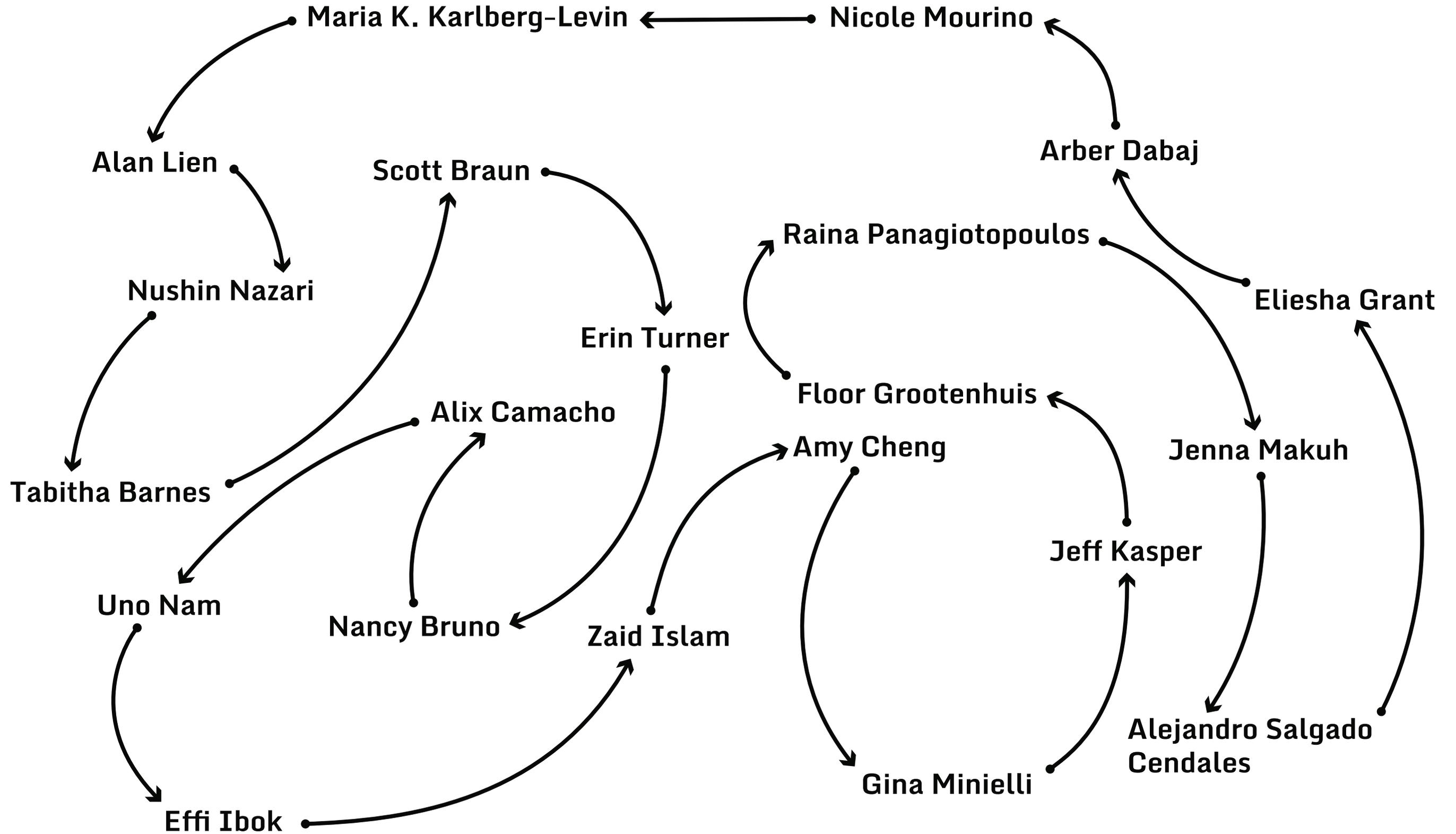




DINING WITH VULTURES

Queens College / CUNY
2016 MFA Exhibition



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AN ESSAY ON THE 2016 QUEENS COLLEGE / CUNY MFA EXHIBITION



Sarah Fritchey, Curator,
Artspace New Haven

Of all the birds of prey, the urban vulture bears the most vulgar reputation. Samuel Goodrich, describes this creature as slow, filthy, voracious and allured, undeterred by putrefaction and corruption.¹ Many literary examples reaffirm the vulture's negative symbolism. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is punished for bringing fire to mortals by being pecked at by a vulture for the rest of eternity. (fig. 1) In Aesop's Fable of the lion and boar, the animals agree to a truce at the mere sight of a flock of vultures forming in the distance. (fig. 2) In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the dead man's "vulture eye" is eerily still living. More recently, entertainment writers have coined the phrase *Culture Vulture* to describe an individual who consumes the arts in excess. In the financial world, analysts have introduced the term 'Vulture Capitalism' to describe a system where an investor profits by selling off the assets of a dying company. (fig. 3) Together, these references cast the bird in a variety of unfavorable lights—as an omen of death, eater of the dead, and predatory creature. These portrayals, however, overlook the great service that the bird provides its ecosystem. As it eats, the vulture transforms death and refuse into new life.

