



Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power* (2018). Image courtesy the artist, Honor Fraser, and Fowler Museum at UCLA.
Photo: Monica Nouwens.

Meleko Mokgosi at the Fowler Museum

February 11–July 1, 2018

“‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh.’”¹

So begins a crucial scene in Toni Morrison’s potent novel *Beloved*, in which the matriarchal character Baby Suggs delivers a powerful sermon on the necessity of affirmations of self-love. Her words, at once subversive and deeply beautiful, quietly oppose the flagrantly intimate violence that colonial oppression bestows upon the body. These words are several of many referential framing devices present within Meleko Mokgosi’s *Bread, Butter, & Power* at the Fowler, an expansive exhibition of 21 of the artist’s large-scale paintings that form the most recent chapter in his ongoing series *Democratic Intuition*. The paintings, which depict subjects from the artist’s native Botswana and directly reference the narrative monumentality of European history painting, deftly interrogate the relationship between art history, postcolonial discourse, feminism, and black subjectivity.

Mokgosi opens the exhibition with more paratext: along with the framed, annotated photocopy of a page from Morrison’s book, there are similarly

inscribed photocopies of Nkiru Nzegwu’s 1990 poem “Sisterhood,” and June Jordan’s 1978 “Poem for South African Women,” as well as two posters, with one declaring—next to reiterative images of a raised fist—“They Will Never Kill Us All.” A single shelf presents an array of the artist’s thoroughly trodden research books, spanning tomes of postcolonial theory, African history, and seminal novels chronicling the plights and triumphs of black narrators, including Morrison’s *Beloved*.

While collectively presented as ephemera—academic and literary marginalia in relation to the meticulously rendered paintings—these references read as footnotes designed to semantically reinforce the works’ deepest layers of theoretical and historical heft. That said, their strategic placement at the beginning of the exhibition infers a narrow pedagogic interpretation of the paintings themselves, hindering the work’s fluid potential to mine these themes without textual support. Nevertheless, despite didactic undertones, Mokgosi’s juxtaposition of image and text catalyzes a curious dialogue between the frame and the page.

The paintings (all 2018) comprise one discrete work, and are seamlessly adjoined on the walls as if to form several long, disjointed film strips. Although each depicts a unique composition, several individual paintings crest beyond the natural frame of the canvas and subtly invade the adjacent image plane. Images vacillate from a distinguished

portrait of school-aged girls, a leafy market stand, a young woman in contemplative repose, to men and women in both humble and resplendent interiors, alternately dignified and forlorn. Laden with visual symbols and iconic figures—a portrait of Harriet Tubman, for example, is buttressed by a picture of Angela Davis, a raised fist, and a bust of Mary Seacole—a single image can point to multiple theoretical frameworks, from intersectional feminism to African-American history.

While this cinematic display tactic verges on visual inundation, it echoes Mokgosi’s handwritten notations in that it elevates the importance of the painting’s margins, which morph into compositional focal points. Here, unfinished brushstrokes—forming a patch of azure sky, or a crumpled bed sheet—disperse to reveal raw, unprimed canvas. In these liminal moments, the artist intentionally divulges his forfeiture of traditional white primer, pointedly negating the supposed neutrality of the white canvas. This action, alongside his dexterous use of hues such as raw umber and burnt sienna, imbues a rich luminescence into his depiction of black and brown skin—a gesture that immediately recalls Baby Suggs’ tender, corporeal celebration. Through emphasizing this tonal specificity, Mokgosi issues a critical corrective to the art historical canon by remonstrating whiteness as the representational default.

Functioning as a compositional pause or

1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1987), 103.

ellipses, three large canvases of text—one in English, and two in the Southern African language of Setswana—are dispersed throughout the exhibition’s cinematic installation. Hand-painted in a translucent wash of graphite and bleach, these semantic interludes directly thread back to the conceptual and linguistic snares metaphorically cast by the books and prints across the room. In one, permanently stained into the canvas with whitening bleach, Mokgosi transcribes—yet does not translate—a traditional oral proverb that, according to the artist, recounts a phantasmagoric fable. Another, in English and formatted as a formal academic footnote, asserts that democracy is inherently gendered—a written synthesis of Mokgosi’s research (and a thesis conceptualized within his paintings). These almost dueling languages serve a dual purpose: he immunizes one language from symbolic erasure, while employing the other, English—itself a linguistic vestige of colonialism in Southern Africa—to complicate the idealized vision of a political system touted by neo-colonial forces.

Mokgosi ultimately frames the act of painting as an instructive, restitutive, and restorative one—an act akin to language in its ability to craft, frame, and laud that which yearns for historical (and contemporaneous) representation. As such, the exhibition suggests that the texts footnote the paintings, while the paintings themselves—intimate tableaux that unearth poetic moments

of individual agency against the backdrop of postcolonial discourse—append the texts. While Mokgosi’s inclusion of an academic index directly encourages cultivation of an intellectually literate viewership, his scholarly generosity verges on overshadowing the transformational language of his paintings themselves. If Baby Suggs’ lyrical sermon points to a radical reclaiming of personal agency—physically, spiritually, psychologically—amidst the violent throes of oppression, then Mokgosi’s painterly impulse echoes this through his attentive, indeed loving, approach to his subjects. This begs a final question: should painting—or should these (exquisitely crafted) paintings—necessitate such textual prerequisites?

