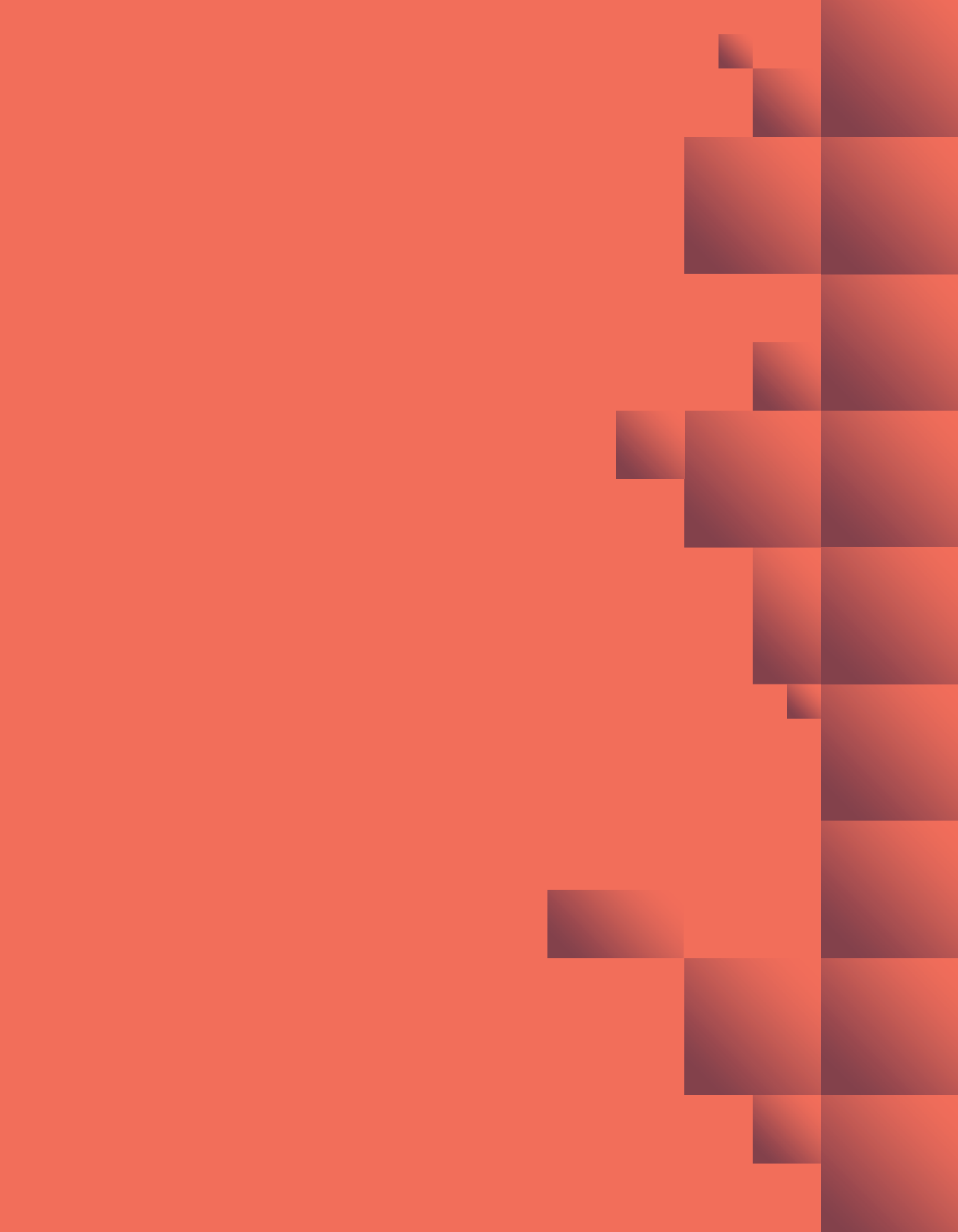


2022

mfo

MASTER OF FINE ARTS EXHIBITION





2022

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MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Arts and Letters
Department of Art, Art History, and Design

FEBRUARY 26–MAY 15

Gallery Talks:

Wednesday, March 16, 6–8pm

Closing Reception + Award Ceremony:

Saturday, May 7, 6–8pm

mfa

2022
Candidates
+
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The *Master of Fine Arts Exhibition* is the culmination of a three-year program in which artists explore their creative practice under the supervision of a faculty guidance committee. Candidates in MSU's MFA program seek new and rigorous forms of artistic expression; attempting to transcend aesthetic obstacles and to make meaningful contributions to the world. The Department of Art, Art History, and Design celebrates the creative research of Benjamin Carey, Evan F. Christopherson, Nicolei Buendia Gupit, Hannah Tamiko Mackey, Erik Mueller, and Lillian Young as evidence of both incredible achievement at graduate school and continuing promise for impact on visual culture.

This year, the inaugural AAHD Critic-in-Residence Thea Quiray Tagle wrote a series of essays about each student's work to appear in the exhibition catalogue. And this year, the annual Master of Fine Arts Prize will be awarded at the exhibition reception to an outstanding candidate by guest juror Elizabeth Chodos, Director of the Miller Institute of Art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The 2022 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition is organized by the MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, with curatorial oversight provided by Steven L. Bridges, senior curator and director of curatorial affairs. Support for this exhibition is provided by the Graduate School at MSU and the John and Susan Berding Family Endowment.

TANI HARTMAN, Chairperson
Department of Art, Art History, and Design

“Contextual thinking in art and design is literally transformative. We typically think of ‘transformation’ as referring to change, which is true at a general level, but its Latin roots more precisely refer to a ‘forming across.’ This is exactly what artists and designers who think contextually do: They reconfigure forms across previously accepted categories of definition. Their art ‘moves’ us because they have moved the boundaries of our understanding.”

