

OTHER STRUC TURES

SF State School of Art, MFA Thesis Exhibition April 28–May 18, 2023

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The SFSU 2023 Master of Fine Arts in Art Thesis Exhibition

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Essays by Dionne Lee

INTRODUCTION

It is a long-standing truth that artists often guide the way towards interrogating the establishment and realizing possibilities previously unimagined. Feeling trapped within rigid and restrictive systems is an experience known to most: cultural conventions, gender roles, even our own skin, all structures that can inhibit us from self-expansion. Through form and material, artists possess the unique ability to theorize and offer to others an embodied point of reference for exploring the unfamiliar and reconsidering the common, while staying rooted in curiosity. When we encounter and welcome these alternatives, a new liberatory order appears within reach. In *Other Structures* Mel Nothorn, Sun Park, Leonard Reidelbach, Philippa Renshaw, Sanaz Safanasab, Jiovanny Soto, and Owen Takabayashi propose new apparatuses for being and belonging.

Working across textile, video, sculpture, painting, installation, and printmaking, the 2023 SFSU MFA cohort explores the possibilities of a limitless existence within the repressive confines of manmade conditions, with an inherent insistence on new foundations. A common motif in the exhibition is the erection of partitions, although none are solid or fixed. Light seeping through walls' unpatched holes illuminates an otherwise dark space, and a cold world takes on a rosy hue seen through threadbare fabric. The artists maintain a keen awareness that these frameworks, even the ones they propose, will always be in flux—sculptures teeter, fabric frays, boundaries are porous, and things spill. Throughout *Other Structures* we encounter rebuttals to industrial capitalism, oppressive governments, and stigmas attached to drug use. The exhibition challenges viewers to grapple with the effects of loss and mourning, the weight of memory, and the faultiness of perception.

Ultimately, we are awed by the power of a body able to shed itself, the healing that takes place through nature and community, and the literal potential of world-building. The work of each artist pushes the limits of what keeps sustainable structures standing and what can fracture the foundation of those that harm.

MEL NOTHERN

The primary emotion from which I create is wistfulness — one part yearning, one part desire, one part melancholy. Working in the realm of imagined pasts and affected futures, I make sculpture to examine the nature of life and memory, and the futility of my compulsion to capture it.

Every present moment, what we call “now,” can feel like the most abstract element of time; both fleeting and impalpable, it is never really ours. At its best “now” can be transcendental, until the moment inevitably seeps into the past. Mel Nothorn ruefully explores the tension between the impermeability of now, the pliancy of memory, a futility towards the future, and the knots they tie within oneself.

A moment of Now is put on loop in the piece *Fountain/Perma-spill* where Cactus Cooler Orange Pineapple soda continuously flows out of its can, as if determined to stain the carpet underneath. The brand Cactus Cooler is geographically bound to the American Southwest, including Southern California—the site of Nothorn’s upbringing and coming-of-age. The can’s label looks like the doodle of a talented adolescent and promises both coolness and blast. This carefree design contrasts with the implication of a mistake that lasts forever, as the soda continues to spill. An innocent accident is amplified as an eternal ill symbolizing the anxiety that one mistake will insistently follow you as more than just a shadow, which shape-shifts through the environment and can even become invisible in the right light. Instead, it assures to embed itself within you as a stain, permanent and deep. In *Fountain/Perma-spill* we are presented with a dead-pan fabrication of the past as omnipresent and how it can macerate the moment of Now, like the carpet under a can of Cactus Cooler.

Engaging with familiar signifiers of youth and young adulthood, a time perhaps where one makes the most mistakes, Nothorn uses humor as a tool for reckoning with her own attempts to change how the past affects her present. This grappling is a fight against a resignation to one’s power over memory and personal history. In *Memory Machine* a toy dispenser is filled with charms made of glass and notes detailing past moments from the artist’s life. A toy dispenser becomes a body—a stomach holding nervous energy, a brain filled with thoughts. Viewers are invited to empty the vessel by purchasing these keepsakes. Nothorn’s *Memory Machine* is both a container and protector of these memories, that are at the same time asking to be set free.

In *Snowglobes*, six of the piece’s namesake are filled with a variety of brightly colored soda. There is no snow, no trick or spectacle—if you shook them nothing would happen. We are offered a plateau of engagement instead of what could otherwise be a moment of childlike amusement. Resembling crystal balls with no prediction, not even a prompt to ask again later, the globes are engraved with fragments of memories attached to a specific person from Nothorn’s life—there is no prediction, only recollection. A clear globe, filled with water, is the closest we get to feeling the potential of the future, not knowing what is to come but its engraving suggests a willingness to accept the unknown.



