



Master of Fine Arts

THESIS EXHIBITON

26 MARCH 2021
Blaffer Art Museum

University of Houston School of Art

43rd

Master of Fine Arts
Thesis Exhibition

26 MARCH 2021
BLAFFER ART MUSEUM

University of Houston **School of Art**

Graduating

Artists & Designers

- 7 Marky Dewhirst
- 9 Marley Foster
- 11 Verónica Gaona
- 13 Wanda Harding
- 15 Jamey Hart
- 17 Kathryn Lanier
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- 21 Noah Leen
- 23 Virginia Patterson
- 25 Samiria Percival
- 27 Stevie Spurgin
- 29 Marie Williams

**KATHRINE G.
McGOVERN**
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY of **HOUSTON**

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Introduction: Emerging from a Challenging Year

By David Politzer, Director, School of Art

Given all that happened in the past year, it's a miracle to see the Class of 2021's work so elegantly exhibited in the Blaffer Museum. Neither the pandemic nor the other rattling events of 2020-21 slowed these students down or compromised the rigor of their work. It may be just the opposite, actually.

When we pivoted to learning online, it wasn't long before we felt the loss of intimacy. Looking at art without being able to greet each other's work in the flesh was a huge blow. Even "two-dimensional" art has dimension, which is very difficult to translate over a video call. Being in one another's studios allows us to be vulnerable; it's a letting-in to a creative production space, where we can observe the discarded false starts in the corner, the frivolous doodles at the edge of the desk and the exciting first scratches of a new idea.

On screen, we're relegated to the defined space behind the person, which is too often a carefully curated bookcase, an innocuous blank wall or a canned digital background like the screensavers and wallpapers popular 30 years ago. Although it goes against so-called best-practices, I would appreciate seeing

a good mess, a visit from a pet or child, or a coffee mug that says, "This Ain't Coffee!" Like the frivolous doodle, these visual distractions give us insight into the creator of the creative works.

Even as this cohort of students adjusted to new ways of learning and making, their predecessors, the Class of 2020, grappled with loss as Covid forced the postponing of last year's Blaffer exhibition indefinitely. 2021 sculpture MFA Stevie Spurgin was devastated, "It broke my heart. Then it was like, 'Oh my gosh, what if we don't have a show either?'" Without the typical in-person culminating events and group celebrations, students are left without closure.

IPEF student, Robert Legans-Johnson described how Covid disrupted his ability to connect socially. "I love technology but social media is not enough. It takes me a while to get adjusted. As an undergrad I spent three years of building up confidence so I could socialize comfortably during my fourth year." He hoped to follow a similar trajectory as a graduate student, blossoming socially in his third year. The isolation wrought by the pandemic has interrupted the final steps of solidifying a tight community.

The disruptions to our everyday routine have been too numerous to count. While most of the buildings on campus were either closed or open at a very limited capacity, the studios in the School of Art were designated essential research labs and remained available for student use. Many students chose not to come to their studios on campus, a particularly difficult personal decision. For some, the only safe choice was to move into a home studio, or a virtual studio, which meant drastic shifts in scale, materials and privacy. Through clenched teeth, some students mentioned their family members as not always sympathetic witnesses to home studio practice, who weren't thrilled about new messes, or could not understand why Dad was doing arts and crafts but couldn't play right now.

Our graduate students have the option to teach in their second and third years, and many of them still did. They are a vital part of our expanding faculty community and as such they also invest emotionally in our undergraduate students. Many members of the class of 2021 were in their first years of teaching when the pandemic hit and were at the forefront of our shift to remote teaching. They saw their own feelings of fear, isolation and confusion mirrored in their students and were forced to play many roles: teacher, student, mentor, counselor, motivator, confidante and friend. Even the most committed teachers lost touch with their students, some of whom completely disappeared after the move online.

Sculpture MFA Marie Williams said that during video calls we're "staring straight into each other's faces and that gets exhausting and draining to make constant eye contact." Graphic Design MFA Samiria Percival observed of her students,

“This age group is incredibly hip to the digital environment. Many are suffering from depression and anxiety and I think that digital connections are helping. Many students like to have their cameras on but also like the control of turning them off.”

Most of what I’ve written thus far will sound familiar—the anxieties and discomforts of the pandemic have touched us all. I recount them here to put this show in perspective and describe a relentlessly grim backdrop behind a remarkably resilient group of individuals. How did they find the motivation to continue their creative practice through this turbulence?

