



I KEEP THE LADDERS CLEAN
2024 MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

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Contemporary Art Museum
University of South Florida, Tampa

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Sarah Howard | |
| BETWEEN THE QUALIA | 3 |
| Colin Edgington | |
| ARTIST PROFILES | |
| Colin Edgington | |
| AINAZ ALIPOUR | 7 |
| TISHA BENSON | 13 |
| CAROLINE COLBY | 19 |
| MASON DOWLING | 25 |
| ANDREW KING | 31 |
| MANANTIAL | 37 |
| HARSH K SHARMA | 43 |
| TANNER SIMON | 49 |
| AMBER TOPLISEK | 55 |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | 61 |
| Margaret Miller | |



INTRODUCTION

Sarah Howard

1

Congratulations to the graduate students on their 2024 Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition! The thesis exhibition is a culmination of three years of dedicated creative inquiry and practice and a celebration of the innovative and interdisciplinary work produced by USF School of Art and Art History MFA graduates. Throughout this transformative time in the MFA program, students are guided by our distinguished faculty, visiting artists and scholars, and challenged through critiques, studio visits, and review sessions to experiment and expand their conceptual and imaginative abilities and elevate their artistic research, practice, and professional skills in bold, new directions. Harnessing the expansive freedom of the MFA's interdisciplinary philosophy and the scholarly resources of the university, these students have probed new concepts, materials, and forms to articulate their individual experiences and hone their artistic vision. The graduating MFA class should be exceptionally proud of their achievements at USF, an AAU research university, and within the MFA program, acknowledged as a premier program among national peers.

The College of The Arts, led by Dean Chris Garvin, supports the fully-funded program, providing the MFA students with time and resources to develop their creative practice, research, and teaching skills and cultivate their professional experience and networks. The School of Art and Art History faculty work closely with the MFA candidates to direct their efforts to successfully navigate contemporary art practice's theoretical, conceptual, and material complexities, prepare their work for professional exhibition, and provide skills for their future careers.

The CoTA and School of Art and Art History faculty and staff provide critical and practical guidance and assistance to the students during their time in the program. The department extends gratitude to Associate Professor and MFA Graduate Coordinator Noelle Mason and SAAH staff members Don Corbin, Irineo

Cabreros, Julie Herrin, Rachel Lynch, Forrest MacDonald, Chuck McGee, Marie O'Neil, and Maureen Slossen for their dedicated contributions to the students' success.

Since 2001, CAM has generously provided space and resources to present the School of Art and Art History Master of Fine Arts Thesis exhibitions. A museum exhibition is a critical component of the MFA graduate educational experience, providing an opportunity to work with the museum's professional staff and acquire skills in the intricacies and considerations that factor into the professional presentation, including coordinating loans and valuation of works, installation, lighting, exhibition documentation, and publication. Special thanks to Margaret Miller, Director of the Institute for Research in Art, and the entire CAM staff for their efforts to coordinate the 2024 MFA Thesis Exhibition and accompanying publication.

The School of Art and Art History is incredibly thankful to contributing writer Colin Edgington for his insightful essay probing the process of artistic discovery and what it means to generate meaning through form and materials, as well as his thoughtful profiles for each exhibiting artist.

This exhibition catalog would not have been possible without the generous funding from the Stanton Storer Embrace the Arts Foundation. The School of Art and Art History is grateful for the foundation's continued support for the MFA program and its students.

It has been an honor and pleasure to serve as Interim Director during the 2023-2024 academic year and experience this stellar and talented class of MFA graduates as they embark on their bright futures and artistic careers.

—
Sarah Howard
Interim Director
USF School of Art & Art History



Tanner Simon, *Big Soup*, 2021. oil on canvas, 102" x 87"

BETWEEN THE QUALIA

Colin Edgington

*What it is to see is not already defined,
and our eyes can thus remain open
upon an infinity of views, of sights.
—Luce Irigaray*

To make art today is to toil in matter in a way that embraces the immaterial, the things that exist but are not often readily available or easily readable. It is to extract from things and their representations that which moves them, activates them, connects them, or lies hidden in them, and then to project that out into the visible world. It is to contend with the infinity of views, those that lie before us and those laid down before us. An abundance of this kind can be overwhelming and the response fraught with the obvious. And yet, this is the artist's job, albeit a difficult one. These nine artists have embraced their role in it by laboring in spaces where meaning materializes from the immaterial. The immaterial and material are not a division but a nebulous gradient in-between where each sifts and searches according to their own paths of exploration.

The theorist and philosopher Vilém Flusser noted that matter was originally “either defined as ‘object of spirit’ [i.e. the stuff of the mind] or as ‘contents of form’” where spirit is the “subject of matter” and form the “container of matter.”ⁱ But as philosophers and scientists worked at the problem, deeper levels of matter were uncovered: those at the molecular level and the particle level (like the quark), and even those at the undetectable level—dark matter, for instance. Today we know that the universe is itself tending “towards a total loss of form.” Matter is in a process of total decay even as it is continuously created, and artists, particularly these, work both with and against this incessant reality. Flusser writes, “Thus, ‘matter’ and ‘form’ become the same thing, namely a transitory and improbable stage of energy distribution.”ⁱⁱ In this dichotomy, between matter and form, the concept of probability—

which has “to do with games, with chance, with luck, with accidents”—enters where energy is particularly at play. This is to say, with discovery and creation. The word itself stems from the Latin *probare* which means to test, to try, to examine, and finally to prove. And what we see here, in these practices and works, is that *probare*, through which innumerable methods and materials are driven by distinct experiences, intuitions, and thinking patterns.

This is what fascinates me about this group. They approach making with an embrace of probability, trying to make anew: new connections, new experiences, new objects, new combinations, new iconographies, new revelations. Ultimately, we find new matter born out of old ashes. We think here of Amber Toplisek's sculptural photography works that—through found photographs, reuse of her own images, tape, and solder, among other materials—both wrap images and extend out beyond them in structures that resemble webs, nerves, and roots. These forms take their shape as she goes, guided by chance and response but ultimately become physical manifestations of memory, both personal and collective. Or Mason Dowling's process of painting which, in an embrace of energy, consists of problem solving that sets a “lineage” from one painting to the next. Symbols—like the atomic bomb—and gestural forms appear and disappear from work to work among a myriad colors and methods of application.

