April Street at Vielmetter Los Angeles

November 16, 2019–January 11, 2020

In a 2005 piece written for *Artforum*, Tacita Dean laments the encroach of technology (at the time, a satellite phone and email capabilities) on Tristan da Cunha, a volcanic island hovering in the south Atlantic, considered one of the most remote places on Earth. Dean writes, "Maybe getting lost, or rather disappearing out of sight, has become an anachronism in our communication-crazed world."[1] Here, Dean neatly dovetails two imperatives, one historical, the other contemporary—on the historical hand, the disappearance of remote "undiscovered" terrain; on the contemporary hand, the attendant shrinking of the world, and an ever-sophisticated communication network that has little relation to geographical difference. We figure our world's complexity today on this plane of information, communication, and interaction, rather than the bucolic splendors of an unspoiled nature; nature, in the Anthropocene after all, is hardly unspoiled.

April Street's relief paintings, in her recent solo show at Vielmetter Los Angeles, harken back to the picturesque, or even the pastoral tradition, minus the shepherds. Street's pieces suggest getting lost, disappearance in senses both deliberate and oblique. Her formal language is that of the natural world, both up close and at a great distance. Comprised of fleshy-hued nylon, her works are is stretched, bunched, and stapled over wood panels, and then finally painted. The softly irregular effect of the bunching recalls topography, like the knotty contours of lumps of wood, and also, tacitly, the shifting planes and flowing curves of the body. Beyond fruits, the suggestion of fruits, and the occasional braid, there are few discrete objects towards which to wonder or contemplate, only shifting landscapes and natural forms following the contours beneath.

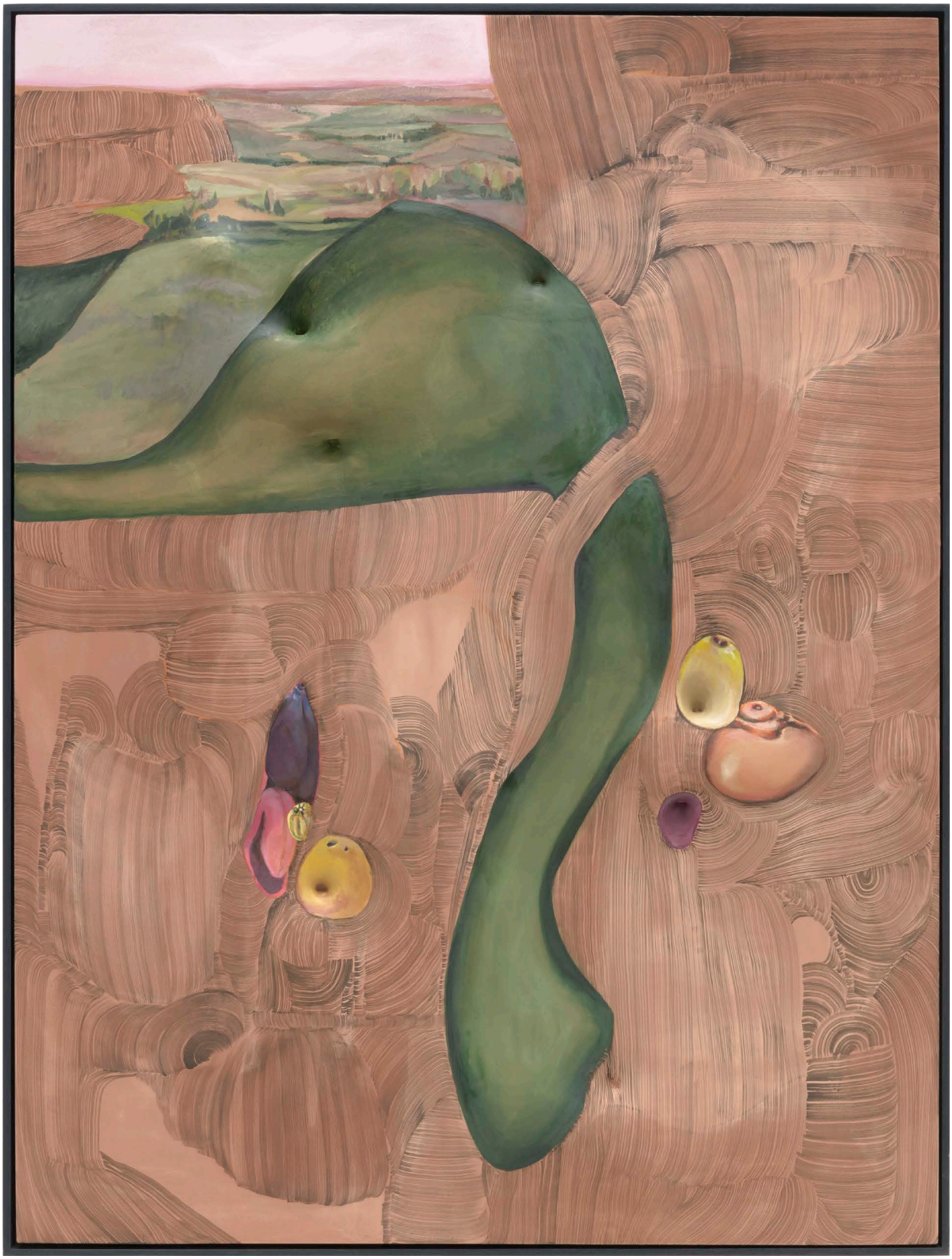
Similarly, often Street simply *suggests* landscape—in proportion, form, perspectival layering, and color. The green-y, temperate zone in the upper right corner of *Treasure Islands #1* (all works 2019) is framed by more arid terrain, the texture of rocks, and sand; from our high desert perch, the land beneath is curiously free of structures or people, even if you squint. The suggestive blends with the literal in *Land with Fruits*, which mostly resembles what could either be expanses of sandy rock or dusty wood. Yet in the upper left corner, a far-off-seeming pasture becomes a gelatinous pool of green, spilling like a waterway down the flesh-toned expanse comprising the rest of the work's surface. Street's landscapes are familiar even if they feel eerily invented. It is difficult to figure if her scenery references the subdivided ordering of arable land or if they're simply an agreeable kind of wilderness—and if she, as their inventor, relishes the pleasure of being the first to see them.

In any case, Street futzes with spatial geography throughout, making of landscape something less majestic and more elemental to her overall compositions. *Strata with Yellow Fruit* toggles between distance and close-up, dreamily. Despite abstracted references to more traditional, panoramic landscape painting, Street's use of foreground and background is less consistent. *Falls with Poured Flower* is absent any implied distant landscape but teeters between scales, implying rushing falls and mid-sized boulders at once, accessorized with taffy-like bands of liquid pink. Each piece in the show possesses stately consistency, owing to Street's natural palette—rosy, pinky browns, light and grassy greens. Her forms reference rivers, rocks, fruit, and strata, and the effect remains contemplative even as Street distorts it, conjuring through her materials the kind of eerie, unmannered growth attributable to unseen science.