First, let’s consider the technology: while video calls are exhausting, lack warmth and are subject to technical snafus they are an incredibly useful and versatile tool. (Can you imagine how far behind we would be if we *didn’t* have Zoom and the Internet?) Many teachers and students have said they truly enjoy online learning. Beyond the flexibility to learn in your pajamas with your cat in your lap, or on your own time, students found a lot to like in the online format. Painting MFA Wanda Harding said that with the separation the screen provides, she was able to untangle the personal from the professional with ease during a video call, protecting her feelings from the sharper comments during critiques. Stevie Spurgin said that teaching online forced her to think about sculpture in an entirely new way, as if reinventing the medium. She stated confidently, “My job is to teach students what sculpture can be.”

Sculpture MFA Marley Foster knew at the outset that sharing her work via a video call was going to be challenging. She was concerned about the translation of the objects into photographs. Gradually she started thinking of photography as more than just a means of documentation, and she began taking self-portraits while interacting with her sculptures. A hybrid practice of photography, performance and sculpture emerged from what she first saw as a problem. “This wouldn’t have happened if not for the shift to online,” she said.

While there are far fewer stop-and-chat opportunities given our social isolation, students reported that scheduled critique meetings required more preparation and were therefore more efficient. With the use of online calendars, assistive scheduling websites and a ticking clock in the corner of the screen, students felt that the digital environment kept them on track and they were able to accomplish more. Teaching was another way students grounded themselves during this difficult time. Graphic Design MFA Virginia Patterson said that “It was comforting to know the expectations of teaching. And seeing my students succeed felt very satisfying. Their commitment and resilience inspired me. Photography and Digital Media MFA, Katie Lanier said, “Teaching has been my solace during the pandemic. I have to show up for my students and that has been vital to my mental health through all of this. We hold each other accountable.”

One painting MFA was motivated to develop and teach their own independent, online course over the summer. They crowd-sourced students using social media, assembling a community of folks who were passionate about color theory. The student said, “The virus is invisible but color is everywhere, you can’t help seeing color. It’s like breathing.” This new community found it comforting to engage about something visible and tangible.

When I asked Samiria Percival about her next steps, she laughed, said that that was my scariest question and held up a pair of scissors and a colorful ink jet print adding, “I’m just trying to get this stuff up at the Blaffer.” But then she went on to describe her efforts to offer graphic design workshops online and printable PDFs, making advanced learning tools available to communities who don’t typically have access to college-level curricula.

A few students voiced gratitude for not having been severely affected by the pandemic and took some solace in the alone time. Painting MFA Marky Dewhirst suggested that because art-making is such a solitary activity, the pronounced isolation, “launched me into thinking more deeply about what I’m doing. It has allowed more time to think and read.” She acknowledged that this was a privilege and that being able to attend a graduate program on scholarship created a unique opportunity to concentrate on her thesis work, free from a number of responsibilities. Marie Williams said she appreciated the time, “to reflect inwardly. I spent a lot of time in my garden because I needed to be around things that were growing.” Veronica Gaona, an MFA student in the Photography and Digital Media program was grateful for how the pandemic forced her to slow down. She said, “I had to stand still and really reflect on my relationships. Having to adjust was difficult but it brought me some peace when I looked at my friends and family members and take stock of what’s important.”

Samiria Percival was one of many students who weighed tough Covid-related financial and personal factors, and ultimately decided to move away from Houston. In a truly serendipitous coincidence, she wound up relocating down the street from one of her favorite professors, who also calls Baton Rouge home. Samiria described the bond they formed, “it feels good to have that connection. Dr. Plummer has already introduced me to the art world out here.” With the advantage of some hindsight, Wanda Harding shared that she experienced an overwhelming creative block during the past year. Covid and the stress of the political environment, compounded with the frustration of feeling blocked created a cycle of paralysis. Professor Raphael Rubinstein told her, “You can’t make yourself make more work.” She eventually came to accept the block, which ultimately set the stage to ease out of it.

During Summer 2020, we moved our entire MFA studio operation to a new building, Elgin Street Studios. With gorgeous natural light, high ceilings and

two elegant exhibition spaces, the new building marks an exciting new chapter for the school as, for the first time, all of our MFA students are under one roof. Katie Lanier said, “The new studios have brought new ideas to my practice, I truly don’t think that I would be making the work I am currently making if I was still in the old studios. Environment is vital to an artist’s productivity.” During the early days of the pandemic, before the studios even had tables or chairs, I was delighted to see students in Elgin Street masked and huddled in their studios, sitting on the floor, eager to get to work.

