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Ry Rocklen at Honor Fraser

March 16–May 11, 2019

In the preface to John McPhee's creative-nonfiction classic *Oranges*, the author describes encountering the fruit in the early '60s at the University of Florida's Citrus Experiment Station. Here, wired-up citrus were monitored as they "breathed in" oxygen and expelled carbon dioxide, "as oranges do until they die."¹ Produce figured heavily in Ry Rocklen's latest video work, *Food Group: Episode 1.1* (2019). While the first two thirds of the video, which clocks in at slightly under 30 minutes, register as a sizzle reel of studio shenanigans slowed to half-time—friends vamp in costume as a slice of pizza or a box of popcorn and are periodically interrupted by animation of the foods they pose as—the final eight minutes are a tender ode to Ojai Pixie tangerines. Their lives are charted by the artist in conversation with an off-screen friend as they tour her family's grove. The camera pans over disembodied hands gently inspecting and sorting the tangerines as the friend describes their devoted followers, who track the fruit down at local farmer's markets. In contrast to the preceding footage, saturated with moments of human engagement that somehow leave the viewer feeling left out, one is struck in this clip by the profound import of these fruits for their consumers (specifically the East Asian community of South Central) as well as for

the custodians who nurture and harvest them—a constellation of lives bound together by citrus.

Like McPhee, Rocklen has consistently explored the rich interior narratives latent in everyday objects—as far back as his contribution to the 2008 Whitney Biennial, in which he encouraged children and their caretakers to create sculptures out of scavenged detritus, which were subsequently installed in the museum. For his most recent body of work on view at Honor Fraser, Rocklen invited people from his circle (friends, gallerists, studio assistants) to pose in costume as a variety of foodstuffs. Their bodies, scanned in the round, were then used to create miniature 3D-gypsum-cast sculptures spec'd to the scale of the food they personified. On a long, narrow plinth with a red-and-white checkered tablecloth were the small resulting portraits, including one of the gallerist Honor Fraser as a bunch of grapes alongside Corrina, a friend of the artist, as a strawberry. They and ten others flanked Rocklen, who was centrally positioned and dressed as a hamburger.

The actual costumes used to create the miniatures were also presented on a giant checkered sheet that flowed down from the ceiling onto the floor in the main gallery space like a photo backdrop. Rocklen rented some of the outfits but fabricated many of them, adding personal embellishments—like his own initials on the French fry costume. Observing their interiors—the inner foam shoulder pads, the chinstraps—one was reminded of the human

bodies they were intended to sheathe. Peering closely into these foam and cardboard constructions, one found evidence of meticulous handiwork as well as more personal touches that were hard to see in the small 3D-printed sculptures—like a facsimile of a red human heart peeking out amid unidentified meat chunks in the taco. The costumes, here presented "in the flesh" (albeit without their wearers), had a heavier somatic presence than the miniatures themselves.

The sculptures and costumes were presided over by *Mr. Pillowman* (2016), a huge steel and wood armature covered in pillows, which Rocklen constructed to display a giant t-shirt for an earlier project. The titular Mr. Pillowman also features in the video, his jaw moving up and down like a ventriloquist's puppet. "I discovered 'Food Group' while perusing your dreams," he intones. He continues, "'Food Group' is exactly what you want. It's exactly what you've been dreaming of," further underscoring the show's emphasis on primal drives. Food and friends alike are crucial to sustaining a life, and one can easily relate to the impulse to combine them. But the results of this mash up, while winsome, had the curious side effect of muting the satiating aspects of both. It's when they were extricated—as in the costumes, which bore a likeness to food but skirted the uncanny valley of verisimilitude; and the brief documentary glimpses the video offered—that one saw life depicted most compellingly.

1. John McPhee, *Oranges* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), xii.



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Above: Ry Rocklen, *Food Group Costumes* (2017). Foam, paint, aluminum, Velcro, and cardboard, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Honor Fraser Gallery.

