



SFSU 2021

MFA

IN ART

KEISHA MROTEK
BERIL OR
KRISTEN WONG



SFSU 2021 MFA
Keisha Mrotek, Beril Or, Kristen Wong

Text by Genevieve Quick
Design by Sheri Park

VIRTUAL EXHIBITION:
tinyurl.com/sfsumfa2021
4/24/2021 - 4/24/2022

gallery.sfsu.edu



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Instructionally Related Student Activities Fund.*

As the pandemic has upended our lives and revealed many inequities within our health and socioeconomic systems, we have been asking ourselves how we make our bodies safe. Additionally, as prejudice in policing and legislation has become alarmingly apparent, BIPOC and LGBTQ communities remain physically, socially, and economically threatened by the very parties that are supposed to protect society. In the last several years, many of us have asked ourselves the difficult and polarizing questions of where our commitments lie in protecting all individuals. As society attempts to heal and recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic and ongoing socioeconomic and racial inequities, we must reassess our understanding of what constitutes safety and ways to mobilize individuals to secure an equitable future.

Even before the pandemic struck, the three graduating MFA students Keisha Mrotek, Beril Or, and Kristen Wong have been exploring what safety means for the individual or society at large. Drawing upon their own experiences, these artists examine ways of activating the individual through seemingly insignificant actions and internal psychological spaces and realities. As their works position interior thoughts and the self against the larger society, they consider our obligations to protect our political system and migrants, sleep as a form of peaceful resistance, and the alternative realities of neurodivergence.

In exploring individual perception, these artists harness optical illusion, dreams, and the hallucinatory. As we take in the world through our eyes, our minds process it. However, our minds also determine how our eyes take in the world. While the circularity of the mind and eye is a vexing conundrum, there are fractures within this system. As Wong's work demonstrates, the eye and the mind are not always in synch. While this presents particular conditions for those with neurodivergence, these ruptures are also opportunities to break conventions. Mrotek's work harnesses these breaks in vision to change perspectives, and hopefully initiate action. Lastly, Or considers the healing opportunities within the unconscious mind when we close our eyes to sleep.

The most terrifying and daunting things about threats are their nebulous shapes, which are sometimes within us. Or and Wong ask viewers how do you escape from yourself, or create a safe place within yourself. Mrotek reveals that even more insidiously, we may unconsciously harbor a narrow mindedness that blinds us to other perspectives. As our minds are entangled with hazardous thoughts, moving forward requires a bifurcated self, one which can shift, expel, or express that which haunts us.

As these artists advocate a nimble mind, one that promiscuously leaps from realities, consciousness, or unconsciousness, they probe the perimeters of safety. As a society, we can't go back to a place of safety. Some of us, particularly BIPOC and LGBTQ communities, have never felt safe in the world. There is no happy ending, nor a single solution to all that ails us. However, at this moment we have the opportunity to explore the fractures in our own perception to generate a collaborative way of improving safety for all.

GENEVIEVE QUICK is an interdisciplinary artist and arts writer whose work explores global identity and politics in speculative narratives, technology, and media-based practices. Quick has contributed writings to *48 Hills*, *Artforum*, *cmagazine*, *Art Practical*, *Daily Serving*, *Temporary Art Review*, and *College Art Association*.

As a pedagogical model that goes back to Victorian cabinets of curiosity, games present small worlds, narratives, or contexts through which we role-play or think through complex problems. As players move figures or objects around a 2-dimensional board, they build narratives, strategies, and spatial thinking skills. Most importantly, players' attention oscillates between the macro view of the individual components and the wide view, the game's narrative or task-based objective.

Despite their playful appearances, Keisha Mrotek's puzzles, games, and calendars probe how we see and remember divisive and heart-wrenching events. Mrotek asks viewers to shift our perspectives, consider the macro view, and most poignantly, asks us to consider our individual objectives and the objectives of society at large.