— Daniel Cavicchi, “Text and Context: Outward in All Directions.”¹

Making art at a time like this is an extraordinary, and completely necessary, endeavor. Nicolei Buendia Gupit, Hannah Tamiko Mackey, Lillian Young, Benjamin Carey, Evan F. Christopherson, and Erik Mueller: the six MFA students graduating this spring from Michigan State University’s Department of Art, Art History, and Design have experienced truly unprecedented interruptions and challenges over the course of their three year program— to say they have worked under

exceptional duress is not an overstatement, but actual fact. The artists in this MFA cohort have really only known the condition of being interrupted. In the second semester of their first year at MSU, the COVID-19 pandemic completely shut down all life as we knew it; for this cohort, their classes were suspended and access to their studios was revoked. Conditions of making and being had to be radically improvised, to account for continued closures of space: online classes for crits and

conversations replaced once-intimate dialogues in classrooms; home studios with sub-optimal conditions forced to stand in for campus studios and resources. That they have produced a final thesis exhibition that is so thrilling as a whole and in its individual parts is a testament to their fortitude as individuals and their mastery of craft as artists. Their show at the Broad Museum looks like any other well-hung and well-installed group exhibition— and in its in sheer ordinary-ness, the exhibition conceals the exceptional conditions that have produced it.

Despite, or perhaps even enabled by, these difficult constraints, this MFA cohort has produced an exhibition that asks viewers to reconsider labor and to reconceptualize notions of *time and place*. Touch and the artist’s hand in creating 2D, 3D, and even digital objects are highly evident throughout the show.

Each artwork in the Broad demonstrates the artists’ raw skill and practiced attention to craft; these are very much artworks made over many hours of physical labor, with deep attention to detail. Hannah Tamiko Mackey’s *light yellow* features a long, non-functional pool made of almost 3,000 porcelain tiles, a shocking number considering she had never worked with ceramics prior to the fall semester of 2021. Evan F. Christopherson’s *Below Threshold* stages a complex choreography generated by sensors capturing the amount of CO2 in the room, the result of his years of studying robotics alongside faculty at multiple institutions. Lillian Young’s output has also been astounding: they produced one hundred new paintings for *Wanted: Runaways* over the course of this academic year, while also painting ten new portraits for a completely different series also on display at the museum, titled *The Black Elders Archive*.

Nostalgia and futurity collide in the projects of Nicolei Buendia Gupit and Benjamin Carey. Nicolei Buendia Gupit's series of three installations under the title *Pamilya*, which rotated at the gallery over the exhibition's run, reimagine individual, family, and Philippine national histories and posit different modes of present and future relations between diasporic people across the Pacific. Benjamin Carey's fantastic machines (*Hula Hoop Machine*, *Bubble Machine*, *Breathing Machine*) playfully solve seemingly-banal problems until one peels back the layers to consider the challenging family histories that have informed these obsessive, forward-looking experiments. Meanwhile, the "where" of Erik Mueller's thesis project *Streams* remains elusive. Living on canvas as well as minted online at NFTs, the three paintings/PSD files comprising *Streams* radically disorganize our

sense of stability in place; an apt commentary on the destabilized conditions we collectively find ourselves in now.

With this thesis exhibition, the graduating MFAs have produced transformative artwork that obliquely reflects both the changed conditions of these times, as well as what remains timeless. These pieces can be enjoyed purely as aesthetic objects, well-crafted and beautifully rendered; they can also be apprehended as commentaries on the state of race relations in the United States, the rise of digital commerce and new modes of interaction, and the making of home. In any event, viewers lucky enough to visit the Broad Museum in person will have experienced artwork crafted with superlative levels of skill, a testimony to the need to make art even in the most unreasonable of times.

— Thea Quiray Tagle

Thea Quiray Tagle, PhD is the inaugural 2021-2022 Critic-in-Residence at Michigan State University's Department of Art, Art History, and Design. She is a writer, curator, and assistant professor of ethnic studies and queer studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her writing on contemporary art and performance has been published in venues including *ASAP/J*, *American Quarterly*, *Hyperallergic*, and *The Journal of Critical Ethnic Studies*. Thea's curatorial projects have been exhibited in sites including Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, The Alice (Seattle), and the Vachon Gallery at Seattle University. She currently lives and works on Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Massachusetts land and waterways. theaquiraytagle.com.

BENJAMIN CAREY

There is perhaps a more elegant way to begin a catalog essay, but I just have to say that I love Benjamin Carey's ridiculous machines. I am enthralled with Carey's obsessive endeavors at solving seemingly superfluous or absurd ("First World") problems through the invention of contraptions made from salvaged everyday materials. In his hands, dress forms and rice paper are magically converted into a skin-like substance essential to the construction of a giant bellows that overzealously pushes air into the wearer's nose: the *Breathing Machine*. Through sheer tenacity and a dangerous amount of ingenuity, the artist has also crafted a machine that simultaneously generates sparks while aggressively blowing bubbles (*Bubble Machine*). Finally, midway through the video documentation of the first operation of the *Hula Hoop Machine*, its seemingly failed design hits pure synchronicity, twirling in in a perfect parabolic arc around and around the artist's hips, and making the

sweat and strain behind its creation disappear momentarily to appear seemingly effortless. Bravo to Carey for creating objects so pleasurable to behold that they broke a critic's inherent desire to "understand" or "read" an artwork. For the first time in a long time, I found myself truly enjoying art for art's sake when in the presence of these pieces, as there is so much pure creativity emanating from them that they are captivating to watch, both in motion and when displayed as still objects.