Below: Ry Rocklen, *Picnic With Carolyn* (2017). Jacquard woven cotton, 80 x 60 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Honor Fraser Gallery.



Above: Rob Thom, *MMAF* (2019). Signed, titled and dated verso, oil and wax on canvas, 46 × 56.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and M+B Gallery. Photo: Ed Mumford.

Below: Barkley Hendricks, *What's Going On* (1974). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 66 × 84 inches. Artwork courtesy of Megan and Hunter Gray. Image courtesy of the artists and The Broad. Photo: Pablo Enriquez.

Rob Thom at M+B

April 6–May 11, 2019

Rob Thom's paintings have you mining your brain to connect dots, eager to name what you are looking at. "It's like the elongated figures and warped perspectives of Mernet Larsen, but with less geometry," you posit. "The orgiastic bacchanal of Hieronymus Bosch, but with more pizza; the chaos of *Where's Waldo* but with more carnage; the depiction of white America similar to Celeste Dupuy Spencer's, but less Trumpy." Thom's oil paintings—which have not been shown in his hometown Los Angeles for several years—are all these things and none of them, and it is this audacious amalgam of the familiar and the nameless that is so captivating. Thom scans crowds across America to present a mish-mashed collection of scenes—track and field meet, carnival, wrestling match, crowded beach—that feel rooted in everyday pleasures while also feeling, at moments, dreamily otherworldly. "Here are the crowds," proclaimed the press release.

Across the work, wax was mixed with oil paint to create a surface that absorbs light with its textural matte finish. Garishly-colored underpaintings in bright orange or neon turquoise peek through his rendering of ghoulish faces or choppy waves, adding an off-kilter energy to his banal American scenes. Stylistically, the paintings feel older than they are; an approach to figuration

that feels more educational—like you might find in an old *Highlights* magazine—than the Quarelses and Schutzes that currently populate contemporary galleries. The non-descript clothing that Thom's subjects wear (blank baggy tees, high-waisted jean shorts, subtle mullets) feels vaguely '90s, as if you might spot a shy and braces-laden childhood version of yourself lingering in the background. Although in a couple of paintings, figures hold smart phones, the scenes feel decidedly pre-internet.

In *Fair Walkers* (all works 2019), a family skulks along in white tennis shoes pushing a stroller past rows of carnival stalls and plush banana toys. In the background, other fair-goers amble, and in a cacophony of abstracted shapes and colors, the people become indistinguishable from the rows of cheaply made baubles. Strangely, in the foreground, a woman walks off the canvas, though her face lags behind, dripping down her shoulder with a macabre and angular jawline. So, here, Thom sets the stage, and invites you to play along: look for clues, oddities, and strange occurrences.

These strange inclusions don't quite disrupt the believability of the crowded scenes. Instead they suggest that what we are looking at, while rooted in truth, may also be a partial fiction. The paintings traipse into fantasy as in *Drive-Thru Zoo*, whose title explains exactly what's depicted on canvas (a cavalcade of safari animals stampeding around a zagging line of gawking cars). One woman leans out of a

sedan tempting a hyena with a slice of pepperoni 'za. Like any good fiction, the painting almost reads as an impending eventuality—soon, nature will be relegated to an experience enjoyed while sitting back on a shaded tram, slurping a Big Gulp.

In other paintings, the outlier is more apparent. *FYB (The Juice)*, pictures the frenzy of a grape stomping festival, wherein a worker dumps a bucket of crabs into the masticated wine mixture. *Reverse Beach* shows a dense vacation scene where sun-screened tourists wade through a choppy ocean, clinging to inflatable rafts. It's not until you've spent several minutes delighting in the activities of the pot-bellied tourists that you notice a man in the left corner of the composition menacingly holding a chainsaw while wading onto the shore. In Thom's America, banality can flip to nightmare in a matter of seconds.