LEFT

Mel Nothorn
Nobody's Business/Wizard Staves, 2023
Aluminum cans, mirror, duct tape
Dimensions variable

ABOVE

Nobody's Business/Wizard Staves (detail)



LEFT

Mel Nothern

***Memory Machine*, 2022**

Toy vending machine, 1-Shot
sign paints, plastic capsules,
lead-free solder, glass, paper
52" x 10" x 10"

TOP

***Memory Machine* (detail)**

RIGHT

Mel Nothern

***Snowglobes*, 2022**

Snowglobes, soda (various),
isopropyl alcohol, hand-
engraved plates
6" x 6" x 8" (each)

ABOVE

***Snowglobes* (detail)**



SUN PARK

I consider entangled bodies: the connections between humans, animals, bodies of water, divine bodies, and places. Sensory overwhelm, disassociation, stimming, collective effervescence, euphoria: these sensations signal the porous boundaries between internal and external landscapes. By recognizing how bodies are connected, I reject purity and honor malleability.

Upheld by chains and clear strings stretched like ligaments, *Before the Roar* and *ooooo* takes on the form of two waves rising from a water's surface as if to meet like sea arch. A translucent and scaly membrane with scab-like layers of sand and toasted *gochugaru*, and a coat of blue fleece and sheep's skin, glitter, and plants that border places familiar to the artist. These thin veils of skin feel slippery, as if some unknown creature has glided across its surface leaving behind a mucus that has since hardened, and another that has lost pieces of its protective coat in transit. At the base of *ooooo*, a video fills a hole within the soft and slimy surface, from above we see a porous and pulsating crust leaking fluid. Peering under the skin, a bodily system is exposed: slow oozing of yellow slime becomes a rush of pus, slowly obscuring our view, as if flushing out a wound. Surrounded by a crescendo of trickling sounds that can trigger a form of frisson, we must assume what we are standing within is an environment that is alive.

Sun Park creates fantastical habitats and dreamscapes from places known to their current and past selves. These cavernous spaces become cocoons for self-soothing through ancestral and self-driven ritual, with objects enchanted and common: pine incense (a cleansing tool in Korean folk magic), the mixing of slime with rice, sand, ocean salt and table salt, and Korean chili powder. Exploring the evolution of self through ceremony, Park reckons with their upbringing within white evangelical institutions and looks to stimming, Korean shamanism, tactile experiences of place, and the innate knowledge of the body, to split the surface of experience and make room for new skin to grow. This process of molting is both a vulnerable shedding and an armored growth. The exoskeletons that Park creates are in flux, preparing for each next stage.

The religion or culture in which one is born into is a cloak draped over you by others, a skin bequeathed. With Park's personal and family history criss-crossing the Pacific, with roots in Korea, the ocean becomes a site to submerge and emerge—a backyard and a channel towards heredity. Immersed in the sounds of a leaking body, we are reminded of the wetness underneath the skin, our own inner oceans, and briefly, we experience our own submergence.



Sun Park
ooooo (still), 2023
Video
5 minutes



ABOVE

Sun Park

Before the Roar, 2023

Slime, sand, beaded fishing line, speaker wire,
ceramic, toasted gochugaru
108" x 30" x 144"

RIGHT

Before the Roar (detail)



LEONARD REIDELBACH

I think of trans study as a methodology in complicating possibility rather than defining bodies. My hope is that bringing a conversation of opacity to pleasure and that reforming matrixes through formal variations has a potential to open up a more nuanced, dialectical, and somatic understanding of perceptual difference.

Visibility is not linear, it is peripheral and connective. To truly see and be seen, one must experience a level of registration within the body. Leonard Reidelbach explores the intricacies of visibility within identity and personhood through textiles, printmaking, and installation. With connection to community as an anchor, Reidelbach looks at how the dance between body and space is negotiated, or liberated, in public and private.

Sea of Fags is a gridded installation of screenprints depicting scenes of collective movement and pleasure. Underneath spotlights, bodies float, dip, and do headstands among waves. The figures are both within the sea and the sea itself. *Sea of Fags* is a study of endless expansion, when the individual self merges with the communal body, and what waves liberation can crest.

