

BEELER GALLERY

at Columbus College of Art & Design

1,000 Miles Per Hour

September 15th - October 28th

FOTOFOCUS
BIENNIAL



Columbus College of Art & Design

60 Cleveland Ave, Columbus OH, 43215

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

INTRODUCTION

1,000 Miles Per Hour – the speed of earth's rotation at the equator – showcases the effects of perspective through photography and other contemporary practices. Tim Rietenbach and I curated the exhibition as part of the [2022 FotoFocus Biennial](#), a month-long celebration of lens-based art that unites artists, curators, and educators from around the world. It is on display in CCAD's [Beeler Gallery](#) from September 15 – October 28, 2022.

The FotoFocus Biennial, now in its sixth iteration, activates over 100 projects at museums, galleries, universities, and public spaces throughout Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, Dayton, and Columbus, Ohio in October 2022. Each Biennial is structured around a unifying theme; this year the theme, *World Record*, considers photography's extensive record of life on earth while exploring humankind's impact on the natural world.

The theme of the biennial is left intentionally vague: is "Record" a noun or a verb? The question that raises for me is, if the world is being recorded, then by whom? Through what lens? And to what end? While all of the artists in this exhibition have very different kinds

of practices – some of which are only tenuously lens-based – we selected works that highlight the *idea* of a lens.

At the most basic level, every person with a cellphone makes value decisions every time they take a picture, deciding what will be included within the rectangle of the pictorial plane and what will be left out. The notion of omission, redaction, and blank spaces comes up repeatedly in conversations with the artists whose works are seen in this show.

[NASA's Voyager Golden Record](#) and the [Eames' film Powers of Ten](#) serve as conceptual touchpoints for *1,000 Miles Per Hour*. The record launched with the Voyager spacecraft contained photographs, illustrations, mathematical equations, music, natural and industrial sounds, and spoken greetings in a variety of languages to show the diversity of cultures and lifeforms on Earth. It was a kind of time capsule, a celebration of the ascendancy of "homo technicus" as we launched pieces of ourselves into the solar system and eventually beyond the heliopause.

Powers of Ten offered a fantastical visual depiction of exponential changes, taking us from a picnic blanket on the shore of Lake Michigan (10^0 meters), beyond our galaxy and out to the edge of the known universe at that time (10^{24}

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

meters), then zooming back in to view a proton in the nucleus of a carbon atom inside a human body (10^{-16} meters).

The film was released in 1977, the same year the two voyager spacecraft were launched. That was also the year I started kindergarten. The scientific advances enabled and celebrated by these utopian cultural artifacts reverberated through my early education; and probably not coincidentally, Charles and Ray Eames made their film for IBM which had its corporate and manufacturing headquarters in my hometown, Endicott, NY. I spent my childhood eagerly anticipating the next batch of high resolution photos to be beamed back to earth from the rings of Saturn, or getting close-ups of the immense storm that is Jupiter's red spot. The images evoked awe and wonder.

I first learned to process film and make photographs in the darkroom of [Kopernik Observatory & Science Center](#) while tracking sunspots during a high school astronomy course underwritten, in part, by IBM. In using the NASA images and Eames' film as a starting point – a sort of baseline against which our curatorial choices could reverberate – we intended to make apparent not just what was considered scientifically and culturally significant at the time, but perhaps even more importantly what was not considered.

Historically, photography and film have created indices of national resources, documents of our social conditions, records of war and industry and human achievement, but they have also been used by empires to maintain hegemony and subjugation, and deployed as record-keeping devices for imperial, genocidal regimes.

Photography has been a tool of governance and art and science, especially when used in concert with taxonomic regimes like Linnaean designations, which at their very outset, classified and hierarchized human beings and placed white Europeans at the top (Eshun). At the heart of the problem are control and how we negotiate inequities.

Images, like words, are among our primary signifiers, but what happens when our received truths go unquestioned to the point where we literally can't envision any alternatives? It leads me to ask how we might rethink identity and image culture. The questions we propose, and the ones we don't, belie our values. Zooming out – perhaps by a factor of ten – we see that the things we think to name, record, and depict reveal our assumptions and biases. Without a word or symbolic image assigned to describe it, a concept is not just difficult to articulate, but barely visible and nearly impossible to cognize.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

On the other hand, modern philosophy has shown that language itself can be violent and divisive because it reduces the multifaceted complexity of reality into idealized abstractions: archetypes, stereotypes, others. By naming a thing we seek to contain it, cementing it into an ideal if imagined form (Slavoj, p. 52). Do we assume that culture, and the biosphere itself, has evolved to a logical endpoint, the pinnacle, and that every historical thing humankind has enacted has therefore been inevitable? We are not suggesting there are easy answers. Instead, *1000 Miles Per Hour* invites gallery visitors to sit inside of these difficult questions while considering a variety of works that reframe identity, memory, and cultural values through telling alternative visual narratives.

In their earnestly titled, 700 page history of humankind, *The Dawn of Everything*, David Wengrow and David Graeber conclude: “Perhaps if our species does endure, and we one day look backwards from this as yet unknowable future, aspects of the remote past that now seem like anomalies – say, bureaucracies that work on a community scale; cities governed by neighborhood councils; systems of government where women hold a preponderance of formal positions; or forms of land management based on care-taking rather than ownership and extraction – will seem like the really significant breakthroughs... not as

random bumps on a road that leads inexorably to states and empires, but as alternative possibilities: roads not taken. After all, those things really did exist, even if our habitual ways of looking at the past seem designed to put them at the margins rather than at the centre of things... It means that we could have been living under radically different conceptions of what human society is actually about. It means that mass enslavement, genocide, prison camps, even patriarchy or regimes of wage labour never had to happen... It also suggests that, even now, the possibilities for human intervention are far greater than we’re inclined to think (Graeber and Wengrow, pp 523-4).”

If we have always been in the presence of myths, then it seems things may have really started going wrong when we insisted that there was only one answer, one way to be, and then exterminated the alternatives. Surely an argument in favor of fewer cultural solutions for how to live shouldn’t be winning the day. Many of the things we believe make us “civilized” have precipitated calamities, but we may still choose to step back from the precipice. Maybe we will see more clearly when we look through different lenses.

In addition to the golden record images by Frank Drake and Jon Lomberg, and the film by Charles and Ray Eames, this exhibition includes works by contemporary artists whose

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

practices demonstrate distinct approaches to the art of recording, and which broaden the indexical and poetic deployments of contemporary creative practices. The featured artists are James Turrell; [Stephanie Syjuco](#); [Dawit L. Petros](#); [Lisa Jarrett](#); [David Bowen](#); [Hans Klompen](#) with Orlando Combita-Heredia, Jeremy Naredo, and Sam Bolton for Ohio State University's Acarology Collection; CCAD Alumnus [Chad Hunt](#); [Ben Kinsley](#) with Robin Hewlett; and [Roger Beebe](#). This catalog includes interviews with those artists whose names are hyperlinked above (just click to go there). The conversations have been edited for concision and clarity. All images are courtesy of the artists or Beeler Gallery.

Darren Lee (Dee) Miller
Associate Professor and
Chair of Photography

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Eshun, Ekow. "The Background Hum." White Mischief from BBC, 4 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m00106by>
- Graeber, David and Wengrow, David. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.
- Slavoj, Zizek. *Violence*. London, Verso, 2008.

[Darren Lee \(Dee\) Miller](#) is an artist, educator, curator, and writer whose work employs community-engaged, trans-disciplinary collaboration and anti-racist, anti-heterosexist advocacy to center the experiences and "subjugated knowledges" of individuals from

marginalized identities. They were invited to serve as Chair of Photography and Associate Professor at [CCAD](#) in 2019. Their [teaching, curatorial work](#), and [artwork](#) have been recognized through numerous residencies, exhibitions, acquisitions, and a 2019-20 [Fulbright Research Fellowship](#) to Brazil. Dee currently has a solo exhibition at the [Rosewood Gallery](#) in Dayton, OH.

[Tim Rietenbach](#) serves as the Faculty Director of Galleries and Professor of fine arts at Columbus College of Art and Design (CCAD). In addition to teaching, he has been the recipient of individual artist grants from the Greater Columbus Arts Council (including a Public Arts Grant to install Gigantic—a 100-foot-long sculpture of the human skeleton in the Columbus Science Museum—and a Dresden / Saxony Artist Residency in Germany), the Ohio Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His work has been featured in group and solo exhibitions at the The Centre Pompidou (Paris France), Sluice Art Fair (London England), Columbus Museum of Art, and many others.

[Beeler Gallery](#) at Columbus College of Art & Design (CCAD) welcomes visitors to its 6,000-square-foot exhibition space located on the first floor of the Canzani Center at 60 Cleveland Ave. in Columbus, Ohio from 10:00 AM - 6:00 PM, Monday through Saturday. Admission and parking are always free. To learn more, visit beelergallery.org.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

STEPHANIE SYJUCO

works in photography, sculpture, and installation, moving from handmade and craft-inspired mediums to digital editing and archive excavations. Using critical wit and collaborative co-creation, her projects have leveraged open-source systems, shareware logic, and flows of capital in order to investigate issues of economies and empire. Recently, she has focused on how photography and image-based processes are implicated in the construction of racialized, exclusionary narratives of history and citizenship.

Born in the Philippines in 1974, Syjuco received her MFA from Stanford University and BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She is the recipient of a 2014 Guggenheim Fellowship Award, a 2009 Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Award, and a 2020 Tiffany Foundation Award. Her work has been exhibited widely, including at MoMA/P.S.1, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and is represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Walker Arts Center, and many others.

Stephanie Syjuco spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Tuesday, July 26, 2022

Dee Miller: When we began the curatorial process, we started talking about the golden records that were included in the Voyager spacecraft. They



were intended to communicate a story about planet Earth to extraterrestrials via 12-inch, gold-plated, phonograph records containing an archive of sounds and images to portray the diversity of life and cultures on earth. I feel like the images that make up [Block Out the Sun](#) interrogate the kind of ethnographic images that were included on those golden discs. I'm curious to hear what you think about your works being shown in this context.

Stephanie Syjuco: *Block Out the Sun* is responding to photographs that were taken over 100 years ago, so I see my intervention or overlay on top of these as a conversation with the historical record. It was very common for photography to be used as a tool for ethnographic study, as well as a kind of pseudoscientific analysis of non-Western cultures and peoples. In the context of the exhibition, it brings it back into dialogue with how we're currently examining lots of things, whether it's image making technologies,

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

or cultural and political perspectives. I think it's good to revisit what we have deemed historical.

Miller: These images came from a historical archive in the state of Missouri. Can you talk a little bit about what was the original purpose of those photographs? And can you also talk about your research practice in that archive and the resulting studio process for you to make that work?

Syjuco: I was invited to do a solo exhibition by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. One of my works focused on the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. It was one of the largest at the time, and became a vehicle for the United States to show off its newfound position as an empire. The photographs I used for my work were staged in a faux Filipino village at the fair. It was common at the time for what were called "human zoos" to be set up and essentially act as educational-entertainment experiences. A lot of the photographs were literally people posed to highlight their perceived exoticism and were circulated in postcards and tourist brochures. And, to be honest, they were meant to highlight the subject's racialized inferiority to American whiteness. I spent two weeks going through image files and records in different St. Louis archives. What was really crucial about that process was that, unlike an online database in which you're scrolling

through images on a screen, I was able to physically touch photographs. That act of touching literally became part of the work, with my hands intervening on top of the photos. These were physical processes, as opposed to the more passive browsing and image-surfing that happens online..

Miller: One of the things that just stood out to me as you were talking is the Spanish American War made Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines part of the United States at the same time. I know that you immigrated to the United States from the Philippines when you were a little kid, and in adulthood you made the conscious decision to become an American citizen. In 1900 would you have been American by default?

Syjuco: No, citizenship wasn't automatically granted to people residing in the territories the US "won" after the war. There are legal definitions of who is and who isn't a United States citizen, and this has shifted over time, much of it around racialized lines of exclusion. There was a moment in history when the Philippines could have been kept as a territory, like Puerto Rico. Or maybe it would have gone more like what happened in Hawai'i – formal annexation into a state. But for multiple reasons that didn't happen. But because of this colonial history my family has been tightly intertwined with the United States for over 100 years. My grandfather

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

became an American citizen, having fought in World War Two as a Filipino on the side of the American military, and was granted US citizenship in return for his service (which was actually an anomaly, given how many Filipino servicemen were still fighting for their promise of citizenship decades later). I happen to have been born in the Philippines to an American citizen mother and Filipino citizen father, and because of some turn of paperwork, was not filed as an American citizen at birth. It makes me think about how when we say, “immigrant” or “foreigner,” there's a tendency to assume very stark delineations to those terms, whereas the reality is much more porous and integrated, especially between empire and colony.

Miller: Yeah, it's a really messy proposition, I go back and forth between Columbus, OH and San Juan, Puerto Rico all the time, because my partner is Puerto Rican. And I find that it's really humbling to face all of my blind spots, the ignorant preconceptions that I have as a white American, sometimes not being aware of the things I'm assuming. It's interesting to think about the language that we use, which can be really insensitive when we're talking about immigrants, whether someone's “legal” or “illegal,” or the term “alien.” I could use this as a kind of tenuous segue back to Voyager and space aliens. Tim and I talked a lot about the presumptions that must have been

required to even undertake something like the Voyager project. I feel like maybe I can bring the utopian impulses of someone as brilliant as Carl Sagan back down to earth by acknowledging that this kind of archiving time capsule project was an outgrowth of imperial white culture. So NASA launched those things to communicate with aliens, and maybe to precede us colonizing the stars. But it seems like the real audience was right here on earth. As I was preparing for this interview, I stumbled across your 2018 conversation with curator Astria Suparak, where you discuss activism, audiencing, and free speech relating to your project [Cargo Cults](#) at MoMA back in 2018. In that interview, you told Astria that even in the context of the show in MoMA, with very clear signifiers present in the images, the works didn't always communicate clearly, especially to those whose privilege might have made them unable to receive the critical message. I haven't formed this into a question, but I was wondering if you wanted to respond to some of the threads that I'm trying to connect here?

