

I can feel your heartbeat

Rigorous studies show that, if we know someone well and are with them when they are going through an experience, there is an unconscious syncing of our heartbeat with theirs.¹ One body's interoception (how we can understand and feel what is transpiring inside our bodies) is shifted by the internal bodily/emotional experience of another person (their own interoception). It's a well-worn phrase that humans are "wired for connection," and with the COVID-19 pandemic and circumstances for connecting in person greatly diminished (if not completely absent), what connection looks like has been a moving target for many months. *our constellations: astral embraces and tactual consciousness* is the result of the magnetic pull I felt toward Fountainhead Residency artist alumni who conjure feelings of connection in their work. Through materials, symbols, and narratives that are in tune with touch, natural environments, and the liminal, sometimes spiritual, energies that operate between our emotional lives and external surroundings, these artists invite us to connect with each other, the earth, the astral, and ourselves. Essentially, my aim was to curate an exhibition that feels a bit like a hug.

Several key interests in my own pandemic life also informed this exhibition. When my mother passed away after a long struggle with COPD in the spring of 2020, I started exploring divination as a way to connect with her through synchronicities, symbols, and the Tarot. I also began to religiously listen to neurologist Andrew Huberman's podcast "Huberman Lab," which fed my fascination with mind-body connection through a new framework. Lastly, I was gifted a woven textile wall work by my friend's mother (a second mother to me), who downsized when she moved into assisted living after a hemorrhagic stroke. The tapestry was made in the 1970s and is at once delicate and sturdy in its construction. It is a precious object that signifies both my favorite decade and her home, a modest ranch house with an expansive yard and a spectacular garden that was two doors down from my childhood home in Nashville, TN. My attraction to art that intuits the embodied, divine, tactile and ideas of interiority—whether bodies or dwellings—is an extension of these recent interests and experiences.

Together we're better

"[Textiles are] the first thing that's wrapped around us when we come out of the womb and it's on us every single day. I think visually we're moving towards that because we need a warmth, we need to be loved again, we need that cloth wrapped around us."

¹ "There are beautiful studies that show that for instance when we know somebody pretty well and they are going through some sort of experience of any kind our heart rate actually starts to mimic their heart rate, our breathing starts to mimic their breathing....There is a mirroring....Somehow human beings are able to register the internal states of other beings... even at a distance." —Neurologist Andrew Huberman, The Huberman Lab podcast. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW9QKc-iFoY>

—Cheryl Pope²

In considering the tactile, many artists in *our constellations* tempt us to touch objects through sensuous materiality, presenting magical yet untouchable subjects like the moon and stars or creating narrative works that ask us to contemplate the role of touch and gesture in our intimate connections with people and places. Artists in *our constellations* who foreground the tactile in their materials are Andy Coolquitt, Katrina Coombs, T.J. Dedeaux-Norris (formerly known as Tameka Norris), Adia Millett, Cheryl Pope, and Chiffon Thomas. They tempt the viewer to touch by asking them to occupy an intimate space with the work—to look closely and observe the small gestures embedded in an artwork’s construction (sewing, knitting, etc.)—and/or by presenting the viewer with soft, cuddlable textures and surfaces. They knit, weave, braid, and sew, tempting us to touch the fabric, thread, yarn, bark, and shag in their objects and installations.

Chicago-based artist Cheryl Pope’s *Woman and Man Reclining on Striped Mat XVII* and *Woman and Man Reclining on Striped Mat XV*, both made in 2020, are from her recent series of large-scale wool roving work. Their surfaces are pilose and their compositions feature larger-than-life nudes of Pope and her partner at the time: “It’s a direct reflection of my immediate life: unabashedly celebrating intimacy, vulnerability, and pleasure.”³ The bodies and their cropped, intertwined limbs eschew single point perspective and reside on the same plane as patterned backdrops that are intentionally ambiguous in their simultaneous inclusion of domestic interiors and outdoor environs. To make the works, Pope lays pre-dyed wool inside line drawings and then binds the fabric and the wool together using a needle felting tool. The artist has compared manipulating the wool fibers with the dreading of hair, seeing the material as “bodily.”⁴ Much of Pope’s practice prior to this series was personal to her but not about her. In many of her earlier works, the artist collaborated with Chicago communities, facilitating conversations and workshops where youth wrote about their experiences. For these projects, Pope employed the “act and politics of listening”⁵ in order to, as she puts it, bring stories “back to an elitist audience [the art world]. . . saying, you guys have swept these narratives away as if they don’t still exist but they are very much still the narratives on the ground that are being lived.”⁶ While Pope’s interest in connection has shifted to romantic partnership with *Woman and Man Reclining on Striped Mat XVII* and *Woman and Man Reclining on Striped Mat XV*, she describes it as a natural progression: “The work I was previously doing was about equality and race and

² Victoria Stapley-Brown, “Cheryl Pope on love, representation and the comfort of textile art” in *The Art Newspaper*, June 11, 2019. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/interview/cheryl-pope-on-love-representation-and-the-comfort-of-textile-art>

³ Cheryl Pope, email to the author, September 5, 2021.

⁴ Stapley-Brown

⁵ Cheryl Pope, artist’s website: <https://www.cherylpope.net/>

⁶ Kylee Alexander, “CHERYL POPE: A CHAMPION FOR COMMUNITY” in *She Makes Chicago*, April 4, 2020. <https://shemakeschicago.com/blog/2020/4/4/cheryl-pope-a-champion-for-community>

injustices and safe spaces...The new works still deal with those same issues, but it's trying to come at it through love."⁷

Like those in Pope's works, physical gestures that indicate intimacy and alchemy are a substrate in *our constellations* and appear in the works of Stephen Arboite, T.J. Dedeaux-Norris, GeoVanna Gonzalez, Karsten Krejcarek, Sheena Rose, Kristen Schiele, and Chiffon Thomas. In *Iron Father*, Chiffon Thomas foregrounds the tactile and renders intimacy through physical gesture. Using thread and iron, the figures—a father and son relaxing on an intentionally ambiguous cushioned surface—are sewn into a piece of tree bark. Many of Thomas' works explore fragmented time, nostalgia, and intimate relationships from the artist's own life. With *Iron Father*, "The figures are family members constructed with different processes and materials. Both figures are tender in their own way, constructed out of singular linear strokes of fiber and rebar wire that begin to take form and create a whole."⁸ According to Thomas, the tree bark is not only tactile but parallels psychological processes around time and memory: "I wanted to use the tree bark to kind of fragment time and act as an extraction from its original placement. I feel like that act of extracting also speaks to memory and events, to what it means to revisit moments and decode the information being provided."⁹ Thomas' and Pope's works are joined by many others in *our constellations* that feature nature in concert with the human figure. In a variety of ways, these pairings of the natural world and the body inspire us to consider the interconnectivity between our emotions (which emerge from bodily signals) and our surroundings.