In the cheekily titled, *Three holes, two feet, one guy*, a free-falling, or perhaps freely falling, figure takes up a wall. One could imagine the figure is a scaled-up version of a body swimming among *Sea of Fags*. The holes carved out of the body function as veiled portals, as they are partly obscured by velvet treated with a devoré effect. These openings are both invitation and boundary. We are generously offered the lushness of velvet as a threshold into a space to visually roam, but not enter; a soft permission to look with limitation. This negotiation is the artist's assertion of a right to opacity as a way to uphold and protect pleasure. Reidelbach is inspired by the potential of the body, employing a trans-lens to explore the boundless and soft-edged nature of self. This makes the right to opacity – the right to not be seen, to not be registered—an act of self-defense. Bringing to question how privacy, as a means of safety, can be obtained for the trans body. To accept the complications of visibility is to understand the consequences of looking without registration. Yet, Reidelbach takes advantage of this complication as an opportunity; the sheerness of the holes, where the pile of the velvet has been burned away, is rose-tinted.

Looking through *Three holes, two feet, one guy* takes us to another ocean, an inner landscape of water reflecting off of surfaces. This protected space reads as a room for becoming, the boundless and cyclical process of unfolding like a wave—cresting and crashing back into the larger ocean body.



Leonard Reidelbach
Sea of Fags, 2023 (detail)
Silkscreen and gouache
on black paper
22" x 30"



LEFT

Leonard Reidelbach
Sea of Fags, 2023
 Silkscreen and gouache
 on black paper
 22" x 30"

ABOVE

Leonard Reidelbach
Three holes, two feet, one guy,
 2023 (detail)
 Devoré velvet, fiber reactive
 dye, pink beads, wood
 stretcher bars
 44" x 37" x 2"

PHILIPPA RENSHAW

Choosing to focus on the mundane pleasures that can be observed amongst the chaos of urban growth and hyper connectivity, I re-consider the relevance of handcrafts in a technological age. Investigating pattern through material exploration, I choose to use often undervalued hand processes such as sewing, printmaking and ceramics.

Philippa Renshaw's textile works are compilations of fragmented patterns found in the everyday: shadows cast on the sidewalk, arches, corners, and slants of buildings, plus other motifs of daily life. Mending a patchwork of collected memory, the artist turns observation into inquiry through assemblage and appliqué; privileging the power of the hand within the work's production. Through material Renshaw grapples with the capitalist evolution of masking the human hand's presence in everything from urban architecture to the clothes we wear.

Seeking the hand in everyday objects is a search for intimacy. In *De/Re-Constructing City Patterns* Renshaw relies on what has been made by others through her use of recycled materials and on the capability of her own two hands. The dependence on these two elements is not only an attempt of making sense, but one of making touch between object and person. The creation process is a space in which the person and object blend; the object becomes human too.

The aesthetics of textile are often meant to be alluring and immaculate in their construction, Renshaw achieves the allure but threatens construction by leaving large holes in her textile works, allowing the edges to fray. This choice is a subtle critique of the troubled ways capitalism relies on and exploits labor. To encourage unraveling is to subvert the means of production. Allowing something to become undone is a risk that motivates potential, the spreading edge of material is reaching for a second life. Renshaw's methodology behind her singular use of secondhand fabrics is metaphorically akin to darning. This choice is born from a respect for the embedded labor, the material itself, and a desire to reincarnate. Every bit is used; nothing is discarded. Renshaw's installation contains countless fingerprints from a lineage of makers.

Suspended in space, the viewer is able to circle the textile installation mimicking the same agency we have with personal items like turning a garment inside out, examining its care instructions and source of origin. Across its underbelly exposed seams become a proxy for the hand and human alchemy, distilled through the tip of a finger: the slow stitch, the lack of selvage, gaps left from what's been cut-away, the internal process of pattern building, the creation of a new order. The hand lives on the surface.



Philippa Renshaw
A shape for each of my material belongings, 2023
Porcelain, secondhand rope & cord, secondhand thread, time, energy, patience
Dimensions variable



ABOVE

Philippa Renshaw

***De/Re-Constructing City Patterns*, 2023**

Secondhand fabric, secondhand thread, janome sewing machine, heatnbond, rotary cutter, time, energy, patience
12' x 14'

LEFT

***De/Re-Constructing City Patterns* (detail)**

SANAZ SAFANASAB

My art is rooted in hybridity and the concept of opacity through cross-cultural experiences. Inspired by the aesthetics of Iranian Art, I am invested in re-presenting them as deconstructed, reduced, and displaced. My work focuses on collective mourning while criticizing patriarchy, public surveillance, and political control.

Siyah chador is Persian for “black tent,” a nomadic dwelling constructed from goat hair. Traditionally, the goat hair is sheared by men and then woven into a home by women. In a nomadic life your shelter must be packable. It must be able to be taken down and erected while keeping its structural integrity; its reuse is as vital to one’s survival as is traveling in a pack, ensuring safety in numbers and protection from the elements. The *siyah chador* is a home unbound, on the same journey as the traveler.