This exhibition posits the question: might a group of artists be surrogates to a flock of feeding vultures? *Dining with Vultures* presents this thought-experiment to explore artistic production as an activity that is profoundly connected to the ecosystem in which an artwork is made.² In this case the "ecosystem" is the Queens College MFA in Studio Practice and the Social Practice Queens graduate programs in which the twenty-one participating artists are currently enrolled. The show examines the impact that this constantly changing environment has on each artist's work, and identifies the lines of interconnectivity that bind the students, faculty members, their shared work spaces, campus communities, and the school's resources. This exhibition frames the acts of sharing, scavenging, consuming and slaughtering within this ecosystem as voraciously vulturesque and profoundly life-affirming.

Featured Artists

Nushin Abbasnazari
Scott Braun
Nancy Bruno
Alejandro Salgado Cendales
Alix Camacho
Amy Cheng
Arber Dabaj
Eliesha Grant
Floor Grootenhuis &
Setare S. Arashloo
Effi Ibok
Zaid Islam
Jeff Kasper
Maria K. Karlberg-Levin
Alan Lien
Jenna Makuh
Raina Panagiotopoulos
Gina Minielli
Nicole Mourino
Uno Nam
Tabitha St Cyr
Erin Turner

1. Goodrich, Samuel G. *Peter Parley's Book of Curiosities: Natural and Artificial*. New York: Collins & Hanny, 1832: 576-7. Print.

2. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ecosystem as "the complex of a community of organisms and its environment functioning as an ecological unit." Online.

For the purposes of this exhibition, each student was asked to scavenge the personal work space of one of their classmates. The choice of studio was based on the criterion: “Whose work do you most want to devour?” The students had thirty minutes to enter, identify, and remove one “dead or near dead” element from their colleague’s on-campus studios. They had only the next twenty-four hours to consider and modify it, using a process central to their own practice. The students were free to select a physical, digital, or conceptual object (i.e. an unwanted artwork, refuse from a trash bin, a lingering scrap, dust, live mold, a sound, or a file on a computer). (fig. 4)

The results of these forced collaborations demonstrate the students’ diverse approaches to art-making and willingness to work across differences in order to collaborate.³ Readers may view the “food chain” in the opening pages of this catalog. The assignment shows how artists, much like vultures, intentionally and unintentionally make each other’s practices possible. Alone, they could not take on such ambitious projects, benefit from the diverse knowledge of their peers, or grow from a humbling encounter. Above all, the assignment demonstrates that artists contribute to art world dialogues both when they are “eating” and “being eaten”, or, when they produce an idea, and when they give up an idea for others to take ownership over and consume.⁴

In many ways, the artists in this exhibition live parallel lives to the vulture. As with vultures, society has a tendency to underestimate the service that artists provide urban centers. Goodrich explains, “The service [vultures] render the inhabitants is the devouring all the carrion of that great city, which might otherwise corrupt the air.”⁵ Much like a vulture, Alan Lien, for example, utilizes industrial scraps to make his free standing sculptures; these materials might otherwise be destined for the landfill. Similarly, Jenna Makuh works on salvaged two-by-fours, exploiting the narrowness and length of the wood in her extended panoramas of train stations.



Fig. 1 - oil painting of Prometheus and the vulture by Theodoor Rombouts (Flemish, b.1597- d.1637)

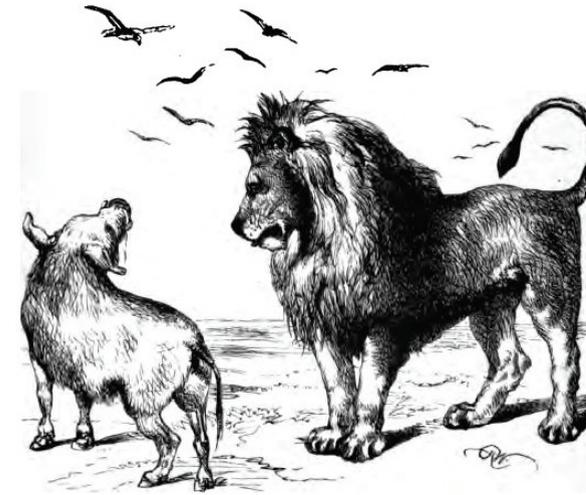


Fig. 2 - Aesop’s Fable of The Lion and The Boar. Illustrator: Harrison Weir, John Tenniel, Ernest Griset, et.al. Copyright 1881, WM. L. Allison, New York.