With *Black Moon*, Adia Millett mines the histories of quilting and African textiles along with the allegorical heft of the moon. Foregrounding the tactile, her choices of fabric, form, and title are based in a self-described interest in identity, psychology, spirituality, and nature.¹⁰ Squares of printed African fabrics are quilted together with solid colors of green, blue, gray, and white. The printed fabrics include floral motifs and arc-, star-, and orb-like shapes in gold, simultaneously rooting the work to the earth—upon which the moon shines—and intimating a canopy of the astral—where the moon resides. For Millett, the action of deconstructing and recombining textiles in her quilts and the use of culturally diverse fabrics reflect "African American experiences with broader ideas of identity and collective history" and is one way of "investigating the fragile interconnectivity among all living things."¹¹ Many of the materials in Millett's works are repurposed. *Black Moon* is doubly so as it is made from the remnants of a past work: "'Gold Moon' and 'Black Moon' were actually part of an older piece titled 'Beneath You.' I cut that piece apart (something I often do). Structurally I wanted to take the square grid apart and construct something more organic. The process felt like I was channeling the moon as she gave birth to

⁷ Stapley-Brown

⁸ Chiffon Thomas, email to the author, August 3, 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tyler Nesler, "Adia Millett" interview in INTERLOCUTOR, April 8, 2021.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/4/8/adia-millett-interview-morton-fine-art-the-moon-is-always-full>

¹¹ Artist website: <http://adiamillett.com/>

the embryo forms, 'Black Moon' and 'Gold Moon.'"¹² Millett, who increasingly is focused on artist support, collaboration, and social justice activism during the pandemic, says themes of connection also have accelerated in her practice during this time: "I am more driven than ever to make work that is built around empathy and respect for each other and our collective consciousness."¹³

Be broken into a million pieces. / Only then will your heart no longer be confined / by the precious delusion of your own identity. / And perhaps you will stop being a house / with a few windows for the light to pour in. / Instead you will be the ground and the sky. / You will be the echo of your mother's cry / and the imprint of your father's feet. / You... will be everything! —poem by Adia Millett¹⁴

As in Millett's textiles, gendered labor and Blackness are investigated in three woven works by Katrina Coombs and a textile-based installation from the *Estate of Tameka Jenean Norris*. In Coombs' wall works and in the *Estate's The Fabric of Our Lives*, both artists foreground the tactile to alchemize themes of identity, labor, and ancestral or cultural histories of "women's work" like weaving and sewing.

Three woven wall works by Jamaican artist Katrina Coombs are placed throughout the gallery, adding plush, cascading, and ethereal softness to *our constellations* with *Armour of the Other*, *Her Constellation*, and *Lost Souls Not Forgotten*, respectively. This exhibition's title was inspired by *Her Constellation*, a tall, intricately woven wall hanging with a color palette of burnt orange, maroon, mustard, and deep salmon. With these color schemes and with woven patterns reminiscent of macrame, *Her Constellation* arguably shares many qualities with 1970s decorative textiles. The weave and colors are gradated, with the hues growing warmer/darker and the weave looser from top to bottom. In the foreground, a waterfall of hanging fibers is fastened with pearlescent beads, forming a hair-like inverted "V" anchored by faux pearls. In *Armour of the Other*, a different shiny object from the sea, the cowrie shell, is sewn into the object's soft yellow fibers using red thread. Cowrie shells symbolize spirituality, fertility, and, with a history of being used as currency, wealth. Composed of five loosely woven draping orb shapes, the combination of color and form in *Armour of the Other* evokes radiating suns. The work's title correlates with the artist's continuing investigation of the "Other." Coombs defines this term as the "social insecurities and turmoil that a woman faces as she struggles and becomes displaced by her daily life in an attempt to satisfy herself, partner, family, friends and life on a whole....The 'I' becomes absent as the Other prevails and creates a structure and void of neurotic divergence within."¹⁵ Coombs' interest in incorporating spirituality and the ancestral into her practice began after the artist's grandmother passed away. It was then that Coombs learned about Yoruba spirituality and turned her grandmother's bedroom into a studio. Coombs' third work in *our constellations* extends from the wall in the shape of a triangle. In *Lost Souls*

¹² Nesler

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rosanna Albertini, "Adia Millett: The Gold of Science," in *Albertini 2014*, August 3, 2019.

<https://albertini2014.wordpress.com/2019/08/03/adia-millet-the-gold-of-silence/>

¹⁵ Katrina Coombs, artist's website: <https://katrinacoombs.wordpress.com/about/artist-statement/>

Not Forgotten, nine tightly woven white oval forms hang from the ceiling at eye level. Each elongated sphere features a patterned centerline stitched in mustard thread. The installation's title is a direct reference to ancestral conversations in Coombs' work and reflects the artist's belief that these "highly spiritual ancestral relationships...are central to understanding womanhood."¹⁶