Chris Kraus at Château Shatto March 24–May 19, 2018

“The detective novel is the only novel truly invented in the 20th century. In the detective novel, the hero is dead at the very beginning, so you don’t have to deal with human nature at all, only the slow accumulation of facts...”¹

Laurie Anderson

Maybe it’s the fact that Chris Kraus’ videos so effectively mirror and index their New York City location during the city’s grittiest and most annoyingly hyped period (mid-’80s to early ’90s)—this, in turn, a fond and early touchstone for my own aesthetic fascination. Or

maybe it’s the New Yorkiness of voice in Kraus’ works, seeming always grimly determined, always moving despite their operative, plaguing demystification of structure, of narrative, of the image. Dave Hickey, in a different context, says “Think of it this way: Up in the front of the boat the guys in power are tossing bales of ‘inessentials’ overboard—content, rhetoric, image, narrative, genre, contingency, complexity, and desire all go over the side—while, back in the stern, as the boat chugs along, a bunch of women and queers are frantically hauling those bales out of the water and back into the boat.”²

Kraus’ videos at Château Shatto, comprising the entirety of her work in the medium, have the air of a reworked bale, marked as they are by uncertainty and anxiety, particularly towards narrative. Most of the narrative outlines conjured in her videos are rudely and routinely interrupted, often mid-sentence, by shifts in tone and voice. These moves align Kraus with the structuralist strategy—better on paper—of pointing at the mechanics of film itself by, I suppose, making it difficult to watch, understand, or care about.

Kraus’ video works were made in the decades immediately following minimalism and conceptualism, spanning 1982–1995, in which each were in their “post-” phases—the chronically neurotic condition so many movements find themselves in in academically-minded contemporary art in which



Chris Kraus, *The Golden Bowl or Repression (2)* (2018). Digital print on 100 lb. uncoated paper. Image courtesy of the artist and Chateau Shatto. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

Chris Kraus, *How to Shoot A Crime (3)* (2018). Digital print on 100 lb. uncoated paper. Image courtesy of the artist and Chateau Shatto. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

the “questioning” of every structure became as essential to art as form, color, or medium once were.

But whatever the reason, I find Kraus’ work both endlessly watchable and tedious, kinetic and oddly cold. Kraus, in a manner that feels very French, regularly presents the warmth of sexuality, desire, passion, and storytelling through the lenses of conflict, sadomasochism, murder, and madness.

To put it more succinctly, Kraus’ films are not fun, but nor are they merely, drably, good for you. Kraus makes heavy use of voice over, undercutting its associative omniscience with readings, diaristic passages, and text out of context, routinely interrupted by a shift or cut in the video stream. Several works reference the structure of crime or procedural television shows—gritty, mournful saxophone and hard-to-decipher police chatter thrown into the mix. There are characters, such as the dominatrix in *How to Shoot a Crime* (1987), or the kidnappers in *Sadness at Leaving* (1992).

Mainly, there is philosophizing, of both the pontificatory and diaristic sort so particular to Kraus’ written work, in voice over form. *Terrorists in Love* (1983) features a narrative read over scenes of a small party of individuals in an imaginary boat on a hillside. The spoken text is funny and squirrely, not so much moving the narrative along as ping-ponging away from and around whatever Kraus’ central conceits are. It’s an evasive filmmaking,

making its way periodically into abject and sadomasochistic territory. In a long work, *Foolproof Illusion* (1986), which fixates on French dramatist Antonin Artaud and his “theatre of cruelty,” the abjectness is literalized in scenes of Kraus and others declaiming some poor out-of-frame sod as “filthy,” “disgusting,” “fecal.”

Perhaps the most “New York” aspect of Kraus’ films are the lingering shots of the city’s crappy back ends—a visual implication of NYC’s toughness so commonly dramatized as to soften its authentic contemporary misery. Scrolling text in *In Order to Pass* (1982) obsesses over the act of remembering as partial and incomplete, and thus a plaguing disappointment. History of course coaxes us to regard remembrance as particular and essential to culture and its continuing survival, and it is here that Kraus begins to find the contours of a widely relatable tension that moves beyond the structuralist anxiety of medium.

One set of prints mounted to a gallery wall, also titled *In Order to Pass* (2018), show four different gloved hands and forearms, with text painted onto the gloves. This text forms something of an aesthetic manifesto for Kraus’ film work: “Fantastic Imagery,” “Disconnectedness,” “Juxtaposition,” and “Sitting.” That Kraus’ work may be described as idle, disjointed, discordant, and surprisingly compelling, mirrors these four tenets. *Gravity and Grace* (1995), Kraus’ feature-length final film, features a hilarious scene at the end

where Gravity, our heroine throughout, meets with a curator at the New Museum who describes her work as “neither abject nor sublime,” pontificating at screamingly funny length on Gravity’s media and work as “not shitty enough” for the contemporary moment. A befuddled Gravity exclaims, “My work is made out of garbage!”

