

KK: Maybe we should get started? Carrie, Jonah, sound good? So, welcome, everyone, thank you for joining the conversation today. My name is Kibum Kim, of Commonwealth and Council, a gallery at which we have Carrie Yamaoka's show currently on view, *pour crawl cast peel*. For the beginning I'd just like to say, my pronouns are he/him, and we are located in Koreatown, Los Angeles, on Tongva land, and we are very, very excited about this conversation today between Carrie Yamaoka and Jonah Groeneboer.

So to give you a brief description of them and their work, Carrie Yamaoka is an artist whose work operates at the interstices between painting and photography. She often uses reflective material like silver mylar and black vinyl on which the image emerges, implicating both the body of the viewer and space and the light and how you encounter the work. Carrie has shown in numerous place, but more recently she has been part of the show *arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, Carrie Yamaoka, fierce pussy amplified Chapters 1–4* was shown at Beeler Gallery, Columbus College of Art and Design, and *Chapter 5* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and a new chapter of the ongoing project is slated to open in February 2022 at Palais de Tokyo. And as part of that, Carrie and Joy and Zoe and Nancy are founding members of the queer art collective fierce pussy.

Jonah Groeneboer is a New York-based interdisciplinary transgender artist working in abstraction to address the politics of representation. He developed this strategy to examine the expectation that the transgendered body be readily available for visual scrutiny. The work offers a slowed-down experience where minute shifts over time replace binary understandings. He creates aesthetically paired down forms that respond to or are dependent on the architecture and light conditions of the exhibition space, implicating the position of viewership and the environment. Forces such as tension, gravity, light and sound are both structural and material in his work. Groeneboer's sculptures and diptychs are often described as unphotographable. These materially spare works are used by Groeneboer to question visual perception's capacity to produce complete comprehension. The impossibility of seeing in totality is an integral concept in his work, providing a counterpoint to Minimalism by its insistence on a political position within these contingencies. We're so excited about this talk because there are so many interesting kinds of parallels in how Carrie and Jonah approach their work. Just quickly, Jonah is also an accomplished writer as well and is a contributing critic for Artforum.com, and he has shown his work at various places including David Zwirner Gallery, MoMA, Art in General, Queens Museum, and many many other great spaces.

So without further ado, I will hand it over to Carrie and Jonah. And again, after they've spoken a bit we'd like to open it up to the audience too, so if you could just type in the chat if you'd like to speak or write the question there we'd be happy to weave it in as well. Thank you. Carrie and Jonah.

CY: Thanks, Kibum. Thanks everybody at Commonwealth Council for making this all happen. Thanks to Jonah for participating.

JG: I second those thanks, and thanks Carrie for inviting me to participate in the conversation with you too. There is a lot of affinity between our practices and the more that we talk the more I learn how much there really is, so it's an honor and a pleasure. Thank you. I'll start by asking you questions. This show does span decades of your practice and what's really clear is your dedication to reflection. So I'm just wondering how long you've been working with reflection and what drew you to it originally.

CY: The show spans from 1991 to the present, and there are a couple of examples of early text-based works from the early nineties, before I was working with reflective materials. But out of that text-based work that I was doing then, I started working with palindromes and reversible words and I moved to working with mirrors because it was a formal analogy to reflectivity but then of course it opened up so much more. I worked with mirrors for a couple of years but I ended up abandoning that because the mirror surface is such a cold, hard, objective representation. There are very few things you can do to really mess with that or intervene with that. I used to do things like strip the backing off the mirror so you could see through the mirror glass, but it ultimately renders a reflection that's seemingly objective. So I started working with reflective mylar, or reflective polyester film I guess is more appropriate, around 1994. And I had to figure out, because I wasn't using traditional painting materials—actually, I was branching into using sculptor's materials—I had to figure out how to work with these materials so I had to do a lot of experimentation in the studio, and I feel like the studio still is kind of a lab, today. I like to see the studio as a place where I'm experimenting with processes and materials.

JG: I'd like to talk a little about the process, too, because it is very experimental and maybe we can talk about *approximate square*— I saw that go through in the slides a little bit. Because that piece is so surprising to me, when you told me how you made it.