The multifaceted nature of identity is also present in the work of T.J. Dedeaux-Norris. After having a funeral for her previous self on January 31, 2021, Tameka Norris changed her name to T.J. Dedeaux-Norris and changed her pronouns to they/them. Any work made before that point is now part of the *Tameka Jenean Norris Estate* and any works made after are by Dedeaux-Norris. Changing their pronoun was a gender signifier and a signifier of the "multi-consciousness" that comes with "operating multiple selves."¹⁷ In *our constellations*, there is one sculpture from the *Estate*, *The Fabric of Our Lives*, and a commissioned video by Dedeaux-Norris titled *Art Medium Tarot*, which will be discussed later in this essay. *The Fabric of Our Lives*, like previously mentioned pieces by Coombs, Millett, Pope, and Thomas, is textile based and foregrounds the tactile. As in Millett's work, the sculpture repurposes fabrics, and, as in Thomas' *Iron Father*, there is a connection to family as it features shredded and braided clothing from the artist, her family members, and "any odd stuff left behind at the laundromat."¹⁸ Dedeaux-Norris sees her adoption of abandoned articles at the laundromat as one conduit for connecting with others: "Operating as a single person sometimes, the times I felt most connected to folks were when I was in transit, on a subway or in a laundromat. Like when you can sit in a room with someone and not say anything."¹⁹ The sculpture's weighted, unruly pile of multicolored braided fabric rests on a circular "stage" made of a green packing blanket from the Emerson Dorsch Gallery. One end of the braid is attached to the ceiling, embodying ascension and movement. The sculpture's title is taken from the cotton industry's longtime slogan, and the artist leverages it here to implicate the history of cotton and slavery in the Southern United States. In addition to the clothes' affiliation with the artist and her family, *The Fabric of Our Lives* also consequently references the connections between Black identity, the private act of braiding, and the culturally shared public histories of agricultural enslavement.

Andy Coolquitt's commissioned floor and wall works in *our constellations* foreground repurposed fabrics and, similar to Dedeaux-Norris, include found objects as a "conduit for connection." In his decades-long practice, Coolquitt has exhibited a "willingness to follow various material where they lead,"²⁰ foregrounding found objects in his sculptures, installations, performances, and photographs. In the floor sculpture *00000000000000000000* and the wall work *00000*, tailored

¹⁶ Winston C Campbell, "'Iyami Aje' by Katrina Coombs: A Milestone Exhibition for Our Times" in *blaqmango*, May 10, 2020. <https://blaqmango.wordpress.com/2020/05/10/iyami-aje-by-katrina-coombs-a-milestone-exhibition-for-our-times/>

¹⁷ T.J. Dedeaux-Norris, "Artist T.J. Norris discusses T.J. Dedeaux-Norris Presents the Estate of Tameka Jenean Norris installed at the Figge Art Museum from October 24, 2020-January 31, 2021" on YouTube, October 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9An-tjoEts>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jeffrey Kastner, "Review, Andy Coolquitt Lisa Cooley" in *Artforum*, December 2014.

used toilet seat covers are wrapped around wooden disks and supported by idiosyncratic metal legs and mounts. Their titles index the circular forms and number of objects in each installation, an ongoing method of titling in Coolquitt's practice. Similar to Liz Rodda's video of a showroom jacuzzi, which is discussed later in this essay, intimacy takes a turn towards the deadpan and tongue-in-cheek when we think about the very personal way in which these appropriated items usually function. Removed from the bathroom and arranged together in a friendly, fuzzy adaptation of Minimalist seriality, they connect to the histories of 1960s geometric abstraction and soft sculpture.²¹ Coolquitt elaborates on his exploration of this paradox: "I'm interested in the relationship between radicalism and banality, between transcendence and inadequacy, between planning a revolution and powder room color schemes."²² As early as 1989, Coolquitt saw art as a way to create community and connection, including the concept "that art could be a prosthetic and serve as a means of communication between people."²³ With 00000000000000000000 and 00000, Coolquitt's practice of following materials where they lead and his desire to design "objects that can facilitate, not manipulate social connections"²⁴ infuse the gallery with playful yet precise powder room color schemes. In this way, his sculptures form an important allegorical and material bridge between the domestic/personal and the abstract/formal works in *our constellations*.

You don't have to tell me

There is so much that is unknown to us, from the furthest external place—what lies beyond the universe, to the furthest internal place—our psyche. —Beverly Acha²⁵

The phenomena of interoception (how we can understand and feel what's going on inside our bodies) and exteroception (our sensitivity to stimuli originating outside of the body) are woven throughout many of the works in *our constellations*. By incorporating interior spaces, vistas, vibrating abstractions, and/or displacement, artists Beverly Acha, Melissa Brown, GeoVanna Gonzalez, Karsten Krejcarek, Liz Rodda, Meredyth Sparks, and Michelle Weinberg invite us to varying degrees to contemplate the energies and spaces that reside between our internal sense of self and our external surroundings.

The video *Jacuzzi* by Liz Rodda shows an empty jacuzzi cycling through all of its jet speeds and light features in what seems to be a salesroom. In the context of this exhibition, the jacuzzi's watery nature intimates the subconscious and—through its function as an effervescent shared relaxation space—implies touch and connection. It also functions in part as an allegory for the

²¹ Andy Coolquitt, email to the author, July 15, 2021.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rachel Hooper, "jsut that way" in *Andy Coolquitt* ed. Rachel Hooper [with contributions by] Dan Fox, Matthew Higgs, Jan Tumlrir, (Houston: Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston; Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 22

²⁵ Emily Burns, "Q & A with Beverly Acha" in *maake*, 2021. <https://www.maakemagazine.com/beverly-acha>

liminal spaces between emotional interiority (interoception) and external sensations like touch (exteroception). Similar to Coolquitt's commissioned works, *Jacuzzi* forms a bridge in *our constellations*, connecting works rooted in the physical world with archetypally spiritual works like Kristen Schiele's *Water Goddess*. The found-footage video provides a humming, bubbly white noise soundtrack for *our constellations*, adding to the sense of swaddle Pope so eloquently describes and that this show aims to impart. Rodda's practice often involves "collecting, manipulating, and reframing material to build psychological tension, humor, and states of disassociation."²⁶ *Jacuzzi* solidly demonstrates these attributes and represents the artist's use of videos that are "made for purposes other than an art audience."²⁷ While much of her digital work involves combining multiple found videos, the footage in *Jacuzzi* is not altered. Originally, Rodda changed its context by showing the video in situ with sculptural elements for her exhibition HOT ZEN ISLAND at The Museum of Human Achievement. With *our constellations*, the video's context is shifted again, this time by the gallery setting, the exhibition's themes, and the other works on view. In HOT ZEN ISLAND and in *our constellations*, *Jacuzzi* reflects Rodda's interest in mining online archives like YouTube for videos that are absurd and "embody a straightforward aesthetic" as a way to highlight "the complicated nature of remaking images and the instability of their meaning when placed in new contexts."²⁸