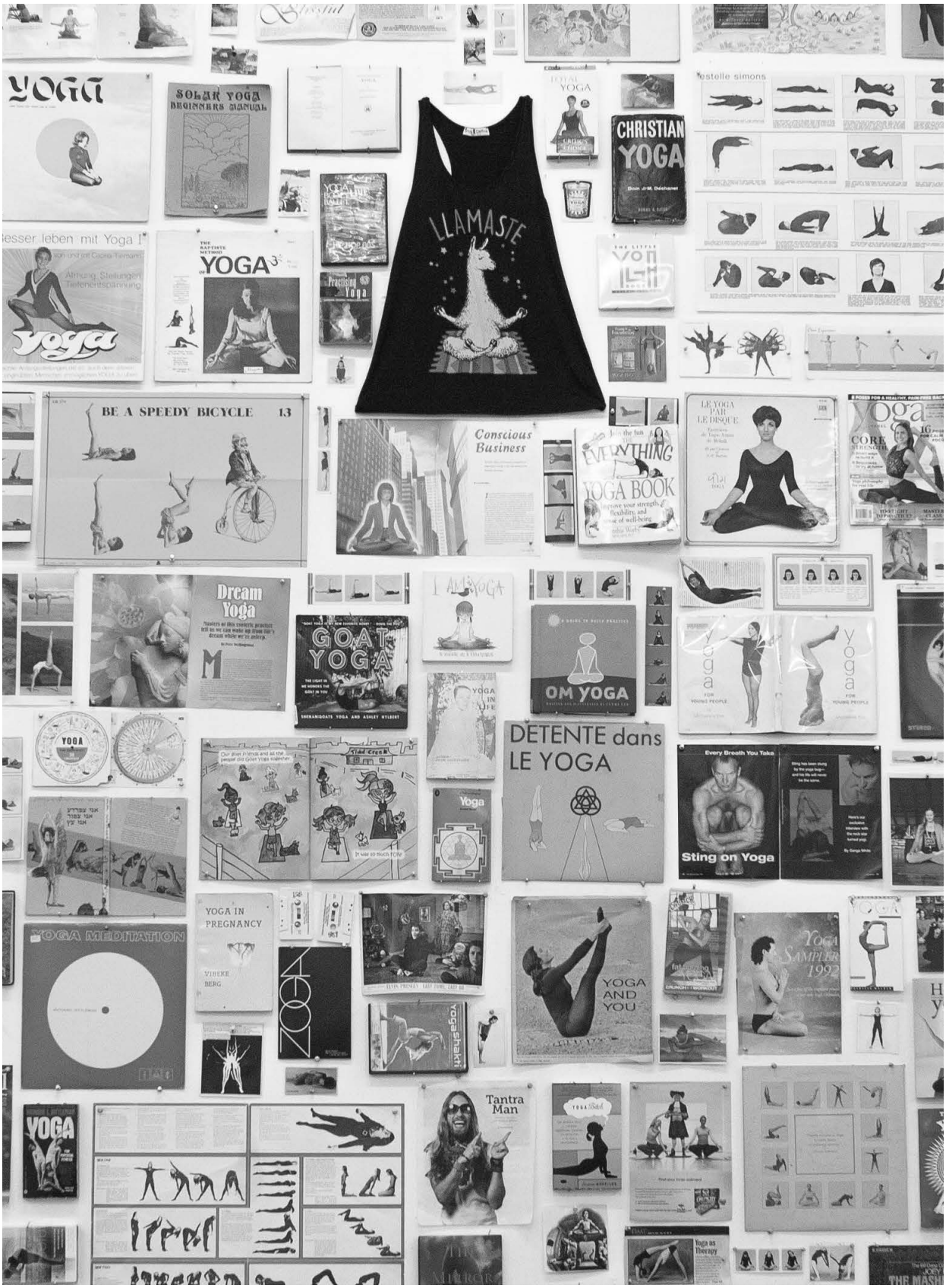
Though no image of a machine, or for that matter, a human being, manifests (*Speaking In Tongues #1* and *#2* and *Treasure Islands #1* and *#2* do all depict braids of hair), it's possible to read Street's work as figuring the natural tensions of the Anthropocene. *Strata with Yellow Fruit*'s even contours of grass green suggest the geometricizing, taming influences of machines, or strategic agricultural practices, like encouraging animals to graze within set limits. A painting in the picturesque tradition, Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* (1834), pictures this overtly— shepherds tend to grazing sheep who form fields of evenly graded grass; people walk from one point to another creating trails in the landscape that then become dusty roads. Cole's title alone, ominous now,

1. Tacita Dean, "Tristan da Cunha," *Artforum*, Summer 2005.

Aaron Horst



April Street, *Land with Fruits* (2019).
Acrylic and nylon on wood panel and canvas with hand painted frame, 48.75 × 37 × 4 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.



Chiraag Bhakta, *#WhitePeopleDoingYoga* (detail)
(2019). Mixed media installation, 36 × 18 feet.
Image courtesy of the artist and Human Resources.
Photo: Maria Kanevskaya.

but perhaps once aspirational, alludes to a societal digestion of wild landscape into a tamed, ordered space for living, movement, and pleasurable viewing. Street removes the people and the machines, but the order remains, as if by forces so sophisticated as to be invisible.

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," from which Street takes her exhibition title, pictures the titular Lady, isolated, living on an island, cursed to continuous weaving, and watching the goings-on of the outside world in a nearby mirror. This serves to fascinate a would-be suitor (Sir Lancelot) passing by on his way to Camelot. The Lady, similarly smitten at Lancelot's reflection, leaves her island for Camelot, solitary in a boat, but dies floating on the river before she reaches the city. The themes of brittle purity and frustrating unknowability are paralleled in Street's budding fruit and blooming natural forms which picture an impossibly beguiling, constantly renewing landscape, never quite in focus. The press text cites the "World Landscapes" of the Flemish Renaissance as a reference for Street, paintings which sought an idealized, panoramic order—an exercise in imagination as much as in imagined mastery. Street's play with scale, then, may be either anti-monumental or offered as a corrective counterpoint wherein a foregrounded fruit occupies the same compositional space and importance as a distant bucolic view.

