

THE

MOBILE LIBRARY

Volume 3

Issue 2



She took a dance class so she could be a go-go dancer. She didn't get the right shoes so she looked like she belonged in the Elce Capades instead.

Volume 3 Issue 2

Curated, edited, and published by The Aerogramme Center for
Arts and Culture.

Copyright © 2023 The Aerogramme Center

Reproduction in whole or part is prohibited, except by permission
of the publisher.

ISSN 2767-9691 (print)
ISSN 2767-9683 (online)

Designed by The Aerogramme Center
for Arts and Culutre
Edited by Zoë Elena Moldenhauer

Printed in the United States

@aerogrammearts
www.aerogramme.org

MISSION

The Mobile Library Magazine provides a multi-digital exhibiting experience for artists and writers to showcase their work during the pandemic closures. Each publication is unique, pairing 6 artists and 6 writers together at different stages in their career to build a collaborative experience.

This year, Volume 3 will explore the theme of memory with Issue 2 exploring memory, moments, and experiences of being a young adult. Contributors responded to our prompt 'What does it mean to discover your identity?' 'How did you navigate living on your own for the first time?' And 'what relationships did you cultivate in college or at work?'

Accompanying this issue are two interviews; one from our podcast "A Guide to Art, Activism, & Culture," and one from our Flat Files: Artist Interviews & Studio Visits.

Cover Image
Juliet Martin, Go-Go Dancer, 2021.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

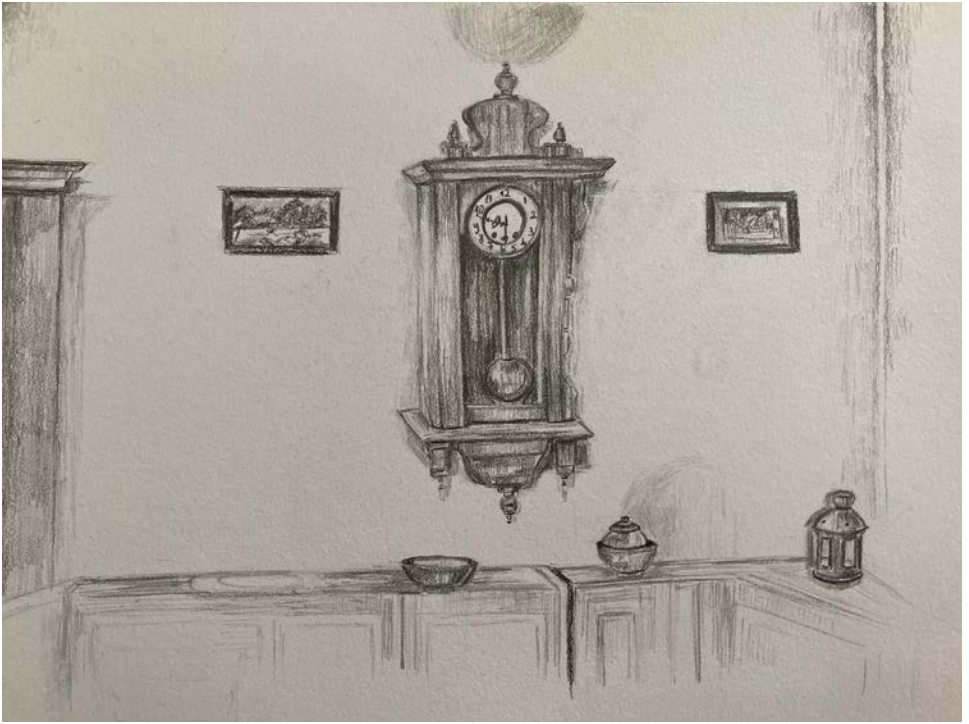
- [4] Come to My Paradise by Nelly Shulman
Artwork by Fergana Kocadoru Özgör

- [12] Never Meant to Stay by Abigail Reeth
Artwork by Juliet Martin

- [21] The Quinceañera in the American South
Podcast Interview featuring Saskia Lascarez
Casanova

- [41] M101 by Blossom Kelley
Artwork by Cory W. Peeke

- [53] Beauty Queen Fight Night by C.E. O'Banion
Artwork by Haris Malekos
- [63] Mindful Practices: Brian Jerome
The Flat Files: Artist Interviews & Studio Visits
- [78] Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness by
Danila Botha
Artwork by Natallia Tsarkevich
- [90] The Rebel by Mukut Borpujari
Artwork by Benjamin A. DiMaio



Empty Room, 2023
Pencil on paper, 18 x 24 cm.

COME TO MY PARADISE

Text by Nelly Shulman

Artwork by Fergana Kocadoru Özgör

Started by the bloody red color, Max read a sign more attentively.

"Today only. Grand sale of the magical objects! Everything has to go!"

A chilly wind whirled the autumnal leaves over the grey mossy cobblestones. Max had no idea how he ended up on this narrow side-street somewhere in the medieval quarter of the city. Having come here for the business meetings, Max spent almost all of his time marooned in the dull meeting room on the top of the no less boring office block. Today he was supposed to fly back home. Before they broke for lunch, Max decided to eschew the basement canteen and try his luck around the old city.

The pot of steaming mussels served to him in the small café next to the

jagged spires of an ancient cathedral, filled Max with a blissful feeling of an utter satisfaction. Picking up his cardboard coffee cup, Max aimlessly wondered in the warren of the tiny alleys and enchanting cul-de-sacs. White swans glided over the leaden mirrors of the city canals. Stopping at the tiny shops, he admired the wooden toys and the busily moving trains of the model railroad. His children outgrew such toys but now, still perusing the odd assortment of the strangely-looking objects on display, Max decided to buy something on a whim.

"Welcome to My Paradise", said the smooth female voice.

Max was almost drowned in a spicy wave of her fragrance. She wore a simple black dress with an austere white collar and a resemblance of a hood. Max thought it funny that a proprietress of a witchy shop would dress as a nun. The woman smelled of a woody sandal and autumnal moss. The hood revealed a single lock of a hair the color of rusty leaves. Her eyes were of the most piercing blue that reminded Max of the Arctic ice.

"Come have a look," she smiled. "I have many nice things to offer."

The dark cavern of the tiny shop enveloped Max. Looking at the antique display case, he noticed an assortment of the strange sticks.

"What are these?" he asked.

The woman lifted the display cover.

"Magic wands."

Picking the elaborately carved wooden stick, she pointed it at Max and he laughed.

"Do they actually work?"

Max did not think twice. His younger son loved the magical paraphernalia.

"How much is it?" he reached for his wallet.

The woman shook her head.

"First the spell, because this wand is vintage and I have never tried it yet".

Max spread his hands.

"Shoot."

The cold fire burst from the wand and the mocking laughter filled the room.

"Splice! Once! Twice! Thrice!"

Three golden chains, flying out of a stick, lashed at Max. The floorboards creaked, revealing a black gap underneath.

"Come to my paradise," he heard, plunging into the bottomless abyss of pain.



Destroyed House, 2022
Pencil on paper, 21 x 30 cm.



Destroyed House II, 2022
Pencil on paper, 18 x 24 cm.

LOOK AT HER

The evening did not go well from the very beginning.

Still being awkward at German, he did not realize that the metro station he needed was closed. The old train crept past the platform cluttered with cement sacks. Embarrassed by his language, he did not dare to ask the fatigued evening passengers what was happening on the line. Only having aligned at the crowded transfer station he saw some advertisements on the walls.

Berlin transport authority started to translate all messages into English. Boris understood that he needed to get on a free shuttle bus, transporting passengers between stations.

A fine rain of early spring drizzled outside. A rather large line gathered at the exit of the metro. After two months, he was already familiar with the city.

"Straight, and in front of the square to the right."

Hoisting a canvas bag over the shoulder, he perched a cap on the top of his balding head. The act could not hide his age.

"No need to hide it," Boris grunted. "I am going to the life drawing class but I am sure that not only youngsters are expected there."

He found the announcement of the classes with a live model in a library. Participants paid what they could, which seemed a modest contribution even for a refugee like him.

"Coffee and tea on the studio," said the announcement. "Come at eight in the evening."

Gazing at a thrush jumping on a wet lawn, he drank a raw charm of April twilight. The sunset gilded over the house roofs. A yellow tram rumbled along the intersection. The thrush shrilly squealed, fluttering on the garbage can.

The chestnuts lined the street. A couple of days ago a tender green haze wrapped the trees. Passing a crowd of smokers on the pavement, Boris noticed a glimpse of something white in the basement window.

A girl in a gymnastic suit and a tutu put a bare leg on a chair, tying the ribbons of the ballet shoes. A mass of dark curls obscured her face but Boris finished the painting with small freckles and barely noticeable languor under her eyes.

"They are certainly gray," he decided. "Better even grey-green."

Having found the correct house, he pressed the studio button.

"The second courtyard," said a cheerful young voice. "Take an elevator to the seventh floor, we are open."

The studio was located right under the roof. Boris missed the rustle of pencils, the light debris of eraser, the pristine cleanliness of the sheet. In his can-

vas bag lay a freshly bought etude album.

"The class is starting soon," he went through a hollow entrance. "I wonder who the model is?"

He found a high door in the second courtyard, painted in Prussian blue. The thrush was singing somewhere at the top of the roof. Boris pulled a copper handle. At the entrance, several bicycles stuck together in a flock. A children's cart with sheepskin forgotten inside stood nearby.

The elevator buzzed and the door slammed again. Something sweet swept over Boris.

"Wait," ordered the girl, "I, too, go upstairs."

He recognized the dark hair, now gathered in the messy bun. Her bare knees were unsuitable for the beginning of April. The suede ribbons wrapped the thin ankles. She remained in the tutu but threw a canvas jacket over the gymslip. A black scarf embroidered with bright patterns hid her throat.

Her eyes, as Boris requested, turned out to be grey-green, but he noticed only a few freckles.

"Few but in the right place," the specks scattered across rosy cheeks. "It turns out that she is an actress and an artist."

The girl dragged a bag with the logo of some theater.

"Sorry," muttered Boris when her thin finger poked into the peeling button.

The girl tilted her head to the side.

"You have an accent," her dark eyebrows moved. The elevator crawled upward. She also spoke an accented English.

"Russian," he admitted. "My name is Boris."

The elevator shaft was built outside the house. Light and shadows changed on her face. Thin lips painted with carmine smiled.

"I am modeling today," the girl did not let go of his palm. "I am Marta, a refugee from Ukraine."

He wanted to hit the 'Stop' button, but the doors wheezed. The electronic music splashed on the landing, thundering in the studio.

"See you soon, Boris," Marta dived into the crowd besieging the entrance.

The elevator, barking something in German, pushed him inside, offensively but not painfully. The doors closed and Boris found the bottom floor button. Leaving an empty album on a bench near the entrance, he walked back to the subway.



Doors, 2022
Pencil on paper, 21 x 30 cm.

My Mother's Room, 2023
Pencil on paper, 18 x 24 cm.



NEVER MEANT TO STAY

Text by Abigail Reeth
Artwork by Juliet Martin

"Are you coming to KPot?"

It was the last day of the school year, and I had just clocked out one final time. I was already dreaming of curling up in my quiet home, streaming Disney+ in my pajamas, and stuffing my face with popcorn. No children in sight.

KPot? I could feel my eyes becoming round and glazed as donut holes as I turned to my coworker and fumbled, "Um, no, no, I'm not."

She nodded and gave me a smile that simultaneously read "that's too bad" and "predictable."

I wanted to say, "Who's going to KPot? No one invited me." Then again, maybe this *was* my invitation. I could just as easily answer, "Yes, I'm coming! What's the address?"

Except that didn't feel easy. Summer break had finally arrived. Teachers had gone out for happy hour all year, but I never joined the after school fun. This was my last chance, but why bother? I had already decided on a new school for the next year, so it seemed pointless to forge any friendships now.

Of course, maybe I wouldn't have transferred schools if I had built relationships with my coworkers over the past nine months instead of hurrying home in solitude after every chaotic day corralling students. Regardless, I didn't feel connected to the other teachers, half of whom mispronounced my name, and I didn't have the heart to correct them. It seemed easier, safer to move on rather than deal with the awkwardness of finding conversation topics beyond classroom management or venting about school administration. "*So how do you spend your free time?*" "*Free time? What's that?*"

Instead, I turned to my favorite habit of young adulthood—cutting ties and running. I picked up the habit when I left my home in Minneapolis, Minnesota for college. I was a self-conscious high schooler who overthought every interaction and conversation until my default became silence. I was a mime, as one of my teachers less-than-graciously put it. Like many college freshmen, I wanted to re-invent myself, and I decided the easiest solution was moving cross-country where no one would know me. This seemed like a promisingly quick fix that didn't involve explaining myself or salvaging relationships that I had sidelined by shutting down like a turtle cornered by kids at summer camp.

I thought changing my home would change me.

"Tonight, I expect everyone to contribute. Speak from your personal experience. Share your thoughts to show commitment to this discussion and this group."

Glancing around the circle of students, I got the distinct feeling that our professor was speaking to me. Heat flooded my freckled cheeks. Although I rarely added my voice to the conversations, I showed up every Monday night for this voluntary book study. Didn't that show my commitment? Throughout the evening, the professor's expectation hung over my head like a rickety umbrella about to collapse in a deluge. *Say something. Say something*, I chided myself. *Show your commitment.*



Baby Carriage, 2021

Hand-woven and machine-made fabric, inkjet prints, 12 x 10 in.



Pixie, 2021
Hand-woven and machine-made fabric, inkjet prints, 12 x 10 in.



Underpants, 2021
Hand-woven and machine-made fabric, inkjet prints, 11 x 9 in.

I was becoming known by professors, classmates, and roommates as a quiet, observant loner—sweet enough but not one for long-winded answers, small talk, or a night out dancing. I spent most of my time studying in my dorm room or the library. Which isn't to say that I never ventured outside my comfort zone. Once, I tied a sock across my forehead, rubbed mascara under my eyes, and tore across campus for a team building exercise. Another time, I smuggled food from the dining hall and piled into a car full of freshmen for a weekend away. In my own quiet way, I did the "wild" college things tolerated by my tiny, Christian liberal arts school. I had left home to change myself, only to discover that I didn't want to fit into my new environment. My home was in Minneapolis. The more time passed, the less I participated in collegiate antics, the less I felt committed to that place, and the more I was anxious to leave.

When I graduated in a brief three years, I intended to stay in touch with the few friends I had made. I sent an occasional text message, a monthly email, just to check in and assure myself that I, at least, had tried to keep some relationships alive. But I felt no connection to the place. It never felt like home.

Still, I wasn't ready to return to my childhood life in Minneapolis, so I moved on—this time to Florida. I joined a young adult mission program for a two-year stint in Tampa, which seemed like a safely temporary adventure. Two years would be long enough to settle in without putting down roots or committing to one place.

"Siri, get directions to home."

Home? From the passenger seat, I shot a sideways glance at my roommate. I shouldn't have been shocked. We had lived in our house for nearly a year, so certainly it was the closest place we had to home, especially as out-of-staters in Florida. After all, it was just a shortcut for Siri to recognize one location as home, so we didn't have to enter our address into the GPS every time we drove back from the beach. Yet something inside me rebelled against calling that house my home. It was a cozy, bungalow-style building with a grassy front yard that soon became a jungle in the rainy summer months. Nestled in a gentrifying neighborhood full of young couples and slobbery dogs, it was the definition of the American dream home. Why couldn't I call it that?

I still clung to the idea of my estranged childhood home where I felt I belonged yet where I chose not to return. However, I didn't feel the homesick ache I used to get in college, standing in the steamy shower stall of my residence hall, counting the weeks until my next flight to Minneapolis. Sometimes, I almost made a Freudian slip, almost thought of the house in Tampa as home. But I always corrected myself. *Not home. House. This is my house.*

After two years refusing to call Tampa home, I inexplicably gave that title to the third floor of a Philadelphia row house. Between the time I moved to Florida and my move to Pennsylvania, I hadn't returned to Minneapolis, not even for a visit.

Maybe I realized I would never move back to Minneapolis. Maybe it was the location, inner city Philly—the sound of sirens screaming down the street mixed with rattling bass and the saccharin sweet melodies of the ice cream truck—reminiscent of my urban childhood. Maybe living on my own, having my own bathroom for the first time in my life, gave me a sense of ownership or stability in this transitory living situation.