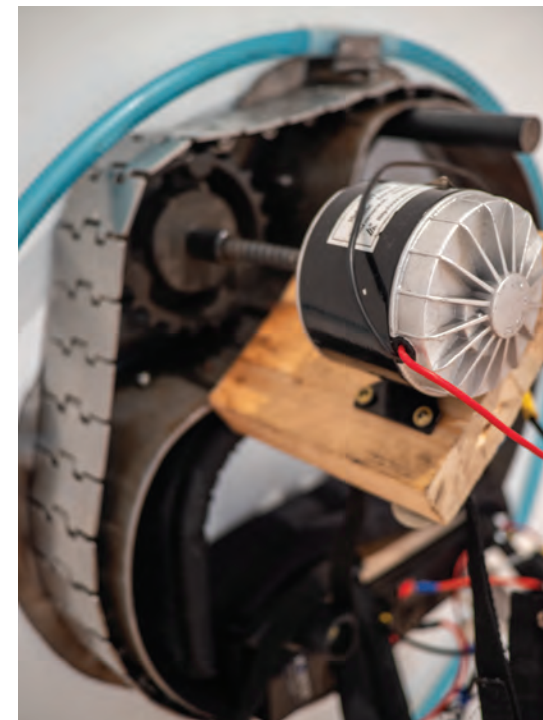
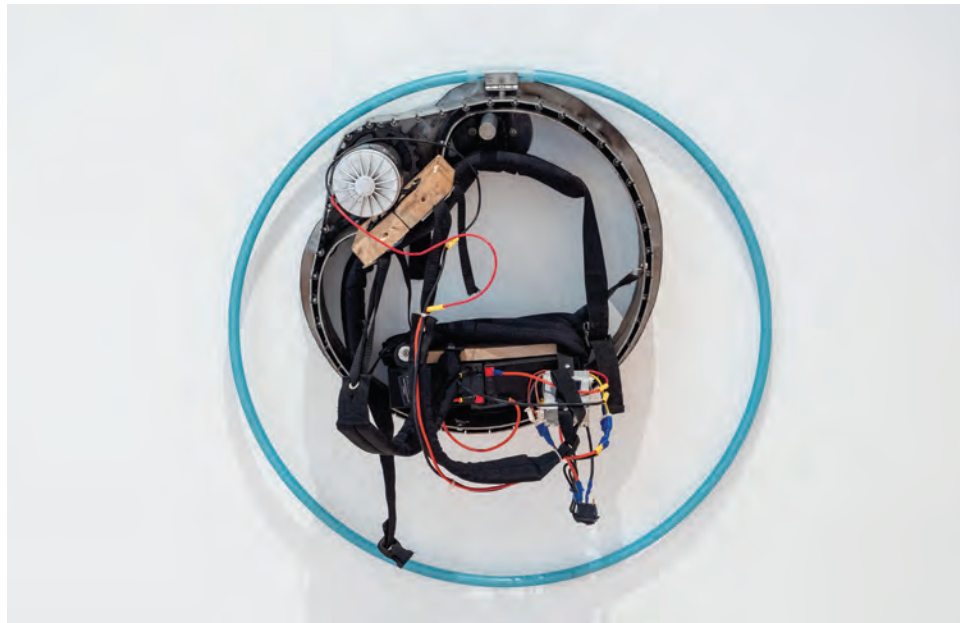
That is not to say that these machines are without substance or concept—far from it. They are, in part, the result of the artist metabolizing strange childhood experiences into functional, albeit "useless," objects. Carey's recollections of the arduous processes by which his father (with no previous architectural or design background) built their family home in the Midwest are at turns hilarious, heartbreaking, and unsettling. How much fun might it have been to live

underneath a giant circus tent as a child; how painful must it be to have asthma and breathing problems now because of all the fiberglass insulation you played amongst then. In some ways, this MFA exhibition is evidence of an overcoming or surpassing the patriarch—of an adult successfully creating objects that work, rather than build relentlessly and fruitlessly a home that never quite does. The artist has powerfully harnessed what Svetlana Boym calls "reflective nostalgia," a mode of making sense of one's longing and loss for home that remains ambivalent and does not shy away from contradictions; reflective nostalgia calls memories and truth into doubt, as an emancipatory re-working of the past towards more free, or open, possible futures.²

Yet, the three machines on display at the Broad Museum are so much more than the residue of family history or Carey's working through of intergenerational trauma. These

pieces poetically illuminate the beauty that results from an artist fully taking risks and recognizing that the possibility of failure is inherent to the process of discovery. They are the products of an individual unafraid of magical thinking about the present and the future—a trait that the collective needs more of in our current dark times. These are fantastical machines that solve problems you didn't even know you had. And they are simply fantastic.

BENJAMIN CAREY



Clockwise from Top Left:

Bubble Machine, 2022
Gas motor, wood, metal, plastic rubber,
and digital video
(3 min., color, sound)
36" x 45"

Breathing Machine, 2020
Electronics, wood, metal, plastic,
rubber, fiber, and digital video
(3 min., color, sound)
58" x 42"

Hula Hoop Machine, 2021
Electronics, batteries, wood, metal,
plastic, fiber, and digital video
(3 min., color, sound)
36" x 36"

EVAN F. CHRISTOPHERSON

A glitch in the machine catches my attention first. A clear plastic arm appears stuck in position, fighting to get free so that it can continue its undulations along with its mechanical kin, all of which make up Evan F. Christopherson's *Below Threshold*. The sound of stalling is painful, as attempts to right itself are frustrated by the simple limitations of the technology. Meanwhile, the hundred or so other arms do their work of becoming a near-synchronized plastic wave form that moves in response or relation to the amount of CO2 captured by its sensors; like the relationship of wind blowing across seagrass or cornfields, so too does the exhalation of our breath in the gallery impact the motion of this machine.

Christopherson is a research-driven artist who has been long interested in the intersection between science, art, and technology; his previous experiments have taken an