Sanaz Safanasab uses inspiration from this structure to create a space for mourning, an emotional landscape typically traversed in private or solitude. The installation *Hejleh*, the Persian word for “chamber,” is a six paneled canopy woven from green, red, white, and black fiber, including the artist’s hair. The colors, except for black, are signifiers of the Iranian flag. The artist’s dark hair is sometimes pronounced, surrounded by red with strands breaking away from the textile, or barely legible as it camouflages into black. Taking on the same task as the women weavers who fabricate the *siyah chador*, Safanasab enacts an ancestral ritual not just in the making, but in the spiritual labor it takes to hold her own grief and that of others. *Hejleh* is meant to be a site for a communal and visceral processing.

Originally from Iran, the artist pulls from her experiences as an immigrant, the effects of displacement, personal loss and grief layered with the realities of distance from one’s family, yearning for a home that is perilous, and a solemn recognition of how this distance can underscore the limits of one’s power to clasp the source of affliction.

The 40+ years of gender apartheid in Iran under the Islamic Republic have recently culminated in prodigious uprisings by women-led protests across the country, out of anger and grief, over the murders and abuse of women committing what are considered crimes of morality. These “crimes” include not wearing a hijab and immodest dress. From afar, the artist witnesses the public process of collective rage and mourning. The action of cutting off her own hair (what has become an act of solidarity and protest among Iranian women) to weave into a dwelling for the most fraught and overwhelm-

ing of emotions, overturns cultural norms and creates a refuge for navigating through losses that are personal, political, and communal.

A stacking of ceramic cylinders creates *Minaret*, a rendering of a tower belonging to a mosque from which the call to prayer is cast. Sections of *Minaret* sit ajar in its assembly, precarious and threatening to slip into collapse. The space inside *Hejleh* slowly fills with an oriental rhythm of percussion and echoing wails that increase in disorder and volume, as if trying to project past the limits that sound can travel, longing to be heard on a land the body cannot go.



Sanaz Safanasab
Minaret, 2022
Ceramics, concrete, and mirror
7" x 12" x 12"



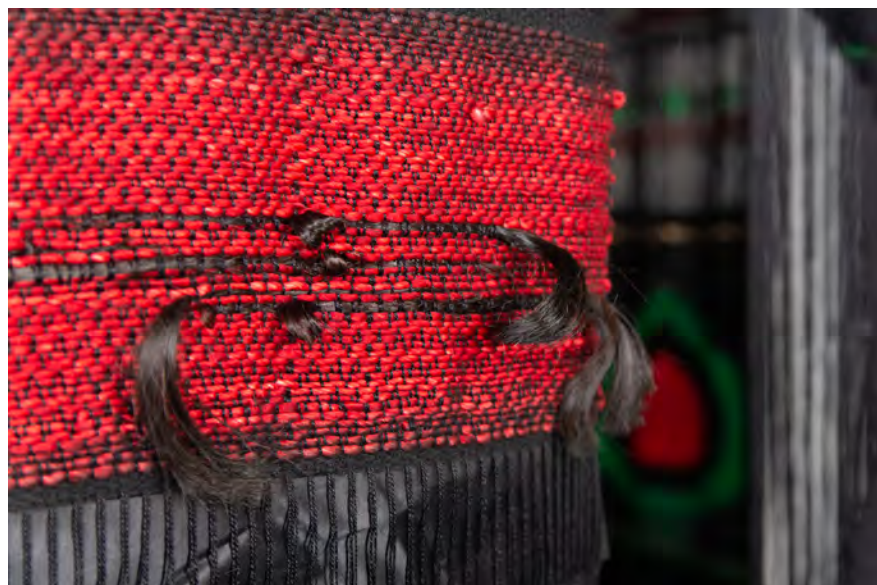
ABOVE

Sanaz Safanasab
Hejleh, 2023

Steel rod, wood, papier-mâché,
mirror, acrylic paint, fabric, fiber,
and artist's hair
10'x7'x7'

RIGHT, NEXT PAGE

Hejleh (detail)



JIOVANNY SOTO

Influenced by Latino Iconography and Spirituality, I work from intuition. My work displays ways in which cannabis has influenced my life through changing perspectives, but most important medicinally. As a fourth generation *curandero*, my appreciation for the hierba is shown through exploring its materiality through multiple mediums in my work.