There certainly was nothing homey about my new residence. It was an old building that had seen a lot of life but not a lot of love. The furniture was an eclectic bunch of donated chairs and dusty dressers; the communal kitchen was full of abandoned pots and unclaimed cans of nearly-expired beans. One morning, I watched mice play tag across my bedroom floor. How could this be home?

It was dusk, and the February chill had crept through the thin walls of the row house when my parents visited me six months after my move to Philadelphia. We sat in plastic chairs around a vinyl tablecloth printed with neon lemons. My parents searched the internet for hotel rooms while I googled take-out.

"What would you change first?" my mom asked, looking around the sparse dining room. "You could get a comfy chair or a rug."

"Um, I have lots of ideas," I said. "Like a new tablecloth." I ran a finger over the pockmarked vinyl, courtesy of my foster cat.

"Even just organizing the kitchen could really help," my mom continued. "If you want, I can stay back and clean while you and Dad pick up food—whatever helps."

"No, no, it's fine." I quickly returned to scrolling through my phone. "Maybe I *will* get a new chair."

A few weeks later, I received a card in the mail from my mom. "I want to apologize for being so quick to suggest 'improvements' for your home. Instead, I wish I had been grateful—quickly grateful—to be the mom of a daughter who focuses on more meaningful things than a conventionally comfortable living space."

Reading her words, I started to cry. I hadn't realized how much I wanted my parents' approval of this space I was finally calling home.

Surprisingly, I didn't cry when my dad texted me just before summer break, saying they were moving—he had accepted a job at my alma mater. "It's time for a new adventure," he said. While I wondered if it was also time for his midlife crisis, I knew I had inherited his adventure-seeking gene.

I didn't try to undermine my parents' move the way I would have a few years earlier. Growing up, I despised change in my life. I wouldn't cut my hair. I exclusively sat in the passenger-side backseat of our family minivan. I refused to throw away my favorite, ratty sweatshirt, and when I eventually outgrew it, I hid the sweatshirt deep in my dresser drawers where my mom wouldn't find and trash it.

Maybe it wasn't change itself that I despised but the sense of loss when



Jump, 2021
Hand-woven and machine-made fabric, inkjet prints, 12 x 9 in.



Go-Go Dancer, 2021
Hand-woven and machine-made fabric, inkjet prints, 12 x 9 in.

something comfortable and reliable no longer felt like mine. Maybe it was easier never to let anything or anyone or any place become so familiar that it would hurt to let go. Breaking a commitment felt like failure, like losing part of myself. Now I was reminded that nothing was reliable—not my worn out sweatshirt, not the childhood home I had always assumed would be waiting for me.

As a young adult, change became an inevitable part of my life, and I decided it was less emotionally risky to chase impermanence. Three years in college turned into two years in Florida which became one year in a Philadelphia school. If I never committed to a place, leaving it behind didn't feel so shattering. So when my coworker invited me to KPot on the last day before summer, I automatically said, "No." I wasn't ready to deepen relationships that I had already determined to sever.

As I exited the school building, I thought about the eighth grade graduation ceremony earlier that week. Students who acted indifferent all year, snoozing on their desks or recording TikToks in the hallway, had rubbed tears from their eyes as they paraded past their teachers, friends, and families to "Pomp and Circumstance." They had called one school home for most of their young lives, and then they experienced the loss and letting go that I carefully avoided. Even as they cried, the students and I knew that they would be okay. We knew they would look back on their elementary education with rose-tinted glasses, and they wouldn't regret the relationships they had built or the years committed to one school. They would celebrate their achievements and hopefully, someday in the future, reflect on their learnings. They weren't cutting ties so much as reaching a milestone. The students were never meant to stay in one place forever, and still, they had fully embraced that place for the time they were there.

I hoped that, someday, I could say the same for myself.

As summer break began, I didn't turn around and walk back to the school. I didn't call my coworker to say, "I'll meet you at KPot." Instead, I rode the subway and walked along the street as cars honked and an ice cream truck serenaded from a distance. Then I climbed the stairs to the third floor of an old row house that I called home.



English

**Cultural Traditions:
The Quinceañera
(Keen-say-an-Yair-uh)
in Cabarrus County**

This exhibition explores the history of the fifteenth birthday party, or the quinceañera. Using text in English and Spanish, you will learn about the origins of the tradition, the changes that have happened since, and the way this tradition is celebrated in the American South.

Here, the term Hispanic or Latina(o) is used to refer to people of Latin American heritage who live in the United States.

As you make your way through the exhibit, can you think of other coming-of-age rituals celebrated by others?

THE QUINCEAÑERA IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

A Guide to Art, Activism, & Culture

Podcast Interview featuring Saskia Lascarez Casanova

The Aerogramme Center is pleased to present "A Guide To Art, Activism, & Culture" a podcast that delves into social issues seen in museums and in art collections today. We aim to focus on themes of decolonization, representation, and appropriation within the frameworks of art and activism.

Hosted by Zoë Elena Moldenhauer

About Saskia Lascarez Casanova

I spoke with Saskia Lascarez Casanova about her exhibition "Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus County" currently on view at The Cabarrus County Museum of History in North Carolina till April 22, 2023. Through oral histories, Saskia explores the intersection of race, gender, class, religion, migration and family to present how the quinceañera has shaped the way that young Latina women identify themselves in American society.

Saskia Lascarez Casanova is an Costa Rican born-North Carolinian historian and museum professional. She received her bachelor's in History from Georgia Southern University in Savannah in 2019, and graduated with a master's in History and Museum Studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 2022. Saskia is the Public Programs and Collections Manager at the North Carolina Museum of Dolls, Toys, and Miniatures, and Exhibition and Programs Contractor at the Historic Cabarrus Association.

Instagram: @sakibomb1029

Pp. 21

Installation image of "Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus County" (Cabarrus County Museum of History, North Carolina, September 26, 2022–April 22, 2023). Image of purple quinceañera dress on stand. Photograph by Saskia Lascarez Casanova.

Zoë Elena Moldenhauer:

Welcome Saskia, thank you for speaking with me today! Can you introduce yourself?

Saskia Lascarez Casanova:

Sure!

My name is Saskia Lascaraz Casanova. I am originally from Costa Rica. I was born and raised there till about 11 years old then my family and I migrated to Miami, Florida. We've lived there with my grandparents for about five years. Then we came to North Carolina, and I've been here for the majority of my life, so I kind of just call North Carolina home.

I have my bachelor's in History from Georgia Southern University in Savannah, and I just graduated last May with my master's in History and Museum Studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

ZM:

And today we'll be discussing an exhibit you curated entitled "Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus Country" currently on view at the Cabarrus Museum of History in North Carolina. So, what is a quinceañera? Where does it originate, and can you share with us how this project started?

SC:

Yeah, so a quinceañera is a life cycle ritual that's celebrated across the entire American continent. Its origins are unfortunately unknown, but from my research I found that there are roots in indigenous and colonial practices.

And it all started from my own experiences as a Latina growing up in the South. Once we moved here, I had to adjust to the Southern culture, the accent, the way of life here. And, I guess because I'm such a social person, I always want to adjust to my spaces which kind of erased my Latina identity a little bit. And I kind of suppressed it [my identity] to fit in with my friends who were majority white.

After a while, I went off to college, and then joined a Latina sorority that basically taught me the beauty of being, you know, I don't have to choose between my Latina identity and my American identity, I can be both and exist in both spaces. So, it kind of made me wonder, you know, how are the new generation of Latinas growing up here in the South, especially in North Carolina, identifying themselves. Are they identifying as Mexican-American? Are they identifying as just American? Are they keeping any cultural traits from their family's heritage? So, that's kind of where

it started.

I figured the quinceañera is such a perfect kind of micro world to see all of those things: sexuality, religion, family, economics, identity, all those things kind of can be studied through the quinceañera.

ZM:

The quinceañera is typically associated with Mexican culture. Can you explain what happens at a quinceañera and what are the required aspects to make it complete?

SC:

So, I think, the reason why we think of quinceañera, and we associate it with Mexican culture, is because the Latinos in the US—the majority of them—are from Mexico, and so, they bring that Mexican culture.

When I asked my cousin what do the last 30 years, you know, in Costa Rica has there been an uptick in quinceañeras? What's it like? She said that it has become very prominent, especially with the rise of "My Super Sweet 16" and all those MTV shows. So, I think other Latin American countries do practice it, but perhaps not with the importance that is given in Mexican culture.

So basically, there's two big components, there's the party and the Thanksgiving Mass. So, majority of Latin America—not everybody anymore—is or was Catholic. They would have a Thanksgiving Mass to give thanks to God that the young lady has reached the age of 15 and she is reaffirming her faith and beliefs in God and The Virgin. And committing herself to a life of what's called *Marianismo*, which is like the beliefs that women in Latin America have to act, as close to possible, to The Virgin Mary. So, they have to be very godly, very subservient to their men, take care of their children, take care of the house. And promise the community that she will become an active member of the Catholic Church.

In newer years, the Thanksgiving Mass has kind of gone a little off to the side. There're tons of different reasons why, but it's just an outdated portion of the celebration. However, the party now is like a really, really big deal. So, within the party your like three main things that I would say is you have to do a waltz. Typically, with your dad or with your Court of Honor or *Chambelanes* and *Damas*, or not. The changing of the shoes. Usually, the quinceañera will walk in with flats or—one of my interviewees was wearing Crocs, another one was wearing Vans. So, you walk in whatever shoes that you're comfortable with. But those shoes are the ones that kind of represent you, as a child, and then your dad is supposed to change you into heels. So that represents you becoming a woman. And then the cut-



Installation image of “Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus County” (Cabarrus County Museum of History, North Carolina, September 26, 2022–April 22, 2023). Image of U.S. Quinceañeras and gold dress with doll. Photograph by Saskia Lascarez Casanova.

ting of the cake, which is very wedding-esque. Used to be you would have little steps, so it was a fountain in the middle, and you had your little like dolls of your *Chambelanes* and *Damas* lined up. I mean there were crazy extravagant.

I want to say in Mexican culture, since that's what I've studied the most here, they do a *baile sorpresa*, which is like a surprise dance. To kind of thank the guests and be like, 'Hey look at the performance I made for you, thank you for coming to my party.'

And there's also a big thing happening nowadays, which is like a surprise gift. So, you get like this huge box, and you open it and then there's a bunch of trash and newspaper. And then there's a smaller box—it's a Russian nesting doll of boxes until you get to a big gift, which is usually like the keys to a car or very nice jewelry, or like a huge wad of cash.

There's of course little things here and there like the last doll. So, they used to get a doll made exactly to their likeness, even down to their dress. Nowadays a lot of girls are opting for teddy bears instead. The crown has a big aspect of it. Used to be, you would wear a tiara and then when you changed into your shoes you would also change into a crown. Nowadays you just wear your big crown from start till end of the party.

You just customize it to how you want, and that's I think one of the aspects of American culture that's kind of made its way into this very Hispanic tradition.

ZM:

And I remember asking you about the extravagant dresses. Do you know where that specific style comes in?

SC:

So I do know a little bit about the history or the transitioning of the styles of dresses. Originally it used to be a white dress to signify purity. Then it went from white to like a baby pink and then from baby pink, I want to say beginning about the maybe late 80s to early 90s is when girls started customizing their dresses to whatever color that they wanted. And then of course it really blew up in the early 2000s. So you had red, green, purple, silver, gold, champagne, any color imaginable. Gorgeous, gorgeous, dresses.

Again, that individualization that is such a like pillar of American culture. Also, probably because their mothers were a little more willing to allow their daughters to choose whatever they wanted for themselves instead of the mothers choosing for them.

ZM:

And so, you talked specifically about Mexican culture. But are there some specific differences between Mexican, Ecuadorian, Costa Rican, et cetera?

SC:

Well, having a conversation with my cousin who still lives in Costa Rica, she did mention that it's kind of 50/50. So, 50% of the girls will want the party, 50% will want either the money, or a trip, or a car.

I'm willing to say that, more than likely, most of Central America—I do know in Mexico they still, I mean the Thanksgiving Mass is—you're doing it. So, I'm thinking that probably throughout Central America it's, 'We're going to do the Thanksgiving Mass, and then we're going to do the party. Otherwise, you're not getting anything.'

At least here [in the US], a lot of the quinceañeras I've gone to, it's mostly *chambelanes* or the male escorts—they don't put a lot of emphasis in having the *Damas*, the female accompanying party.

For my quinceañera, I had 14 couples. I had 14 guys and 14 girls. But a lot of the girls I've spoken to say that either they only have a handful of

girlfriends and their girlfriends just plainly say, 'You know, like I appreciate you inviting me, but I don't really want to do that.' Or they do have some friends, but they don't ask them to be their *Damas* because girls can be catty and jealous so they're afraid that they'll kind of outshine them at the dance or whatever maybe. Which is completely understandable. It's their big day.

I guess, maybe that's one of the variances I've seen is that most Mexican quinceañeras I've attended, it's mostly the quinceañera and the boys to kind of make her shine. As opposed to, I guess, maybe in other cultures you have a mixture of both the guys and the girls.

ZM:

How did you start your research? Did you send some kind of notice to different communities to find out their customs or attend different quinceañeras?

SC:

So, I did make flyers and I reached out to a couple of friends that I have in the local school district. They weren't able to kind of mass email it out, but they were able to put me in contact with a few Spanish teachers and English teachers, History teachers, that might be willing to let their students know about the oral history project. Ultimately, I ended up finding the people that I did, through word of mouth.

Yeah, so, again, the whole reason why I kind thought about this topic was just my own experiences growing up in the American South and kind of grappling with these dual identities. So, I was interested in learning how this generation of young ladies are growing up and grappling with their identities. And I was taking, like research methodology just to teach us the different sources, how to analyze them, how to get information that might be hidden. A professor wanted us to pick a topic and because I had already been thinking about quinceañeras, I was like, 'Oh, you know, let me do some research on quinceañeras. I want to see what's available.'

The Library of Congress has a historic newspaper section, I found a ton of newspapers, but it was mostly from very Latino friendly states. So, Arizona, California, Florida, New York, Illinois, Texas. I decided to focus on a newspaper from Arizona that was ran by a woman and a newspaper in Corpus Christi, Texas that was ran by the Catholic Church of Corpus Christi, Texas. So it's a very secular paper, I believe.

So, in that newspaper the emphasis was about the celebration. So, if you're planning on having your Thanksgiving Mass, you need to sign up for our quinceañera classes. It's, you know, X amount of money. It's

for X amount of weeks. And then afterwards you have your party. Then they started announcing retreats for quinceañeras, and then I remember seeing one of the announcements was talking about a group quinceañera, that they were hosting at the Church. So instead of having one Mass per girl they were having, like a huge Mass for a lot of quinceañeras. The latest newspaper from Corpus Christi that I saw was talking about a boy quinceañero camp to teach them about God and get them prepared for their Thanksgiving Mass to celebrate their quinceaños celebration.

Then the Arizona one, was mostly announcements. So, it was a lot of beauty tips. So, if you want to look like, '*una quinceañera con tu cutis muy bella*, blah, blah, blah.' So it was a lot of, 'Oh, you should be doing these things to look young' or, 'Don't use too much makeup if you're young, it's going to age you and make you look older,' and 'Wear your hair a certain style.' 'You should use these certain types of dresses to accentuate your—' it was very focused in the appearances of women and focused on quinceañeras. Like that was a quintessential youthful look that you wanted to achieve.

So anyways, did all that research, ended up realizing that there wasn't—when I say Southern States, I mean like Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, those Southern states—I found a gap in the scholarship in North Carolina. And I know that in the 80s and 90s there was a large influx of Latinos to the state due to farm workers. And I started to think, surely I can start seeing when they [Latinos] started arriving. Maybe I won't be able to see exactly when they started celebrating quinceañeras and stuff, but I could at least start to trace when the population started to grow. Then potentially look at when Latino or Hispanic serving businesses started to open up.

ZM:

You kind of mentioned that there were quinceaños for boys. Is that also typical within the celebration, or is the focus more on young girls?

SC:

From my research, the focus has always been on girls.

Like I mentioned earlier, you know, we don't have a record of when the quinceañera really began or its origin, however, there's been records found from as far back to the Mayans, Toltec, and the Aztecs, even. Back in those times, the life expectancy was so short that as soon as you were able to bear children, you needed to start having children. The whole thing was to produce soldiers for the empire. So when the girls turned fifteen,

they were basically ready for marriage and the ritual that they would have was to try and find a suitable partner.

