillance occurring now that the monument's been removed. Does it serve us better to no longer have these symbolic representations of brutality and racism if those forms of violence continue to remain omnipresent in our shared spaces?

JT: That's a great question because the evidence then of the systemic racism is there, whereas now this is down, and I do think it's important that it's down fully, but I see what he's saying then because then it's almost like, "well, this is gone so maybe everything's okay now?" That's actually a really interesting point.

DJ: I think there's a lot of nuance that can be brought to the monument conversation right now. On the one hand, these structures are very real gathering points for hate groups and do lead to direct forms of violence. At the same time, I feel that some of the calls for removals and replacements follow a reparative framework that I'm wary of. I think there should be a more in-depth conversation around what's actually changing in public space apart from the more symbolic or aesthetic forms that are being removed or replaced.

JT: It needs to go hand in hand, the sort of deeper work. Yeah. No, that makes good sense. One of the other things that I was really interested in when you were talking was the layers of history that are in these public spaces. I actually don't know what was in that spot of the Rizzo sculpture in 19th century Philadelphia or whatever. This eraser happens again and again of these contested histories of things happening in certain places and then them being erased and pushed away. In some ways your work on that video and even the objects, the metal objects, made me think about that and how there's so much going on layered into city streets that we walk on every day that we have no idea what came before. They're all just waiting at the surface to be kind of released or known in that way.

DJ: No, definitely. I've been interested in trying to make works that hold both the historical and the cursory together in the same space. A lot of my work is trying to pay attention to the more immediate social formations that are created around subjects like monuments, public artworks and architectures in order to tease out the ways in which these larger historical narratives are still being enacted in the physical and psychic space of everyday life.

JT: But one of the things that did occur to me, because I've been working with an artist on some work that she's doing about leisure and specifically leisure in the black body and thinking about how you do and do not see the black body at leisure. And she's thinking about, frankly, 19th century painting and what it means to put a black body in those spaces. But I was thinking about that con-

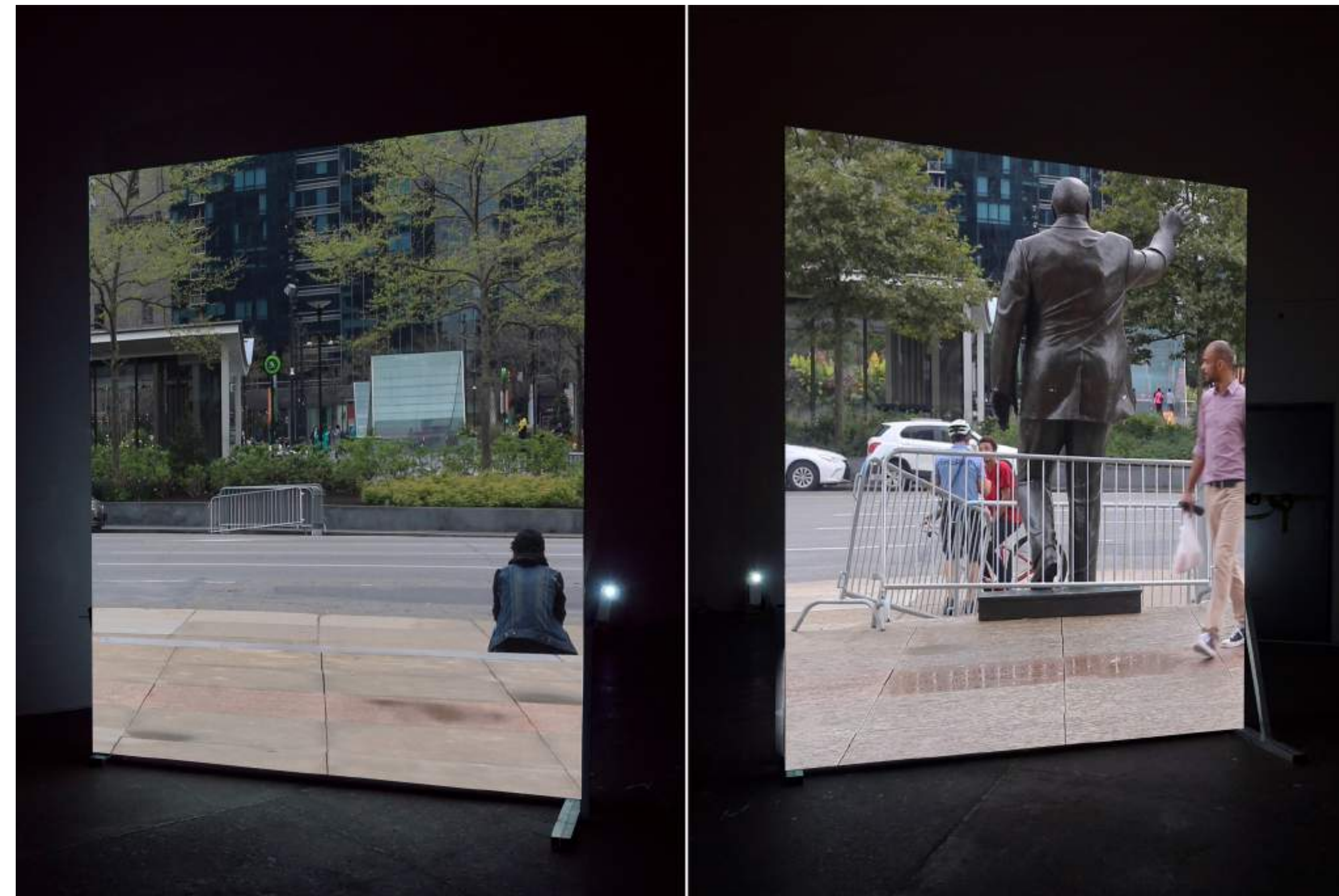
David Johnson, *Loiter (Michael Dezer)*, 2020 - ongoing, Removed standpipe spike

nection between loitering and leisure too because there is that connection between those two things in very different ways, but how that's really being dissuaded by these spiky structures and objects and things. And so once again, a certain group of privileged people are given the opportunity to loiter or leisure and another isn't, and this is mostly related to sort of homeless people. But it's an interesting question to me about how we're reinventing these things again in our inner urban spaces, and in our public spaces, we're saying who is the right public to function in these spaces.