Second, many of the exhibiting artists share the vulture’s attraction to living forms that society deems marginal. Zaid Islam’s video installation, for example, brings attention to an under-reported hunger strike led by over 100 South Asian refugees during Thanksgiving Day 2015. Nancy Bruno’s “Blanket of the Poor” commemorates children who live at or below the poverty line.⁶ Alejandro Salgado Cendales’s painting depicts a man experiencing homelessness sleeping in a subway station with an I [Heart] NYC bag. Gina Minelli’s portraits eradicate the stigma around mental illness as a character deficit, and Nushin Abbasnazari’s sculptures carve out a safe space for individuals who seek isolation.

In addition to giving greater attention to under recognized human lives, the artists contemplate how humans impact plant life, animal populations, and landscapes. In “Banana Yellow,” Alix Comacho confronts the overproduction of bananas in Central America and the Caribbean, marking the point at which a surplus of bananas transforms into a surplus of food waste. Uno Nam and Amy Cheng contemplate the ways in which humans underestimate the variance and psychic powers of domesticated canines, and Erin Turner exposes the devastating impact of mining in Oak Flat, Arizona, a sacred Apache land.

Third, vultures, like many of the exhibiting artists, are surprisingly gregarious and will work together to consume an especially large meal. Scott Braun’s two-sided chair, for example, requires the participation of two or more viewers to realize its meaning (two viewers may choose to face one another, or look away). Nicole Mourino’s “9 to 5” is chiefly concerned with making abstract painting a legible and accessible art form (she often works with her grandmother in mind). Jeff Kasper’s walking tours intimately appeal to the individual viewer, who might be inspired to retrace his poetic route through neighborhoods in Harlem and New York City’s outer boroughs. And Floor Grootenhuys’s “Untitled Talks” invites a veteran maintenance worker at Queens College to lead a discussion with the artists in the show.

3. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, “collaboration is work across difference.” Tsing, Anna L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. 2015: 29. Print.

4. Tsing: 5. Tsing writes on “eating and being eating” as a situation that brings a living being more closely interconnected with a multispecies living space, and less prone to feeling alienated from the living world.

5. Goodrich: 576. Carrion is the food of vultures, the dead or near-dead flesh of animals and trash.

6. The “Blanket of the Poor” is a reference to the novel *The Adventures of Don Chipote, Or, When Parrots Breast Feed*, which follows the hapless tale of rural Mexican farmer who leaves his family behind to seek riches in America.



Fig. 3 - film still of Ryan Reynolds in The Big Short (2015)

Fourth, some of these artists share the vulture's basic attraction to corruption. Maria K. Karlberg-Levin's "Anxiety Totem" modifies the classic form of a ceramic urn into a nerve-wrackingly tall stackable column. Raina Marie Panagiotopoulos's paintings of child horror film stars staring into computer screens rethink what it means to be 'possessed by evil.' Eleisha Grant's supersized chicken nugget exposes the artificiality of the processed food's shape and surface texture. Arber Dabaj's painting records a month long period of wrestling with oils, acrylics, and unconventional tools, and Tabitha St Cyr's abstract busts depart dramatically from her former sculptures, which were more interested in realism and beauty.

Like vultures who clean the environment even as they feed off of it, these artists are part of a complex relationship between their peer groups, audiences, and surrounding landscapes. Once we acknowledge the interconnectivity of the "art object" to its larger ecosystem, the white walls of a gallery space might actually begin to feel a bit cozy again. Within these white walls, the art object is safe, sacred, finished. If preserved in a collection, its life might even surpass that of the artist, or the landscape of its making. But once we see the artist as vulture, there's no going back from where we came. Nor can we continue to live in a state of denial. Even the most tightly controlled museum environment is unstable, and as artists continue to disrupt the notions of what contemporary practice, authorship, and collaboration might look like, they transform the landscape with each move.