The boys would become soldiers so they would get this big celebration and get their weapons, swords, whatever they used during those times. Then colonization happened. Spaniards brought Catholic religion and they also had debutantes. So, in high society, when the girls were coming of age they would have kind of like a debutante ball to show off to society like, 'Oh, you know, here's my beautiful noble daughter, she is ready for marriage, who is the highest bidder?'

So those two mixed along with the Catholic component gave us maybe the basis of what we understand, the quinceañera to be.

ZM:

I'm interested also in the social utility of this custom. Do you have a measure of how much is being spent considering how extravagant these celebrations can become? Are people spending more compared to their incomes? Do families go into debt? How are families financing quinceañeras?

SC:

When I conducted these oral histories, we briefly touched on the financials of it but I didn't want them [the interviewees] to feel pressured to tell me like the exact amount or anything like that. But here there's a system of *compadrazgo*, so you've got your *comadre*, *compadre*—your daughter's godparents. And those are their religious godparents. But for a quinceañera you can have godparents for basically anything.

So, for example, you could have a godparent for your cake. So it's more of a sponsor type of thing. So you ask somebody, 'Hey, would you be willing to be my sponsor for my cake?' and that person, if they say yes, they're in charge of purchasing your cake. And then, as a 'Thank You,' in the invitation of the quinceaños, they'll list me, so it'll be '*madrina de pastel*' or like 'cake sponsor.' And during the celebration, at one point, they will call out all of the godparents or all the sponsors, they kind of come up, you take a photo and then you go back and sit down.

And it doesn't even have to be a family member. I remember when we first moved here it was back in 2004. The Latino population was, I would say, a quarter of what it is now. So, the women who were throwing parties for their daughters had left all their family and friends behind. So, this was a way for them to make community on top of being able to celebrate their daughters quinceañera. Despite the difficulties, despite the migration, the tough challenges that they face moving to a whole new country.



Installation image of “Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus County” (Cabarrus County Museum of History, North Carolina, September 26, 2022–April 22, 2023). Exhibition tour. Photograph by Saskia Lascarez Casanova.

A quinceañera party can go as little as \$10,000 and you could have it as big as \$50,000.

Families do go into debt, but they see it as—I don’t want to say an investment on their daughter—an investment in memories if that makes sense? So, some of the mothers throw the party for their daughter because they themselves either had to grow up very, very quickly. Help take care of their siblings or perhaps they had to leave their home at a very young age. Perhaps they were pregnant at a very young age. Whatever reason may have been that they were not able to have a quinceañera, when they throw the quinceañera for their daughter, it’s kind of like a way for them to have a quinceañera they weren’t able to.

So they spare no expense. They also use this *compadrazgo* system that helps them offset some of those expenses. And a lot of times they

just start saving from a very young age. And I know a lot of people criticize, 'Oh you could have used that money for their college' or, you know, 'for a car' or for whatever other thing. But I look at it this way, ultimately, it's the girl's choice. If she chooses, like, 'Hey, you know I don't really want to party. I would much rather you spend it on my education.' Of course, the parents are going to say, 'Yes, absolutely honey, we'll save it for your college.'

Others, which is what I'm finding out, who may have been born in another country and migrated very young, who are DACA recipients or maybe don't have legal status, are not able to go to college. Or if they are able to go to college, they have to pay for it out of pocket. So, for a lot of them they don't see college as a viable option.

It's difficult.

ZM:

And that was actually my next question, was considering how common the celebration is, do families want their daughters to get an education or is there still this expectation to marry young?

SC:

So, what I found out from my oral histories is that the mothers 100%, 'Yes, my daughter needs to be educated. I want her to graduate high school.' One [mother] said, she had to drop out because she was pregnant with her daughter right after her fifteenth. So, she was very explicit, 'I don't care what she wants to do, I will support her.' Marriage is no longer the security for these women, and education is the security. So, that's what the mothers are seeing and learning, and so are the daughters.

So that was—of course, you know, just swells my heart to learn that we are now focusing more on educating our daughters as opposed to marrying them off. So, it gives me a little bit of hope that perhaps that *machismo* that's been so prevalent in our culture, is starting to shift, hopefully, you know.

ZM:

And I kind of want to circle back to—you were describing the cultural practices of the quinceañera. But your research mentions Karen Mary Dávalos who connects the importance of rituals to the formation of identity for young Latina women in the US, as well as the familial structures within the communities and the high importance placed on the Church. So, can you talk more on what influence the Catholic Church has on the mindset of the quinceañera?

SC:

Yeah, so, that newspaper from Corpus Christi really was a great resource and it really opened my eyes to how much reach the Catholic Church had in everyday people's lives.

One of the first things that I remember reading was a four-part editorial piece from a man who later became the first Mexican-American Archbishop of Texas, I believe. And it was basically him having a big rant about how much we have strayed from the real meaning of the quinceañera which is to give thanks to God for allowing the young lady to reach this age and for her to be able to give herself back to God and The Virgin. So that's kind of where I started to see the religious portion of Thanksgiving Mass is starting to drop off then. And so, they [the Church] were just trying to do anything and everything to get people to start having it [Thanksgiving Mass].

In Catholic religion you have, I believe it's 5 [7] sacraments—the quinceañera celebration is not a sacrament by the religious Church standards. So technically, the Catholic Church doesn't need to be having a quinceañera Thanksgiving Mass. It's just somewhere along the line somebody started doing it and then others started doing it. So, it's very interesting to see if it's not sanctioned by the Church as a sacrament, why are they having it, you know?

Oh, and I tried to interview a local priest, who is Hispanic and gives Spanish Mass here, but he wasn't very interested in interviewing with me. And when I asked him, 'Well, can you just tell me briefly, you know, what your experience is, how you feel about it?' He's like, 'My experience doesn't really matter, you know, these girls here, they're going to have their party with or without the Church, and they're going to do what they want. They mostly just want the party.'

So, it even seems like they don't even want to partake in the celebration.

ZM:

I wonder if the religious component of the quinceañera isn't a way for the Catholic Church to dominate or control women's bodies? I have a working understand of Catholicism, but so much of the language used is almost violent to where women are punished—historically—simply because of their gender. And this notion of purity and the desire to have or control a women's virginity is predatory under the umbrella of the quinceañera.



Installation image of "Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus County" (Cabarrus County Museum of History, North Carolina, September 26, 2022–April 22, 2023). Image of Saskia and Scarlet. Photograph by Saskia Lascarez Casanova.

SC:

That also falls within that *marianismo* term I was talking about earlier. Absolutely! It seems like a way to try and control women's bodies. Because they [the Church] would literally tell the girls like, 'This is your chance to pledge yourself to God' and like, 'You will be an honorable woman and stay pure until you are married' and then like, 'You will not give any lip to your husband. You will do what your husband says. You will give him however many children he wants.'

This isn't spoken, but it's implied—it doesn't matter if your husband steps out on you and has other relationships with other women. That's expected of him because of this *machismo/marianismo* paradigm. The way that they show that they're a "man" is through their virility. Through having however many women, having however many children. And the women, no matter how they're treated, they will achieve the love and peace and comfort of The Virgin Mary through all of these sacrifices that they have to go through. Through living with abusers, with men who have extramarital affairs.

ZM:

So how are Latinas finding agency within the cultural practice of having a quinceañera?

SC:

Well, I definitely think the definition of womanhood has changed and these girls are adapting to that. The perfect example to me was literally one [interviewee] wearing Crocs her whole party, the other one wearing Vans. It's like genius, of course!

So the one that was wearing Vans, I think, I wanna say she told me that she skates so it makes sense why she would prefer to wear Vans throughout her party. They're creating agency because a lot of their responses was, 'I wanted to have a quinceañera not only because my mom wanted me to, but also because I wanted to connect with my heritage.' So, some of these girls have been born and raised in Cabarrus County. So, this is all that they've known. Even though they all speak English, understand Spanish, and can reply, a little bit, in Spanish they're still able to connect to their heritage through their classmates, through their family, and through this party, in the South especially.

ZM:

How do quinceañeras for people who identify as nonbinary or with the queer com-

munity, are they more receptive to having a quinceañera knowing that it is gendered? Or is there just an acceptance of having a birthday, on your fifteenth year, that incorporates some of those like pageantry elements? If you've seen anything like that?

SC:

I would have been very grateful to be able to interview somebody who identifies as queer or nonbinary.

So, the advances that we have achieved in the US—even for me it's difficult to find the words for some of these terms, so I have to reach out, you know, to cousins in Costa Rica and ask them like, 'Hey, how do you say gender nonbinary in Spanish?' Just even having those types of conversations with my parents, it's difficult finding the words in Spanish to express what these things are? With that being said, I haven't here, in Cabarrus County, heard or experienced a nonbinary person having a quinceañera.

So, HBO has a documentary on quinceañera—the name is escaping me right now—but it's, I believe, a four part series. They're about an hour long each episode, and the first episode starts with a trans girl who's celebrating her quince. And they're talking about how—because they're older women, so probably I'd say their forties-fifties maybe? Back in their day, even here in the US, they weren't having these opportunities. They couldn't be their true authentic selves out in public. It's great that you are able to have this and exist in this space and not like fear for your life and not have the obstacles that we had. It's a very touching episode, but I would love to see that happen more.

I'm just afraid that even Latino culture here in the US, is not as advanced as the rest of America. And even American culture is still not as advanced as it should be when it comes to these topics.

ZM:

Yeah, so we talked a lot about the social practice of the quinceañeras, so how are you trying to frame your research? How do you extract information on this huge subject and organize it? Is the exhibition based on geography, by origin, or looks at the history of quinceañeras? How are you choosing what pieces to display in a museum setting?

SC:

That's a great question.

So, the Cabarrus Museum of History where the exhibit is currently displayed, is a one room museum inside the Historic Cabarrus County

Courthouse. The city wanted to demolish it to build a new courthouse that is existing next to it. So, a group of local citizens got together and attempted to save it, and they did. So then, from there stemmed the Historic Cabarrus Association—it was called the Concord Museum, and now they're the Cabarrus Museum of History.

I mean, I originally—I wasn't even going to do an exhibit. My project was supposed to be just oral histories. And as I started the first oral history, I mentioned something about, 'I wish I would have kept some of my things' and so the quinceañera I was interviewing, she said, 'Oh I still have all my stuff.' And I was like, 'Would you be willing to lend me your things for an exhibit?' And she said, 'Of course, just let me know when.' So then I started the task of finding a museum that would be willing to host this exhibit.

So, then I started reaching out to different museums. This one, here in Cabarrus County, obviously was my top choice because they also have an oral history project collecting the stories of local Cabarrus County citizens. I said, 'OK, these are Cabarrus County citizens. This oral history can go nestled in within that bigger oral history project that they've got.'

So I had one dress—I basically had one whole collection. We're going to call it the 'Purple Collection' because everything's purple. So, I had her dress, I had her *crinolina* which is the big hoop skirt that goes underneath, I had her crown. She gave me her quinceañera ring, her earrings, her necklace. She gave me her bouquet, her Bible, her cushion. She gave me her heels since she didn't use them. I had an invitation because I was invited to her party. I had a little keepsake, so her party was September of 2021. So her keepsake was a little organza baggy with a mask and a hand sanitizer because, you know, that was still COVID.

The photographer, who photographed the 'Purple Collection', I reached out to her and so, she put me in contact with a few others [quinceañeras]. I was able to get the collection of one other girl. I'll call her the 'Gold Collection'. Most quinceañera dress skirts are made of tool, like layers upon layers upon layers of tool. Her dress was, I guess maybe the tools on the inside, but on the outside it's a very beautiful satin cloth and it's—I mean—it's got the most gorgeous embroidered detail crystals everywhere. Beautiful! And it has a cute little *bolero* like a shawl that's also all embroidered. So, the shawl you're meant to wear it when you're at the Thanksgiving Mass and then at the party you take it off and most of the dresses were sweetheart necklines, some of them had like spaghetti straps. And then through my mom I was able to find one of her friends, has a daughter who is in a wheelchair. So, her dress wasn't as poofy, but it

was also golden and it has like these very beautiful turquoise embroidered butterflies everywhere. And so, she gave me the little doll that she got, which looks exactly like the dress and her crown.

I did go to the local Catholic Church and I found some books on quinceañeras. So, they have like preparation books, so it's like a little quinceañera booklet that teaches you what things to read before your quinceañera class that you're meant to go to. I had to supplement things like that, like the book. I had to get a rosary because none of the girls that I interviewed had a Thanksgiving Mass.

And then after I had all the items, I just kind of figured out, you know, how to place everything and so then I started the first panel is basically like a very brief introduction to what the quinceañera is, the definition of the ritual, and then just a brief definition of some terms that I used. So, for example like I outlined on there the term Latino, Latina, Latinx, Hispanic is used interchangeably throughout this whole exhibit. It means a person who is of Hispanic or Latino descent that lives in the US. That's it. Kept it simple.

Then the second set of panels is talking about the origin. So where do we believe it came from, how it was practiced back then, the traditional parts of it. So that white dress, the very covered dress, the Thanksgiving Mass. Then we move on to new things that have stemmed from the celebration. So, then I showed a picture of this little girl who was celebrating her cinco-cincañera. So she was turning five but she had a big old poofy quinceañera dress, and she had her Court of Honor. I think she had like three or four little boys with her. Adorable with her crown and everything. And then, there's also women that are turning fifty, they celebrate cincuentañera.

So, then after that it moves on to the like quinceañeras of today. So the US Quinceanera, which is a term Julia Alvarez coined in her book "Once Upon a Quinceanera." If you watch MTV's "[My Super] Sweet 16", that's a US quinceañera. Very extravagant, over the top, 'I expect a car for my birthday,' which, you know, of course, that's not the experience of every girl who's celebrating their quinceañera here in the US. But, the emphasis is more on consumerism and materialistic possessions.

And then on one side, I talked briefly about the oral history project, how it ties in with the quinceañeras, how the items tie in with the quinceañeras, and I put like a small little sound bite of one of the interviews.

ZM:

And who do you imagine your viewer being?

SC:

I did the panels both in English and Spanish. With the text for the panels, in Spanish in particular, it was definitely a challenge because, like I mentioned, I have a pretty good working Spanish. But I know that most text for museums can sometimes be daunting, can be very scholarly, and sometimes it just puts people off. You know, you start reading the first sentence and you read a word you don't understand and you're like, 'OK, moving on.' I wanted to make sure that it was accessible for all, starting with 8th grade level and lower.

And I had that same challenge with Spanish. So, what I would do is, I would type my text in Spanish and show it to my mom and ask her, 'Hey, read this and tell me how you understand or what you're understanding from this.' So, she would read it and then she would tell me, 'Well, I'm not sure why you're saying this?' I would explain the context and she would say, 'Well, then you need to explain the context because if I just read this, I don't know what you're talking about.' So, she really helped me bring it down to a public history accessible level where everyone could understand.

Not even to mention the nuances that there are within regular Spanish, Mexican-Spanish, Costa Rican—like all of our Spanish is all jumbled. So, I had to figure out, you know, how to make sure that my audiences were understanding what I was trying to say in the most plain, clear, jargon free, text possible.

I really, mostly, wanted to hit Latino and Latinas in the community. However, I knew that that was going to be a challenge just to even get them to the museum. The museum's free, but a lot of our people don't like to go to museums or don't go to museums because they feel excluded. They feel like it's a very elitist organization, or they just don't enjoy going to these places. So, I wanted to try to make it welcoming and make it friendly and make it seem less daunting than what most museum experiences have been for Latinos.

And I also created a program, like a little take home paper doll quinceañera. So, I had five different skin tones, so you would pick whatever doll you wanted. Then I had every color imaginable for the dress and then you had like glitter glue pens and washi tape and little sequins like all kinds of fun things. And it was really fun to see which dolls certain girls would pick. So I figured most girls would go for a doll that looked

like them, but they would choose other dolls that didn't quite necessarily look like them and they would dress them up and make such intricate, beautiful designs on their dresses and they were so proud at the end of it to show it and take a photo of it. It was the cutest thing. But it wasn't just little girls who were doing it. It was also older women.

I remember I took my grandma to see the exhibit and she made one. She still has it and she, I mean, she sat there for like an hour and a half because she wanted her doll to be beautiful. And she said, 'This is what I would have worn if I would have been able to have a quinceañera.' That's what I wanted, you know.

ZM:

There are two audiences that you're speaking to, Latinos and non-Latinos. And so, how are you making the research accessible or interesting to both?