In *Acknowledging the View* (2020), Mrotek presents a partially assembled puzzle of the 2017 Trump Presidential Inauguration at the Washington Mall. The puzzle's random curvilinear pattern abruptly cuts the image into many scattered pieces. As viewers are invited to assemble the puzzle, they attempt to create a completed picture out of many seemingly disjointed parts. As we attempt to understand the larger political system piece-by-piece, Mrotek offers a symbolic format for thinking through the complex problems of our political system.

As with reality, no picture is ever complete without viewers, whose perspectives shift and interpret meaning. Mrotek's puzzle also exists as an anaglyph image, where the parallax between the left and right eyes create the optical illusion of three-dimensionality. As anaglyphs operate on the brain's merging of left and right, blue and red, so do the politics of our divided country. Most importantly, anaglyphs require viewers to complete the image, otherwise they're two inchoate images layered on top of each other. While typically, three-dimensionality is achieved when viewers wear glasses with both a red and blue lens, Mrotek offers glasses with either red or blue lenses, as many of us have already decided which picture we want to see.

Expanding this idea of perspective, in *From This Position* (2019) Mrotek presents a wallpaper-sized print of an aerial view of a tent from an American detention center in Tornillo, TX. The tremendously enlarged image is repeated to create a dizzying and unending pattern. While the wallpaper resembles modernist design, it also suggests a Magic Eye optical illusion. Mrotek sets viewers up to second guess their eyes. While nothing is in fact hidden, Mrotek uses this format to reveal what all along has been in plain sight. Mrotek's overwhelmingly large print suggests that we will only see the injustice that our government creates if we truly want to look.

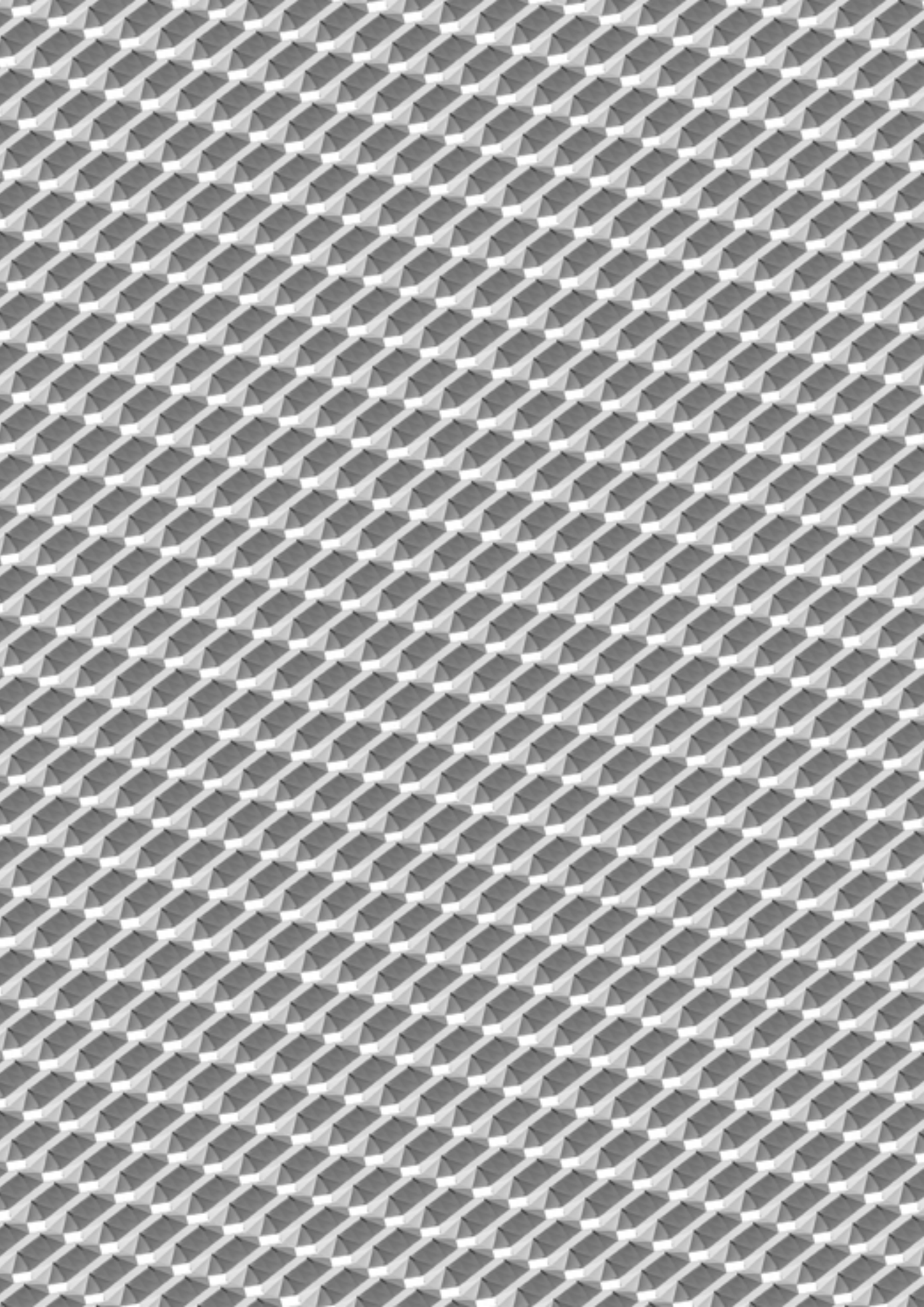
As viewers interact with Mrotek's works, they become active agents who piece puzzles together, change perspectives, and test memories. While eradicating all of the violence and violations in the world seems daunting, Mrotek presents small things that can collectively make a difference. Mrotek's work shrewdly acknowledges the fact that our biggest obstacle in establishing an equitable and peaceful world requires considering different perspectives to see the whole picture.

