

1 Peter Saul
 “Crime and Punishment”
 New Museum, New York
 by Alexandre Stipanovich

Bearing organs, faces, fluids, and copious energy, Peter Saul’s paintings have a strange life of their own. If the paintings could talk, one might hear the sound of a dreadful and agitated laughter, straight from an amusement park in hell. “Crime and Punishment” – the artist’s retrospective at the New Museum – gathers sixty paintings from 1960 to the present day. They are joyful and cheeky depictions of the effervescence of modern life, displaying strange revelatory figures that personify the significant and the frivolous, the absurd and the punitive – blistery protrusions of a brain overly worried about the fate of the world. Saul was born in San Francisco in 1934 but was never part of the psychedelic scene there. He said he was too old for it, and that he was “happy with [his] psychology” and so didn’t need to alter it. His work lives at the frontier of abstraction and figuration, where character becomes expression and vice versa.

The New Museum retrospective starts with his early work, including his “Ice Box” series that laid the groundwork for everything that would follow: the painting as a stage where objects become animated. Saul claims to have ignored his contemporaries, but *Ice Box Number 1* (1960) recalls Philip Guston’s brushstroke, David Hockney’s palette, Rauschenberg’s flat composition, and Warhol’s incorporation of commercial elements. Saul found his leitmotiv almost from the get go: to portray the blind and unforgiving brutality of American politics and culture. Works like *Man in Electric Chair* (1964) and *Saigon* (1967) fathom the role of the electric chair and the Vietnam War in the collective psyche. He starts including political leaders (Washington, Reagan, Bush Jr., Trump), yet his affinity for 1930s comic characters like Superman and Smokey Stover contrasts sarcastically with these historical and political elements, stressing the complex and paradoxical nature of modern American culture. Is violence more vicious with a humorous



1 Peter Saul, *Donald Trump in Florida*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. 78 × 120 in. Hall Collection. Courtesy of the Hall Art Foundation.

tone? What is Saul’s intention anyway? Is he willing to achieve automatic painting, like the Surrealists who had “automatic writing”? Does he want to portray a noisy, doomed, and panicking civilization? Is he interested in a dreamlike festival of caricatures in Day-Glo colors? Peter Halley, another avid Day-Glo user, makes paintings that are rigorous and impermeable, in marked contrast to Saul’s liquid, almost slimy surfaces. In his paintings from the 1970s until today, each character appears as an extension of a nearby figure, in constant transformation, like in John Carpenter’s *The Thing*. No figure is isolated: bodies are always morphing, mutating, part of a bigger self, like a hallucinatory epiphany regarding the great universal truth beneath all things. This fluidity connecting different entities allows us to linger on different realms at the same time, tying humor, politics, fear, and symbolism into a gruesome yet hilarious amalgam.

2 Rosie Lee Tompkins
 BAMPFA, Berkeley
 by Michele D’Aurizio

Rosie Lee Tompkins – the pseudonym of Effie Mae Howard – was a textile artist born in rural Arkansas and based in Richmond, California. There she created hundreds of quilts and textile objects that, since the late 1990s, have been widely celebrated for their compositional and material sensibility and sociopolitical subtext. Tompkins’s work defies categorization as art or craft. Yet, according to Lawrence Rinder and Elaine Y. Yau, the curators of her retrospective at BAMPFA, it engages both fields dialectically, thus transcending the still exclusionary label of “applied modernism” and ushering a genuinely global narrative of twentieth-century modern art: “It is from the perspective of craft that Tompkins’s art might work toward the promise of a more inclusive art history,” writes Yau in her catalogue essay. Despite the premise of interpreting Tompkins’s art *qua* craft, the exhibition unfolds via a number of quilts pristinely displayed on the museum’s walls as if they were framed pictures. The museological strategy of displaying utilitarian objects calls for no deviation

from that of the Duchampian ready-made and, conventionally, pieces of fabric are hung like modernist paintings. At BAMPFA, the adoption of this mode of display can’t help but result in a missed opportunity to develop a language of exhibition design that could speak to the material lives of Tompkins’s textile art while still highlighting its formalist qualities. It is not only a matter

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of offering the quilts’ surfaces, often made of shimmering velvets and glittery synthetic fabrics, to a mode of perception that is not solely frontal. Tompkins never developed instructions for the exhibition of her objects, thus leaving curators to deliberate on the orientation of the quilts; vertical display, then, forces their compositions, embroidered texts, and embedded imagery into a single reading direction.