Many students said that the opportunity to mount solo exhibitions in the Elgin Street Galleries was surprisingly motivating. The thesis exhibition, as in past years, is a large group show that students have been working towards in a sustained way for at least two years. The Elgin Galleries offer a new, alternative space to experiment and take risks in a professional gallery setting, without the high stakes expectations of the thesis exhibition in the Blaffer. “I want to fill that up!” was Wanda Harding’s reaction, remarking how it would be an opportunity to show sketches, some “B-Side” type work, motivating her to think differently. And Marky Dewhirst excitedly described her upcoming show, “It could be a bomb!” Yes! Explosive and unexpected. When Veronica Gaona deinstalled her solo show at Elgin Street she reflected on the experience, “I can see this work out in the world. The show made me feel like I can expand my ideas, I can make these bigger and propose the body of work in another space.”

These students are all exceptionally driven and are not likely to let anything stand in the way of making work or finding success through that work. This exhibition in the Blaffer Art Museum is proof of the resilience, grit, patience and progress they displayed over the past 3 years. When asked to reflect on their time in the School of Art, and identify areas of personal growth, the responses were quite encouraging. Robert Legans-Johnson said that before coming to the School of Art, he knew he was a creative person, but wasn’t sure where he fit in. Now he confidently identifies as an artist, and says that while “that is a bit scary, I’ve amassed the qualities and indicators of being an artist.” Or perhaps, he released them from within and now feels comfortable identifying as an artist.

For Virginia Patterson, who spent nearly a decade doing client-based work before she came to the SoA, the initial steps toward honoring herself as her most important client, came when she was a first-year student. Comparing the work she made her first year to her thesis work, she noted that, through trial and error and some tough love dispensed by SoA faculty, she learned to trust her instinctual imaginings and expand her notions of successful design.

Wanda Harding said somewhat sarcastically that she arrived, “Making perfectly adequate paintings. But there was a huge shift. Now my eyes are completely opened and I think more deeply about what I’m doing.”

Marley Foster said, “I found a lot more support here that I didn’t know I needed. I was offered more help than ever in my life.”

The sphere of influence of the pandemic is enormous and exhausting. It forces us to be hyper-conscious of everything we do outside our homes. For the most part, slowly, we have adapted and accepted the necessary changes to slow the spread of Covid. This is in part due to the hope that some sort of relief or shift back to the way things were in January 2020 is coming. But none of these promises - of a vaccine, of herd immunity, or more accurate testing will be like rebooting the computer after it freezes. The side effects of the pandemic will be with us, long after any of these promises come to pass.

This brings to mind the Stockdale Paradox, made famous by Jim Collins in his book on leadership, *From Good to Great*. Collins uses the experiences of Admiral James Stockdale, a pilot and POW during the Vietnam War to highlight the difference between hopeful optimism and faith that’s rooted in an honest assessment of your situation, no matter how dire. Or as Mel Brooks said so succinctly: “Hope for the best, expect the worst.” The Class of 2021, despite all that was thrown at them, managed to persevere, confronting the brutal facts of a pandemic while maintaining faith everyday that their creative works were important. As Stevie Spurgin put it, “I had to convince myself that this was my new life. I can ride it out until it gets back to normal. If there is a such thing as normal anymore.”

Marky Dewhirst

My approach to painting grew out of watching life unfold through impaired vision and the comfort of small spaces. I learned to navigate by wayfinding, and that experience taught me how shadow shapes and blurred objects could become elements in building invented figures and imagined worlds. My continued embrace of this perspective and an attraction to the relationship between the seen and unseen, deeply influence my work.

I look to the fragmented and unsettled to create images with strangeness, ambiguity, and psychological intrigue. I begin my paintings with representational imagery and a singular intention, but ultimately, the process entails significant reworking of the paint – wiping, layering, moving existing forms, and creating new images from the vestiges of older images. This assemblage of mark making leaves archeological layers and a history of the image, reflective of my endeavor to make each painting a confirmation of our psychological struggle.



Marky Dewhirst
Cigarette and Tea
2020

Oil on canvas
31" x 35"



Marky Dewhirst
Ammonite
2020

Oil on canvas
30" x 43"

Marley Foster

Homes – and the objects within them – are alive. As an anthropological study, I reconfigure the objects that fill these domestic spaces into artifacts, evidence of a white, middle-class suburban aesthetic and its costumes, rituals, and evolution. The more I do this, the more I see things like wooden kitchen chairs, polyester curtains, and king-sized bed sheets as participants in teaching and upholding the systems of power in which we live.