The artist pulls his dense crowds from a variety of sources—events he attends where he now lives in the Pacific Northwest, discarded books, and online sourced images of shopping malls, fairs, and rallies. The jeering crowd in *BRWC*—the largest and most dense painting in the show, depicting a swarm of wrestlers punching and drop kicking each other while rowdy onlookers cheer with arrested attention—becomes isolated in another painting titled *MMAF*. Here, Thom gives a close-up of the crowd itself: an overalls-sporting, visibly angry woman points and yells, while others cheer and clap, and still others grin excitedly, recording the unseen action

on their phones. Plain colored t-shirts and blazers devoid of any campaign slogans, logos, or sports team insignias allow this rag tag bunch to exist as any crowd, anywhere. Still, West Coast liberals they are not, and their expressive jeers point to a more base level event—whether wrestling match, cock fight, or Trump rally. By removing any demarcating details, the crowd comes to represent the buzz of flagrant anxiety so ready to flare and flout these days, in response to any action.

After the various throngs of people portrayed across many of Thom's paintings, *The Cold Room* is almost completely devoid of them. Save for a few small figures hemmed into the bottom corner of the composition, the discordant crowds here are replaced with an unruly trash heap spilling across the canvas. While elsewhere we see the silly, stupid, and entertaining realities of daily life, here we are confronted with its wreckage—after the carnival closes, and the wrestling match lets out, there will be trash.

And too, after the political candidates have come and gone, our emotions properly manipulated in pious and contorted rage—there will be trash. Yet more than a stern political or environmental warning, Thom's outlook seems broadly un-sermonic, as if collapsing all of our frenzied human activity (whether responding to Trump's wall or tossing back cocktails on a Carnival cruise to the Bahamas) into an equal hum of emotional wattage. Amidst the chaos of a teetering world, someone somewhere is dumping a

bucket of crabs into a vat of grapes. And, why the hell not?

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, 1963–1983 at The Broad

**March 23–
September 1, 2019**

In a June 1967 letter inviting artists to a meeting of the Organization of Black American Culture,¹ Chicago-based artist Jeff Donaldson posed a series of questions, the first of which was: “Do you consider yourself a Black visual artist, an American visual artist, or an artist, period?” It is a question that the 60 or so artists included in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, 1963–1983* can be seen grappling with in vastly different ways, presenting a heterogeneous portrait of Black American art reflecting the radical social, cultural, and racial upheaval of the period.

The exhibition begins in New York, with the Spiral Group, who formed in 1963 and mounted only one exhibition, featuring work pared down to a black and white color palette. Stylistic variance greets the group's collective query—“Is there a Negro Image?”²—from Romare Bearden's collaged images of African-American life, to Norman Lewis' Abstract Expressionist canvas *America The Beautiful* (1960). Look closer, and Lewis' seemingly abstract jagged white forms scattered across the black canvas become

a procession of cross-bearing Klansmen in hoods.

Befitting the show's title, there is an abundance of defiantly radical, even revolutionary, work included in the exhibition. Emory Douglas' bold graphics for *The Black Panther* newspaper attack the “pigs” while also calling for solidarity with other dispossessed people around the globe. *Fred Hampton's Door 2* (1975) by Dana C. Chandler references the 1969 murder of Fred Hampton, a Black Panther leader shot to death in his sleep by police. Painted red and green, colors of the Black Liberation Flag, the door is riddled with small holes as if from a shotgun blast. A red and green U.S. map by Faith Ringgold titled *United States of Attica* (1972)—after the 1971 prison uprising—lists scores of incidents of American violence beginning with slavery and the Native American genocide. Inviting viewers to “write in whatever you find lacking,” she presents these not as historical moments of the past but as a continuum of injustice that extends to the present day. These range from the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876 to a 1712 slave revolt in New York City, that resulted in 38 deaths.

A particularly engaging section is devoted to the Chicago-based group AfriCOBRA, or the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, of which Donaldson was a founding member in 1968. Using vibrant colors, repeated bits of text, and an almost decorative approach to form, their paintings emanated a frantic funk-infused energy, incorporating both celebration and protest.