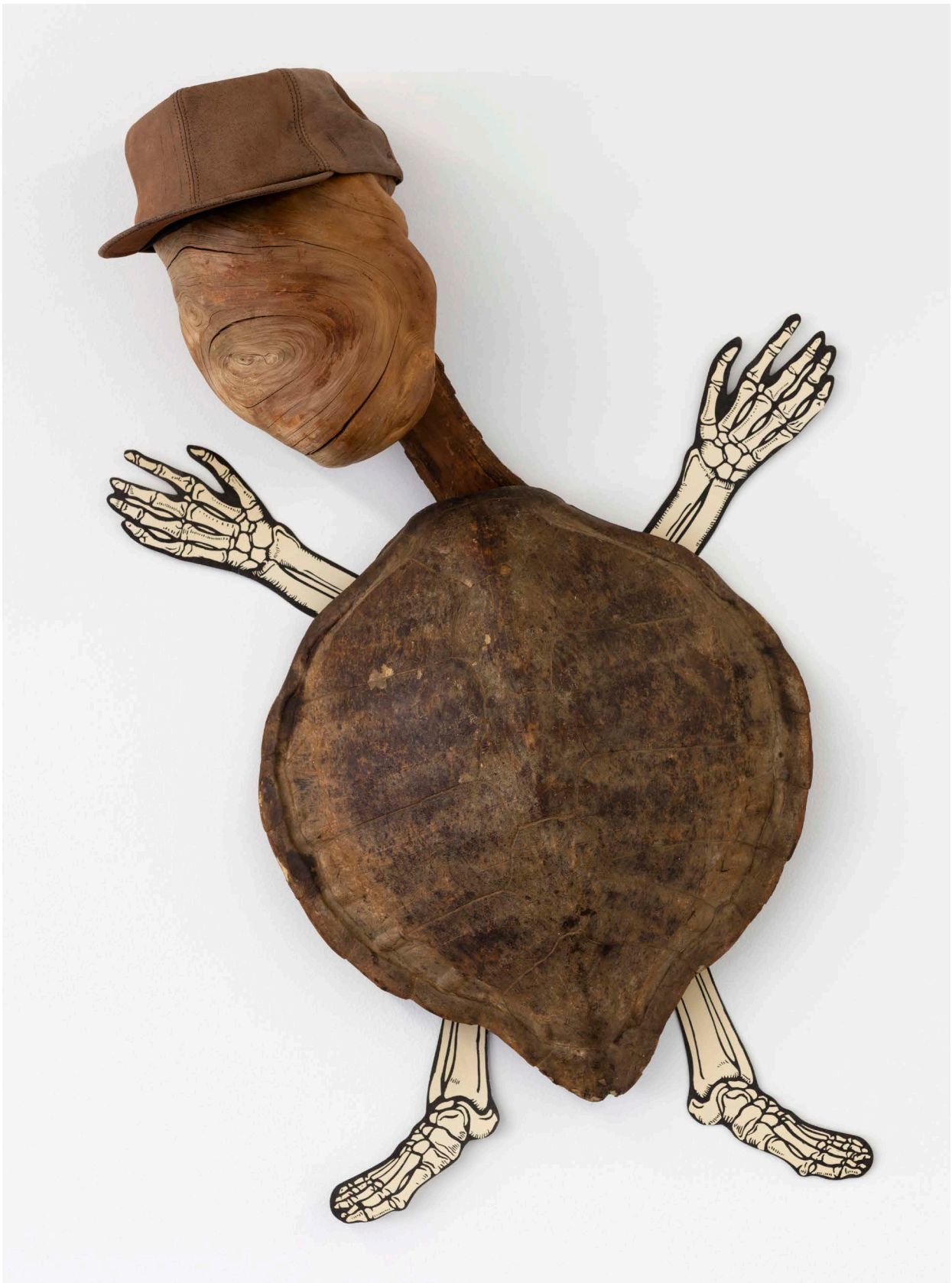
While Street's works move and pool with a graceful asymmetry—encouraging the kind of getting lost that Tacita Dean yearned to find—they embody the curious lack of friction, conflict, or angst intrinsic to the formal language of World Landscapes (which often depicted dramatic stories from Biblical and historical narratives within a compositionally overwhelming panoramic environment). Pastoral painting often lands at some point in the continuum between scenographic accuracy at one end, and total abstraction of color, line, and plane at the other. Street's work straddles these, and is not overt in any depiction of the tension between the natural world and our indelible, continuing imprint on it, though the climate crisis inevitably colors our contemporary reading of a landscape. The main thrust of Street's tacit critique is formal—her allusions to centuries-old landscape painting and to Tennyson's Camelot picture an idealized past that never quite comes into view, perhaps because it was never really there.

Chiraag Bhakta at Human Resources

October 18–October 27, 2019

In 2014, Chiraag Bhakta's installation of yoga ephemera titled *#WhitePeopleDoingYoga* was censored by the Asian Art Museum (AAM) in San Francisco. The installation was originally commissioned by the AAM as a contemporary and educational counterpart to the historical exhibition *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*. Recently, Bhakta reproduced his original uncensored installation at Human Resources and exhibited it alongside documentary evidence detailing the controversy surrounding the AAM censorship. Further, the day before his opening in Los Angeles, Bhakta published a lengthy exposé-style article, titled "The Whitewashing of #WhitePeopleDoingYoga," in *Mother Jones* magazine, delivering a biting critique of the AAM's mishandling of his project by predominantly white staff. According to Bhakta, this included, without his consent: the removal of "white" from the installation's title; the reframing of his artwork as "lighthearted" in marketing material; and the refusal to sell merchandise that was printed with his hashtag for fear of offending museum-goers, donors, and staff. Adding insult to injury, the curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* was to travel, declined Bhakta's project after consulting with local yoga studios (as a part of exhibition programming, local teachers had planned to teach yoga in the same space as his aptly titled installation). At Human Resources, this collection of archives exhibited alongside the original uncensored artwork positioned white fragility, American capitalism, cultural appropriation, and institutional critique in a perfect messy alignment.

The exhibition, accompanied by the *Mother Jones* article and a catalog with supporting essays by independent writers, not only publicly aired Bhakta's unresolved feelings about being mistreated by white institutional power, but also simultaneously outlined a critical argument for his



Tom Potts, *Untitled* (2005). Turtle shell, burl, Halloween skeleton parts, pigskin cap. Image courtesy of the artist and POTTS.

work's importance. From floor to ceiling, he filled the back wall of the gallery with a dynamic assortment of yoga-themed books, albums, pamphlets, magazines, and t-shirts from the 1960s to today. As an archivist and designer, Bhakta used scale, color, shape, and value to actively direct the viewer's attention across the expanse of his collection, a difficult feat given the proportions of his display which contained hundreds of uniquely selected items.

At face value, the content of his archive, featuring mostly able-bodied, white Americans, reduces yoga to an exoticized system of self-improvement, physical fitness, or spiritual enlightenment. Since Swami Vivekananda introduced basic yoga techniques to the U.S. and translated sections of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* into English in the late 19th century, Westerners have been fascinated, channeling these ancient practices through a countercultural hippie modern aesthetic. Concentric circles, Yantra diagrams, and stylized fonts wrap guidebooks and album covers in Bhakta's collection, invariably offering yoga to pregnant women, nudists, mothers, Christians, people over 40, and children alike. Across the subjects pictured—be it an American soldier in full uniform posing on the cover of *Yoga Journal* or Homer Simpson meditating in lotus pose—the collection evidences how Western culture has regurgitated yoga to mean very different things to different people.