Even in California, where the recreational use of cannabis is legal, there are still cultural stigmas, and racialized stereotypes, attached to the plant. Jiovanny Soto looks to assert an alternative narrative that is rooted in personal experience and familial healing.

Soto reconstitutes cannabis as pulp, ash, and through fermentation, using the plant as pigment, blending it with paint, porcelain, and turning it into ink to create large-scale paintings and drawings. His work is an amalgamation of healing modalities: art and herbal medicine.

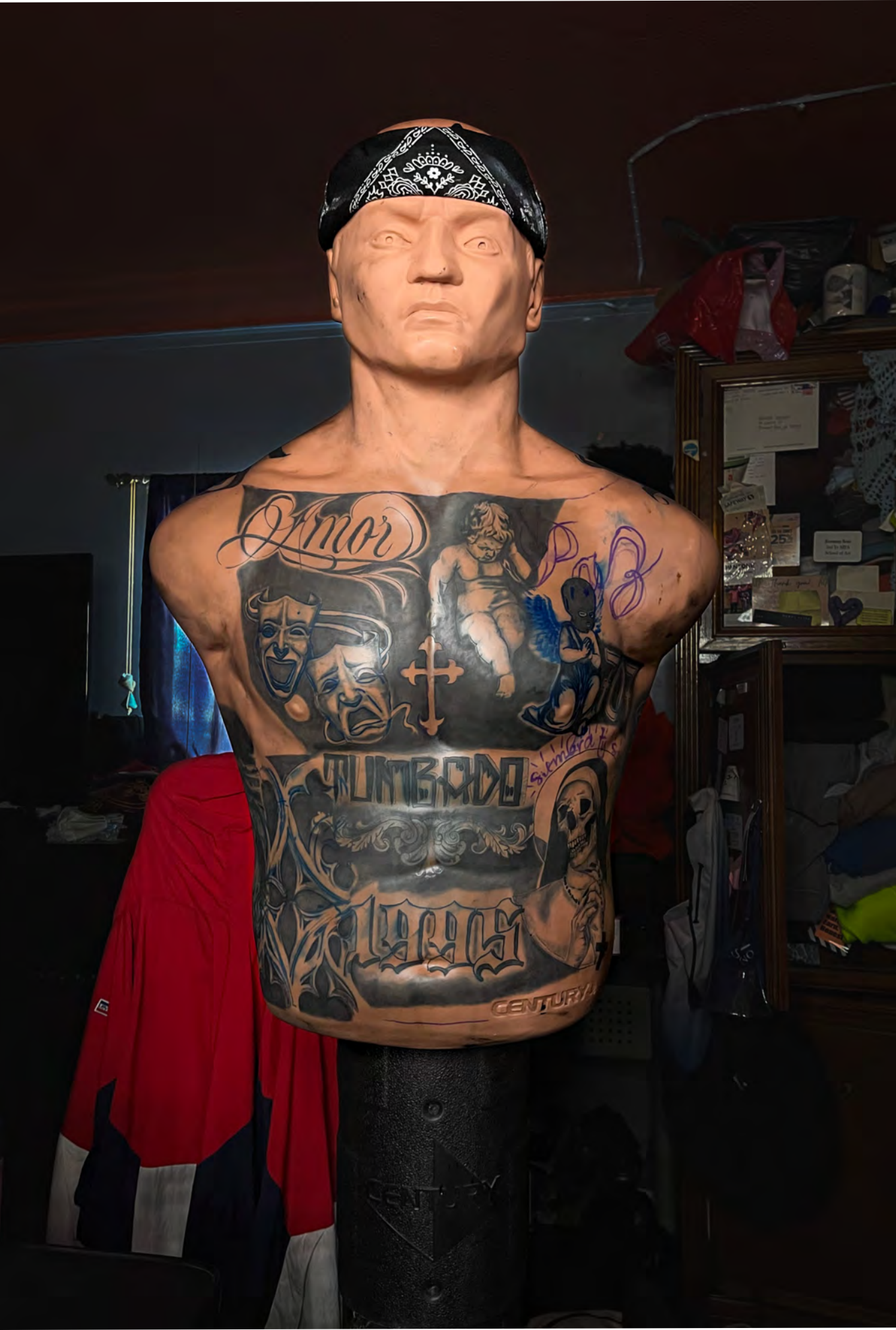
In the triptych *Curado*, Soto references the banded pattern in Mexican weaving often used for *serapes*, *huipiles*, *rebozos*, and blankets. Made from cannabis-infused porcelain and oil paint, the paintings feel like a minimalist depiction of stacked landscapes, each emitting a hot pink sunset through a mirage. Face-to-face you wouldn't register the presence of the plant; it is hidden but aggrandized in porcelain – another material you wouldn't expect to find in a painting. Cannabis is preserved, as the title suggests, into a cultural and personal patterning and a new story is told.