In Los Angeles, assemblage artists like Noah Purifoy and John Outterbridge picked through the rubble of the 1965 Watts rebellion, using the charred ephemera of racial unrest as their raw material. A few examples of their work are on view here alongside Daniel LaRue Johnson and Betye Saar, who gets her own gallery at the show's close. Although it is mentioned in wall text, a section devoted to the Brockman Gallery is unfortunately lacking in *Soul of a Nation*. The legendary Leimert Park gallery that championed several artists included in the show, specifically black Angelenos, would have been a meaningful addition, especially to The Broad's staging.

The exhibition then diverges from these geographic groupings to arrange works thematically. The inclusion of artists dealing with portraiture suggests that even the representation of the black body can be seen as a radical act (considering the historical dominance of white subjects in Western Art). David Hammons takes a more literal approach, incorporating prints of his own body into his works as in *Black First, American Second* (1970). The title offers a straightforward response to Donaldson's inquiry. In his realistic, life-size portraits, Barkley Hendricks confers a cool dignity to his black subjects.

On the other end of the representational spectrum are artists who engage with abstraction and minimalism, including color field painter Sam Gilliam and performative sculptor Senga Nengudi, who still maintain a reflection

of African-American identity. Painter Frank Bowling—represented here by luminous, large-scale abstractions onto which he has stenciled ghostly outlines of the continents—felt that black artists were able to “reroute fashion and current art convention to ‘signify’ something different to someone who grew up in Watts.”³ Jack Whitten's *Homage to Malcolm* (1970) might reflect Bowling's sentiment. On the black triangular canvas, which exhibits a play of effects and paint handling, he used an Afro comb to striate a central triangle, revealing layers of red and green underneath. Here, geometric abstraction becomes a symbol of black liberation. In Melvin Edwards' *Curtain (for William and Peter)* (1969–70), strings of barbed wire hang, united by a length of dangling chain that weighs them down at the bottom, melding strands of minimalism and seriality with the brutality and violence of everyday life as lived by African Americans.

Soul of a Nation is not an encyclopedic take on black art of the era, nor should it be. Rather, it provides just enough insight into each locus of activity to inspire further exploration. Originating at the Tate before travelling to the Brooklyn Museum and Crystal Bridges, the installation at The Broad is solid and well-organized by curator Sarah Loyer, who beefed up sections on Los Angeles artists. Still, the question lingers: *why here?* The Broad was founded to showcase the collection of mega-collectors and philanthropists Edythe and Eli Broad. Of the 2,000 works by 200 artists in their collection,

none were included in *Soul of a Nation*, pointing to a larger issue of artists of color being largely absent from this blue-chip collection, aside from contemporary art stars like Mark Bradford, Kerry James Marshall, and Kara Walker. Although L.A.'s California African American Museum's galleries may not have been able to accommodate an exhibition of this size, it's worth noting that CAAM was the single biggest lender to *Soul of a Nation*, contributing seven loans.

This is not to say that The Broad should not be recognized for making the work available to the thousands of visitors that flock to the museum from around the world, in addition to organizing a substantial programming series. However, hosting a traveling show is not the same as acquiring works for their collection—one supports artists of color in a sustainable way, while the other could be seen as a superficial display of inclusion. According to a 2018 study by *In Other Words* and *artnet News*, only 2.3% of all acquisitions and gifts at 30 prominent U.S. museums since 2008 have been of work by African-American artists.⁴ Real change means adding these works to permanent collections, making an institutional commitment, so they can be seen and valued alongside the Koonsees and Kusamas long after *Soul of a Nation* has closed.

3. Frank Bowling, “It's Not Enough to Say ‘Black Is Beautiful,’” *ARTNews*, April 1971, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/07/21/from-the-archives-frank-bowling-on-why-its-not-enough-to-say-black-is-beautiful-in-1971/>.

4. Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, “Museums, Acquisitions and Artists of Color: Why Now is the Time for Change,” *Sotheby's Magazine*, Jan. 11, 2019, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/museums-acquisitions-and-artists-of-color-why-now-is-the-time-for-change?locale=en>.