DJ: Most of the standpipe spikes I've been removing have been taken from the financial and midtown districts in Manhattan. They actually don't exist so much around residential areas. It's really around businesses and corporate spaces that these hostile architectures are used, targeting people who are living on the street, seeking spaces of temporary shelter, or operating in alternative economies. In my research, I've found that the way a lot of developers and business owners talk about loitering is really in relation to controlling what "types" of people make up their desired public. It's not just about who goes into their stores but also who surrounds them. I mean, it's all a trickling down to just reinforce capitalism.

JT: Capitalism. Right. Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's an okay justification in some ways, they're saying.

DJ: In that way I'm really interested in loitering as an antagonism towards claims of property and ownership. Because even loitering law, from what I understand in the US, is completely racialized and came out of chattel slavery and the desire of white slaveowners to regulate the number of black bodies who could gather in public spaces. What types of bodies have the ability to linger in public for extended periods of time without the danger of state violence and death is something I'm continuing to think through with these works and other projects. I don't know if that's going to be immediately apparent since the sculptures are intentionally meant to be non-representational in relation to the bodies they're conditioned against. They exist as static objects themselves and the gap between them and the outside is more in the psychic space of the viewer. *Loiter* is a working title for the pieces and as an ongoing project it's definitely opened up a method of working and relating to the city that I want to go deeper into.



David Johnson, *Public Deferral*, 2018–2021, 2 channel video loop, aluminum, wood

*Referenced in conversation

Jessi Ali Lin

Jessi Ali Lin is an artist working with and through sculpture, video, performance, and embodiment. Her work explores the notion of positionality both in terms of physical position and the multivalence of identity. She is interested in the objectness of the body and how it forms, morphs, and reconfigures according to systems and structures within and outside of ourselves. Lin holds a BA in Art & Art History from Barnard College, Columbia University, and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Art from the University of Pennsylvania. She is the recipient of the Dedalus Foundation MFA Fellowship Award, the Oakley Medal Award, and the Vermont Studio Scholarship Award. Her work has been shown at IceBox Project Space, Philadelphia, PA, Lightbox Film Center, Philadelphia, PA, and Dixon Place, New York, NY. She currently lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.

Instagram: owoooooooooowo

A conversation between Karen Patterson, curator at the Fabric Workshop and Museum Philadelphia, and Jessi Ali Lin.

Karen Patterson: Tell me the importance of the seesaw.

Jessi Ali Lin: I've been interested in perspective and horizon line through out my practice and because I do have an interest in the phenomenological relationship between body and objects and body and space, I came to it thinking more about image making and stability of images, and it comes from me understanding how I position myself in the world, especially as someone who grew up in Taiwan and then moved here during my teenage years. So I was just learning how to perform and position myself in these different contexts, aware of this kind of instability of image not just in photography but of ourselves in our daily lives.

KP: Yea, how we project ourselves, or how we present ourselves in the public versus the private. Because what I was struck by the seesaw is that there is this kind of connotation of innocence, childhood, um play, and the way you've placed these fragile but luminescent beautiful objects on the seesaw makes you then think that something that was meant for play and joy can also be a great sign of instability and mistrust, and that the support structure is not there in that way.

JAL: It's interesting that you say support structure, because I think about that as context. Like a single gesture has very different meanings depending on the context.

KP: And so I want to talk about the oval shape in your work. For me it felt like I was being let into a scene, I had a perception of window into something, it's beautiful, it's ethereal, it's full of light, and yet I have this sense of unease. I recognize something about the domestic when I'm looking in there and I also recognize a tension. Do you think that is intentional on your part or do you think that is me projecting? Are you thinking about tension or stress?

JAL: This is a project that I am still trying to figure out at the moment. I approached this series through creating still life images, so for me intuitively, I just use domestic objects in the piece because these are the objects I'm looking at everyday.

There are two films with similar qualities that I want to bounce my ideas off of. One is The Assassin by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, which I watched again last night and it was extremely beautiful and tranquil, and so still and super decadent because it was set in a palace, but there was all these tension and turmoil happening and I am interested in that. Also, the plot of the film is always so confusing when watching it, but I'm reading about it again. Basically the story was set during the time of war, between the empire and its kingdoms. And I just thought it was so interesting how Hou could show the tension through all of these tranquil scenes.

And another film is *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Ackerman. And it's this mundaneness that is so suffocating that I'm interested in that I do feel in the past and is definitely amplified even more during this year of global pandemic, where we are asked to stay at home.

KP: We are asked to stay at home and what I was struck by looking at your work was, I don't know what you're thinking and I really want to, and I really want to because I want to know you the character, you the body in the image, um, I want to know why you keep placing things on the seesaw knowing it's teetering. I want to know if you enjoy being in the scene, is that part inserting your body into the narrative if you will, and I just want to comment on how evocative it is to see you move through the space and I felt that even more so with the work you just sent me. I'm not sure what space you're in with the audience, but you have this very uncanny ability to make us wonder what the role of your body is in the scenes.

JAL: I think it's a very sad role, I mean I don't think I play the role, but if I think about it, I think it's sad. I think there is a kind of emptiness to it. Maybe it is not so evident in the seesaw works, but in Choreography B there's one gesture in the work which is to mirror/not mirror or to smile/not smile, so these are things that are very dependent on other people, rendering the performers very hollow because it is so uncentered, or its center is so determined by others. If I think about that in relationship to the seesaw piece, I think I'm placing the objects thinking about com-

Jessi Ali Lin, *Still Life III*, 2021, Video, wood panel, paper, needles, 13 x 6 x 2.5, feet, 18:54 minutes

Jessi Ali Lin, *De-still*, 2021, Glass, metal, acrylic, Dimensions variable

position as well, so I'm thinking about the image that it's going to make so it feels very external. I guess I haven't figured it out yet, I guess in a way hollowed?

KP: Hollowed, exactly. I think you're doing an amazing job with that especially with the smiling/not smiling, and your interest in the tension/relationship between personhood and objecthood and this toggling between hollowness and then there is a flash for me when you're walking up the stools and you're just holding the position with your foot lingering in the air and your hands down here, I saw personhood, but I saw personhood in your attempt to be an object, I think an object of support? I guess I want to give you the floor to talk a little bit about how you think about the relationship between personhood and objecthood, especially in your performance work. Is it all about creating the image in that way? Is it that you are once an object and a person for the image and for the composition?

JAL: I think the work is thinking about image, but I'm thinking about objecthood simply as our bodies in our everyday life being objects. I'm thinking not just about domestic space but being in architecture or even nature or garden, just how we are being positioned or shifted by these environments, or I mean, a cup as well, that is determining our relationship to space.

KP: Yes, it's a gesture, it's forcing us to a certain formation.