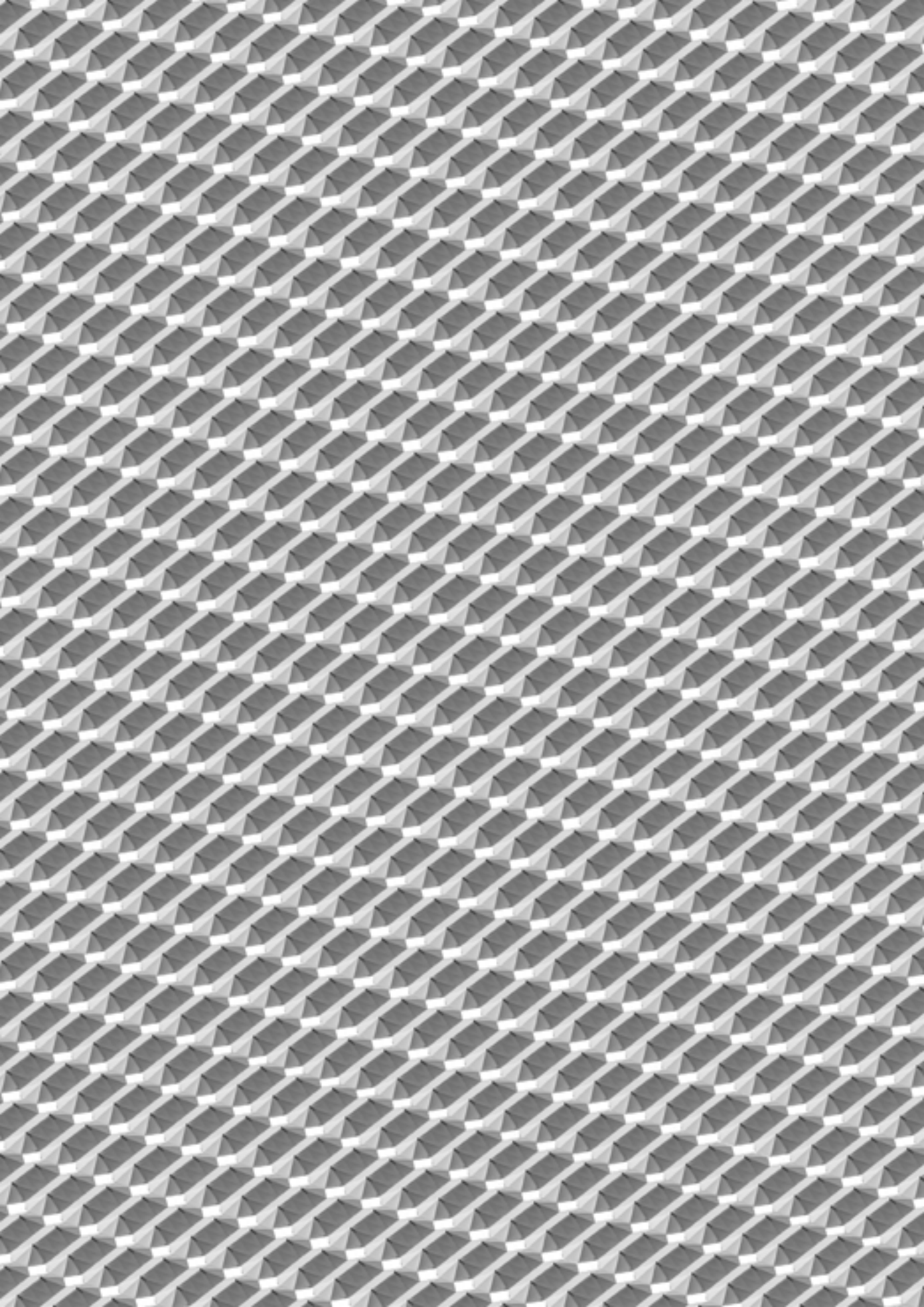


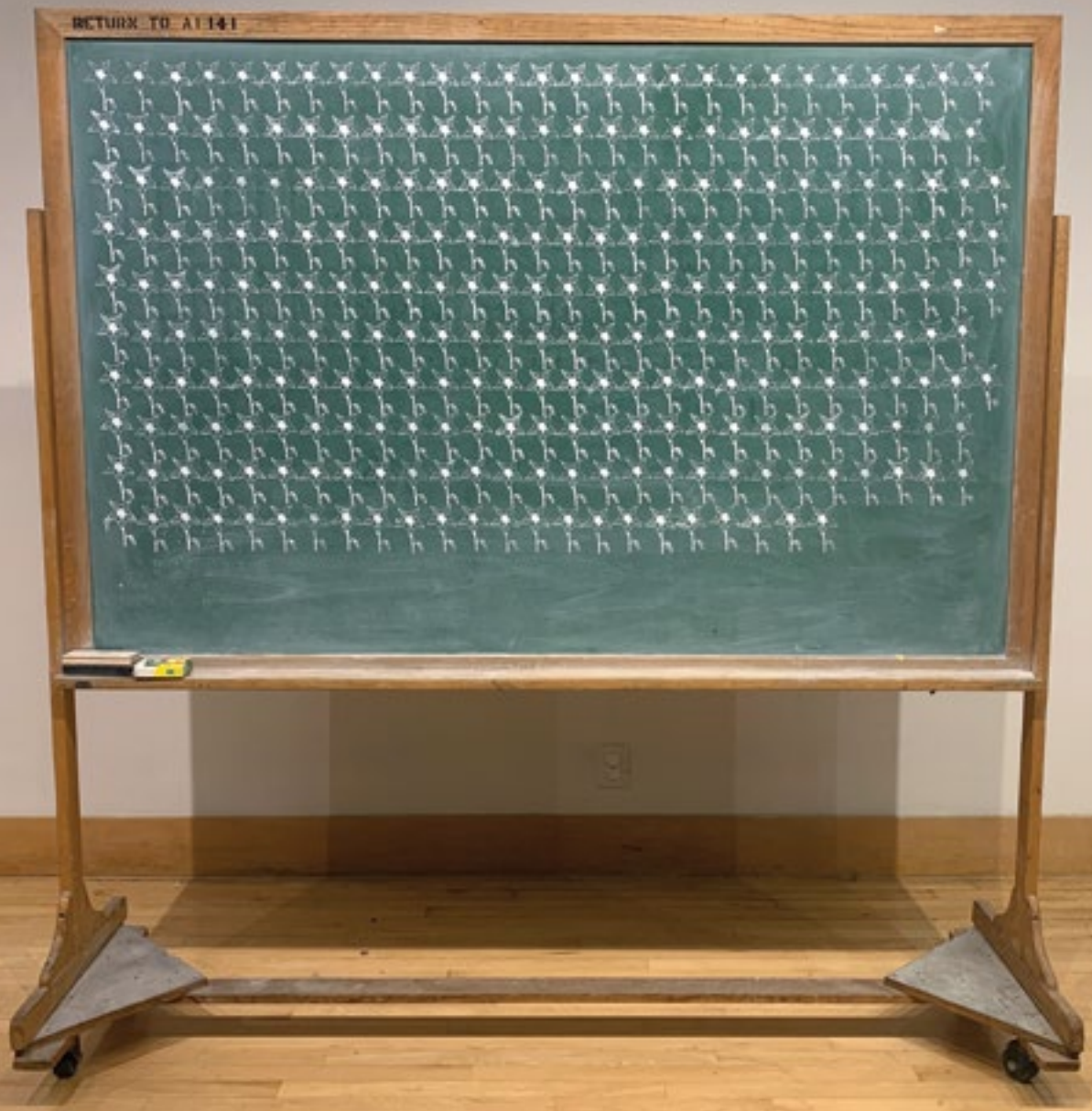
KEISHA MROTEK

My work focuses on the rise in nationalism, the strong partisanship that exists within our country, the role we play as individuals in contemporary politics, and problem-solving within a capitalist structure. The work ranges from serious to satiric, highlighting the dark absurdity of contemporary socio-political discourse.

Acknowledging the View (2020) Cyan and red acetate, matte board, digital print on chipboard. 16x20"







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Never Again, Never Again, Never Again... (2019) Chalk screen printed on chalkboard. 48x72x18"

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TWO PAGE SPREAD (PREVIOUS)

From This Position (2019) Digital collage. Dimensions variable