1. Jeff Donaldson, letter to unidentified recipient, June 1967 (Jeff Donaldson papers, 1918–2005, bulk 1960s–2005. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

2. Jeanne Siegel, “Why Spiral?,” *ARTNews*, September 1966, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/12/12/september-1966-norman-lewis-romare-bearden/>.

Anna Sew Hoy & Diedrick Brackens at Various Small Fires

March 16–May 11, 2019

There's a tension in Anna Sew Hoy's work between compositional strangeness and casual-seeming mess. Whether or not this vexes you as a viewer depends, I suppose, on your level of tolerance for ambiguous states, or for objects that exist somewhere in the space between the clumsy hand and the graceful mind. Sew Hoy's latest show at Various Small Fires, *The Wettest Letter*, continued in the vein that the artist has mined for years—mutable stoneware frozen by firing, augmented with fabric and leather accessorizing that suggest the expression of identity as a contradictory state, both endless and formative.

If ambiguity, by definition, needn't cohere, then the risk of vagueness is one Sew Hoy seems comfortable taking. A corollary to this approach is that her resulting works, often pitched to a nebulous scale somewhere between art and bodily object, invite a high level of projection from the viewer. *Blood Moon Breastplate* (all works 2019)—a frontal, layered disc of fired clay, with bits of denim and repurposed scrunchies gripping projecting "hooks" of clay on the face—alludes to an awkward kind of wearability. A softer, inner oval of red flocking suggests bodily softness, even as the dimension, shape, and ostensible weight of the

piece all conspire against the actuality of wear.

Within the gallery, Sew Hoy's pieces alternated between wall and "pedestal" (no-nonsense arrangements of cinder block) mounts, though others, like *Accumulation Entropy II* and *Veiled Orb* were simply piled or plopped directly on the ground. *Orb* muddled its evocative central form—a faceted orb of fired clay with a beguiling, black-glazed interior—with cast-over leather netting. *Comfort Soft (Bobbi)* spoke to *Veiled Orb* from across the room with t-shirts wrapping its fired clay arched form, and an interior pool of orange ping pong balls. Sports, athleticism, and allusions to battle were only a few of the loose thematic threads here, dropping and appearing so casually as to culminate in a gauzy suggestion of latent physicality.

Thrown Shade I similarly took a beguiling central object—a black mirror, surrounded by a thick cord of denim and corduroy—and cast over it a droopy piece of black lace. The reference to "throwing shade"—drag parlance for being rude (or honest!)—was funny, if clumsy. *Face's Place* and *Cheeky Kid* each featured similarly placed, and seemingly precariously balanced, mounds of fired clay perched within rounded openings on each disk's face—these openings were connected by limp cords of suede and silk. The mounds might have been breasts, hands, or protozoa, but to Sew Hoy's credit they came off, somehow, as mysteriously alive.

The courtyard at Various Small Fires—stark white walls, usually ablaze

in the L.A. sun, and Turf Terminator-style gravel—can feel either appropriately shorn of distraction or annihilatingly barebones, and Sew Hoy's five works here got a bit swallowed up by their context. Never quite formidable (even anti-monumental) as objects, her pieces came off as awkwardly domestic. If *Psychic Grotto Birdbath*, *First Position* did indeed do double duty as both birdbath and sculptural object, *Within, within III* was, appreciably, somewhere between bird hospice, bird tomb, and termite mound. *Accumulation Entropy I* consisted of a handful of used electronics partially embedded in a husk of plaster—a kind of contemporary economic hairball, clotting various kinds of waste together, like a landed snippet of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. As art, *Accumulation Entropy I* had the curious function of performative debasement, if not the added magic of transmuting value in the form of a salable object where none was previously divined.