SC:

I wanted to be able to introduce people who are not familiar with the tradition, with Hispanic culture to the quinceañera—a small glimpse of what it's like to grow up Latina. And I wanted Hispanic and Latina women or people that came to see the exhibit, to see themselves represented.

So, one of the biggest things for me that basically propelled me into my museum career was seeing myself, seeing my culture represented in these spaces that are majority white spaces. So, I wanted to create that same feeling, especially for these girls who I interviewed. Just the fact that they were able to give me their time and participate in this record that will stay forever. So, I just wanted a way to be able to give back to them and let them see themselves represented through an artistic way to potentially inspire them to want to pursue whatever career they want.

This career for me, has been in the making for fifteen years, it feels like. But, you just have to continue and preserve and make that representation. If you don't find it, make it for others so that way they can also be inspired to fulfill their dreams and follow whatever it is that they want. And then, they can then be the representation that they want to portray for others.

ZM:

Yeah, well do you have any final thoughts or announcements you would like to make?

SC:

I will be presenting on this topic at the National Council on Public History is happening down in Atlanta, Georgia, April 12th through the 16th and I'll be presenting on the 13th, which is the Thursday. And then in March, I will be presenting the same project as well at the North Carolina Museum's Conference in Gastonia, which is from March 26th through the 28th.

At both of these conferences, I'll be presenting the potential of creating this as a statewide project, particularly at the North Carolina Museum's Council. I would love to see what kind of reception I get to the idea. Because then, you know, I could just partner with local organizations and I could put that into my proposal for this grant I'm thinking of. And then at NCPH to show the progression of the project and how it's gone so far. Why not do it on, you know, the whole South. Let me head up South Carolina and Georgia and head over to Tennessee and Kentucky and, you know, of course that would be ideal, but we'll see.



Installation image of "Cultural Traditions: The Quinceañera in Cabarrus County" (Cabarrus County Museum of History, North Carolina, September 26, 2022–April 22, 2023). Paper dolls. Photograph by Saskia Lascarez Casanova.

M101

Text by Blossom Kelley
Artwork by Cory W. Peeke

It started out normal enough. I pulled the flimsy yellow card out of my back pocket and forced it into the angry black slot. The satisfying "*boing*" sound let me know that there was indeed enough money on my MetroCard. I walked down the dingy gray aisle and took my usual seat by the window. Usual, because no matter which dirty New York City bus I was forced to ride, I would only choose to sit in the rare single seat by the dirty gaping window. The smell of piss, sweat and baby wipes was strong in the un-airconditioned bus, which had succumbed to the blistering August heat.

It was true that I had the option of taking the train, but I couldn't lie to myself – I actually liked getting on the buses downtown. The suffocating subways only reminded me of my ironically oppressive claustrophobia. The upper east side wasn't technically considered downtown, but 86th street was definitely downtown to me. And plus, I loved seeing how New York City unfolded before my eyes. When I was younger, I would sit on the bus next to my Papi. Knees in the seat elbows on the windowsill as I watched the world roll around me. I loved it. He would rest his heavy brown arm on my shoulder whenever my tiny feet would accidentally graze across his urostomy bag hidden beneath his baggy cargo shorts. Bladder cancer never got in-between me and Papi's special times, our bus rides across New York's hidden neighborhoods. He told me that we were anthropologists blessed enough to scavenge our own backyard. "Exploring isn't traveling the world," he would say as I fidgeted in the grimy blue seat. "Exploring is observing. Exploring is listening." I missed him now more than ever.

I think back to the shape of his large brown hands with the sharp knuckles, the way they would pat my chubby thighs with reassurance on the rare occasion that I was sitting still. I remember thinking how heavy they looked against my pale skin. I remember when the roles became reversed. I remember how frail and gray his hands looked against the white hospital blanket, the last time I patted them as I said goodbye.

I thought that he could have been stronger. Papi was such a fighter, he knew what it meant to struggle and lose – it was what had given him such an appetite for the win. As I watched the crumbling tenements pass before my eyes, I thought of Papi. I allowed myself to remember the deep rumble of his voice as he

let his story unfold in twisting turns only his language could possess. The idioms, the truths, the lies and the in-betweens would be entwisted in his web of tales. He was a master storyteller, and he always knew that I would be enthralled by whatever fell gracefully out of his mouth.

That was why I knew. Listening to Papi was why I could sit here smiling out of a dirty window, allowing my smile to beam onto the shit-filled street and rat-infested buildings. I smiled because I knew. I knew the stories, I was the only one who would sit in his lap as a child and listen, fighting the childhood urge to fidget and squirm. Out of my eight brothers and sisters I was the one to inherit the truth, the knowledge. They would always accuse me of being the favorite, *la nena*, the sacred one only because of place on the birthing chain.

Maybe that was true – or maybe I appeared to be the favorite because I was the only one to listen. I never knew my mom. Papi had said that the crack riddled her body throughout her last five pregnancies, leaving her completely destroyed by the time I came along. I've only ever seen one picture of her, a tiny yellowish photograph I found in Papi's sock drawer one day. I tried hard to search for any sort of resemblance between she and I, but couldn't find one.

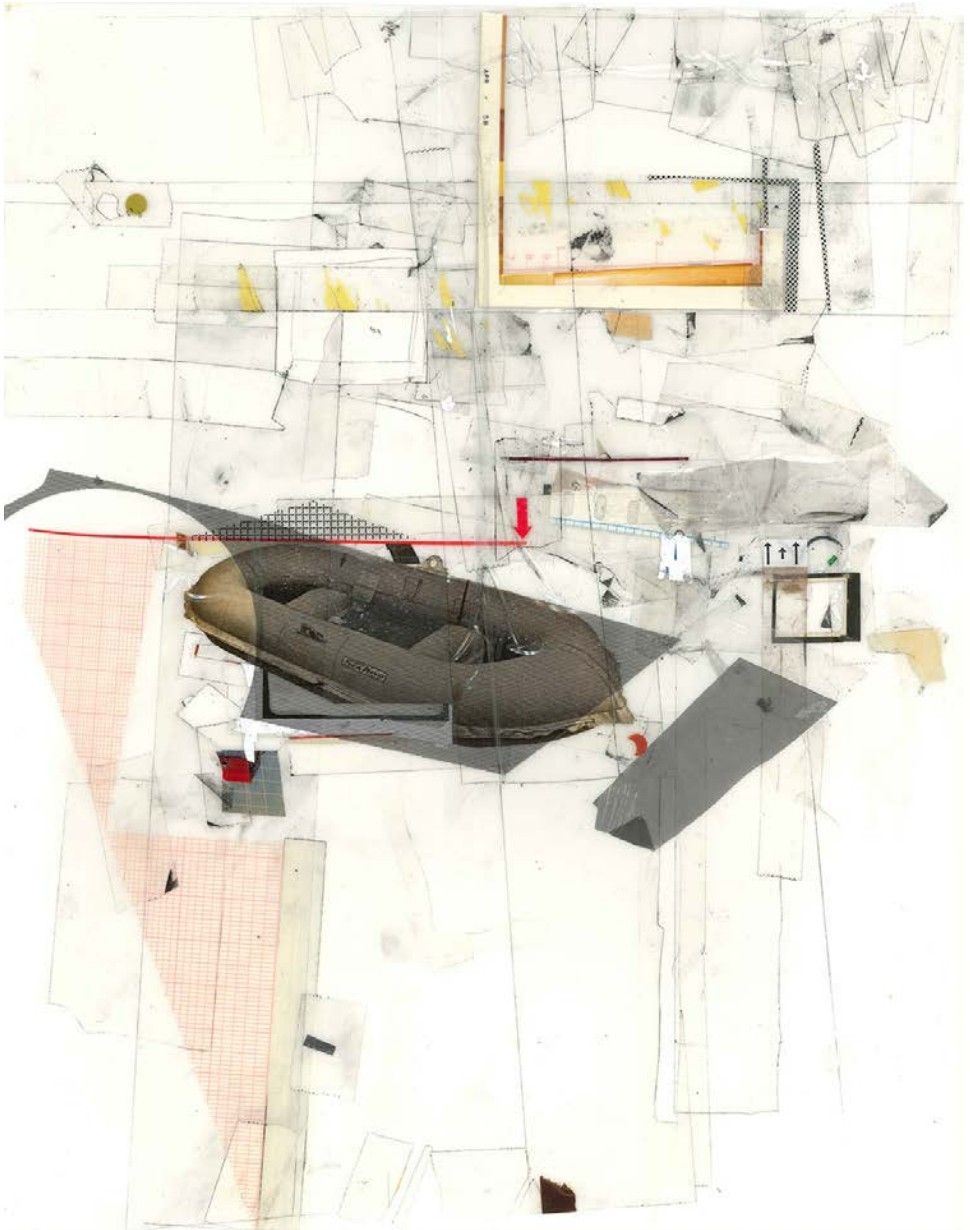
They never talked about her either, my brothers and sisters. The longing didn't seem to affect them in the same way that it did me. They lived, they breathed, they fucked, they cried and they didn't care. But me, it left me open. It left me torn, completely ripped apart. If she, the very human being whose *destiny* it was to love me, couldn't bring herself to do so, then how could anyone else?

Wherever she went she took a part of me with her. I was hollow on the inside. Beneath the clothes and the skin there was a giant hole. Only my limbs remained, which gave me the appearance of being a complete human being. No one knew the truth about me, and I was so scared that one day they would find out. I was scared that one day someone would try to dive beneath my flesh searching for something deeper, not knowing that all they would find was death. Emptiness. I was so afraid that they would die and fall into the nothingness that was within me, fall forever and never be found again.

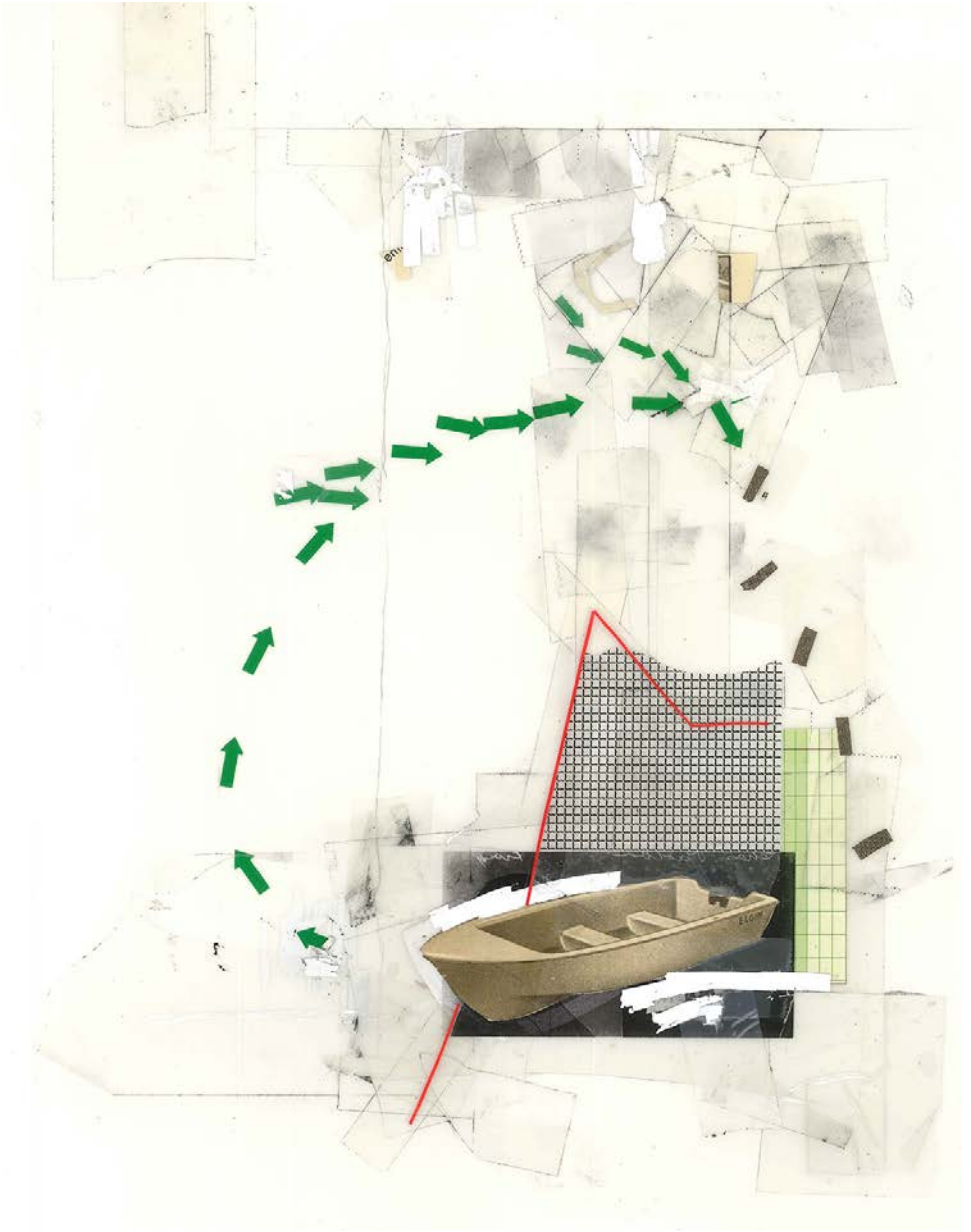
Papi was the only one for me, he was the only one who understood the emptiness I held. He said that my brothers and sisters inherited the wild spirit of their mothers, but I was the lucky one. I was the one who inherited his calm observant nature. I'm not sure if I believed it, but I was always glad to hear it coming from him.

I knew the story of his *mami* and *papi*, I listened so intently it felt as if I knew them. Maybe that's what had alienated me from them, alienated me from my brothers and sisters. Knowledge had formed the bridge between us and my insistence had widened the gap.

Which of course I did not. Anybody who would have listened to Papi



a consciousness preoccupied with memory and expectation, 2020
Adhesive tapes, charcoal and found images on Dura-lar, 14 x 11 in.



course correction, 2020
Adhesive tapes, charcoal and found images on Dura-lar, 12 x 9 in.

would've known why. A year or two after they came to the country the whole family had attended a cookout, a celebration of their safe arrival from *la isla del encanto*. Papi was never clear about what happened, although his story was always colorful. As I sat in his lap, he told me the story of his beautiful mother, as cursed and as blessed as the Virgin Mary. He told me of the man, feverishly drunk with sweat forming at the moustache, and how he had waved the gun forcefully in his poor mother's face.

He told me about his father, who had jumped up from the lawn chair in an attempt to defend his bride, and how he was shot square between the brows in a matter of seconds. Papi told me the story in slow motion, how the man had turned to face his *mami* and how she instinctively acted to protect her before she thought to protect herself. She had thrown her body over his during a summer cook out that turned into a gun battle. Her body had been riddled with bullets and they absorb them all, getting them lodged in her fleshy tissue. Not a single one had reached her baby underneath. "I'm blessed, *m'ija*" he whispered to me from beneath the white sheet. "I've been blessed from birth." How could someone so blessed go out crumpled to half their body weight. How could someone so blessed go out like this.

As the bus rattled and rolled, I thought about my contradictory nature. *Si existe en la cabeza, vive en la lengua* Papi would say to me, shaking his round brown head with a smirk on his face. And it was true. I was the quiet one of the bunch, the one that birth-order had destined to be the perpetual runt. Yet I wasn't afraid to speak the truth I saw around me. Despite my fear of talk, I was never afraid of my self-expression – and maybe that was my downfall.

After all the time I spent being so far away, I was worried that getting back would mean nothing. All that I had seen and tasted and experienced would taint me and change me.

At times it worked out for me, I thought as I watched overcrowded tenements roll into cascading glass structures, vacancy signs and "Apartments for Rent" plastered all over the windows. Papi was right – if I thought it, I said it. If I were thinking something good, then my bluntness would be to my benefit. If I thought my sister Lana looked beautiful, or if Raul's shiny black hair looked particularly lustrous I was not afraid to tell them about the beauty that I saw. But I saw the ugly too. I saw how rapidly Lana's features changed as her liquid addiction grew out of control. I saw the broken nose, black eyes and busted lips that permanently lived on the face of Nena, Raul's girlfriend. I saw and I spoke and I alienated myself in the process. I didn't comment on my surroundings to be spiteful or cause resentment. I commented on what I saw because I so desperately wanted to change it. I wanted to stop the cycle of beatings and violence, I wanted break away from my family's addiction to recoveries and relapses. I wanted to shake

from hovering darkness that kept us destructively self-contained for generations. I wanted to awaken all of us, mind body and spirit, from the few bits of trauma that we could prevent. But I was cursed with a truth that no one would hear. No matter how hard we tried my siblings and I, we couldn't avoid the fact that we were more often than not faced with the ugliness that society tried to hide. And me, being me, I couldn't control the forced awareness that would escape from my lips as I tried to force them to see things the way I did.