Kraus’ film work would seem to reach back beyond the structuralist work of the ’60s and ’70s to an earlier realm, of montage and vignettes—the parlance of Sergei Eisenstein with the tone of Chantal Ackerman. Kraus’ film aesthetic limits the viewer to a fits-and-starts narrative, and one continually bungled by its own mechanics: the fact of being a film or an image, the desire to seduce and move one emotionally through the movement of a picture, the distillation of a narrative into a cultural form never matched in real, lived life. Pleasure suitably demystified, Kraus’ protagonists throughout struggle instead with the basic duality of logic and emotion, perhaps best captured by the dominatrix in *How to Shoot a Crime*: “You have to be sensitive to people in order to be shitty to them.”

Ben Sanders at Ochi Projects March 03–April 14, 2018

The 1912 gospel song “In the Garden” describes a moving, solitary encounter with Jesus in a garden—a metaphorical account of personal salvation. Over the past century, it has been interpreted by a wide range of artists from Mahalia

1. Laurie Anderson, “Three Songs for Paper, Film and Video,” 1984, *United States Live*, Warner Brothers, LP.

2. Dave Hickey, *25 Women: Essays on Their Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 62.

Jackson to Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash and Elvis. L.A.-based artist Ben Sanders borrowed the song's first line for the title of his solo show at Ochi Projects: *I Come to the Garden Alone* (an appropriate choice given the singular and idiosyncratic style of his paintings and drawings). The drawings, several of which functioned as studies for the larger paintings, were made while Sanders sat in church, as if subconscious visual interpretations of the religious service or perhaps confessions of a wandering mind.

The works draw on a smorgasbord of popular and art-historical references: lowbrow pop surrealism, '60s counterculture cartoons, '70s stoner artwork, '80s new wave graphics. Faux finishes, airbrushed shapes, and hand-painted objects share space on each canvas. They also incorporate unconventional media: *The Know-It-All* (2016–17) is framed by slabs of Himalayan pink salt, while *The Kiss* (2018) features a grid of white MDF tiles on its surface, and sections of bright, squishy pool noodles act as its frame.

Despite these far-flung references, most of the works update traditional genres of landscape and still life. *The Table* (2017) depicts a wedge of cheese, radish, tomato, golf balls, and an anthropomorphized vase resting on the titular object, rendered with a detailed wood grain that wraps around the sides of the canvas. The tabletop is flipped up, the space compressed, as in a Cézanne.

The Kiss could be read as a contemporary Vanitas image, and a warning against excessive hedonism. Against

a frenetic background of neon shapes and a blue and yellow checkerboard pattern, another personified vase sits surrounded by a beer bottle, oyster, glass of Campari, and an olive skewered by a cocktail sword. A flower sprouting from the vase's opening extends a bright-red tongue into the lowball glass. A bead of sweat drops down the vase's face, as a trickle of blood flows from its nose—as if overloaded by the visually garish environment surrounding it.

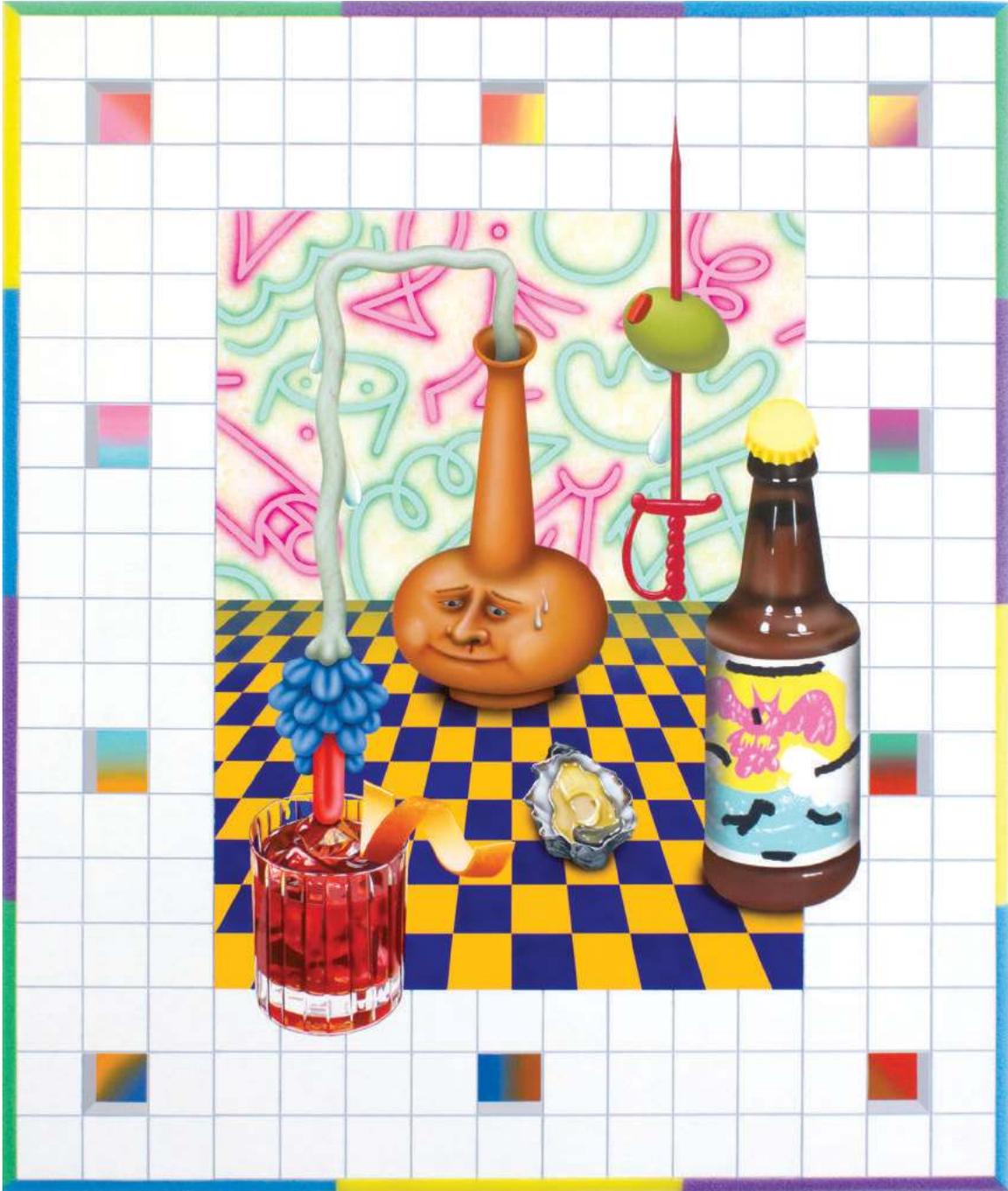
The central figure in many of these works is the Teleflora vase. Once used to send flowers to loved ones through floral wire services, they are now relegated to thrift store shelves. Seen in this way, the Teleflora vases take on the role of the song's protagonist, solitary figures in search of redemption.