JAL: So in that way, I feel that the body morphs to these objects. I just think of, maybe it's like me trying to organize my house or something like that, but I guess it's kind of like design, because the object is there, then I am determined in this way, so I feel like my body is just like the object on the table.

KP: I'm designed to do these gestures because these objects are designed to help me, serve me, accomplish a goal in that I form my body around picking up a cup.

JAL: Just pointing to agency, like we all have similar agencies as these objects.

KP: And then, so we all have similar agencies to these objects, so when I think about the work you just sent with the kind of cut out and you are able just to sit right in front of it, it is carved out for your torso I think, you know what piece I'm talking about?

JAL: Yeah.

KP: What I was struck by was, are you going to fit there? Is it comfortable? And did you carve this space so that you are more comfortable? Or is the space carved and you are trying to form to it? And I think that is what you are talking about with agency too. Are you shaping the object to make you feel more comfortable or are you forming yourself to the object?

JAL: I think part of the discomfort was my fault when making the installation. It was hard to design to make everything fit with the chair stacked on the platform and have my body fit to the table. But I think what I wanted to do was similar to the photo I sent you of me being in the pool with the fruits and stuff. And I think again, I'm interested in that waterline, for similar reasons, because it's like our bodies and this lemon don't have much difference, we are just being sorted by this volume of water, you either float or you drown. So it's questioning organizing principles and hierarchies. So for me in that work, the planes are thinking about, by putting the body in the same plane as the objects, thinking about being in the same waterline.

KP: Exactly, so you are setting up more scenarios in which the body can be compared to an object and that there are more similarities than differences. But testing that, it seems like there were several tests in the performance, is that right?

JAL: You mean going to the different planes?

KP: Would you describe them as tests, or a flow of activities? Or how would you describe those?

JAL: I don't think of them as tests, but rather as forms to explore the way that the body is morphed and formed by structures. To further the discussion on bodies and objects is the part where I stand up from the table where I keep my gesture from sitting there to the next plane. I'm thinking about index, but rather from us indexing a sur-

Jessi Ali Lin, *Still Life III*, 2021, Video, wood panel, paper, needles, 13 x 6 x 2.5, feet, 18:54 minutes

Jessi Ali Lin, *De-still*, 2021, Glass, metal, acrylic, Dimensions variable

face or something, we are being indexed by the object and how we place ourselves in them.

KP: I think I want to talk about the idea of infiltration. I know that is really interesting to you and that is really an exciting read of your work that I hadn't seen until we had our conversation. I have been thinking a lot about it, about what does infiltration look like in the domestic sphere and infiltration can be acts of protest, does that incapsulate what you have mentioned to me before? The idea of infiltration and the home?

JAL: I think these are different connecting points. I think I was thinking about femininity in relationship to infiltration. Like femininity as performance, not necessarily domestic but I happen to be working with the domestic space and I think I was getting more reading of that through my work. I could see how to go forward with that. I think what you were just talking about, the character, the role... I'm sure everyone is performing in one way or the other, but from my experience, I just think about it through femininity, it's this role that is needing to please someone else. Because we were talking about the context before and you have to perform or position yourself in relation to that context, so that means you have to understand the system well to navigate.

I can talk about what we talked about last time about protests, which was that I felt that the fact that there were a lot of protests and public resistance last year, this public space where people could speak their voices, means that there is this allowed space. But I'm thinking, what if there isn't a space like this, how do you even resist? So I thought that femininity is really interesting, I'm thinking about it not in the way for fighting for women or feminism, but more about strategies of captivity, because I think that, um... like being in that role, or more so traditionally that you are subordinate in a way, and how do you sustain a performance or..

KP: Well I'm wondering if it's more like what are the subtle gestures inherent in that subordinate role that are actual acts of protest that can be invisible for some but have a ripple affect and have a larger affect? You know these subtle, slight moves that could go unseen or unnoticed but if you're clever enough or if you have enough to protest, these small gestures pack a lot of energy, and just pushing the needle a little bit could especially, if it's domestic and the role is expected, as you said is to be subordinate, how do you slightly push the needle?

JAL: Yes, how do you push the needle, but most importantly infiltrate. I see this strategy of captivity like the wooden horse that entered the city of Troy. You have to gain the trust of your enemy in order to infiltrate. Femininity plays a facade that makes subordination visible, which allows infiltration to happen underneath. So right now, I'm interested in the strategies and forms of captivity, seeing how these may be a tool for resistance.

Jessi Ali Lin, *Choreography B*, Embodiment, time, space, horizontal planes, 15 minutes, 2019

*Referenced in conversation

Rebecca Naegele

Rebecca Naegele is an artist who works in sculpture, installation, video and photography. Her work is informed by cultural and spatial symptoms of neoliberalism, consumerism and technological advance. Rebecca's process is grounded in observation and an experiential translation of life under late capitalism. Her work materializes a material language of precarity through instability, collapsing visual space, fragmentation, and disrupted viewership. Cyclic history, speculative value, infrastructure, architecture, and duration guide and inform her work. Videos explore notions of progress through cyclic repetition, repeated attempts without resolution, and mechanisms of surveillance. Rebecca Naegele lives and works in Queens, NY. She received an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts at the University of Pennsylvania in 2020 and attended the Whitney Independent Study Program's Studio Program in New York, NY in 2016-17. Recent exhibitions include Pilot+Projects, Philadelphia, PA; Little Berlin, Philadelphia, PA; Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space, New York, NY; 3A Gallery, New York, NY; 321 Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; and BRIC House, Brooklyn, NY.

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A conversation between Karen Patterson, curator at the Fabric Workshop and Museum Philadelphia, and Rebecca Naegele.

Karen Patterson: I was curious as to what interested you primarily about the idea of surveillance?

Rebecca Naegele: My relationship to surveillance comes from a personal unease or resistance to it. I began observing surveillance helicopters flying in place during the 2014-15 Black Lives Matter protests in New York City. As I navigated the city, I could locate protests on the ground by noticing where the hovering helicopters overhead were. I continued to film helicopters flying in place for some years until I collected dozens of videos. The helicopter became an index of protest. The sighting was initially resonant for me because the helicopter flying in place seemed to illustrate a stunted progress I have felt politically and socially in some ways. A friend showed me recently that an NYPD helicopter costs $1500 per hour, and it's focused on surveilling people that are putting their efforts towards standing up for social justice. I felt concerned for democracy observing these overt forms of surveillance.