On an adjacent wall, Bhakta outlined the AAM censorship with archival material—printed emails, social media posts, removed artwork, and unsold merchandise—judiciously linking one object to the next in sequential order like courtroom evidence. The timeline began with the AAM's logo and a portrait of its founding collector Avery Brundage, whom Bhakta identifies as an avowed Nazi sympathizer, and ends with a printed email exchange between *Mother Jones* editors and an AAM curator, fact-checking the validity of Bhakta's written claims (dated October 16, 2019, just two days before the show's opening). Bhakta displayed materially what he so richly detailed in his online article; in effect, he showed us the receipts. His adeptness at branding his message, evident in both the name of his original show title/hashtag and his brash social media handle, @PardonMyHindi, was solidified in his project's second iteration. Bhakta knows how to get his message across. What is less clear is whether Bhakta's installation moved beyond his positionality to raise critical questions about the cultural ownership of modern yoga, which has transformed from a set of ancient traditions originating in South Asia into a transnational phenomenon invariably influenced by British colonialism, Hindu nationalism, American new-ageism, and global capitalism.

From the outset, Bhakta's focus has been on calling out the appropriation and commodification of Indian culture by white Americans. The museum's mishandling of Bhakta's original installation reifies the need to decolonize art institutions and exemplifies the problem of whiteness—and how it is invisible only to those who inhabit it. But as his recent exhibition title *Why You So Negative?* interrogates, the controversy put Bhakta on the defensive. In his blow-by-blow account, he seemed to answer with ironic determination: "here's why!" Publicly shaming the institution is one approach. Lost in the controversy, however, is a more probing question, raised by his archive, about the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. That task of discernment would require an engagement with yoga that goes beyond book covers, lifestyle trends, and Sanskrit tattoos.

Don't Think: Tom, Joe and Rick Potts at POTTS

December 08, 2019–February 16, 2020

For the past three years, the artist-run space POTTS has inhabited the front part of a former plumbing supply store in Alhambra. Opened in 1939 by Norman Wallace Potts and his son Norm Jr., Potts Plumbing Parts moved to its current location on Valley Boulevard in 1968, where Norm Jr.'s sons Tom, Joe, and Rick essentially grew up before eventually taking the store over themselves. The brothers were also founding members of underground music collective the Los Angeles Free Music Society (LAFMS) in 1973. POTTS gallery co-founder Jackie Tarquinio Kennedy had met the brothers through her previous position at The Box gallery, which mounted an LAFMS exhibition in 2012. The plumbing store had been shut down since 2015, and the

Matt Stromberg

unused storefront inspired Kennedy and her collaborators to start the gallery space in 2017. Even after its transition to a gallery, the back room at POTTS retained the tools and accoutrements of the plumbing shop, electronics and instruments from the LAFMS, and also served as a painting studio for Joe and Rick.

As many artist-run spaces do, POTTS is closing after three years, and for their last show, the gallery has paid homage to its forbearers, bringing together four decades of work from the three Potts brothers: from doodles posted on locker doors to surreal cartoonish paintings and assemblage sculptures. Traditional artistic hierarchies are discarded as paintings are displayed alongside makeshift functional objects. Although a checklist identifies which brother is responsible for each work, specific attributions are de-emphasized, and instead the focus centers on recreating a time, place, and certain familial energy—a creative nexus that defies easy categorization.

This show highlights the Potts' legacy of experimentation: from utilitarian items cobbled together by Tom (who designed the shop's sign, also adopted by the gallery) to Rick's fantastical paintings of bucolic landscapes filled with Boschian creatures and Joe's thrift-store assemblages. Small photos of the plumbing shop are placed on the gallery's windows, visible from outside, as if overlaying the space's previous life onto the present. Several of Rick's doodles—reminiscent of underground comics á la R. Crumb—are drawn on stationary from other plumbing shops. Pettis Pipe & Supply Co.'s letterhead boasts "Right Now Service" above Rick's ballpoint drawing of a dog with the pyramidal Eye of Providence for a head. The drawings are placed on rusty locker doors that were pulled from the plumbing storage area in the back room. A few more of Rick's more finished paintings are on view: *Untitled (skeleton torso)* (1976), a Christ-like figure with a corkscrew nose and a fleshless skeletal torso, and *Eye* (1980), a solitary eyeball run through with angry red veins.

A large assemblage of pipes is placed in the center of the gallery. Made by the oldest brother, Tom, who describes himself as "not an artist," *Untitled (pipe rack)* (date unknown) was not intended as an artwork. Rather, the piece was made as a functional device for the shop—a sort of rack to hold long pipes. But, relocated to the gallery space, it becomes a minimalist installation, its form as important as its function. Tom's other contribution to the show is a sculpture made from the shell of a sea turtle—which Tom notes he ate part of. The shell is fleshed out with a wooden burl as a head topped by a pigskin baseball hat, its hands and feet are made from paper Halloween skeleton parts. The piece, *Untitled* (2005), is both unnerving and charming, the kind of low-fi humorous bricolage that is evidenced throughout the show. Also on view, for instance, are assemblage works by Joe of thrift store paintings mounted on one another—a gladiator heaped atop a matador layers and obscures meaning. As Joe notes in a text from the early '80s, reproduced in a gallery newsletter: "All painters are interconnected. The individual artist is an illusion." The notion is equally applicable to the anonymous painters he is recycling as it is to the intermingled work of the three brothers.

Joe's output also includes serial works like *All Seeing Eye* (2015), a grid of colorful digital prints, each detailing an example of a supernatural occult eye from various cultures: Akhenaten, Masonic Eye, Hamsa. This trope is extended into contemporary conspiracy theories around the panopticon and the All-Seeing Eye of Tech, illustrated here by an image of the donut-shaped headquarters of GCHQ, a U.K.-based intelligence agency. *The Daily Planet* series (1983) takes images of from autopsies, pornography, and architecture, and reproduces them in dense layers, recalling both grainy xeroxes and the rich tonality of etchings. As you gaze at the prints, recognizable forms jump out of the jumble.

Although the show challenges discreet categories of artistic display, and much of the works on view were considered doodles or practical tools by their makers, it would be wrong to say that this is a show of outsider artists. Joe and Rick both went to art school, and Rick's paintings have been exhibited at Richard Telles Fine Art. In addition to their show at The Box, the LAFMS has also performed at institutions like MOCA and the Getty. As vital members of this group, it is an oversight that their musical output has not been included in the POTTS exhibition, although there may be a closing performance.