Consider the quilts’ versos. After Tompkins’s meeting with Eli Leon, the collector and African American quilt scholar who would become her patron, she began assembling only the tops of the quilts, which would be finished, in fact “quilted,” by other sewers on Leon’s request. No verso is visible in the BAMPFA retrospective. A layered history of labor is made opaque (the quilters’ names are mentioned



in the wall labels), while Tompkins’s art is celebrated in a singularized form of craft – her textiles having been periodically reformatted in a quilt-as-commodity mode at the expense of their untrimmed hems, informal outlines, and rhizomatic appendages. It is no secret that this exhibition follows BAMPFA’s reception of

- 2 Rosie Lee Tompkins, “Jewelry Christmas Tree” bottle, 1997. Glass jar, metal cap, glass knob, fabric, costume jewelry, seashell necklace, decorative trim (with rhinestones, beads, and metallic yarn), fabric cord, metallic cord, “Hell on Wheels” patch, individual beads and faux pearls, glue, and other media. 11 × 6 × 5 in. Courtesy of Eli Leon Bequest and Berkeley Art Museum.
- 2a Rosie Lee Tompkins, *Untitled*, 1991. Velvet, velveteen, velour, and cotton backing. 73 × 67 in. Quilted by Irene Bankhead. Courtesy of Eli Leon Bequest and Berkeley Art Museum.
- 3 Alex Da Corte, *Rubber Pencil Devil*, 2018. Glass, aluminum, vinyl, velvet, neon, plexiglass, folding chairs, monitors, high res digital video, color, sound. Photography by Tom Little. Courtesy of the artist; Karma, New York; and Dallas Museum of Art, Colorado.

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a large bequest of quilts from Leon’s collection, which included most of the objects on view here. One may wonder, then, if a mode of display that had allowed for a thorough encounter with the quilts wouldn’t have shed more light on the material conditions that underlay the creation of Tompkins’s objects – conditions in which Leon played a leading role, beginning with the very invention of Howard’s pseudonym. Threaded into Effie Mae Howard’s work is a call against the art institution’s pigeonholing tendencies into discrete formal languages and media of expression. It should not be forgotten that those tendencies are also channeled through modes of collecting as well as displaying art objects.

3 “For A Dreamer of Houses”
 Dallas Museum of Art, Colorado
 by Caroline Elbaor

Raymond Carver’s 1981 short story “Why Don’t You Dance?” centers on an anonymous grief-stricken and alcohol-soaked man who, in mourning his recent marriage separation, bizarrely reassembles the contents of his home on his front lawn. When a couple mistakes the setup for a garage sale, the man attempts to purge himself of his personal affects, offering discounts from where he reclines on a sofa in the grass, double-fisting whiskey and beer. It becomes clear that in divorcing himself from his house and belongings, the man is attempting to rid himself of that which shapes his identity. “For a Dreamer of Houses” at the Dallas Museum of Art is an assembly of fifty-four works all culled from the museum’s collection, with ten being recent acquisitions. Citing its foundation in French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s theory of the house as metaphor for mental and social development, the exhibition questions how domestic spaces and objects influence belonging, alienation, fantasy, gender, and the body: all themes again pertaining to identity formation. The strong relationship between the home and identity emerged in the nineteenth century following the decentralization of organized religion, at which point the “sacred” sphere shifted to the home, where “values of peace, protection, quiet, and nurture formed a domestic ideology and cult of childhood.”¹ This thread between the



church and home is evident in Francisco Moreno's *Chapel* (2018), an immersive installation mimicking a chapel space, with an interior covered in intricate collage-like paintings reminiscent of frescoes from Renaissance and Baroque art history. Another prominent work, Do Ho Suh's *Hub, 260-10 Sunghook-dong, Sunghook-ku, Seoul, Korea* (2016) is a translucent structure that recreates architectural facets from the artist's childhood home with polyester fabric and stainless steel. As with all of the nine works in Suh's "Hubs" series, the installation's meandering interior represents the increasingly messy line between public and private life, and the ongoing shifting of identity. Moreover, in the form of an eye-catching neon skeleton of a home's frame, Alex Da Corte's *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018) also focuses on childhood experience within a domestic context. Screened on a loop inside is a three-hour video amalgamation of fifty-seven dreamlike film fragments taken by the artist and his assistants, which underscore iconography associated with childhood. The legacy and significance of objects and materials shines here as well. A sparse section dedicated to domestic items is populated with three sculptures by Olivia Erlanger, Robert Pruitt, and Sarah Lucas; Erlanger, in particular, delights with *Pergusia* (2019) by marrying fantasy with the mundane via a scaly mermaid tail pouring out of a washing machine. Pruitt's *me and this mic is like yin and yang* (2002) combines a vacuum, oversized doily, and microphone to celebrate the act of performing for one's self in the privacy of the home. Pipilotti Rist is also on view with 2010's *Massachusetts Chandelier*, a colorful hanging sculpture made entirely of underwear, which evokes the abdomen as the original human "home." Danh Vo's *Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs* (2013) is a wall work displaying leather sourced from an upholstered chair that originally sat in John F. Kennedy's cabinet room. Other works in the show include paintings, photographs, and works on paper by artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Clementine Hunter, Bill Owens, or Misty Keasler, which function like treasured ephemera. I initially questioned the idea of "viewing" a virtual exhibition hinged on architecture, skeptical of the impact physical distance may have on a show so reliant upon the sculpturally immersive. Yet the role of the home in the ongoing development of identity is so tenderly at the forefront of "For a Dreamer of Houses" that the absence of imposing sculptures or installations does not detract from its poignancy. By exposing one's home or belongings, one exposes parts of the self, and so the exhibition thereby remains successful, ultimately proving that constraints cannot dampen the power of memory and objecthood.