The artist grows all the cannabis used in his work. The deed of cultivation, nurturance, and harvest is a dedication and alchemy all its own. This full-circle relationship to the material is an act of reciprocity and one of defiance against the negative social and political constructs surrounding cannabis the artist was immersed in growing up.

If the presence of cannabis in Soto's paintings is a result of his garden, then the installation *Mi Linaje* is the lab. A cauldron sits atop cinder blocks and sticks ready to hold flame. A video is revealed when peering into the vessel – an herbalist, a *curandero*, at work. *Mi Linaje* translates to “my lineage” suggesting the magic of concoction, be it cannabis and paint or the plant and the body, as an act of reclaiming what has always been woven into a sense of self.



Jiovanny Soto
Sigo curando, 2023
 Painting, cannabis infused porcelain and oil paint
 on canvas
 48" x 60"



ABOVE

Jiovanny Soto

***Generaciones*, 2023**

Digital scans

16" x 24"

LEFT

Jiovanny Soto

***Las huellas de mi creencia*, 2023**

Personal found objects

48" x 48" x 72"

OWEN TAKABAYASHI

Everyday found materials are departure points for my work. Through bricolage, I recoup value and meaning from the mundane, arriving at new views, new values, and new meanings. I invite the viewer to re-consider perspectives, and perceptions, to reorient, and practice, ethical, and sustainable modes of being.

Through reconstructing the ready-made, found images, and discarded materials, Owen Takabayashi highlights the ways in which the familiar is undetermined. His work insists the viewer rethink what they know, proposing that new seeing can be a pathway to new understanding and therefore new being. Works displayed on industrial shelves make reference to the artist's workspace and internal processing. Takabayashi does not assert his assemblages as fact, instead we bear witness to his own inquiry and negotiation.

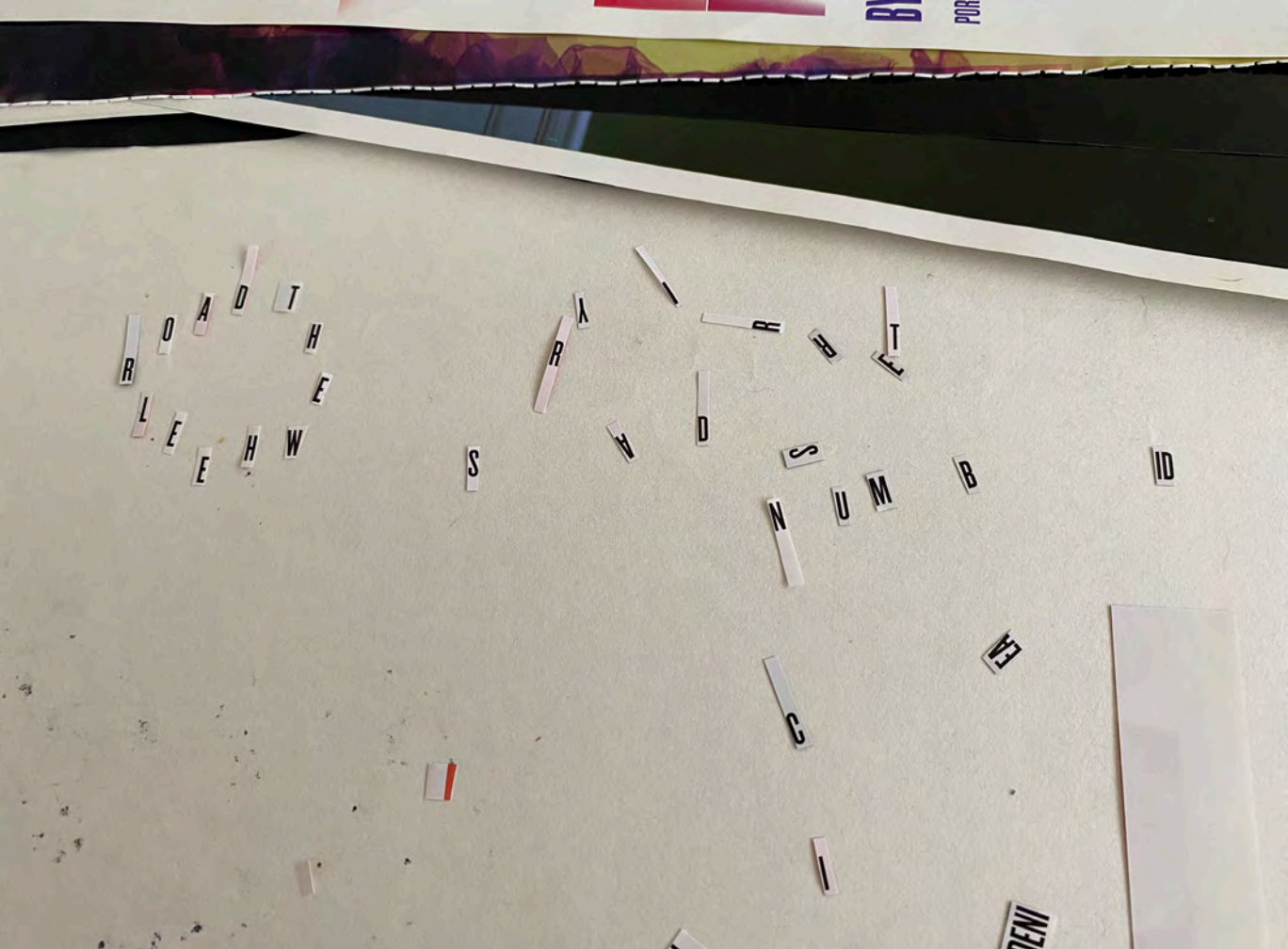
Unmistakable signifiers like National Geographic yellow, distinct even when turned inside out as the artist does to frame a variety of found images, allow viewers an anchor in which to contextualize what sits within its borders. Surrounding anything in the recognizable golden perimeter adds a level of validity to images based on the long-held assumption of National Geographic as a reliable peek into the wonders and cultures on earth. It can't be ignored, however, the history of the magazine that has cropped the world in problematic and exoticized ways, troubling our relationship to the images Takabayashi has placed within its borders. Pictures of the earth, color gradients that represent temperature scales reminding us of our warming planet, gray gradients suggesting fog, a microchip pulled from a credit card (which appears slightly larger than the framed picture of the earth), force us to reimagine how these images can be understood while also pointing to the ways we are all bound to subjectivity.

