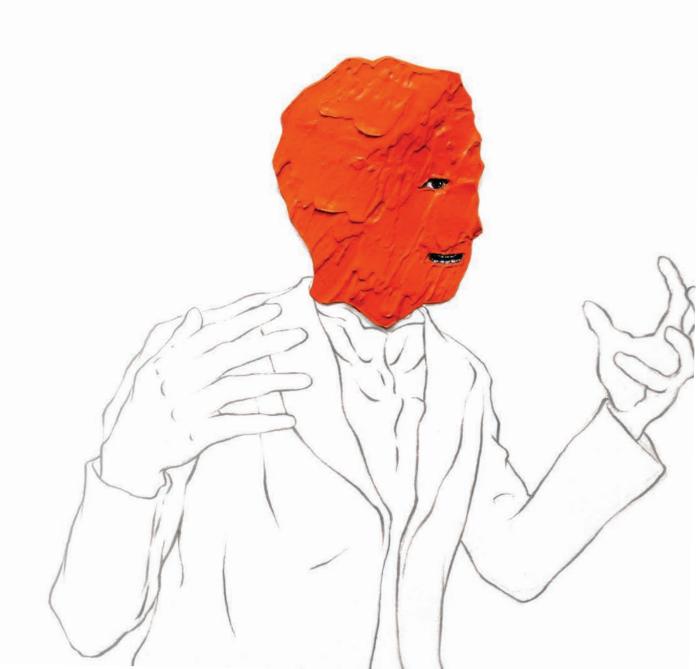
AMID/IN WNY 2022



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ARIEL ABERG-RIGER

BECKY BROWN

JULIA DZWONKOSKI

BECKY KOENIG

AVALENE MUSIK

TONY NASH

KARLE NORMAN

CRAIG SHEPERD

HEATHER SWENSON

XIII

NESTOR ZARRAGOITIA

curated by Kyle Butler, John Massier & Rebecca Wing

January 14

February 25

2022

From 2015 to 2017, Hallwalls presented a series of eight regional group exhibitions under the over-arching rubric of *Amid/In Western New York*, a coy allusion to a multi-venue biennial from the previous decade called *Beyond/In Western New York*. Where *Beyond/In* was anchored by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, helming a group of galleries, museums, and curators from Buffalo to Lewiston, *Amid/In* was decidedly low-fidelity. Three humble curators poking their noses into over 200 artists' studios and exhibiting the work of 78 artists across all media. Five years after that final group exhibition, we felt it was time to get the band together for a fresh gig of studio visits and snap judgments. As was the case in the original project, we obeyed no theme and pursued no specific logic outside of what we found interesting, an iconoclastic collection of weird gestures and curious choices.

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JOHN MASSIER: Usually working in book or web formats, it was exciting to prompt Ariel Aberg-Riger to concoct a version of her work for a gallery setting, within a group show no less. Her resolution to retell a regional ecological tale on a canvas scroll takes the original web-based story and transforms it into a kind of historical artifact, a freshly discovered manuscript whose casually hand-written story belies the dark, portentous tale within.

KYLE BUTLER: Much of Ariel Aberg-Riger's work is in digital storytelling, with narratives splayed out over a vertical scrolling format. The space available for the narrative is indefinite, and translating that narrative structure to a gallery meant having to negotiate finite space. Her answer to that, a hand-drawn narrative printed on canvas and hung like the cloth towel racks that haunt bar bathrooms, is endearingly physical.

REBECCA WING: I was surprised that the visual stories woven by Ariel Aberg-Riger escaped my notice for so long, She's got a admirable back catalog of drawn characters and stories of historical significance which, accompanied by her hand-written voice cutting to the heart of the matter at hand, washes over you with the familiar pacing of a conversation with a good friend. We all seemed to gravitate towards Riger's piece themed on Lake Erie at once. I remember tracing her lake-as-paint down the page during our studio visit, following the water's splashing and pooling alongside her story.

JM: Becky Brown's works strike a jovial balance between tight, specific gestures and the possibility that some gestures and lines are barely held in her control. They can be sharp and pointed or loopy and goofballish. But the smartness of her aesthetic choices gleam through the cacophony when you realize how her riotous fields of color manage to hang together in some kind of considered balance, an unexpected result given the wacky freedom of the individual elements. It's always refreshing to see works that maybe shouldn't work, but do.