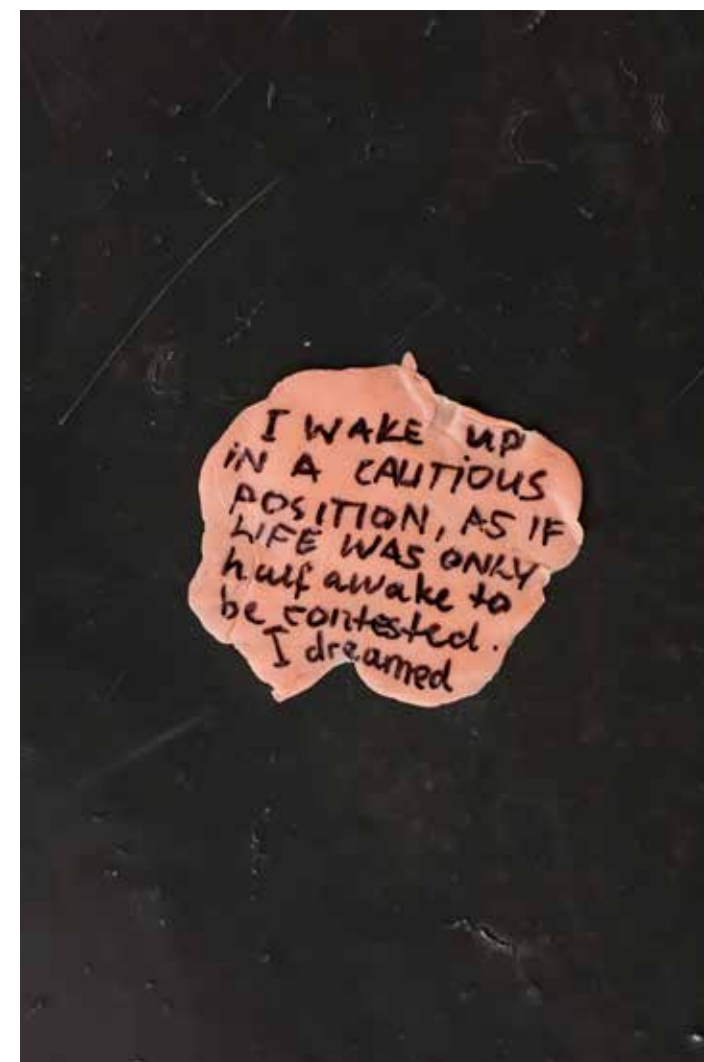
4 Hito Steyerl, *The Tower*, 2015. Three-channel HD video installation, environment and sound. 6'55". Courtesy of the artist; Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London / Paris / Salzburg.

1 David Morgan, "Domestic Devotion and Ritual," *Art Journal*, 57:1 (1998) pp. 45-54.

4 Hito Steyerl
"The Tower"
Thaddaeus Ropac, London
by William Kherbek

Hito Steyerl's work *The Tower* takes its name from a real-life endeavor so bizarre it had to be made into fiction. The titular tower refers to a characteristically hubristic project by Iraq's former dictator, Saddam Hussein, to "rebuild" the mythic Tower of Babel in contemporary Iraq. Saddam was known for his literary pretensions – he was said to be working on an epic novel when the invasion of 2003 began – but one has to wonder if he'd bothered to read to the end of the Babel Tower story. Spoiler alert: it doesn't have a happy ending. Though invasion scuppered his plans, Saddam's megalomaniacal project lives on in an aptly named video game, *Skyscraper Stairway to Chaos*. Steyerl's film is narrated by a Ukrainian developer who worked on the game. Across three screens situated on a blood-red dais, various heroic and humble building projects are rendered digitally. The developer tells the story of the Kharkiv-based firm, staffed by laid-off engineers made redundant by the end of Cold War state defense largesse, who now create visual representations of luxury developments and provide digital models for securing such properties. The kind of hyper-security their services visualize contrasts with their own fragile economic and physical security. The offices are, the voiceover notes, less than an hour's tank journey from the Russian border. Steyerl is a master of conjuring high-end dystopias. *The Tower*, with its images of ominously empty luxury properties and bedraggled battlefield tents, surveys the brittle social dynamics of the twenty-first century, and the ways in which media supply comforting, high-definition imaginaries for those who can still afford illusions. For all its black-pill dread, *The Tower* is not without absurdist humor. A submachine gun blasting a luxe interior to pieces carries a frisson of giddy liberation, and the gleam that appears on the words "hi-tech" as they appear on-screen following the voiceover might raise a smile from even the most committed Doomer. In the five years that have passed since Steyerl made this work, the world has added many new volumes to its encyclopedia of anxiety; but instead of feeling quaint or even naive, *The Tower* seems as bleakly prescient as the ancient story from which its title derives.

