

We were remote. Going back to school with the pandemic surging and political system teetering, we were wary of, and very grateful for, the utopian bubble of an MFA program. Whether in-person, hybrid or virtual, we were at Cornell. I was in California and New York City, always at some kind of epicenter. Those in Ithaca nestled together on campus, masked. From the other side of the screen, I was impressed: the collective and collaborative effort of the students, staff and faculty kept the studios open. I was also amazed by the students who worked at ambitious scales out of their living rooms. I was really into the grad seminar that fall: for all the *Black Mirror*-like alienation of the apparatus, we achieved a certain intimacy. We had all gone underground. We huddled, at great distances, together.

Layla Zubi's recent monotypes, such as *Untitled (Integrated Communities, Growing)*, use iconography and patterning to describe an inexorable suburban sprawl and the uncanny sameness of tract homes; yet, within that uniformity, there is difference. These works on paper map out a hybrid identity, as multiple forms of belonging, from religious heritage to geographical location, intersect across planes of representation.

Xiaoyao Yao's fragmented drypoint, aquatint works on paper, such as the 2021 *Bathroom* series, offer glimpses of a mundanity in flux, the tiles of the room tilted as if the world were sliding out of frame. A figure is visible only at the margins, and only in pieces, as we see the feet of a bather sinking to the floor. Depressive, abject and collapsing, the colorless space nevertheless affords a constructed normalcy for the body's daily rituals.

Paloma Vianey's wrecking ball / piñata *The Weight of Our Fear*, 2021, is constructed of plaster, oil paint, chain, and rebozo fabric from Ciudad Juárez. Like all of Vianey's work, the sculpture is emblematic of the entangled humanitarian crises and inherent violence of the US-Mexico border, as seen from the artist's specific vantage point as a young woman navigating femicide, racism, separation and inequity. The fire-orange ball hangs low to the floor, menacing, like a meteorite hovering over a pueblo of ants waiting to be crushed.

Grace Sachi Troxell's totemic structures such as *Untitled (Carrots)* and *Untitled (Moss)* employ materials grown by the artist, slipcast vegetables slathered with turmeric, lemon, ginger, and buttermilk to cultivate body-sized figures into being. Troxell's sculptures evoke pre-modern traditions of ceramics and vessel-making, the engorged forms recalling a hippy modernism imbricated with feminist post-minimalism and non-western aesthetics, promising a post-human futurity that will outlive us.

David Nasca's stuffed-animal worms are non-binary phalloi extending into and out of shell-like cocoons and protective rock formations. Part diorama, part sculpture, *Relic* and *Reclaim* (both 2021) set glazed stoneware in counterpoint with shimmering foil-coated leather, hardness and softness touching, seemingly animate and solidly unmoving materials performing a queerly artificial staging of exoplanetary, aquatic environments, that (hopefully, for now) elude the human realm.

Erin Miller's silkscreen installations are a flat paper funhouse, an imaginary tunnel of love into the body through an ecstatic hellmouth, a glimpse of the interiority of the unconscious through raucous, colorful dream imagery. Using the repetition of printmaking in tandem with the improvisatory mark-making of gesture, Miller's practice embraces contradictory impulses as it confronts the viewer with a fantastic reality.

Christine McDonald's *Trumpet* (2021) is a conical sculpture housing a cast family of birds, an image of shelter and invasion, protection and opportunistic symbiosis. McDonald's conceptual installations take the viewer through a network of interrelated objects, forms syntactically structured with rhyme and rhythm, a physically concrete poetry. McDonald's alchemical approach to myth making offers a subjective narrative of radical ambivalence.

Kirk Henriques's paintings are composed from a shifting, liquid process informed by the artist's persistent inquiry into the politics of color – in all its manifestations, from the redlining of urban centers to

the figurative representation of familial legacies through photography. The rondo *Genesis* (2021) swirls, a merging and emerging planetary formation, while *Strong Drank* (2021) uses hibiscus to deconstruct Zobo, a festive potable, constitutive of the cultural body, itself shaped by ritual.

Erika Germain's coded abstract paintings have poetic armatures. Language, as a system of arbitrary signs which nonetheless produce meaning, is translated into new forms. In *Finnegan II (for be that namesake)*, 2021, each letter is reduced to a colored dot; when set onto the canvas, words become the molecular structures undergirding colorful compositions that oscillate against the eye. In *We Can't Be* (2021), chunky impasto marks are traces of the cypher, making tangible signs referring to a text long lost.

Morgan Evans-Weiler's installations, photographed and printed on aluminum, offer fragile models for an ontology of objects. The white-on-white compositions play upon an ikebana-like surrealism, obscure, even occult, offering an opaque transparency that tests and traces the edges of legibility, the perception of materiality conjuring a sonic decay, a hauntology evading the phenomenological, teasing at perception.

Over the course of the semester, we talked a lot about the work they were making, against the odds, in those studios and at their homes. I had retreated into my iPad, while the Cornell MFAs worked through a virtuosic array of approaches to art-making. Their ideas objectified, the group cultivated abstract expressions of identity, meditations on the realness of material production, and its consequences. Framed by that unavoidable interface, Zoom, we flashed through photo slideshows and embodied laptop camera walk-throughs of installations, drawings, sculptures, and paintings. I never saw them in person. From my point of view, the Cornell MFA 2021 are survivors of a real-life dystopian science fiction story. It was something like tending to a banzai garden in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. It is a parable of maintenance and care in the face of a reckless and uncaring onslaught.

—Alexandro Segade, May 2021