KP: It's been my experience that in certain stages of my life, certainly grad school, I crystallize an idea and I let it go. I had to pressure cook it to the point where it no longer serves me. Then the next thing I know something has stayed with me beyond that pressure cooker of an experience. I'm really curious to know, especially the grad school experience that you had, where a lot of the things that you were thinking about and critiquing have come such an amazing detrimental way. What I would love to know first off is what has stayed with you and what have you let go of? Especially in light of the pandemic, working from home, and a completely different world, but still related to what you were exploring. In terms of studio practice, what have you let go of from grad school and what are you thinking about?

RN: I was reading Shoshana Zuboff's book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, which talks about surveillance that takes place on online platforms without users' knowledge. Its insidiousness struck me as alarming. Zuboff advocates for more regulation in that sphere, especially because without that regulation and without our awareness of it, it can begin to erode democracy. You pointed to something I realized as the pandemic was hitting last year. The things that were of concern then, including surveillance capitalism, those issues became more serious when COVID hit and everything was forced online. We started to hear about how Zoom isn't secure and how some workers' lives are being policed even more through digital platforms and how the work day is being extended and work/life boundaries are increasingly blurred. We saw existing inequality deepening in the pandemic. At the time it felt like everything that we're concerned about is accelerating, and we can't really stop it. I needed to take a break from researching the drawbacks of a society that's neoliberal in a large structural economic sense and on a micro level, valuing individualism and competition. The content was getting to be too heavy, and my priorities shifted to the more urgent needs that were coming about with the pandemic, more towards public health concerns and then the protests and Black Lives Matter advocacy. Mutual aid projects really kicked off around this time and these community led efforts are against that competitive individualism we're all taught that we need to survive.

KP: When I look at your work, it seems like you spend a lot of time analyzing systems. I'm looking at your chart right now, where you start with individualism at the center of it and where it can go to narcissism, to self-reliance. You just keep breaking it apart and breaking it apart. I admire that before you even step into what might be emerging out of that in terms of solutions or counternarratives that you need to spend time understanding all the systems that contribute to that feeling, because I think when COVID hit, I was immediately struck by how individual we really are. I didn't spend a lot of time until that moment thinking about all the systems that have encouraged us to be individuals as opposed to community members. It showed that we are now a year into the pandemic and, yes, the only solution that we've come to is not taking care of each other, but it is a vaccine, which I'm grateful for. Yes, of course vaccine, but it strikes me when I look at other countries and I look at smaller communities where people know each other. Shutting it down and really taking care and putting on a mask and self-isolating was a way of taking care of your community members, not just yourself. That just did not translate into larger centers or other parts of the country. So that came to a reality in a very real way of how individual we have been encouraged to be. What strikes me then is that with all these systems that

Rebecca Naegele, *Seen from above* (still), 2019, 6:24 min, Digital video

you've discovered, out of there comes this burgeoning idea of connectiveness, similar to the book *Emergent Strategy.* Now that you've spent a lot of time thinking about the systems that create and support individualism, what are you thinking about now?

RN: Thinking about cooperation and community building as alternatives to competition feels important, as well as the mutual aid and local community organizing that's been happening. It can be hard for artists, who are often itinerant and traveling to opportunities, to build and maintain local community. I left New York to go to Philly for grad school and now that I'm back in Queens, I feel more motivated to engage in a very local way, which is possible because I'm not commuting to work in Manhattan, which I normally would be. I'm curious to learn how other people are experiencing it. I have the privilege to be working from home and it has been necessary to be hyper-local this past year, but that's something I want to take with me moving forward, being more aware of and more in touch with my neighbors and supporting my local neighborhood and its economy. I've been doing outdoor hands-on activities like working at the community garden and volunteering with NYC Parks and NYC Composting Project. You mentioned Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategy*, and a lot of her book is about working together to be adaptable and looking at ants and bees and other types of cooperatively structured organisms. I've also been reading some books which draw on Indigenous wisdom, including Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Her writing has helped me think about us humans as being part of a larger natural ecosystem, and about how to respectfully and healthily exist on the planet which is at risk in so many ways because of human exploitation of natural resources and unbridled consumption and expansion.

KP: I'm struck by the Octo-Bouncer too, and I'm interested in this question - how hard it is to change? You went from what I would describe as a really intense understanding of surveillance in our marketplace on a personal, vulnerable level to now thinking more about community and cooperation. You strike me as someone who's very empathetic and have this other side that you had to study this part before you can move on to this part. I'm looking at your idea of status quo in relation to stability and how hard it might be to be unstable and unknowing. Is that where you are in your research with your project? Do you have any ways of conveying this emergent thinking through visual work yet?

RN: I'm thinking about ways to visualize inhabiting stability and instability simultaneously, and revolution as both physical revolution in the revolving helicopter rotor as well as social movement. The camera eye embedded in The Octo-Bouncer's Arduino program calculates the ball's 3D position to determine the position of the glass plate, which shifts precisely so the ping pong ball remains bouncing on the plate. The visual metaphor is in some ways similar to this idea of movement in stasis and stunted progress I was capturing in the hovering helicopters surveilling protests from overhead. I'm hoping that meaning can come from the pairing of the videos and the mood of this frustrated stuckness. I think about cyclic history and wonder how much political potential there is to go in a new way? Is the system rigged so that we don't veer too far off course, too far away from a status quo position of 'stability', always hovering around the center? For me, the Octo-Bouncer has political allusions to getting back to the 'moderate' position, never veering too far away from a political center position. I suppose there has been such a break from day-to-day life in the last year throughout the crisis of the pandemic, economic crisis and crises of human rights and democracy, that there has been enough time to incubate or lay fallow so new ways can emerge. I think about this in relation to plant dormancy, the state in which a plant exhibits little or no growth. It's a survival strategy to have this period of arrested growth which later leads to a period of new growth. I think many people had time to reprioritize and think about how they want to live moving forward throughout this past year.