CY: So for many years I've been working with very simple, silicone molds that are rectangular or square, and using those as the forms for pieces. But actually accidentally, on a smaller scale, I realized that if I mixed up the resin in a proportion that was incorrect, it didn't really behave properly; it actually exploded up and burst out of the mold and inflated in a way, so I tried to repeat that in this piece, it was a very simple 24-inch square mold. There was resin, some of which was tinted, actually it was clear resin to begin with and then later it was tinted with titanium white, and I inserted this layer of reflective mylar in there and I mixed up the resin in the wrong proportions and it kind of blew up out of the mold. And for a while I was really unsure, I could see inside inside the form that there was still liquid resin and I was a little worried that maybe it wasn't going to set up properly so I poked two holes in the bottom to see if I could drain some of the inside liquid out and then maybe it would be a hollow form. But what happened was, these two appendages that you see out of the corners emerged. And I did a couple of other things to it, but really I didn't manipulate it much further than that. I guess it's a good example of—I'm interested in working in ways that surprise me, and I am also interested in working with materials in ways they are not meant to be worked with, kind of breaking the protocol of how one is supposed to use the resin.

JG: I really love that approach, mostly because I am really interested in approaches where there is kind of a non-mastery built into working with materials, where it's not about, you know, I want my material to do this so I'm going to follow these steps and I know what the outcomes will be, it's really a process of meeting the materials, and that meeting of the materials does allow for a lot of discovery and a lot of experimentation, and it's something that I like in my practice too, and why I work with thread. I could make forms out of wire, but then I'm putting my hand there and it stays, it's a shape, but instead, working with the thread, working with a material that needs to be met so much that I actually get to work with things like tension and gravity, for instance. Is that something that you think about in your practice consciously, or is it something else?

CY: Oh, I consciously think about it. I'm always looking for, you know, I mean especially more recently I'd say in the last five years, I'm always interested in looking at error and defect, especially since I come from a background of having worked at a very young age with photography and then as a painter; in those two realms there's such heavy, loaded baggage of this notion of mastery—the mastery of the print or mastery of the painter, and connoisseurship around technique and all these things that really drove me crazy, actually. So I kind of looked for a way to work outside of those boundaries.

JG: And do you now, since you have been working with some of the same materials for so long, do you feel like there is kind of a level of skill that goes into working with materials for that long? But is it a skill that makes you make them better, or is there some predictability? I mean this piece I think is from 2015, right? So it's not that long ago that you had a surprising piece.

CY: Sure, I've been working with those materials for such a long time that I have a certain degree of control, for sure, and I know how they'll behave. But I'm always consciously engaging, I'm always looking for a little window I can open onto the process where something enters in that I didn't intend. Sometimes I call that chance, but chance is a really loaded word too, and people misunderstand what that means because sometimes when you say chance they think it means it's totally random, when it's really really not. I kind of think of it as setting up a situation for something to happen in the studio and then by extension in an exhibition space as well.

JG: From what I've experienced about your work in person, I think that a kind of setting up a situation or allowing certain things to happen in the studio is certainly also an approach you take to installation. One thing that I've experienced is that that feeling of encounter when I'm seeing your works and there's something that happens with in-person viewing where I can see myself because they're reflective, I can see other pieces in the room, but what I see really depends on the angles that I'm addressing the work through, and also because your works will often be married or scarred or fragmented in some way, it's always sort of partial. And so there's a kind of dynamic possibility in the way that you install that I feel is also in your studio practice.

CY: Ideally I hope that a viewer is tempted to encounter work in a number of different ways in a given exhibition space—from different angles, and to notice the specificity of the light, if there's natural light, or to notice the architecture of the space, to notice other people in the space. In a

way it involves leaving, handing a great deal of authorship over to the viewer. Also something I'm interested in.