The works without vases feature insects, and could be considered portraits as they are lacking in any real accompanying objects or landscape elements. In *The Night Ant* (2017), several airbrushed, geometric forms make up a large ant, with a detailed human face with delightful eyebrows, each hair a unique brushstroke. Smooth spheres and columns make up the legs, like branches of Peter Halley's abstract circuitry. *The Seraph* (2017) is the most clearly religiously-referential of the paintings, depicting an angelic being with stained-glass style wings. It lacks the grace and beauty we have come to associate with angels however, instead being a somewhat comic and grotesque figure: a butterfly with six gloved hands, green skin, and a second set of eyes

that erupt on stalks from its forehead. In Sanders' cosmology, even heavenly creatures are solitary, strange, and a little bit sad.

After viewing the paintings in the main gallery, the upstairs space features several small drawings, studies which offer scant perspective, instead illustrating how little the works change from sketch to painting. Perhaps it is the art historian in me, but I ended up wanting to see more development between the two bodies of work, some fleshing out and refining of the stream-of-consciousness ideas sketched out in a church pew.

Viewing Sanders' paintings is gratifying, even if not instantly so. It takes some time to ingratiate oneself with his distinctive stylistic and narrative constructions. Even then, many of his references remain obscure, like arcane illuminations in a medieval manuscript. Sanders' heterogeneous mix of style, techniques, and materials could be said to aggressively flirt with bad taste—even if it is a bad taste that is particularly on trend at the moment. What keeps these works from simply being throwback pastiches, however, is the curious cast of characters that are at once relatable and quite alien. Although born of Sanders' personal, spiritual experience, they offer viewers myriad paths through the fantastical garden he has created.



Ben Sanders, *The Kiss* (2018).
Acrylic, oil, and enamel on panel and MDF tile
board, foam pool noodles, 75 × 62 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Ochi Projects.



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iris yirei hu, *Detail of La Ofrenda en la casa de Juana, Antonio y Porfirio* (2018).
Acrylic, oil, textiles on canvas,
60 x 67 inches. Image courtesy of the artist
and Women's Center for Creative Work.
Photo: Ruben Diaz.

iris yirei hu, *the Poem (after emi kuriyama)* (2018). Embroidery on burlap,
79 x 29 inches. Image courtesy of the artist
and Women's Center for Creative Work.
Photo: Ruben Diaz.

iris yirei hu at Women's Center for Creative Work March 24–April 27, 2018

iris yirei hu is a kind of shaman, connected to an alternative world shaped by an alternative cosmology. It is from this well of her wisdom that she assembles her *Survival Guides*. The connotation of a “survival guide” is extreme; the most severe of the self-help guides. It implies, by its very existence, that survival is only one option among other (potentially bleak) possibilities. Those who follow the survival guides tend to be equally extreme—exhibiting the will and resilience to prevail over some mortal catastrophe. Just as they say, “there is no atheist in a foxhole,” I imagine that there are no survival guides in easy times.

Each of hu's works in *Survival Guides* is a chapter in her body of work—and they too are extremist. These full-room installations are colorful and bright, richly patterned and textured, maximalist and joyful in their inability to sit still. Every work is multiple by design: wall works spill onto the floor, floor works stretch up walls, paintings are fused with fabric collages, poetry becomes embroidery.