Mirroring and fragmentation form a substrate within this exhibition's interoception/exteroception proposition. In these works, the act of mirroring is extended beyond the allegorical realm of personal reflection and becomes a tool for disrupting the visual plane and highlighting the interplay between perception and place. In *Anniversary*, Melissa Brown uses the mirror as a compositional device that expands perspectival possibilities and hints at things unseen. Using digital methods and digital scans of analog manipulations, Meredyth Sparks' works disrupt images by expanding and refilling space. In Sparks' work *Extraction (Mirrored Cutouts)*, the source image also includes a mirror that, as in *Anniversary*, allows a simultaneous forward-facing and rear view. With Michelle Weinberg's drawings, shapes are mirrored and float on a flattened visual plane, and in *Bounce House*, light bouncing off a disco ball permeates the room in the form of a graphite grid.

Reflection is prevalent in the work of Melissa Brown. Incorporating side-view, rear-view, dresser, and makeup mirrors as well as skyscraper windows and phones, her matte paintings made of Flashe, acrylic, and oil on Dibond often expand the visual field beyond a single head-on perspective. Brown's practice is influenced by landscape painting, which she sees as a useful modality for exploring the liminal: "I've traditionally considered myself to be a landscape painter, and I still would consider myself in that realm, mostly because a lot of my paintings deal with the difference between, or the line between, reality and fantasy. Landscape, or representing a

²⁶ Exhibition statement [no author named], "Star Child" on Ditch Projects website, January 19, 2019. <https://ditchprojects.com/Liz-Rodda>

²⁷ Questions by Rachel Beaudoin, Johnna Henry, and Samantha Kalson, "An Interview with Liz Rodda," MASS Gallery, Austin, TX, 2021. <https://massgallery.org/interview-with-liz-rodde>

²⁸ Ibid.

space, is a great way to make something exist in both realms.”²⁹ Of course, the mirror as a device appears frequently in art history. A classic example is Jan Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), where a man and his pregnant wife are reflected in the convex mirror behind them. While Brown’s interstate images from 2018-19 reflect part of the driver’s (presumably Brown’s) face or hand, her 2020 paintings rarely, if ever, show Brown or anyone else in the mirror. Instead, mirrors reflect the details of landscapes, skyscapes, and interiors. With *Anniversary*, a window frame and blue sky with idyllic cumulous clouds are in the mirror, and a shadow on the wall indicates that there is a lamp in the room. Through shadow and reflection, we become aware of elements that are technically beyond our view. The comb, card, doily, and dresser are physical items in the frame, yet the reflection and shadow are not physical and, arguably, can be interpreted as allegories for states of expansive illumination and shadow work respectively. Several elements in the composition of *Anniversary* are pertinent to themes in *our constellations*. The crocheted doily links with this exhibition’s textile pieces while the invitation features two arms holding cups, much like the Tarot’s soul connection card, the “Two of Cups.” Brown has a history of including divination themes in her work, and to highlight that association, *Anniversary* was placed in the sightline of T.J. Dedeaux-Norris’s video *Art Medium Tarot*.

In her *Extraction* series, Meredyth Sparks works with digital and analog collaging as a way to confuse space, “optically flattening out and expanding”³⁰ it. The resulting imagery has a tone of elegant disruption and implicates the subjective, perceptual space that resides between our bodies and their environments. Works in the *Extraction* series have been made from a variety of media over the last eleven years, including large-scale collages that combine “decorative or outmoded textiles with found photographs of mundane domestic objects like window frames and lattice screens.”³¹ The images in *our constellations* are photo collages from the series, all made in 2020. In *Extraction (Mirrored Cutouts)*, the source photograph, which Sparks digitally overlays with geometric forms, includes the image of a mirror. Similar to Brown’s work, this mirror reveals what lies behind the domestic tableau, in this case a door jamb and curtain. By combining and repeating an underwhelming wall lamp image and a vibrantly striped fabric in *Extraction (Triple Sconce)*, Sparks orchestrates a dynamic accordion-folded composition that intimates infinite reflection. Underscoring the 3-D studio aspect of her work, Sparks explains that the third/middle sconce in *Triple Sconce* “was created by wrapping the image around a painting stretcher bar, then leaning that in front of the stitched piece”³²—a doubling in the studio that generates a tripling in the final photo. *Extraction (Dusted Figurines)* is also based on a stitched collage and beautifully reflects Sparks’ concept of “approximation,” which she describes as “a way of expanding out and refilling the space that has been excised. It’s an approximation because those spaces are represented using different techniques. They have their own materiality, acting

²⁹ Emil Gombos, “Interview: Melissa Brown’s Currency” in *Two Coats of Paint*, September 3, 2016. <http://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2016/09/interview-melissa-browns-currency.html>

³⁰ Meredyth Sparks, email to the author, August 24, 2021.

³¹ The Arts Club of Chicago, exhibition announcement, January 2013.

<https://www.artclubchicago.org/exhibition/meredyth-sparks/>

³² Meredyth Sparks, email to the author, August 24, 2021.

almost like camouflage.”³³ With *Dusted Figurines*, there is a squeegee-like extension of the image’s top edge. Here, the paneling and bits of the figurines are extended through digital manipulation to form a “camouflage” version of the wall, which is then stitched to a print of the source image. When looking closely at *Dusted Figurines*, the viewer can see stitching peek out along the seam between these two elements. In *Mirrored Cutouts*, *Triple Sconce*, and *Dusted Figurines*, Sparks’ manipulation, like mirroring, ruptures the frame, infusing interiors with an in-betweenness that is at once familiar and surreal.