Don't Think sets out an almost insurmountable

challenge for itself: how to capture that space between art and life in a conventional gallery exhibition, where art (only half of the equation here) is what's on view. The objects included provide one facet of the Potts brothers' very messy and expansive oeuvre. It is bittersweet, but perhaps fitting then that this is the gallery's last exhibition. It highlights the limitations of a traditional show that freezes and flattens a disparate practice. Though, wandering into the back storage area, between rows of makeshift plumbing tools designed by Tom, musical instruments used by the LAFMS, and stacks of Rick's whimsical paintings, one gets a visceral sense of the gesamtkunstwerk of these brothers. Here, the gallery walls become porous, the back room an unofficial addendum, a living archive. Still, the exhibition itself offers a worthwhile entry point into a phenomenon that extends beyond the walls.

Sarah McMenimen at Garden

November 9, 2019–January 11, 2020

A series of coiling sculptures were clustered across the floor of Garden's second level granny flat in Sarah McMenimen's *Mud*. The works, three-dimensional aluminum forms, are composed of cast seashells. *A Cursed Leaf* and *Swamp Rose* (all works 2019) undulate; others, like *Yellow Throated Flyer* and *Hermit Thrush* bend in sharp precarious angles. Still, they all seem to have a self-organizing shape, like coral or stacking DNA strands. Some, *Full Moon Moth* and *Equator (Distant Thunder)*, seem like pre-sentient limbs, perched in potential motion. After assembling the shells into a flowing arrangement, the artist masks the work with a mold, and then burns the shells away to create the metal sculpture. The resulting forms seem to accumulate and unfurl—they emerge out of collaboration rather than coercion. McMenimen acts as an archivist, collecting and reproducing forms while protecting their integrity from too much human influence. She carried these themes throughout *Mud*, negotiating the boundaries of the human ego and the natural world with humility in its most literal sense: on the ground.

The *Aggregate* series (titled *Travertine*, *Los Angeles* and *Inyo*, respectively) emerged out of a careful collaboration between process and landscape. After months of collecting plaster casts of human and animal prints during hikes throughout Los Angeles, the artist pressed the prints into resin, dirt, and clay, turning her collection of imprints into positive relief. The resulting wall works appear somewhere between topsoil and text, as the prints drift into a "semantic tangle."[1] Artist Anni Albers' view of textiles is helpful here; for Albers, the handmade offers "an organic transmutation of form" that can't be replicated by machinery.[2] Material is evidence of process, and for Albers, bringing the body closer to both makes it possible to leave a trace of the human in the final form. McMenimen engages in this transmutation in her *Aggregates*, but instead of hand and cloth, she uses "kindred bodies"[3]—her feet and the feet of animals—to weave together disparate times and places.

The traditional (and often male) genre of landscape painting might center around the self, ignoring the organic materials that physically make the work possible (canvas, horsehair brush, and mineral pigments are all sourced from the natural world). The colors, texture, and mark-making of the *Aggregate* series are not representations of the landscape but instead a collapsing of both material and the resulting forms. The work is not a visual reference on a canvas, but it rather displays the process of its own shaping; what Charles Ray might call a "pneumatic sculpture,"[4] a work made from *pnuema*—a word used for life, spirit, or breath. In other words, McMenimen does not depict landscapes but displays forms emerging from her own body as she navigated them. Arne Naess, the philosopher and founder of the deep ecology movement, would call this a search for the "ecological self," an enlargement of the self-centered ego into larger ecological contexts.[5] McMenimen's *Aggregate* series gather this search into legible form.

To get at this idea, the gallery uses the term "ecotone," the place where two ecologies meet and interpenetrate. McMenimen's reliefs negotiate the boundaries of human and animal, art practice and landscape, subject matter and material, weaving them all together into aesthetic objects. What makes this show so compelling is how her work, especially the *Aggregates*, offer insight for viewers navigating their own

Michael Wright

1. Steve Harrison and Deborah Tatar, "Places: People, Events, Loci—the Relation of Semantic Frames in the Construction of Place," *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 17, no. 2 (2008).

2. Anni Albers, "Designing," *Craft Horizons*, 1943.

3. From the *Mud* exhibition text provided by Garden.

intersecting social and biological boundaries. In a book on art and the politics of land use, Lucy R. Lippard suggests that art can be a "restorative vehicle" that might "open cracks into other worlds" and "rehabilitate the role of the communal imagination."[6] The *Aggregates* gather these fracturing boundaries into one place where they might be rehabilitated. Like Ana Mendieta's *Body Tracks* (1982)—where the artist marked gallery walls with a mixture of blood and pigment—McMenimen gathers together time (the months of collecting prints) and place (the Los Angeles biome) into forms that invite viewers toward that shared imagination.[7] The *Aggregates* are like maps that can help viewers return to surrounding landscapes with the same embodied awareness of the artist.

McMenimen's careful choices move toward another complicated ecotone: art and ethics. As Yale theologian Willie James Jennings wrote: "We are joined at the site of the dirt, and the dirt is our undeniable kin…. We are creatures bound together."[8] When McMenimen creates sculptures that dialogue with the natural shapes of shells rather than contort them into another symbolic object, she's allowing interdependence to shape her art process. Reflecting on the land and those who walk across it can lead the eyes outward to larger social fabrics—and those who are ignored or harmed by the machineries that shape it. Joining her with hands and feet in the mud is an act of communal imagination, a growing awareness of bodies bound to the land and to one another.

4. Charles Ray, "Log," *DOMUS* (2007). For more on pneuma, see the artist's text for *Hinoki*.

The writer would like to acknowledge the artists Veronique d'Entremont and Brody Albert whose conversations have influenced much of the thinking in this review.

5. For more, see Einar Strumse, "The Ecological Self: A Psychological Perspective on Anthropogenic Environmental Change," *European Journal of Science and Theology*, January 2007.

6. Lucy Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), pp. 8–9.

7. "My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world," wrote Ana Mendieta, in her journals, quoted in Anabel Roque Rodríguez's "Ana Mendieta—An Artwork As a Dialogue between the Landscape and the Female Body," *Widewalls*, January 2016.

8. Willie Jennings, "Can White People Be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness," *Can "White" People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018). Note: Dr. Jennings' essay argues that whiteness begins with a rejection of the body's relationship to land. In this context, McMenimen's non-hierarchical embodied practice might be read as a map for navigating social ecotones.