Earlier *Guides*, such as *when the Sun devours the Moon* and *joy* (both 2017), were cathartic and psychodelic tours through her shattering grief and tender healing in the wake of

devastating loss. Though her recent body of work—*Survival Guide: inheritance*, housed in the Women's Center for Creative Work—felt far more demure and grounded. Created in residence as a part of WCCW's “Health/Care” quarter, hu's work in the most basic sense is about how inheritance might become a form of healing.

For this exhibition, hu went beyond her own personal heritage by including participation from eight collaborators and their extended families. By doing so, hu explores the concrete products of time, bonds, lineage, and posterity, inviting in even those that are not hers.

To enter the installation, one must remove one's shoes and shift around *the Poem (after emi kuriyama)* (2018). *the Poem* is made up of floral sashes of Tawianese Hakka fabric (a recurring material in hu's work and a nod to her Taiwanese heritage). One must duck beneath the burlap curtain bearing the words from the late kuriyama: “the poem I wanted to write you didn't make it in here but I see it everywhere so tell me where you can see it so I can see it too.” kuriyama's words are a prelude to inheritance. hu and kuriyama ask us to trust the incomplete, the intangible, and the perpetually shifting. And much to the tune of the prelude, the small room where *Survival Guide: inheritance* lived felt like a work in progress.

The richly hued walls (two equally large horizontal bands, a warm gold above a deep blue) were punctuated

by hu's paintings and embroidery. hu's largest work, *La Ofrenda en la casa de Juana, Antonio y Porfirio* (2018), features a ring of scenes from the lives of a family of Zapotec weavers of Oaxaca, Mexico. The tenderly painted vignettes encircle an extra-terrestrial sunset and are framed in a flowery Hakka border. An *ofrenda*, or “offering,” is commonly associated with the Mexican Día de los Muertos alters that are lovingly assembled to memorialize and honor loved ones who have passed away. With this in mind, the whole room became an elaborate *ofrenda*. Among the offerings: a lantern made out of an American flag dotted with pompoms, a hanging sculpture, and a delicately assembled bridge made of sticks and string holding a set of miniature vessels. A number of shiny white worry stones rested on *Magic Carpet* (2018), a floor work created by hu's eight exhibition collaborators along with their mothers, children, partners, or kin. By entering, we inherited this *Survival Guide*. Every work was an offering not to just a loved one, but to us, and anyone who takes their time, attention, and remembrance to these objects.

Wielding the crafts of her collaborators and their families as a part of her own, hu is not supplanting their history with hers (or vice versa), but argues for the import of the elaborative and hybrid nature of inheritance itself. *Survival Guide: inheritance* is a demonstration that personal and collective histories are shaped through a unique

web of exposure, inclusion, and connection. *inheritance*, as an act of communal creation, was a healing in itself. It is an example of one way to survive: to reflect and invest in our connections, by blood, by love, or otherwise. These works remind us of the rhizomatic course and intrinsic paradox of inheritance: it is received from the past, cultivated and morphed in the present, and simultaneously imparted into the future—it is always a work in progress.

Harald Szeemann at the Getty Research Institute February 6–May 6, 2018

Days after the news of Helen Molesworth's contentious firing from MOCA went public, *Artforum* published an essay by the curator on the work of artist Simone Leigh. While restating the troubled history of museums as a Western colonialist enterprise, Molesworth made a more personal admission: "An overconfidence in the power of critique might be a vestige of privilege," she wrote. "I confess that more days than not I find myself wondering whether the whole damn project of collecting, displaying, and interpreting culture might just be unredeemable."¹ Whether her remarks were intended as a kind of apology or a sign of professional ambivalence, the flurry of speculation surrounding her departure—which ranged from accusations of staff abuse to her radical support

of black artists to her brusque treatment of members on the museum's Board of Trustees—pressingly reflects, as Julia Halperin wrote for *Artnet News*, "broader tensions in the museum world over what, exactly, the job of a modern-day chief curator entails."²

In 1971, famed Swiss curator Harald Szeemann also wrote a confession of sorts. Prominently featured in the introductory panel for *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions*, amidst a reverent portrait tableau of the curator, *Collision + Harmony (Prayer)* begins with the line, "I am privileged." Indeed, at age 28, Szeemann was the Kunsthalle Bern's youngest director, taking charge of the institution in 1961. Credited with inducting generations of conceptual and post-minimal artists onto the hallowed walls of the museum during the '60s and '70s, Szeemann cut a wide swath, introducing the public to a diverse and often eccentric set of artistic movements, from kinetic art to American photorealism to more obscure utopian folk art from his native Switzerland.

His notorious 1969 exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* was restaged at the Prada Foundation in 2013 during the Venice Biennale to much critical acclaim. The original presentation—sponsored by Phillip Morris and featuring an unruly group of artworks including a Michael Heizer piece that attempted to destroy the exterior plaza of the museum with a wrecking ball—was far more controversial, catalyzing Szeemann's

eventual resignation after an eight-and-a-half-year tenure. Soon after, he initiated *The Agency for Intellectual Guest Labor*, a single person entity whose sole proprietor was Szeemann himself. He even produced packing tape and stamps emblazoned with the logo and motto for his administrative front. On view at the Getty Research Institute in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions*, these tools function as objects of parody and pragmatism, lending legitimacy to the curator's newly independent endeavors by emulating the presentational and distributional systems of an "official" museum.