Syjuco: In reference to what I was saying to Astria, one thing I learned from producing *Cargo Cults*, which attempted to critique the genre of ethnographic photography, is that it's very difficult as an image maker to counter public perception of certain types of images. We're kind of wired to make automatic assumptions about

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

what an image is saying. When I was working to critique ethnographic photography, I found that it became really difficult if I presented anything that looked vaguely like an ethnographic photograph, because it was too quickly read as the real thing. That was the dilemma I was facing. Another thing I learned is to never use myself as a model in my artwork because then the work is read as somehow autobiographical. People are always referring to *Cargo Cults* as my self portraits, when they are just totally fabricated farces. And I was just like, would you say that to Cindy Sherman? I think for artists of color whose cultures are not well represented in the larger imagination, there is the added dilemma of the larger audience demanding a form of cultural “authenticity” — and they think they can see it, even when it’s a complete fiction.

Miller: You're asking how we can unlearn to see things in a particular way?

Syjuco: Sometimes art can be good for challenging historical ways of seeing, but I think it's up against a lot.

Miller: When you describe *Cargo Cults* and *Block Out the Sun*, and when I think of your project [Citizens](#), I'm reminded of when Coco Fusco collaborated with Guillermo Gomez Peña to perform *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*. I also think of Carrie Mae Weems' *From Here, I Saw What Happened, and I Cried*. Do you see your work in conversations with

these projects specifically, as a continuation of their critiques of systems of domination and subordination?

Syjuco: Yes. I went to school in the early 90s, and so there was a lot of emphasis at the time on *The Pictures Generation* and notions of appropriation. I've become much more interested in the idea of image trafficking, which is not necessarily about the images themselves but about their ability to circulate and thus gain power — in both a positive and negative sense. I focus on what gets promoted by this circulation, and what gets stifled.

Miller: I'm curious about your use of that particular terminology. When I hear the word “trafficking,” it makes me think of something that, if it's not illicit, is violent and harmful.

Syjuco: Definitely. There's a controversy right now around Harvard's collection of Daguerreotypes taken of an enslaved individual named Renty Taylor, and his daughter Delia. Their descendant Tamara Lanier is attempting to get these photographs from the University, to remove them from circulation because Harvard gets both capital and cultural currency, economic and cultural benefit from circulating them through licensing, reproduction fees, etc. To Lanier, these images are family. We're at a point where you could argue that there's power in images, but there's just as much power in how they are trafficked.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

So yes, in the internet age when everyone celebrates how easily and widely images can circulate, we should think about whether all images need to circulate, and if so, how can we do that more carefully.

Miller: The way that things are being interrogated does give me hope; but still, everything everywhere is, in one way or another, still white supremacist. It's basically the air that we breathe. And sometimes I feel like anything made from outside of that framework is seen as antiracist by default, even when it's intending to do something else or communicate within subcultures or in groups. Do you think dominant culture forces BIPOC, queer, and differently-able creatives to carry this burden of continuously educating majoritarian colleagues and peers about racism and structural bias?

Syjuco: On the one hand, there are a lot of white folks that are seeking to learn more right now. They are asking others to provide that knowledge, which makes perfect sense given how lopsided things have been for centuries. And on the opposite end, there are folks who never want to see or know more because they've already made up their minds about what the dominant structure should be. I think a lot of artists of color are being asked to create works that are easily encapsulated, for the sake of legible soundbites or educational moments. So a problem with the

demand of representation is that you're asked to represent in ways that kind of flatten what would otherwise be a nuanced or individual perspective on how one represents a culture or a class or a race or gender.

Miller: I've struggled with that to a certain extent when I'm trying to have my work communicate on different levels. I think you've said this in other interviews, that when galleries or museums are talking about whether or not your piece is legible, what they really mean is, how easily is it understood by the majoritarian culture.

Syjuco: I've had to realize that maybe there are some cases where I make artworks that need to be legible, because they're in a certain context, and I understand that's how they're functioning. And in other cases, I can make work that speaks on multiple valences. It's a kind of code switching, but overlaid on how one makes artwork.

Miller: I feel like we're talking a little bit about audiencing, and about how explicit things are. In *Citizens* – and particularly the image where you have the gray and white checkerboard, the sort of Photoshop background that is a shroud for one of the sitters – how do you strike a balance between the didactic and the aesthetic within that process and the resulting pieces? Both for the portrait subjects, and for art

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

collectors and gallery viewing audiences?

Syjuco: To answer the first part of your question, that was a project that I did in 2017 with (now former) students at UC Berkeley that grew out of participating in and witnessing protests in response to a rise in white supremacist and white nationalist groups coming to campus to bait the community into conflicts. Many of the students I work with belong to targeted groups and we were collectively talking about how to react and live through this moment. I came up with the idea of photographing students as stand-ins for the anti-fascist protestors who were present but couldn't be photographed. The students and I talked through what we saw, recreated approximations of the clothes the protesters wore, and then posed the formal portraits. That process was a kind of inter-pedagogical dialogue when we were making it. It's been interesting to see those images circulate since. I've had people tell me recently that, considering they were made four years ago, those images are still relevant, because we still see white nationalism rising. The white supremacist marches in Charlottesville happened around the same time, too, and I just remember thinking, this isn't going to go away anytime soon. In fact, it will get worse.

Miller: I really appreciate and admire the dialogic processes you're deploying in the work. And I was wondering –

especially for, say, a marginalized student who may be at risk of deportation, or other students who, maybe we're only seeing their eyes, but even so, if they're identified, they could be at risk of being targeted by right wing activists in some way – how do you negotiate feelings of safety? And how do you work with these participants to figure out what the boundaries or limitations are that we want to observe?

Syjuco: That was an upfront part of the discussion, and I held space for that. Also, I don't know if this makes a difference or not, but I don't profit from these images. I've decided that if I'm working with someone from a marginalized group that is the subject or the center of my image, that my portion of any sale goes either directly to the individual, to support them, or to a cause they want to support. I understand that there's a power dynamic where as a professional artist and professor I might gain cultural capital from this work, whereas they'll perhaps have to be anonymous. The portrait of the undocumented woman with the checkerboard transparency veil, she was able to start a nonprofit organization called the *Undocumented Filmmakers Collective*, and all the sales from that work – and it was quite substantial – went directly to the organization she founded. Subsequently, she came out publicly as undocumented a couple of years afterwards, and she was able to do that on her own terms. She's an activist

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

now in her own right, which comes back full circle.

Miller: What are some of the difficulties of participatory, collaborative work, and using dialogic processes? Or what are the benefits?

Syjuco: If you're working with others, the choices of how everyone is depicted and represented ultimately affects what gets produced. I've had to learn how to be comfortable making hard pivots. I wouldn't even call them compromises, but it's meeting a design challenge, so you change the work to change the function. I have whole other bodies of work and projects that I completely author, where I don't feel like I'm either putting people at risk or potentially misrepresenting them, and in some ways that can be easier.

Miller: One of the things I've experienced in my current project, where I'm collaborating with people on how their portraits are made, is that it's both very rewarding and very slow.

Syjuco: It's so antithetical to the traditional model of the photographer orchestrating things in a studio, or of a journalistic documentary style where you pop into someone else's life and click. That way of working can feel really extractive.

Miller: Do you call yourself a photographer?

Syjuco: No, I don't actually, that's funny. I speak to a lot of photography departments, and I make photographs, but I generally say, "I work with images." I think it's because I have a deep respect for the craft of photography, and I'm not a technically trained photographer. That's why sometimes work with low resolution images and things that can be distorted.

Miller: You're making photographic objects. Some of them are large banners, canvases with sculptural elements and photographs. The only places I've seen your works are in museums and galleries. There are certainly opportunities when showing in those spaces, but when you talk about advocacy, is it approached and seen by the audiences you want to reach, outside of collectors?

Syjuco: Yes, but with a caveat. I make a lot of work that doesn't necessarily get recognized as art. I've been lucky, and I'm thankful for the museum and institutional and gallery support, because they offer a very formal, high end presentation space for work. And it enters a certain dialogue that not everyone finds themselves participating in. But then I can do a lot of other cultural work, and I don't even know if I would call it art. It's just part of my practice. I create resources and databases and things where people can access information or distribute /

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

contribute to things. Sometimes it gets talked about as social practice.

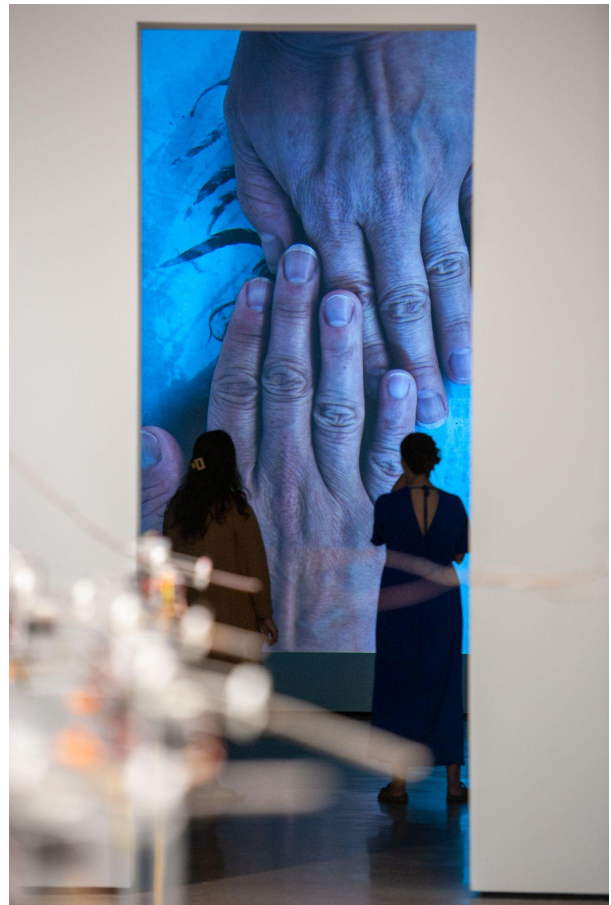
Miller: That makes me think about the work of Rikrit Tiravanija, and people are like, “is it artwork? Or is it an opportunity for fellowship?”

Syjuco: I have study centers and collections of zines, like how-to manuals and resources that you can download. I did a project where I was creating an aggregation of shared teaching syllabi so that teachers who are new to the profession don't have to start from scratch. These activities aren't really artworks, but I think they're part of this notion of how things circulate. I just call them all projects. I leave the word “art” out sometimes because I find it's actually not useful.

Miller: Do you think of that work as a kind of activism? Or would you categorize yourself more as an advocate?

Syjuco: I do work that has an activist bent, but I generally don't say outright, “I'm an activist”— not because I'm embarrassed by that term, it's just that I have colleagues who are hard-core activists and that's a different kind of work. Maybe I'm an artist activist, or I'm an artist who sometimes does activist work. It's hard to say. Even though I'm based in the Bay Area, a lot of my recent work involves research and travel all over the country, including the Midwest.

These projects have focused on the construction of the idea of “America” and as an American artist, I appreciate being in dialogue in these multiple contexts.



1,000 MILES PER HOUR

DAWIT L. PETROS

is a visual artist, researcher and educator. Throughout the past decade, he has focused on a critical re-reading of the entanglements between colonialism and modernity. These concerns derive from lived experiences: Petros is an Eritrean emigrant who spent formative years in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Kenya before settling in central Canada. The overlapping cultures, voices, and tenets of this constellation produced a dispersed consciousness, global and transnational in stance and outlook.

Among the awards he's received are a Terra Foundation Research Fellowship, an Art Matters Fellowship, and Artist Residencies at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the McColl Center for Visual Art, and the Addis Ababa Photo Fest. Recent exhibition venues include Oslo Kunstforening, the 13th Biennial of Havana, Kansas City Art Institute's H&R Block Artspace, the Studio Museum in Harlem; the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, the Medina Galerie Mediatheque in Bamako, Mali, the Lianzhou International Photo Festival in China, and many others.

Dawit L Petros spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Thursday, September 8, 2022.

Dee Miller: I think your journey as an immigrant to Canada – as a refugee of the 30-year war between Eritrea and Ethiopia – provides important context



for understanding your work. Would you be comfortable sharing a bit about your journey and how you arrived where you are now?

Dawit L. Petros: Absolutely. We left in the middle of the protracted war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. We embarked on a long journey from East Africa and eventually arrived in Canada as refugees. The physical, cultural, and geographic displacement is not just part of my biography, it is one of the most important sets of conditions that produced my understanding of the world. My work and the research underpinning it are intended in large part to help me understand these experiences. I am comfortable talking about this especially in this moment when anti-immigrant rhetoric that fuels so much cynical politics is ascendant.

Miller: Is a white supremacist ideology against immigration taking hold in Canada, too? It's certainly a problem here in the United States, but I didn't know if rising illiberalism was also infecting our neighbor to the north.

Petros: I would say yes but I think the intensity may be different. The attempts

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

to control mobility are rooted in ideologies of the Western nations that have historically monopolized access to resources and capital and are now attempting to fix people where they are.

Miller: And especially now that climate catastrophes are causing mass migrations. Anti-immigrant sentiment surprises me but I suppose it shouldn't. Anyone who looks like me and lives on this continent obviously has ancestors that came from somewhere else. My mother's family immigrated from Naples, Italy at the turn of the last century, and I guess you could say they were economic refugees. But I don't want to suggest my family's experience was in any way equivalent to yours. And certainly, the movement of Italian settlers to African colonies like Eritrea bestowed an enormous amount of privilege on the imperialists that wasn't shared by the people already living there. Even the language we use belies that inequality: expatriate versus colonial subject. In the book chapter you shared with me prior to this conversation, writer Theresa Fiore cleverly plays with the possible double meaning of the word (pre) occupation, and you use that word in at least one of the titles of your works. Please expand on the possibilities of those ideas and how they come to play in your work.

Petros: Fiore describes how "pre-occupation" used with a hyphen refers to how people, places, and objects

we connect with contemporary immigration are already marked by previous histories of colonialism and emigration. This meaning is contrasted with "preoccupation" without a hyphen, which Fiore describes as the feeling of anxiety that the presence of "others" induces. These two sets of meanings are at the heart of my research and work. I am investigating how the displacement of Italians from their own historical memory of coloniality and migration impacts their contemporary relationship to African refugees traveling to Europe through Italy. How have the latter who traverse the Mediterranean become a stranger to Italians, when a plethora of historical material exists to show there was a time of greater familiarity between these communities? The work occupies the space between these two sets of preoccupations: one that says there is no physical space on this land for you, and another that says, this story about you and about the other has already been constructed. What do you do in that space? What do you do in the gap between?