Compounded works are thematic to this group, threaded throughout their practices. Andrew King, for example, makes sculptures, paintings, and ceramics, that are collaged or assembled with a variety of processes and applications. Ultimately, the works clash and collide into new forms entirely, alloys ripe with a gestural dynamism that is both simple and complex. This occurs as well in Harsh K Sharma's work where the synthesis of material,

ⁱ Vilém Flusser, *Immaterialism*, (Metaflux Publishing), 8.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 30.

creative approaches, and cultural differences brings form to new objects through repetition, reflection, and stillness. Play and chance are historical foundations of creativity that are steeped in action: we *play* a game and *take* a chance. We *work* in the studio or out in the field. But to do so we must have a sense of the game or a sense of what a chance means within the framework of our enterprise!

What does it mean to examine meaning through process? An idea, often a response or synthesis of response and concept, may turn into a gesture that creates something new and then we act again, to cover or continue, destroy or complete. During this process, which can be seen in totality from this group, the stripping bare of certain hierarchies of artistic expression, the prevailing use of certain tools, the beautification and preciousness of the object, and the shroud that drapes over our daily experience of the real becomes embedded in the work. We, as viewers, see and feel that they want to upend the easiness of certain aesthetics, ways of looking, and comfortability of works. Like Tanner Simon's use of MS Paint and oil paint—the latter considered the epitome of *fine art* painting, the former a “low culture” doodle program—which becomes an examination of the gradient of information evident in the now and the past. It builds into what the artist calls the “form of an icon.” They are recognizable as such but not easily placed, living between states of known and unknown, through varied forms of representation. The form is icon and body, engulfing the viewer in its image.

Power structures cannot be avoided here and one's body is why, as it is always the threshold for which we understand power. We incorporate ourselves into the work when we see it, and thus activate it and the work itself stands before us sometimes looming over and sometimes beckoning forth. In both Ainaz Alipour's and Caroline Colby's work, the body becomes a source of exploration.

Many of Alipour's bodies are lying, keeled over, folded, hunched, or lying on their face and/or belly. These bodies are collective, universal, but distinct. She plays with these forms as she does material (even when immaterial). For Colby, the body is transformed as well, into “bug people” and through characters from pop culture such as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and into animations—in part utilizing video game motifs—where, in this instance, the viewer becomes immersed in a looping scene. For both, disruption, distortion, and expansion of the body attest to the existence of certain modalities of power—perpetual observation, acts of trauma, and structural inequity, to name a few. But they also remind us that we are part of a body—familial, social, local, global—and thus to the connectivity of us all.

I think of a note by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his essay “The Intertwining: A Chiasm,” where he writes “that the visible of the world is not an envelope of quale [a property which is experienced as distinct from its object, like the redness of the color red], but what is between the qualia, a connective tissue of exterior and interior horizons ... the openness through flesh: the two leaves of my body and the leaves of the visible world. ... It is between these intercalated leaves that there is visibility.”ⁱⁱⁱ This space of visibility, where insight is gathered, is mirrored in the physical space between the work and the viewer and is often one of a de-centering nature. This is seen in Tisha Benson's objects, reworked forms—compounded at times, transfigured at others—that eschew their built-in meaning and recognizability in favor of one that can give the viewer a new experience. A new experience requires an openness from those who enter such a space and confront such objects and images.

Much of what is specifically said above about these artists is interchangeable with the others. Each is examining, playing with, deliberating on, and reacting to the economy of images, phenomenology of

ⁱⁱⁱ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, edited by Claude Lefort, translated by Alphonso Lingis, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 131.

perception, cultural histories, and presences while expressing their intuitive drives. The body, representation, hierarchies of power and status, cultural relevance, and history, among other things, are engaged by all nine artists. What is explicitly interesting is that nothing here is hidden. Even when concepts, methodologies, and materials are intangible or immaterial, they are nonetheless presented. When done so, a transformation between, and amalgamation of, material and immaterial is formed. From this, the phenomena often overlooked or that lie outside our private orbits can be sensed. But the necessary visual acuity to sense these phenomena “requires focusing, however brief”^{iv} even when they are surrounded by visions, sounds, and scents that may disrupt one’s attentiveness. And to see the network of things, between these artists and their works and the world-at-large, where there exists the infinity of views and sights, we must look *between the qualia*.

—
Colin Edgington, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Edgington is a visual artist and writer originally from New Mexico, USA. His visual work has been exhibited internationally and published widely. His photographic novel *[umbrae]* was awarded the Iowa Review Photography Prize and appeared on the cover and in the pages of the Winter 2013/14 issue of the Iowa Review.

His writings have appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artforum.com*, *Frieze magazine*, *Flash Art*, *MOMUS*, *Exposure magazine*, *Afterimage*, and *Minding Nature*, among others. He has also contributed essays to catalogs for many group and solo exhibitions and monographs including Erin Wiersma’s *After the Burn* (München: Galerie Wehlau, 2022) and Patrick Nagatani’s *Buried Cars* (Santa Fe: MNMPress, 2018).

He holds an MFA in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts, NYC (2016), an MFA in studio art from the Mason Gross School of Arts, Rutgers University (2010), and a BAFA in studio art from the University of New Mexico (2005).

iv Ibid., 131–2.



AINAZ ALIPOUR

When Ainaz Alipour arrived at USEF, she began to sew, taking up this tactile meditation in the name of comfort. When she sews, memories of her grandmother bubble up from their chamber. A desire for comfort is also an acknowledgment of discomfort, and perhaps anxiety for one begets the other. It is this that one may have as an entry point to her work, which migrates between the tactile and the virtual.

The body is central to Alipour's work and can be seen throughout her oeuvre as performances transformed into media, textile, and installation pieces. The act of consumption—and its means—looms throughout her work. An early video installation consisted of a body pillow with three appendages meant for people to lay on and to peer into the center where a 360-video of the artist eating the material inside can be viewed. In earlier animations, one may see a mouthless woman moving to and fro transforming into a mouth with feet and hands coming out of her lips, hands stretching and reforming, and flowers opening and closing. Dubbed over these scenes is the artist's voice, singing in ethereal tones. The song is indecipherable because it is reversed to become a remnant of language, initially Farsi—the artist is Iranian—that is now a soothing universal sound emanating from the depths of her being.