Taking cues from Conceptual Art practices and Fluxus aesthetics, such gestures aligned Szeemann as an artist rather than a stiff connoisseur. He has also been historicized as the first "independent curator"—a professional designation that has now become endemic to our neoliberal landscape and remains a symbol of privilege, manifesting in figures like Hans Ulrich Obrist, or any number of (usually white, male) directors wielding curatorial celebrity and power today.

Presenting the life and career of Szeemann through a dense selection of materials taken from his personal estate—a massive trove of 22,000 artist files, 50,000 photographs, 25,000 books, and countless other ephemera acquired by the Getty Research Institute in 2011—the exhibition's hagiographic approach also implicitly traced the historical development of curator as brand.

Olivian Cha

1. Helen Molesworth, "ART IS MEDICINE," *Artforum*, March 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201803/helen-molesworth-on-the-work-of-simone-leigh-74304>.



Harald Szeemann lecturing in front of *Werk Nr. 003* (undated) by Emma Kunz. Image courtesy of The Getty Research Institute and Emma Kunz Zentrum. ©Anton C. Meier.

Harald Szeemann on the last night of documenta 5: *Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today* at Museum Fridericianum (1972). Image courtesy of The Getty Research Institute. Photo: Balthasar Burkhard.

Ali Prosch at Bed and Breakfast

March 18–May 20, 2018

I do not often experience contemporary artwork curled up in my pajamas, nightly scrolls through Instagram notwithstanding. But as I lay across a double mattress outfitted in white bedding, Jacquelyn Falcone, co-owner along with Daniel Arismendys Taveras-Hernandez, of the Los Angeles art space Bed and Breakfast, reads aloud to me from a chair placed neatly in the corner, her voice dancing across the sculptures of *Come Undone*, a solo exhibition by artist Ali Prosch.

Bed and Breakfast is a name to be taken literally. Falcone and Taveras-Hernandez go to hospitable extremes: hosting visitors overnight in their bedroom, the gallery's exhibition space, reading them bedtime stories of exhibition-related readings, and preparing a communal breakfast in the morning before departure. Falcone and Taveras-Hernandez sleep on a pull-out bed in the living room on nights when a reservation has been made. As Falcone speaks, my eyes dart around the bedroom-cum-gallery, and I try to focus more on the artworks, for a moment, than the reading taking place.

Each of Prosch's pieces serve as a kind of surrogate, in some cases for a practical item that might naturally be found in a bedroom, as in *Untitled (curtains)* (2018),

Three thematic groupings: "Avant-Gardes"; "Utopias and Visionaries"; and "Geographies" offered some structure for a rather compressed presentation that was comprised, not so much of artworks, but the fecund forms of art history: letters, sketches, photographs, and artifacts.

Only a handful of the art objects on view were recognizable as such: Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise* (*Box in a Suitcase*) (1967) or Richard Artschwager's *blps* (1967–2015). Address books, passports, and objects like *Travel Sculpture* (ca. late 1960s–2004), a slouchy Christmas tree made from Szeeman's luggage tags that is both art object and archival record, all reveal the accelerated effects of globalization on curatorial practices. Other records reflect the broader global political climate: a touching April 1968 letter from Szeemann's mother, for instance, pleads he use his Swiss passport rather than his English one and reprimands her son for visiting Cuba, and other "Eastern states" known for more radical politics.

Providing a compelling history of postwar exhibition making vis-à-vis the curator, what the multitude of materials also reveals is that even in Szeemann's ostensible independence his curatorial endeavors were heavily reliant on an expansive network of professional and personal constituencies. When approaching the question of what a modern curator's job entails today, this seems to be a critical insight. In a moment when

media's hegemony continues to capitalize on exacerbating political polarities and reducing complex events to more affecting hot-button issues, the act of critique is not a privilege, as Molesworth states, but a necessity. Rather than accept curators as mythic personas or radical individuals singlehandedly "undermining the museum,"³ we might instead position them as nodes in an intricate constellation of institutional powers, economic interests, and political agendas. Szeemann's "prayer" concludes in the same way it begins, "I am privileged because I can call this moral/ethical conscience my own, and because everything is not so very simple."

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/moca-helen-molesworth-tension-1246358.art-world/moca-fires-chief-curator-helen-molesworth-according-to-report-1243853>.

3. Christopher Knight, "MOCA Fires Its Chief Curator," *Latimes.com*, March 13, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-moca-fires-molesworth-vergne-20180313-story.html>.