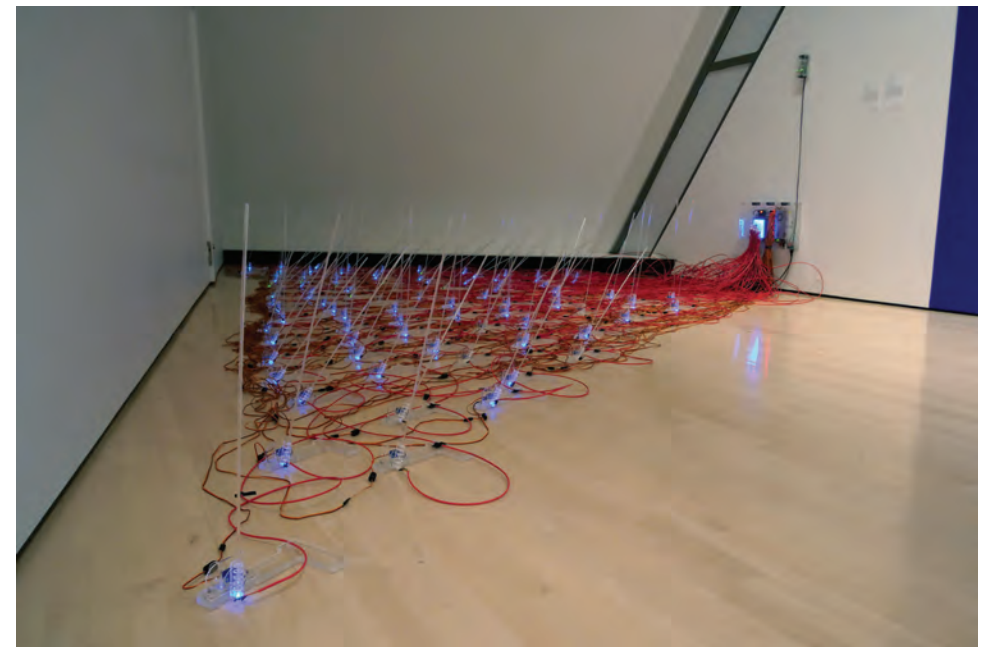
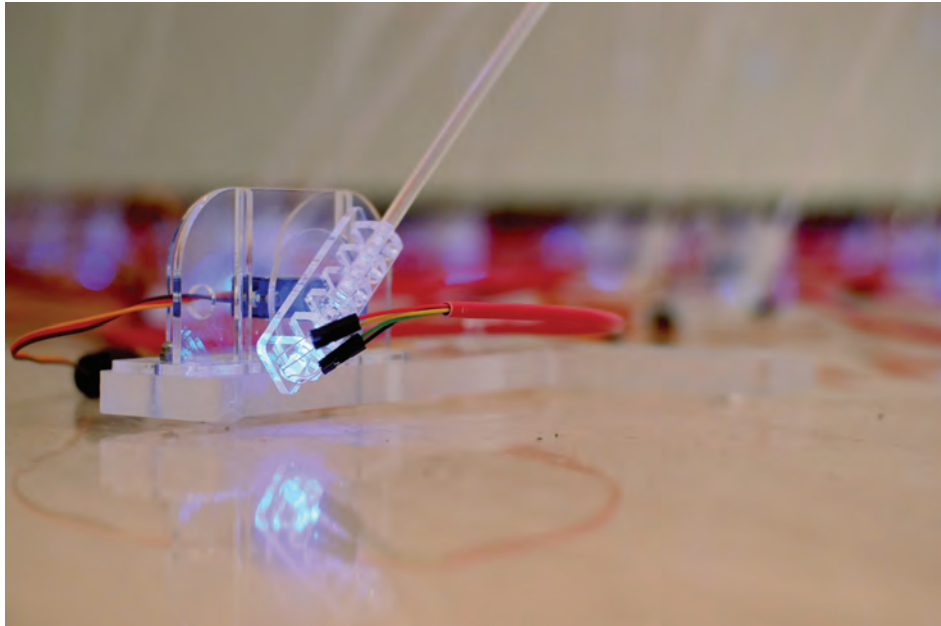
omniscient or god's-eye view of the roles that robots and machines can play in recording data and generating new objects legible as art. *Below Threshold* is another such intellectual and artistic endeavor, but it also exceeds any kind of objective reading given the times we find ourselves in now. Breath, and the capturing or manipulations of the breath, has never been a neutral subject—and it is even more impossible to pretend that it is today. Beyond the current pandemic and its grave impacts on an infected person's ability to breathe, the withholding or staunching of the breath of Black folks and other minoritized peoples in the United States by the police has, since the 2014 murder of Eric Garner by an on-duty NYPD officer, become a rallying call of the Black Lives Matter Movement: I Can't Breathe. Thus, when encountering *Below Threshold*, I remain constantly occupied by the questions: Who is truly free to breathe in this space, and how is their breath counted

or registered by the sensors? If someone's breath were to stop or be stopped in the gallery by (un)natural causes ranging from COVID to a chokehold, would this machine be a reliable witness to that event? And, finally, outside of this particular artwork: what other kinds of surveillance technology is made invisible by its being packaged as art, and how does its framing as a mere artwork help obfuscate more pernicious uses to which it can be put?

Below Threshold is a visually arresting and immersive artwork that invites a variety of interpretations and questions from differently located viewers. In Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein's important text *Data Feminism*, they ask data scientists to interrogate the context, limitations, and validity of the data under use, rather than take data at face value; they say that "one feminist strategy for considering context is to consider the cooking process that produces 'raw' data."³ In

the context of early 2022, even as it was installed in a white cube space as beautiful as the Broad Museum, I cannot help but be concerned with the politics of breath and the "cooking processes" that overdetermine who can exhale without limits. It is impossible to create a work that measures CO2 flux in a room resulting from human breath patterns when environmental racism, police violence, disability and illness continue to suspend the breath of so many around the globe, and even within the heartland of America. Christopherson's meditative field, its gears and gyres whirring methodically and seamlessly—until the glitch, that is—gave me occasion to remember all those whose breath has been stolen, especially over the course of the past two years. This work offered an unexpected, and difficult, memorial to them.

EVAN F. CHRISTOPHERSON



Below Threshold, 2022
Acrylic, servos, microcontrollers, wire, and gas sensor
15' W x 20' L x 2' H

NICOLEI BUENDIA GUPIT

"She's my mom, and she's also my dad... I learned everything from my Nanay Dela."

Members of a Filipino family reminisce over their late matriarch, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, as they share a meal together. We hear their conversation wash over a tableau of their dinner: paper that has printed and cut out to mimic banana leaves cover a table, and spilling over it is a massive spread of Jufran banana ketchup and soy sauce, dragon fruit and jackfruit, empanadas and lumpia, a lucky cat statue, and a small Mother Mary. These objects have been cast in resin and paper clay and are garishly painted in a bright neon, the same shade as a cinematic green screen. Five white paper clay plates are set at the table, and projected over each plate is video footage of a different Filipino dish— iconic dishes from kare-kare to adobo— diminishing over time as it is eaten; hands and forks appear in the frame, as evidence of a meal enjoyed. It is a spectacular, beautiful rendition

of a mundane dinner, preserving a fleeting moment of connection forever....and yet.