KB: Becky Brown's work often equates visual complexity with the complexity of the hyper-connected world of information. It doesn't act so much as a societal barometer as it does one for the psychological impression of that information: overwhelmed, fragmented, and with familiar phrases, images, and sites briefly coming up for air before diving back into the muck.

RW: There wasn't a single thing in Becky Brown's studio that I didn't want to hang in the gallery for the next 7 weeks for this show. John made a fair point that *Amid/In 2022* was already shaping itself into a lovely cacophony and we narrowed our focus to a body of work that is an outlier because of its scarcity of text (not including *My Passwords*). The layers of image/line/pattern/color are so visually dense, often providing camouflage for the most recognizable elements in her small paintings-photographic figures and landmarks collaged into the frenetic environment of each surface, or the stack of objects-spiral-bound notebook and paper pads-seemingly dumped casually on a tabletop and inadvertently encapsulated in a sculpture-with new lives as part of a collective whole.

JM: Extra bonus points to Julia Dzwonkoski for landing upon a very apparent schtick—"I'll make drawings about ghosts!"—without the result becoming schticky. For the simplicity of her ghost form (a curvy line with two dashes), Dzwonkoski manages an encyclopedic range of scenarios, gags, and philosophical moments. While admirably humorous, they surpass their own cheek with great eloquence and frequently give us pause to think. And given the repetition of the core element of the ghost, Dzwonkoski manages an endlessly compelling deftness in her formal pictorial arrangements. The whole idea sounds like a one-liner but the actual works accrue together to plumb much more resonant depths.

KB: Julia Dzwonkoski doesn't seem to suffer the same fretting over which ideas to act on as many makers do. Her threshold for a compelling idea is permissive, and as a result her drawings illustrate all sorts of peculiar turns of thought. The main character of the ghost is persistent throughout, regardless of context, acting as an anchor to Dzwonkoski's traipsing notions.

RW: As universal and human characters, Julia Dzwonkoski described her pandemic project as one acutely aware and responsive to the artist's own gut feeling, placing a confidence in her viewers that somehow an idea—a phrase, a compositional decision that feels right—will also serve to hook and delight her viewers. Despite the brisk pace at which she continues to produce these paintings (often, a few throughout the course of a single day), the overwhelming variety of the ghosts' irregular activities and oblique remarks provide enough mystery to have prompted many personal contemplations, finding myself recalled from a reverie after following a suggestion along an entirely novel train

of thought or unexpectedly ruminating on one of life's fundamental questions. I joked with a group of students while sharing images of this series, "I like to ask myself, 'What ghost am I?'" It's no surprise that they'd enjoyed asking themselves that question just as much.

JM: Unsurprisingly, given that she has written a text book on color theory, Becky Koenig knows the power of colors when amplified through specific drawn gestures, no matter how simple. Or, better still, she is aware of the power simple forms and lines provide to certain treatments of color. And there are some wide poles in her work, from rigorous geometric forms to entirely ambiguous entities. Each play with space and mark making in dynamic and energetic ways.

KB: With each next piece, Becky Koenig seems to commit herself to a small idea built from the fundamentals of color and drawing. It could be a relationship between mark and shape, a relationship between textures, or between image and render technique. It's akin to reductive, formalist art, but with enough of a drawing voice and image reference to never quite land at something so austere.

RW: Apparitions seem to haunt the walls of this show—the oversized presence of a digital detritus in the form of Becky Brow's forgotten, revived, and accumulated passwords; Becky Koenig's selection of a single-use shape that drifts or looms multiples within the edges of one of her abstractions; Avalene Musik's figures of techno-cryptkeepers in a glitchy checkerboard pattern that reappear in several of her paintings; Karle Norman's life-sized silhouettes in cut-and-dyed leather, embedded in (and with) an autobiographical chronology that shares some the visual qualities and the weighty presence of ritual funerary objects; Julia Dzwonkosk's literal ghosts; Tony Nash's slow rendering of the repetition of a daily commute where banal frustrations and encounters of the day-to-day provide the only flashes of clarity sharp enough to recall one's attention to the here-and-now; and the shaky Nestor Zarragoitia portraits that have that same feeling you get from looking at old family photos of people you never knew.

JM: I can recall when we visited Avalene Musik's studio and perused works made by someone who only started painting in earnest during the pandemic and how enraptured we were. There were so many works where we discussed specific, painterly gestures and choices that appealed to us. And the wild spectrum of styles—from still lifes to graphic b&w works to works that were ominous and mysterious. Her freedom toward subject matter and unpretentious approach is the attitude many a schooled artist has tried to return to once they've been over-taught art school stylings.