Michelle Weinberg also constructs fractured compositions and narratives within interiors in *Marking Time*, *Bounce House*, and *Game Room*. These small color drawings abandon single point perspective, transforming familiar spaces like the artist studio into surrealist compositions. Shallow space is common in Weinberg’s work: “From architecture to a theatrical stage kind of space, I’m always exploring figures against a backdrop, as opposed to figures floating in infinite space that recedes away from you. I was drawn to paintings by Matisse and to Persian and Indian miniature paintings from an early age.”³⁴ Slightly bigger than Tarot cards, Weinberg’s drawings feel portable and present flattened planes brimming with signifiers that imply a narrative or mood. *Bounce House* and *Marking Time* present scenes in the artist’s studio, a continuing motif: “One of my major subjects is the artist studio. The studio has been the limit of my travel in the world [since the COVID-19 pandemic]. I use the studio as the main stage, the main event.”³⁵ While large-scale paintings of interiors are central to Weinberg’s oeuvre, during the pandemic she began to expand her drawing practice beyond informal sketchbooks to include small finished drawings in color pencil and graphite. In *Bounce House* and *Marking Time*, rectangular rods float like gravity-defying interlopers, and in *Game Room*, a mirrored disco ball’s blanket of reflected light is represented by a graphite grid. In all three, we see a lack of perspectival depth in flat geometric forms and patterns such as flowers, grids, and circles. Objects, artworks, and calendars lean, hover, and hang in a manner that resides in the mind’s eye as much as in physical reality, implicating the artist’s internal life and external environment in equal measure.

In their video *Exotic Naps*, GeoVanna Gonzalez, like Sparks, disrupts the visual field. Images such as clouds, rocks, shadows, architecture, and foliage are cropped tightly and float across the screen, framed in rectangles and squares. They are then interspersed with video footage of the artist sitting, slouching, stretching, standing, and lying on a bench. Overlaid throughout is audio of Gonzalez reading a stream-of-consciousness poem. The poem is derived from notes in their sketchbooks and includes explorations of the pragmatic (“Materials for artworks listed”), the political (“Labor in the creative field”), the conceptual (“Translation as manipulation”), and the spiritual (“The word sacred means set apart”). Gonzalez’s body of work is “preoccupied with questions around gender and identity” and their media have included sculpture, performance, social practice, and video. Commissioned by the ICA Miami, *Exotic Naps* is the artist’s “personal

³³ Meredyth Sparks, email to the author, August 24, 2021.

³⁴ Kate Mothes, “Michelle Weinberg,” interview in *Young Space*, December 12, 2016. <https://yngspc.com/artists/2016/12/michelle-weinberg/>

³⁵ Michelle Weinberg, Fountainhead Residency IGTV Studio visit with Michelle Weinberg, June 16, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CBghC7OIQRW/?hl=en>

meditation on the quarantine experience” and was made in the first three months of lockdown.³⁶ While the video was filmed during quarantine, the audio’s source material was from several years of notes: “It was a moment where everything stopped and what that did was make me reflect on my past, present, and future. The text that I am reading in the film is made up of notes and parts of quotes, ideas that I had written down in my sketchbooks throughout several years, that I compiled together as a stream-of-consciousness poem.”³⁷ With *Exotic Naps*, Gonzalez’s externalization of their internal monologue, their use of physical gesture, and their inclusion of images from nature and architecture parallel the themes of connection, nature, and interiority in *our constellations*.

Karsten Krejcarek’s photographs in *our constellations* juxtapose tightly cropped deadpan compositions with mercurially lit encounters in isolated exteriors. The images are poetic and mystical and, as in much of his work, feature encounters in nature. The photographs—and titles like *Jennie in Bolivia on the Day of Our Improbable Meeting in the Amboró Forest, Not Aware of the Impending Atrocity, nor That in Six Months I Would Be Giving My Bicycle to Her Boyfriend*—leave much to the imagination, piquing curiosity and asking viewers to engage their intuition in interpreting the images. Krejcarek primarily works in video and photography, making work that is in tune with the metaphysical: “Through his artistic practice and explorative fieldwork, he has expanded upon concepts of syncretism, the multiplicity of belief, and symbiotic relationships between nature and the unconscious—ideas that have largely informed and benefited the narrative structure of his work and life.”³⁸ More than any other artist’s in this exhibition, his body of work explores the energies that can emanate from the intersection of interiority and physical environments: “I believe that part of pursuing and engaging spirituality, or higher realms, is a process of othering yourself. It’s a practice of stepping outside conscious reality and observing yourself and the world from afar.”³⁹ In *Jennie and Parque de El Retiro, Shortly after Walking Away from Ana, for What I Thought at the Time, Was the Last Time, and While Waiting for the Ladies-in-Waiting*, Krejcarek documents uncanny moments while traveling. Printed on a small scale to encourage a feeling of intimate encounter in the viewer, the photographs index moments of physical and emotional exhaustion respectively. Jennie, who was a stranger to Krejcarek when they met in a remote location of the jungle, is sleeping next to a dark body of water. She is exhausted from a long hike, and her shoes are stained pink from the soil. Krejcarek, who makes a practice of looking for dead bodies when he hikes, photographs Jennie’s leg in a way that makes it difficult to determine whether the scene is benign or whether the figure is indeed a corpse. In *Parque De El Retiro*, a leafless plant stalk signifies an emotional afternoon in Madrid after the artist walked away from a fight with his wife. When

³⁶ Girinandini Singh, “Sculptor GeoVanna Gonzalez on creating perception through her creative practice” in *stir world*, May 28, 2021. <https://www.stirworld.com/inspire-people-sculptor-geovanna-gonzalez-on-creating-perception-through-her-creative-practice>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Karsten Krejcarek, “Artist’s Statement,” Fountainhead Residency website: <https://www.fountainheadresidency.com/karsten-krejcarek>

³⁹ Terri C Smith, “John Dilg and Karsten Krejcarek,” exhibition essay, Regina Rex, April 6, 2021. <http://reginarex.org/writingpiece.asp?wld=334>

Krejcarek happened upon the lone plant, he was attracted to the lighting and the parallel between the plant's physical isolation and the artist's tearful state. The golden light surrounding the plant and the artist's choice to center it in the composition impart cosmic wisdom to diminutive foliage, an act of alchemy rooted in the interplay of the physical conditions and emotional states of the moment.