In 2013, Beril Or was active in the Turkish protest movement against the repressive regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As Or and her friends peacefully protested, they were subjected to a brutal police response. When personal, social, and political safety are uncertain, physically removing oneself may provide refuge. However, removing anxieties and fears from the mind is a more daunting and nebulous task. If safety is the absence of threats, Or's works consider strategies to remove threatening thoughts. Moreover, Or's works consider metaphorical states of resistance and removal, where absence is not indifference nor apathy. Rather, removing oneself is a conscious act of repair and recovery.

In *Part Of A Ritual III* (2020), Or draws upon the Turkish shamanist tradition *kurşun dökmek*, literally translated as "pouring lead." *Kurşun dökmek* casts out psychological problems, unexplainable ailments, or demons. As the name suggests, a healer pours molten lead into a container of water near the subject's head. When the hot lead hits the water it solidifies, alchemically transforming the unnamable and amorphous maladies of the mind into a craggy solid piece of lead. Once objectified and expelled from the mind, one's demons can be physically cast away.

When we remove diseased tissue from the body it dies; tumors no longer parasitically feed off their hosts. Like a medical specimen, Or displays her lead malady in a bell jar. As a dead object, the trauma is no longer threatening. Or's project probes how we study and remember horror and trauma. As individuals battle the dark voices in their minds, the world battles authoritarianism, greed, violence, and prejudice. Or's work suggests a poetic metaphor for transforming all that ails the world into a material object we could expel.