The Medea Insurrection at the Wende Museum

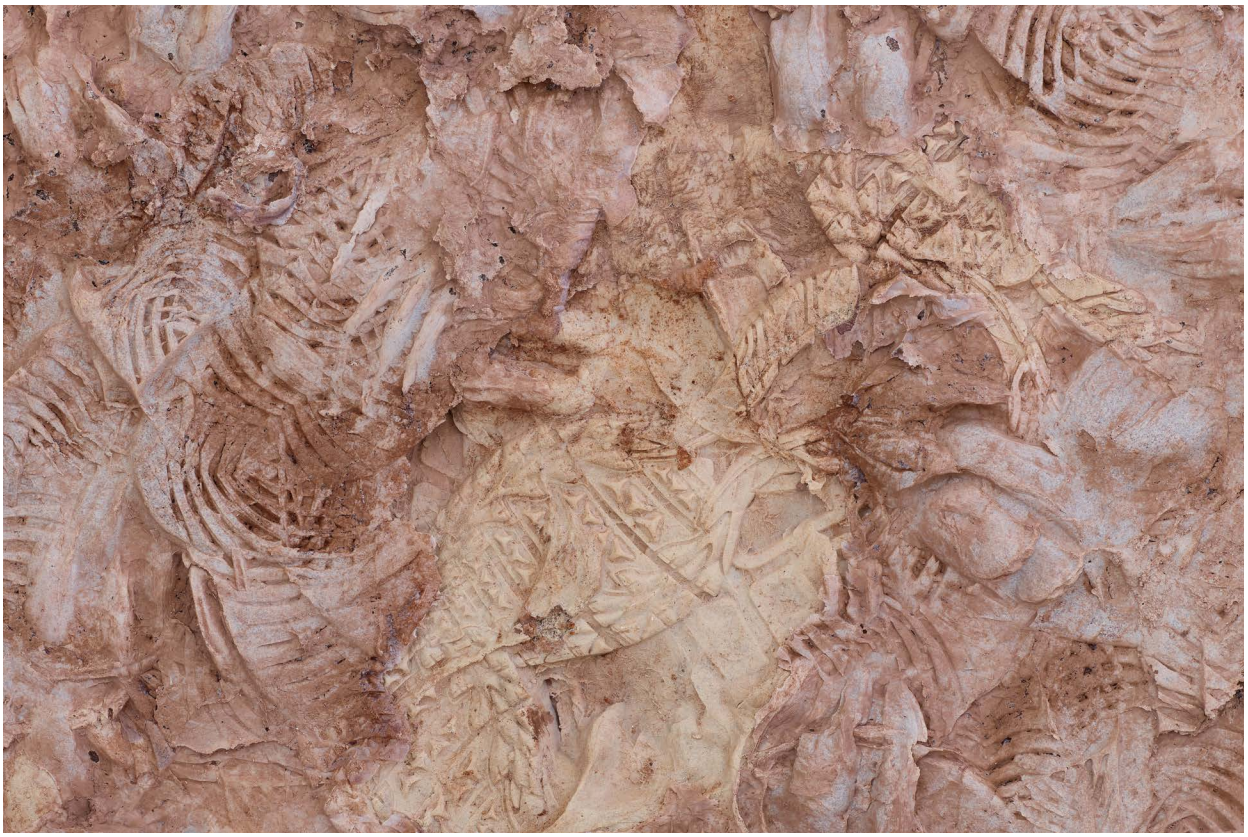
November 10, 2019–April 5, 2020

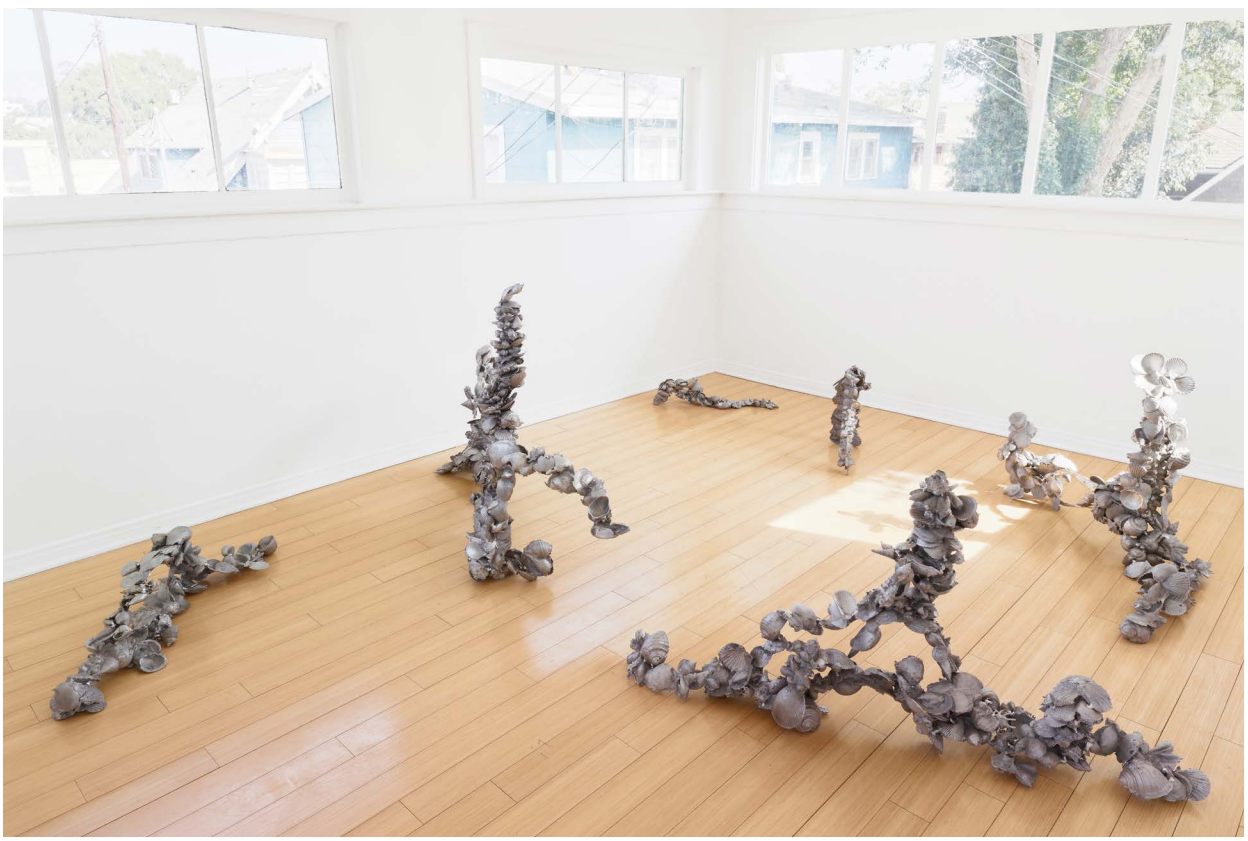
In contemporary American society, it is easy to take our right to self-expression for granted. We express ourselves so often it can feel like a chore or a second job. Because of this, we can easily forget that there are places where the expression of dissenting opinions is not just a matter of social unrest or distrust, but a potentially illegal act.