Miller: I'm curious to hear you talk about the idea of the gap in the piece that we're showing in Beeler, [*The Constant Retelling of the Future in the Past*](#). It looks like you're using archival images that you sort of slice and build into these carefully constructed sequences. Describe your research practice for making this piece, and explain the histories of migration and politics that

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

you intend to bring to the forefront with that work.

Petros: *The Constant Retelling of the Future in the Past, Parts I and II* use photographs produced between 1890-1937. Part I contains images produced in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Libya. These show the streets full of cars, the Fiat Factory, an engine room of the Teleferica, architectural models of agricultural villages in Libya, and land cultivated by the indigenous labor. Part II depicts scenes including Italians leaving for life in North America, celebrations and public events. They also show the labor and infrastructural works through which Italian laborers contributed to nation-building in Canada. Therefore, the images were produced in one instance by the Italian colonial project in Africa, and in the other the immigration process of Italians arriving in North America. How do we read and understand images that were produced in order to substantiate Italian superiority, in one context, versus Italian inferiority in another? So the young Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali immigrant who arrives on the shores of Italy today is not a stranger at all because in many ways what they represent is the return of these repressed Italian histories. I modified the original documents in various ways, first elements from particular images are extracted, rescaled, and re-situated into proximity with other images or even removed altogether. Second, abstract black bands

of varying dimensions are inserted among the composition. So a single photographic image is re-situated within an expansive horizon that recalls the mobility of cinema or the photographic contact sheet. These interventions highlight gaps and absences in the photographs in an attempt to interrogate their original functions and assumptions of neutrality.

Miller: I've never thought about it this way until right now. Your work is showing me the multiple ways in which our personal stories intersect. My mom's family immigrated to work as stonemasons. They helped build parts of Pennsylvania and New York, and they were proud of that; but also, when my parents were married in 1969, even then it was still considered a mixed marriage by custom if not by law because whiteness had not yet been conceptually expanded to include my Italian-American, Catholic mother, at least not in the eyes of my Protestant grandparents. Today I benefit from the subsequent expansion of whiteness that includes someone like me. I don't mean to make this so personal...

Petros: A thoughtful conversation can be destabilizing because it undermines the seeming certainties of the positions we occupy. Many Italian Americans are not familiar with these intertwined histories, and this is the triangulation I'm interested in: the historical movement of Italians to North and South America is

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

connected to the historical movement of Italians to East Africa, and those are connected to the contemporary movement of young Eritreans and other Africans into Italy. It is worth noting that prior to Mussolini and the fascists, Italy referred to their immigrant communities in North America as colonies, and the project in Africa was meant to “repatriate” Italians in America to colonies in East Africa. My work examines how, if we're to understand future formations, we have to do it through knowledge of historical formations. It's not about bridging the gaps. What I want to do is to highlight gaps that offer spaces to question and think.

Miller: We've already mentioned the underpinnings of othering that are tied in with the colonial project. And we've both shared a little of our personal histories. I feel like it's important here for me to acknowledge that you and I have been friends since 2004. We went to grad school together in Boston. I remember back then, a number of us including me presumed your creative practice was primarily about blackness. And I've got to say, looking back, I'm embarrassed by my own racism, by how I oversimplified and made assumptions about something I didn't truly understand while presuming I did. My students and I had a dialogue last week about this quote from Carrie Mae Weems: "I think that most work that's made by black artists is considered to be

about blackness. Unlike work that's made by white artists, which is assumed to be universal at its core." I don't know if you want to respond to this, but I thought I'd bring it up.

Petros: Yes, the presumption is if you are black in the United States your work is about blackness and more precisely, American blackness. When I was awarded a Graduate Teaching Fellowship at SMFA, Boston, I taught a class on American racial imagery called “Deconstructing Whiteness.” I wanted a space for me to learn and articulate my relationship to American notions of race and blackness while setting boundaries for my graduate peers and my faculty cohort, “This isn't *black* work, just because I'm black. What Carrie Mae Weems is pointing to is absolutely spot on. And, when people correctly assume work to be dealing with blackness, it is frequently reduced to a predictable kind of experience of blackness. I've spoken in other places of the fertile capriciousness of blackness, not just as a subject, position, but as a political category. When my work is seen as operating within a space of blackness, I in no way presume that equates it with a lack, or absence of complexity. I think it's expansive and complicated.

Miller: When Tim and I were considering which works to include in the show in relation to the images that NASA sent on the Voyager spacecraft, we felt it was essential to point to absences. It's very

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

telling to see what was and wasn't depicted in that particular time capsule that we sent out into space, who wasn't included, and how "the other" was considered. The things that weren't said speak powerfully about what was valued. It sounds to me like that's one of the ways that you're thinking about these elisions or omissions, like blank spaces in our cognition.

Petros: We've been educated to understand we must approach an image with a healthy amount of skepticism. Part of that skepticism means recognizing that when an image documents a particular element, there is another element that it could have documented, but didn't. The presence points towards an absence. There are many things we do not see in a photograph, even when it's plainly in front of us. How can the occupation of gaps become an artistic strategy? I'm curious about what we do with it rather than just attempting to fill it.

Miller: Please explain some of the nuts and bolts of your research and ideation process. How do you gain access to these images? And then, how do you build ideas from there? Or maybe it is the other way around?

Petros: I am working with material that I started collecting in 2012. There are too many archival collections to mention. The central ones that I have been working with in Eritrea are the Pavoni

Library and the Asmara Heritage Project in Asmara. In Rome, I have conducted research at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Geographical Society. In Chicago, I have completed research work at Northwestern University's Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, The University of Illinois at Chicago's Special Collections Department, The Florence Bartolomei Roselli Library, The University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center, The Art Institute of Chicago Archives, and The University of Illinois at Chicago's Special Collections Department. In Montreal, Canada, I have consulted with historical documents at The National Archives of Quebec in Montreal, the Archives of the City of Montreal, and the Italian community archive housed at the Casa d'Italia. So the repositories range from academic and governmental entities to community sources and personal archives. Images from my own family don't make their way into these things, but they do inform my work.

Miller: In my lectures I often say that our architectural and interior design choices are some of the ways in which we display socioeconomic status, national identity, and our aspirations. These indicate how we want others to see us, and even more importantly, how we wish to see ourselves. In terms of Italy's fraught projects abroad, both in its African colonies and in the other countries where Italians settled (like Canada), there's a kind of writing,

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

erasure, and rewriting that is enacted by the buildings. Fiore calls them “examples of cultural palimpsests.” What questions are raised for you when you place images of these far apart places directly adjacent to one another? Or when you block our view of someone’s face with the mirrored reflection of a landscape or industrial site?

Petros: My interest in this project from the outset was built forms, especially architecture and infrastructure. I then began to include publications and journals. I was invested in how these objects manifest and shape cultural presumptions and ideologies. They tell us a great deal about the values which underpin the establishment of an empire and the formation of an imperial subject. A focus in the larger project is a building in Montreal that was built in 1936 by the Italian community. The Casa d’Italia is a space that reflects the intersection of Italian Canadian migration stories with inter/national narratives because of the broader social forces that shaped both its construction and subsequent events. The aesthetics of the building highlight architecture’s role as a social microcosm in which national fissures, dreams and aspirations take shape. In examining the building’s language, what is revealed are stylized Fascist icons in the interior and exterior of the building. By rendering the language of its construction visible and connecting these to the historical conditions that produced them, it

becomes the connective tissue to buildings in Eritrea which, in the present, continue to reflect a strong Fascist iconography. I am interested to know how these buildings in Eritrea are forms whose meanings are potentially not so overly determined that one cannot redirect them. Though they bear the visual markers of their origins they have been recodified to also mean something else. They are now the emblems of an independent country. This does not obliterate the problematic histories of empire, fascism, and colonialism. All forms have to have the possibility of being rewritten, reoccupied, redirected. This type of logic makes its way into a lot of the other work in my project. For example, the highly visible figures standing with mirrors in the landscape offer an incompleteness which allows spectators standing before them a space to enter the work.

Miller: The title of your ongoing series *Spazio Disponibile* can translate as “vacant space” or “available space,” and recalls Italy’s colonial projects in Africa. As an American viewer living in Ohio, it also calls to mind the violent history of my country’s westward expansion into previously occupied lands. Right now, I’m standing in a place that, less than 200 years ago, was home to the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe, and Cherokee peoples. The ways in which we rationalize our contemporary presence here depends upon a self-serving form

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

of amnesia. And I think that the economic system we participate in – one that sees the living world outside of humanity as nothing more than a stockpile of natural resources, and “human resources” – leads rationally to fascism, or at the very least, to authoritarian regimes. Some might say the Eritrean dictatorship since 1993 is one of the fruits that grew from the seeds of Italy’s fascist, imperial interventions. I know these are separate and complicated things, but I was wondering how you see these threads I’m attempting to interweave.

Petros: That’s a lot, but I’m happy you framed the early part of the question by at least acknowledging and recognizing the land you’re on. I think all too often, especially in academia, when we talk about decolonizing the museum and decolonizing the curriculum, we fail to recognize that we must begin by decolonizing the land. This has to be where it begins, with an absolute acknowledgement that a significant amount of the territory on which the United States and Canada is built must revert back because the claims have never been settled. These are unceded territories.

Miller: That’s basically what Dr. Dori Tunstall, Dean of Faculty at OCAD said when she delivered the President’s Lecture here at CCAD last fall.

Petros: To the latter part of your question, fascism in our contemporary moment moves through the epistemologies formed through the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment project. Imperialism and colonialism are part and parcel with the post-renaissance knowledge that “illuminated” the western world. Part of what I’m doing is learning that the nativist projects, the fascist projects, the anti-immigrant projects, and the resurgence of ethno-nationalism we are witnessing have historical precedents.

Miller: I hear people talking about liberalism and fascism as if they’re in diametric opposition when in fact, they seem pretty tied together.

Petros: This is an important point, especially within the context of Italy because the displacement of Italy’s colonial history is predicated on the notion that they overthrew the fascists. They disavowed the fascist project, therefore they wiped their hands clean of it. The reality is that many of the worst excesses of the Imperial colonial project began during liberal Italy, and the fascist project is a manifestation of many of the beliefs and ideologies carried over from the liberal project.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

LISA JARRETT

is an artist and educator. She is Associate Professor of Community and Context Arts at Portland State University's School of Art + Design. She is co-founder and co-director of KSMoCA (Dr MLK Jr School Museum of Contemporary Art) and the Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice in NE Portland, OR, and the artists collective Art 25: Art in the 25th Century.

Her intersectional practice considers the politics of difference within a variety of settings including: schools, landscapes, fictions, racial imaginaries, studios, communities, museums, galleries, walls, mountains, mirrors, floors, rivers, and lenses. She recently discovered that her primary medium is questions.

She is the recipient of a 2018 Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Award, and a 2022 residency at Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts. Her work has been exhibited widely, including at the Barrack Museum of Art in Las Vegas, Russo Lee Gallery in Portland, OR, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, and many others.

Lisa Jarrett spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Tuesday, September 6, 2022.

Dee Miller: In your statement you say that the piece we're showing in the gallery, [Meditate on the Blank Space](#)



[Below](#), was created as part of Takahiro Yamamoto's performance piece, *Direct Path to Detour*. Talk a little bit about his project, and then how this piece has taken on a life of its own.

Lisa Jarrett: Taka invited me and a number of other artists to produce works around a performance piece he was building to explore identity in the context of his own practice. So there was a performance and there was also a publication and an exhibition of objects. When I created the piece I knew it would live a double life in a sense. It was going to exist in a publication and on a gallery wall. I conceived of it from the perspective of objecthood, and I approached it without any pictorial information, relying on text. This comes out of being rooted and bound to questions as a central starting place with my work. I ask you to meditate on a space that's below, and that refers to what? What direction is below? Is it straight down? Behind? One panel is transparent with the exception of the

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

text, and the other panel essentially functions like a black mirror. But it's also not a mirror. It just happens that the black space is where you see yourself reflected, even if the didactics of the text are really where people tend to look. Each item in the list is an idea for a ridiculous book title. It was fun to think about how I would use imaginary publications to bring forward ideas about searching for identity, and how identity is put upon us. The piece doesn't give you any real direction. It doesn't give you any answers. I'm more interested in the kinds of questions I end up formulating when I'm trying to work through my ideas.

Miller: It's interesting that you talked about the blank space possibly being below the reflective, black panel. It's a really conscious choice to use a black void or a white void, especially when we're talking about subject positionality in these terms. But as you say, the piece is your litany of 26 statements. At first I was looking for blank spaces in between the lines of text, and I thought of them as invitations to reflect and respond. There's a sense of humor but some of them are like, ouch, you know? And then I started to go there and fill in those blanks. It felt like some were targeting arts professionals, like "the trouble with semiotics" while others felt like bias incidents I've seen on campus like, "No, I won't fucking cornrow your hair for Halloween." And then there were these moments of Zen where Black Jesus and

Agnes Martin have a conversation. As viewers/readers, are you prompting us to reconsider over simplified notions? Or reflect with some honesty on our past or present blind spots?

Jarrett: It's all of those things. They're funny, they're serious. One of the lines, "Picking Cotton: 100 exercises in empathy" grew into another body of work. And the idea of bias incidents, I want to circle back to that first, because that's letter Z on the list, right? That's the one that came to me through a student. When she was visiting a friend, the friend's mother asked her to braid her hair. This friend's mother is a white woman, long story short, she basically had my black student braiding her hair for a Halloween costume! As she told that story I was so mad. I was like, "I wish I had been there with you." But what would I have said or done? What would you do? What does someone need in that situation? And then there's the one pointing to semiotics and all the things that happen when you start thinking about signs and signifiers. It can be kind of cringy to watch students who are trying to use the things they're reading to interpret their work at that time, but they're not quite ready. So there's a place of never being ready for the things we are confronted with. Going back to the notion of the black void versus the white void, when I was conceiving of this object, I was certain it would be on a white wall. I didn't have to add anything white, the whiteness is always ever

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

present. It's the thing that it's always inside of. And there's the way in which the void of blackness, when combined with reflection, pulls you in because you can't get out of that piece without seeing your shadow or your reflection. I realize there are a lot of ideas contained in this work. That is what happens when I find myself looking for lists to organize the information. How do we put order into our lives? How do we move through the world logically when it is, in many ways, highly illogical? I mean, I'm a person who critiques institutions while also relying on them for my living. We're in a constant state of paradox and I hope to carry that into the work without diluting it into a simple system of answers.