New computer-generated animations—which form a perfect synthesis for the artist between video and illustrative animation—depict what might be an extension of the previous work in which women-like forms undulate into and out of one another, bend oddly, have masks for faces, and feet that move or point in the

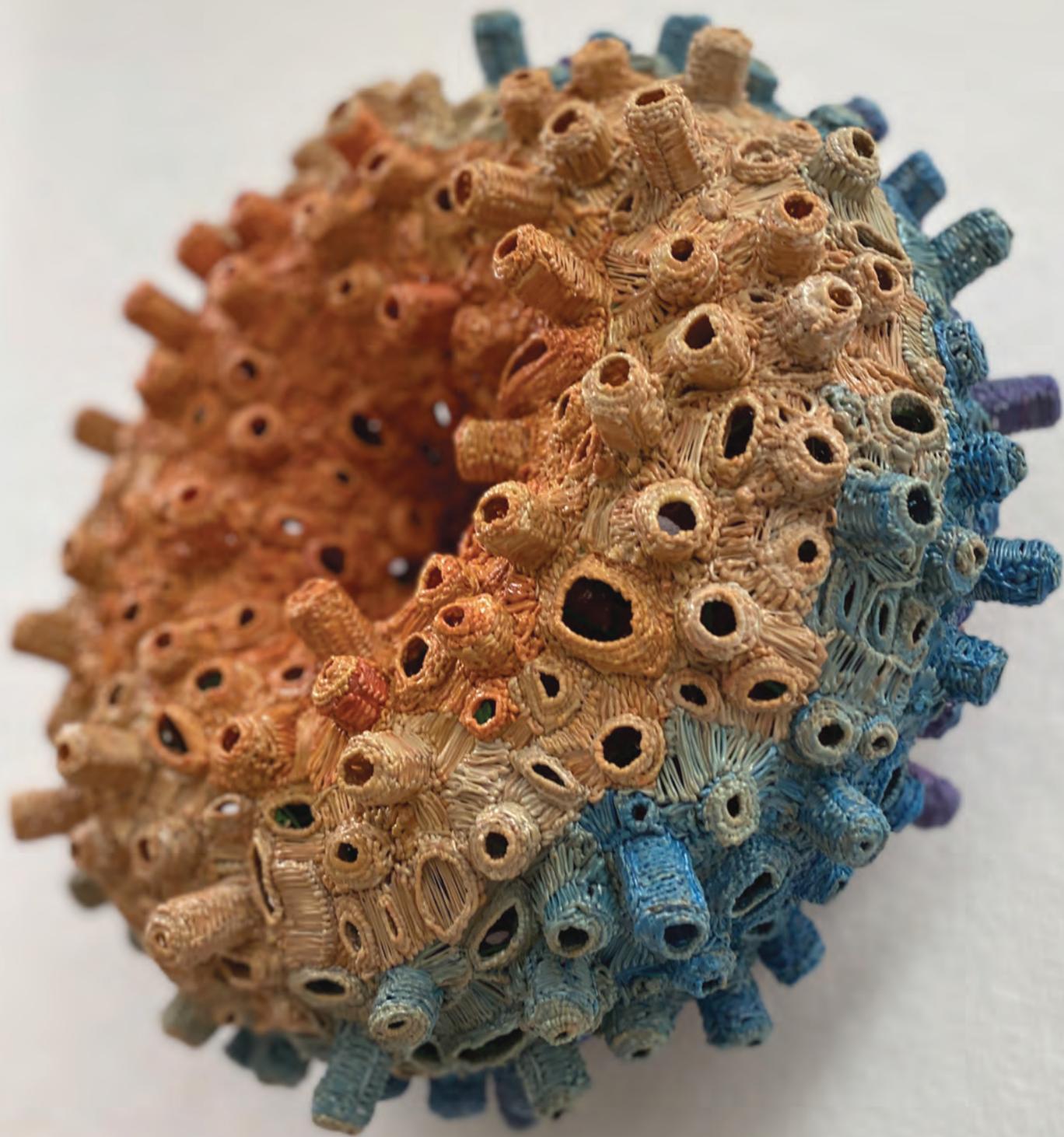
wrong directions. The forms are white, black, purple, and pearlescent providing a kind of distancing, much like the song in reverse, from the real. For the artist, these works express certain relations of fantasy and terror. But pain and the imagination loom large throughout Alipour's work. According to Elaine Scarry, "Pain and imagining are the 'framing events' within whose boundaries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur; thus, between the two extremes can be mapped the whole terrain of the human psyche." And pain is not just physical, but psychical and emotional. This framing is perhaps most evident in the digital "place" the artist is creating for all of these figures to perform in.

When presented, Alipour's video works are often paired with physical forms reminiscent of the bodies in the animations. At times they are stuffed forms the artist calls "cushions" in pastel and earthy colors, not reminiscent of skin or viscera and so, pulled back from the tones of real bodies but not entirely. Other physical works are sewn forms that hang on walls or lie flat on the ground and still others that are figurative, one of which suggests a woman plucking another's eyebrows. Sewing, which has a soothing effect on the artist, is multitudinous for its utilitarian and symbolic elements, the former as clothing or decoration and the latter as mythmaking (spider that sews) and stitching up (sutures). Pain and the imagination become poles between which the artist is trying to create a new language, one that embraces the body as creator and destroyer, matter and memory as well as fantasy and terror.





Ainaz Alipour, *Slap-eaters*, 4 channel video - soft sculpture installation, 2024





Above: Ainaz Alipour, *Sand Work*, 2023. textile, 57" x 43"

Facing page: Ainaz Alipour, *Ostinato*, 2023. sculpture, 31" x 31"



TISHA BENSON

Tisha Benson's practice is born out of a desire to create works that occupy a space of their own, one that opens the viewer up to new experiences. The objects she creates are culled from the world around her and include natural and manufactured items. These are then reworked into forms that at times rest between relic and invention, and at others are completely unknowable. These are archaic-like forms that are light—even when they appear heavy—but “of the earth”. There is something primordial about them that eclipses the present, like symbolic objects stripped of history and meaning. And they are new in the sense that one has not encountered them before, and thus must contend with their newness, creating one's own meaning simply through experience.

