

JOHN PEÑA NEW WORK

John Peña • *New Work*
May 13 to June 24, 2016

John Peña is a multidisciplinary artist, illustrator and educator from the desert of Washington State. He makes art as a way of exploring the natural world and his daily interactions. A few of John's projects include: racing with clouds, sending a letter to the Pacific Ocean every day for the last twelve years, making daily drawings about his life and constructing large-scale plaster word balloons that are precariously balanced on two by fours. John has attended a number of residencies including The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, The Bemis Center for Contemporary Art & The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA. He currently lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

www.johnpena.net

WORKS (front to back)

Daily Geology, 2016
pencil on paper
2.23.16
3.8.16
3.16.16
3.20.16
3.28.16
4.1.16
4.10.16
4.15.16
4.16.16
5.7.16

Word Balloon
(*Sometimes I Just Don't Know How To Be In The World*), 2014
extruded foam, plaster, wood, screws

Outrunning Clouds, 2007
video (detail)

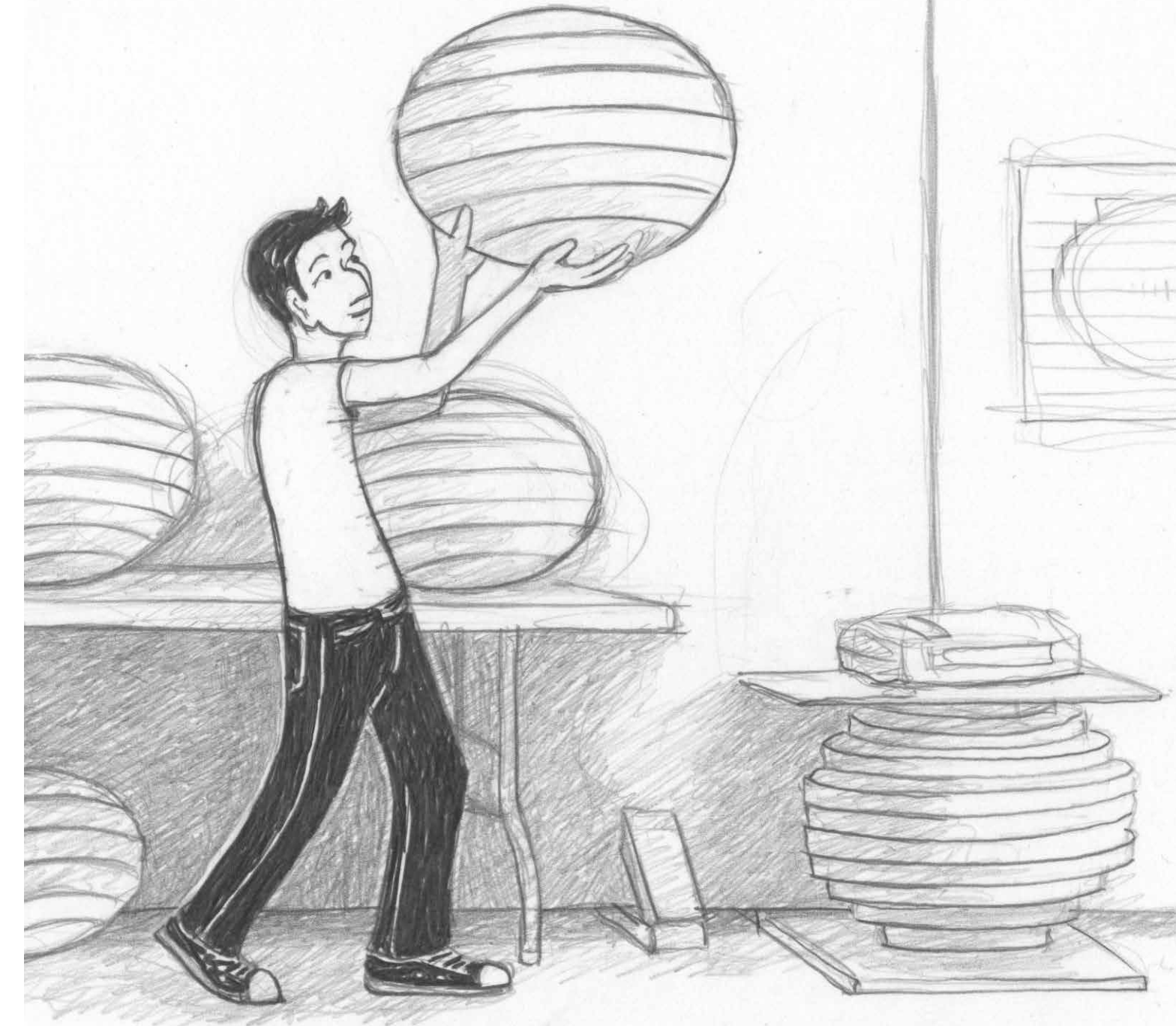
Shadow, 2011
video (detail)