KB: Avalene Musik is nurturing a unique ingenuity with painting, where her solutions for how to render an image often surprise or amuse. Though relatively new to painting, she has quickly developed a visual language that remains intact despite the frequent shifts in subject matter. Those shifts suggest an earnest aspect to her work, where there's the same investment portraying an unassuming still life as there is mulling over heavier issues of identity.

JM: It was a little crazy, how many Tony Nash paintings we selected. They are small, but I can recall how challenging it was for us to restrain our enthusiasm. It was a reflection of how many wondrous moments there are throughout his seemingly banal dash-cam oil paintings. The subject matter is truly ordinary but there's loads of painterly magic taking place, almost hypnotically so. Colors, forms, his treatment of light and weather conditions. There are tight renderings

and more elusive ones. There is the traffic of the commute and the vacancy of an empty toll booth, evoking a peculiar and unexpected range of emotions. Ordinary life rises to the surface as some kind of ethereal experience.

KB: Tony Nash's series of commute paintings make the most of a banal situation. He's translated an unremarkable, necessary aspect of work life into a deep resource for images. The series leans toward being systematic, as if he's constructed a second job from the byproducts of his day job, but this is undercut by the exploratory way in which he settles on compositions by freely scrubbing through archived video until a reasonable image is discovered.

RW: I like the wonkiness geography and rendered space in this show, The grid of Tony Nash's oil paintings—culled from years of video footage from his daily commute—restrict any impulse or desire to relish in our admiration of a friendly stretch on a familiar road, or to gain a better vantage for our closer inspection of some subtle regional landmark. The vista is viewed uniformly from the driver's seat, once removed from lived-experience, contained within the frames of the windshield, Nash's video camera viewfinder, the still image selected as reference photo imported to a different digital device, the edges of the painting, the boundaries of the gallery wall.

JM: Karle Norman's figurative leather works really grabbed us in a weird way during our studio visit. I think we collectively appreciated the strangeness of his choice of format, retelling his own history across leather sarcophagi in a manner dominated by personal visual codes not entirely decipherable upon immediate inspection. Or even longer inspection—specific meanings remain veiled. Like long-lost hieroglyphics, his alluring works transform personal experience into symbolic narratives filled with mystery and transformation.

KB: We lucked out. In amassing artists and work for this exhibition, we happened to catch Karle Norman as he was just working out the specifics of a fresh, but long-brewing idea. The figurative leather works in the exhibition are uniquely iconographic, building a simplified and oblique language from the image distillations of his previous work and from his own history with family, spirituality, and change. Along these lines, I appreciate how the landscapes also included in the exhibition give a clue as to the origins of the sensibility in the leather works.

RW: Both Karle Norman and Becky Brown are dealing with real geographies—locations that actually exist in the physical world—but Norman's landscapes from an aerial view are based on photographs taken by the friend-of-a-friend on a journey Karle wasn't present, While Becky Brown's map has been constructed with different priorities in mind than its effectiveness in orienting a user in their actual physical surroundings. Brown invites our dreamlike uncertainty, obfuscating a too-recognizable map-form by scattering her topography with locations selected for the sheer poetic happenstance in the name of a place

JM: Craig Sheperd's astute transformations of familiar Rust Belt imagery into sharp, brightly hued scenes evoke the clarity of signage while also breaking down representational forms into somewhat abstract configurations. It's fascinating that he cites "neglect" as one of his sources of inspiration, though his aesthetic treatment transforms these sites of neglect into enchanted spaces where every object and form is lovingly rendered with great control and specificity. He applies great care in rendering neglect.

KB: Craig Sheperd's subject matter of aging infrastructure, colloquial street scenes, and the paraphernalia of the built environment could, in other hands, have the effect of a sort of fetishized voyeurism to weathering. But they are made with such care and precision that there is instead a respect communicated, as if that work ethic is a nod to the fellow toilers of daily life. Craig's aesthetic also seems informed by the pragmatic aspects of the imagery he portrays, where his paintings have a clarity of image in the same way that a road sign has a clarity of message.

JM: Though miniature in scale, Heather Swenson's sculptural scenes—with scaffolding, signage, and rocks—nonetheless impart their own kind of epic quality. The epicness of a charm bomb. There is a knowing quality to her reconfiguration of familiar, quotidian arrays in tiny, fragile arrangements. She realizes the allure of our world when remodeled as tiny considerations. It speaks a little to our own Lilliputian pomposity in relation to our world and tempts us to lean in if we want to get in on the action of the piece.