JG: That makes sense, having a practice that's invested in non-mastery, you would then also be invested in less authorship. And maybe we can talk a little bit about—well I think there's something, because we are on Zoom, and there's a kind of remote feeling that happens through this-through people who maybe can't see the show because they're not in LA right now. And what I noticed when I was looking—because really, neither of us have seen the show in person—

CY: It's true! [laughs]

JG: So, one of the things that I was noticing as I was looking through the images is, I kept going back to my memories of encountering your work in person and that sort of visceral feeling would emerge and that's not just through seeing the images but it's also the way that you use weight. Like, certain works will be pinned to the wall and they're kind of light, like two pieces of separate mylar for instance, it has a lightness to it. And then other works will have a kind of weight and gravity to them. And sometimes it is literally a thick piece of resin that has a lot of weight when you encounter it with your body. So there's a real viscosity to experiencing these works in person, and there's a kind of wetness or a sweat in the way that you work with these materials that produce a literal kind of bodily feeling or reference.

CY: I'm interested in how people see with their senses beyond just eyesight. So, here for example [*24 by 20 (clear/black)*, 2020] I'm really interested in the fact that, what happened was, I was rolling the resin on—I work flat—and I know that on the black vinyl it will roll out perfectly fine but then it will not really want to attach to the ground, to the vinyl, because it's plastic, it will crawl, it sort of beads up and crawls. And I cannot necessarily control how the crawl happens, I can kind of intervene in some ways and then it crawls and it sets up and it dries and it ends up looking kind of wet. And I hoping that for a nanosecond the viewer is sort of like, wait a minute that looks wet, how could it be this way, it's sitting on a vertical surface and it's not dripping. It looks wet, it reminds me of condensation or rain or sweat, there are a myriad associations one could have that have to do with a kind of sense memory, maybe. But I feel like also a more direct engagement with the viewer, that it's not just a purely visual experience. It's actually an association.

JG: I think it pulls from the phenomenological capacities of viewership, which I love. The first time I encountered one of these works, one of your crawl works, I really became aware of the moisture of my skin and on my eyes especially. I had a very bodily reaction to it.

CY: Good! [laughs]

JG: So maybe we can go a little bit from there into reflection. Because what I find so fascinating about your work and your use of reflection is that many people could look at your work and say it's abstract work and it would get classified that way. And I think for me there's so much that the

reflective surface allows a depiction of the figure. When you're standing there you see yourself; it *is* a representation of the figure. And I believe that abstraction and figuration are just another binary that needs breaking down and I'm really interested in practices that do that. Yours specifically does that through the viewer's presence. And so I'm wondering how you see your work in relation to figuration and abstraction.

CY: That's a really interesting question, and kind of a conundrum. I absolutely agree that it's a binary that needs to be broken down. For me, I feel that on a personal level I have always in the past been lumped together with abstract painters, which is totally not at all how I see my work. And sometimes in response to that question, or when people refer to my work as abstract, I say it's not abstract, it's concrete. But that isn't necessarily it, it's concrete because it has to do with materials and processes but I'm kind of skirting the question by saying that. But yes, absolutely the figure is implicated, the body is implicated in this work, completely. Because you only experience the work [in person], and that's why the documentation and photographs are a kind of pale facsimile.

JG: I mean, these kinds of works are really difficult because part of what we've been talking about is dynamic possibility in making and also installation, and then in viewership, and when you have a representation through documentation you only get one specific viewpoint,

CY: Yeah, it's only one particular moment, it's only one person's moment in relationship to the work, on a particular day, at a particular time, with a particular light, from a particular angle.

JG: Exactly. And so then documentation will always be a partial view, it will always be specific, but only one possibility within a huge realm of possibilities.

CY: Clearly the camera doesn't see the way we see, so that's another thing.

JG: Yes, and this is something that I've noticed with your work too, like your stripped pieces where you erased part of the mylar and so that some of it is reflective and some of it shows the gallery wall behind it, and when I'm looking at these pieces I can look at myself, I can look at the gallery wall, or I can look at what's behind me, and I can choose all of these things, and because of the way our attention focuses, when I'm looking at the wall or I'm looking at the rest of the room I'm not looking at myself, and still documentation kind of forecloses a lot of those possibilities.

CY: Well, still documentation presents the illusion that there's a picture where there really is no picture.

JG: Yeah.