While we've all seen pictures of the earth, we must remember there was a time where this wasn't a reality. I am reminded of the editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, Stewart Brand, and his circulated button with the urgent question: "Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?" Brand's belief that seeing this would bring a sense of collectivity and shared destiny. However, as highlighted by Takabayashi, it is unfathomable to fully comprehend the rock we live on. We are now desensitized to the image; looking and knowing will never be enough. This gap, between looking and knowing, is precisely where Takabayashi wants us, highlighting the limits of perception and exposing what it means to reexamine.

Another way the artist challenges this is through the use of text reconstituted through visual structure. Resembling concrete poetry, Takabayashi employs spirals, circles, pyramids, and hourglass shapes as an architectural framing for words, phrases, and scramblings of letters that render illegible, disorienting us in the search for meaning. The function of this structure feels analogous to that of a wooden house frame in mid-construction; we cannot fully see the home, or make sense of the space, until the walls are added. The artist is releasing thought without order, but he does not leave the viewer adrift. One of the least obscured phrases found among Takabayashi's text work is "dismantle structures" in an hourglass shape, all-caps and unmoving, a visual contradiction from the expected flow of sand. Here time is frozen as a call to action.



Owen Takabayashi
KitKatBoBitBatpuppupBeastpapawpaw, 2020
Cat, cat cone collar that looks like a fried egg or
daisy, digital photo
Dimensions variable