Beverly Acha is also interested in articulating energies that reside between internal perception and external environments: "Referencing architecture, diagrams, and landscape, her core concern is the perceptual slippage within these systems, the spaces between knowing and seeing, experience and memory, and the real and the imagined."⁴⁰ For the diptych *mira*, *Anochecido Rosado y mira*, *Noche Azul*, abstracted windowpanes foreground vistas that present time passing from sunset to dusk. When Acha painted these, she was paying special attention to the "color of the sky and the difference in light between inside and outside, specifically with a focus on shifting contrast."⁴¹ The diptych, which was based on two high windows in the artist's studio, is coupled with the gallery's architecture in *our constellations*, hanging high where the wall meets a soffit above the desk. Nature and the astral inspire much of Acha's work, including astronomical diagrams and drawings that have influenced the way she thinks about abstraction and image making. For the artist, abstraction is a language much like poetry that speaks to the unknown and ineffable: "There is so much that is unknown to us, from the furthest external place—what lies beyond the universe, to the furthest internal place—our psyche."⁴² Her pastels, *ripple (isla y el horizonte II)* and *arco (isla y el horizonte VII)*, epitomize this impulse to manifest the unseen through abstraction. Drawing with pastels in this manner is new to Acha's practice, and it is the first time they have been exhibited. Both *ripple* and *arco* echo the psychological and astral themes in *our constellations* and are in keeping with Acha's overall practice, including its themes of movement, sound, and rhythm.

I'll meet you halfway

And I know as I go on with this reading, we will connect vibrationally, you will feel me and I will feel you. We are all in this together. – from *Art Medium Tarot*

In *our constellations*, Beverly Acha's pastels and Karsten Krejcarek's photographs provide linkages between the artists who address the liminal space between interiority and exteriority and the artists who venture into the purely mythical and energetic. Mining mythology, divination, dreamscapes, and/or the chimerical, Stephen Arboite, Eleen Lin, Sheena Rose, Kristen Scheile, and T.J. Dedeaux-Norris often explore the unseen or the unseeable. Interestingly, while on the surface their works are dreamy and ethereal, they also investigate cultural complexities such as colonial histories, disability justice, Black identity, and gender.

⁴⁰ Beverly Acha, "About," from the artist's website. <https://www.beverlyacha.com/info.php>

⁴¹ Beverly Acha, email to the author, August 25, 2021.

⁴² Emily Burns, "Q & A with Beverly Acha," *maake*, issue 4/2017.

Dreams and metamorphosis are central to the work of Stephen Arboite, who sees them as “gateways into an alternate reality that exists within the human psyche; manifestations of our deepest desires, fears, and emotions.”⁴³ Arboite, who was born and raised in New York City and is of Haitian descent, uses coffee as a medium, making work through what he describes as a “psycho-spiritual”⁴⁴ lens. Coffee has become a metaphor for the artist’s cultural history and his spiritual pursuits: “Placing an emphasis on the historical significance and materiality of coffee, I create connections between my Haitian heritage and coffee as a spiritual medium used to emote scenes from my psyche, while simultaneously navigating a path of healing for myself and others who are yearning for a greater sense of self.”⁴⁵ *Tusajigwe (We Are Blessed)* is, like much of Arboite’s work, larger than life in scale. In it, the image of a young Black male figure seems to have descended from a futuristic moonlit desert. Shirtless, he wears what appears to be a fabric headdress and a blue strap (possibly for a bag) slung over his shoulder. The figure’s eyes are concealed, and it is difficult to discern whether they are obscured by fabric or shadows. *Tusajigwe* is from the artist’s *dreamscape* series, and the visage is simultaneously authoritative and gentle, familiar and uncanny. In the context of *our constellations* and its Tarot subthemes, *Tusajigwe* resonates with a “Page of Wands” energy that implies a desire to dream and embrace new journeys. Like Katrina Coombs, Arboite’s practice is influenced by ancestral knowledge. Concerned with the “forces of communal and individual healing, especially within the context of the African and Caribbean diaspora,”⁴⁶ his interests also dovetail with themes of healing and Caribbean culture found in many of Sheena Rose’s drawings.

Based in Barbados, Sheena Rose openly addresses healing and Afro-Caribbean culture in work that also explores “clever ways to articulate that classism, racism, and colorism are problems.”⁴⁷ Her intricately rendered small-scale drawings in ink are influenced by illustration and feature characters from Rose’s imagination. Works are given an additional sense of mood and dimensionality through the use of blocks and washes of watercolor. Rose’s subjects in *our constellations* includes female manifesters (*Blue Devil, Rainbow Machine, The Healer, Healing*), and figures who represent emotional states (*Stillness, Heart Racing*, and the Tarot-inspired *Ten Swords*—a card that represents the emotional state of painful endings). Healing has become a topic for Rose since her recent diagnosis of Lupus: “I am...trying to show my diagnosis...as a landscape. I want to show how lupus moves in my body and how it feels, as though my body is a landscape or a world itself.”⁴⁸ The hooped skirts in *Healing* and *Ten Swords* and the sculptural cloak in *Rainbow Machine* reflect Rose’s interest in the history of colonization on the island and her interest in fashion design. In many of her works, the artist melds elements from 19th-century

⁴³ N’Namdi Contemporary, “Stephen Arboite,” [statement about *Dreamscapes* series], Sept 13, 2020. <https://www.stephenarboite.com/press>

⁴⁴ N’Namdi Contemporary, “Stephen Arboite: Artist Statement,” n.d. <http://nnamdicontemporary.com/artists/stephen-arboite/>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Heike Dempster, “Stephen Arboite. Dreamscapes: The Metaphor Has Shifted to Healing,” April 8, 2020. <http://artdistricts.com/stephen-arboite-dreamscapes-the-metaphor-has-shifted-to-healing/>

⁴⁷ Alia Akkam, “Sheena Rose: A visual and performance artist channels her challenges into creation” in *hospitality design*, January 31, 2021.