The Medea Insurrection: Radical Women Artists Behind The Iron Curtain at the Wende Museum gathers a diverse group of women artists whose artwork pushed past the governmentally-approved themes of their time. The exhibition includes artists from the former people's republics of Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic. The tie that binds the artwork together is the illicitness of the content, which defied boundaries of acceptable artistic themes of the era: e.g., nationalism, the prioritizing of the group over the individual, or the depiction of laborers as happy and empowered, regardless of whether or not that was reality.

Many of these women used photography and textiles in their work, a move that could have been strategic, as these mediums were not officially recognized by the Soviet Union as forms of art and therefore

Jennifer Remenchik





Above: Sarah McMenimen, *Inyo Aggregate* (2019). Resin, dirt, and clay, 30 × 27 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Garden, Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder.

Below: Sarah McMenimen, *Mud* (installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of the artist and Garden, Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder.

were not subject to its strict regulations. In *Identity Shirts 1-7* (1970–'80) Romanian artist Ana Lupaş framed seven worker's shirts inside out, hanging them side by side in a neat line. While the shirts are uniform and identical in form and color, the presentation pulls out the unique details of each one, marked as they are with a particular worker's stains of sweat, ink, and blood. These idiosyncrasies pull away from a communist ethos, instead reinforcing that while workers (or any collective group of people) may operate in unity they steadfastly remain unique individuals, each beset with their own distinct personality traits, habits, and experiences.

Hungarian artist Dóra Maurer, one of the more well-known artists in the exhibition, likewise utilized repetition and textiles in her work. In the first image of her film *Timing* (1973/1980), she holds up a white rectangular cloth containing visible creases, subsequently folding and unfolding the fabric while her own body remains barely visible in the background. In this gesture, she, like Lupaş, explores the effects of the passage of time and the impossibility of exact repetition (or, put in more political terms, total conformity). Notably, Maurer claimed her work was not political. The Soviet Union's official policy towards artwork was that if it did not contribute to the realization of the Communist Party's goals, it was not artwork. This snaps Maurer's statement into view as one of inherent political dissension, however indirect.

In a more overtly critical work, painter Doris Ziegler's *"Rosa Luxemburg" Work Team, Portrait Eva* (1975) turns the depiction of the worker, a strong motif of socialist painting, on its head to reveal the truth of working conditions for female laborers. Though women were given full political equality in the Soviet Union's constitution, the lived reality for most women was more dire. Many worked two full-time jobs—in a profession assigned to them by the government—while doing most, if not all, of the housework and child-rearing. In the latter sense, the women who lived behind the Iron Curtain have much in common with American women today. While contemporary women may get to choose their vocation, the financial realities of life in the capitalism-fueled economy of the U.S. practically demands a two-income household, especially to rear children, and domestic chores still often fall to the female or "feminine" partner at home.

In keeping with their practice of selecting contemporary artists whose work relate to the themes of their historical exhibitions, the Wende Museum invited three artists currently working in Los Angeles to exhibit alongside the more historic works in the show. One of these artists, Sichong Xie, is uniquely touched by the consequences of censorship—her grandfather was punished for an illustration of donkeys he drew that was interpreted as mocking the Chinese government during the Cultural Revolution. Following in her grandfather's footsteps and the lineage of artistic resistance, Xie photographs herself in a male communist uniform adorned with a fake Louis Vuitton print. In this gesture, Xie complicates the binary between male and female, while elucidating how capitalism, much like communism, can work to erase our humanity by convincing us to use brands to express our identity, all the while giving us the illusion of freedom and choice.

The Medea Insurrection commemorates women artists who were brave enough to make art (a great privilege!) that went against the propaganda of their place and time. They thought radically but operated strategically, a tactic that allowed them to survive. In this way, they mirror the exhibition's titular character Medea, the controversial and complicated female figure who used intelligence and ruthlessness (traits thought to be unbecoming to a woman in Greek society) to realize her goals. Like Medea, like many contemporary women, each artist chose to disregard the societal limitations placed on their gender in order to achieve greatness. Across the exhibition at the Wende, these artists search for meaning and express dissent unapologetically in politically uncertain times, an important message to carry with us, especially today.

Sichong Xie, *From You Can't Take That Away From Me* (detail) (2016-2018). Photographs, giclée prints, Los Angeles / China. Image courtesy of the artist and the Wende Museum.

(L.A. in N.Y.) Mike Kelley at Hauser & Wirth

November 12, 2019–January 5, 2020

I wonder what Mike Kelley would think of our contemporary and very *online* conversation about trauma or self-care or even astrology. Though it's a public dialogue that is deeply necessary and long overdue, it's one that was less explicated in Kelley's era. Specifically, the term "trauma" is misused to the point of satiation. Kelley tiptoed around these themes, though he seemed to despise the associations viewers made between his material choices and what they assumed was unresolved trauma in his life. In a 2000 interview, Kelley told critic Dennis Cooper that the response to his work had changed once he started using craft materials like yarn and felt, saying, "...people really started to free-associate around those materials and to project all sorts of things onto my own biography."[1]

In his well-known sculptures, Kelley used thrifted objects to make elaborate surfaces out of plastic kitsch and costume jewelry. This translation of "low" culture to high played out in reverse in *Mike Kelley: Timeless Painting,* recently on view at Hauser & Wirth's cavernous Chelsea location. Throughout, paint was just another material for Kelley to make fresh textures and to poke fun at the history of art as much as mainstream culture. The exhibition culled works from 12 on-canvas series created between 1994 and 2009, and inevitably, the curatorial premise claimed to give deeper insight into the role of memory and trauma inherent in Kelley's work. Kelley's habit of reusing found materials with prior histories was here applied to painting; he repurposed images from bawdy cartoons, old television shows, and other back page ephemera and then collaged them together to reveal uglier meanings behind collective culture.

The gallery was divided into four maze-like chambers with two sepulchral spaces at the entrance. The first room acted as a key for the exhibition to follow, presenting paintings plucked from each series represented in the exhibition. In the second room was *Profondeurs Vertes* (2006), an opaque installation originally shown at the Louvre and which features a three-channel video accompanied by looped, melancholic chamber music. The three large screens—each showing close-up images of American paintings in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), each cited by Kelley as an influence—hung just below the ceiling. Lining the opposite wall were seven framed graphite sketches that each reimagined a character from John Singleton Copley's masterpiece *Watson and the Shark* (1782), which Kelley saw at DIA as a boy. The dim grotto offered insight into Kelley's earliest influences—an ode to a zygotic artist, forming before our eyes.

Tucked into the back of the gallery were a handful of picks from his *Timeless Painting* series (1994–1997). In *Timeless Painting #4* (1995), the buck-toothed donkey from the variety show *Hee Haw* is dressed in drag. In loopy, buttery strokes, the donkey is appointed with Pippi Longstocking's ketchup-colored hair and a country-humble straw hat with a daisy in its brim. His blue eyeshadow highlights his perfectly set lashes. At the snout, finer lines overlay the softer second layer of paint and the registry is slightly off, a jab at Warhol's exalted printmaking. *Timeless Painting #4* is Kelley at his funniest: juvenile, smart, and a little bit sad.