When the mind is free from threat, it can rest and repair. In *Weight Of Memories* from *Sleep Series* (2019), Or presents a poetic sculptural manifestation of sleep. Or cast concrete into a void made by her head. The shadowy state of a sleeping head is objectified, turned into a rock-like object that weighs down a pillow. The airy and pliable pillow succumbs to the concrete's rigidity and weight. Forces are in harmony. When one is in restful sleep, one's head is heavy as a rock.

As sedimentary rocks are formed through layers of mineral deposits, in dreams layers of reality and fiction merge. Like tectonic plates, memories, desires, and fears rupture and rise to the surface. The objective of sleep is letting go and inactivity, which runs counter to our capitalist society that increasingly escalates our demands for concentration and productivity. As unions organize strikes, they position inactivity as a form of resistance. As a time dedicated to the unproductive and non-linear, sleep is perhaps the most peaceful form of resistance.

Through many strategies, Or's work explores the poetics of resistance and removal. As we tend to consider active and visible labor as productive, we frequently underestimate the value of the invisible act of not doing, unconscious thinking, or passive resistance. Or suggests that healing oneself and allowing one's mind to wander are radical departures from the escalating demands of the world.

BERIL OR

In my art practice, I examine whether or not it's possible to recover from trauma. I explore how hiding, escaping, or healing from memory as well as absence of memory can affect individuals. I create situations where people can hide and rest within restlessness.



Part of a Ritual III (2020) Lead. 7x5x8"







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Weight of Memories from Sleep Series (2019) Pillow, concrete, found steel. 48x11x36"

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TWO PAGE SPREAD (PREVIOUS)

A Replacement For Your Loss (2020) Rock, person's body. Dimensions variable

Kristen Wong lives in multiple levels of reality; as her body physically occupies one space, she has a myriad of different reactions, perceptions, and memories. While Wong turned to photography to capture a vantage of the physical world surrounding her, these photographs did not exactly match the reality that she experienced. Through collage, mark-making, and text, Wong articulates her mind's eye.

In Wong's book *in my head i do everything right* (2021), the first page is scrawled with, "This is not a book for you." The artist claims a space for those in the neurodivergent community by writing, "this book is for everyone who has had the cops called on them during a panic attack. . ." Being informed by suicidal ideations herself, in her own community, and in society at large, Wong includes newspaper clippings with headlines that tell stories of a woman's suicide in an Ohio river and a dead man found in his bed. To the general newspaper reader, these are the anonymous casualties of contemporary life. However, Wong's grandmother's handwriting indicates that these individuals were the artist's great-uncle and great-great-grandmother. While it's impossible for viewers to know if there's a familial link to Wong's bipolar disorder, she expands the idea of loss to those within her community and beyond.

Poignantly, the text overlaid in Wong's collages suggests "checking out" as a metaphor for not being emotionally or psychologically available. Wong writes, "Am I the only one here who is counting down the seconds til I leave" and "the person you are trying to reach is absolutely watching the phone ring—until it passes." As society increasingly expects that we immediately respond to every text and email, Wong explores being unavailable or unresponsive when the mind is elsewhere. As these words express her internal voice, they are overlaid on a tightly shot image of a terrarium and a self-portrait. The small world of the terrarium stands in comparison with the bubble world of the self, where getting out of yourself or the world is a daunting and possibly horrifying task.

Throughout Wong's work, the artist transforms mundane places with layers of images, windows, and mirrors. As Wong collages images upon each other, they become alternative views, a double or triple reality. Open sliding glass doors suggest the invisible barrier between external and internal and bathroom mirrors duplicate the world backwards. Wong suggests that this delicate world can be fractured with several images of broken car side-view mirrors. As Wong's collaged materials and frantic marking frame her images, she also paints arch-like portals that restrict the image to a window. While Wong's multiple or fractured worlds consist of layers, this is not an onion, where through each layer one moves closer to the core. Rather, these are simultaneous, shifting perspectives of an ever evolving self.