KP: I agree and I wonder if are we going to be able to do it? I think it has been a very deeply self reflective time for a lot of people, me included. Now as I feel some reason that we're emerging out of that fallow phase, I'm wondering if I have to do something different or if I am already different. I think some of my habits relate to productivity and we're conditioned to think about productivity. I find myself thinking that I need to do more. I feel like that bouncing ball where I think I'm just going to be doing more of the same because I want someone to show me what changes they went through. I'm in a very uncertain

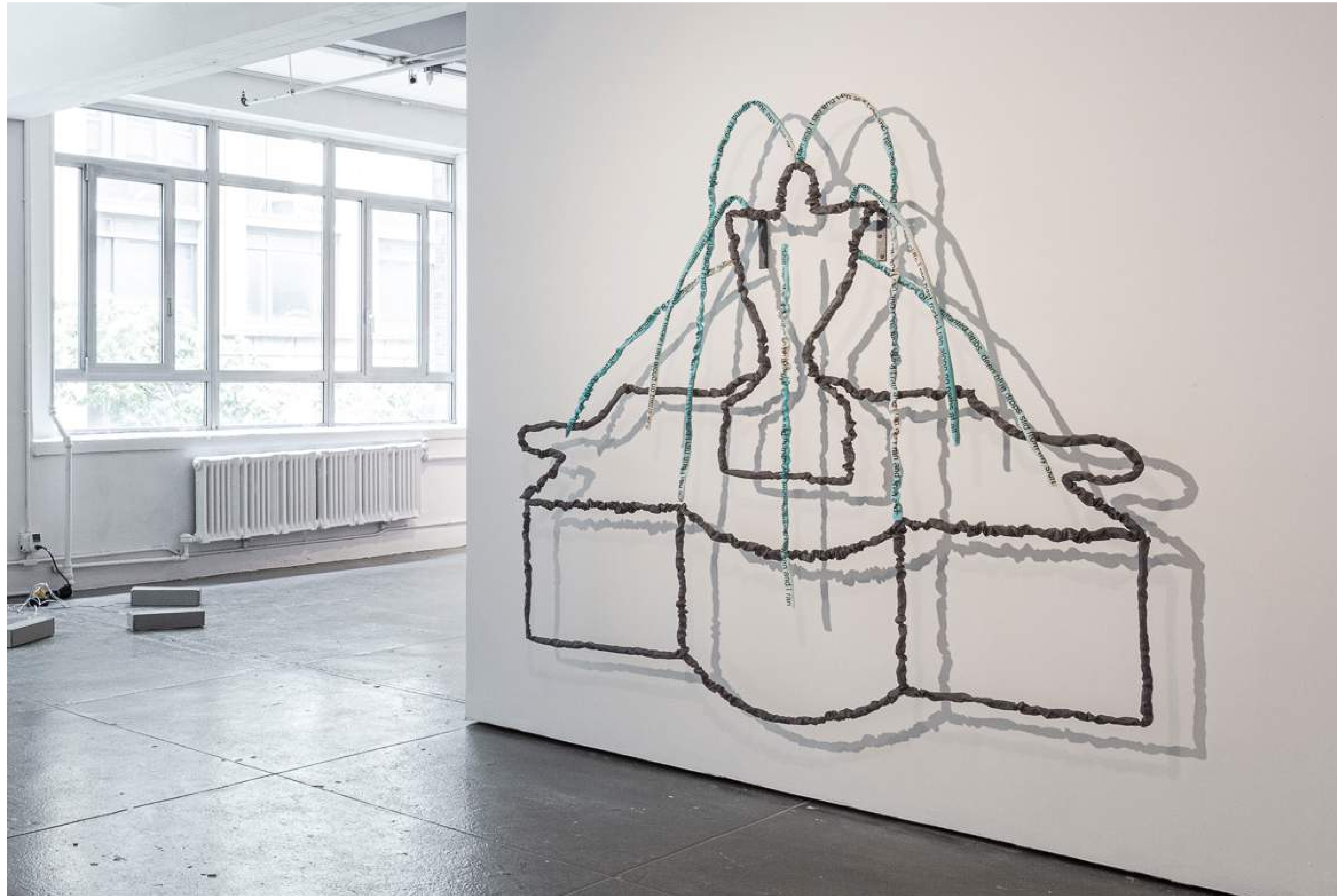
Rebecca Naegele, *Mythic Progress* (detail), 2021, Looped digital video, monitor, plastic container, mirrors, wood, 35 x 32 x 23 inches

phase of what got absorbed in the past year that has affected change in me and is that change physical. That's the uncertainty that I feel. All the reading that you're doing is like let's look at other structures, structures in nature. Trailblazing you have as an idea, and I love that. What can we look to that has its own systems that constantly have to adjust and change no matter what? But where are you at?

RN: I've measured my value for a long time in terms of productivity. I'm starting to relax on that in some ways. Laying fallow feels necessary now. Mary and Pat Kelly gave us Jenny Odell's book *How to Do Nothing* as class reading last year, and it came at the right time, interestingly, right before the pandemic hit. Odell writes about taking time to observe birds and taking time to do nothing as a necessary step to reorient to the world through observation and also leaving space for thinking to happen in a way that you may not be cognizant of and just slowing down from capitalist productivity.

KP: This will be a really interesting time, especially for where you are with your work, because it's almost like you've been watching us this whole time, because you're witnessing and you have the tools to translate what we'll be wrestling with now, especially for those who have come through this fallow period. There's a logic to what you're exploring in grad school and beyond. There's a nice logic to it.

Rebecca Naegele, *Mythic Progress (detail)*, 2021, Looped digital video, monitor, plastic container, mirrors, wood, 35 x 32 x 23 inches



Emmanuela Soria Ruiz

Emmanuela Soria Ruiz (b.1992, Granada, Spain) is a multidisciplinary artist and educator based in Philadelphia (Lenni-Lenape occupied land) working in and across sculpture, video, installation and performance. Through both research-based and intuitive methodologies, she investigates hegemonies embedded in personal histories, Greco-Roman mythology, literature and history of architecture. She obtained her BFA from The Cooper Union in 2014, and an MFA from The University of Pennsylvania in 2020. Recently, her work has been featured in the Icebox Project Space, Pilot + Projects, Automat Gallery, Cherry St. Pier, and Practice Gallery in Philadelphia, PA.

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A conversation between Kelly Shindler, senior program specialist for exhibitions and public interpretation at the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage in Philadelphia, and Emmanuela Soria Ruiz.

Kelly Shindler: Can you talk to me about the text that is included in the sculptures?

Emmanuela Soria Ruiz: Yes, so these two sculptures are part of a larger body of work that uses myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a point of departure. There is a category of myths in which nymphs such as Daphne, Io, or Arethusa, transform into non-human elements to escape sexual assault. Right before the pandemic I had been working on a performance with lots of bodies that was referencing some of these myths. But once it was unsafe to meet in person, I shifted to an earlier idea of making sculptures that are inspired by the shape of a scrunchie. I wanted to use the wrinkly, femme, and excessive line of a scrunchie as a line of text or as a line of drawing. I made two fountain shapes in reference to the myth of Arethusa, who transforms into a spring of water in order to escape Alpheus.