KB: One of the enduring themes of Heather Swenson's work is informal structures. She at times riffs on ancillary built forms like temporary signage or DIY all-weather structures. In another series (not included in this exhibition), she catalogs the many iterations of security patterns in envelopes, tracking a structure that typically goes unnoticed. Behind this is a sensibility, perhaps informed by her practice of collage-as-sketching, where shapes are skewed, textures isolated, and the composition is defined by a combinatory playfulness.

JM: The works by XIII are wildly diverse in realization but all share an iconography of a kind of mysticism, a spirit world infused by touches of digital representation and qualities of futurism. Maury Povich as a stand-in for a generalized white devil is particularly potent, with his dead white eyes and angular horns, painted as though they were exaggerated in Photoshop. Meanwhile, her hazy portrait of a black figure in an ambiguous orange shirt is simply rendered with its details smudged away but evoking a particularly strong evocation of identity and personhood.

KB: If XIII weren't so capable at shifting styles, you could say they were dabbling. In this exhibition alone are five paintings that each could become a body of work, but may instead be followed by five entirely different paintings. What I gather from this is that XIII is comfortable reacting to the world as themselves, employing their abilities when the interest strikes them. There are constants despite the differences among the works, like a persistently glamorous color palette and a manner of expression informed by digital media.

JM: I'm not certain we would call the paintings of Nestor Zarragoitia surrealist, but there is a decided weirdness to his sense of representation and portraiture. It's a world of misfit characters painted with a purposefully convoluted, but confident, style. There are so many spaces within his paintings that are wonderful to consider—odd renderings, satisfying color choices, and, most apparently, the off-kilter nature of his portraiture. It's as though he is conceding that we are basically a world of weirdos and it might be most appropriate to give subtle—and sometimes aggressive—emphasis to that weirdness.

KB: Nestor Zarragoitia's paintings illustrate specific scenes, though not always intelligible ones. You may not know who is being depicted, what narrative is playing out, but there's the sense that you are being made privy to a moment.

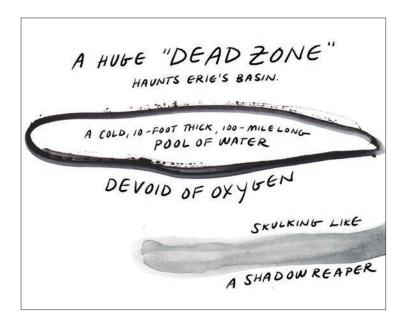
In one, a man swings a chicken around, presumably for reasons. In another, Francis Bacon is restrained to a chair at what looks like a casual back yard gathering. Add to this Nestor's oddball shifts in stylization, what results are images that are as familiar as they are uncomfortable.

JM: In the end, as curators, we concede to our own weird inclinations and attractions in the artwork we selected. It's what we loved at this moment in time. As we begin to install it in the gallery, unsurprisingly, those seemingly-intuitive decisions reveal some kind of internal logic and all these crazy, disparate works start to look like they belong together. Natually, we collected them together under a shared title, so they "belong together" in that sense. But in other ways as well, in comfortable ways, where different things made by different people reveal their shared dreams, their shared color schemes, their eloquently-rendered lines, shared thematic origins, and the expressive threads of emotion that run through all we make and see.

BIRDS DIED OF BOTULISM. THE LAKE WAS, IN THE WORDS OF TIME MAGAZINE: "A GIANT CESSPOOL IT WAS BLEAK. THINGS HAD BECOME SO BAD, WE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO MAKE THEM BETTER.