Nushin Abbasnazari

Untitled, 2016
Ceramic (7" x 5")



Scott Braun

Liberty, 2016
Poplar, Pine, Fir
(36" x 18" x 99")



Nancy Bruno

Blanket, 2016

Barb wire, glass, spline draped over
metal stand (7'-7" x 6'-2")



Alejandro Salgado Cendales

ILNY, 2016
Acrylic, Enamel, and Oil on Canvas
(6' x 8')



Alix Camacho Vargas

Banana Yellow, 2016

Benjamin Moore paint: paradise green, banana yellow, and black horizon; custom wooden shelves. (8" x 8" x 8")



Amy Cheng

The Voice Within, 2015-2016
Oil on canvas
(18"x24")



Arber Dabaj

Untitled #0001, 2016
Oil on canvas
(54"x54")



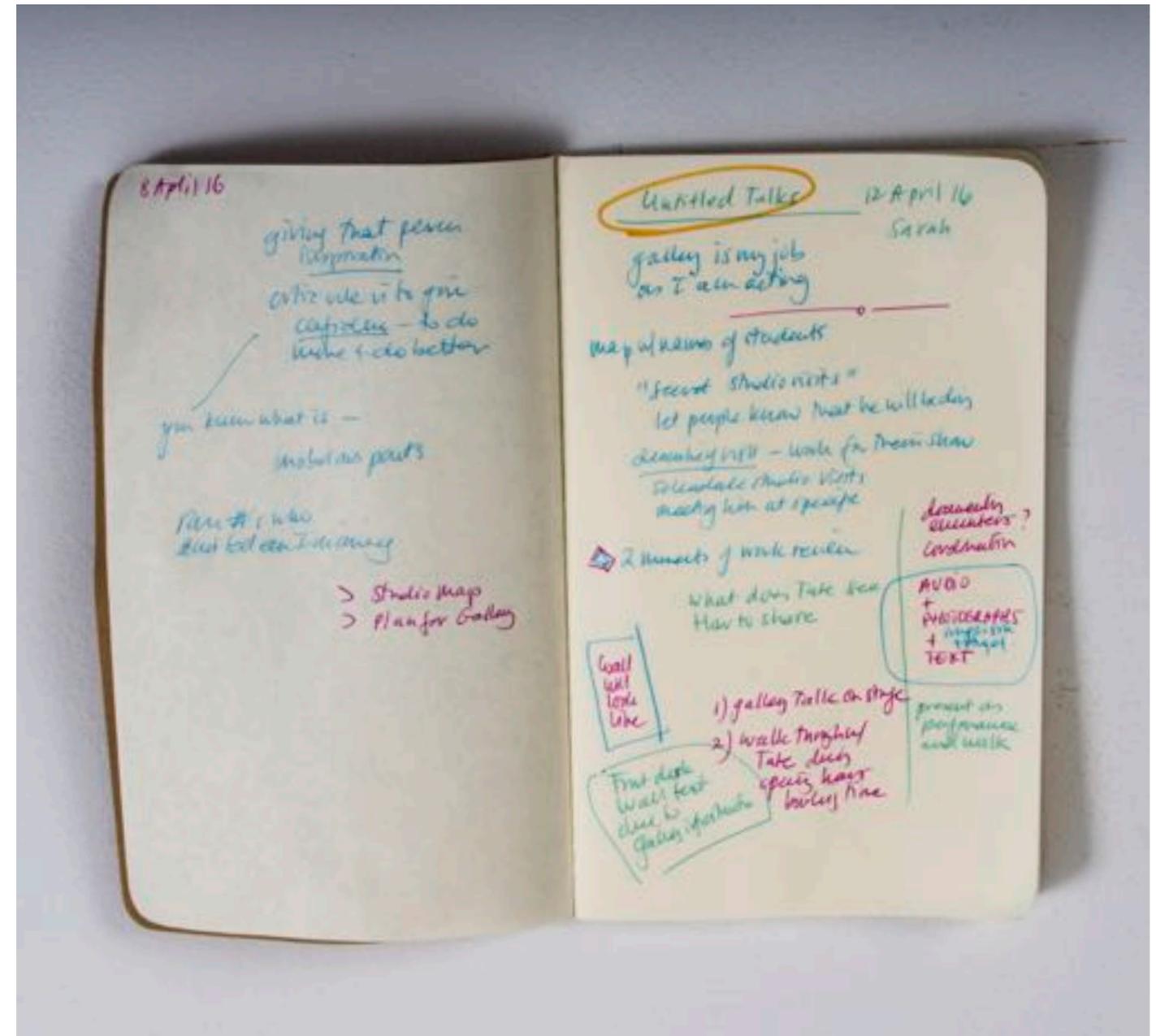
Eliesha Grant

Untitled, 2016
Photo print on Han. Cotton Rag
(44''x 68'')