In a surgical process of mending, I juxtapose homely objects with one another and put them into unexpected contexts. Brass cabinet knobs, curtains stuffed and bulging from walls, and my own body transform from passive residents of my childhood (white, Southern, upper-middle class) home into witnesses of its sociopolitical enmeshment. This new perspective of looking lays bare layers of colonial history present in the objects that fill our homes, unravelling materially ingrained definitions of family, Southern conservatism, and gendered labor as household stuff is remade into objects of reckoning.



Marley Foster
I carry them with me
2020

Image on cotton pierced by
brass grommets
45" x 30"



Marley Foster
Bloated Portrait 4/4
2019

Stuffed curtains
4' x 2.5' x 6" (approx.)

Verónica Gaona

Verónica Gaona is an interdisciplinary artist living and working across the Texas-Mexico border landscapes. Informed by her transnational identity and the sociopolitical climate, Gaona creates an ongoing dialogue between her own body and the land to investigate notions of architecture, migration, and death by conducting location-driven research. A first-generation Mexican American from a family of migrants who has frequently re-located to search for employment, Gaona attempts to disrupt dominant conventionalities of time, such as acceleration and temporal linearity, by examining her physical and psychological situation. Her artwork exists at the intersection of installation, digital media and performance, and it brings to the foreground labor and spatial issues at play in her migrant family experience. Working from the border, she uses her position, as insider and outsider, as a tool to bring migrant spaces to life and center them within the larger debates on migration.



Verónica Gaona
Arrastrado (Swept Away)
2020

500 sheets of fabriano cotton paper soaked with río grande water and dirt
30 ft x 8 ft



Verónica Gaona
Para aquellos que no regresan en vida, siempre está la muerte
(For those who do not return in life, there is always death)
2020

2010 ford f-150 stationary rear back window with white vinyl
5.75 ft x 1.3 ft

Wanda Harding

Like forest systems, the forms in my paintings live in symbiotic relationship. I paint communities of disparate, biomorphic shapes that keep their particularity while contributing to the collective. Social and psychological dynamics reverberate within the organism, whether aggregated on a canvas or as separate shapes roaming free on a wall. The paintings evolve organically, with each form laid down in response to its neighbors. Individual forms emerge through hue and value changes, each further differentiated through brushstroke, texture, translucency, partial erasure, and layering. In some places the forms are coming together, in other places they're pulling apart, some overlap their neighbor forcefully, some slipping in together. Ultimately, my work is premised on the belief that ideas and emotions can be conveyed through purely formal means such as color and composition. Each shape's particularity is valued as it negotiates with the others a healthy maintenance of the whole.



Wanda Harding
Connected and Particular
2020

Acrylic on canvas
24" x 30" x 1"



Wanda Harding
Separate and Connected
2021

Acrylic on paper
14" x 11" x 0"

Jamey Hart

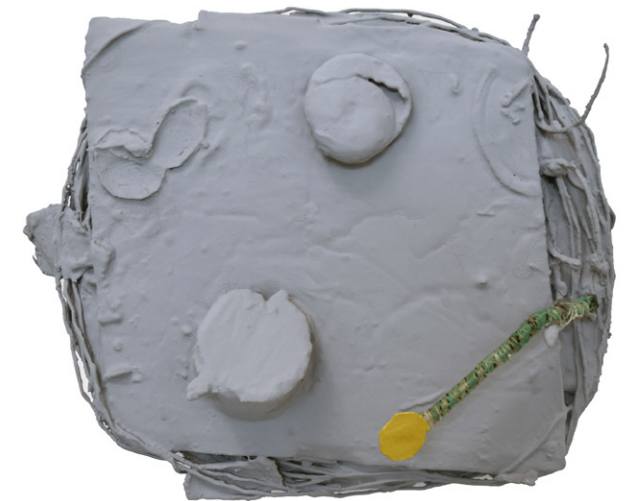
Legibility is the degree of ease that signs and symbols convey direct meaning based on their appearance. The capacity for objects to communicate hinges upon their visibility, though a visible object is not necessarily a legible object. There are things that barely register despite being visible, articulating a space between something and nothing. Certain objects disclose this space. Plastic bags against a curb verge on disappearance in their ubiquity. When I make an object, I give extended attention to materials and situations that are veiled in their commonness and acute specificity. The fragile maintenance of minute fragments from these experiences is a way to consider them as singular.