Miller: Much of your work explores a non-normative or non-majoritarian subject positioning within the American context. You've talked eloquently about the ways in which whiteness maintains its hegemonic position by remaining unnamed and unmarked, so then everything else is "marked/othered." I imagine your pieces communicate differently to white viewers and viewers of color. What are your approaches to audiencing your work?

Jarrett: It's very much about who can read it, and how. White people speak English, Black people speak English. Many people living in the United States speak English, but it doesn't mean we all understand the same thing when we

read a text. I want that to be evident in the kinds of things I have chosen to include in those proposed or imaginary titles without explaining what you might need to know to understand it from the perspective of a Black woman, which is also not a monolithic thing. It's important to avoid speaking in totalities, but I've noticed that when Black people comment on this work, they tell me about one or two lines that really got to them, it just hit home. On the other hand, what typically happens with white viewers is a more somber situation and I'm more likely to hear, "now I know what you're going through." And I'm like, "I'm not expecting you to empathize with me like that. I'm suggesting that these could be useful topics." What I notice mostly is that the emotive content of the conversation based on the identity of the person I'm speaking to is really different. One is like, "Oh, my God, I relate. And here's my story." And the other is like, "I *understand* you."

Miller: So much of your work relies on the audience becoming co-conspirators in the creation of meaning. And it leads me to some of your other pieces like [In Equality](#) and [People's Homes](#). It looks like you had a lot of collaborators, so I was curious if you would describe either one of these projects and explain how you coordinate that kind of community participation.

Jarrett: Those two projects are collaborative in different ways. I do have

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

what would be considered a traditional studio based practice where I make objects, although I'm really interested in those being participatory at times. My socially engaged practice is inherently not about the production of an object, but about the sorts of interactions that can potentially happen around an object. The coauthors of *People's Homes*, Molly Sherman and Emily Fitzgerald, invited a group of artists to partner with Portland's longtime residents. So each of us partnered with a resident to ultimately produce a kind of yard sign. I wanted to work with oral histories of the 1948 flood that essentially wiped out Vanport, where most of the city's black population lived at the time. I got to work with Thelma Sylvester to learn about her experience. She was in her early 90s and died less than a year later. It was a beautiful opportunity where somebody else's socially engaged project connected me as a collaborator with somebody else. The art wasn't the sign Thelma and I made – that was just a marker. The point was the relationships and the knowledge that we built together as artists, elders, and community members.

In Equality was a piece for an exhibition called *Speaking Volumes, Transforming Hate*. It was literally about transforming white supremacist texts. A defecting member from an organization called "The Church of the Creator" had all of these books like, "The White Man's

Bible," and didn't know what to do with them. So he gave them to the Montana Human Rights Network, and they eventually made their way to Holter Museum of Art curator, Katie Knight. She put out a call for artists to physically transform the books. Starting in 2007, I worked with communities of students in the Helena area for this participatory project; and so, most of the kids I've worked with over the years have graduated high school by now. Since I first started that project, I've begun a whole other part of my practice working with young people in Portland. My colleague, Harrell Fletcher and I co-authored and directed a project we call [KSMoCA](#), which is The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Museum of Contemporary Art in a Pre K-5 public school in Northeast Portland. We are building a contemporary art museum inside of a public school, shifting access to contemporary art beyond the primary institutions which tend to be far away, cost money, and don't touch right into the everyday experiences of kids. We want to normalize art.

Miller: It seems like you're literally using pedagogy as a medium. What sort of work has emerged from that?

Jarrett: At the [Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice](#) – that's a satellite project to KSMoCA – our original intention was to build a strong contemporary art presence for students that could follow

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

them to middle and high school. What we've learned through these partnerships is how valuable it is to work not just with the students, but an entire community of collaborators, administrators, and teachers. At KSMoCA we brought in students from Portland State's Art and Social Practice MFA program, along with undergraduate students, so that they have an integrated, place-based experience. Meanwhile, the elementary school students remain in their everyday environment. We go to them and enrich that space with the introduction and inclusion of workshops, exhibitions, and works on the walls, and also by building relationships with major contemporary artists who give public talks and lectures. The elementary school students often do introductions for the visiting artists in the school's library. We're also building an art library that sits within that space, and we have a growing, permanent collection that's been generated over the years. We work in collaboration with the students and the artists. One recent example was our collaboration with Hank Willis Thomas who had an exhibition at KSMoCA at the same time he was showing at the Portland Art Museum. We worked with him to create a photographic quilt made from pictures of every child in the school that included their conclusions to the phrases, "Freedom from..." or "Freedom for..."

Miller: That was part of the *For Freedoms* project, right?

Jarrett: Yes. The kids got to meet the artist, and they learned to understand his work. They saw it being constructed in real time when we printed and mounted it in the hallway. And then to watch children run up to see their faces and point to the place where they interacted with the artist reminded me of the impact those kinds of experiences can have, especially when we're young. Those things stick with you. Formative experiences are kernels that carry us through to becoming professional artists. But maybe the best way to say it is there is no single story. It is a cacophony of collaboration, and all the different stories at different levels in different moments in different people, those are the relationships being centered. That's the Art. The output, as you put it, the things getting made, are a kind of evidence. That artifact is also wonderful, and it's how an art museum helps the public understand what happened. But none of this is something most of us would expect to see in a K-12 public school environment. We are creating conceptual contrasts, to make these presences and absences more visible.

Miller: It sounds like what you're doing, in addition to everything else, is democratizing Contemporary Art, making it more accessible for those kids,

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

and also empowering them to use their own voices.

Jarrett: Absolutely, but I would replace the word “democratize” maybe with “not-hierarchize,” whatever word that would be, if only because I don't love how political “democratize” is. And when you talk about the broader impact, in a sense the reason it's an art museum is because Harrell Fletcher and I are artists. That's where we come from and how we come to it. The discipline isn't necessarily important, I don't even care if these kids grow up to be artists. I mean, don't get me wrong, if one of these children walks into my college classroom one day there will be a lot of happy crying. The bigger picture is helping them understand they can have an active role in their education and careers. Most of our students have no idea what it means to be an artist or historian or writer. It's difficult for them to conceptualize. We're giving kids some of the tools they need to ask a few more questions so they can feel confident approaching things that may even change their minds.

Miller: This idea of empowerment and giving-voice is something I picked up on in your collaboration with Lehua M. Taitano and Jocelyn Kapumealani Ng in [Future Ancestors](#). It felt like a hopeful instantiation of black futurism, or broader than that because it's also indigenous futurism. It made me think of Alicia Wormsley's ongoing project, *There Are Black People in the Future*.

Can you talk a bit about the experience of working in a space that assumes your lived experiences and realities are normative without needing to be explained? And what was it like to partner with these two women?

Jarrett: Our partnership is ongoing. Lehua and I founded the collective [Art25: Art in the 25th Century](#), to formalize our long-standing artistic collaborations. Then we invited Jocelyn to join us after working with her on *Future Ancestors*. One thing I've learned in my career is that I can just make it up, and then it's real. Like I made a drawing, we made this collective and now it's here! I say it jokingly, but it is empowering to be able to bring something into being. Lehua and I have been working together informally for years, and we met Jocelyn through a project we did for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, on Oahu. The whole premise of *Art25* is that we select an artist somewhere on the globe that we want to work with, invite them to work with us, travel to their location and create art that centers their practice. We focus on how they might understand indigenous futures, Black futures, and the point is getting to know each other so that we can learn collaboratively across great distances. What does it mean to be thinking about Black and indigenous futures in the context of contemporary artistic practice in the 25th century? Obviously we are referencing *Art21* – which I think is the best teaching tool of

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

all time – but when I watch those, I still leave with questions. When I was a student watching *Art21* I was like, “but how do I even get to be that kind artist when my studio is in a basement?” On the PBS show there's no bridge between emergence and success. We wanted more transparency around things that the art world continues to leave opaque, even when they're supporting the work of artists we admire. *Art25* is doing this for me, helping me further my practice as well as meeting the needs of other artists in my community.

Miller: It's a really creative approach to your entrepreneurial practice. I imagine it opens some avenues for funding and additional collaboration.

Jarrett: Exactly. Just claiming collaboration as a modality is important. And I love what happens when you bring people together. There are a million ways to do things. You don't have to be right all the time. You can be in conversation, in dialogue. Ultimately, it can change how you define Art altogether, and I'm excited by that possibility. Collaboration points to something different than a precious object that purports to have been built by one person because, in reality, it takes a lifetime of experiences and the sharing of expertise.

Miller: I believe the building of knowledge is a collaborative endeavor.

Jarrett: I am really excited about the potential for this particular exhibition to point to absences, not just within the canon; but, when you think about what we would want to communicate to another species, when I look at what was included on *Voyager*, the lens becomes very apparent. Tim Rietenbach said you two were interested in looking through a different lens, and I love the framing of that curatorial perspective. Personally, the word I've been favoring lately is “prism.” Light passes through, and instead of focusing it refracts and you get to see a fuller representation.



1,000 MILES PER HOUR

DAVID BOWEN

is a studio artist and educator whose work has been featured in exhibitions at ZKM Karlsruhe, Fundación Telefónica Madrid, Eyebeam New York, Ars Electronica Linz, BOZAR Brussels, Science Gallery Dublin, Itau Cultural, São Paulo, Laboral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial Gijón, The Israel Museum Jerusalem, The Cranbrook Museum of Art Detroit, Intercommunication Center Tokyo and Center for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona.

David Bowen spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Thursday, August 18, 2022.

Dee Miller: The first time I saw your work was at the Mattress Factory Museum in Pittsburgh in 2015. When Tim and I began discussing ideas for this exhibition, we connected [Space Junk](#) to the golden records that were included on the Voyager spacecraft that NASA launched out in space as a beacon to communicate something about our species. But also, those spacecraft will become junk floating in space when they stop working. When I saw your installation, I understood it to be a kind of combination of modern geolocation technology with low-tech objects, tree branches that look like dowsing rods. Instead of potentially communicating with extraterrestrials, your piece was showing those of us on Earth that there's an aspect of our life that's already living in space. You use wooden sticks to



literally point at orbiting garbage. How do you feel about the conceptual connections that I've drawn, and my reading of your material choices to bridge science and pseudoscience?

David Bowen: All the work generally starts with formal contrasts. I've been thinking about the difference between natural and mechanical systems, and for me it's not a dichotomy at all. I mean, in the Anthropocene, especially with *Space Junk*, how and when did these objects become natural? I think the oldest thing up there that we're still tracking is Explorer One, which was our answer to Sputnik. Explorer was supposed to be up there for 2000 years. But it ran into some unanticipated resistance or drag, and now it's only going to be up for 200 years. Things in lower earth orbit are in a constant state of decay. They're moving really fast, like 17,000 miles an hour to maintain orbit, and I like thinking about how they kind of are eventually going to be on a trajectory of their own. So obsolete objects in lower Earth orbit are what I'm tracking, not the space station

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

or things that are way up there in geosynchronous orbit like the satellites used for GPS. Those are not going to decay. They may still be there when the sun explodes. I've done a couple projects about Voyager. I don't think it's just another piece of space debris, it's way more poetic than that. It's even a character in the first Star Trek movie.

Miller: I've always thought of the Voyager spacecraft as a kind of time capsule.

Bowen: In the movie, Voyager comes under the care of an entity that wants to help on its exploratory mission. It becomes so data hungry that it is gobbling up everything in the galaxy. I relate to longing for more information, and my work is about visualizing data. There are sites where you can track which piece of orbiting debris is going to reenter next, and where. You can plan to go and watch it streaking across the sky, which is wonderful. And these human-made things becoming natural phenomena are pretty cool.

Miller: I want to come back to a word you used earlier: decay. When you talk about objects decaying, you're talking about their orbits right? They eventually re-enter earth's atmosphere and crash into the planet?

Bowen: Yes, the ones in low Earth orbit do that, like rocket bodies and things that we shoot up there and don't think about. They eventually encounter the

atmosphere, and the friction basically makes them burst into flames. If they don't incinerate completely, then they hit the Earth, usually out in the ocean somewhere.

Miller: I was also wondering if by decay, you meant that they literally degrade and break apart.

Bowen: I don't think so. I read about this in the Atlantic, and there's just not much to intervene with them in the vacuum of space, unless they crash into each other. I read that the Chinese government is shooting at low-orbit debris, which seems like a bad idea because then there will be even smaller pieces that are harder to track. But the things that are way up there are really untouched. They're on a trajectory that's not going to put them in contact with anything. I'm thinking a lot more about physics, the power and energy that it took to get them up to that particular speed and orbit. That's why I mentioned Explorer running into some friction that no one calculated, and slowed it down enough to where it's not going to be up there for 2000 years.

Miller: Decay is a slow spiral.

Bowen: Yes, ultimately barreling to its final death.

Miller: How do the pieces in this exhibition operate? I know you're using data that you can gather publicly, but

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

then, how do you make them actually work?

Bowen: There's a website that's tracking everything as far back as Explorer 1 right up to what's being launched now. It gives you two pieces of data. One is altitude, and the other is azimuth. Altitude is the degree above the horizon, and azimuth is the angle or direction away from a north or south compass reference point. Both of these are based upon the position of the observer, which are recorded as latitude and longitude. So I'm using these data to orient the twigs in the installation to point in the direction of Explorer as it orbits the earth. I wrote what's called a scraper using Python script. The code goes to the website, finds and pulls the data to map the altitude and azimuth onto stepper motors so they can track it, tracing arcs across the sky in real time. Each motor is controlled with its own arduino, and the data is coming to them from a laptop running behind the scenes.

Miller: Until you described it I hadn't considered that, depending on where in the world you install this, it's going to be pointing in different directions because the altitude and azimuth are going to be in different places depending on the installation's latitude and longitude.

Bowen: Absolutely. The first thing the scraper does is input its own GPS coordinates, because the computer

knows where it's at. It uses that as a relational reference to what it's pointing to. Installing it on the other side of the world would be very different. I did iterations and experiments where they were tracked as they went below the horizon, because they're going all the way around. Have you ever played around with the stargazing apps? What is cool is that you can look down through to the other side of the Earth and find out what's going in that sky, too. I decided not to do that for this installation because I wanted to be site specific.

Miller: It sounds like most of the information that you're using is in the public domain. But have you ever tried to gather data that were not in the public domain? Like, has anyone from the NSA or FBI ever knocked on your door?

Bowen: No, I am just interested in what's readily available. I like accessibility. Even though anybody can get the same data on their computer, I think there's still a mystery to it. And there's still wonderment. I do embrace that mystery.