Sometimes I work by using literary texts as inspiration, and I use them as primary sources that I read pretty closely. In this case, I decided to work with Arethusa's myth because it is told in the first person. I was really struck by this fictional narrative first person. I was thinking about utterances of accounts of rape and abuse- how these incredibly brave, public first person accounts are now part of the media landscape, but also how often these words do not protect the victim, and do not bring justice, and we are sort of left with them. I think I wanted to do something with these words so that they could be read in a different way.

I read about Ovid's use of wordplay, and I began to notice the emphasis on running in the myth of Arethusa. A lot of these myths that are about rape spend most of the text describing long chases, these long runs, Daphne running from Apollo, Syrinx running from Pan, and so on. The description of the transformation is quite short compared to how much text is dedicated to the chase. Ovid uses all these analogies about animals hunting, so it seems that the attack will be inevitable, and then he interrupts this dynamic with the transformations. And in these other myths, during the chase Ovid constantly changes point of view between the nymph and the god trying to attack, kind of like how one would edit a car chase in a movie. But in Arethusa's case, since it stays with the nymph's point of view, it really describes the terror of the chase- it talks about running past cliffs, past rocks, past fields, when there are no paths at all. And after she transforms, she keeps running, like rivers run. So I was thinking about how all this running by foot, the running of water, and then translating that as the excessive running of fabric of a scrunchie.

KS: So, how legible is that text to a viewer?

ESR: There is a lot of repetition of simple sentences in my sculpture, which makes it pretty legible. I wanted to mirror the repetition and excess of running with the excess of fabric in the scrunchie. I was also hoping that because it is still a bit difficult to read, it would invite closer examination. I wanted the reading to be a tactile experience as well as visual.

KS: So, there's an interesting soft and hard thing going on, right?

ESR: Yes. In that sense, materially, I'm not super used to them. There is a steel structure that hides under the soft, wrinkly fabric, and the materiality is closer to something like expanding foam... like some sort of excretion. The volume of the scrunchie feels a little, I don't know how to put it...

KS: Monstrous?

ESR: Yes.

KS: Aggressive.

ESR: Yeah, that too.

KS: There's something interesting about the scale of it, too, right? These are people sized, right? Or are they bigger?

ESR: I think they're just a little bit bigger, but they're fairly people-sized. It was the largest scale I could make them so

Emmanuela Soria Ruiz, *Running water 1 (with Arethusa's words)*, 2021
Printed silk and steel, 80 x 60 x 6 inches

Emmanuela Soria Ruiz, *Running water 2 (with Arethusa's words)*, 2021
Printed silk and steel, 84 x 64 x 16 inches

that it wouldn't look like a drawing, but rather like a smallish representation of a public fountain.

KS: Yeah. It looks like they're playing with form, which makes sense given the source material, in that it's about transformation and going from something. And protection, right? To shape shift for one's own protection, as in those myths. And survival, too. I wonder, do you feel your practice has changed a lot since the pandemic started? How has it impacted how you think about your work and what you make?

ESR: Well, I think it is difficult to tell yet. I mentioned this forced pause in my projects that were centering performance, and going back to earlier interest in baroque sculptural forms. I was interested in how this excessive fabric, how those wrinkles... Wrinkles? Or maybe Folds. Folds says it better.

KS: I like wrinkles!

ESR: I like wrinkles too! This interest goes back to a proposal I wrote to attend a summer residency at the American Academy in Rome in 2019. I went there to study baroque sculpture, especially the works of Bernini that depict moments of rape such as the sculptures of Apollo and Daphne, or the *Rape of Proserpina*, and also of rapture, like the statue of St. Teresa. I became interested in the use of folds, which can be understood as a demonstration of virtuosity in the stone carving, the illusion of turning fabric into stone. I was thinking these folds are also a strategy for depicting violence, because they establish a tactile relationship with the viewer, which can be more intimate, so that these moments of violence need to be taken-in slowly, and close up. I wanted something similar to happen with my sculptures. Even if there is no actual touch, I wanted the encounter with the shape and material to point at tactility. Especially in relation to the text printed on the fabric, since some of the folds hide as well as reveal the words. Its also a way of protecting the words.

KS: Well, and then the object is performing for you.

ESR: Yes. In relation to your earlier question about how the pandemic has changed my practice, I've also found it helpful that it has not been possible to have a lot of humans in my performances. Before the pandemic, I was really interested in making a piece that was a chorus, which has been very much not allowed. The shift forced me to think more seriously about how these myths center non human elements, how these metamorphoses are anti-anthropocentric propositions. So in a way the circumstances enabled me to center the objects and non-human elements in my performances, or to try to get the objects to perform for me.

KS: Yeah. And maybe the fact that the viewer can touch this object is half the battle, in a way, because after a year of touch being a threat, and back to those myths, touch would be the end for those nymphs, right? If they were caught, then they were conquered.

ESR: Yeah. Even in these stories, there recognition of the transformation comes by touch. When the attacking gods finally grasp the nymphs, they are instead hugging marsh reeds, or kissing bark. I'm invested in these experiences that are invested in the interactions of the different senses- how to look and read not just with vision. I was reading about the impact of smell in our well being, in our mood and perception of the world, mostly because of the loss of smell and taste in relation to COVID-19, because of all the things we're missing, I think those are in people's minds.

KS: Yeah, kind of a heightened sense of perception and an appreciation for it that we did not necessarily have before.

ESR: And more and more noticing of the limitations of vision, and of images on screen.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity

Emmanuela Soria Ruiz, *Running water 1 (with Arethusa's words)*, 2021
Printed silk and steel, 80 x 60 x 6 inches

Emmanuela Soria Ruiz, *Running water 2 (with Arethusa's words)*, 2021
Printed silk and steel, 84 x 64 x 16 inches

Valentina Soto Illanes

Valentina Soto Illanes (b. 1988, Santiago, Chile) is a Latin American artist currently living and working in Philadelphia. She has exhibited her work mainly in South America and partaken in interdisciplinary residencies and research projects, interested in how disciplines of knowledge categorize the encounter of flora and fauna. She holds a BFA from Universidad Católica de Chile, and an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and Universidad de Chile. In 2020, she received the Master of Fine Arts Fellowship from the Dedalus Foundation.

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A conversation between Michelle Millar Fisher, curator of contemporary decorative arts at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and Valentina Soto Illanes.