My engagement with objects is entangled with the same systems that render objects meaningless. The varying shades of invisibility in things are the collateral manifestations of underlying structures that define value and significance. Objects are always inherently more than their discernible qualities. In my practice, these conditions are foundational.



Jamey Hart
Passenger
2020

Umbrella, pine quarter round,
cardboard, wood, floor enamel,
diagram of kite and bird problem,
nails, duct tape, other things.
20" x 16" x 3.5"



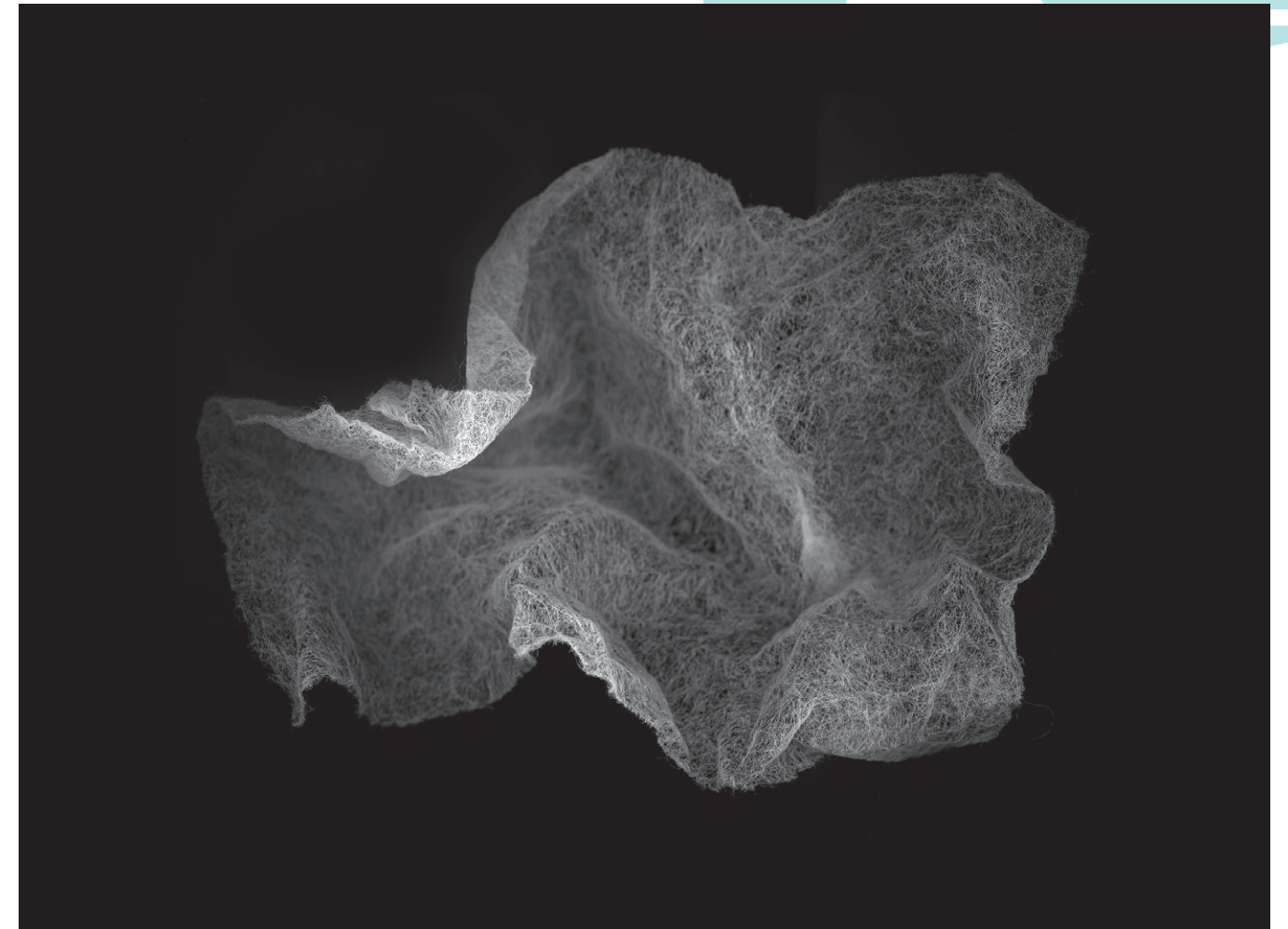
Jamey Hart
Reappearance
2020

Filler primer, two clementine peels,
glasses, bungee, paint, wire, wood,
paper, imprint, glue, other things.
12" x 15" x 6"

Kathryn Lanier

Feelings of isolation commonly follow diagnoses of bipolar disorder, anxiety, and clinical depression. I combat this isolation by visualizing these intangible, very real struggles found in the space in which we cross from stability to instability. Inspired by my and my sister's journeys of diagnoses, my work naturally became centered on mental health.