Miller: I think what you're talking about is a sense of reverence. Like when you're looking at a rainbow or at the milky way. And even though we can explain these things, they're still quite beautiful.

Bowen: You can see a satellite if conditions are right. And it's pretty easy

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

to see the International Space Station with the naked eye. But the mystery is important to me.

Miller: You talked about the Voyager project being poetic, and I think it had utopian impulses. But *Space Junk* monumentalizes garbage, which is an absurdist gesture, and also kind of embarrassing for humankind. It got me thinking about all this stuff we are throwing away into an environment that we still don't know an awful lot about. And all this orbiting refuse is going to have negative impacts on our ability to continue launching things into space.

Bowen: I think about how we're fucking this place up pretty bad. I also imagine what it might be like after we've driven ourselves to extinction. Earth will be fine. Life will continue. It'll find an equilibrium. It's more about us, I guess. And that's sad. I can see your face as I say this and I'm not trying to upset you. But yeah, I have pieces that are more overtly about the huge amount of trash floating in the ocean. And today it's 80 degrees and humid in Duluth, Minnesota, and it's not supposed to be this rainy or this hot. These are the more immediate ways the Anthropocene comes into play. I think it is important to consider orbiting debris, to elevate the mundane or to remind us of all the energy that was put into getting shit into orbit. Crazy amounts of energy. There was a spatula floating up there for a while, and a glove, shit that just got away from an astronaut when

they were working on something. The 17,000 mile per hour spatula! I also get the romantic "science and exploring and questing for knowledge" narrative that comes from things like the Webb telescope. Lately, there's an awareness building, and some newer rockets are designed to come back and land to be reused.

Miller: My concern about the immediacy of anthropogenic climate change is what it means for our ability to continue to feed and house all human beings, which we weren't universally doing very well even before the planet's life-support systems began crashing. It's an urgent problem. I'm connecting the themes and processes in *Space Junk* and what you just mentioned, garbage in the ocean, to your 2021 piece [Wilderness](#). That piece is an installation of 13 disposable plastic grocery bags whose floating movements in the gallery are determined by data you gathered. It made me think of the enormous trash gyres circulating in the world's oceans. Please describe the data collection process, what you hope to communicate to viewers, and what kind of experience you want them to have.

Bowen: I did a residency in 2019 on board a research vessel that went across the Pacific, from Astoria, near Portland Oregon to Honolulu, Hawaii. I was collecting data about the movement of the ship. They were scanning the sea floor, and I got the 3-D models from that,

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

but my favorite place to go on the ship was on top of the “monkey deck,” like 3 stories up. It was the highest place I could go to look out at the Pacific, and all you see is a lot of blue and a 360 horizon. It made me feel like I was in an untouched place, and I was like, maybe things are OK. But then I’d look down and see a floating bucket or a flare gun or a piece of rope. My delusion of wilderness was shattered by those objects floating by. I had an older laptop with me, back when they used to have spinning hard drives. Those laptops had accelerometers in them, which would know when the computer was being dropped. I hacked into that to get data about how the ship was rising and falling on the ocean swells. I mapped that movement onto the bags. So they’re literally showing whatever the Z of the computer was when it was on the ship.

Miller: Where was this installed?

Bowen: There’s a local gallery where I set it up, and also the Minnesota Museum of Marine Arts. Because of COVID, it wasn’t traveling much. I installed it next to another piece showing the 3-D seafloor models, the two pieces in conversation with each other.

Miller: Were you able to observe people in the gallery interacting with the piece

Bowen: Quite a bit, actually. One the iterations was installed in a storefront

window, and people would walk past on the sidewalk. It was lit from below, drama!, like looking into a fishbowl. There were a lot of comments about how they looked beautiful, like jellyfish. I’m hoping that there’s a push-pull with *Space Junk*, too, a formal beauty paired with a bleak reality.

Miller: What have been some of the opportunities or limitations or both of communicating these ideas or creating these experiences while you’re working within the white cube of a contemporary gallery space.

Bowen: I was just talking about that today when I shared this work-in-progress. This robotic arm has a little chainsaw on the end of it, and it’s controlled by a houseplant here with some sensors on it. Data from the plant controls the robotic arm that’s connected to the chainsaw. The thought is that the plant will be protecting itself to a certain extent. It was a great studio visit until they were like, “How the hell are you going to show this thing?” And I was like, “Fuck if I know?”

Miller: OK, wait. What kind of inputs are being measured from this plant?

Bowen: You get variable resistance from the leaves. I’ve done a piece where I flew a drone with a plant. Basically there’s a ground, a negative in the soil.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

Miller: This reminds me a little of making a potato into a battery.

Bowen: Yeah, so I'm basically analog reading each of the leaves and going straight to the analog pin in the arduino. You get variable resistance that's random as hell, it's really like all over the place, which is exactly what I'm looking for but I don't know how I'm going to show it. There's a piece I did right after Sandy Hook, [Fly Revolver](#), where a blank gun is controlled by flies. The gallery in Vancouver was supportive, but I don't know if you've ever shot a gun. It's really loud, unnerving. I didn't really realize what I had made until I set it up in that context where the public's coming and it's not such a controlled environment like my studio. The gun might go off in five seconds, five minutes, five hours, you just don't know. But you do know it's gonna be really loud. And I guess what I'm trying to say is that it didn't really come across in public the same way I'd experienced it in my studio.

Miller: That reminds me of Wafaa Bilal's 2007 performance-installation, *Shoot an Iraqi*, where he put himself in the gallery on the receiving end of a paintball gun fired by internet users. I think he ended up giving himself PTSD through enacting that piece.

Bowen: A very brave, scary thing to do.

Miller: And perhaps not fully considered, like you said about your gun piece. A lot

of your projects translate environmental data in one way or another into a visual representation or some kind of immersive experience. You're saying that sometimes those results can be a little bit random, but I think the thing that's constant is where you're looking for the inputs, and sort of maybe how you're using those data. Do you see your works in conversation with earlier work by others that we might think of as part of the Environmental Art movement like Olafur Eliasson, Agnes Dennis, Andy Goldsworthy, or even someone like Smithson or Richard Long?

Bowen: Absolutely. Eliasson's work is fascinating, very influential. In terms of the environmentalist aspect, I think of it as kind of a collaboration. For example Smithson's earthworks are designed to just kind of exist. I have the romantic notion that I'm taking my hand out of it, which is ridiculous, because I'm coding it all. There's an Icelandic artist who did a piece where he was painting, not knowing when a gun would be shot into the air behind him. The piece is about the mark he made when he flinched. This sort of reflexive movement, serendipity, and chance is also an important element in John Cage's music. That's what I'm striving for.

Miller: Do you have an anecdote that you would like to share about some unexpected thing that happened?

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

Bowen: I have an installation called [Tele-Present Water](#) that uses data from National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration buoys. They're out there in the Pacific on the Atlantic, used for ship navigation and to measure wind speed, wind direction, and so on. The piece uses data from the buoys to recreate the undulating ocean in the exhibition space. The gallery called me on March 11, 2011, and said, "Something odd is happening." That was when the tsunami hit Japan. I don't think the tsunami actually hit the buoys, but maybe the ocean rose or fell beyond what the buoys would normally report, and it was recorded as an error? Or maybe too many people were hitting up the NOAA site that day and the system just got overwhelmed? We aren't sure, but that mystery about what's happening on the other side of the planet is humbling.

Miller: CCAD is a small art school. In addition to experimentation and idea building, we focus on improving the craft of students' work. A lot of our curriculum is focused on making objects and services for sale. I'm going to maybe go out on a limb and guess that it probably doesn't work that straightforwardly with your installation works. Can you talk a little bit about making a living as an artist creating these kinds of experiential environments?

Bowen: I'm an art school kid, and I talk to my students about this, too. I do sell work occasionally. And once in a while I get something into a museum collection. Maintenance is always an issue with this type of work, as I'm sure you will find when it comes to you all. Early on I was making drawing machines, and I remember thinking, what is the work here: the drawing or the machine? Ideally, it's everything. I am very fortunate right now to have gallery representation, and they handle my European and international things. And a lot of what we're doing right now is pay-to-install work. That's the business model we use for income. I tell my students to always have something in a gallery or on the way back. Or at the very least, you need to receive a rejection letter every week, because that means you're hustling and putting yourself out there. You need to have something always in the air. And you have to make stuff happen, not wait for it to come to you. It also depends on where you're based, how expensive your rent is, and how much public funding is available for the arts. So you find a way to cobble it together. One minute you feel like you're getting your ass kicked and you can't keep up with all the things you've got going on, and then the next minute, it's like, where's it at? What's going on? What is the next thing?

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

HANS KLOMPEN

is a Professor in the Department of Evolution, Ecology, and Organismal Biology and Director of the Acarology Collection at The Ohio State University. He studied Animal Ecology at the Catholic University in The Netherlands and received his PhD in Biology from the University of Michigan working with Barry O'Connor on systematics and host associations of sarcoptic mange mites. This was followed by two postdocs working on tick systematics, using morphology (with Jim Oliver at Georgia Southern University) and molecules (with Bill Black at Colorado State University). In 1996, Hans was hired at Ohio State University where he is the Director of the [Acarology Collection](#) and main organizer of the annual Acarology Summer Program, a 1-3 week set of intensive workshops teaching identification of mites.

Dr. Klompen spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Thursday, August 23, 2022.

Dee Miller: I'm curious about your background, where you're from and how it influenced the direction of your career as a research scientist.

Hans Klompen: I was born and grew up in the Netherlands, did my Master's there in biology and then I met my



future advisor from the University of Michigan. He was interested in mentoring students, and I wanted to do a PhD, so that worked out nicely. I did my thesis on mange mites, then switched to ticks for a postdoc at Georgia Southern University, which happens to be the home of the United States National tick collection. Yes, there is such a thing! And after that, I did molecular work during a postdoc at Colorado State, and finally got hired here at Ohio State in 1996. I retired a year ago.

Miller: It sounds like for the whole of your career, from the time that you were a PhD student until now you've studied – I don't know what to call them – parasitic insects?

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

Klompen: I've been studying mites the whole time. People ask, can you make a whole career out of doing only that? Well, as of now there are about 60,000 known species, and I'm interested in species descriptions. And our estimate of diversity for mites is somewhere between one and five million, so there's still a lot of work left to do. I like them because they do unexpected things, and they look interesting.

Miller: So, mites aren't insects?

HK: No, they are arthropods like insects but they are much closer to spiders. Officially arachnids have four pairs of walking legs while insects have only three pairs.

DM: And these are so tiny that we normally can't see them with the naked eye?

Klompen: Most of them are tiny, less than a millimeter, but others are six or seven millimeters, and you can easily see those. The ones I work with are as small as half a millimeter to almost a millimeter and a half. It's all microscope work.

Miller: So, what is Acarology? How would you describe it to a non-scientist?

Klompen: If you say, "entomology," you're talking about the science of insects, entomon. When you're talking about "arachnology," you're talking

mostly about spiders, arachnids.

Acarology is the study of acari, which is the Greek word for mite. The Greeks did describe a few mites, not very well, but they did.

Miller: I imagine that's because they didn't have the technology to look so closely at something that small. Have you been working with powerful microscopes since the beginning? And how has that technology changed over time?

Klompen: Imaging has been an eternal problem, because we always want more. It's perfectly simple to look at a mouse or a bird, they're big enough, no problem. But to see mites, you need magnification. I started working with relatively simple microscopes. In the 90's, we mostly used phase contrast illumination, which is a fairly standard way of looking at things at 400x - 1,000x magnification. But to clearly see the kinds of details visible in the exhibition videos, we use another technique, differential interference contrast. It has also been around for a long time, but I didn't have access to it until later in my career. It is really nice when imaging thicker mites – the ones I'm working with are relatively round and dense. A colleague of mine is really into scanning electron microscopy (SEM), which works well on hard mites but is absolutely awful on soft ones. So things like dust mites that most people recognize, when you put those under a standard SEM

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

treatment, you get an image of a shriveled, ugly thing because you have to dehydrate specimens for SEM. The USDA developed a technique for imaging specimens at the temperature of liquid nitrogen. That's super cold but you don't dry it out, so you get gorgeous images of soft bodied mites.

Unfortunately, it requires a low temperature scanning electron microscope (LT-SEM), which on average costs somewhere above half a million, and my lab doesn't have a budget like that. So my students started using confocal microscopy because they got interested, for whatever reason, in the functions of mite body parts, learning how things work.

Miller: Confocal? What is that?

Klompen: Confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) is an imaging technique that increases resolution and contrast by using a pinhole to block out-of-focus light as the image is recorded. We capture multiple flat images at different depths to eventually reconstruct images of three-dimensional structures. One of my students spent a year working on understanding how the mouthparts of these little guys work. He was particularly obsessed with extremely small mites, and got fantastic results. And then another student heard about some outfit in Germany. The German government gave them Micro-CT scanners, and then prompted them to

find different ways to use them. And we were like, we will definitely put these to use. Micro-CT is a 3D imaging technique using X-rays to see inside an object, slice by slice. They can do what a confocal can do. We now have Micro-CTs for about 50 species, and I am trying to figure out what to do with all of it because my students have more skill with this equipment than I do.

Miller: In the films you shared with us for the exhibition, we can see that cross sectioning view, we're going slice by slice through the organism. What are some of the difficulties and benefits of working that way to image the mites?

Klompen: Confocal and Micro-CT allow us to look at the inside, and the tradition has been for us to look only at the outside. In fact we used to use chemicals to clear all internal structures away. However, there are structures on the inside that we know very little about and that we couldn't study after those structures were cleared. Things like mouthparts that I already mentioned, and structures on the inside of the genital chamber of females that are quite variable. Now, after we scan we use the computer to slowly remove anything that is not the structure we want, to eventually build a 3-D image of the structures we are focused on. We know how to do it, but it's a hell of a lot of work!

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

Miller: When you talk about removing the parts that you don't want so that you can focus on the thing that you're paying attention to, are you doing that clearing away with the actual physical organism, or are you doing that as a form of image editing?

Klompen: This is post-production work. We don't actually look at the specimens directly anymore, only the images that we have on the computer. We have to remove the bits we don't want to be in the image, much like retouching a photograph. But, we do this in 3-D, and sometimes there are little things sticking out that we don't even know are there. It's very easy to knock it out before you realize, oh, I really wanted that.