ABOVE

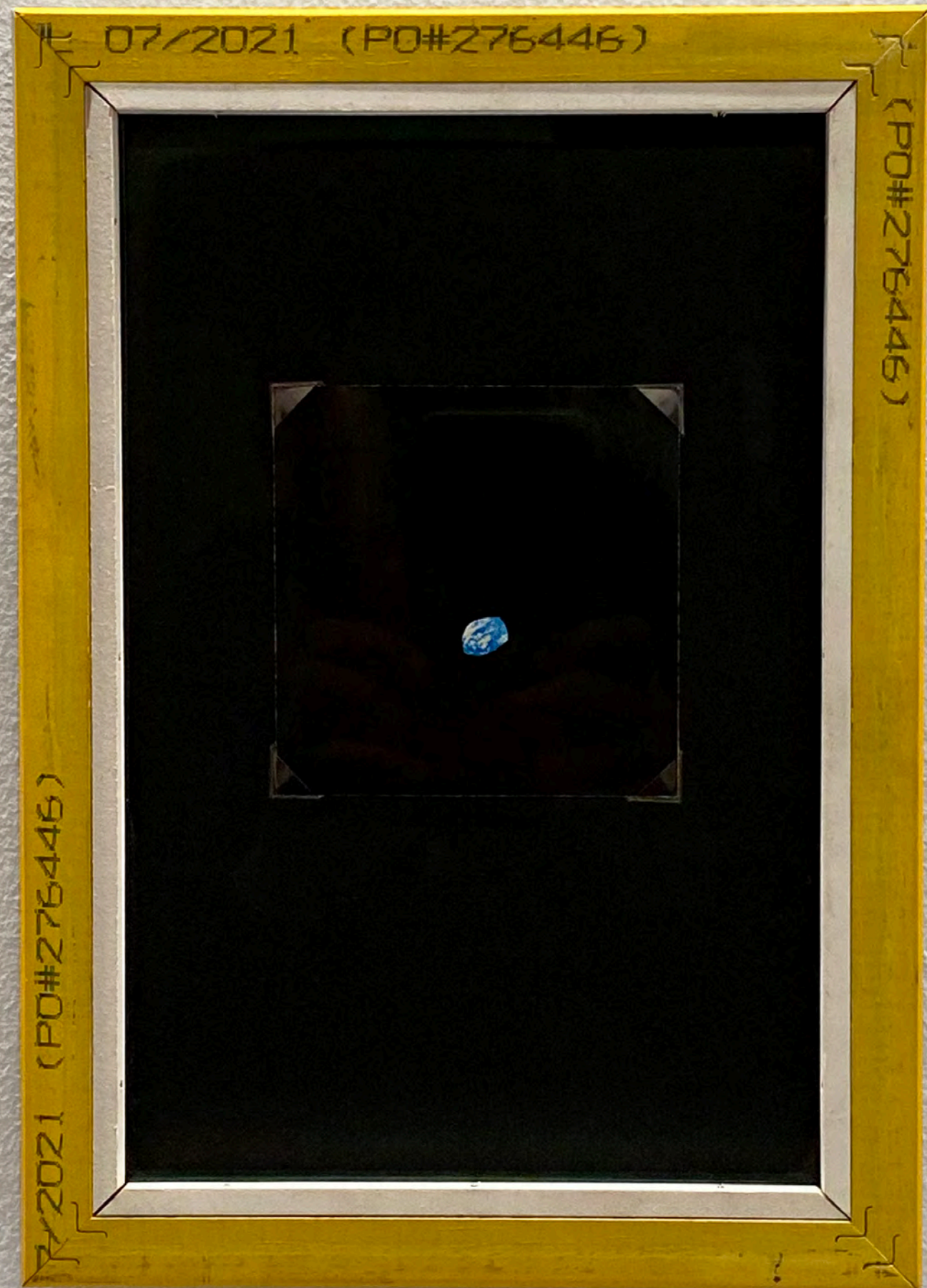
Owen Takabayashi
*A reminder to get outside
 the house*, 2020
 Collaged paper, digital photo
 Dimensions variable

RIGHT

Owen Takabayashi
Memento Mori, 2020
 Acrylic, canvas
 8" x 10"

NEXT PAGE

Owen Takabayashi
Blue Potato, 2021
 Readymade/handmade frame,
 collaged paper
 10" x 7"w



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

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.

OTHER STRUCTURES

April 28–May 18, 2023

Opening Reception

April 28, 5–8PM

Saturday Opening

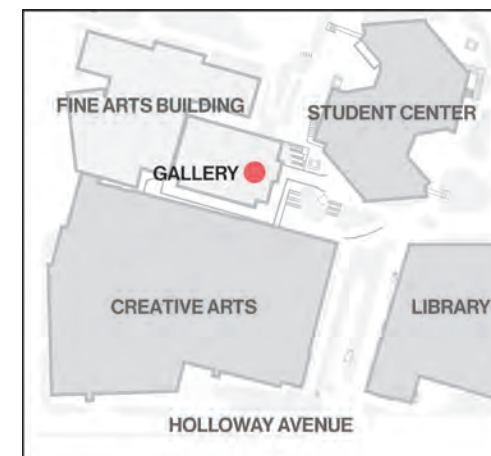
May 13, 12–4PM

SFSU Fine Arts Gallery

San Francisco State University
Fine Arts Building, Room 238
1600 Holloway Avenue San Francisco, CA 94132

Tuesday–Friday, 12–4PM, and by appointment

gallery.sfsu.edu
[@sfsugallery](https://www.instagram.com/sfsugallery)



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