2. Julia Halperin, "Clashing Visions, Simmering Tensions: How a Confluence of Forces Led to MOCA's Firing of Helen Molesworth," *artnet News*, March 16, 2018,

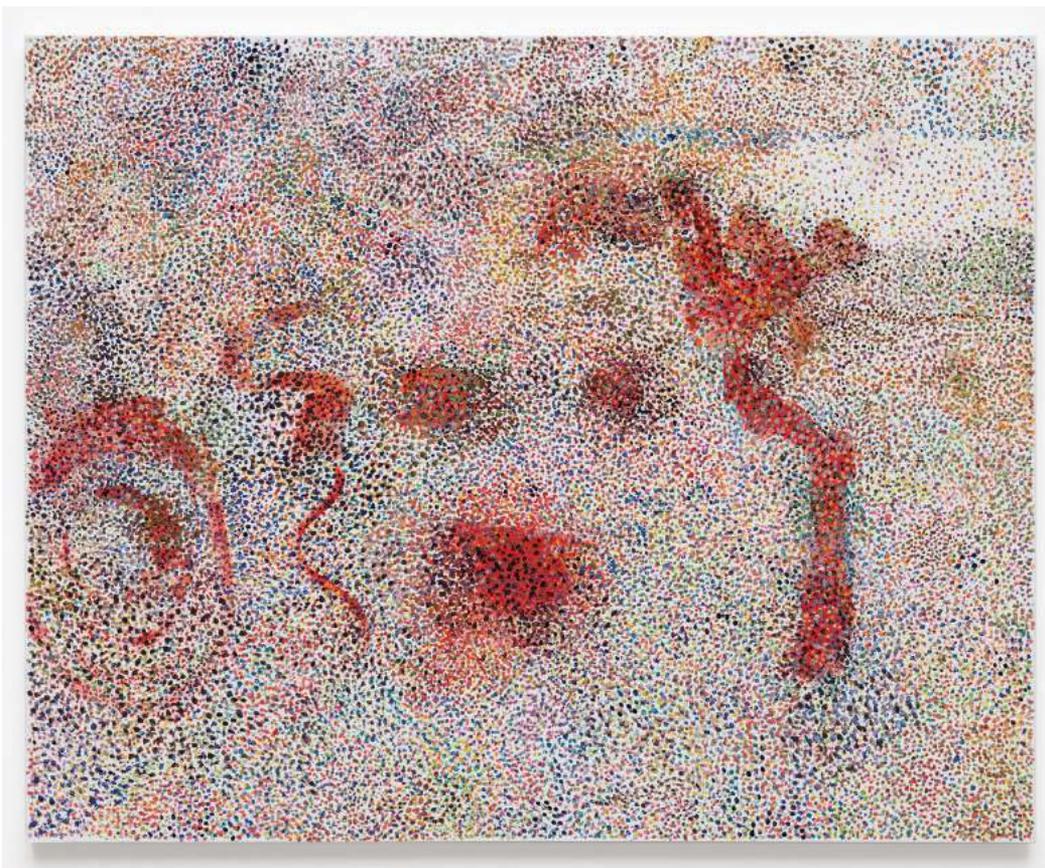


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Ali Prosch, *Come Undone* (2018)
(installation view). Image courtesy of
the artist and Bed & Breakfast.
Photo: Lani Trock.

Ali Prosch, *Untitled (curtains)* (2018) (detail).
Image courtesy of the artist and
Bed & Breakfast. Photo: Lani Trock.



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Reena Spaulings, *Medusa 11* (2018).
Acrylic and oil on linen, 40 x 50 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist
and Matthew Marks Gallery.
Photo: Alan Wiener.

Reena Spaulings, *The Male Gates*
(installation view). Image courtesy of
the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

comprised of long latex sheets that dangle from a wooden dowel. In other instances the sculptures are more self-referential, serving as stand-ins for artworks or decorative items themselves, as is the case with *Untitled (wall piece)* (2018) and *Untitled (mobile)* (2017–2018), a rectangular swath of coral latex dotted with tufts of rabbit fur and hung from another, smaller, wooden dowel. All the pieces perform a kind of imitation, embodying the skin rather than the substance of the items they purport to depict. This flesh-like association is only further emphasized by the pervasive look and smell of latex, a material used in all the exhibition's works.

The press release states that *Come Undone* “explores the nuanced processes of aging and loss” and is “set against cultural constructions of beauty ideals that pedestal the flawless.” While pieces such as *Untitled (grey braid)* (2017)—in which the titular braid is trapped within a cylinder of latex bound like a sconce against the wall—do suggest a bodily maturation, Prosch's peachy color scheme and elegant use of materials more immediately culls up images of a rosy-cheeked debutante than an aged woman bound within the looming reality of death.

However, there are moments when the exhibition's pleasant facade cracks, such as in *Untitled (towel)* (2018), a sculpture which hangs casually atop a bronze hook affixed to the bedroom's closet door. A line of oversized wart-like

nodules dripping with a brown viscous liquid run along the artwork's surface, a vague but impactful allusion to the human body's grotesque realities.

I wake up in the morning able to consider aesthetic details I didn't notice as Falcone read to me or as I lay in bed afterwards, my mind too consumed by the inherent self-consciousness of sleeping in an unfamiliar bedroom. The morning light of Los Angeles exposes another strange and subtle flaw in *Untitled (curtains)*. The latex “curtain” does not sit against the wooden dowel “rod” quite like fabric would; it clings a little too tightly, curling at its edges, as though the dowel were an arm attempting to pull through an undersized latex sleeve.

This understated difference, once so easily overlooked, is now impossible to ignore, mirroring the way life's imperfections accumulate and surface over time—that ring around the collar, the dust upon the bookshelf, those smile lines that become permanent rather than temporary fixtures upon the face.