In this installation, the first of three iterations to be exhibited at The Broad under the title *Pamilya*, artist Nicolei Buendia Gupit has produced an outsized mimicry of remade objects to fantastically re-create home and its pleasures. In *Pamilya - March 12th, 1922, in memory of the artist's grandmother, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, who was born on this day*, what first appears as homage or monumentalization of a domestic scene is a dissemblage, however, with the connections of this family being as fragile as the paper pulp used to make the plates. Without their late *nanay* to bring them together, and the demands of late capitalism pulling them in every direction, this family has remained scattered across the globe; some have not shared space with one another in a decade or more. Separated by thousands of miles across land and sea, each person spoke individually to Gupit of their

memories, and it was Gupit alone who edited these sound bytes into an imbricated environment.

In this layered simulacra, *Pamilya* does not fetishize the past but rather imagines other ways of being in relation across borders material and metaphorical. The taste of home and family are bittersweet as *ampalaya*, with internet connections and video projections serving to connect in the absence. These meals are meant to be slowly savored by the viewer, who must work to fill in the missing bodies at the table as well as the details of history with their own assumptions or even their own recollections. When I encountered this table, I have taste memory of homes on both sides of the Pacific: sitting at the kitchen table of my lolo's house in Quezon City, my yayas peeling *atis-atis* and *mangosteens* for me to eat at the end of a hot day riding jeepneys all over town; at Christmas dinners in Jersey City, Tampa FL, and wherever my extended family rooted down, listening to my mom arguing with

one of her brothers over some long-standing family drama while my aunties gossiped and my little cousins played all around us. The food was always the only thing my loud and sprawling family could all agree on— that it be delicious; that most of it be Filipino food; and that we would have more than enough to eat, to save, and to share.

The late, great Filipino food writer, Doreen Fernandez, reminds us that food is inevitably connected to love; she goes on to give an example of a friend who expresses their love not only through the food itself, but through the "total menu-performance."⁴⁴ In the total menu-performance of Nicolei Buendia Gupit's *Pamilya* series, Filipino food as binding agent is the constant. The project reminds us why people in the diaspora remain so attached to our food as a material and metaphorical symbol of lifeways left behind and then remade: in the face of so much unspoken and unacknowledged losses, it is evidence that love still remains.

NICOLEI BUENDIA GUPIT



Clockwise from Top Left:

Pamilya - April 17th, 1942, in commemoration of the artist's grandfather, Francisco "Tatay Kikoy" Hebreo Buendia, who survived the Bataan Death March on this day, On view: March 17 – April 17, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3

Pamilya - March 12th, 1922, in memory of the artist's grandmother, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, who was born on this day, On view: February 26 – March 13, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3

Pamilya - May 1st, 1898, in remembrance of the period of American colonialization of the Philippines which began on this day; May 1st, 1934, in observance of the Philippine Independence Act which took effect on this day, On view: April 21 – May 15, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3

HANNAH TAMIKO MACKEY

“All my love to the queers claiming ocean on land. To the brave ones here salting the rest of the Earth by building our uncommon lives around each other. We feel buoyant on illegal terms. We prioritize each other over the gravity of socially enforced narratives, laws, and tax structures. We act on the knowledge that everything could change, and yet if I was choosing I would choose you again.

We will all be marine mammals soon. So thank you for remembering to swim despite everything.”

— Alexis Pauline Gumbs⁵

In Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ visionary text, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, she writes of the possible lifeworlds we could create on land if we would think alongside and learn from the practices of marine animals as diverse as Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins, Blacktip reef sharks, and ringed seals. Her ruminations are deep engagements with Black feminist thought about making kin, which we all can learn from and apply to our differently situated contexts. As I spoke with Hannah Tamiko Mackey about

her meticulously crafted objects displayed under the title *light yellow*, I was struck by the resonances between these two artists. Also invested in speculating with marine life, Mackey’s research into fish biology and practices allow her to reflect upon human experiences differently—and to speak obliquely to the conundrums faced by mixed-race Asian Americans who are dislocated across multiple places and times.

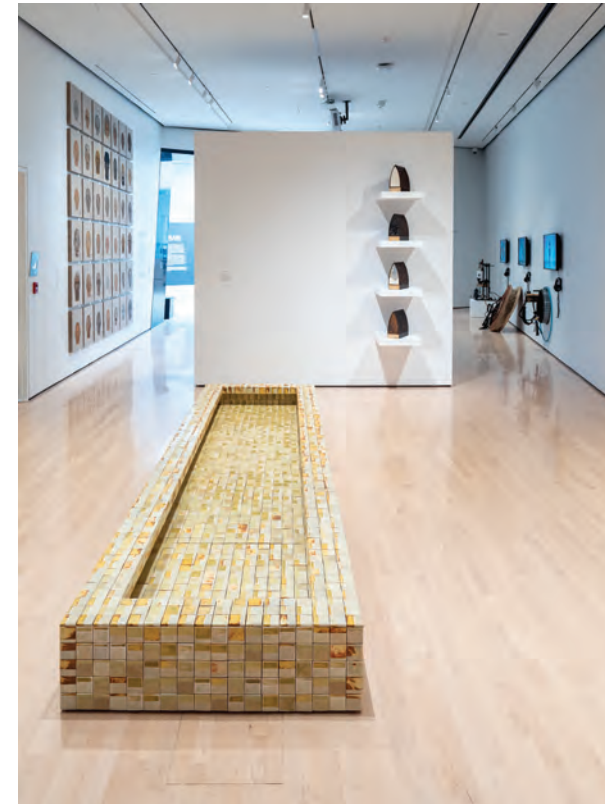
With *light yellow*, Mackey adds another dimension to their expanding, vast mythology of human-fish hybrids that live on Earth; the hybrids are a distinct species who, after generations of loss and assimilation into life amongst humans, have forgotten their origin stories and have only fragments as a clue. The four reliquaries and a pool— an impressive sculpture made from almost three thousand soda-fired porcelain tiles— shown at the Broad Museum are the ruins of their civilization, which current hybrids try to make sense of, in order to navigate their lives anew.

