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Untold Narratives

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GIANNI MANHATTAN

curated by Madeleine Planeix-Crocker

Artists: Amy Bravo, Carina Emery, Alison Flora, Valentin Noujaïm, Berenice Olmedo

Spine

*It's time to let go / of this posture, this torque
Maggie Nelson, "Summer Song (or, The Rose)"*

After looking into scabs as the site of expulsion of deep-seated irritation, we now indulge the itch and scratch at the surface[1]. Dogged in our digging, from muscle to tendon, we reach the bone. Our journey could end here. Instead, we meet those who continue to scratch, to scrape, to pick — doing so because there's a complaint to be made, a quarrel to be had, a story to be told. Touching the core, arriving at the spine : this locus of interest focuses our attention to the labor of the so-called "nitpickers". Should we lend an ear to their work, we might just catch the "crack" and "snap" of the calcified structures at which they take aim.

Here, we encounter five artists who, in a sense, take on the breaking of these worlds, erected and buttressed specifically for those with proverbial "backbone". Each in their own way, these artists interrogate the politics that manage and inform physical architectures, as well as social choreographies that will us to "stand straight", "keep it together", and "soldier on". This timely interruption of the reproduction of standard and status begs the question : what happens, indeed, when we "let go / of this posture" ?

The works gathered for Spine could therefore be approached as variations that offer breath and momentum to a movement aimed at "shift[ing] the perspective of life-world normativity into alternative builds"[2].

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For instance, Berenice Olmedo researches the designated support structures meant to correct bodies deemed “abnormal”. Following a thorough examination of the technical and artificial apparatus that (re)condition movement, the artist then isolates these devices from the bodies to which they are generally attached. Exposed, the orthoses, such as Claire, appear as fragmented and fragile structures. Berenice Olmedo therefore probes : are these really the tools on which we can rely to hold us together ?

Though apparently rigid in their materiality, Carina Emery’s Stretch Receptors break the fourth wall. Arched and extending into space, they desperately seek contact. The sculptures are injected with a chartreuse silicone, reminiscent of the the jelly-filled sense organs found in cartilaginous fish, capable of recording relationships between signals and movements. Paired Clickers I refers to the more subtle articulations found in specific points of contact, such as joints, kept lubricated so as to preclude stiffness.

Armed and winged, Amy Bravo’s protagonists rise at the intersection of her Italian-Cuban cultural heritage and personal narrative, revisited. Carving out a lineage once buried by exile and ancestral conflict, while harnessing artifacts gifted by loved ones, the artist re-builds mythical moments through meshed media. Viewed as a series, these scenes carry the story of (dis)inheritance and transformation, heralded by the ghostlike traces from which the figures have seemed to emerge.

Drawing her own blood for paint, Alison Flora performs a sort of “infrastructural improv”[3] with spine-chilling effects. By unexpectedly tapping into her very own resources (in this case, blood cells produced partially in the vertebrae), the artist’s reflexive process serves as an antidote to solitude : bereft, she is not. Indeed, the reverberating feedback loop put into practice by Alison Flora is mirrored and expanded by the piece Passage en écho : it is precisely through echolocation[4] that multiple sonic, not static, bodies are unearthed — blood ties.

“In the gut of the world”, to borrow from Alison Flora’s title, is also where Valentin Noujaïm’s protagonist seems to find herself : in this particular instance, encased in a cold skeleton of glass and steel. To

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Exist Under Permanent Suspicion portrays an office worker — played by Kayije Kagame — caught in a skyscraper of the Parisian central business district, La Défense. In a frenzy of loneliness, acute fatigue, and insatiable appetite, Claire fever-dreams her escape from the edifice's core, thereby metabolizing the meaning of “burn out”.

As these five artists seize structures, making them quake, crack, and crumble, the breaking point can also feel particularly isolating.

*You fracture more than a bone when you fracture a bone: you also
experience a break from something; it is no longer as it was before; you
are no longer as you were.*
Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

Yet, staying with the assembled variations, we may understand these snaps as pivots, movements and methods that bear release, always already into each other — in other words, I've got your back —

I find my way by following your spine
June Jordan, “Poem for Nana”

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Coda :

As is often the case in my curatorial practice, I imagine exhibitions as research opportunities. Once guided by an initial line of inquiry, I seek out, fall upon, and ricochet onto voices that shed precious light on the study. Some of these voices manifest themselves through the works shared in the show ; others accompany the articulation of texts. My words are bound in gratitude to these encounters for which I have provided complete bibliographical references with the hopes that you may dig your way through them, too —

Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life, Duke University Press, 2017.

Lauren Berlant, On the Inconvenience of Other People, Duke University Press, 2022.

June Jordan, “Poem for Nana” in Directed by Desire, Copper Canyon Press, 2007.

Maggie Nelson, “Summer Song (or, The Rose)” in Something Bright, Then Holes, Zed Books, 2019.

[1] *Scabs* is a group show I curated in 2023 at *Mécènes du Sud*, Montpellier, featuring works by CAConrad, Ève Gabriel Chabanon, Mimosa Echard, HaYoung, Ndayé Kouagou, Tarek Lakhrissi, and Tai Shani. *Spine* represents the second chapter of a trilogy of exhibitions examining the performativity of bodily operations.

[2] Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Duke University Press, 2022, 12.

[3] Term offered up by Lauren Berlant in *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 98.

[4] Echolocation is a technique used by bats, dolphins, whales, and other animals to determine the location of objects using reflected sound, as a means of navigating through pitch darkness.

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