Sew Hoy's combinatory ploy—heavy stoneware with lightweight fabric, the historicizing weight of ceramic form plagued by of-the-moment detritus—can easily fall down a relational rabbit hole, feeling random here and purposeful there. Though, this is in its own way a perverse approximation of the forming of identity, to which Sew Hoy's titles alluded. According to the press release, Sew Hoy's title came via a riddle, told to her by artist Liz Lerner. "What is the wettest letter of the alphabet? Answer: the C." Liquid suggests many states—moving, buoyant,

ruminative, uncontained—and Sew Hoy’s output, always shifting, resides somewhere therein. Diedrick Brackens, by contrast, in *unholy ghosts*, an exhibition of his weavings showing alongside Sew Hoy at Various Small Fires, finds narrative in liquidity.

Brackens’ hanging threads in *immersion circle* (all works 2019) had the disturbing air of liquid—whether blood or water—dripping from a dark, supine figure in the upper third of the composition. A black bear, or dragon-like figure with yellow threads loosely outlining its face, crawled over a shoreline to the bottom right, perhaps departing from the water that buoyed the figure above. A less narrative threesome of works hung together nearby—*nuclear sum*, *braided gate*, and *tongue and teeth form first*—each containing crisscrossing lines and a similar three-panel structure. While the warps on each included static red and blue lines running top to bottom on either side, the wefts varied between colored and black threads, forming shapes suggestive of genetic or algorithmic coding.

Though Brackens and Sew Hoy traffic, loosely, in similar languages of bodily identity and intimacy, Sew Hoy’s is a wandering, evasive thematic where Brackens’ tends towards the plaintive, cerebral, and narrative. Both foregrounded a messiness of process, evinced as much in Brackens’ loose threads and uneven cuts of fabric (see *look spit out*) as in Sew Hoy’s pile of sand and computer parts (*Accumulation Entropy II*), and this hurried quality can come off as a self-conscious refusal of technical prowess. The

theme of the body, as an unknowable and beguiling entity, despite its intimate familiarity, is fitting—something to be approached, sketched out, but never fixed.

Julia Haft-Candell & Suzan Frecon at Parrasch Heijnen

April 6–May 25, 2019

At Parrasch Heijnen, Suzan Frecon’s studious works on paper and Julia Haft-Candell’s meaty ceramic sculptures share an affinity for amorphous forms—each embrace a canny marriage of sloping geometries and bleeding edges. An accounting of these intricacies necessitates acute, attentive viewing, revealing both a material and philosophical sensibility that champions slow, conscientious making.

Framed as a conversation between two discrete bodies of work (one by each artist), the exhibition begins with an intimate grouping of six small-scale works by Frecon, and consequently opens into a more cavernous room of sculptures by Haft-Candell, most of which roost on staggered white plinths of varying heights. Both artists occupy their respective spaces with a composed yet commanding physicality. Haft-Candell’s ceramic sculptures (all works 2019) sit like scattered islands, each with an unexpected gravitational pull. Like land masses, they appear to be in constant tectonic flux, shape-shifting at each vantage point. *Forest Green Shift* morphs from earthen

vessel to torso; its surface dripping with a muddy green and eggshell glaze and bearing the markings of fingers dragging through wet earth—both a visual metaphor and a precise summation of the work’s own making.

Likewise, from one angle, *Folded Slab: Rose, Slate* enacts its title: the clay slab folds in on itself like a piece of paper, splintering—seemingly in situ, as if it could instantly crack and crumple—under the pressure of its own mass. This rupture finds echoes in Frecon’s work, a collection of watercolors that similarly embrace mutable organic states. The paper in *composition in 4-5 colors with lapis and malachite* (2015) puckers and buckles under pools of ochre, lapis, and moss paint, echoing the weighty materiality of Haft-Candell’s sculptures while also mirroring their painterly glazes.

Discordantly, a small half-wall bisects the two artist’s spaces, partially segregating them from view of one another, and subsequently dampening the viewer’s opportunity to be fully enmeshed in the works’ nuanced connections. Akin to a lapse of direct eye contact during intimate conversation, this curatorial partitioning effectively privileges monologue over dialogue.