Removed from daily circulation, the pool and reliquaries become merely decorative. We can only imagine the uses to which they would be put— are the reliquaries meant to honor deceased ancestors, and do they carry the dead’s souls within them? Is the pool for swimming laps, or is it for other, more sensual, delights? The porcelain is smooth to the touch, so shiny you almost want to lick it— and, who knows, perhaps previous generations of hybrids did just that. Without hybrids who know how to activate these relics, the objects exude a sense of melancholic loss. In this way, they make manifest David Eng’s concept of racial melancholia, in which whiteness has “contaminated” the understanding of oneself as a person of color and haunts the rest of one’s affective worlds.⁶ These sculptures thus are apt metaphors for the condition of multiracial Asian Americans, who are both/neither one group or the other, and who— like the fish-human hybrids— find themselves straddling two worlds.

Returning to the relations of fish, however, might offer another, more

optimistic reading of *light yellow*. The koi decorating the reliquaries— a nod to Mackey’s Japanese heritage, and a recurring motif on decorative objects across Asia for centuries— are schooling fish after all. Japanese koi are omnivorous fish that migrate significant distances to reach their preferred spawning grounds of flooded meadows and stagnant marshes. They have long lifespans and are so strong they can swim up waterfalls, which is why they’ve become auspicious symbols of health and longevity. They are schooling fish that swim together for many years. Rather than try to recreate the past, anyone in the present— whether fish-human hybrids or diasporic, immigrant, and multiracial folks— can activate in new ways the objects in *light yellow*, to remember that we too have survived despite multiple migrations and dislocations. We can encounter these objects not to mourn, but to recall that we, too, are strong enough to swim up upstream. Despite so much stacked against us, we continue to make home with one another, across time and place. We continue to swim, despite everything.

HANNAH TAMIKO MACKEY



light yellow, 2022
Porcelain, wood, and mixed media,
Pool 12' x 3' x 3',
Wall Pieces each 5" x 12" x 14"

ERIK MUELLER

Encountering Erik Mueller's *Streams* in the Broad Museum, I am first taken by the initial effacement of the painter's touch in these three paintings. Impossible landscapes that the artist initially generated as Photoshop PSD files before rendering them on canvas, *Streams* make queer the romantic, colonial American landscape painting to compelling effect. Perfect mountaintops overlap mountaintops over a chromakey blue background in *Wednesday*, while out-of-scale trees and flower pots hover in suspended relation to a titled ground in the lilac purple-washed *Don't forget to Like and Subscribe!* At first sight, these landscapes are perhaps a little too perfect in their construction, and as devoid of context as the dystopic machine-made fields of now-iconic science fiction films like *Blade Runner* and *Westworld*.

I searched for human errors on the painting's surface— a smear, a smudge— and could

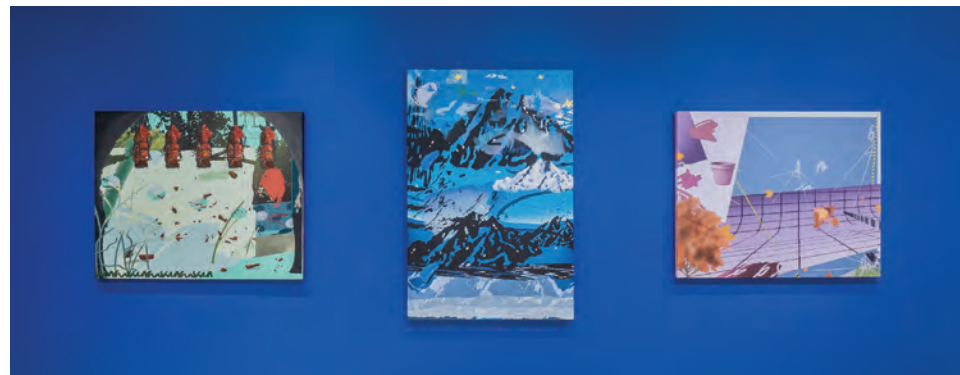
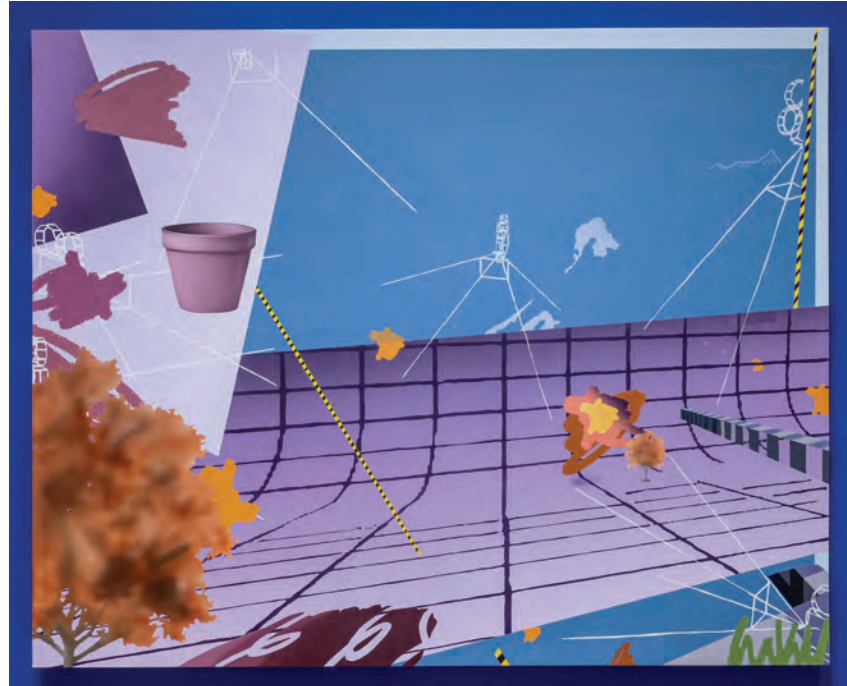
not find any; it was only as my eyes settled and began to register the glitter on each that I saw evidence of an artist's hand. *Today too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days* most successfully makes use of shine and texture: a row of reddish-brown blobs running across the top of the canvas suggest the torsos of livestock slaughtered and hung in a butcher's freezer, heavily processed meat for gyros being cooked on a vertical rotisserie, or even lab meat grown for artificial organs. These strange forms became a visceral reminder of the prize for taming the American West, as capitalism and settler colonialism have flattened the entirety of the Midwest, in particular, in the service of creating vast tracts of "empty lands" for use by corporatized meat and agriculture industries. It was with this prick of recognition that I better understood Mueller's desire to create compositions across the digital divide. In working between Photoshop

and canvas, modifying each piece in conversation with the other across dimensions, Mueller wants us to question whether we as individuals are more authentic out here or in there, when both realms are equally as artificial and mediated by structures such as capitalism and its resulting discontents.