"You can't force them *m'ija*. You can't force the world to see what they wanna hide."

I shook off the sadness and pulled my large pink headphones over my ears, blasting the most soothing samba I could find in my playlist. A sharp halt and muffled announcement caused me to pause my music in fear of the inevitable. My bus was rerouted due to a festival that was taking place across 116th street, the street necessary to the M102's existence. My worst fear had been realized. Yes, buses rerouted often, but this line hardly ever did. It was my one safe zone, the only place I could dip my toes into the pool of nostalgia without tripping and stumbling in. The bus would now be going along the M101 route. I loved bus rides I really did, but I had avoided the M101 for years. For me, it was similar to traveling along a route of death, a route that was hell-bent on making me face my deepest fears. I had no problem recalling Papi in my memories - but to see the apartment we shared, to see the physical proof of his existence collide with the vacancy I felt since he left this earth, I couldn't do it. I couldn't take the repercussions this detour might bring. I took a deep breath trying to allow myself to be soothed by the voice of Gilberto Gil. It wasn't working. The bus did a sharp turn across 125th street and 3rd avenue, the way it should've done nine blocks previous. I inhaled, I inhaled sharp until it felt like my breath was stabbing my lungs. I shouldn't have chosen today to visit *titi* Barbara, I should've waited I shouldn't have come today. I nervously tapped my fingers against my phone's screen as the bus made its way across 125th street and Madison avenue. I wasn't prepared for this, I wasn't prepared to see the past I've spent months trying to hide from. But I had to pick up his ashes. Everyone decided that I would be the one to collect them from *titi* until the memorial in Puerto Rico three months from now, where can scatter them across the sandy beaches of the Atlantic, finally laying our Papi to rest.

I inhaled. I was scared, I was angry, I was confused, and most importantly, I hadn't been back since it happened. And suddenly there I was.

On the corner of 125th and 5th avenue in front of the building that he had grown up in, the building where he raised all of us. It looked so small sitting between two newly built high-rises. The Chinese restaurant was now a Bed Bath

and Beyond and a Shake Shack. Gleaming, glistening glass lay atop thirty years of the violence and poverty that I knew. The violence and poverty that shaped me. The violence and poverty that I was so protective of. There was no comparing the glory of this financial capital with the tiny little shithole that contained all of me. The little shithole the city was trying to wipe away. I sobbed with my whole body as it convulsed and shook. I sobbed as I remembered the smell of boiling crabs wafting in from across the street. I sobbed as I remembered summer nights, the parades and festivals that took up the entire street. I sobbed as I remembered the snowy days with no heat or hot water, the rattling of Papi's music as he tried to warm us with his spirit. The used needles in the park, the sight of grown men bent over in their stupor as the heroin hit their system, the vacancy of peace meant nothing to me now. It was all a part of the experience, of life's experience, a sad fact that I could neither excuse nor deny. History shouldn't be explained away. History is fact, history is truth. History is a collection of experiences which are neither good nor bad.

All of my history was here. And as the bus released its brakes in a sharp jerking moment, I knew that all of my history was gone.

I was sitting directly across from it and I couldn't recognize it. It had less than a year and so much had changed in the neighborhood since then. Papi was one of the last original residents and I see that they didn't waste much time completely gut renovating the building. The hull still remained, although not much else was there to accommodate the frame. A frail elderly woman boarded the bus and sat directly behind me, patting my back gently as she whispered in my ear. "It's gonna be okay, baby. Whatever it is, it's gonna be okay." But I knew I would never be okay again. I had a hand to caress me, but it wasn't the hand I needed.

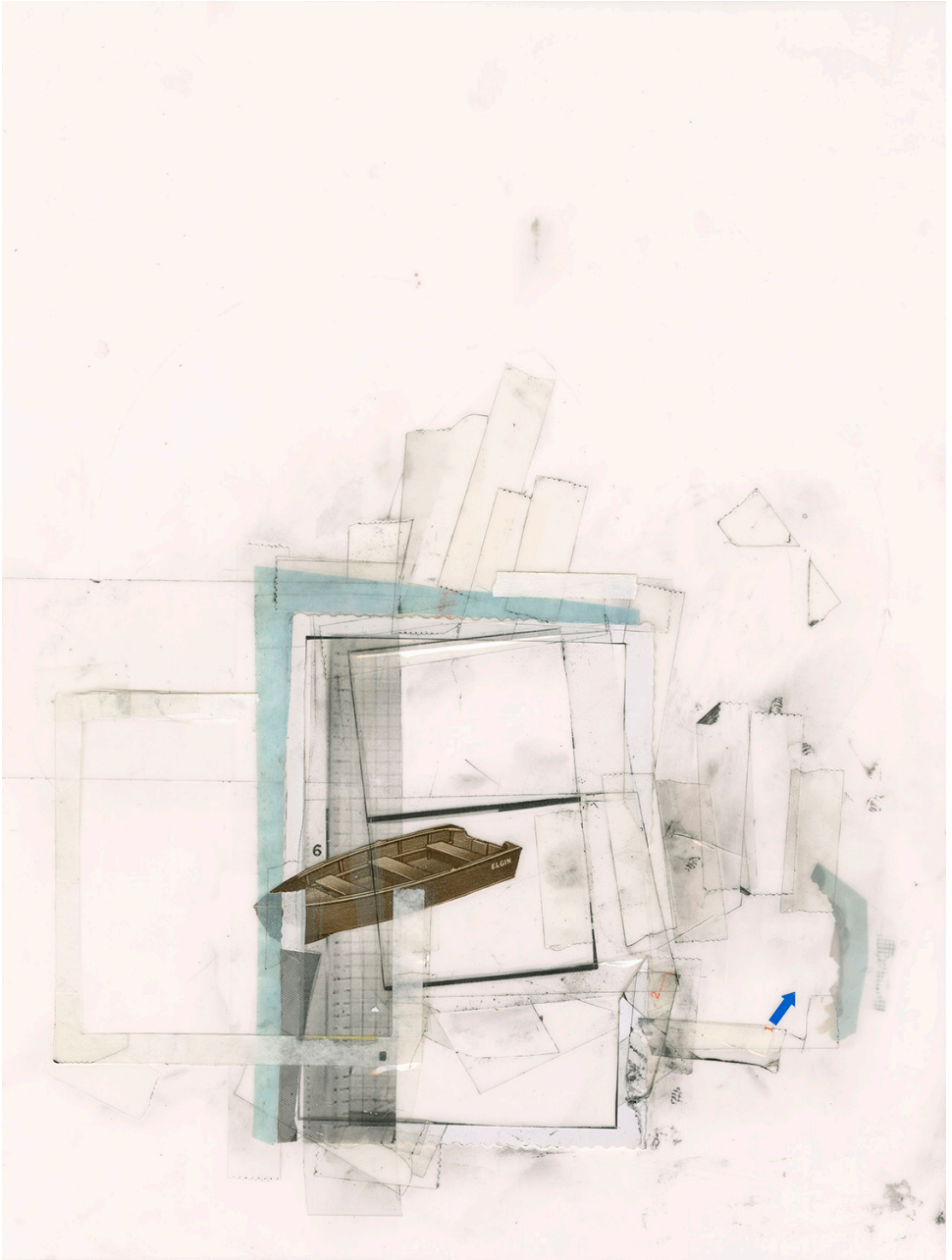
I missed Papi more than I realized. I missed a Harlem that would never return again. I missed my home more than anything.

I missed home my home so much.

I missed the life that I used to have. I missed the simplicity, I missed the days were all of my fears and dramas could be soothed by the gentle caress of a big brown hand. I missed all of it. Every last drop of my memory I missed. And as the bus roared its engine forward, I knew that I would never get back what I missed. No part of me could ever be had again.



red sky at morning, 2022
Adhesive tapes, charcoal and found images on Dura-lar, 14 x 11 in.

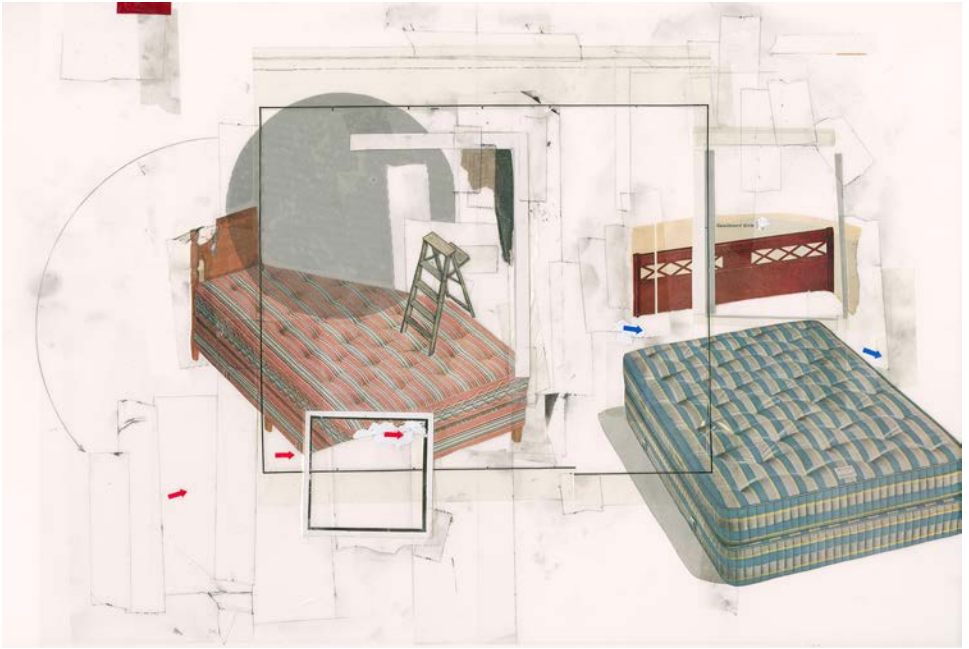


so here we are amidst, 2022
Adhesive tapes, charcoal and found images on Dura-lar, 12 x 9 in.

I MISS MY CHILDHOOD

When I say I'm from Harlem
It's not what I really mean. I try to say I was
Raised in Queens, bred in the
Ravenswood projects nestled between the N train and
A deactivated power plant. Mommy shuffled Lon and I
along the Triboro Bridge each morning, so early the sun would
Rise as she pulled in front of CPE II.
She would carry me half asleep inside for
Mary to lay me out on a mat, in hiding
Where I would sometimes wake as my classmates
Shuffled in.
The school was far from home but close to
My grandparents
In Harlem
Who picked me up each day, leading me on
winding walks up fifth avenue
Forcing me into blissful unawareness of my birth
Father who worked three blocks away and never
Saw the inside of the place
I called my home.
Nana and poppy were my parents and they
Went to every recital, they chaperoned every dance, they welcomed
Each and every friend I made as we sauntered through their
Two room apartment.
sometimes when I pass building
Number 2018 on 125th street
I burst into tears because I can't believe my
Only physical form of peace has been ripped away.
And Papi's dead.
And the block is cold. And nothing I knew
Fucking looks the same.

My life is a mouthful.
It's too long to explain
that I may have lived in Queens
But my heart forever belonged
in Harlem
nestled snugly on 125th street
between rivers, smog and childhood
innocence.



running hot and cold, 2022

Adhesive tapes, charcoal and found images on Dura-lar, 12 x 18 in.



Car Portrait, 2022
Digital Photography, 6,000 x 4,000 px.

BEAUTY QUEEN FIGHT NIGHT

Text by C.E. O'Banion
Artwork by Haris Malekos

We always met at the park to play basketball, or drink, during breaks in college. The hoops' rims were the thick, unforgiving orange loops that would've made Kobe Bryant give up shooting. My friend Edward was the tallest, maybe 6'3, and the only one with any God-given ability. He'd glide around our chubby frames, the ball skipping effortlessly on the concrete court, and lay it just over the rim. The rest of us were resigned to loud head fakes and chunking jumpers that either ricocheted off the rim or hit off the steel backboard—causing a vibration that the community college's seismograph might pick up. I specifically remember Brian, who was built like our school's lunch lady, slipped on a patch of pine needles mid-shot, the ball hung in the air like a deflated balloon until dropping straight into the net—our only pure swish of the day.

Bringle Lake Park was an almost entirely concrete slab of parking lots,

basketball courts, playgrounds, and walking paths on the south end of a small lake with an even smaller green space of browning grass near a sand volleyball court. A small dock stretched over the water, always surrounded with just enough moss to make fishing a chore. It was popular destination for family walks, group birthday parties, and high school dispute resolutions. You might hear about an argument in first period, then before the bell rang for seventh, it was confirmed: "They're going to Bringle."

You'd have to pull off next to an E-Z Mart gas station and follow a winding road until the pavement gave out to rocks, then dirt, then pavement again when you hit the pine-shaded parking lot. This was all in the early 2000s—I hear the new four-year college has a dormitory setup on the park now.

That day was calm. Summer break was coming to an end, and I was growing impatient to get back to college. Geese were playing on the lake, a newly constructed retainer wall had some rather artful graffiti, and Edward was adding to his already lofty pick-up game legacy when the growl of glasspacks and ripped mufflers roared over the treetops.

We let the ball bounce away into the sand of the volleyball court and walked to the edge of the parking lot when a small blue coupe sprung from the tree line, churning up a cloud of dust, its spoiler shining in the sun, its frame bouncing with the bass of its speakers. A glasspack is a cheap muffler that is illegal in the U.K. and generally frowned upon in polite society. You can hear it before you see it. Usually a little red tube, I presume glass, that looks more like a dog's penis than an intimidating car accessory, but that didn't stop a ton of kids in my hometown from sticking it on their sedans, trucks, and SUVs. I thought I'd graduated from the sound a when I moved to Baton Rouge for college, but a guy in my fraternity had a glasspack on his 2002 Mitsubishi Montero Sport. He was from Shreveport, so that checked out.

The blue car ran up onto the asphalt parking lot, the engine eating into the serenity of the nearby geese playdate, and a gaggle of other cars followed out of the woods.

A black Honda Civic, a couple of Camrys, a few trucks of different make a model but mostly Ford Rangers, and one red sedan. The blue coupe found a parking spot across the lot from us and sat rumbling under the threaded shade of a small willow tree. As the other cars filed in, they all made sure to give the blue car a parking spot or two of distance. Doors opened and slammed, and the crowd made their way to the pavilion by the greenspace.

"Well, damn," Brian said, breaking any concentration we had on the scene. "I thought we were about to get to see something."

"Yeah," I said, "Who are these kids?"

"I don't know," someone said, "Look like they might be juniors? Maybe

sophomores?" The soft bounce of the ball returned as Edward retrieved it and started shooting. The kids were all under the darkened pavilion, probably for a birthday party or just a meet up. If they were sophomores then they'd just gotten their licenses, and when you just get your license in Texarkana, you feel like you can do just about anything.

I turned to get back to our game when I heard a familiar voice, raspy and wet, yell out, "Casey—hey!"

I turned to find Neil Riley, the younger brother of a friend. He and his brother both had shaved heads since they were young for their swim team. Neil was jogging over in shorts and a long white t-shirt. We exchanged some form of a handshake that came more naturally to me back then, and I asked what they were up to.

"Oh, man, dude, there's gonna be a fight," he said. His voice was always coarse, like he'd been screaming over a dirt bike race the hour before he met you. "Big fight. Gonna be a good one."

I asked who they were—Neil went to Texas High, a 5A school on the other side of town. They had a few D1 scholarship football players that I'm sure knew their way around a punch—but before he could answer, the familiar crunch of gravel turned our attention to the entrance.

A black car, going closer to Mach-5 than whatever the parking lot speed limit might've been, zoomed past us to the end of the asphalt, near the water's edge. The crowd under the pavilion screamed when the car drove by and they started coming out into the sun, huddling around the vibrating blue one.