Her process is one of reaction, or rather, is a discourse between her self and the slowly transforming object that lies before her. In some works, she takes shower-lining-like material and pushes into it to create little bubbles in a way that feels simultaneously painterly and sculptural. The malleability and workability of the objects are important as are her intuition and patience in working with them to coax out or build in that new form. She is open to this process of metamorphosis—distancing from the object's specificity and history—as a catalyst into new territories of experience. The artist's gesture is often absent, relegated to the presentation or “posturing” of the objects in the space of their presentation. This, she says, “gives the objects a sense of urgency.” We may think of her palm frond works that transform the recognizable symbol

and fallen branch into something that curves off of the wall or bends up from the floor like the ribs of a whale washed up on the shore. To rework these objects, which have an existing form (often ripe with applied meaning), is to tackle the epitome of transubstantiation.

The palms, we know, are steeped in religious and cultural meaning—a symbol of peace, victory, eternal life, and so on—but here they become something else: an archaic bone maybe, or a large gestural line drawn by the artist and presented in such a way that the viewer shrinks in its presence. This free-floating response to her work is the point. We search for ways to tie them to a grounded experience or understanding that we recognize (bones, palm fronds, paint, string, shower lining, etc.). The human response is to connect them to something already known. When we stumble through this process, an awkwardness arises, one that interests the artist in both the existence of the object and the viewer's experience of it. Thus, her process becomes one of shedding, even while building, trimming, layering, and so on, of most historical, environmental, material, and cultural contexts. During this process, which leads to awkwardness, she consciously disrupts aesthetics that are easy and brings up the potential for one to be uneasy in its presence. Uneasiness brings newness. In the end, each object is as epistemological as it is phenomenological. We are left with a new form, a new object which is ready to be laden with meaning.



Tisha Benson, *cradle in the crease*, 2023. mixed media, 134" x 324" x 276"





Above: Tisha Benson, *from all the tensile units*, 2023. mixed media, 46" x 32" x 36"

Facing page: Tisha Benson, *Half the Hum*, 2023. mixed media, 114" x 312" x 384"





CAROLINE COLBY

Caroline Colby’s work spans painting, drawing, installation, performance, and animation. Through these media, the artist has centered on the body and its wounds, both physical and psychological. Early work contained figures disguised in landscapes and later characters and narratives which the artist used as surrogates for a variety of concepts surrounding trauma, pain, trust, anger, and ultimately the limits of one’s self. She has channeled much of this through characters including her “bug people” and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. The work—a word which the writer Elaine Scarry states as both a synonym of pain *and* creation—becomes a nucleus for these concepts, the artist’s own experiences, the formal and aesthetic properties of the work, the material’s cultural meanings, and its impact on and reception by the viewer.

The artist also embraces video game motifs along with art historical themes, including an immersive stairwell animation. This work, which constantly flows in a never-ending sequence, immerses the viewer in a cycle of

turning stairs. Stairs have long been a subject of concern for artists, from Michelangelo’s *The School of Athens* to Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and M.C. Escher’s drawings full of disorienting staircases, to Bruce Nauman’s quarter-of-a-mile-long staircase, *Untitled* (1998–99), built across the sprawling Oliver Ranch in California, and the famous bell tower scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. It is also an oft-used motif in video games. The staircase becomes one of duality, we climb them or descend them, and suggests many facets of culture including upward social or economic mobility, attaining higher consciousness (ascendance), or lowering oneself to another’s level. To be infinitely caught in a staircase, where one might climb forever or descend forever, is a labyrinthine trap that may suggest the experience of human life. We exert energy climbing and at times alter our decisions and step down or back or move away. These choices and their expressions reverberate through Colby’s work which ultimately challenges the viewer to consider succumbing to dread and embracing acceptance.



Caroline Colby, Still from *A_Game_Called_X*, 2023-24. 5 looping animations on 5 tablets, 8"x 4" each tablet

Caroline Colby, Still from *I_thought_I_heard_you_crying*, 2023. video on TV, 3:05







Above: Caroline Colby, *X_On_My_Mind*, 2024. digitized sculpture, 2" x 5"

Facing page: Caroline Colby, *M3*, 2024, fabric, Mylar, paraffin wax, cheesecloth, wire, cosplay foam, ballet shoes, plastic bags, duct tape, thread, elastic, dimensions variable



MASON DOWLING

Mason Dowling’s practice can be seen as a tethered thread that carries, what he calls, a “steady vibration” from one work to the next. Each addresses a studio problem and continues it on to the next, or settles it and creates a new thread that carries forth into further work. This is the painterly invention that Dowling approaches with each new painting, one that contends with forms, icons, images, symbols, networks, and gestures. There is a constant pushing and pulling, expanding and contracting, in the name of problem-solving without ending. To keep a work open and yet consider it finished is the great difficulty of painting in this way. Dowling addresses this through an ecological approach, where each work—often made in multiples and simultaneously along with other works—becomes a kind of fragment that attests to the interconnecting whole of his oeuvre.

As a painter, he works at various scales and through various strategies. At times color is emphasized, at others line, and then repetition of form or shape. Layering is key and there are moments where the primacy of the idea behind the painting peeks through from beneath its surface. Material and physical devices help guide his process at times, like painting with tape and then tearing it off at different stages or folding the canvas before and after the paint is applied, which ultimately forms a mosaic-like grid. Chance and surprise are important as his process includes a call-and-response effect. He enjoys the accumulation of marks and works until something resonates with him. As such, the viewer engages not just the composition, texture, color, layers, and other properties of the paintings, but also the dialogue of the artist that exists between mind, material, head, and hand.

Material is ever-present. There is of course the paint, but also impressions abound throughout: the edges and indentations of tape, the rippling from the folds, and in some cases the marks of fabric can be seen, which he uses as a method of mark-making. This often gives the paintings the look of various printmaking techniques from the mezzotint and aquatint to sugar lifts. It means, beyond the accumulative aspect, the painting’s surface becomes ground for masking, resisting, abrasion, and cutting into. Each of these actions creates new spaces for him to work, as does the use of symbols (icons, text, numbers, images, motifs), which become ways for him to experiment with the fixity of the symbol. These symbols—ribbons, arrows, Xs, potatoes, and Harold Edgerton photographs, among others—are flipped, covered, inverted, and ultimately transformed. Even the plasticity of acrylic paint is challenged as Dowling creates surfaces that appear wet like watercolor.