I suddenly realize that I have become exactly one day older in this exhibition. Yet, rather than brood on thoughts of my eventual mortality, I head for the kitchen, where Falcone and Taveras-Hernandez expect me for coffee and blueberry pancakes.

Reena Spaulings at Matthew Marks

April 14–June 30, 2018

For those unfamiliar, Reena Spaulings is a fictional character in the eponymous 2004 novel by artist collective Bernadette Corporation, of which John Kelsey is a co-founding member. Reena Spaulings is also an artist collective and an art gallery in New York City (with an outpost in Los Angeles), both of which were co-founded by Kelsey and Emily Sundblad. In addition to these, Kelsey is also a widely published essayist and artist in his own right. Whether under the guise of a collective or exhibiting solo, Kelsey is represented in eight cities by no less than seven galleries, many of which represent artists also on the Reena Spaulings gallery roster. This shrewdly architected branding of interconnectivity is continually reinforced at museum and gallery openings, editorial meetings, art fairs, dinners, after parties, studio visits, lectures, and conferences. As such, Kelsey has arguably positioned himself as a figure with more channels of agency than any other person in the art world.

In his artistic collaboration with Reena Spaulings—which includes a rotating array of artists—Kelsey frequently foregrounds these mechanisms. Take, for example, their recent portraits of art advisors that were shown at Art Basel (several of which sold to a collector through an advisor represented in one of them),¹

or the older *Enigma* paintings: wine-stained tablecloths snagged from opening night dinners that Reena Spaulings evidently attended (and you did not). At times, it seems this imbrication of social, economic, and cultural capital *is* the work, and the objects themselves function merely as byproducts of a clout machine operating at full steam. Importantly, though, these and by extension all Reena Spaulings works point out that the terms “artist” and “artwork” are fictions and that their production, display, and exchange are nothing more than suspensions of disbelief. It would be easy to malign Reena Spaulings as mere purveyors of insider trading had their activities never transcended such navel gazing, as their latest exhibition at Matthew Marks’ Los Angeles outpost demonstrates.

Reena Spaulings shows at a number of established galleries, but none sells primary market artworks for upwards of eight figures in the same manner as Matthew Marks. Indeed, *The Male Gates* is the first foray into the mega-gallery realm for Reena Spaulings, which begs the question: will a practice heretofore nurtured by more intimate and interdependent networks thoroughly deflate in such a blue chip context?

Straddling two galleries and comprised of nine canvases, five painted airport security gates, and a single marble sculpture, *The Male Gates* is by and large a show of and about painting. Within it there are repeated allusions not only to the current approaches

toward the medium but historical ones as well. Half of the paintings are executed in an intentionally sloppy pointillist style, at once an allusion to Georges Seurat and a depersonalization of gesture. As their fictional name suggests, the undermining of individual authorship is a Reena Spaulings staple, wherein anyone or indeed *anything* could have been responsible for the work’s execution. An example of such painterly abdication is the gigantic and brushy *Seascape* (2014), which was painted with the assistance of an iRobot Roomba—a knowingly feeble conceit that tests the limits of Reena’s smugness. The work’s size here is rather functional in terms of its relationship to the freestanding *Gate* works (all 2018), installed in a zigzagging fashion in the center of the main gallery. Glossed quasi-seductively in house paint, they act as literal and metaphorical portals through which the viewer experiences *Seascape* and its attendant paintings. More compelling, however, are the *Gate*’s biopolitical associations. Security gates like these are typically installed at institutional thresholds such as airports and prisons where the body is either denied or granted entry, where dominant/submissive power dynamics are innately understood. Their appearance here reminds us that “the individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws.”²

The notions of power and control raised by these works are echoed in the smaller-scale paintings, each

bearing the title *Medusa* (all 2018) and taking the compositional form of pointillistic female visages or loosely brushed Gorgonian coral. Medusa, as we all know, is a female monster, a gorgon, with snakes in place of hair, whose gaze turned men to stone. Reena’s repeated allusion to a figure of table-turning male domination is particularly trenchant, considering the exhibition’s proximity to the Hollywood film industry, where the #MeToo movement began. Against this backdrop, Reena’s Medusas transform themselves into vessels of feminine fortitude.

On the whole, there is a sense that the show’s location informed certain subjects explored in the work, but not any of its lo-fi production value—a crafty balance of contextual transcendence and brand maintenance. The show’s title, *The Male Gates* at once nods to the painterly notion of the male gaze and the male-dominated gatekeeping inherent to all aspects of life, including the art world. With this, the exhibition succeeds most when it calls into question our conceptions of artistic authorship, institutional control, and gender-based power. It’s interesting to note that this particular Reena Spaulings exhibition was not only executed by Kelsey and Sundblad, but also included Jutta Koether, tipping the gender balance of the collective. Still, ask yourself: Would Reena Spaulings (or indeed John Kelsey himself) have reached their current level of visibility were she not a fe/male fiction, but a female-only entity?

1. Melanie Gerlis, “Collectors Take A Long Hard Look at Themselves,” *The Art Newspaper*, June 15, 2016, 4.

2. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3.

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