While Frecon and Haft-Candell’s pairing alludes to the ways in which both paper and clay function as malleable receptacles for the weight of the artist’s hand, the connective tissue tethering the works’ already quiet subtleties threatens to disperse in separation. As their sculptures and drawings



Above: Anna Sew Hoy, *See Yourself In Wool* (2019). Chromatic clay, glaze, sand, and mixed media, 30 x 31 x 5.5 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles and Seoul.

Below: Diedrick Brackens, *unholy ghosts* (2019) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles and Seoul.



Julia Haft-Candell, *Swim* (2019). Ceramic, 51 × 32.5 × 15 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and parrasch heijnen gallery.

undoubtedly reciprocate sympathetic gestures from across rooms, it begs the question of how a more interwoven installation could have fleshed out these complexities and coaxed them to bear fruit.

One entry point into this mysteriously dangling dialogue rests with the notion of the vessel—that sacrosanct paradigm inherent to the history of ceramics, but more or less absent from even the most esoteric discourse surrounding drawing. In Martin Heidegger’s classic 1971 essay “The Thing,” he asserts a purely philosophical definition of the vessel: “the vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that [it] holds.”¹ While neither Frecon nor Haft-Candell present vessels in the traditional sense, they maintain Heidegger’s inference with regard to their holding of the void, or space abstracted.

In speaking of her work, Frecon has stated that it seeks the “highest possible plane of abstraction,”² interpreted here as an oblique compositional state wherein all external reference points are obliterated. This is particularly clear in *orange b, i* (2012–2013): an oblong, marigold wing of color overwhelms the edges of the paper, which can barely contain the contours of its shape, as if color were a pigmented void capable of slowly eating away at that which surrounds it. The warped, skin-like materiality of the paper nonetheless remains apparent, suggesting that the paper substrate is as pertinent as the abstraction that it contains.

Haft-Candell similarly cradles voided space as if it were concrete, alterable matter. In *Interlocking Arch*, the most monumental sculpture in the exhibition, a set of ashen, ceramic hands, connected by a limb-like appendage, sprout up from the ground to meet and interlace with an identical pair of hands, fused together by a second serpentine limb that cranes down from above. The sculpture forms a veritable ouroboros—the ancient Grecian metaphor of infinite wholeness characterized by a serpent consuming its own bodily appendage—and as such reads more as a portal than an archway. The work’s tension derives from the fact that the void at its center both buttresses it and appears poised to destabilize it, as if the limbs could tumble and unfurl if the interlocking hands lost their grip around its brute force.

As both Frecon and Haft-Candell embrace the manipulative compositional power of material absence, they activate the negative space within and around their works as an elemental force, revealing the complexities of their relationship to abstraction. In the end though, this negative space extends to the physical space between rooms, where the distance ultimately becomes too great to sustain the subtle intricacies of this conversation.

(L.A. in N.Y.) Shahryar Nashat at Swiss Institute March 20–June 2, 2019

Shahryar Nashat deals in desire—not a Koonsian, flashy, buy-it-now kind, but rather like a digital enticement, giving the viewer bits of a story, and leaving them wanting more. In his self-titled show at Swiss Institute in New York, interest is piqued as refined glimpses of a narrative emerge in the details of each work; this narrative expands across the exhibition, but never fully coalesces. It is this lack of resolution by which we are propelled through the show’s arc of obsession, power struggle, and heartbreak to forge an intimate connection to the implied body within Nashat’s sculptures.

In the first gallery, a pink light radiates through the water-speckled windows (which were film-tinted for the show), illuminating a sculpture called *Start To Beg* (all works 2019). The sculpture, made from pink synthetic polymer, fiberglass, and atomized acrylic, takes on the form of a bench, but one with bulbous deformities and missing sections that resemble large bite marks or scratches. This first implication of the body in the exhibition—by way of an object with which we regularly interact—sets a tone: the artist implies a certain brand of intimacy that is laced with hazard. The bench sculpture looks both sleek and somehow defiled.

1. Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 171.