⁴⁸ Marsha Pearce, “You Are Not Alone: A conversation between Marsha Pearce and Sheena Rose” in *Quarantine and Art*, May 27, 2020. <http://marshapearce.com/qanda/you-are-not-alone/>

British illustrations and signifiers of Afrofuturism as a way to upend the colonizer images she saw growing up. When discussing a 2019 large-scale drawing project at Perez Art Museum (Miami), Rose touches on this: “Barbados is very English, we saw very English illustrations. In this [project], to me, it was like ‘I want to see myself’; I want to see myself in a particular manner, treated like if I was an archive....So there is a mixture...a very traditional look, but then a very futuristic element.”⁴⁹

Two very new works by Rose are also on view: a drawing that addresses the peril of living in Barbados with volcanoes and hurricanes in an era of global warming (*Ash Fall*) and its companion video, which documents a related performance (*Shelter*). In both works, the umbrella is a symbol of inadequate protection from ravaging climate events. They were made after the artist went through her first hurricane, which was preceded by a volcanic eruption on the island. An Instagram post about the project poetically captures the moment that inspired these works: “Shelter/Where home is/Survival/Where home is/Volcano Ash /Hurricane Winds/Power out/Gas Leak/Radio/Alarm/Anticipate/Report/No Death/What’s next?/Shelter/Where home is.”⁵⁰

Eleen Lin also explores ideas of home in her paintings, framing them through mythology, literature, and fantasy. The two paintings seen here are *Cetus* from her *Mythopoeia* series, which is inspired by the novel *Moby Dick*, and *Dog Eat Sun* from her *Pet Society* series, which she began after adopting her first cat, Meme. Born in Taiwan, growing up in Thailand, and earning a Western education in England and the U.S., Lin describes herself as a “third culture kid,” which she defines as “a person who grows up in more than one culture.”⁵¹ Consequently, her paintings often “illustrate the nomadic solitary experience of drifting among various traditions, the dichotomy of original and translation, and the obscurity of cultural boundaries today.”⁵² Looking to the sky, *Cetus* and *Dog Eat Sun* reference the celestial and mythological in different ways. Characterized by a night sky, ship’s bow, and a whale’s blowhole, *Cetus*, like many works in *our constellations*, includes the element of water and the moon, and with its intricately patterned sail, is in conversation with the exhibition’s textile pieces. The title *Cetus* is an oblique reference to *Moby Dick*, referencing a constellation in the shape of a sea monster from Greek mythology named “Cetus” (in English often called “the whale”). Lin describes how *Moby Dick* intersects with her identifying as a third culture kid: “*Mythopoeia* reiterates *Moby Dick*. Many elements in this piece of classic American literature relate to my experience as an immigrant artist: the cultural diversity of the crewmates, the journey from New England to Asia, the segregation from society, and the mysticism of travel.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Pérez Art Museum Miami, “The Other Side of Now: Sheena Rose,” July 25, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0yRXuPIpAo>

⁵⁰ Sheena Rose, Instagram: @sheenaroseinc, July 10, 2021.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CRJgq4qgmVu/>

⁵¹Eleen Lin, *Who’s Next: Eleen Lin* [Interview with GENEYCLEE GALLERY], May 2, 2019.

<https://www.geneycleegallery.com/post/who-s-next-eleen-lin>

⁵³ Ibid.

Dog Eat Sun has a more absurdist tone that reflects how Lin embeds paintings “with multivalent [compositions] and cynicism” as a way to express the “awkwardness and humor set up by a mix-match of cultures that is fundamental in celebrating our diversities.”⁵⁴ *Dog Eat Sun*—whose title is a literal translation of what a solar eclipse was called in ancient China—shows a black dog standing in a sandbox at a park and holding a disk decorated with the image of a sun in its mouth. Behind the dog is a street sign that reads “Hound Square.” Connecting to divination and the astral through its allusion to Chinese and Western astrology (Year of the Dog and sun signs), *Dog Eat Sun* ties in to *our constellations*’ astral themes, illustrating Lin’s use of Chinese folklores and the fusing of “human-animal relationships with the modern-day urbanite’s attachments with their pets”⁵⁵ in the *Pet Society* series.

Poetic ambiguity and mythology also inform the figurative work of Kristen Schiele. Her chimeric characters, conjurers, and goddesses are often endowed with elements of futurism, feminism, and, paralleling many of Sheena Rose’s drawings, the power of manifestation. Driven by the process of drawing, Schiele’s practice is informed by Norwegian death metal, Japanimation, clowns, sci-fi, and masks from around the world. While these works are rendered in paint, her characters are developed through drawing. Schiele often draws and redraws different masks and figures, including live drawings of the people around her. Sometimes she sketches on tracing paper and then layers existing drawings to see what new characters emerge: “[I like layering] them because you never know what’s going to happen, which character will stand out.”⁵⁶ Through transparency, color, and a stacking of gestures, these figures—which are sometimes humans/animal or human/goddess hybrids—seem to personify soul vibrations that, in energy work and Tarot are referred to as “the divine feminine.” Schiele has stated that her work actively challenges the male gaze and its feminine ideals, especially works like *The Three Graces* from Greek mythology. In *our constellations*, Schiele’s ethereal characters actively resist the male gaze through otherworldly visages and veils of body language. Rendered primarily in blues, *5 Works on a Cedar Shelf: Undercover* expresses an explicit duality between the external, masked “blanket” persona and the melancholy female figure they swaddle. With *5 Works on a Cedar Shelf: Flower*, the character, as in Stephen Arboite’s *Tusajigwe*, directly addresses the viewer with an enveloping gaze. Here two torsos intersect to produce three gesturing arms: two hands form the meditation mudra *Jnana* and the third hand holds a rose. The shelf works *Bird* and *Circle* also feature two sets of gesturing arms, with one figure’s head that of a human (superimposed with a bicolored circle) and the other’s replaced by a bird mask. Located at the center of the shelf, the disembodied face and radiating aura of *Hypnosis* create a hub for the other four works. In Schiele’s second work, *Water Goddess*, there is a direct reference to spiritual archetypes. Placed near the watery sounds of Liz Rodda’s video *Jacuzzi*, this large-scale wall work includes a square that features a head and two hands; a solid green horizontal bar; and a base painted with white-capped sea water. The goddess, whose eyes are partially drawn and whose cheeks are colored rectangles, seems to be looking at her reflection

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kristen Schiele, “Kristen Schiele: Virtual Studio Visit,” Fountainhead Residency IG Live on YouTube, May 1, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROQhK4Q3Z24>

in a powder compact, reiterating in voluminous fashion this exhibition's themes of mirroring, water, and the supernatural.