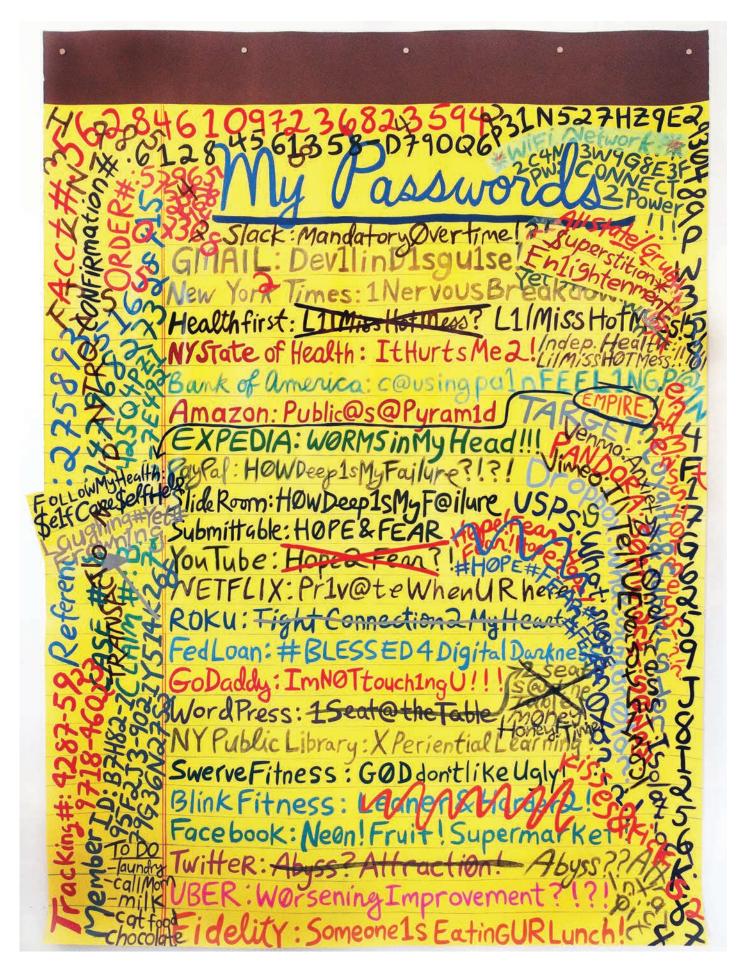
ARIEL ABERG-RIGER







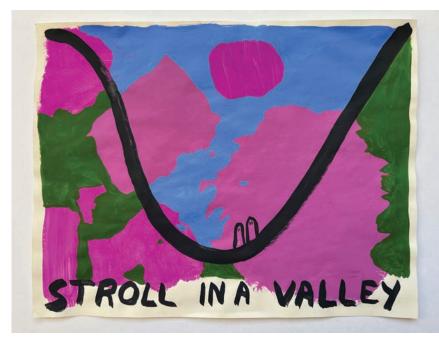
LEAVING-A COLD, DARK, DEATH HOLE IN THEIR WAKE.



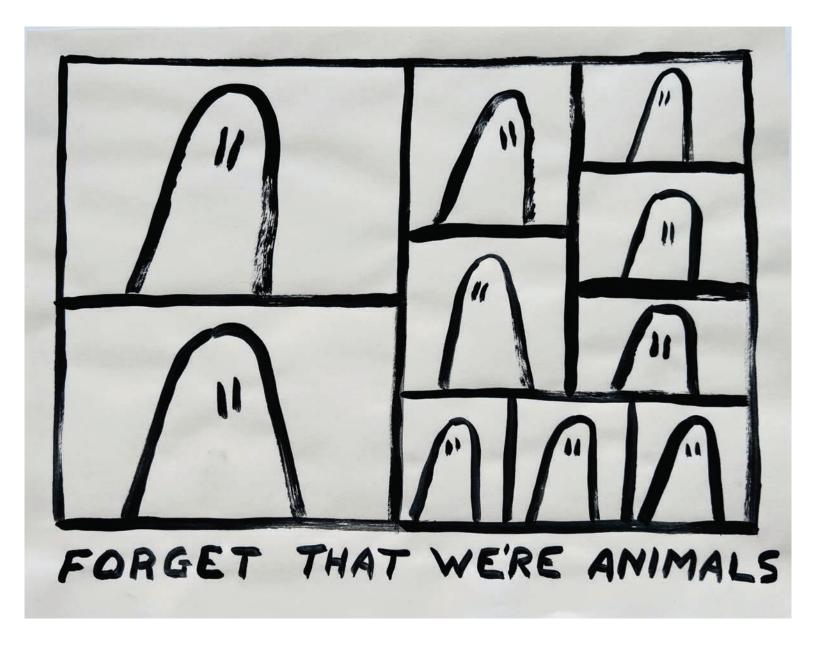


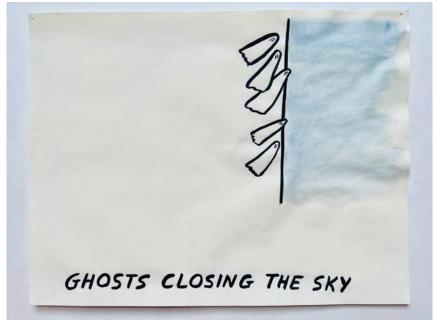
 $\it My \, Passwords$, 2020, acrylic paint, pencil and ink on paper, 77 x 55.5 inches $\it Big \, Box \, Store$, 2017, acrylic paint, collage, and found objects on freestanding wall with molding, 59 x 49 x 12 inches