Miller: Photographers do a lot of post production retouching, and I'm trying to imagine what it would be like to work not just with an x and y, but also with a z axis!

Klompen: You constantly have to rotate the image to see, okay, well, that is not connected to anything else, so I can remove it bit by bit, work my way deeper inside.

Miller: It sounds tedious.

Klompen: Very tedious. The thing is, we seem to have no problem attracting students to our program who want to be on a computer twirling things around.

Miller: The images themselves are really beautiful, kind of seductive. They look like aliens from outer space, which is, I think, part of the reason that Tim and I got excited about them. They fit well with the theme of recording the world, both at the macro and micro-levels. Learning more about how things work – and creating beautiful images – are certainly goals that I admire and share as a scholar; but, this very expensive equipment, and the time to pay the research assistants to do this work comes at a cost. What is the cost benefit analysis that the university or the grant funders are looking at here? Besides just getting to know the biodiversity of mites, what are the imagined applications of the work you're doing?

Klompen: I'm more interested in the questions; but, one example of a pragmatic application is that there is a huge, very diverse lineage of four-legged mites that feed on plants. They transmit quite a number of plant diseases, so dealing with these is important for food security and the economy. On the other hand, some of our research can seem esoteric. For example, one student dug a hole on campus to look at mites in deep soil. They are worm-like with barely any legs and have absolutely no economic importance. Yet, we found that they are the closest relatives to these things attacking plants. The two different groups of species share a lot of the same structures, but they function in different ways. We can use this research to figure

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

out how the plant mites operate, and I think that is of value in itself. One of the movies that you have is a genus of mite that most people did not care about until we discovered that in their immature state they are parasites of ants. They attack ant pupae, feeding on them and effectively sucking them dry. When they do this on their original host with whom they co-evolved, there's not a lot of loss. However, there are very damaging invasive ants out there, and these mites effectively eradicated an invasive species of ants from a large area in Columbia. So biocontrol is a possible application of our research. I thought it was totally cool to discover parasitic mite babies. So I think in answer to your question, do I look for things that have importance to society? Not necessarily. But it happens.

Miller: It sounds like this could be of real value to agricultural systems or forest conservation. Has any of this work been patented for this purpose?

Klumpen: Not that I know of. We generally think the overall interest in mites is so low that it's not worth it. It's hard to get people excited. I mean, these videos look good. And I think we are finally getting to the point where the images are interesting. We really want to print them as photos or 3-D, but it's still difficult to get enough resolution. If I can't see the hairs, then I don't want to print it. We're working to set up a small program on how to identify species for

high schools, making the 3-D images available to them as research specimens, and as the starting material for taxonomic keys. Everything can be done online, and the images are hopefully going to be good enough and interesting enough that a highschool student will want to spend time with them.

Miller: I feel like the idea underneath your answer here is you feel strongly about creating aesthetically pleasing images that are interesting to spark people's curiosity. Like you want to seduce them into science. We are showing these in the context of a contemporary art gallery. How do you feel about having your research displayed in an art exhibition?

Klumpen: It's great. The way I'm looking at it, a pretty picture with an interesting story might hook people and get them interested in science. I'm also very interested in getting the attention of people who don't care about the science to just say, "Wow, this is weird!" In that case, I hope I have gotten them to think about something. We may not be saving the last tiger, which of course should be done, but this is something different.

Miller: Saving last tiger, conserving biodiversity, or making people more cognizant of the ways our industrial economy and settlements impact other living things, are these what you hope to

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

direct our attention to?. Is there a kind of advocacy going on here?

Klompen: I can see that argument but I don't really want to push threats to biodiversity using mites. Using my research to raise awareness about threats to biodiversity would be difficult. But if I get someone to think, "Wow! There are so many different kinds of weird things," then absolutely.

Miller: Getting people to express wonder?

Klompen: Yeah. And I hope they start thinking about all these strange things that are really small and beautiful, or at least interesting. Even if they don't think the mites are pretty, then at least I can help people to be aware of things.

Miller: Learning never stops. There's always something new.

Klompen: There are so many options just for entertainment or whatever. Now we are getting something that we can show people. And in my view, if you can show pretty pictures, you have won half the battle. Without photos, communication with the broader public just doesn't work.

Miller: You retired last year, but it looks like you're in your lab, working. So, what's next for you?

Klompen: I love this work. I love these little critters. I want to spend time working on them. One of my former advisors said, "I get to do what I want to do, and get paid for it, too!" So that's, in large part, my motivation to just keep on going. There are a number of things that I want to finish that I find too interesting to drop.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

CHAD HUNT

is an award-winning photojournalist. During his time as staff photographer for *Virginia Style Weekly*, he received 38 Virginia Press Awards. Since moving to New York in 2004, Hunt has made three journeys to Afghanistan as an embedded photographer with the U.S. Military, creating photo stories for *Men's Journal*, *Popular Mechanics*, and the cover of *Time Magazine*. Last year, *Popular Photography* featured his project, *Porch Portraits*, photos of trick-or-treaters that he has done every Halloween for the last six years.

Hunt received his BFA in photography from Columbus College of Art and Design, and studied at Virginia Commonwealth University's MFA program. Other training includes the Eddie Adams Barnstorm VII Workshop and working with Mary Ellen Mark.

Chad Hunt spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Thursday, September 22, 2022.

Dee Miller: It's so nice to be talking with an alum of CCAD's photo program. I saw that, among other things, you worked with Mary Ellen Mark in New York before landing the job at *Virginia Style Weekly*, which really launched your career. Share some highlights from those early years, and what you learned along the way that helped you get to where you are today.



Chad Hunt: I met Mary Ellen when she gave a talk at Kenyon college. I had one more semester left at CCAD before I would graduate, and I had no idea who she was. I really liked her presentation and then I thought, I've got a box of prints in the car, ran to get them, then I'm pestering her. "Hey, Mary Ellen, can you look at my pictures?" She was like, "come to the student thing tomorrow." And I said, "But I'm not a student here." I just bugged her, "can you look at these please,". So, she opens the box, looks through the prints, puts the lid back on without saying a word, flips it over and writes her name and phone number on the back of the box. There wasn't email back then. And she says, "I really want

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

you to come to New York and work with me. Call me.”

I come from a blue-collar family and couldn't afford to go to New York City for an unpaid internship. I worked hard all summer and saved the money to go. Every week as my internship approached, I would mail Mary Ellen a note with a print of one of my recent photos. When I finally showed up, I wasn't just Chad then new intern. I walked in the door and everyone said, “Chad's here!” and she immediately took me on as one of her assistants. I think that choice might have had more to do with the fact that I could carry big bags full of Hasselblads and film backs and lighting equipment. I learned a lot that summer. We did everything from advertising to editorial work. My first day there, I was showing Patricia Arquette her contact sheets. My one big takeaway from working with Mary Ellen was how to take pictures, the consideration of what to leave in and what to leave out of a photograph.

There's a well-known photo from her *Streetwise* series of two runaway kids. The main subject is pulling a gun out of his pocket. The way the gun is tilted makes it look shiny and bright, there's a reflection coming from it that sets it apart from the rest of the images on the contact sheet. When I viewed the contact sheet, that image was the only one where the gun was reflective. None of the other photos were as interesting

because in that one the kids are sort of receding and space, and the gun really pops out at you. What it taught me was it's really about the editing and about spending enough time with your subject to get the one shot that transcends all the others. It also taught me that Mary Ellen Mark is a normal person working her way through her vision, trying things and figuring out what works.

Miller: I feel like I tell students all the time to spend more time and shoot more, that the statistical likelihood of getting a really awesome photo increases when you shoot all 36 frames of the film on one thing, or, you know with digital, make hundreds of captures instead of just taking three or four and moving on.

Hunt: I saw all of Mary Ellen's contact sheets from her work as a still photographer on the set of “Apocalypse Now,” and, you know, there's that one shot of Marlon Brando that we all know, but there are also about 30 other photos of him on the contact sheet that aren't iconographic. Looking at the images, I could see how she was working. She would take the time to figure out what worked and what didn't and how to zero in on the part that's working. I've tried to adopt that approach throughout my career.

Miller: It sounds to me like Mary Ellen Mark needed to keep her cool and

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

remain calm, even in places where she felt unsafe. You've made three trips to Afghanistan as an embedded photographer with the US military, and I can't imagine a more dangerous assignment. I'm curious how you made that happen.

Hunt: After I left *Virginia Style Weekly*, I moved back to New York and resumed working as a photographer's assistant. I missed the editorial and documentary stories – everything from shadowing a homicide detective to photographing kids eating ice cream cones – and I wanted to make a difference with my work. One day I came across a soldier's blog where he was writing letters to his family. The images he was posting were nothing like what I was seeing on the news. And I thought, no one else is telling that story. I want to do it. I started by emailing him, "Hey, I've been reading your blog. I would love to come over there. How do I make that happen?" He put me in touch with someone who put me in touch with someone, and they said, "If you want to apply, here's how you do it." That was how my morning started, and by the time my wife got home from work I had all this stuff printed out. I remember one webpage I had open was bulletproofme.com. And my wife was just like, "Okay, what is happening here?" At the time, I was a freelancer so I couldn't go to an editor's office and ask them to reach out to the military like, "We're *Time Magazine* sending Chad to do a story."

I had recently done some work for *Le Monde* that was published on their website, so I reached out to that agency and asked, "Can you write a letter?" And then, when the army got that letter, they asked, "What do you want to do?" I asked them to put me on the smallest base they had. I got the reply email and it just says, "Mr. Hunt, we'll see you at the base on September 22. Bring your own body armor." When I helicoptered-out to the first forward operating base (FOB), it was 3am so I just slept on the ground outside the PR tent. At sunrise my contact comes out, shakes me awake and says a Humvee has been hit with a RPG. I was going into a firefight. And he got really close to me and asked, "This is what you wanted, right?" I jumped into a Humvee. There was a soldier in the turret up top loading the gun. I looked at her and said, "I'm here to take pictures, to tell your story, but if you need me to do anything, ask and I will not hesitate." That was my way of saying I understand the environment we're in. When I came back with that body of work, [Embedded](#), I immediately got a *Men's Journal* assignment to go back. This time it was with a writer. My goal was never to be a war photographer, it was just to make good pictures from a war zone.

Miller: I imagine that a lot of these situations can be stressful, you can be in a hurry, you might be worried about your own safety or the safety of others. How do you keep your cool and remain

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

present in the moment to see and capture what's happening?

Hunt: The work I did at *Virginia Style Weekly* was good training for how to look through the camera. I became even more aware that while I was seeing what was inside the viewfinder, I also had to see outside of that. I'm not really a tough guy but I was surprised by my lack of fear in that environment. I worked so hard to get there and put myself in that position, so when they said, "We're gonna go on a six hour mission right now," I felt it was a privilege to be able to jump in and walk with them through the valley. And it made me feel close to my dad who was a medic in Vietnam. It helped me relate a bit better to who he was. As far as the safety goes, I put myself into some positions that weren't so smart. I'm a little hard of hearing now because I didn't use any ear protection when I was photographing firefights and mortar fire. But I didn't think about that at the moment. I was excited to be doing something other than assisting a photographer doing advertising work, and it was nice to make my own art.

Miller: I don't want to make it sound like I presume the US military is using you to create propaganda for them; but, on the other hand, would they consent to your embed if they felt you would portray them in a very critical light? How do you find a balance between what you feel needs to be seen and what our armed forces would prefer you not show us?

Hunt: They were protecting me and that would by nature give me an immediate bias, right? But the reality is the Army rarely looked at any of my images when I was taking pictures. They only once asked to look at what I photographed when I was working on a sensitive story on my third trip that was about how missions are planned. The only parameters were that I was not allowed to shoot sensitive material. Like, let's say I'm in a Humvee and there's a computer screen open and it has a map on it. They didn't want me to take that picture because the enemy could say, "This is what they're looking at on that screen," or, "This is how close they can zoom in." They also didn't want me to document the base in a way that could be used to attack it. Everything else I could do. It didn't change the kinds of pictures I made. It didn't make me think, I can't take this photo, because the army is never going to allow it. On my third trip I noticed that soldiers were more aware of my presence. They'd want to make sure that they had their eye protection on so they wouldn't get in trouble. But overall they would say, "Thank you for coming out. No one knows what we're doing here."

Miller: We usually think of documentary work, especially journalism, as a kind of index of real events, that the photographs act as a kind of witness, a record of history. But I think most of us also intuit that effective images communicate stories to which we can

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relate and that evoke emotional responses. What role does narrative play in your work?

Hunt: Narrative is a huge part of my work, even when I don't have words next to my pictures. I like for my images to have some sort of other layer to them. In my portraits of victims of priest molestation – they're grown up now, they're adults – there's one photo of a man closing his eyes and he said, "When I close my eyes, I can still feel his whiskers on my cheek." That quote with that image says so much. I've always worked to give my photos a narrative, whether it be the environment, artifacts, or even just the way they're looking or smoking or whatever.

Miller: What would you tell the students in my *Lens Based Narrative* course who are making stand-alone images to suggest a narrative or sequences of photos to tell a story?

Hunt: Shelby Lee Adams said, "When I look into my subjects' eyes, I see my own reflection." I take that to mean you have to have a connection with somebody, you have to take a minute to not take pictures and relate to people. I'm trying to make a connection, to find some empathy between us. I took a photo of a kid I met on the subway. We got off at the stop and I took the photo. He told me his name was Tony, so I titled the work, *Tony in Brooklyn*. About four years ago that image ran in a magazine and

the kid in that photo looked me up. Now he's 30 years old, married, and has kids. And his name is not Tony, he just didn't feel comfortable telling me his real name back then. We have plans to go back to photograph him in the same spot. My point is that even in that moment I made enough of a connection with a 12 year old kid that he wanted to look me up. Photography starts to become secondary to building relationships. You have to spend time with your subject. You can't parachute in and out, and you can't photograph something that's totally foreign to you.

Miller: Maybe to put an even finer point on it, if I'm photographing people whose lived experiences are different from my own, then I need to do my homework. I have to learn things, be humble, give people an opportunity to step forward, and use my platform to elevate their voices.

Hunt: I would also say you're gonna get better photos if you ask a question and then listen.

Miller: We need to take ourselves out of the center, because it's not about us.

Hunt: It's absolutely not about us, and the sooner you let the person you're photographing know that you're genuinely interested in them, that you're not faking interest but letting this person explain their experiences, then everything opens up to you. That's when

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preconceived ideas go away. You have to go in with an open mind and not try to bend it into something that it's not. Maybe it's not the story you wanted to tell initially, so you find a way to tell a different story, one that's more true.