The black car then reversed back up the hill, its engine whirring like a baseball card stuck in a bike tire. Neil leaned over to me and yelled, "It's Mandy McCoy. She goes to Arkansas High. Just won Miss Teen Texarkana on the Arkansas side!"

"Oh," I said, "That's exciting stuff." I shrugged a little. Another fight over a guy, probably a welder's apprentice or aspiring roughneck. His name was likely Cole, Rhett, or Travis. Or Trent. It was one of those. And these two girls were probably the type that at least pretended they liked to hunt and could drive a stick shift or something.

"And what's going on here?" I said, pointing to the blue car. "Is that the other one? I mean, you know, like the other woman, the mistress or something?"

"Ah, nah, man," Neil said, the black car getting closer and closer, backing into a spot, trunk facing the pavilion. The crowd encircled the two cars, the blue one's stereo still blaring, subwoofers threatening to tip it over. "Mandy was talking shit about *her* dad," Neil said while he pointed from the black to the blue. And before I could run through all the scenarios of what someone would have to say about my dad to get in a fist fight at Bringle Lake, he answered it for me: "Who just



Memory of a Summer, 2022
Digital Photography, 6,000 x 4,000 px.

died... from cancer!"

The shock of this moment hit me harder back then. Now I'm almost 33 and my glutes feel like death might come tomorrow—just have to hope it's in a more dignified manner than an incurable debilitating illness. Something like a heart attack at the mall. Something my kids won't have to defend in combat, apparently.

He shouted this last part as a door of the blue car flew open, and out came Callie Clausen scratching and screaming like a cat out of water. Her tiny, tan legs propelled her across the parking lot as her short brown ponytail popped back and forth like a towel in gym class. She went to Pleasant Grove, my alma mater. A smaller, white flight 3A school at the time with nothing to its name but a solid volleyball reputation and decent enough ACT averages. Her older sister was my sister's age and on the drill team—another feather in the cap at the school.

Somewhere in her car, I knew she had her Miss Teen Texarkana-Texas sash she'd won a few days earlier. And, yes, her dad had recently passed away. I think from cancer.

Callie started beating on the black car's hood, standing in the way in case it wanted to take off. I couldn't see through the tinted windows, but I imagined this pint-sized pageant queen was putting on a good enough show to scare almost

anyone. Then Callie kicked the front headlight. The car turned off, doors opened, and out came four girls. They were thrashing, pulling, and gnawing on Callie in the blink of an eye.

There were a few well-timed accusations like, "Nobody kicks my fuckin' car," while the one I assumed to be Mandy was kicking Callie on the ground, and "I'm gonna fuck up your fuckin' face," while Callie was scratching Mandy's face.

The three other girls from Mandy's car got pulled off by a group of guys at the beginning but would sneak their way back in for a kick or punch. The guys chaperoning would grab them from the waist and sling them out of the way, telling them *we'd* keep this fair. It always went like this. These guys would police the events and decide the winner. They'd pick the villain, ironically missing their part in the affair.

I couldn't breathe the entire scene. Each smear of blood, ripped tank top, or pulled strand of hair widened my eyes a bit more. Mandy's blond hair was pulled out by its black roots.

The summer sun was beating down, and I knew from twisting my ankle and sitting in the grass earlier that it was sharp and hot. They were rolling in it. Neil was standing on a picnic table now, screaming "Get her!" His arms pointing to the sky like Rocky Balboa in the purest, most East Texas form of ecstasy I can imagine.

At one point, Callie got Mandy onto her back and landed a few open palmed tiger paws across her blushed face, dirty from makeup, blood, and grass. One of Mandy's gang, who I was instinctively—if not from school pride then from my love of the underdog—growing to hate, tackled Callie to the ground. The girl was dragged out of the fray by her shorts by Neil and another guy, but it gave Mandy enough time to roll over and secure a solid grip on Callie's ponytail. Then the real yanking started.

She about broke Callie's neck as she paraded her around the pavement, Callie swiping from her back, Mandy tugging on the ponytail with her right hand, running in a haphazard circle, punching wildly with the left. Callie tried to roll over but, from the looks of things, Mandy had been in a scrap or two—I think Scrapping was a credited elective course at Arkansas High—and she dropped a knee into Callie's back. She pinned her on the ground and gave a few pops to the ear before the sound of sobs outdid the crowd, the cussing, and the still vibrating car.

When Mandy got up and stepped back, we could see Callie laying in a fetal lump. Her volleyball shorts were torn or scuffed beyond recognition, and her hair went every which way like she'd just been electrocuted by the sophistication of the moment. If this were a hidden camera moment on ABC's show *What Would You Do?* which I've now spent hours dissecting the actions of others in the face of controversy or shame, I failed the test.

She sat up on her side like a mermaid, yelled that Mandy was a b-word,



The Lake, 2020
Digital Photography, 6,000 x 4,000 px.



The Idea of Flowers, 2022
Digital Photography, 6,000 x 4,000 px.

which Mandy trumped with a c-word, before the less than empathetic crowd climbed in their cars, leaving her in the dirt and the grass and the concrete and blood. She was stoic for a moment, like a waylaid, duty-bound foot soldier. She had to fight, had to, despite the overbearing sense of loss and fruitless outcomes—like a service academy football player going into face Alabama.

Neil ran over and gave me a fist-pound before leaving. “Man, that was incredible. Glad you got to see that, huh?” He was jumping back and forth like he’d just had too much Mountain Dew.

“I guess so. Holy shit,” is all I could muster.

“See ya, man,” he said over his shoulder, a group motioning him to a large truck. “I’ll tell Mikey you said Hey!”

“No,” I said, “Don’t tell anyone I was here.”

The cars took off, and the sounds of their engines, the gravel, and the stereos were replaced again by the dribbling basketball, clanging backboard, and vibrating windows of the blue coupe. Callie was now sitting with her legs crossed well enough that I remembered she was a gymnast. Her elbows sat on her knees, hands holding her head up a little as she looked at the ground, moaning on and off. She had a helpless confidence about her as if she might cry or punch the ground.

I turned to find Edward still dribbling, absent from the theater of cruelty. Brian and Adam stood in shocked silence. I doubt even this stopped Edward from playing basketball. Brian and I walked, our hands in gym shorts, over to the blue car. Brian reached in and turned the music off, which drew her attention to us. Her glare was lessened by the fact her left eyebrow, which must’ve been drawn on pre-brawl, was gone, and her face and left ear were reddish but not mangled. She had a busted bottom lip, and her shoulder, bare from the ripped tank top, was slowly dripping like through a cheese cloth.

“You okay?” I asked. I winced when she looked at me, her hair was matted down with some cocktail of sweat, grass, and blood, and the right side of her neck that I couldn’t see before had a bad gash, the hint of highlighter-green nail polish around the mark. It’s the image that flashes in my mind every time the all-girls Catholic school in town sends us a letter. *Academic Excellence! Blue Ribbon Award Winning!* But dammit if girls can’t be brutal. Today I hold my daughter close—knowing that soon someone will be equally as cruel, but hopefully just with fists and not words. Bruises wear off, and makeup can cover a scratch, but little girls are starting to scare the shit out of me. I can still smell the blood from Callie’s knees, an odor like copper—like a bowl of pennies.

It’s not lost on me that Callie went to my high school which was split down the middle with boys and girls, and there I’d been, letting it happen.

“Do I look okay?” she said.

I felt bad. We knew the Clausens, and I knew my dad had done something

at the hospital during the treatments—something positive, I'm assuming—but I wished I could be a similar help now. What should I say to a beauty pageant queen that just got drug around a parking lot by another beauty queen because she showed up to fight in the name of cancer-shaming?

"You look like you just got pulled around a parking lot by your hair," Brian said, covering the general gist of what I was thinking.

"Well fuck you," she said and got up, pebbles and dirt falling to the ground as she wiped her shorts and legs. She climbed into her car, slammed the door shut, and the doors and windows went back to vibrating. She backed up quickly, nearly missing Brian's foot, and screeched out of Bringle Lake Park.

"Can you believe that man?" I said, my hands held out in front of me like I was trying to catch some rain. "What the hell was that?" Brian shook his head as we walked back to the court. "And what's she getting mad at us for?" I grappled with the idea that maybe we should've intervened. What would that dude from *Apocalypto*—a movie I'd recently seen and decided was worth structuring my idea of chivalry and honor around—have done? He'd grabbed a poisonous frog, rigged a dart gun out of one of these cat tail reeds, and shot Mandy. So, that was out. "Aren't you mad she told us to fuck off?"

Brian laughed. "Nope." He called for the ball. "She's embarrassed. And I'd bet fighting wasn't her talent at the pageant."

We all laughed. Looking at my daughter now who, at three and a half, didn't put up much a fight during the local Methodist Church's Easter Eucharist and Egg hunt last week, I feel it's safe to surmise she probably wouldn't stand a chance at Bringle Lake. My wife keeps showing me fliers of different after school activities, and try if I might, I can't help but lean towards the gender normative activities for a little girl—something Texarkana people might call "girl sports" like ballet, tennis, or soccer—something European. If she tries softball, will that lead to a scrap? Despite my best efforts, she'll probably be what she wants. My wife will say it's meant to be.

"Besides," Brian said, dribbling the ball quickly from outside the 3-point line "All I can think about right now is draining this shot in your face." In one motion he stepped back and heaved the ball towards the goal—as graceful and smooth as a sneeze. Brian had been a left tackle on the football team in high school and approached every athletic endeavor as such. The ball lined to the square on the backboard, smacked the center and missed the rim. The metal pole attached to the backboard rocked back and forth, the backboard itself rattling like a tin roof in a hurricane. "Shit!" he yelled. "How does Edward keep making these?"



The Tower, 2021
Digital Photography, 6,000 x 4,000 px.



MINDFUL PRACTICES

The Flat Files: Artist Interviews & Studio Visits featuring Brian Jerome

The Flat Files is a growing virtual archive of artist conversations highlighting the inequalities of gender, race, and class in the art world. In addition to these conversations, artists are given a platform to share their studio space, where ideas and creativity happen, regardless if it's their bedroom or a professional space.

About Brian Jerome

Brian Jerome was born in York, Pennsylvania in 1990. He was raised in Dallastown, Pennsylvania next to a corn field. He moved to Philadelphia in 2008 to pursue and receive a BFA in Printmaking with double minor in Philosophy and Art History. In 2017, he was awarded his MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts on merit scholarship. Brian has been shown and collected all around the world including the United States, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK. When not in the studio, Jerome spends time with his wife and 3 daughters or cooking as a professional chef. He loves gold.

Website: www.brianjerome.com
Instagram: @brianjerome_

Artist Statement

I do not consider my work to be about trauma, but it is based around it. I do consider my work to be about life and about my experience as a human. It is an abstract, diaristic approach to talk about the things I find difficult to be vulnerable about.

In 2010, I fell 5 stories through an abandoned building and was left in a medically induced coma for 10 days. I woke up to learn that I almost died, my

Pp. 63 Brian Jerome

Too Much, Too Late (Mania), 2022

Oil, acrylic, colored pencil, chalk pastel, oil pastel, crayon, graphite, charcoal on canvas. 60 x 46 in.

femurs were broken, and the last 10 days of memory I had were all hallucinations. That experience resulted in complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with previously diagnosed Bipolar II disorder.

I found abstraction as a way to comfort and deal with these things. I found painting and mixed media as a mindful approach to deal with overwhelming thoughts. I know it is not just me that has gone through the confusing nature of life. In fact, I know I am lucky to not have suffered as hard as others have.

However, I cannot shake the fact that we all deal with these atrocities that surround us, no matter how small or large. The hopes of my work are not just to serve as my diaries and therapy, but to allow for a discussion for each and every one of us to admit that things are hard, and even harder to explain.

Welcome Brian, can you introduce yourself?

My name is Brian Jerome. I'm an artist that up until four years ago was living and working in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I still work there, but I moved outside with my family. I work out of Philadelphia, that's where my studio is.

I went to undergrad at Tyler School of Art at Temple University where I focused on printmaking as a means to become an illustrator without doing the graphic design program. At that point, I didn't have the discipline to do graphic design and I found printmaking to be kind of more open-ended and process-based.

And then, I was fortunate enough that the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts reached out to me and asked me to attend graduate school there, which I did. And it was there that I transitioned into becoming a mixed media painter.

You began your career as an illustrator, primarily working in printmaking. What made you pursue painting instead, and who/what were some of your influences that informed your definition of abstraction?

Living in Philadelphia and going to the PMA (Philadelphia Museum of Art) to see Cy Twombly's "Fifty Days at Ilium" when I was in high school—I grew up in York, Pennsylvania, which doesn't really have an arts community at all, but I was fortunate enough that my high school teacher made a trip to Philadelphia to see specifically this exhibit for me. I was kind of like a worrisome student, and she noticed that art was a really good focus for me and a positive thing. So, she was reaching out trying to get my angst

to turn into art.

And I actually hated the exhibit. When I first went, I had a really clear definition in my head of what art should be. And to me it was really defined by my love of comic books growing up. I really enjoyed Ralph Stedman's illustrations, and I guess, especially when I was younger, things had to have like a sense of violence to them, or a sense of urgency, and sense of fear.

As I progressed more, and through drawing and illustrating, I slowly moved into being interested in abstraction, because I realized you can only portray certain emotions and thoughts to an extent representationally. After that it doesn't really get the message across. So, it took me ten years, give or take, to realize that what I wanted to communicate was innately abstract and I had to find a different way of doing it. And in doing so, I initially thought of the Twombly room—and I visited there, and slowly branched off to visit other forms of abstractions.

Before graduate school, my grandmother purchased a newly published Rothko biography book. And in reading through his life—I had only grown-up seeing Rothko's in books where you can't really see the gravity of the painting and really have that experience Rothko wanted you to have of being smaller than the painting and being aware of something larger than yourself. And that really changed my mind on what artwork could do.

In my own practice, the up-close interaction is very specific to the viewer. Because in this day and age of technology, you just simply can't take a picture of how light affects an object and subtitles behind it, especially if you're using a multitude of different whites.

Abstraction took me a while to get to. And I didn't know until I went to graduate school that I was considered, by some professors and some of my peers, "too young" to do abstraction. At that point I was twenty-five turning twenty-six. And I kind of understand that in hindsight, but I would still tell anybody, 'as long as you have your chops and you've lived enough life, you can probably go into abstraction.' If you don't feel like you have a real complex thought on what being human is or witnessing life, I would tend to say, 'focus on something else before you find abstraction.'

Can you say more on how someone can be considered too young to be an abstract artist?

The Spoils of (Civilized) War, 2023
Oil, acrylic, graphite, pastel, oil pastel, colored pencil and lithography crayon on canvas. 38 x 62 in.



I personally take it more as it shouldn't be an ageist thing. I don't think that there's an age for it [abstraction], but I do think that there's a maturity in work that has to happen. At least—and this is all opinion—but I would say, depending on the kind of abstraction like pattern, design, geometric abstraction can come at an early age and there's a place for it in the world, and it can be fine arts. But I would say, especially with minimal abstraction, I feel like you should go through a huge growth period of trying so many different styles and almost going over of what's too much in a work of art to bring it back to the core of what you think needs to be in there.

And you might be an artist that really overloads everything, that might be the answer too. But I think it's really important in your career to not just be eighteen and go to college and think that that's the artist that you're going to be for the next fifty years.

Again, with the aging and everything, is I have to search through thirty-three years of my life and filter things, to get things out. And I feel like if I was still sixteen, I'm only building things off of the prior sixteen years, which usually aren't that insane in the scope of life as you get older. So, you're only working with a limited sense of emotions, and even traumas, that I feel like as you go through life there's more things to pull from when you're a non-representational artist because you're almost searching for more and more things.

I have an anecdote. I remember I had a couple of professors in grad school, and one very, very great one in undergrad that always talked about *the* paint and the feeling of *the* paint. You think your professors are nuts using these terms and stuff, but as you get older, you understand what they're saying because they're even abstract terms. It's not the paint as in the object, it's almost like the paint as the universal creation of painting, and what that artistic creativity can do with material.

And so, I had these professors constantly telling me like, 'you gotta feel the paint.' And I thought that they were nuts! And it's actually—at least from what I found—this falling in love with yourself, the materials into the creation, and actually being a part of it and not separating yourself from the object.

And sometimes things like white on white become very special and romantic in that thing, because almost you, as a creator, are the only one that knows that moment in it. And you kind of really hope that that moment it's seen by somebody else as being that delicate or that, at least for me, intentional.