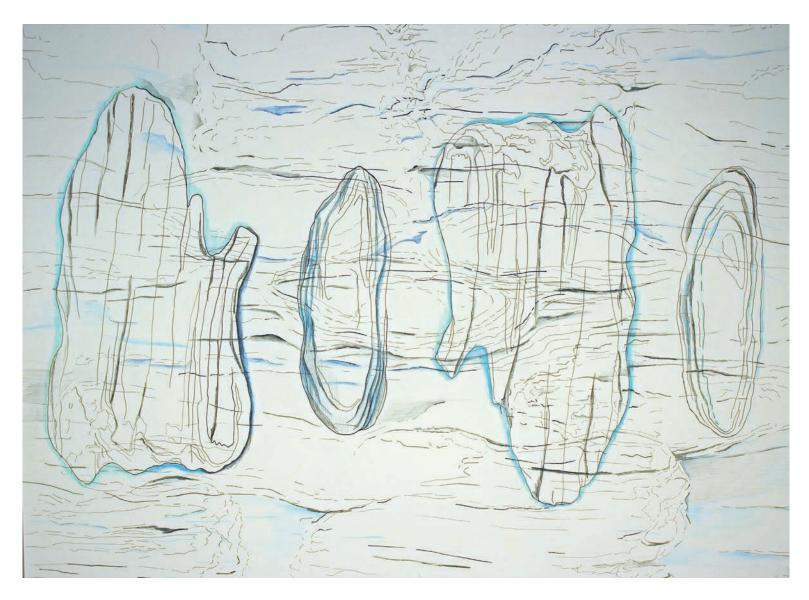
JULIA DZWONKOSKI

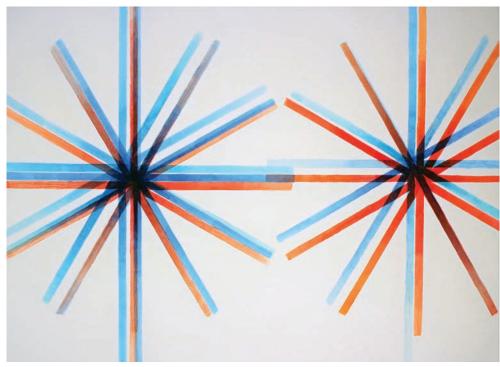






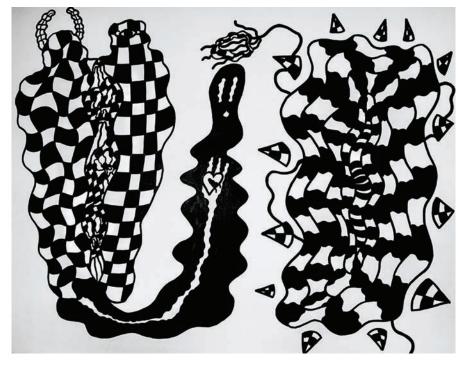
BECKY KOENIG





Green Haze, 2020, ink on paper, 30 x 24 inches, Intervals, 2021, ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 22 x 28 inches Overlay 2 and 3, 2020, watercolor and ink on paper, 26 x 34 inches 13