The second major component of *Streams* was not visible in the gallery, for it necessarily only exists online. Each PSD file used as source material for the three paintings has been compressed and uploaded onto a server, with the URL to access these files being minted as an NFT on the Tezos blockchain and sold for the minimum price (~ \$0.007). With the URL alone minted as an NFT and the PSD files remaining open source, Mueller attempts to subvert the NFT logic of making proprietary otherwise freely circulating digital files. Claudia Hart's *Feminist Manifesta of the Blockchain* (2021) proposes that "identity on the blockchain

presents an allegory for the 21st century, wherein identity is ritualized through the computer file, individually designed, smart-contract bound, and secured on the blockchain," and thus, "minting a token is an enactment of authenticity, an ontological shift in the history of representation."⁷ It seems, then, that by refusing to privatize the artwork as an unalterable original, Mueller wants to undermine the very premise of an artist's identity as a singular genius. If so, this makes his strange re-workings of sublime American landscape paintings more radical in intent and outcome. Symbolically divesting himself from ownership over an artwork, he disavows the colonial project that birthed this genre of landscape painting. Now, that's a vibe.

ERIK MUELLER



Clockwise from top left:

Don't forget to Like and Subscribe!
from the series *Streams*, 2022,
Original .psd file listed as an open
source NFT on Tezos via Objkt,
Acrylic, and Glitter on canvas
wrapped panel, 4" x 5"

*Today too, I experienced some-
thing I hope to understand in a
few days* from the series *Streams*,
2022, Original .psd file listed as an
open source NFT on Tezos via
Objkt, Acrylic, and Glitter on can-
vas wrapped panel, 4" x 5"

Wednesday from the series
Streams, 2022, Original .psd file
listed as an open source NFT on
Tezos via Objkt, Acrylic, and Glitter
on canvas wrapped panel, 6" x 4"

LILLIAN YOUNG

Fannie Flono. Galine Baker. Pearl Prince. Bruce Doser. Patricia Brown. Opal Lee. Finis Springer. Ronald Magee. Ernie Boone Sr. Bob Ray Sanders.

This list. This *list*. This list! This list of names— of Black elders in artist Lillian Young’s life and larger communities— is so unlike others that have been generated over the past eight years. Those other lists enumerate the numbers of lives lost: to police violence, to transphobic and homophobic attacks, to domestic abuse and sexual assault. Young’s list, instead, is a gift of names of Black elders, alive and thriving, to accompany portraits that joyfully looking back at you and which burst out of their frames with presence.

Lillian Young’s *The Black Elders*, from the series *The Problem with Archives: A Portrait is Worth our Word*, one half of her ambitious MFA thesis exhibition, is a viscerally affecting encounter with

liveliness and a magnificent display of survival that is most needed as we enter the second full year of a global pandemic. Standing underneath a sound dome that blends the voices of these elders together as they recount their memories of life under Jim Crow segregation in the South or de facto segregation in the North, I am undone by the weight of each larger-than-life portrait. Each person’s expression is singular rather than flattened, all eyes steady and returning the viewer’s gaze. Vibrant single-color backgrounds ranging from jewel tones to primary brights highlight every individual in a way both dignified and audacious. The artist’s grandmother— smiling in the top right quadrant of the Broad Museum installation— holds a salt-rimmed margarita glass, shown imbibing life’s pleasures rather than being ground down by its pains. Directly to the left of her, another elder in a natty pin-stripe suit holds his bejeweled fist up— not quite in a militant

pose, but invoking a picture of command and strength all the same. And while it is not easy to match each name with a face and a voice in this project, it remains abundantly clear that each elder was deeply seen and regarded by Young; all were willing subjects in her creation of new records of Black histories and legacies that endure beyond overdetermined narratives of subjection.

On the flip side of *The Black Elders* is Young’s second thesis project, *Wanted: Runaways*. If Young’s portraits of Black elders are dynamic, rich, and empowering, the one hundred paintings comprising the *Runaways* series are its absolute inverse. In this project, borne of extensive archival research into runaway slave ads held in museums and archives across the South, Young has attempted to render faithfully the images of enslaved people by creating portraits based on the violent language of the ads themselves, the text of which is

literally re-written across each person’s face. *Wanted: Runaways* superficially shares visual resonance with Kara Walker’s silhouettes and Betye Saar’s *Aunt Jemima* series of mixed-media pieces, as they both repurpose stereotypical representations of Black people in the Americas. Yet this series is more troubling than those aforementioned endeavors, given the artist’s intention that these be reparative portraits. Young intends with this project to bring justice and redress to enslaved people and their descendants in the United States, but the question remains: is it ever possible to create non-violent images which are inspired by the language of the violators? Aligned as I am with the writings and artworks of Black feminist artists and scholars Saidiya Hartman, Lorna Simpson, Simone Leigh, and bell hooks, I am compelled to resoundingly answer, *no*.⁸ Yet Young’s project is an earnest attempt to consider otherwise, and for that it is worth a serious look.