Nearby were the electric *Carpet Painting* and *Wood Grain Painting* series (both 2003). *Carpet #8* particularly shines: an old reddish rug is mounted to a wood panel, framed neatly, then brushed over with Kelly green acrylic paint. The result is high art meets radioactive schlock—like barf hit with forensic UV light. Rothko mocked without the redemption of a chapel.

A selection from *The Cult Paintings*, namely *The Prenatal Mutual Recognition of Betty and Barney Hill* (1995), hung in an adjacent room. The Hills were an interracial couple and the first Americans involved in a widely-reported alien abduction in 1961. The couple—even after undergoing hypnosis—could never quite convince the public of their traumatic experience. In the painting, Kelley depicts the couple as two floating children's heads only with their racial identities reversed—here, Barney is white and Betty, black—both with mouths agape in horror. The flatness of the composition makes the couple look poster-like, and the swapping of their races pulls American racial biases

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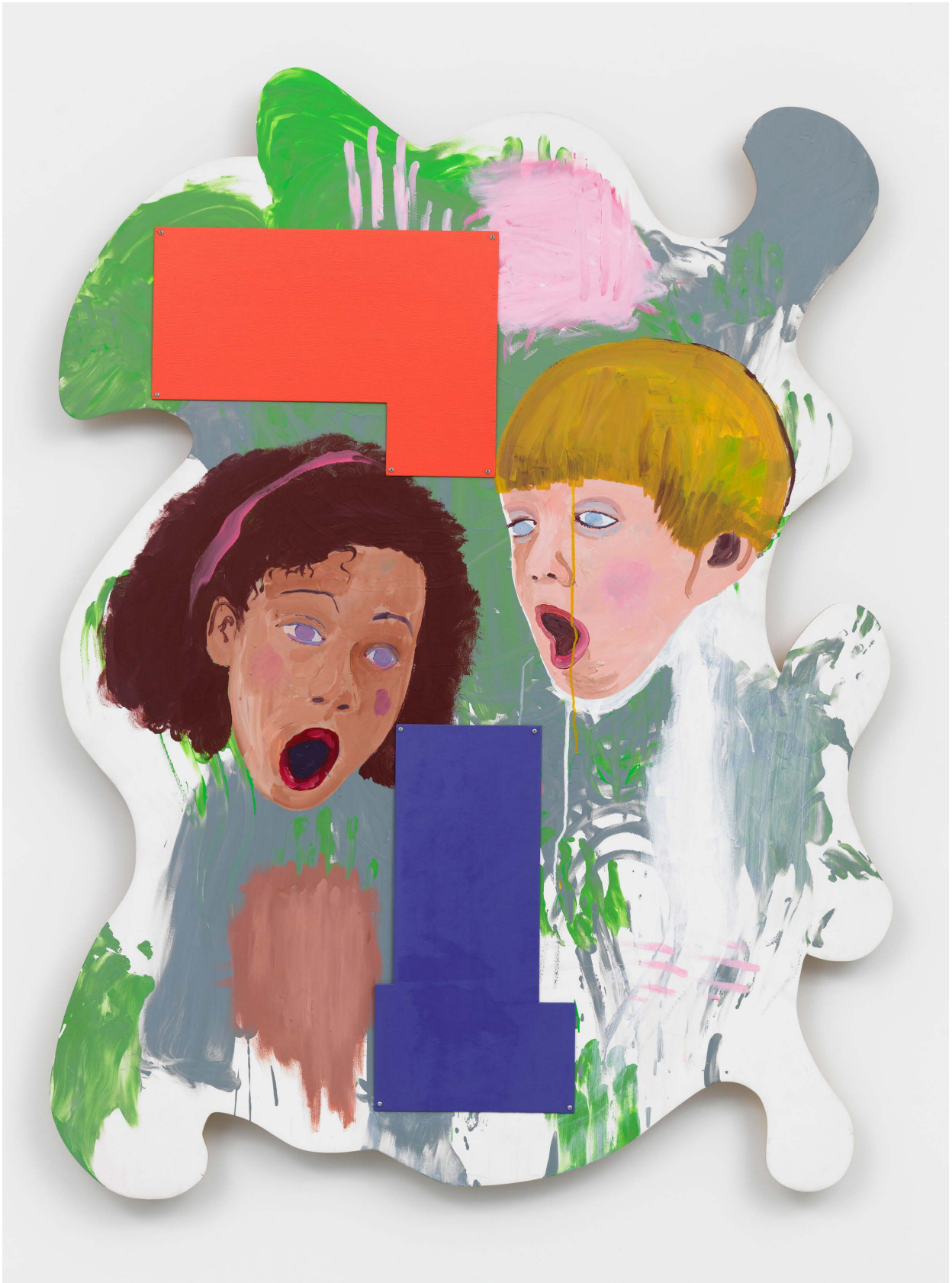
1. "Trauma Club: Dennis Cooper Talks with Mike Kelley," *Artforum*, October 1, 2000, https://www.artforum.com/print/200008/trauma-club-dennis-cooper-talks-with-mike-kelley-32194.



Mike Kelley, *The Prenatal Mutual Recognition of Betty and Barney Hill* (1995). Acrylic on wood panel, 64 × 47 inches. © Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved/VAGA at ARS, NY. Image courtesy the Foundation and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Dan Bradica.

into the absurdist experience of abduction. For the rest of their lives, the Hills were treated as test subjects and freaks, which speaks more to the era's discomfort with interracial couples than the existence of aliens.

For Kelley, trauma was baked into the machinery of the institutions artists like himself stumbled through—systems of inverse elitism whose boundaries must be shoved in order to expand to include outside voices. The jokes about repression were less a ruse than an allusion to systems of abuse that were more insidious in his era, though becoming blindingly obvious in the one we currently inhabit. He needled the link between societal trauma and repressed memories, which makes the art world's hunt after his ultimate meaning a bit of dramatic irony. Enduringly and in light of suicide, fans and friends alike clamor for resolved insight into Kelley's personal history where there isn't any. Of his friend, artist John Miller said that through Kelley's art history jokes and references to trauma, he "put forward a kind of allegorical institutional critique: the abuse exacted by the institution concerns exclusion and legitimation, nothing less than a matter of symbolic life and death."[2] Kelley rooted around at the rot of American nostalgia and yanked it clean out of its socket, using what he found to point to larger systematic traumas (and perhaps to confront death itself). This selection of paintings from Kelley's oeuvre composed a better guess at one of his acerbic punchlines—if only he were still around to deliver it.

2. John Miller, "Mike Kelley (1954–2012)," *Art Agenda*, February 6, 2012, https://www.art-agenda.com/features/233339/mike-kelley-1954-2012.

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