

# *A gathering, a sensual conversation between thinking bodies*

## INTIMATE IMMENSITY

Sitting at my parents' dining table over the holiday and reading Gaston Bachelard's essay "Intimate Immensity" (in *The Poetics of Space*, 1958) on my laptop. I know that B.'s text is your inspiration, Alexis. There are some beautiful passages: "Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone." We are "sensitive inhabitants of the forests of ourselves," and as certain poems' sounds invoke "the echo of the secret recesses of our being... an intimate call of immensity may be heard."

Have you felt "an extension of our intimate space," as B. writes, while sitting in the presence of a living, growing tree? While shaping handmade paper, clay, or wire into a sculpture? While touching the contours of a drawing with just your eyes?

I'm crossing and uncrossing my legs, though, tangling with some of B.'s blind spots: his all-male selection of poets (Baudelaire, Rilke, Supervielle, etc.); his sense of internal largeness that seems dependent on individual aloneness; his descriptions of mental experience that do not often touch on the physical. There's just one beautiful body-moment in which he notes that if you silently read a vowel sound—"ah"—your vocal chords will slightly tighten in response. It's important to breathe.

## BODY

In organizing this exhibition, you have reminded us of this sensing of personal depth that extends imaginatively in and out of each of us. Through the work of eleven artists, you have cast this as feminist: collective, restorative, experienced by many folk, and so, so bodily. The tactility of folds, wrinkles, lumps, curves, dots, and twists sends me back and forth in a sort of sensual conversation between my body and the "bodies" of many of the works.

As I read about the contemporary artists you selected, I came across a line by Susanna Wesley on Fabienne Lasserre's delicately balanced sculptures: "I want to stretch with the shapes of her forms. I want to follow the delicate lines and gauge their tensions."<sup>i</sup> Some years ago, I felt similarly about a large-scale painting of a dancer by Laura Owens—and I did bend and stretch my limbs with her shapes in a grey-floored gallery until the arrival of another gallery visitor shook me back into myself. I danced, in part, because I could not grasp the painting intellectually and I felt ashamed of this; my body thought through movement.

Brie Ruais, whose large, highly textured ceramics are included in the show, said of her explicitly feminist practice: "For me, the work [is] about what happens when one's body is overcome by a physically demanding process... We are forced to remember that making something sometimes requires the laborious use of the body."<sup>ii</sup> The body stores and releases experience often through tension and touch. Michelle Segre's fibrous three-dimensional drawing *Substantial Stringata* (2016) arranges objects and parts of objects—umbrella handle, saw, fan blade—that our hands know through muscle memory and trusses them into thinking webs.

Your own cluster of biomorphic sculptures, Alexis—of layers of handmade linen on cotton paper stretched like skin over paper mache forms—feel restorative. And Sun You’s vulnerably small-scale sculptures congregate on a low plinth-like table, leaning, hanging, and balancing as red, orange, yellow, green, and blue painted curves surround and connect them like lines of boundary and communication that emanate from persons.

## GATHERING

You’re the host of a gathering—one that celebrates and connects artists across generations in this bright, rectangular gallery around the School of Fine Arts’ second-floor stairwell. You have claimed a specific, expansive lineage for yourself and for the contemporary artists in this exhibition by including Judy Chicago’s *Untitled [test plate from the Dinner Party, 1976]* from PAFA’s collection of American art. The plate contributed to her iconic *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) installation that honors the creativity and power of 1,038 named women—from mythic Ishtar to Eleanor of Aquitaine and Emily Dickinson—through collaboratively made place settings and inscriptions. And the round, twitchy face of Louise Bourgeois’s *The Angry Cat*, 1999, which you hung diagonally opposite the plate, manifests an artistic great-grandmother at the party.

As a papermaker, you explored the collection of PAFA’s Brodsky Center, an international forum founded by Director Judy Brodsky, which enables artists with interest in paper and print to work one-on-one with master craftspeople and realize their visions in these ancient mediums through mentorship. El Anatsui, Lynda Benglis, Chakaia Booker, and Joan Snyder each collaborated with master papermaker Anne Q. McKeown on delicate, layered works that celebrate the sharing of ideas, skills, and practices. As malleable paper responds so sensitively to touch, each work registers its maker’s body and indexes a physical thinking process.

## ALEXIS AND BARBARA

When you first told me that you would curate an exhibition including your own work, I thought of a tiny black and white photograph of big droopy organic imposing textiles suspended from walls and ceiling, which I’d seen in the ICA exhibition catalogue for Barbara Kasten’s 2014 retrospective.<sup>iii</sup> For her MFA thesis exhibition, *Dimension of Fiber* (1970) at the California College of Arts and Crafts, Kasten curated her woven works in shoulder-rubbing conversation with works by other artists—including U.S.-based artists Sheila Hicks and Annie Albers, and Polish textile artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, who subsequently became Kasten’s mentor during a Fulbright Scholarship stint. Kasten expanded herself, her community, her practice to touch all of these others.

You are present through your own sculpture’s inclusion, and I am present through this writing, which sets even more places at the table. And you’re inviting the viewer to become part of this lineage, or at least to assess their position in relation to it. And this becomes especially powerful when we think about one of your most important audiences being the students at PAFA who will come see this show for inspiration and return to their studios to work.

*Bea Huff Hunter*

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<sup>i</sup> Susanna Wesley, “Fabienne Lasserre at Parisian Laundry, Montreal,” Akimblog, November 19, 2015, <http://www.akimbo.ca/akimblog/index.php?id=1078>.

<sup>ii</sup> “Brie Ruais,” Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/brie-ruais>.

<sup>iii</sup> *Barbara Kasten: Stages*, ed. Alex Klein (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, 2014).