Michelle Millar Fisher: I was wanting to ask you, I've seen your work before, and have always loved it. My craft heart gets really excited about the way that you use clay and other kinds of materials from the terrain. My first question for you was, I'm curious about that kind of epiphany moment, when did you come across the Wardian Case for the first time? What was the moment when you discovered it and what was so exciting to you about it?

Valentina Soto Illanes: One of the reasons I chose the MFA program at UPenn was because it was interdisciplinary, so I kept going to classes that were outside of the department and that dealt usually with botany and the history of plants. It wasn't until the last semester that I took this history of sciences class called Botanic Empires, which fitted perfectly with my interests. We read a lot of different books about how botany became the science of imperialism in the age of colonial expansion, and that is when I encountered this artifact, reading a book about one of the main directors of Kew Gardens (botanical garden in London).

They mentioned the Wardian Case, and I became very interested in this technology because I had never heard of it before. It was also an aha moment for me, because I had never thought about how they transported all these plants through months of sea voyages. This object became very interesting, as it's one of those things that you don't think about because it's packaging, it's a media that doesn't survive through time, but it impacts a variety of things. I´m still unsure if it's only an obsession that makes sense or not, which is usually how artists feel all the time. I'm still learning about the case, which is also hard because I've only found one person who writes about it and whenever I talk about it with other people, I feel I'm still the one most excited about it.

MMF: As a design curator, I'm always interested in technologies and for example, packaging for me is a part of design history, a big part of design history in terms of the way things get from A to B, but also the ways in which ideas are often communicated. I really loved it as a central part of your work. I was also curious, do any of them still exist? Can you see them in museum collections? Are they still used in more contemporary forms to transport plants?

VSI: They're actually not in use because of air travel, that's why they became obsolete. Now the technology to transport plants is usually seeds, and travel times are faster because of air travel. Nowadays it's actually not even seeds, it's more of biological matter, I don't know what would be the more precise term for that. That's the other interesting thing, that most of them didn't survive. I think worldwide, there's only six or seven that survive as objects in museum collections because most of them were burned because they transported a lot of pests around the world. I was reading one paper which stated that the most successful thing that the Wardian Case transported wasn't even plants, it was pests worldwide. This is also very interesting to think about when an object is created for a specific outcome, but actually another unexpected repercussion is the most successful thing. I was researching this object before the pandemic happened and then when COVID hit, I thought this doesn't even make sense anymore. After a while when I continued the research, words like 'plant quarantine', 'pests', 'pathogens', came up and I thought, okay, I think this is relevant to the moment, where this case can serve as a proxy.

Valentina Soto Illanes, *Squares of Tropic Summer* (still), 2020–2021
Single channel video with sound (10:07 minutes), wood, glass, growing lights, grass, soil sourced from Bartram's Garden. Dimensions variable

MMF: Yes, totally. What you were saying there reminded me to ask a related question. If that was the kind of aha moment that brought you to the Wardian Case as a central part of the work you're going to show, can you tell me a little bit about your other works, with unfired clay as a central medium of yours? Can you talk a little bit about how you came to that? Why do you return to that as a material or as a part of your practice? I love it. I really loved

the ways in which you've used it. Conceptually, how did you come to it first?

VSI: I came to it after a residency in Colombia, in 2015. At the time, I was working with modelling clay, and people would always tell me that I should use clay or ceramics because it was more permanent, but I never really bought into the idea because I always associated it with a very set craft and not in a contemporary manner. I obviously wasn't researching because when I went to that residency, I came into contact with a lot of contemporary artists that were using ceramics in amazing ways. When I came back home, I enrolled in a clay studio. That's how I came into clay as a medium, but more precisely with unfired clay, it was spontaneously as I was preparing this exhibition where I was going to fire 12 pieces of ceramics and eventually I ran out of time, so I had to show some of the pieces in unfired clay. I remember my teacher at the time was very against that because it's also the frailest state of clay. I also think about it with my anxiety of producing works that keep on getting stored in my mother's garage or something. I'm also thinking how this material can have a more circular life or an endless life. I know I keep on coming back to unfired clay because I still haven't found another material that allows me that full circle.

MMF: I love the way that your conceptual use of unfired clay met the concepts of the Wardian case in your work, because clay comes from soil and soil is this sort of terrain, and where the use of the Wardian case is to think about imperialism, contested geographies, the movement from one space to the other. I just felt that that was a really beautiful symmetry between the material of unfired clay and then thinking about the plants that might grow from the ground, but also the past that then involved themselves in that ecosystem. You talk about performing decay as a central part of your practice and work, and the widespread use of the Wardian case, which is almost an opposite idea, as this sort of blossoming, a movement across the world. Now that I've heard you talk about this, I'm not sure that I think about it as a dichotomy because the Wardian cases also decayed in a way too. I'd love to hear you talk more about the notion of performing decay, why that's so conceptually interesting to you.

VSI: Yes, I feel it ties into what I was telling you before about this anxiety of building objects that will never decay. Obviously because of the times that we're living in, where most of the things aren't decaying materially as they should, this is a recurrent feeling a lot of people have nowadays and are dealing with it in different ways. The more personal part is that I started to feel that my work was becoming very formulaic before coming to the MFA program. I was building things that then they were showcased and that was it, it became very static. So I wanted it to be more of a performance when I showcased the work, for it to be a constant experiment in live time, and you can obviously achieve this in multiple ways. In this manner, the Wardian case ties unto the unfired clay pieces, because of the unpredictability of how things are going to spread, like the dissolution of the unfired clay and the timing. I can assume that there's going to be a way in which something crumbles, but I don't really know how this piece is exactly going to play out. This questioning of how the piece is going to behave also becomes the fuel to keep working because I want to see how these things play out. More conceptually, this is also my interest in this paradigmatic need for control and the inability to, which ties with this idea of colonialism and imperialism of trying to control everything and where the excess, or "gray areas", are suppressed. Also thinking of decay in terms of, what decays and what remains? We're also thinking through time, so what are still the things that we're trying to change, but also what is coming up to the surface from the past, sort of like ghosts. This is something that you can see when things are literally dissolving in your eyes, like a metaphor or an image for this.

MMF: I know that we're running out of time, but I'd love to know, because I think it's so necessary, but how has it been for you making work over the last year during the pandemic? What has it taken to make what you're going to show within this exhibition?