Using forms of abstraction achieved by layering physical translucent material and digital media, my pieces reflect on an individual's own mental health. Transparency evokes the in-between, gray area of tangible and intangible; it expresses periods of transition and uncertainty. Raw materials move as the viewer moves in the space of the work forming a concrete connection between the physical work and the viewer's body.

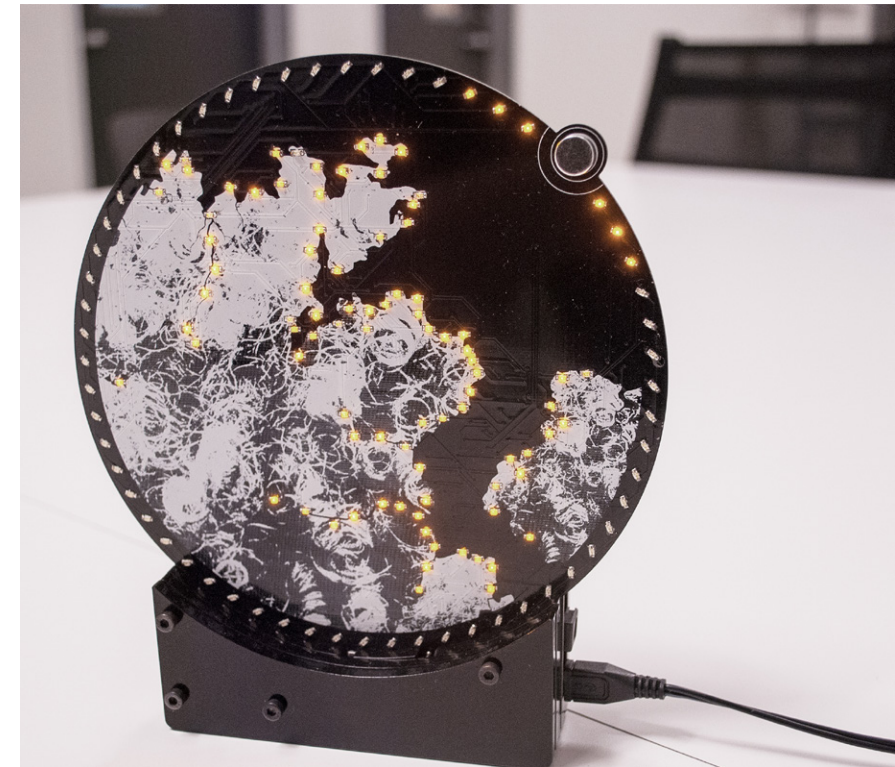


Kathryn Lanier
Isolate Body
2021

Vinyl wallpaper
12' ¼" x 35' 6"

Robert Legans-Johnson

Electronic media, as vast as it is ubiquitous, has potential to elicit a grand spectrum of emotions. This era of tech comes from the work of unparalleled human ingenuity, but also, paradoxically, the logic of true and false statements. This translation of the physical, digital, and emotional is my core curiosity, and my work is an ongoing exploration about these combinations. I use a mix of various digital skills—electronics, programming, laser-cutting, and 3D printing—to create digital altars, identity-distorting photo-filters, and planetary utopias.



Robert "yonderboy" Legans-Johnson
Cosmic Planet
2019

Printed circuit board with electronic components,
laser-cut acrylic sheet, hardware
7 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 2"



Robert "yonderboy" Legans-Johnson
Overwrite
2019

Printed circuit board with electronic components,
metal chain
1 x 1 x 1/2"