You describe your work as a diary. Can you explain what that process means to you

and how it is translated externally?

Yeah, that's a good question.

The first part would be me and the paint, and the object and going through my life. So, I'm a pretty vocal person—an open person—so I have one way of coping and processing. Which I'm, assuming to a lot of people seems very healthy that I can talk about my feelings and everything. But at least for me, that is only so much an extent of what I mean. Because a lot of it [my artwork] is extremely emotional. If you think about it, ever since you're growing up from being a baby, you're just slowly translating cries and screams into explaining what you mean.

So, the personal things to me, I'm thinking about them, I'm interacting with them, I'm processing them while I make the work. It's the definition of cathartic. And it's a huge release for me. And the age-old question on when a painting is done, for me, is when I have processed what I wanted to do, and that can be a whole spectrum of emotions and everything. And it's when I feel like I have nothing more to say, even though I'm not talking. And sometimes, you know, it's not resolved so the painting might be wonky, and might be off a little bit but that's the end of me dealing with it. And I have to accept it as a human that events take place and feelings take place. So, in turn I'm sharing that with the painting, that even if it's unresolved, it's okay. It still exists.

And then the interpretation on a second fold is from the viewer and the object. And I typically find it more interesting to not originally be there when somebody is viewing a painting, because I feel like naturally, me being there tends to skew it because the first question that somebody asks is like, 'what were you thinking, what's this piece about?' And because of what I said, what my work is about, is I don't want to talk about it. That's not what's important to me. It's important that I put it [my artwork] out there in the world. That's me dealing with it [my process]. And my hope is there's something in there [a painting] that the viewer can find some interconnection with themselves.

And typically, I found that people tend to say, 'I don't know why, but I just love this painting or this area,' and I don't think that they have to tell me anymore, or to find anybody else what they like about it. Because to them they're having that connection of what you can't speak about, and that's pretty amazing.

Can you expand more on how you image the viewer engaging with your paintings considering how vulnerable and intimate a diary is? Is the literal dialogue happen-



Pieces of Peace With No Peace of Mind, 2022
Oil, acrylic, colored pencil, chalk pastel, oil pastel, crayon,
graphite, charcoal on canvas. 50 x 44 in.



We Waited While It Approached, Whispering, 2022
Oil, acrylic, colored pencil, chalk pastel, oil pastel, crayon,
graphite, charcoal on canvas. 56 x 50 in.

ing between the viewer and the title of artwork?

That's a really good question that I should ask myself.

I would say it's such a weird second or third thought in my head. Before I publish any painting—which I guess is now another form of processes—is I get to decide when people see these, and that's also when I complete the thought.

But sometimes they go weeks without titles because I want the title to fit the emotion. It's the closest word I can get to encompassing the entire feeling of it.

And I guess I do that because I was never a fan of 'untitling' things, or if I ever have a painting called "Untitled" that would be for a specific reason. So, I find those [titles] to sum them [the artwork] up, and then I guess that's a kind lead in for a viewer, for abstraction.

I've been told that the titles really help somebody, because it helps them believe if people are tied to seeing imagery. It can help them start seeing something to process it.

With the titles, I try to use vague pronouns and sometimes collective pronouns as a way that—even though it's personal to me, if I'm sharing it with somebody else, I can't say, 'me, me, me, me, me' all the time. Because then nobody cares, and it's annoying. So, I do try to invite the audience with me, that they are a part of it with me, while they share it.

So, yes, it's two-fold. The titles are there for me as an attempt to explain myself, but it's also there for the interpretation for the viewer.

I want to circle back on something you said earlier about responding to urgency or immediacy. How does one respond to urgency/immediacy to create a work of art, and how are you trying to define that?

I live half hour to forty-five minutes from my studio, so if I have an immediate idea or a certain color or mark-making comes to me, I either have to write it down here in my house and hope that I understand it by the time I get to the studio. Or, I have materials here that I can try and do that with. Or if I'm fortunate enough, I just bolt right to the studio to do it.

That's why, at my studio, sometimes I'm just sitting there for hours listening to music and looking at work that I'm working on, because there is a layering in my work that even though I work over layers and stuff, I personally feel like I can still screw it up. If I'm having this one beautiful moment in one section and I really go all in with a graphic mark, I'm los-

ing that. At the same time, that's part of my practice to overcome those things and understand tangibility. But sometimes it's a super big bummer.

So, I sit there meditating, taking a long time to come up with something that sometimes the mark is done in milliseconds. Then I'm back to sitting again. So, that's also one of those questions when somebody asks, 'how long does a painting take me?' Because there's aspects of my paintings that people can read quickly and aspects of people can read slowly, and I think that that's a cool conversation for a piece to have. Because it was drawn out for a split second, kind of like moments in our life. We can have weeks of boringness and shittiness, and then there's like one good announcement you get. Both things are real, and one shouldn't take precedence over the other one, really, because they live symbiotically.

In your artist statement, you write about a traumatic experience you've had and how you use art as a way of healing. What advice, if any, would you share with artists to create a practice of care?

I think having the right time of alone time can really help to process things. Because you are left by yourself, and you're kind of forced to process things. Or even if you're trying to push them down, your brain's gonna have you have it come out of you in some way or another, and that's definitely better than bottling it up inside. I think art can also help, like with me, to express things that you might not be comfortable expressing to other people. And just like I do, sometimes, there's still a veil to it and a protectiveness to it. But it's still a step towards vulnerability.

I have friends down to my studio a lot, and it takes us back to college that we used to make art together. And these are all pieces that aren't for sale, a lot of times they go on the trash afterwards because it's just hanging out critiquing and doing that. But most of my friends, especially from undergrad, we were a group of people that we didn't take things overly seriously, but in turn, made us very serious artists. If one of my friends goes 'oh, I love this area, but that over there, that just sucks.' I'm not going to be offended, because then it's up to me to defend if it sucks or not, or maybe it does suck. But at least we're having a conversation between two people, and it kind of takes you out of that polar opposite of spending time with yourself. I think a studio practice is both personal and it should be a place where others are involved also.

I really think everybody should have a creative outlet, and I feel like sometimes people feel like it's a closed world in creativity or very exclusive, and it's not. I love hearing that since the pandemic, some people

have just picked up something creative as a hobby, and I feel like that would be so much more beneficial to our society. I had a friend in undergrad do it—you can be a baseball player, and you can still do ceramics. Like, you don't have to be all in on one hobby or the other.

Even though a studio can be a sacred place to a person, if you're invited inside it's not a church. So, people come in feeling like they have to have gloves on or be delicate. And at least for me, it's an extension of a home. And, so, I welcome people in.

Usually collectors are the ones that asked to come [to my studio], but I really try to always say, 'yo, you should come out to my studio,' and I hope nobody ever takes it as like, 'Oh, you gotta check out my studio.' It's just that I like providing a space where others can create also because that just makes me happy, you know. To share that experience with somebody else.

And not everybody has the resources for a studio or resources for a bunch of materials. I didn't for an extremely long time, so I like sharing that. And other people that have the means to a studio, I call to them to invite more people to come do work with them in the studio.

You are also a chef. Does the labor-intensive process of cooking inform your painting practice in anyway?

I consider cooking to be kind of like my sculpture practice that some other people have. It just happens to smell and taste really good.

But I accidentally became a chef from starting as a dishwasher while I was in high school. But anybody will tell you, unless you're lucky enough to have the privilege that you don't have to work as an artist, you typically end up in the food industry. And in all humbleness, I ended up being really good at it [cooking]. And I do think that that comes from an art background because of how I think about food.

White wine and seafood to me is like Naples yellow and adding some white to get a perfect egg-shell. It's theory, but it's also trusting yourself and it's also what works overtime. And you can create style in a kitchen, too.

The interesting thing that doesn't fold over between the two is, I'm very, very, very clean in a kitchen and well disciplined, but my studio is a wreck. It [my studio] has like four different stations. I'm constantly moving materials over. And, I guess, another thing that being a chef informed my work is, I change out when I go into the studio. I used to wear the same street clothes into the studio, but I kinda look like a hot piece of shit all the

time. So, having different clothes, I feel like makes me more appropriate when I go into public with my wife and stuff.

There's a mindfulness of being a chef that is very similar to the mindfulness of being in art. The only difference is the mindfulness of being a chef, there's still a sense of stress and immediacy where I feel like the timing of painting can be a lot more slowed down. But it is a similar experience because you're making something.

How do you know when a painting is done versus a dish? Do those same rules apply?

I would say at first, even over cooking or under cooking something is one aspect of cooking. I would say the overlap between the two really happens when you have a chef or somebody that over complicates a dish. And I think that typically comes out of distrust for yourself that sometimes over complications can be over seasoning. Less is more when it comes to food, typically. And I believe, a lot of the times, is the answer for art. It just takes artists a long time to realize what their bare bones as them themselves, as the artists are.

It's really actually weird because you have more ability with a dish. There's a visual sense, an olfactory sense, and a taste sense. So, you have more chances of hitting what you want on an initial try. You can get one of those three correct. Where a painting, you're really only working visually—and I guess emotionally—if that's a sixth sense, but that one's a wild card.

So, when I'm done with a painting, is when I have nothing left to say about it anymore. And the weirdest thing ever, is typically there's some that are unresolved and they drive me insane. But even in my brain is like, 'maybe a painting down the road will help me resolve that, but I'm done now, and I have to move on because you can't ruminate.' And so, that's when I'll take them off the wall—and tying into printmaking—I lay them flat and put the stretcher over it. So, like a print going through a press, I have to really hope that it's gonna look like what I want, when I pick it up off the ground. But then, that's the final idea. And then I document it and title it. And really, when the title goes with it, that's when it's completely done.

And interestingly enough, the paintings that I don't find successful, but yet again are finished typically, sell first, and it's kind of frustrating. I guess there's more of a connection there if more people feel unsettled and unresolved also.

Maybe that is a cool, shared feeling to have.

Have you had any feedback from someone who's purchased your work that might answer that in anyway?

With any purchase, I used to put in a little note that I thought was really nice—and I hate the word, but a little cute. I'd say, 'Thank you for buying it [the artwork]. If you have any questions, please contact me. I would love to tell you more about this work. And can you show me an installation shot.' I think I've gotten two people that ever did that at all.

Weirdly enough I feel like there's an aspect of buying my work that might be private. If they're having a reaction like I intend to, maybe they don't want to talk about it either. And I've been lucky enough to see some of my work that has been displayed in the middle of a living room. I've had a painting put in somebody's bedroom as a centerpiece, and that one's kind of an honor because that's somebody's private room. And that's something that they're looking at every morning when they wake up, and the last thing before they go to bed. And that's pretty incredible.

Do you have any final thoughts or announcements you would like to share?

Yeah, I have a show at a gallery in Miami called Galeria Azur. And I have no idea what to expect, and I've never been to Miami, so we'll see how it goes!

Always (& forever), 2022
Oil, acrylic, pastel, oil stick, colored pencil, graphite, chalk
on canvas. 36 x 60 in.



THINGS THAT CAUSE INAPPROPRIATE HAPPINESS

Text by Danila Botha
Artwork by Natallia Tsarkevich

We stood on the edge of the store, half the students edging their way into the narrow doorway. One was taking slow drags of an e- cigarette while her friend looked on, twirling a piece of hot pink hair around her finger, surreptitiously checking out three of the guys who were loitering on the sidewalk, staring at their phones, the last one, a tall, shaggy haired rock kid, with metal studs on his belt, bopping his head so hard one of his wireless headphones flew out. I bent down and handed it to him, and he nodded at me. This last store was just a bonus, and technically, I'd told them, they could go home now if they wanted to. They were well behaved, so they stayed, dragging their feet, the girls in heavy nineties redux platforms that looked better than the ones I actually wore in the nineties. So far, nothing has made me feel older than seeing clothing I wore fifteen years ago become cool again.

They weren't even really my students. My pregnant friend Tehilla, who was forced into early bed rest, convinced her principal that I'd be the perfect substitute. I was such a mediocre student, I never imagined myself standing in front of a group of kids, telling them what to do. I never imagined that they'd actually listen to me.

It was the kind of school where the kids could wear and learn whatever they wanted, so when they were into something, they were obsessed.

I didn't get obsessed with anything until I was in university. As an undergrad, I started doing large scale acrylic portraits. I used the most vibrant colours I could find, and I loved the thick, expressive textures. In studio courses, you sit with headphones on, in your own world, for hours. You forget your body. You ignore your hunger cues. You forget everything except each individual brushstroke on the page.

Tehilla was in the photography stream, but we were both obsessed with faces, with the emotions and thoughts you could discover in every line. She took pictures at my first show. It was a group show in a gallery in Parkdale, filled with women in black leather jackets, chunky highlighted hair and wing tipped eyeliner,

and guys wearing t-shirts of bands I'd never heard of, bright, tribal tattoos poking out of their sleeves. I made my way towards the food, thin slices of brie and grapes, crushed Melba toast and sweaty cubes of cheddar. I had two paintings that both sold and I started to think for the first time, in a real way, that maybe I could be an artist.

When we finished school, I kept painting, working part time at a gallery and applying for grants, and she went straight into a full-time teaching job. We still saw each other, and she'd want to know all about my latest residency in Dawson City, and I'd ask to hear about her students. She'd take them to graffiti alley, or underpass park to capture all the street art on camera. They even made photography murals, and I was inspired by her energy and passion.

Getting sick happened suddenly. It started with fevers that lasted for days and wouldn't respond to Tylenol or Advil. My family doctor, Dr. Hunter made me go to the emergency room, where they took my temperature and a bunch of tests but were puzzled too. At first, Dr. Hunter was convinced it was Mono, or Epstein Barr, even when the blood tests told her otherwise. She took seventeen vials of blood one day, but she insisted that everything came back normal. I was relieved. I hoped I'd wake up one day and feel like myself again. I got red, itchy rashes on my feet and my hands, and she asked if I'd walked through Poison Ivy. She had me tested for allergies. She had me tested for Lyme Disease, twice. My fingers hurt. They swelled so much I couldn't get my rings on. It hurt to paint.

Dr. Hunter told me about a patient with chronic fatigue syndrome who exaggerated her symptoms. Her mother told her she was so weak she couldn't even lift a spoon but when she came in for her physical, Dr. Hunter caught her lifting up her iPad. She leaned in close enough for me to smell the Dentyne Ice and lingering black coffee on her breath and said "Don't get lazy. Push yourself all the time."

So I did. I kept sketching and painting and going to work.

My brain was foggy. I couldn't remember things, basic things I'd always known, like people's names or books I'd read or characters on TV shows. I was sure that I was going to get fired any day from the gallery.

Dr. Hunter sent me to a naturopath who was appalled that I drank Coke Zero and ate dairy.

"We have to heal your gut," Alexis said, "Lots of bone broth, greens, meat. No sugar, grains dairy and soy."

She looked me up and down. "It will also help you lose weight."

I sucked in my stomach. "Am I overweight?"

"No...but you're on the higher end of the BMI. Excess weight causes inflammation."

I couldn't shake the guilt of having done this to myself.

Every morning I woke up to the blazing, leaden weight of concrete in my



to be yourself home, 2022
Sony alpha 7R3. 857 Kb.



to be Brave, 2023
Sony alpha 7R3. 338 Kb.

fingers and toes. When I took the stairs my hips snapped, complete with cracking sounds. I couldn't do my buttons or the zippers on my jeans. Tight, hard fabrics like jeans hurt my knees, so I switched to leggings and sweats. When my feet ballooned like fiery kielbasas I went up a shoe size and half. I kept dropping things, smashing cups and plates. The lymph nodes in my neck were so swollen that when my doctor sent me for an ultrasound, I burst into tears when the technician ran over each one, one excruciating millimeter at a time.

"It's okay," she whispered. "I know I'm not supposed to tell you, but everything looks okay."

I felt both relief and frustration.

Finally, Dr. Hunter sent me to a rheumatologist. Dr. Arden pressed down on my finger joints so hard that I burst into tears. "You have rheumatoid arthritis," she said. "I don't even need to see the bloodwork." She prescribed Prednisone, and a disease-modifying-anti-rheumatic-drug called Sulfasalazine. I studied the bottles when I picked them up from the pharmacy. One of the side effects of Prednisone was inappropriate happiness.

I wondered how much happiness was appropriate now that I knew I had an incurable, chronic illness. I imagined a team of doctors, like Dr. Hunter, evaluating me, to make sure I never felt too happy. I thought about the permanent damage in my hips and my fingers. I wondered if I'd ever finish a painting again. If I'd ever do another series or if my life as an artist was over.