Throughout Dowling’s work, one may consider indexicality and the experience of the periphery. The indexicality of his gestures and actions, and of the symbols—that is, their marks on or in the surface of the painting are like tracks in snow or grass pressed down from a deer’s having slept on it—speak to the presence of his reactions and point to larger themes that may lie beneath the surface. The edges of things play an important role—the painting’s edge, the space between marks, the layering of forms, and so on. What happens there is significant to Dowling as this is where the politics of painting and mediations are at play and most powerful. It is also where vision reveals something to us not normally noticed or even known. It begs the question: “What is the object and what is the image?”



Mason Dowling, *Untitled*, 2023. acrylic and mixed media on panel, 15" x 12"



Mason Dowling, *Untitled*, 2023. acrylic and mixed media on panel, 15" x 12"



Mason Dowling, *Untitled*, 2023. acrylic and mixed media on panel, 15" x 12"



Mason Dowling, *Untitled*, 2023. acrylic and mixed media on panel, 15" x 12"



ANDREW KING

For Andrew King, the potency of the art object lies in the collisions between processes and objects. Assemblage and collage are paramount whether in ceramics, sculpture, or painting. Through each step of his practice, he questions the dichotomy between labored objects and manufactured ones. How do they clash? Can they align? As such, he is guided by intuition, visual response, and the loaded meanings of each object or medium, which result in complex and compounded expressions that are always active, even when the work is still.

The various processes King works in are not separate but rather related and transposed between one another. We see repeating diamonds or bands of colors appear in his paintings and ceramics, and depictions of animals are appropriated and placed in his assemblages and reproduced in his paintings. The iconographic histories of these animals are significant for the artist as he uses them throughout different works. The dog (and its brethren the wolf, hyena, etc.) show up in various paintings and assemblages. These depictions range from the cartoonish big bad wolf to an expressive Xoloitzcuintle to transfers of actual reproductions to the surface of a bucket and a work the artist calls a “Dog Furnace.” The use of the dog is situated in

the history of art and culture spanning from Egyptian hieroglyphs and sculptures (the Anubis, for example) and Roman marble dogs to painters like Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes and contemporary artist Michal Rovner. King’s use of these types of symbols embraces and disrupts their histories. His use of an eagle, partially broken, for example, examines its symbolic use in capitalism, elitism, imperialism, nationalism, and kitsch while also considering its actual existence as a bird of prey.

Every work is an assemblage, whether a painting full of symbols, forms, and motifs, or ceramics loaded with color, line, shape, and impression, or his towers which include found and dated materials, paint, ceramics, and sculptural elements. These beg certain questions: How do loaded objects become utilitarian ones? Form/Content matter. Where does the utility of process meet an organic process? How are the myriad gestures the artist works into each piece read in totality by the viewers? Ultimately what comes through are themes of labor, culture, time, and memory. The present vs. there and then. The towers in particular are metaphysical. But humor, play, and tension ooze from their surfaces, stating that one doesn’t “need to be so direct” as the works take on a life of their own.





Above: Andrew King, *Holy Pot*, 2023. mixed media, 12" x 7" x 5"

Facing page: Andrew King, *Striped Pot*, 2022. stoneware, glaze, 13" x 8" x 6"



Above: Andrew King, *Block Dog*, 2022. stoneware, glaze, 20" x 24" x 6"

Facing page: Andrew King, *Wiggle*, 2022. mixed media, 40" x 13" x 13"





MANANTIAL

Manantial's photographs stand in the tradition of affirmative black-and-white portraiture that includes Sanlé Sory, Diane Arbus, Ray Francis, Samuel Fosso, Dawoud Bey, Roy DeCarava, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Zanele Muholi, among many others. When looking at them, one sees the brightness of light—through sunlight and flash—illuminating the faces of those close to the artist, and so a bright humanism emanates from their surfaces.

Her works depict family and friends in everyday scenes in both candid and formal styles. Directness and indirectness are threaded throughout the work. People dance at a wedding, men play games at a baby shower, children walk in a pageant with onlookers cheering them on, a lone man sits on a weightlifting bench staring out beyond the frame. Familial and intimate scenes, including dances, cookouts, baby showers, hospital stays, parades, and intimate family exchanges, exude celebration and introspection.

As a whole, Manantial's works become an attestation to her private and public spheres, which act as an extension of her global community. The curator and critic Mark Sealy writes that "photography's capacity to connect us to our sense of being makes it an invaluable visual pathway for embracing the subject presented, allowing one's self to be touched without demanding 'reference or representation'." For the artist, a racially and ethnically mixed queer woman, the images made cannot be separated from their experience and thus become extensions of herself. Notions surrounding identity, queerness, belonging, marginalization, and oppression necessarily are built into the picture plane as they are in the skins and bodies of those who experience them. To share this is to allow viewers the space for discourse surrounding the contradictions and conflicts the artist confronts, resulting in growth and, one may hope, an embrace.