Noah Leen

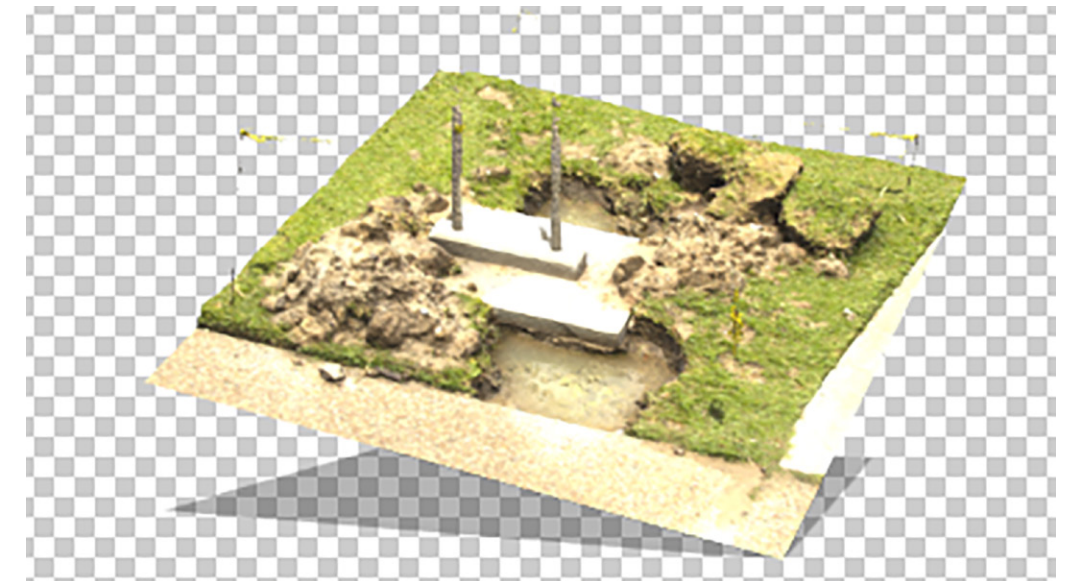
I collect images and objects as evidence of the construction processes involved in remodeling the city-center. A global transition of populations from rural to urban spaces causes constant real-estate development to respond to demand for new housing in and around major cities. By focusing on the development of Houston's bayou system into a regulated recreation area, I exhibit byproducts of a municipal public relations campaign that targets lifestyles increasingly concerned with climate change and physical fitness.

Part of the city's goal is the esthetic refinement of an extensive system of drainage canals, officially publicized as the Bayou Greenways Project. This rehabilitation of the bayou is a way to package an image of the city as an environmentally sustainable space with healthy outdoor activities in an area that is notorious for generating atmospheric pollutants and child cancer. My collection of images and objects implicates the systematic reconstruction of an organic landscape contained within the limits of the built environment.