"Teaching is amazing," Tehilla reassured me. "You get to talk for hours about the things you love the most, the artists, the paintings, the photos. You get to encourage and support young artists. Just try it, if you really hate it, you can quit, I'll find someone else."

So far, I'd lasted two months.

"You can go home when we're done," I promised the students, who followed me inside.

Ken, the assistant manager, who had hair dyed the colour of a goldfinch, grabbed my arm, and breathlessly pointed out a new cobalt blue they had in. "How much?" I asked, pointing to the smallest tube. "Forty-two," he said, "but probably thirty something with your discount."

My favourite kid, a fifteen-year-old named Luna, who had half shaved, half green hair, who called herself a feminist and still wore braces came up behind me.

"Wow, good supplies are expensive."

I nodded, then headed down into the basement, where they kept their extra discounted stuff. Maybe I'd show them the slightly damaged canvases. I'd always loved stuff with character.

I turned back, but she wasn't behind me.

I heard the door close behind me when I got to the bottom of the stairs.

An older man in a charcoal grey suit, with a black fedora stood in the corner.

He had olive skin, a roman nose, and intense half moon shaped brown eyes framed by thick eyebrows.

"It's nice to see you, Lielle."

"How do you know my name?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I know a lot of things."

The door was closed, but the windows were open.

"You may have heard of people like me. Some of us specialize in the past. You seem to be struggling. Would you like to go back? I can take you to when you were exactly their age, to 1998."

I stared at him.

"What do you mean, take me?"

"You can sit down on this couch, right here," he held his arm out, pointing to the black leather couch beside him.

My knees burned. I sat down.

"Do I have to do anything?"

He laughed. "No. Just have a seat."

He waved his hands over me, his fingers separated like a Cohen before they start *duchening*. I wasn't religious, but I'd always found it haunting when I heard it in a synagogue on high holidays. He told me to close my eyes, and I heard him chanting the Priestly blessing in Hebrew and in English.

May God Keep you and Bless you

May His Face Shine on You and Show you Favour

May He lift His Face to You and Bring you Peace

When I open my eyes I'm lying on my stomach. I roll onto my side and feel myself falling off a bed. I jump up, suddenly realizing that I can, and that it doesn't hurt.

I stand on my tip toes. I jump up and down, lift my legs up high. I twirl like a demented ballerina until I see the clock radio on my bedside table.

6:15. Too early for anyone to be awake. My CD player stares back at me. I study the CDs on the table beside it: Tori Amos, Chumbawamba, a homemade mix which included Third Eye Blind, Aqua, Sugar Ray and Meredith Brooks, Jeff Buckley and Blur.

I notice the ceramic dollhouse shaped lamp, the books, which include *A Separate Piece*, and *Catcher in the Rye*. My desk is full of sketches of kids on skateboards and giant sunflowers, plus a half-finished math assignment. There's a full-length mirror in the closet. I stare at myself.



to be Curious, 2023
Sony alpha 7R3. 1.5 Mb.



to be Gentle, 2023
Sony alpha 7R3. 1.17 Mb.

My light brown hair is shoulder length and thick, my skin impossibly smooth, aside from a large red pimple on my chin.

I take off my blue pajamas.

My breasts are smaller but still big enough to be a liability. I think about my cousin advising me to stock up on a bra called the minimizer, and what a waste of money it was.

I stare at my nonexistent hips. Had I had ever seen my stomach this flat?

I thought about all the cream cheese bagels and fries that I judiciously avoided, all the jeans I squeezed myself into, tearing zippers into my skin, thinking I deserved it because they were too tight.

I look at my lean fingers, press down on my joints, and there's no excess synovial fluid, no pain. I edge over to my childish jewelry box. It has a broken ballerina but still plays a song from Beauty and the Beast. I pull out all my rings, the enamel daisy that was my mom's, the gold ruby heart from my grandmother, the silver flower. I put them all on, wiggling my fingers, shaking my wrists. I clap like a two-year-old, and it doesn't hurt. I want to wake everyone so I can high five them.

I remember the code to our family's alarm, it's never changed and I leave a note telling them I've gone for a run.

I run and I run, the wind blowing through my hair and I push and my muscles hurt in the best way but my joints feel nothing, my knees feel nothing as I pound the concrete, my body feels paper light, and I run block after block after block.

I get back and get dressed, in jeans that are massive and wide and floor sweeping.

My mom offers to drive me to school. She thinks its weird that I hug her for so long, and that I'm so excited to eat the scrambled eggs and toast she's made me.

The first person I see at school is Samantha.

She's wearing a purple velour tank top, the straps carefully hidden under a light jean button down shirt, and flares. Her brown hair is stick straight. I get closer and smooth out a piece in the back. She jumps and turns around, then laughs when she realizes it's me. She has huge brown eyes and a sweet smile. I want to tell her how beautiful she is.

I think of how adrift I'll be when we stop being friends. I think about her need to be the best at everything, starting with her grades. I think of how she'll abandon me when I get involved with a guy who treats me badly, how she'll criticize me for not having more self control, and when my grades slip she'll say, "I told you."

I think of how bright her future will be, at first, a full scholarship to the best university, a boyfriend who'll become a fiancée who she'll travel the world with, an impressive job, and a beautiful wedding on a golf course, and then she'll

die not long afterwards. It'll have been so long that when I hear the news, months later, I won't even be able to call her parents.

"What?" she says eventually. "You're like, staring at me." I look down at the huge pink Baby G watch on my wrist, wishing it was an Apple watch.

"I dunno," I say. "Can I call you right after school? "

She nods, gum popping. I reach over and hug her. She smells like the floral, plastic-y smell of Gap's Dream and Woolite.

"You know what, can you call after Dawson's Creek? Anytime after 9:00 is good."

I somehow know that it will be too late by then, and a sadness hits me.

"I'm really happy that we're friends, Sami. I think you're awesome. Can we try harder to support each other?"

She nods again, her eyes enormous. "Whatever you say, weirdo."

I see Tehilla on my way to my next class. She's wearing her usual form hiding black sweats, loose black t shirt and her hair in a high, messy bun, her face beaming. The sight is so comforting I give her a hug.

"Lee. It's good to see you too." Tehilla has always been more adult than a kid. She was the kind of girl teachers always used as their example.

I ask her if she wants to have lunch together, and she nods.

She picks at a sandwich; I eat another apple.

"You need to eat more carbs," she says, and I ask her if she has a Toonie. We split a giant chocolate chip cookie from the cafeteria, and we laugh.

"Hey Tehilla," I turn to her, suddenly serious. "How do you know you want to be a photographer?"

"I just really love taking photos. I could spend hours reading about it and trying different settings."

"Isn't that how you feel about painting?" She asks me.

"I think so. But can I ask you something? What would you do if you couldn't take photos anymore? If you got sick, or if you were in an accident and you hurt your hands?"

"I think," she says eventually "that I'd probably find a way to keep doing it. Maybe I'd have to go slow, only take one photo a day. Maybe I'd find a job that's related to it, like..." she pauses.

"I don't know, graphic design. Maybe I'd work in a gallery."

I laugh. I think about her as an adult, how she'd spent years casually dating until she met Emma. I think about their son, and the baby to come, how they both took turns being pregnant. Their life is so perfect and full.

She leans in. "I think I'd be depressed if it got too hard for me to take photos. I wouldn't know who I was anymore."

I reach for her, until I feel a hand on my shoulder.

I hear chanting, and I open my eyes to find myself back in the basement. He helps me to my feet.

"So," he says, his expression somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

"How do you feel?"

I try to articulate all the feelings I've had, and I find myself laughing.

"Sadness. Nostalgia. Love. Inappropriate happiness."

"Did anyone ever tell you," I start to ask him, "that you look just like..."

"I know," he said, cutting me off. "But you have to know your audience. You're an artist, Lielle. I had to take on the image of the Cohen you most admire. Or at least one you'd actually recognize. His Hebrew name was Eliezer."

He laughs, and I hear him sing a line from Hallelujah, the one about all he ever learned from love, before he disappears.

I feel hot tears running down my face, but I start to smile as I make my way slowly up the stairs.

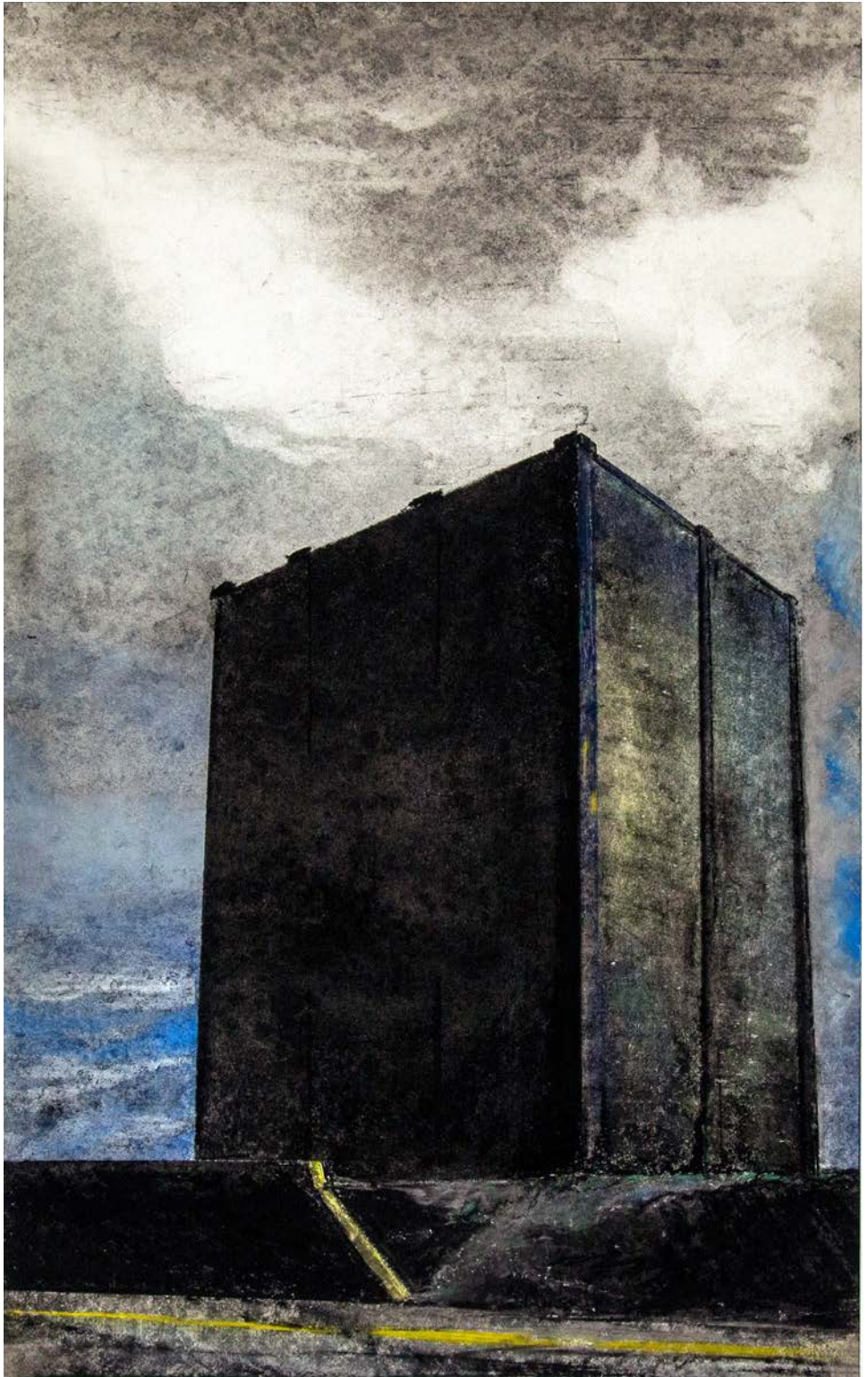


to be Crazy, 2022
Sony alpha 7R3, 2.4 Mb.

THE REBEL

Text by Mukut Borpujari
Artwork by Benjamin A. DiMaio

With a flagrant disregard for existing social norms,
something's brewing in the anvil of thought.
Wild rhododendrons and bougainvilleas running
along the wall,
as we denounce the barriers of casteism and marginalization.
No to the elite.
No to centuries of limiting beliefs and traditions,
their insistence—the shackles of our own minds.
At midnight,
in the waning light of the stars in the sky,
the silhouette of our necks interlocked like flamingos.
I miss you. I never even met you
let us take a deep dive into our imaginations,
until we find the right imagery and metaphors
we can discuss—dissect;
not for ego's sake, but for love.



THE EDGE

I need you
the way fervent,
which is really
a little too much
than mere routine,
requires routine.
Isn't there
an excitement,
though—
a shiver down the spine—
just having done
what we had to?
Unequally, but
earnestly, we love
as can be.
I used to mumble,
under my breath
mouth barely moving,
more the words
themselves sort of
overwhelming,
lost inside it . . . Now
show me
exactly what
you think being brave
is!

SPRING

1.

I can't believe what the sun wrote
For the valley's lackluster vistas
 Something

about the musky scent of crape jasmine
in this time of the year, lightening
further the fragrant whistles of the breeze—
where does she get off upstaging me?

2.

 Blooming Screw Pine—

wasn't it the welcome sign of changing season
with the first gust of thundershower that howls
 through the night—

wasn't it you who found sorrow
in the monotonous sound of rain drumming on the roof,
intermittent flashes of lightning that illuminates the valley
 or was it the foptail orchids—

You or the insectchimes who first moaned,

 lamenting—

enter the valley any time you choose,
and stay there until the spring comes in



Ozymandias No. 11, 2023
Charcoal, sandpaper, bristol, 24 x 38 in.



Ozymandias No. 14, 2022
Charcoal, sandpaper, bristol, 24 x 38 in.

STOIC

It's already summer, and we're getting rid
of clothes, getting ready to greet
the scorching days ahead;
making the place airy and less cluttered.
We're living on the edge, restructuring the house,
getting rid of the old furnitures,
obsolete machineries and funny gadgets.
A small table in the kitchen for two. Our world is
changing, our wardrobes mostly empty;
gone are the skinny jeans and the fancy moccasins—
the windchime and the trinkets.
When someone comes to visit and admires
our complete works of Yeats,
the peacock feather in the open thesaurus,
the mantle vase on a shelf, we say
take them. This is the most important
time of all, the age of dissipation,
knowing full well what we divesting is
like the fragrance of a burning incense stick
that lingers hours after it has been doused.
An ordinary Friday afternoon
when one of us stared
and the other one just laughed

THE OUTSIDER

The memories are breathing down inside me now,
everything slowing to the pace of the snail.
Tip-toed across the yard, the old cat watching;
the pace too slow even for him—
The crack in the earth opens and the roots
rise up to trip me. Thirst lives in me
and the fear of thirst, solitude and the fear
of solitude, death and the fear of death;
though only it will silence me. I remember
the abandoned freight cars
standing on roadside, doors open.
I saw through them the dry fields
beyond. The owl sitting on the gatepost late
in the evening, the canal and its flowing stream,
the cows grazing in its pasture—I was afraid
I'd lose them. If I could only keep them steadfast,
the long days filled me with longings, in pursuit
of something exquisite that eludes me. Always
clumsy, never knowing the manners
of the place I have lived.



Ozymandias No. 02, 2021
Charcoal, sandpaper, bristol, 24 x 38 in.



Ozymandias No. 01, 2019
Charcoal, sandpaper, bristol, 38 x 24 in.

Volume 3 Issue 2

Curated, edited, and published by The Aerogramme Center for
Arts and Culture.

Copyright © 2023 The Aerogramme Center

Reproduction in whole or part is prohibited, except by permission
of the publisher.

ISSN 2767-9691 (print)

ISSN 2767-9683 (online)

Designed by The Aerogramme Center
for Arts and Culutre

Edited by Zoë Elena Moldenhauer

Printed in the United States

@aerogrammearts
www.aerogramme.org

Nelly Shulman

Fergana Kocadoru Özgör

Abigail Reeth

Juliet Martin

Saskia Lascarez Casanova

Blossom Kelley

Cory W. Peeke

C.E. O'Banion

Haris Malekos

Brian Jerome

Danila Botha

Natalia Tsarkevich

Mukut Borpujari

Benjamin A. DiMaio