HAIRLAND

PONYTAIL

LIMIT

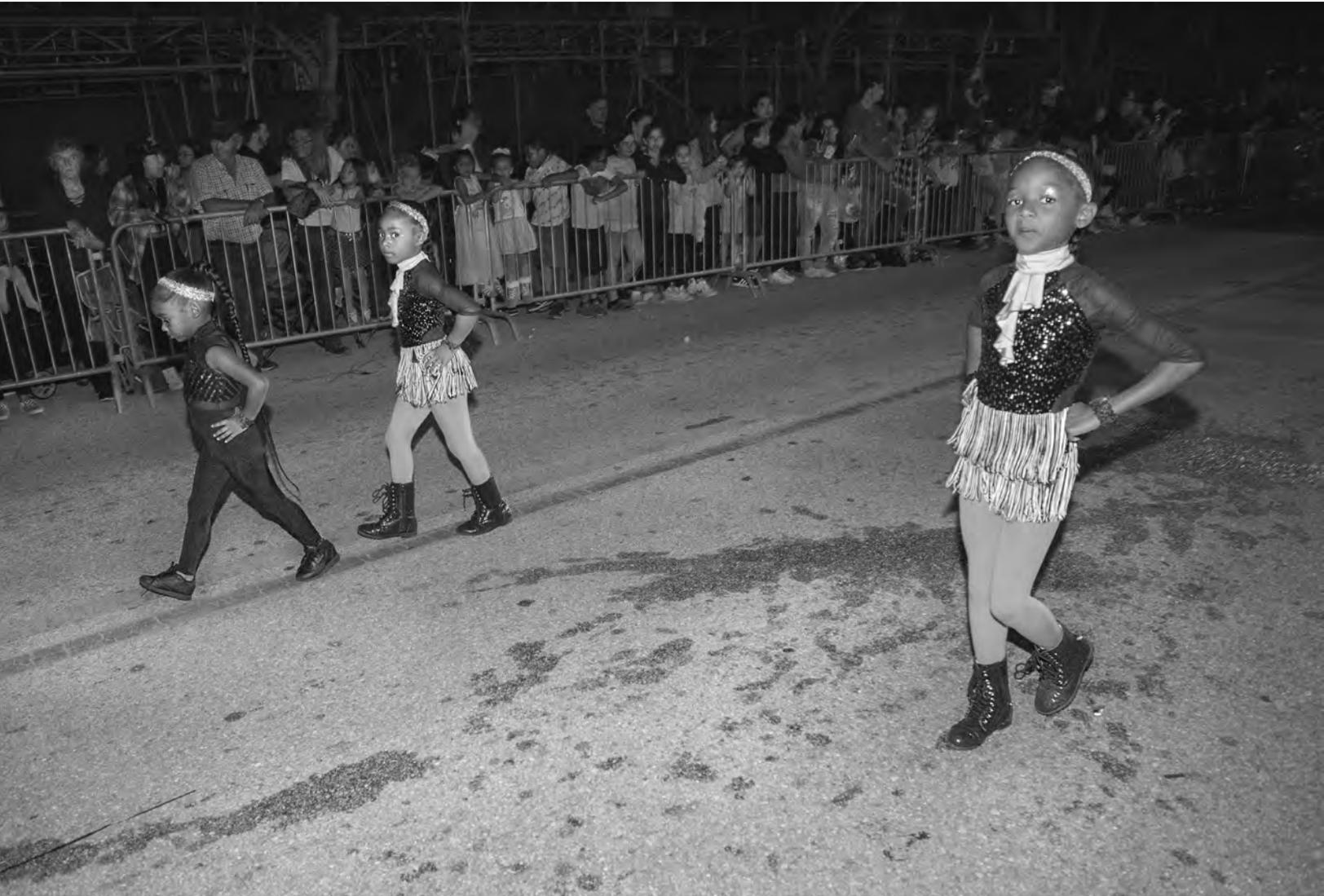
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Above: Manantial, *Tradition of Our Family Hanging in Ur Tradition of Whiteness*, 2022. archival inkjet print, 24" x 37"

Facing page: Manantial, *Her grandparents were raised in the Jim Crow south; she's an artist, too.*, 2023. archival inkjet print, 36" x 24"



Above: Manantial, *Marching History/Future*, 2022. archival inkjet print, 24" x 35"

Facing page: Manantial, *How Can I Celebrate Blackness with My Kids Without Being Complicit*, 2022. archival inkjet print, 32" x 24"





HARSH K SHARMA

Harsh K Sharma's work can be seen as a fusion between disparate things: places, styles, mediums, and presentation. His foundational practice was formed based on technical applications and the classical figurative form. This shines through much of his earlier work in the figural form. One will see play with kitsch and folk iconography (wooden squirrels and bronze pigeons) in addition to traditional forms such as the body and readymade objects. The materials used are abundant, where figures are rendered out of terracotta, concrete, asphalt, stone- and earthenware, wood, resin, casted iron, among others. Presentation varies but is often aware of the pedestal and the plinth: terracotta slippers (juttis?) that look recently dug out from the earth rest on a black mirror. Two figures, one white and one black, the latter covered in thorns, the former pierced with nails stand facing one another.

Sharma's move to the United States from India forced a reckoning in his practice, providing a chance to rethink his process and the concepts behind his work. Difference and diversity of ways of life were met with a shift from the literalness that defined his work before and into a territory of abstraction and conceptual complexity. Here he created a bridge between his current residence and homeland, working on ways to convey his experiences and ideas to a foreign audience. Layering became essential in the treatment of surfaces, fusion of materials, colors, and so on to embolden the amalgam of tradition and contemporary, utility and handmade. What we see in these new works are complex forms imbued with Sharma's homeland but broadened with new experiences and methodologies that ultimately allow for a multitude of readings.







Above: Harsh K Sharma, *Untitled*, 2022. plaster, silica, dimensions variable

Facing page: Harsh K Sharma, *Paranoid*, 2022. plywood, terracotta, 53" x 43" x 4"

Previous spread: Harsh K Sharma, *Cloud far away*, 2023. bronze, 17" x 4" x 8"





TANNER SIMON

Tanner Simon's paintings engulf the viewer in color and iconography that both inundates the senses and challenges the viewer. Vacillation occurs in the viewer due to the works' large scale, intense color variations, and diverse representative styles. Conventional readings of the images and snap judgments are subdued as one contends with the vibratory nature of the works and their potential for meaning.

His process is, as he says, "an absurdist approach" which includes beginning with MS Paint, the digital drawing software, and ending with large-scale oil paintings. These works are meticulously planned from beginning to end but do not reveal this fact simply by being perceived. The voracity with which they are made shines in the collision of realism and simple flattened forms, color fields vibrating against one another, and disparate representations that seemingly may not belong together. Simon is interested in the gradient of information that we are bombarded with but also that exists from idea through process to execution and finality. This gradation is

evident in the final work, but is at times latent, as Simon plays with reductionism throughout the process. We do not *see* the gradation but rather sense it in our confrontation with the object phenomenologically. One may see early computer graphics, child-like expression, or the nature of masking and hiding, but upon further inspection, one may perceive small details unnoticed at a distance and previous marks that eke through the glazed surface of the canvas.