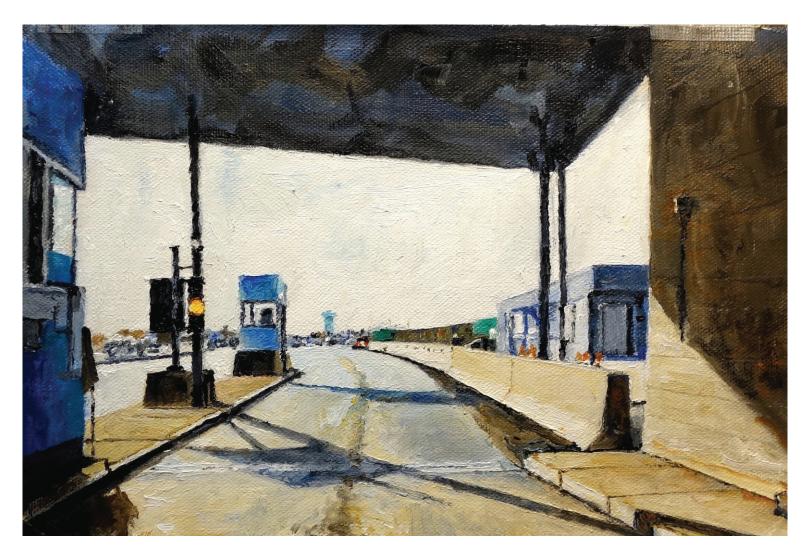
AVALENE MUSIK

















KARLE NORMAN





CRAIG SHEPERD





HEATHER SWENSON

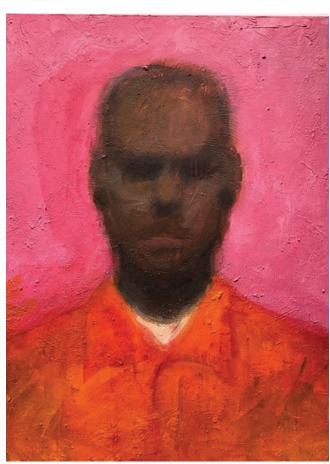






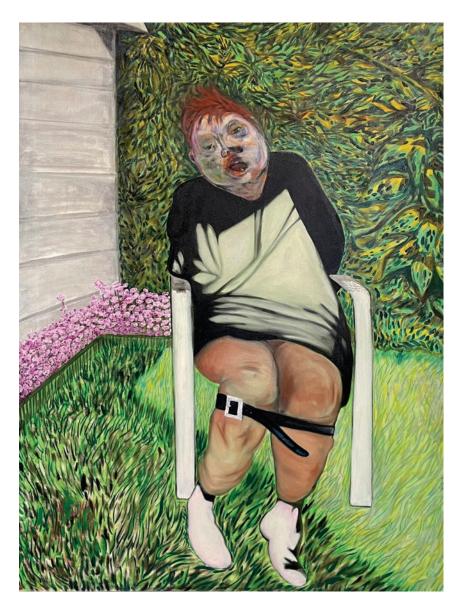








NESTOR ZARRAGOITIA







ARIEL ABERG-RIGER

is a designer, writer, and artist. Her visual stories collage together images and handwritten text to explore issues of equity, the environment, and social justice, encouraging readers to think differently about history, science, policy, and the other forces that shape our lives. She is a 2020 NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellow in Nonfiction Literature, and is currently working on a visual book about American history and identity set to be published by HarperCollins in 2023.

BECKY BROWN

was born in Manhattan and currently lives in Buffalo, NY. She works between painting, drawing, sculpture and installation using found images, objects and texts. Everything begins with material that already exists, such as newspaper clippings, overheard phrases or discarded appliances. She questions whether unlimited access to information and communication actually brings us deeper knowledge or human connection. She received her MFA from Hunter College and teaches at SUNY University at Buffalo. Solo and two-person exhibitions include Arts+Leisure Gallery (NYC), PS122 Gallery (NYC), the Handwerker Gallery (Ithaca, NY) and Fort Gondo Complex for the Arts (St. Louis, MO). Group exhibitions include The Drawing Center, Queens Museum, Freight+Volume Gallery and A.I.R. Gallery (all NYC), the Buffalo Institute of Contemporary Art (Buffalo, NY) and Religare Arts Initiative (Delhi, India). Her installation "No, said the Fruit Bowl," in the kitchen of an abandoned home on Governors Island, was described in the New York Times as "machines vomiting as if in a bulimic's nightmare." She has been an artist-in-residence at MacDowell, Yaddo, Jentel, and the Edward Albee and Saltonstall Foundations, among others. Her writing has been published in Art in America and The Brooklyn Rail.

BECKY KOENIG

received her BFA from Tyler School of Art, Temple University and her MFA from the Department of Art, University of Buffalo. She is an artist, educator and author, who has exhibited her work locally and regionally. She has taught studio art courses in drawing, painting, design and color theory at colleges in the Buffalo area including: Villa Maria College, Medaille College, Buffalo State College and the University at Buffalo. Koenig also taught classes at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, the Albright Knox Art Gallery and at her studio, Koenig Art Studio. Koenig was Assistant to the Chair in the Department of Art at the University at Buffalo from 2003-2016, where she was an administrator and taught studio courses. In 2003, Becky Koenig had a her textbook on color theory titled Color Workbook, published by Prentice Hall, the book is now in its Fourth Edition. Koenig's work has been exhibited at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Burchfield Penney Art Center, Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, Carnegie Art Center, Tonawanda NY, Adams Memorial Art Gallery in Dunkirk, NY along with many other sites. Since 2004, she has represented the estate artwork of her parents, Catherine Catanzaro Koenig and James R. Koenig, archiving, documenting work and preparing exhibitions. The influence of teaching and studying color theory is evidenced in her works, many of which are concerned with nature, vision, optics and science.