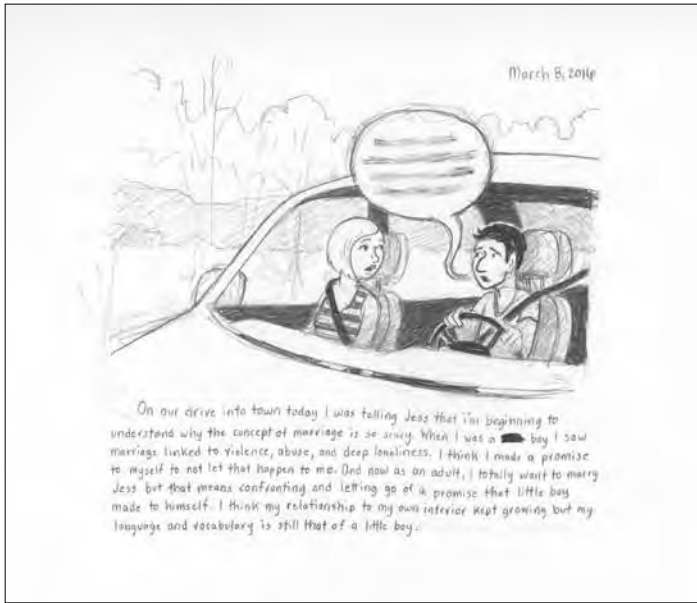
Fence, 2016
video detail



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something from his life that he deems memorable. It sounds pithy—and it often is—but Peña is juggling numerous tangents in this work and does not shy away from the confessional and the acutely personal any more than he does from the comical and the absurd. It is this unfettered honesty that lends particular credibility to a “documentary” project filtered through the haze of memory and emotion.

In this way, they share the quality of all literary memoirs. The prevalent subject is the space between life lived and life recalled, even if the recollection is only hours removed. Their rendering amplifies this ambiguous arena—soft pencil tones, gently muted, no framed borders, and often with half-drawn elements within the panel. Peña’s life, as our own, becomes the stratified stacking of these geological images. It is their cumulative effect that is as resonant as their individual retelling.

Their notational quality extends to Peña’s other works, most explicitly in the *Word Balloon* sculptures. Their delicate sense of pathos is personal to the artist but also uniquely commonplace in the declarations they make: “Sometimes I just don’t know how to be in the world.” “So I talk and talk and work to try and fill the emptiness.” Unlike *Daily Geology*, Peña’s word balloons feel far less about him. It is impossible to stand before them and fail to reflect upon one’s own failings and frailties.

Their self-conscious declarations take on additional layers of complexity by being conveniently constructed for selfie-posing,

amplifying the shared loop of self-awareness between Peña and the audience. If we are alone in some emotional void of our own making, it is a space that we all inhabit to varying degrees. The final gesture of these world-weary sentiments requiring multiple physical crutches to remain aloft would appear at first to slather on a heavy air of sadness to everything. Our insecurities are so insecure, they can barely stand.

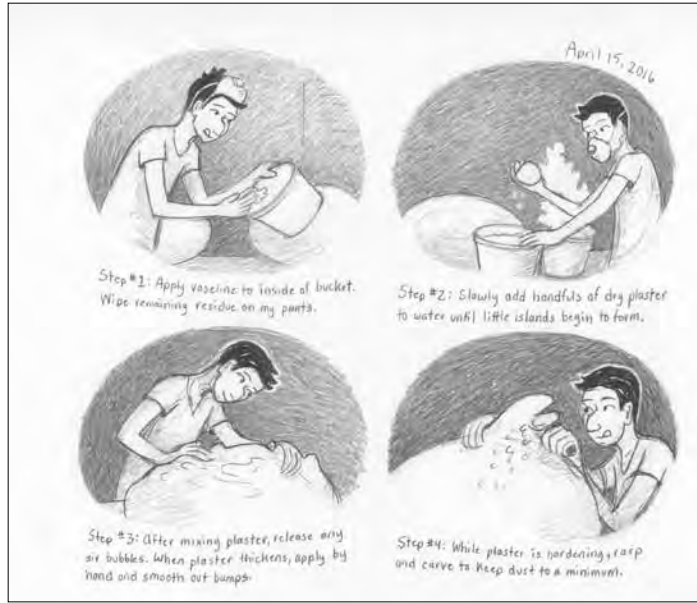
And yet, the frivolity and friendliness inherent in the speech bubble form—its connotation to lightness, to humor, to comic representations—keeps the work from tumbling off a morose cliff. Their physical form displays a pleasant demeanor that holds the heavy sentiments in check. Pathetic self-awareness is not denied—it’s declared quite directly—but it’s not deified. It’s framed in a context that deflates its potentially pompous darkness.

The light and the dark is a prevalent theme in Peña’s work—not surprisingly, since life is filled with a surplus of both. But he even goes so far as to toy with the theme literally in his short videos that feature the artist in relation to sunlight and shadow. His shadowed form appears and disappears from a wall. A tree shadow appears and disappears from a fence. And perhaps most poignantly, the artist tries in vain to outrun the shadow of a cloud as it cuts across a grassy field. As with his other works, the temporal and the ephemeral share a quixotically poetic space.

It’s no accident that clouds figure prominently in the videos. The speech bubbles also mimic clouds, and even the daily geological



drawings waft like clouds across the paper. These conceptual gestures hold the works together, despite their distinctly different formal realities. Collectively, Peña’s work is dreamy and wistful, substantive and fleeting, conscious of failing and imbued with boundless optimism.



They are simultaneously vexing queries and an eloquent set of clues about how to be in the world.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