Noah Leen
*Still From Bayou
Gentrification Documentary
Film*
2020

Digital media
2550 x 1443 pixels



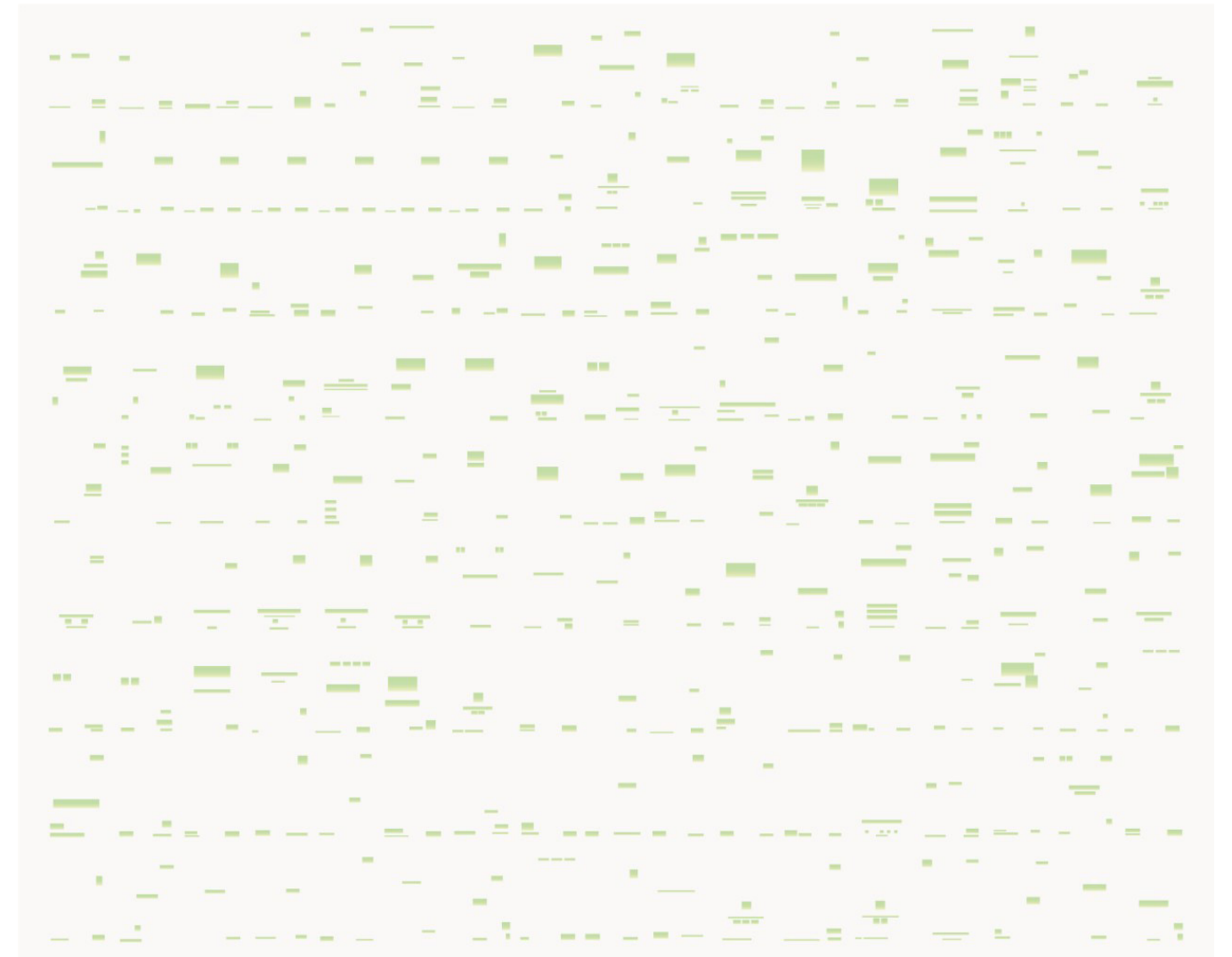
Noah Leen
*Still From 3D Rendered
Bayou Gentrification
Documentary Animation*
2020

Digital media
2550 x 1435 pixels

Virginia Patterson

As a graphic designer and educator with a background in packaging design and food communication, Virginia is concerned with the designer's role as sociocultural producer, critic, and activist. She advocates for design centered around ethics and self-reflexivity.

Her research explores knowledge, culture, and consumption of food within industrialized food systems. Through a critical practice, she uses quantitative and qualitative research methods to interrogate existing food systems and their impacts on health, social equity, the environment, and heritage. Her work aims to educate, empower, and provoke questions, with one underlying inquiry: *how can design contribute to the shaping of a more equitable food landscape?*



Virginia Patterson

Cereal
2020

Digital print
38" x 48"

Samiria

Percival

For centuries, the textures and forms produced by bodies like mine have been banned, abused, and oppressed by the nation in which I was born. Consequently, I have found myself endlessly searching for a place where I could exist free of fear, guilt, or shame. This journey is what led to my exploration of the agency that Black people have had throughout the history of the United States.

To investigate historic documents, photographs and other found material, I utilize design software, a combination of machines like scanners and laser cutters in addition to my own handmade methods such as painting and sketching. These explorations usually conclude in a piece that is an examination or response to threats against liberty. I've derived different patterns, textures and imagery from African American culture that have been symbolic of protection throughout our history. The forms have been analyzed and re-contextualized so that the safety we usually find only in our heads can now be simultaneously present in the physical world.



Samiria Percival
Risk Management
2020

Digital prints
20" x 20"

Stevie Spurgin

I challenge the societal standards of the “normal,” “beautiful,” and “gross,” focusing on what we typically cast away. I investigate marks, stains, residue, and actions produced by the absence or presence of the body. Conversations are created between the grotesque and the lovely by using materials such as used makeup wipes, sweat excretion, my hair, dark chocolate, and gold embroidery thread.

The stains on a t-shirt tell a story, markers of time.

A napkin fixes food mistakes, wearing its tasks on its body.

Permanent tattoos born at birth, decorating with needle-less pigments.

My transformed objects undergo make-overs through the labor of repetitive actions, documentation, and mark-making that leave the work “glammed-up,” “magnified,” and sprinkled with the abject to isolate the language we use around beauty.



Stevie Spurgin
You so Hairy!
2020

Dark chocolate, gold leaf, artist's hair
1.5" x 1" x 1"



Stevie Spurgin
Studio Secretions
2019

Artist's work shirt, gold embroidery thread
24" x 17"

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