2. John Yau, “Suzan Frecon with John Yau,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 1, 2005, <https://brooklynrail.org/2005/11/art/suzan-frecon-with-john-yau>.



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Above: Shahryar Nashat at Swiss Institute (installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of the artist and Swiss Institute.
Photo: Daniel Pérez.

Below: Shahryar Nashat, *Bone In* (2019) (detail). Synthetic polymer, PVC, pigment, and paper, 18 x 8 x 7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Swiss Institute.
Photo: Daniel Pérez.

Nearby in this rose-tinted room is a video work on one of Nashat's signature LED walls—a freestanding screen made up of multiple LED monitors—called *Keep Begging*. The work focuses first on the crook of an arm—a zoomed in shot depicts its every slight twitch, hair, pore, freckle, and vein. While it is at first discomfiting to gaze on a body zoomed in to such close proximity, it quickly becomes normalized. Next, an oddly soothing voice proclaims, “Holidays are over.” And then in a different tone, “Holidays are over. Oops.” With this admission of fault, the arm begins to bend at the elbow, the angle of the camera changes, the light flickers, the music quickens, and the veins pump. The movement is jarring, eradicating much of the comfortable connection that has been built with the subject, forcing the viewer to begin forging a different type of connection with the film. In the narrative that is built between viewer and the implied figures in Nashat's exhibition, this is the first lover's quarrel—the first time one is forced to reconsider their idea of the body that they have come to know.

Eventually the camera settles again on an armpit, slowing back down to a familiar pace. Words once again emanate from the speaker by the screen, “Do we go to war?” And then again, more sweetly, “My dear, do we go to war?” Through these words, Nashat introduces the possibility for interpersonal strife. I almost felt compelled to shout, “No, we should not go to war!” in the middle of the gallery,

as if the voice in the film and I were having a direct dialogue. With the simple introduction of the word “we,” the viewer and the figure/voice in the film enter into a power dynamic, warring in conflicting desires for familiarity and distance.

In the next gallery, *Rib* is a set of four papier-mâché sculptures, loosely shaped like wish bones or walkers and standing abjectly in the corner. After being immersed in the high production value of *Keep Begging*, it's startling to come across this lowly set of papier-mâché forms. One of the sculptures is literally bandaged (with gauze wrapped around its ankle) and it evokes a sense of guilt—after being an active participant while watching the nearby film, we ponder our involvement in the defiling of this anthropomorphized sculpture.

With the three final works in the show, all called *Bone In*, Nashat uses synthetic polymer, PVC, pigment, and paper to construct highly realistic pieces of meat on a slab, bandaged in cellophane, with snippets of paper beneath their clear casing. The paper contains phrases such as “Since I met you I've been trippin” and “This could be us but you're playin.” Here, the “we” has been revoked and instead the relationship is severed into an icy “you” and “I.” The sculptures act as a break-up—this relationship was only meant for the duration of the show.

The greatest success of Nashat's exhibition is to depict something truly human though objects that are deeply engaged with

technology and synthetics. Evoking emotions such as yearning, intimacy, and desire with a subject that never fully materializes, but is alluded to by multiple new media, suggests where culture is headed and tests the boundaries of our own humanity. As our communications become more truncated and digitized, Nashat is astute in his observations of a human need to bond. As with some interpersonal relationships, specifically the variety played out across dating apps or Instagram, this one builds on fragments, some fraught and flawed, leaving a feeling both distancing and deeply intimate.

Sarah Lucas Au Naturel

Jun 9–Sep 1, 2019

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SARAH LUCAS: AU NATUREL IS ORGANIZED BY THE NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK.
SARAH LUCAS, *BUNNY GETS SNOOKERED #8*, 1997. BLUE TIGHTS, NAVY STOCKINGS, VINYL AND WOOD CHAIR, CLAMP,
KAPOK, AND WIRE, 39 × 34 × 31 1/8 IN (99 × 86.5 × 79 CM). © SARAH LUCAS. COURTESY SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON

Free Admission

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