LILLIAN YOUNG

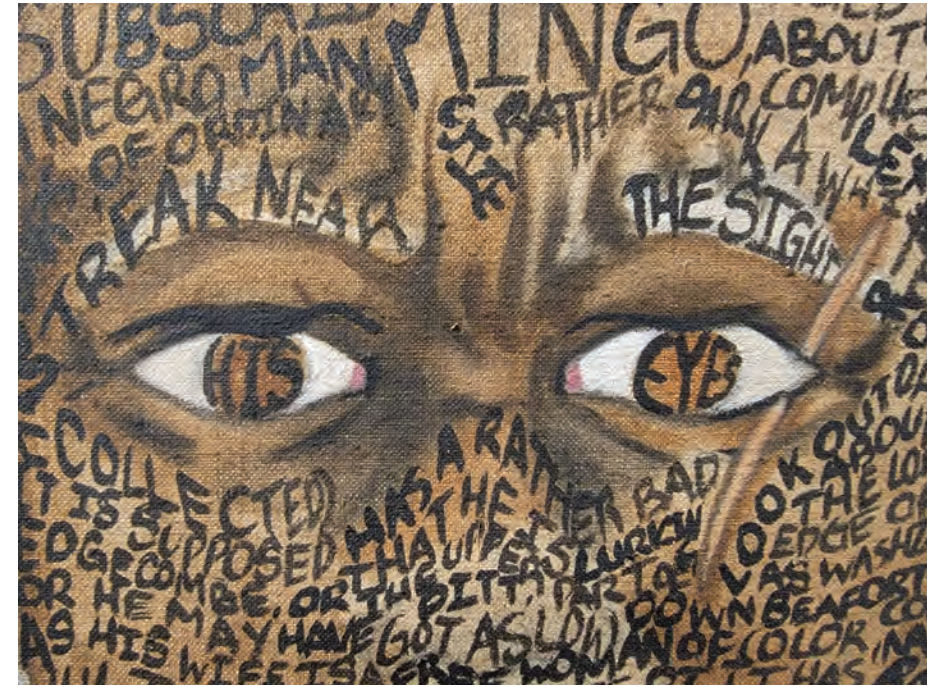


Left to right:

The Black Elders, from the series *The Problem with Archives: A Portrait is Worth Our Word*, 2021-22, Oil on panel, 24" x 32"

Wanted: Runaways, from the series *The Problem with Archives: A Portrait is Worth Our Word*, 2021-22, Oil and ink on linen, 17" x 20"

For more information, please visit: problemwitharchives.art





Installation Images by Alex Nichols



Text Citations:

¹ Daniel Cavicchi, "Text and Context: Outward in All Directions," in *The Art of Critical Making*, p. 71-72. Eds. Rosanne Sommerson and Mara L. Hermano. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2013.

² Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2007): 7-18.

³ Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, Chapter Six: "The Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves," *Data Feminism* (MIT Press, 2020). <https://data-feminism.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/czq9dfs5/release/3>

⁴ Doreen Fernandez, "Contrary Thoughts for Valentine's Day," *Tikim: Essays on Philippine Food and Culture*, p. 148. Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, 1994.

⁵ Alexis P. Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, p. 172. Oakland: AK Press, 2020.

⁶ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10.4 (2000): 667-700.

⁷ Claudia Hart, "Why We Need a Feminist Manifesta of the Blockchain," *Hyperallergic*, April 20, 2021. <https://hyperallergic.com/639180/a-feminist-manifesta-of-the-blockchain/>

⁸ For further reading, see: Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2008): 1-14. Also: bell hooks, *Art on My M*

Image Citations:

Page 12 - 13:

Top Left:
Bubble Machine, 2022, Gas motor, wood, metal, plastic rubber, and digital video, (3 min., color, sound), 36" x 45", Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Top Right:
Breathing Machine, 2020, Electronics, wood, metal, plastic, rubber, fiber, and digital video (3 min., color, sound), 58" x 42", Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Bottom Left + Right:
Hula Hoop Machine, 2021, Electronics, batteries, wood, metal, plastic, fiber, and digital video, (3 min., color, sound), 36" x 36", Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Page 20 - 21:

Top Right:
Pamilya - March 12th, 1922, in memory of the artist's grandmother, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, who was born on this day, On view: February 26 - March 13, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper

clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3, Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Top Left:

Pamilya - April 17th, 1942, in commemoration of the artist's grandfather, Francisco "Tatay Kikoy" Hebreo Buendia, who survived the Bataan Death March on this day, On view: March 17 - April 17, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3, Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Bottom Left:

Pamilya - May 1st, 1898, in remembrance of the period of American colonialization of the Philippines which began on this day; May 1st, 1934, in observance of the Philippine Independence Act which took effect on this day, On view: April 21 - May 15, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3, Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Page 24 - 25:

Top + Bottom Left:
light yellow, 2022, Porcelain, wood, and mixed media, Pool 12' x 3' x 3', Wall Pieces each 5" x 12" x 14", Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Page 28 - 29:

Top Right:
Today too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days from the series *Streams*, 2022, Original .psd file listed as an open source NFT on Tezos via Objkt, Acrylic, and Glitter on canvas wrapped panel, 2022, Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Bottom Right:
Wednesday from the series *Streams*, 2022, Original .psd file listed as an open source NFT on Tezos via Objkt, Acrylic, and Glitter on canvas wrapped panel, Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Top Left:

Don't forget to Like and Subscribe! from the series *Streams*, 2022, Original .psd file listed as an open source NFT on Tezos via Objkt, Acrylic, and Glitter on canvas wrapped panel, Image courtesy Alex Nichols

Page 32 - 33:

Bottom Left:
The Black Elders, from the series *The Problem with Archives: A Portrait is Worth Our Word*, 2021-22, Oil on panel 24" x 32"

Bottom Right:
Wanted: Runaways, from the series *The Problem with Archives: A Portrait is Worth Our Word*, 2021-22, Oil and ink on linen 17" x 20", Image courtesy Alex Nichols

contact

For more info about the Department of Art, Art History, and Design or our Master of Fine Arts program, contact us at artgrad@msu.edu.

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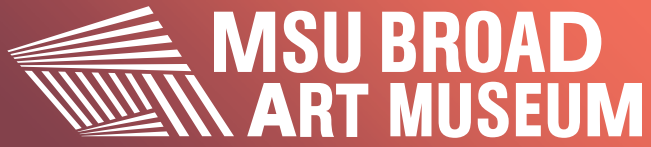
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