CY: I had a really interesting encounter on Instagram because someone who I guess goes and sees a lot of art in LA, his name is Christopher Yin, he posted a picture of *Pour/Peel* on Instagram and tagged me in it and I saw the photograph and I really loved it. I thought it was a

really interesting shot of it, and he put in the little comment area “The little red and blue area that you see in the upper middle portion is me.” I just thought, oh that’s so fantastic.

JG: That’s amazing. Well, what the reflection and these dynamic possibilities allow is a depiction that is so specific to the people, to the context, to the fleeting, dynamic, and the changeable. Is there a political or conceptual impetus for this aspect of your work?

CY: Absolutely. I mean, it’s all about agency and it’s also a lot about the inability to represent or to depict, or handing the ability to represent and depict over to the viewer: where the viewer takes on their role of both editor and author. And I’m always thinking of ideal viewer behavior, and maybe that’s not how people encounter my work, but I just would hope that they not try and derive a kind of totalizing experience out of any one work. I mean, that’s why I don’t do immersive installations because it just feels too authoritarian to me. I’m not interested in that.

JG: I hear that and I also think that there’s something, a slightly immersive quality in all these relationships that are set up, right? So part of these works’ conceptual transition is through phenomenological tactics in the ways that we’ve discussed already. But I wonder what happens to the works’ conceptual possibilities when viewed remotely or through documentation. If it’s dependent on those communications.

CY: Well, it’s a huge problem [laughs]. Just because of what we were talking about before about how every photograph is just one particular subjective take, one particular kind of moment that someone finds, I also find that with living with the work in my studio, it’s impossible to really ever recapture a moment that one has seen before. That kind of interests me too-the sort of fleeting and fugitive quality of the encounter.

JG: That makes sense with all of the strategies that you’re using in your work, including fragmentation. Because there’s the way your surfaces cause an awareness of looking and also a fragmentation of thyself because they’re not true reflections, there’s always distortion. And the work itself is fragmented, it’s pulled, it’s scarred there’s rubbing, erasing, so there’s references in the work to partiality and entwinement, and through process, abstraction and representation, and reflection, what can the places of further fragmentation between the conceptual, phenomenological, and the abstract and fugitive possibilities in the work offer?

CY: Can you phrase that question a different way? [laughs] Because I kind of got lost along the way.

JG: I’m kind of asking, like, you have all these elements of what you do in the studio, these ideas of non-mastery, and then you have how you install them, this way of not creating a dominant authorship. And then this sort of place between abstraction and figuration and the phenomenological. And that creates a sort of a way of having this fugitivity, the fragment as a kind of fugitivity, and I’m just wondering, with all of those qualities together, what kind of possibilities does that open up conceptually or in your practice? Like what do you think that amounts to conceptually?

CY: That's a pretty big umbrella, I don't know—I mean it's hard, but I would say that it gets back to the way in which the political is embedded in the work, what kind of encounter one is interested in, in terms of what kind of encounter the viewer can have with the work and what does that draw the viewer into. And hopefully, ideally, the viewer is forced to parse a hundred different little questions while looking at the work, like "If I could touch the surface I'd know whether it's wet or not, or dry, or whether that's actually set up or not, and all of these thoughts kind of speed through someone's brain when they're looking at the work. It's a little bit like waking people up to this sort of specificity of their conditions, their context.

JG: That's something that I see in your work and that I think I do in my work as well, and I think that there's real political possibilities in that for sort of just the impossibility of a whole or a total in one representation or one moment that that's always fragmented in some way, a singular instance.

CY: You said previously to me something about how you thought about me in the studio and maybe how I encounter the work when I'm working on it?

JG: I've always thought of that. When I encounter your work I always have this idea of you, just working with your reflection in the studio and seeing yourself, so I encounter your work and I'll see myself and other people in the room if there are people in that moment and then I also have an image of you, working. So originally when I first encountered your work, I did see it as a kind of self portraiture, or a way of working toward reflection with the self.

CY: Interesting. Because you know, I don't see myself at all when I'm working on them.

JG: Well, now I know that.

CY: I work flat, and then at different stages, when I put it up on the wall, like you do with things when you just live them, I might put it on another wall and look at it a different way, over time. And I suppose I am seeing myself in the work—and that's a kind of work, just looking is a kind of work, over time, so I am seeing myself in the work but it really isn't self-portraiture. That stumps me! I've never thought of that before.