Miller: I want to dive deeper into this idea of earning people's trust. A few years ago, your [portraits of trick or treaters](#) got a lot of attention. As a middle aged man, how did you negotiate permissions with the kids and their parents? And did you expect the project to be so widely published, or did that surprise you? In other words, what were your goals when you started doing that?

Hunt: When I lived in Richmond, I assisted a photographer who did the same thing, but it was pre digital. And I thought, what a great thing to give back to the community. If I ever have a house I'm totally going to do that. Now we live in a very creative community – a lot of people who work on Broadway – and some of the kids' costumes are just amazing. If the parents are there, I'd explain, "I'm Chad, this is my wife. I'm doing this thing. Can I take a photo?" I would never ask if it was just a lone kid. But I don't necessarily focus on just the best costumes. It's more about the kid. We didn't get many people the first year, but now everyone in the neighborhood knows me and they know about the project. After Halloween I do an email blast to everyone who participated,

giving them the opportunity to download the photos for free. I had to stop doing it though, because last year Popular Photography ran a piece, and then local media reported on it. It seemed like it was everywhere all the sudden. I hired a few local teens to hand-out candy so I could just focus on the pictures. People told me the next day that the line for a picture was so long they left." What started as a gift to my neighbors and friends became something different. Looking back, it really has become a sort of document, showing the same kids as they grow up year by year, chronicling the "year of the zombie" or the "year of Star Wars," or whatever is the popular thing each year.

Miller: It sounds like that project is almost a victim of its own success.

Hunt: Yes, but I love those pictures so much. They're going to be in *New Jersey Monthly Magazine* this month along with an interview. Maybe I'll do it again this year.

Miller: Are you gonna hire an assistant?

Hunt: If I hired an assistant, I could do it. Last year one guy showed up and he was like, "Can you do my LinkedIn photo?" So it's tricky. I would love to bring it back but maybe it's run its course? I'm so fond of that project and it makes me happy that it has been so successful.

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Miller: The project you're showing in Beeler Gallery is called [Soaring Above](#). Describe how you got started with that work, and explain what experiences you hope gallery viewers will have with the images.

Hunt: A friend saw the prints and said, "It's basically your Halloween photography, just with boats," which I thought was hilarious. I am doing a lot of the same things in photoshop and spending a lot of time editing the photo to make it look how it looks. My wife bought me a drone for Christmas during the pandemic and it was an exploration. I'd always watched the barges passing on the Hudson river from the porch at our cabin in upstate New York, and now I'm able to look down to see what's inside the thing they're pushing. I compose them so the boats are always in the same spot, to look like they're flying through space. And I focus on the shapes of the wakes and the negative space around them. It's nice to pull back and look at something from a different angle, to discover something that I wasn't thinking about. Everyone brings something different to the gallery when they view the work.

Miller: Is there anything else you wanted to say? A thought you'd like to leave us with?

Hunt: Now that I'm a middle aged man (haha), I'd like to go back and reassure the younger me who was a student at

CCAD. I remember being so worried about "How am I going to get a job?" and, "What am I doing next?" that I was almost too anxious to go walk through an open door. But I did. That's how I've approached everything. Let's see what happens when I go to New York and work with Mary Ellen Mark. Let's see what will happen if I take this job in Richmond and go to graduate school there. You really have to lean into the unknown.

Miller: You have to trust the process.

Hunt: Trust the process, and also know that you're gonna be okay. Buy the ticket to Afghanistan. Take a chance. What's going to happen if I take this job? Am I going to hate the city? Am I going to love it? That's what I've learned from coming back to CCAD and talking with students. They need to be reminded that they're in for the ride of their life.

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

BEN KINSLEY'S

projects have ranged from choreographing a neighborhood intervention into Google Street View, directing surprise theatrical performances inside the homes of strangers, organizing a paranormal concert series, staging a royal protest, investigating feline utopia, collecting put-down jokes from around the world, and planting a buried treasure in the streets of Mexico City.

He has exhibited at venues such as Queens Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Cleveland, Mattress Factory Museum, Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi in Florence, La Galería de Comercio in Mexico City, and many others. He has been awarded residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Skaftfell Art Center in Iceland, and Askeaton Contemporary Arts in Ireland. His work was featured on NPR, The Washington Post, Artforum, Wired, Hyperallergic, and others.

Ben Kinsley spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Tuesday, July 19, 2022.

Dee Miller: I noticed that you studied in Germany for a semester abroad when you were at the Cleveland Institute of Art, and then on to Carnegie Mellon University for your MFA. I'm curious, how does that all influence what you make?



Ben Kinsley: I grew up in Granville, Ohio, where my parents still live. I graduated high school in 2000 and went to CIA directly from there. At that time, there was a brand new media art program, and nobody really knew what that was. It was still the early days in digital media art (YouTube didn't exist yet, Web2.0 was on the horizon) and we were trying to figure out what this whole interactive media thing was all about. I got into sound and installation art, and I went to Germany to study sound design for a semester. There, my work became much more about doing things out in public spaces with sound and musicians, and it got me thinking about participatory performance. That led me to Carnegie Mellon's "Contextual Practice" program, which focused on art existing outside of gallery spaces. So I went there for my MFA. My partner Jessica Langley is an artist too, and we went to Iceland for a year after grad school. She was a Fulbright fellow, and we spent some time in Europe, and we lived in Berlin for a while. Now I'm in Colorado Springs

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

where I teach at the University of Colorado.

Miller: Can you describe how you coordinate collaborative community participation in your work? I think a lot of our students focus on the craft of making objects so they may be less familiar with your process.

Kinsley: I'm glad that I had a background in craft for what I do now. At CIA, they had a big design program, they even had enameling as a major, things like that don't quite exist anymore. I learned glass blowing, and at the same time I was working on a computer making animations. So from early on I was really trying to meld craft with digital, and I was thinking about how to take the experience outside of the computer. When Robin Hewlett and I did [Street With A View](#), I had been doing a lot of performance work in public spaces. In 2006 I was a resident artist at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. People who live in the neighboring community didn't really come to the residency, but co-existed with it every summer. We were on a lake, they could see us, and I wanted to do something that connected the art residency to those communities. So we ended up staging a play on the shore for people to watch from their boats. I had people in canoes going around serving drinks and snacks, handing out playbills. It was really pretty magical, like a barn raising, a community event. But now

we're in this world where we have to document everything to get the next residency or exhibition. How do you merge participation and documentation? I think *Street With A View* solves that problem. There was a community performance for the camera, and the piece lives on as an experience through the document. I'm amazed it was 14 years ago that we did that project, and it's still being exhibited. Someone two days ago emailed me to ask for photo permission to put it in a book that they're publishing. I can't believe it still has legs, but your question about craft is important because these things live on. I used to think that everything had to happen on a short timescale, but I think I'm much more interested now in things that take some time to make, and that can develop into a document that reflects how special the experiences were.

I've been working this past year on a project called [Tree Talks: Populus tremuloides](#). It's a series of four events, one per season, focused on understanding the quaking aspen from a multitude of perspectives. In summer, I invited a US Forest Service employee who studies Aspen decline. At another Tree Talk, we had a mycologist talk about how roots are connected by mycelium. There was an ornithologist describing flammulated owls that nest in holes created by woodpeckers in Aspens, and then a native artist-activist talked about the spiritual and

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

metaphysical side of trees. A poet who studied with Pauline Oliveros led us on a deep listening walk. All of these events are meant to expand how we think about this tree, to help us make connections. The four in-person experiences are pretty intimate, with a limited capacity of about 20 people per event. Last winter, we snowshoed in and we sat in a circle to have conversations. It's not being videotaped, but I am recording the audio, and in the end, those lectures will be released to the public through an online archive. I'm also documenting through photography, and I'm doing a lot of field recording separately from the talks. I think it's gonna take another year to make a vinyl record with a companion photo book - tangible, aesthetic objects you can sit with and listen to as another kind of way of knowing, another way to get to this place of understanding. The different media help to extend the knowledge sharing, conversations, and hearing the sounds out there. I'm putting contact microphones in the ground to get all kinds of vibrations and things like that. So what I'm really thinking is, "How do we actually know something? Or how do we learn about something through all these different inputs?" I don't want it to just be a podcast or an audio file, something you listen to on headphones. I want it to be meditative, an intentional experience where you sit down and spend time with an object and images and text and sound.

Miller: I was looking online at the *Tree Talks* and the [Myco-Ramblings](#) as you were talking just now. It sounds like what you're doing, rather than being didactic, is collaborative knowledge building, a practice that's integral to my pedagogy. And it got me thinking about what kinds of objects might come out of that process. The images that came to mind were, maybe this 12 inch vinyl could look like tree rings? Or the dust jacket could be made from thin veneer? I think a tactile sensibility would be important. It reminds me of the book, *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. He wrote about mycelial networks that connect trees. That also reminds me of Richard Long, although his experiences were kind of solitary, where he would leave marks in the landscape created by nothing more than his feet. Do you see yourself as part of an art movement? Are there artists with whom you identify? Do you see this work as part of some kind of lineage?

Kinsley: I studied with Jon Rubin at Carnegie Mellon. He was my graduate thesis advisor and my teacher, and we've collaborated on projects together. I'm influenced by his approach and the way he thinks about context as being part of the creative material for making a work of art, as he did with *Conflict Kitchen*. Lenka Clayton, who's also in Pittsburgh, is an incredible artist, and Nina Katchadourian's work inspires me. They each explore how we can make art relevant to people's lived experiences. I

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

teach in Colorado Springs and a lot of our students are local or first generation or military or non traditional. Most of them, even if they declare art majors, have never been to a gallery or museum, or even to Denver. So Art feels like a kind of gatekeeping, a threshold you have to choose to go through. How can we insert our experiences in daily life, or use ordinary occurrences as the inspiration for making? I think of Fluxus and “happenings,” and different spaces for art to exist within. Jessie and I run a gallery space in our front yard called, *The Yard*. We live in a ‘50s, suburban neighborhood not far from downtown. It’s a lot of retired people, definitely not a space where you expect contemporary art to exist. For four years we have been staging exhibitions with contemporary artists, pushing our front yard to be a different kind of space. The parameters of the front yard are wind, weather, sidewalks, dog walkers, and so on. We prompt the artists to consider how the work they make in this space is going to be different from work they would make in a studio or a gallery. It’s opened up conversations about art with people who might not normally feel comfortable talking about art. Someone even wrote a review on the Nextdoor App. We’ve heard from a couple of the artists that this was a really different way to think about their work, and this led to them getting larger public art commissions. The context becomes a big factor in the work that is made.

Miller: You’ve been talking about broadening access to art spaces, and there’s a kind of irony in bringing your work into the white cube of Beeler Gallery. But when I look at your projects – the impromptu performances, walks in nature, how you’re amplifying microscopic sounds and encouraging people to engage with what they can’t see underground, prompting folks to share anecdotes and family histories around mushroom gathering – it’s not just participatory, your audience is an active author of the work with you. They’re your co-creators. Is reflecting on the ways in which we’re all connected a central theme in your work?

Kinsley: I have thought about that. One of my biggest artist inspirations is Brian Eno. He’s written some amazing texts, and his 1995 book, *A Diary With Swollen Appendices*, really resonated with me. It still does. He talked about creating frames, and was like, “okay, what are the parameters of the experience I’m interested in building?” For instance, he got into algorithm composition, and was trying to figure out how to put himself, as the composer, in the position of a listener hearing it for the first time.

Miller: John Cage was interested in this too, right?

Kinsley: Yes. Cage has been another big influence for me. Creating situations that go in a direction you’re not expecting, and where you can discover

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

with the audience is one of the things I'm interested in. When I introduce the speakers at each event, I am really excited to learn, too. I don't really sell artwork. It's funny, do you ever get those spam emails where people are like, "I saw my husband looking at your work and I want to buy him *Tree Talks Event Number Two*, and I'm thinking 'Sure, I would like to sell this ephemeral experience to you, but how? Ha!' These are experience-based things, and it's important to me that I'm part of that experience. I set up the situation, and then I am also a participant.

Miller: You're not making commodity objects for sale in galleries, though maybe the vinyl record and book will be more like that. Do you receive grant funding or professional development from your university to do this work? If so, have there been instances where the mission or goal of the granting institution has influenced either the way you propose a project or the outcomes that you delivered?

Kinsley: Most recently, with *Tree Talks*, I received grant funding from my University, which really only covered the cost of the events themselves. I also partnered with an organization based in Denver, Black Cube Nomadic Museum, who helped produce the series and will be supporting the record publication. But I still don't have enough funds to cover the full cost of production. So, I was looking for more funding to be able

to press the vinyl, which isn't cheap. Like, I don't know how anyone can sell a record for \$10 when they cost much more than that to make. Anyway, I applied for another regional grant before I started the project, which was location specific for projects occurring within a certain radius of Denver. One of my first location choices for *Tree Talks* was outside of that radius, so I ended up choosing Kenosha Pass because I was trying to qualify for this grant. It is also one of the places where Aspen trees are in proximity to different cities along the front range. In the end, I didn't get that grant, but Kenosha Pass ended up being a great location. I do have to piece together possible opportunities and partnerships and sometimes adjust projects to fit. We've done this a bit with *The Yard* as well. Our 2020-2022 season was grant funded and our curatorial process was influenced a bit by the stipulations of the funding.

Miller: For the piece in this exhibition, *Street With A View*, did you actually partner with Google?

Kinsley: At first we wanted to do it in a more guerrilla way, but then it was like, are we just gonna stand outside our house for months on end and just wait for something that might never happen? One of my advisors' college roommates worked for Google Pittsburgh, so Robin and I threw together like a pitch, sent it to him, and he passed it up the chain. The head of

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

Street View in San Francisco got back to us and then, a couple of weeks later, we're on a conference call with Google corporate, realizing the only way we'd ever be able to do this would be to collaborate. Because, even if we got our performances recorded on their Street View cameras, they control what they put online. They could just reshoot the street. At first we said, "whenever you're coming down the street, just let us know and we'll do our thing." And they said, "it doesn't work like that." So we ended up coordinating with Google. They sent a driver to Pittsburgh with the newest camera technology at the time, and they agreed to photograph the streets for us on a specifically scheduled day and time. It was really important to Google that this not be publicized ahead of time because they didn't want a bunch of press there, and we didn't either. We wanted it to be grassroots, an event for the people on that street. The Mattress Factory Museum was a collaborator because it's at the end of the street and they have a good relationship with this community.