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5 "Expectations"
Emalin, London
by Alex Bennett

The message almost sticks to the sole of my shoe: "edges, which feels like an unprepared race after a long, sleep summer daze." The prickly, sour fluster of the awakened body is somewhat compatible with the affect of expectation, a tightening of edges that blurs extrinsic information, a partial view indulging dazzling focus. Leda Bourgoigne's *gum* (2018-20), tiny poems on chewing gum, litter the floor like a bacterial archipelago of somatic shock, injury, and sticky alignment: "we are a messy profusion, born inside the belly of a whale," or "I wake up in a cautious position, as if life was only half awake to be contested. I dreamed." Bourgoigne's work demands self-reflexive contact, suiting the modus of "Expectations" – a group show exploring embodiment within charged structures. Threaded aluminum vanes, typically installed as architectural defense, appear as infrastructural frieze in Patrick Staff's *s* (2019). The site-specific work contends with the disciplined body on terms hot with contrast. The weaponized curlicue has snagged its antithesis: soft toys as rucksack key chains or bedtime armor, their bodies barnacled and eviscerated. Its teeth are licked with diamanté pendant initials and plundered locket, all displayed as skeletal ruin, victory wreath, or lax embellishment. While Staff articulates acts of material oppression, Jessica Vaughn reclaims the otherwise absent materiality

5 Leda Bourgoigne, *gum*, 2020. Detail. Chewing gum, pigment liner. Dimensions variable. Photography by Plastiques. Courtesy of the artist; BQ Gallery, Berlin; and Emalin, London. © Leda Bourgoigne.
6 Marina Pinsky, "Four Color Theorem." Exhibition view at C L E A R I N G, Brussels. Courtesy of C L E A R I N G, New York / Brussels.

of labor in the frippery of civic representation. Two floor sculptures feature discarded upholstery remnants from Chicago's public transit network. Proving the negative content's use, each is dependent on the relational labor of Vaughn's sourcing, signifying too the bodies that are framed, formed by, and in subjugation to the upkeep of municipal appearance. Daiga Grantina's wall sculpture of pregnant quenelles of plastic volition in too-real maraschino cherry and caramel contend with the friction of pillowy felt and wooden brackets. In Grantina's hands, *Stanna* (2020) as stagnant body is a site of contention whether immaterial, granular, or maximal, where structure becomes complex and transitive. Bourgogne's exploration of skin-as-surface counterpoises Grantina's braced chaos, enhancing the meaning that bodies shape and are shaped by the spaces they occupy. In *Such Queer Moons We Live In* (2018), stretched translucent fabric is abraded by torn fishnets in the top-right corner of a chiffon canvas ripped and re-sewn, its netting and floral lacework bleeding into oil-painted fissures. Its quivers undermine the presumption of space and surface as neutral and the sexual oblique as a "deviation from": it's all critically experienced on the site of one's skin. The takeaway poem by Pedro Neves Marques roves through duplicitous assimilation, affect economies, endless doubt, trends and political re-centering. Read in isolation, the ever trembling horizon: "So much freedom / Still."



6 Marina Pinsky
"Four Color Theorem"
C L E A R I N G, Brussels
by Pierre-Yves Desaise

The title of Marina Pinsky's fourth exhibition at C L E A R I N G Brussels is taken from a mid-nineteenth-century theory, according to which it is possible to highlight the regions represented on any geographical map using only four colors. The political complexity of the contemporary world could therefore be visually represented using only yellow, green, blue, and red. This concept could only appeal to Marina Pinsky, who has always paid particular attention to the places in which she works or exhibits. The exhibition is thus placed under the sign of cartography, as shown by the large installation that occupies the center of the gallery: seven aluminum disks suspended from the ceiling, showing on one side heptagonal photographs produced by Theodor Scheimpflug's aerial camera, invented in 1897. On the other side are displayed reproductions of various ancient celestial maps, such as the Nebra SkyDisk (1,600 BC) or Korean astronomical