JG: It is what I thought about originally. I knew you worked flat, but for some reason I thought of you looking at yourself as you're working

CY: No, I never do that.

JG: So, I guess for my last question I want to talk a little but about how all of these ideas relate to your text pieces. We talked about the reflective material but I also know you've had a decades-long practice of working with text.

CY: In the early nineties I was collecting typewriter correction ribbons from friends, from different offices I worked in, and these were these little spools of error, and I was transcribing those spools of error into transcripts, and that became the source for all of my work. I made a lexicon of all the words that I happened to find in those transcriptions. These were records of error, records of deletions, erasures. Some of them were intentionally deleted by the person who's typing, some of them are just chance juxtapositions of letters. So *UV* was one of the works that came out of that because I found it in the transcriptions. The other work in the show that's text-based is *Naked Lunch #2*, and that was from a series of works that I did using books that had either been banned from import to the United States at some point or banned from school libraries. This is taken from William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. And what I would do is, I would shoot photographs of the texts and make a gelatin silver print and then I would use reducing agents to lighten or bleach or intervene with the image so they were unique prints, not editioned. Actually, [for *Naked Lunch #2*] I used chemicals on the original print and then I rephotographed it because I wanted to have the distance of the photograph. I wanted that one generation removed from the actual object. Basically I was always working with source material, with language that was either suppressed or censored or deleted or erased, and trying to find my voice or find my language in that kind of dustbin of everything that has been discarded or banned. I see a real thread and I wish I could come to LA and see the show because I'm so curious how this work from the early nineties looks in the same room with like *20 by 16 (wall #2)* which is 20 inches tall, 16 inches wide and is derived from a rubbing of the wall of my studio. More recently I've been making rubbings of really banal things like the wall of the studio that looks white. But actually while I rub I'm recording all these incidents from the surface so it relates to photography but it is also a form of erasure. A rubbing is like a pre-photographic form of recording, but there is also a way in which erasure is a recording—I'm so interested in erasure and obscuring being actually a tactic that reveals instead of obliterating, if that makes any sense.

JG: It makes a lot of sense to me. As you're talking I'm thinking about the ways that text and figuration are both forms of representation, as is photography. So there is still a play between some kind of abstraction, some kind of obscuring of the representation, or erasing, or deleting. But I love this image that we're looking at now, "earthbound ghost need." To me there's a lot of what you're doing in your practice; the "earthbound" being this kind of visceral—well, maybe the "need" is visceral, need is so visceral. But the "earthbound" being maybe the phenomenological and then the "ghost" being that space of erasure. It's beautiful.

CY: Did that sort of answer your question? About the relationship of text to the rest of the work? I think so.

JG: Yes, I'm always curious about the text work, or I feel like I'm not quite understanding it in the same way, but I think that it is a very similar strategy to the ways you're working with what reflection can or can't apprehend, what the reflection never apprehends.

CY: I kind of abandoned working with text in 1994 because I felt like I wanted a much more direct engagement with the viewer, not through language. Not through a known language, let's

say. But then actually text has been creeping back into my work in the last couple of years. Some of which you know through more recent iteration of *Archipelagoes*.

JG: Which we could also spend a long time talking about [laughs].

CY: Maybe another time.

KK: Carrie, something that really struck me in our conversation when I visited your studio was how you hold onto works that you don't think are quite there or you might not like, or think are failures; how you revisit them sometimes, or otherwise change your perspective on them. So could you speak on that, because for me it also connected to how you work with chance and mistakes as a sort of primary material in your work.

CY: *Pour/Peel* is a really good example of a work that was hanging around in my studio for years; there was something about it I found compelling. It was on a panel that was 68 by 28 inches I believe, 68 tall by 28 wide, with silver mylar and clear resin, I didn't really know how to resolve it but I did decide, because you know, sometimes you have nothing to lose, you think shit, you know, I'll just destroy this and let's see what happens. I ripped it off the panel—maybe part of me was thinking, oh, maybe I could reuse this panel. I ripped it off in three pieces and then I started playing around with the pieces and playing with them against the wall and it was a super exciting moment for me because it turned into a sculpture—which is really hard for painting to do. But it did. So it became something completely other than the original piece on panel.