AVALENE MUSIK

is a self taught artist born in Buffalo, NY, coming from a background in animal welfare and philosophy, she began creating art as a hobby. At the start of the pandemic she found this love for art was much more a passion than pastime. She recently started creating in her own studio, allowing her to explore new mediums. Avalene has now been creating art for little over a year and plans to make this a lifelong career. Her greatest aspiration, inciting her audience to feel the same emotions she feels when creating art.

TONY NASH

lives and works in Buffalo, NY. His mother was his first oil painting teacher. In addition to painting he have done silkscreen printing, video, animation and digital art. Both his parents encouraged and supported his art making until they died. A charming assortment of friends and family have helped him keep making art since then.

KARLE NORMAN

is an artist living in Buffalo, NY. Born into a conservative religious group that emphasized strict adherence to the Bible, he used art as an escape. He credits his grandmother, an artist herself, with instilling the desire to maintain a creative practice.

CRAIG SHEPERD

B. 1984 / Lives in Buffalo/NYC

My youth was spent in the shadow of Buffalo's grain industry- throughout high school I hung out in several abandoned grain elevators not far from my home. As soon as I was able to procure a camera I began photographing these places, focusing primarily on structural documentation, but also capturing the elements of danger that drew me to them in the first place. This chapter of my youth began a lifelong fixation on creating a personal archive of photographs, found objects, and signage that I regularly use as source material/inspiration. I began experimenting with art around 2004, both publicly and privately, using a variety of processes and mediums. Thematically I focus on making work that exists in, or represents public spaces that I've made personal connections with in various degrees. My primary influences are the Precisionist and Cubist movements, industrial construction, demolition, and neglect.

HEATHER SWENSON

is a multidisciplinary artist working and living in Rochester, New York. Currently, she is focusing on silkscreen and exploring new uses of this medium through building three dimensional structures. She was awarded a NYSCA funded residency at Alfred University in 2019, during which she created an edition of artist books categorizing the security tints found in envelopes. Heather has shown work in multiple exhibitions around New York, including solo shows in Buffalo and Rochester, as well as a large scale public art installation for Rochester Contemporary Art Center. Heather teaches screenprinting workshops at her studio and has held demonstrations for members of the Print Club of Rochester. She is the Exhibition Manager of the club and facilitates a biennial international exhibition. Heather received her BFA in Interdisciplinary Visual Arts with a concentration in painting and printmaking from Purchase College of Art and Design in 2012.

XIII

is an artist based in Buffalo, NY. She uses vibrant colors in traditional and digital media to explore techniques and apply them to, most often, the human form. She is inspired by spirituality, futurism and the human experience. These themes manifest in her work in the form spiritual or mystical elements.

NESTOR ZARRAGOITIA

was born in Havana, Cuba and grew up in New York's West Village. He received his BFA from Hunter College, and MA/MFA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and went on to live in almost every region of the United States, as well as spending extended periods of time in Denmark and Sweden. All of these places left their marks on him and continue to inform his work.

Selected exhibitions: • "Feral City" -solo show, El Museo de Francisco Oller y Diego Rivera, Buffalo, NY. • "Art on the Hyphen: Cuban-American Artists of Western New York State" -Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, NY. • "Metamorphosis" -group show, The Ice House Cultural Center, Dallas, TX. • "Connections" -group show, Bath House Cultural Center, Dallas, TX. • "Exposición Bienal de Artistas Norteamericanos" -Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, Piñardel Rio, Cuba. • "15th Annual Juried Exhibition" -Pleiades Gallery, New York, NY. Juror: Donald B. Kuspit. • "Frank and Us" -Artbite Arts Collective, inaugural Frank Lloyd Wright Monona Terrace dedication opening, Madison, WI. • "National Small Works Exhibition" -Chuck Levitan Gallery, New York, NY. Juror: Marisol.

"Metonymy" -solo show, A.R.C. Gallery, Chicago, IL.

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