The icons that the viewer is confronted with are devilish, cartoonish, funny, strange, sweet, and silly but ultimately trigger what Simon calls an "Iconography of desire and disgust." It is this, along with the artist's process, that tell the viewer Simon is examining the hierarchy of things: history, low and high culture, heroic and the everyday, well-trodden and originality, and so on. Thus, in the end the relationship between the viewer and the painting is charged with issues of representation, power, and meaning. The viewer carries this when they leave, whether they realize it or not.





Tanner Simon, *Big Clam / Small Clam*, 2022. oil on canvas, 87" x 102"



Above: Tanner Simon, *Blue Nosforatu*, 2022. oil on canvas, 87" x 102"

Facing page: Tanner Simon, *Park* installation, 2023





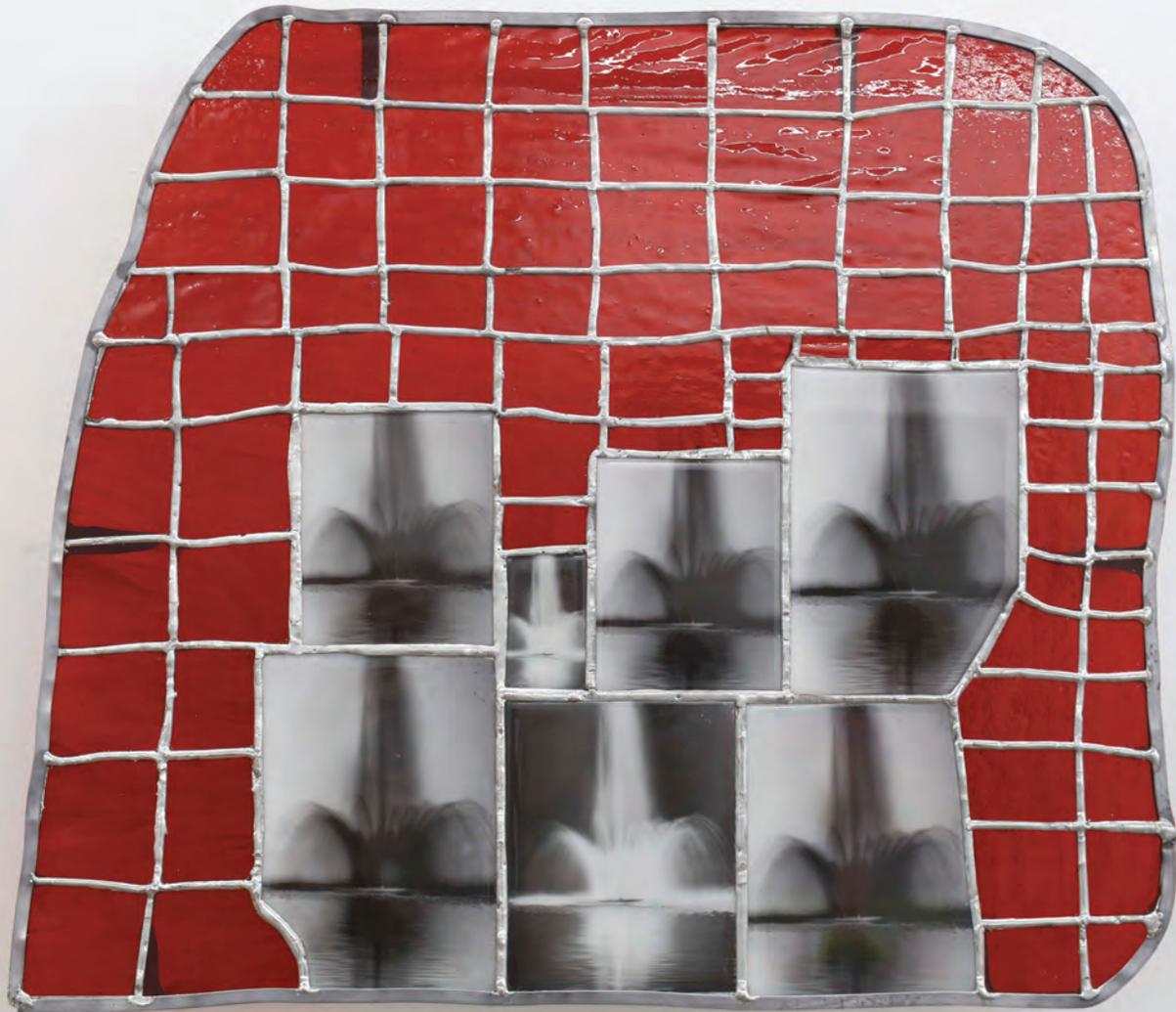
AMBER TOPLISEK

To look at Amber Toplisek's works is to be conscious of one's senses in the act of perceiving. What does it mean to see one seeing or to hear one hearing? This becomes the crux of her work, the unfolding of the act of sensing and its relation to human experience and understanding. As such, the objects she makes place the viewer in various stages between still and moving, seen and unseen, material and immaterial, and rising and descending.

Toplisek pulls images from videos, found or family archives, and other sources before working them into sculptural structures. What these images depict—water waves, portraits, abstractions—is not often tied to the meaning of the work. Instead, the photographs become aspects of the overall material and speak to greater notions of representation, likeness, mnemonics, optics, and so on. Often these images, whether moving or still, are encased or encapsulated by other materials such as steel, plexi, water, solder, and glass, among other things. The forms take their shape as the artist goes, ultimately guided by chance and response. Webs or boxes form around them, or an image is placed into a large sheet of metal, or even into a tank of water, which drains and fills in a constant loop bringing forth an image just before its revelation, before

sinking back down into obscurity. It is the physical manifestation of breathing deeply.