I'm always going back into work and re-configuring it. I think *Peeled Diptych* is another example of that. I also have a little bit of plastic guilt, too, because I work with these materials that are so horrible and I often have things that I think are duds but I don't want to throw those duds away because they're just adding more to the waste stream and I think, well maybe they'll come in handy later down the road. But I'm really interested in going back to work and repurposing it. Fortunately I've had a lot of opportunities to do that, especially with *arms ache avid aeon*, because with Jo-ey Tang, the artist and curator who we worked with, I mean we were going through thirty years of work and grabbing from different moments and it was really an opportunity to go back through things. Exercising that muscle really helped the whole process along with this strategy in the work.

KK: Does anyone have any questions you'd like to ask Carrie or Jonah? I see Jo-ey [Tang] typed a question: "Curious about the horizontal pour work that seems to respond to your earlier work using redacted pieces of books, like a spread, embracing presence in a different way—our screen collectivity perhaps—your other paintings are mostly portrait format, reflecting singular bodies, even if more than one person can be reflected at once. Can you share what prompted this new horizontal format in your repertoire?"

CY: I've rarely worked in a horizontal format, actually. And partially that has to do with this consideration about the body. Some of the larger works are vertical because you can see your body in them, and some of the smaller works are also vertical because they relate to the head and shoulders, the idea of the portrait. And I really really for the most part avoided a landscape reference for many reasons. I don't want anything to look too much like a picture, so I don't want anything to look too much like a landscape. It's a little fear I have. But I realized with that one work in the show, it's called *20 by 12*, I believe, I was interested in that format because the way you may occur in that piece, you see a whole span behind you. It takes up the whole gamut of the room and that started to interest me. So maybe a little bit about trying to encompass more width, or landscape. More situation.

KK: I also think something that has been a challenge for us, especially in these COVID times when folks are not able to encounter the work in person as much as usual—obviously Carrie wasn't even able to come and install the show—the challenge is of documentation, with your work. You know, when we first tried to photograph some of your pieces we went back and forth because you weren't quite satisfied with them. And you actually like when you can see the photographer or the tripod of the camera reflected in the image. So can you speak to that, and I'd also like to hear from Jonah, what he thinks about the unphotographability of the work. Which is also interesting because you have a deep background in photography.

CY: Sometimes when I'm documenting the work I shoot it from an angle because I don't necessarily want the figure or the tripod in there; a lot of times I shoot from multiple angles including the front, but I also sometimes do like the straight-on shot with the tripod because it's a reminder to the viewer that this is a reflective surface, and you're seeing the camera taking the picture of the artwork. Jonah, any thoughts on that?

JG: I didn't necessarily start out to make work that was unphotographable, it just became a major part of the practice in that way that when you make something, then you think oh, this is a problem so you make something else and then you think maybe it's won't be a problem in this work, and then it is, over and over again and then you learn [laughs] that that's just actually part of your practice. But I think it is because there's a way that there is a conceptual strength in working in these places where abstraction and representation meet, or abstraction and figuration. Photography is going to be difficult—it's not going to be the answer. It can be another material or another form to play with, but it's not going to capture what is being made, because of the ways that our senses and the camera are just different. It's partial. And this is why I think that representations are also abstractions, and that's something that the unphotographable kind of points out, too.

KK: Joy [Episalla] has a comment: "The work is never static, so as much as there's a photographic sense similar to the chemicals in the darkroom and the moment before the image resolves." And then for those of us who do have the privilege of being in the space every day, it really has been special to see that the work is about these encounters, always shifting and changing, it's not this monolithic experience. I think the work keeps on living, and it was really

compelling to see, in my conversation in the studio with Carrie, that there are some works that seem to evolve over time as well, just as we do, and I think that's so important.

Well, thank you, super thank you to Jonah for taking charge of the conversation, thank you of course to Carrie for the beautiful show, the work, and thank you everyone for joining. Hope you are all staying safe and let's make it through to a good year in 2021, hopefully.