Wong's windows create another reality that questions the nature of the self and one's perspective. In marking the world, the artist marks the perimeter of her self and claims space for those who share bifurcated and shifting worlds.

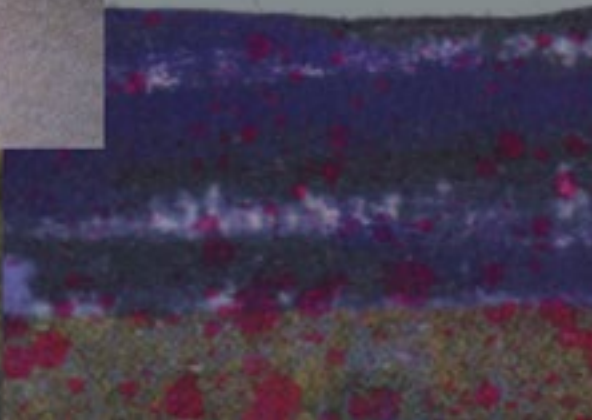
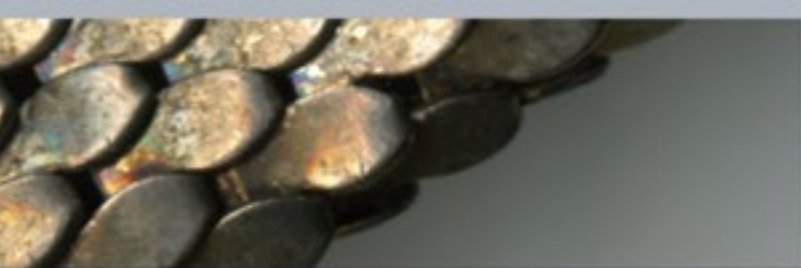
KRISTEN WONG

I make hallucinations. I work primarily in photo and video because of its actuality—because for a moment when you first see a photographic image, you accept its reality. I work and rework photographs digitally and by hand to make physical paper and digital video collages. The fiction that is inherent in collage serves as a channel for me to manufacture dreamlike, hyperreal, and distorted images that challenge the reality agreed upon by society's majority, especially you. The unknown wilderness of the mind is vast and endless.



(don't look back) (detail) (2021) Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable







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Still Life of Tulips #25 (2020) Collaged archival inkjet prints, spray paint, crayon, colored pencil, glitter glue, gouache, shiniest tape, sequins, acrylic paint pen, mean streak. 86x73"

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TWO PAGE SPREAD (PREVIOUS)

right now is the last time (still) (2021) Single channel video. Duration 4:55

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ABOUT THE MFA AT SFSU

San Francisco State University's Master of Fine Arts program in Art provides a dynamic interdisciplinary environment within which students are encouraged to develop their creative practice as professional artists.

The School of Art has facilities for printmaking, painting and drawing, sculpture, photography, textiles, digital media and emerging technology, and ceramics. MFA students have access to all of the School of Art facilities as well as individual and communal MFA studio workspaces.

Our faculty are distinguished and professionally active artists and art historians. Students work closely with a graduate advisor/mentor to chart their individual path through the program, including studio seminars, critiques, and individually supervised tutorials. Coursework and seminars in art history and other academic fields complement studio courses, and students are encouraged to develop rigorous research and writing skills to enrich their art practice.

All students are provided with individual studio spaces, and there are opportunities for teaching, either as a teaching assistant or instructor of record. Our vibrant visiting artist program introduces students to artists in the Bay Area and beyond, connecting students to the local art community. The MFA degree culminates with a written thesis report and a thesis exhibition in which students exhibit an original body of work.

The program may be completed in 2 or 3 years, depending on how many classes are taken each semester. Students will decide before the beginning of their first semester whether they intend to complete the program in 2 or 3 years and meet early on with the graduate coordinator to plan accordingly.

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