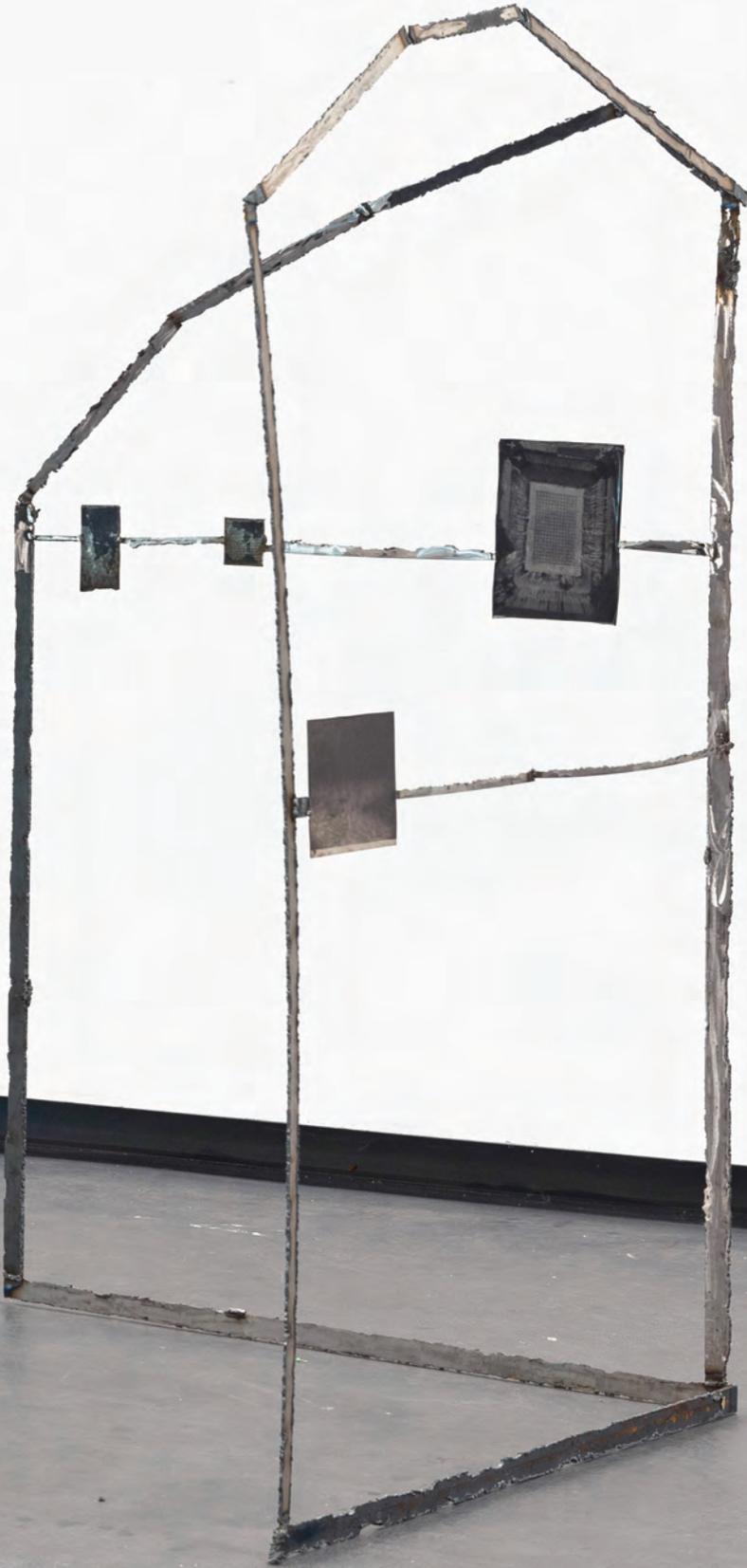
One may see that the material Toplisek uses is “naked”—that is, it is not painted, masked, or hidden—even while the image seems to withhold something. As the images themselves are often physically held, we may see them as constrained or trapped. But they are not imprisoned. Instead, they are a part of the whole, an action that nudges the viewer towards an experience of “flow” that is slow and attentive. It rejects the hastiness of things and asks us to consider our breath and the nature of daily mindless yet positive tasks like washing clothes or sweeping the floor. Repetition—in making but also through photography, as a repeatable process—becomes a central theme to her oeuvre. Toplisek does not seek to point us to a representation of the “out there,” although we cannot help at times but see that even in its obfuscated form. One might think of notions of memory, both personal and collective, as well as the unique and the ubiquitous. But ultimately, the purpose of this work is to point us to the coming and going of objects and sights—her work is a material expression of a phenomenology of the inconspicuous.



Above: Amber Toplisek, *Respite*, 2023. photos, glass, solder, 16.5" x 19.25"

Facing page: Amber Toplisek, *Capsulate*, 2023. gelatin silver print, solder, copper, 30" x 24"







Above: Amber Toplisek, *Decoherence*, 2023. photos, glass, solder, 17" x 13"

Facing page: Amber Toplisek, *Pycnogonum*, 2023. plasma cut and welded steel, 70" x 54" x 54"



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Margaret Miller

The USF Contemporary Art Museum is pleased to present *I Keep the Ladders Clean*, an exhibition of nine students graduating with MFA degrees from the USF School of Art and Art History. I congratulate Ainaz Alipour, Tisha Benson, Caroline Colby, Mason Dowling, Andrew King, Manantial, Harsh K Sharma, Tanner Simon, and Amber Toplisek, whose achievement represents intensive creative research and three years of collaboration with an amazing faculty in the School of Art and Art History.

This annual exhibition partners MFA graduates with a professional museum staff, who equip the students with tools and practical skills they will need in their professional careers. CAM's commitment to the success and learning experiences of students brings outstanding contemporary artists, curators and works of art from all over the world to campus and to the Tampa Bay area. CAM presents lectures, symposia, talks, publications, and other related educational events as well as opportunities for research on its permanent collection, graduate assistantships, and internships.

Curator of the Collection and Exhibitions Manager Shannon Annis, Exhibitions Designer Gary Schmitt, Chief Preparator Eric Jonas, and Preparators Alejandro Gómez and Madison Andrews all work closely with each student to develop optimum installation strategies while introducing the students to best museum practices. New Media Curator Don Fuller and Digital Media Specialist Kenzie Ferrell work

with the students to create this catalogue and other materials. Curator of Education Leslie Elsasser organizes and presents educational programs related to the exhibition and provides a forum for the artists' voices by moderating a panel discussion. Many thanks to Program Coordinator Amy Allison, Chief of Security par excellence David Waterman, Event Coordinator Tammy Thomas, Deputy Director of Operations Randall West, Curator-at-Large Christian Viveros-Fauné, Research Administrator Mark Fredricks, and students Bressia Borja, Delaney Foy, Victoria Mercado-Lues, Arya Mhatre, Anamary Encinales Montoya, Diego Nieves, and Mann Thukral.

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—

Margaret Miller, Director
USF Contemporary Art Museum

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