We went door to door, brought in a local barbecue place to set up a block-party lunch, and it was a fun, little street festival. We didn't put anything online and we said, "please don't post this anywhere," because if it gets out there, Google won't do it. Somebody didn't get the memo and they blogged about it. The Tribune got wind and started calling us asking, "when is this happening?" I

said, "if you publish this, it will ruin the project. If you wait till after it's over, we'll give you first dibs on the story." But the Tribune ended up publishing a story anyway, because they found out we did not have a permit for what they called "a parade," and they called the city on us. Then I got a phone call from the head of Street View, and he's angry because they saw it in the newspaper, because Google sees literally everything. This was my graduate thesis project and I was sweating on the phone, envisioning my MFA project falling through. So, to calm him down I kind of lied and said, "No one reads that paper."

And so we moved ahead. Then on that morning there were torrential downpours, terrible weather, and the Google guy shows up, all the street residents show up. We're all at the Mattress Factory under tents, waiting for the storm to pass. The Google driver was like, is this happening? And none of the media showed up because they didn't think it was going to happen. Then there was a clearing for about two hours, like the eye of the storm. We were able to do three takes, had the barbecue, cleaned everything up, and then it started raining again for three days straight. Google had us sign a contract and they own the rights to the images, which is fine. And they wouldn't promise the images would go live or stay online. We just had to trust it would work out, and fortunately it did!

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Miller: I think it's lovely they archived it for you. I don't have to go into the Wayback Machine to see these. I can just go back in time on Street View.

Kinsley: It's not exactly the original version. At first, it was the one place they didn't have blurred faces, because we had everyone sign releases. At some point I think they reconsidered their liability and they blurred everyone. And then eventually it got updated and replaced. For a while it was a patchwork. You'd go down the street, see the parade as you navigate, and the next click would show new views from a different year. Then, a couple blocks later, the parade pops back in. When it was fully replaced, they added the "go back in time" option. The video shown in Beeler allows you to see the whole thing in its original form, navigating the street and seeing all of the people's faces.

Miller: Since your work is so relational and participatory, do you have an opinion about the role of the artist in society?

Kinsley: When we made *Street With A View*, I was interested in spectacle, and I've moved away from that. Now I am much more interested in what kinds of questions are raised when we share knowledge. When I talk to scientists they say, I've been studying this my whole life. This is my career. And the more we study this thing, the more we realize we don't know as much as we

thought we knew. The more things we try to learn, the more mysteries open up. And I think art works in a similar way. Academia affords me that option more so than my previous freelance career. Working gigs, everything had to happen quickly. I'm trying to kind of push against that.

Miller: Through shared experiences?

Kinsley: And what happens when we look closely at something, slowly over time. How can we, as artists, create spaces for other people to have moments of wonder?

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

ROGER BEEBE

is a filmmaker whose work since 2006 consists primarily of multiple-projector performances and essayistic videos that explore the world of found images and the "found" landscapes of late capitalism. He has screened his films around the globe at such unlikely venues as the CBS Jumbotron in Times Square and McMurdo Station in Antarctica as well as more likely ones including Sundance and the Museum of Modern Art with solo shows at Anthology Film Archives, The Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City, and Los Angeles Filmforum among many other venues.

Beebe is also a film programmer: he ran Flicker, a festival of small-gauge film in Chapel Hill, NC, from 1997-2000 and was the founder and Artistic Director of FLEX, the Florida Experimental Film Festival from 2004-2014.

Roger Beebe spoke with Darren Lee Miller via Zoom on Thursday, August 18, 2022.

Dee Miller: You're just down the road from us at Ohio State University. Did you start there in 2017?

Roger Beebe: 2017 is when we launched the Moving-Image Production Major, but 2014 is when I came into the Art department at OSU. Work on the new major was already underway when I arrived, and what I do is a little different



from my colleagues because I typically work in a black box of cinema, rather than the white cube of a gallery. It's been interesting to have more opportunities to exhibit in gallery spaces, and to think differently about temporality and sound with sculptural objects. I've had a lot of support in the department, and there is a community of filmmakers, like Jon Sherman at Kenyon and Jonathan Walley at Denison, and independent filmmakers like Jenny Deller.

Miller: Tell me a little bit about your life before arriving in Columbus in 2014.

Beebe: I took a circuitous path to being an artist, filmmaker, art professor. I was a French major as an undergrad, but I started out as an Economics major. It was my sophomore year abroad in Grenoble, France that changed my mind. I took a lot of theory classes and had an interest in film, but I didn't start making films until later. After graduation I got a fellowship in Paris for a year, so I went back there and worked as a

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

projectionist in a ciné-club. Watching three movies a day made me a sort of autodidact in film. I was applying to grad programs in French, when I had this realization that I didn't want to teach the subjunctive for the rest of my life, so I decided to go to Duke University's Graduate Program in Literature because it allowed me a lot of flexibility. In addition to learning critical theory and cultural studies, I started making films.

Then I was helping with the Flicker film festival in Chapel Hill, and I eventually started running it. After that, I got a job teaching Film and Media Studies at the University of Florida, where I was located in the English Department. I really liked the context of that department. Students were deeply engaged with theory, reading writers like Walter Benjamin and Laura Mulvey, foundational film theory texts. I also worked a lot with creative writers when I was in Florida, and I love that connection. I remain a big reader of contemporary fiction because it nourishes me in a way that's really important. I just picked up a Yukio Mishima book – the first in his *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy – in one of those little free libraries in my neighborhood. I allow myself to be promiscuous like that, not always guided by a coherent research project.

Miller: I like that you describe your research practices as promiscuous. What is your ideation process like?

Beebe: Each of my films has been born in really different ways, so I can't say there's one process I follow. I am not always research driven, but when I made a film about Amazon.com it was deeply research-based. That happened when I hit a point where I was doing my typical observational filmmaking and realized the concept wasn't emerging from the images. So, I fleshed it out with research and it became a different kind of thing, a different process. My concepts rarely precede my encounters with the images and sounds I'm gathering. There's a material investigation that precedes the conceptual, even though my works end up being grounded in the conceptual.

Miller: The film that we're showing in Beeler, [Last Light of a Dying Star](#), is in large part cameraless. You're working with found material, film strips, didactic films, handwriting, and collage. How did you make the film?

Beebe: It had a very specific origin. I was commissioned to make this work for a show at the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Macon, Georgia. The context of an Arts & Sciences Museum, and an exhibition that centered on outer space, gave me some direction to start thinking and making and finding images. This kind of archival investigation is something I've done more than more than a few times, but this was the first time I did a really deep dive. I had about 4000 educational/industrial films at my

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fingertips. I only brought about 800 of them when I moved from Florida to Ohio, sadly. A collector in Jacksonville gave me 2000 of them, and the former University of Florida teaching archive held about 1900 film prints that they were going to throw away because they had VHS copies of everything. So I stood between them and the dumpster.

Once people knew I was amassing films, they'd just send them to me. In its original form, the film involved both a projected installation and a live performance. The multi-projector piece uses abstractions to suggest things like nebulae and constellations. And when you throw them out of focus, they suggest planets or planetoids. I use animated segments as a kind of pivot to the fully representational images. It's a dual process of me being in the darkroom screwing around with bleach and black-leader to create the abstractions while thinking, how do I get from the abstract to the representational? The first half is in black and white, and the second half is in color, and there's a kind of reset between them.

There is also an object that's at the center of the piece in the gallery, made from a Castle Films newsreel called "America on the Moon." Unfortunately, like many of the prints I have, it has not been treated well over the decades and now it won't sit flat enough to move through a projector. I was like, how do I

give this additional life? And I decided to make a lightbox piece with it. I'm making new loops that will be triggered by motion sensors for the four-channel piece. And I'll do a performance where I show the theatrical version of "Last Light." This is an opportunity for me to revisit the sculptural part of it with some new tricks I've picked up over the last eight years.

Miller: I'm interested in the multi-modal way the piece will unfold over time in the gallery. It seems like it will be different every time I drop in. And who is Jodie Mack? I noticed that you credited her.

Beebe: Jodie is a former student of mine who's an incredible filmmaker teaching at Dartmouth, conquering the world with her experimental animation. She had a film that was an entry in a competition for Converse. It was a bunch of animated, acetate stars, just a 30-second thing and it didn't win the competition. She didn't have any more use for it, so I was like, "I love it, I'll take it." She very generously allowed me to include it in the film. So I cut it in half and made two loops out of it. It's a nice bridge to seeing those didactic films as art too, things that I am transforming, and liberating some of the artistry that is otherwise obscured by their pedagogical contexts.

Miller: This connects to Voyager's Golden Record, and the idea that the images

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

were somehow going to be literally universally understood. You mentioned the ideals of early space travel in your artist statement and I wondered if you wanted to respond to the connections I'm making.

Beebe: It seems like an incredible loss that outer space has become a place where we send a billionaire up in a vanity rocket. To do what? I would love to reconnect with what space once meant, a utopian striving of humankind. I occasionally see that sublimity in science fiction films, a desire to encounter the grandness of the universe. I think that there is part of this piece, especially in the sections that deal with abstraction, where I want to have a little bit of that effect. I hope it reminds people that space is a wonderful, weird, terrifying, giant, incomprehensible place, and not just another place for us to conduct commerce. I think the Webb telescope images are actually doing that, it's in the popular imagination right now. They're lovely images, and we're told our scientists are learning a lot about outer space from them.

Miller: When I look at your project [de rerum natura](#), there's a sense of reverence and optimism on the one hand, and maybe there's a kind of wink to the corniness to some of the imagery. I feel like there's an acknowledgment of the cognitive blind spots that this kind of utopian thinking might create. What I see is like a kind of cautionary tale

regarding the hubris and ascendancy of late capitalism. A questioning of the assumption that all of this was inevitable. It shows we have an inability to conceive of what might come next.

Beebe: I would use different words, but you're onto something. I feel anxiety about the sorts of ideologies that subtend our understanding of what is beautiful. I think *Last Light of a Dying Star* is one where I gave myself over a bit to the indulgence of utopian striving, the desire to connect with something bigger; but *de rerum natura* systematically pulls the rug out from under itself. The silent first couple of minutes of the film are juxtaposed with the parts where my voice comes in, suspicious about the things we just saw. I start the film letting you connect with the imagery emotionally, and then I'm like, you shouldn't feel that way. I didn't interject my voice until the third section, but I structured the sequence of sounds to hint that there's going to be something else going other than just, flowers are pretty and nature is good. In terms of its connection to our perceptions about the inevitability of capitalist systems, I did study with Fredric Jameson at Duke and that deeply informs my worldview. I think the failure of the utopian imagination is a serious one. We can more readily imagine aliens coming from outer space to blow up the planet than we can envision changing things through legislative action or a global political

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

movement. That is a founding tenet of my understanding of the world, but it's not the explicit premise from which these films start.

Miller: I wanted to draw you out a little bit more on the sort of decisions you make in crafting the work. I looked at your 2006 film [SAVE](#), and the narration is disconnected from the imagery. Why did you construct and edit the film that way, referring in your narration to images we had seen, but which can't be seen during the moments when you're describing them?

Beebe: A big breakthrough for me as a filmmaker was realizing I didn't have to have sound and image all the time. For example, in music you have rests. I initially thought about having sound in the first section, but I felt like it was obliterating the rhythms emerging from the way it was shot. It's edited in camera, and there's a kind of weird, off-kilter beat to it that I had trouble pairing with sounds. In the end I thought, let's allow these image beats to emerge on their own. I wanted to express something more complicated than "I love this place, I love this time of day." It's like finding that picture from *The Americans* that echoed across 50 years, rhapsodically looking but also with a jaundiced eye. So when the talking comes in, it feels like an interesting moment to just listen in the dark. Having a voiceover with no images or not having it be an immediate kind of commentary is a strategy that

other filmmakers like Hollis Frampton have used. I have one film with no images at all—I call it a "zero-projector film." I just love the darkened room and people sitting there, having tacitly agreed that for the next 90 minutes they're going to engage with whatever I put in front of them. If it's sound, they will listen. If it's images, they'll sit there and look. One of my anxieties about coming into a gallery is that you don't get that "contract," you get a few seconds of attention if you're lucky.

Miller: Is there a set of creators or filmmakers with whom you identify? Do you see your practice as part of a larger conversation?

Beebe: Jonas Mekas said, "experimental film is a tree with many branches." One branch I identify with is Stan VanDerBeek's giant Movie-Drome with every possible kind of projector and lots of disparate images taxing your brain to learn how to make sense of this complex visual field. Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* is another film I'm deeply informed by. A lot of these found their way back into galleries through the Whitney Museum's *Into the Light* exhibition about 20 years ago. I'm also really interested in landscape film, so people like James Benning who's still teaching at CalArts. He makes laconic films where, for example, there are 37 shots of trains crossing long shots of western landscapes. Contemporary peers of mine, like Bill Brown and

1,000 MILES PER HOUR

Deborah Stratman, take that language and add a kind of essayistic quality that feels very connected to my way of thinking and making. When I think about the first films that I saw that really pointed a path to me, there's the found footage tradition. Bruce Conner is kind of the father of the found-footage film, even though there were plenty of people making those kinds of films before him. Alan Berliner, who's a generation older than me, made a series of four found-footage films in the mid 80s that were stunning, virtuoso displays of what you can do with the relationship between found images and found sounds. I can go on and on, I feel like I'm handing you a syllabus or something.

Miller: I'm here for it, but one of the things you mentioned was that you were a little nervous about getting back into the gallery space, thinking about viewer engagement with the piece, and time spent with the images. So that made me curious, what do you think is the ideal venue for a piece like this? And how do you envision your audience?

Beebe: I make work that takes advantage of the specificity of that encounter. The challenge is not just, how do I convince spectators to have the experience that I want them to have; but, how do I make work where that can't fail to happen? It's built into the apparatus of the white cube. What does that room do? How do I make stuff for that? There are different answers to that.

Sometimes there's a kind of spatial unfolding, and sometimes it's highlighting the sculptural element of the work. The sonic element for this piece involves a certain kind of play, kind of like a puzzle. I hate nothing more than when gallery artists put a two-hour film on a loop in a lit room with quiet sound and somehow expect that anyone will ever sit through the entire thing. Maybe that's not the expectation, but that's not where I'm at. I really want the piece to work in the space, and the space to work for the piece.