The supernatural (and, arguably, the supernatural industrial complex) is most directly attended to in T.J. Dedeaux-Norris's commissioned video *Art Medium Tarot*. Sincerely intrigued by Tarot while also satirizing its tropes, Dedeaux-Norris incorporates typical signifiers found in online Tarot videos, such as crystals, burning incense, a gentle tone, and camera framing that show only the cards and manicured hands. In *Art Medium Tarot*, Dedeaux-Norris, who performs the role of the reader, directly addresses the gallery goer, beginning with "This reading is for you. If at any point you are visiting this exhibition and you happen to hear my voice, know that these words are timeless and they are for you, listener." Riffing on the dramatic manicures of many online Tarot readers, Dedeaux-Norris had fake nails made that are painted with celestial skies, astrological symbols, and Tarot references. Many tropes heard in online readings pepper the video as well, including the phrases "I'm being asked to clarify" and "abundance," the asking for guidance from "spirit," and, when a card confirms an earlier part of the reading, a voice enthusiastically exclaiming, "You can't make this stuff up!" The cards prompt viewers to consider getting more rest, cleaning the ghosts out of their closets, having curiosity about magic, processing grief during the pandemic, and embracing potential material abundance.

There are several areas where Dedeaux-Norris cleverly veers from a typical reading: shifting the focus to the gallery context, highlighting the multiplicity of the word "medium," and cheekily pitting *Art Medium Tarot* against Modernist histories. Early on, the reading connects making art to making magic: "For those of you, ironically, who are maybe here for this message and you're artists, you know a lot about energy—energy being cultivated through your practice, right? But also know that energy is also circulated through magic." Alluded to in the title, Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "The medium is the message" operates here on many levels: the technology of the television monitor itself; the performative paradigms and materials (i.e., media) common to tarot readings; Dedeaux-Norris's adoption of Tarot reading as a medium in their work; and, of course, the Tarot reader's role as a spiritual medium who can channel messages. Using two cards that feature dead white male artists, Dedeaux-Norris humorously refers to some of *Art Medium Tarot's* conceptual underpinnings as well. The Picasso card is amusing in light of the fact that the artist is impersonating a reader: "If nothing else be prolific. Choose as many styles as you do lovers, make something worth impersonating." Toward the end, they pull an art card that features Gustav Klimt and reads, "Every portrait is a self-portrait. If no group will have you, start your own. Like gold, eroticism fluctuates with times." Commenting, staying in character but with a bit of a "wink wink" in their voice, Dedeaux-Norris adds, "I think this is a good landing point. Every portrait is a self-portrait, right?"

I'm on my way back home

As a landing point for this text, I would like to share some thinking about the arrangement of works in the galleries. In a show about connection, my aim was to create an installation that reads as more than the sum of its parts and that is in conversation with the gallery's architecture. The placement of Liz Rodda's *Jacuzzi* behind the front desk, combined with the

projection's large scale, folds the Gallery Director's station into the exhibition and invites visitors to walk toward the back of the gallery guided by light and sound. The high placement of Beverly Acha's diptych, which is based on elevated windows from her studio, also links the offices to the exhibition space and lends the Gallery two new "windows"—the placement is also a tip of the hat to Robert Gober's *Prison Window* (a 1992 piece where bars are installed into a gallery wall's elevated cutout). In an effort to disrupt typical viewing habits and set the tone for a heightened sense of engagement, I placed *The Fabric of Our Lives* near the Gallery doors. Its hanging braid and mound of braided fabric on the floor imply the architectural element of a column and disrupt the "white cube" by encouraging visitors to look in multiple directions and forcing them to decide whether to veer right or left when they enter the Gallery. It was important that *our constellations* also feel cohesive and friendly. In order to cultivate a sense of conversation between all of the works, in some instances I separated pieces by the same artist. While the works aren't adjacent, I did keep them tethered through site lines, rhythmic patterns of placement, and similar hanging heights. For instance, a portion of Andy Coolquitt's floor work, in the second gallery, can be seen when viewing the wall work 00000 from the main gallery, and Kristen Schiele's *5 Works on a Cedar Shelf* in the second gallery sit diagonally behind *Water Goddess*, peripherally peeking over *Water Goddess*'s "shoulder" from around the corner. Textiles by Katrina Coombs and drawings by Sheena Rose are on view throughout the exhibition in both galleries, punctuating the exhibition with repetition, periodic appearances of softness and female archetypes, respectively. In the front gallery, Cheryl Popes' works are hung across from each other at the same elevated center height anchoring them to each other and creating a center point for the entire room. Finally, I eschewed the centerline in this exhibition's installation, hanging intimate works lower (Karsten Krejcarek, Sheena Rose, and Michelle Weinberg) and those that conjured heavenly bodies or ethereal narratives higher (Stephen Arboite, Adia Millett, and Katrina Coombs' *Armour of the Other*). The rejection of a centerline is a metaphor for the mix of scale and expanse included in *our constellation*'s themes, which include earthly environments, architectural interiors, and starry skies. It also was meant to conjure our own interior spaces, homes, offices, and studios where art is hung in a manner integrous to life – over furniture, next to shelves, between windows, etc. After all, for an exhibition to feel like a hug, it first needs to feel a little bit like home.