VSI: It's a tricky question. I feel for me the pandemic stopped my work because I do need a studio space to work. I learn things and think through things as I make, and for a variety of reasons, I couldn't have that space. Part of it was also because I felt I needed time to process what was happening and shift my energy into organizing, tending my close community and emotional labor that the pandemic requires. I was very petrified last year. This

Valentina Soto Illanes, *A Fragile Natural History of the West Indies*, May 2019.
Wood, DIY rain barrels, water sprinkler system, plaster, unfired clay and porcelain, water, plexiglass container. Dimensions variable.

was also helpful in realizing the ways I work best and how I think through new and existing pieces. Even though I did research, filled applications and organizational computer work that´s usually saved for later, I still needed and missed the studio work, which is what I'm doing now. I had a dream at the end of 2020, that I was working with clay with my hands and it was so soothing. I tried to give myself tasks, trying to shift my practice in another manner, for example with drawing, but it didn't really pan out. Which made me understand my research through a sculptural lens, at least for now.

I feel the pandemic really made a deep cut, and froze a little bit my production in that sense, which is ok and you try to be patient with yourself, but at the same time, I was looking at my peers that were doing work last year in a great way, but that was not my case... or I don't know, I guess it was a necessary pause as well after a very intense couple of years in the program.

MMF: Yeah, totally. I think that makes the case for curators, institutions, teachers, faculty programs, MFA programs to be intensely aware of the cohorts that are coming out from the 2020 cohort and the 2021 cohort to be able to, maybe nurture them in ways that are new, because it has been such a strange moment in time. As you said, it's allowed you to clarify the way in which your research manifests through process and a studio space and through making. Which is always really good to know yourself even more, but I really loved and was really excited to hear you say the deep cut in that moment in time in terms of being able to move in directions that you felt you wanted to because that sucks. It's a good thing to make sure that folks nurture this generation of artists because you need it and you deserve it. Maybe that's a good note to end on.

*****This interview has been edited for length and clarity***

Valentina Soto Illanes, *Squares of Tropic Summer*, 2020–2021
Single channel video with sound (10:07 minutes), wood, glass, growing lights, grass, soil sourced from Bartram's Garden. Dimensions variable

Sonnie Wooden Jr.

Engaging with overlapping practices of visual art, filmmaking, and writing, Glenn "Sonnie" Wooden investigates the experiences of individuals through an ontological-and-ethnographic-like process by investigating environments, food, and bodies within and around issues of class, race, romance and violence. Sonnie is from Chicago, IL, and now lives and works in Chicago, IL. He received a BA from The University of Iowa (2018) and an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania (2020).

www.sonnieone.com
Instagram: @sonniewooden

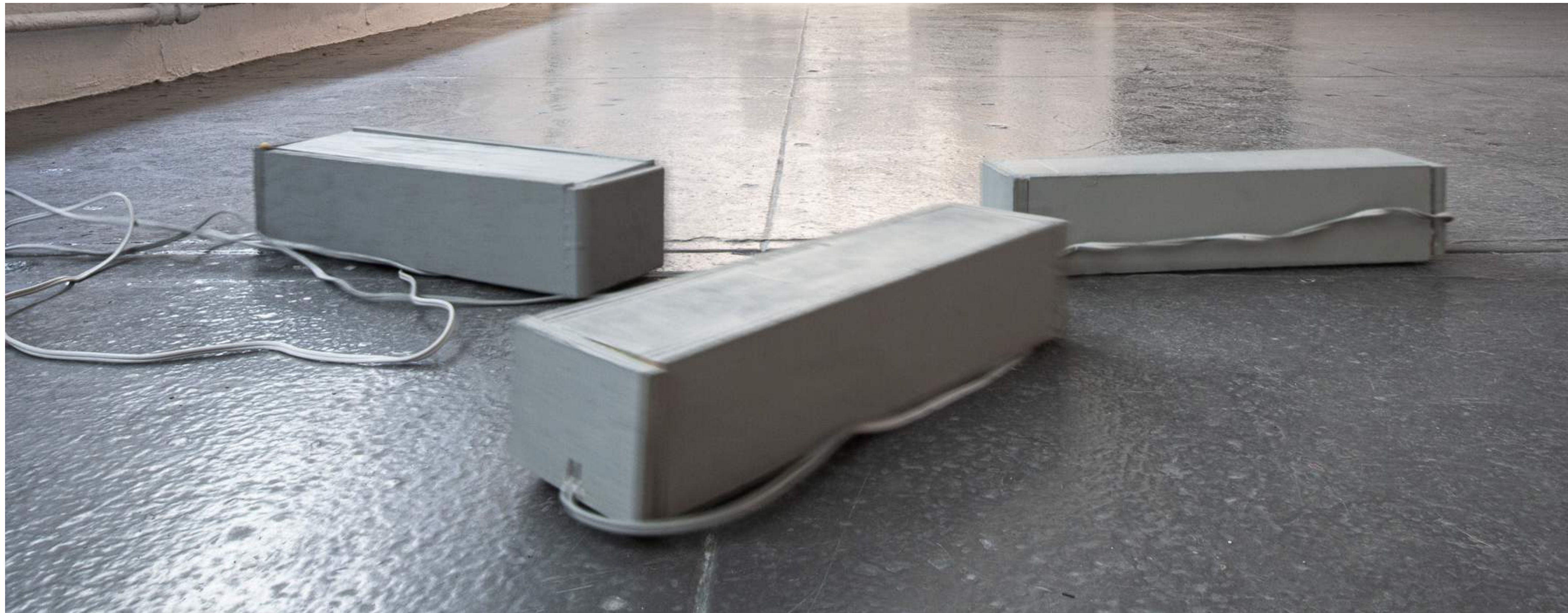
Sonnie Wooden presents Marc Williams and his piece,
Marc Williams, Self Portrait (still), sound, 08:41 minutes

Sonnie Wooden presents Marc Williams and his piece,
Marc Williams, Self Portrait (still), Digital video, sound, 08:41 minutes

Julian Zeidler

Working through personal narrative surrounding identity and a tender research based practice, Julian Zeidler (they/them) engages with leftist theory through misuse and the art of failure. Play is a preciously held political philosophy. Julian is a United Statesian sculptor, drawer, and performer. They received their BSA from Southern Connecticut State University and their MFA from University of Pennsylvania. Julian currently resides in Bradenton, FL.

Instagram: @bondage.of.self



Julian Zeidler, *Butane*, 2021, Hitachi Magic Wand, plywood, glue, power box, timer, paint, Dimensions variable

Julian Zeidler, *Butane*, 2021, Hitachi Magic Wand, plywood, glue, power box, timer, paint, Dimensions variable

WANTS

AND

NEEDS

MAY
15 – 30

EFA
PROJECT
SPACE

WED–SAT
12 –6 PM
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