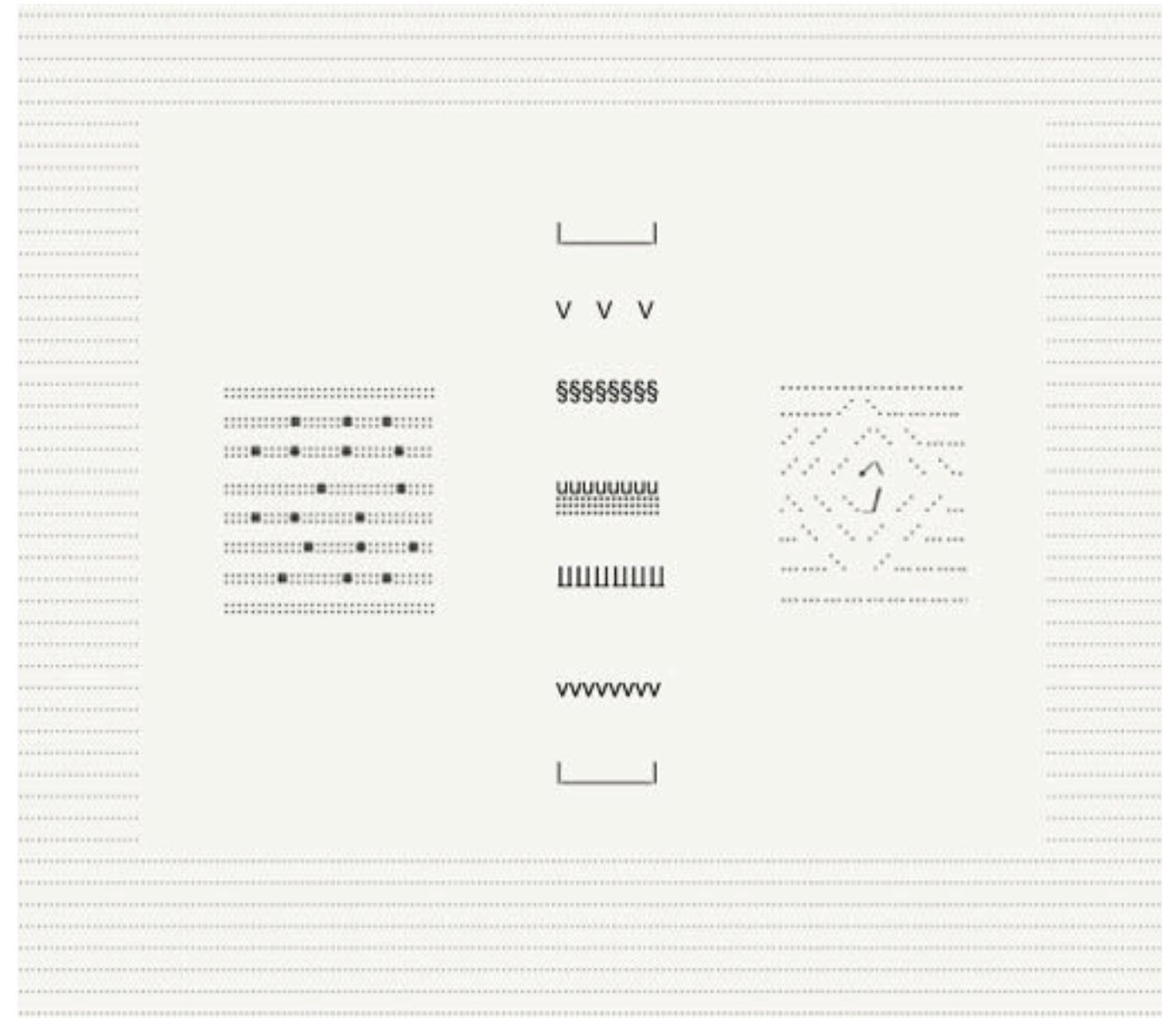
Floor Grootenhuis,
Setare Arashloo,
& Frank Tate

Untitled Talks, 2016
audio, text, photographs, and
performance



Effi Ibok

A Vessel For Energy, 2016
Water, Ceramics, Tubing,
LED grid, Motors



Zaid Islam

Asroe de naile manchitro
chibiye khabo, 2016
Video



office of marginal studies

Jeff Kasper, et al.

Replacement Windows, 2016
Two frosted glass panels (18" x 24")
and audio soundwalk (15 minutes)

"Broken Window" written by Brian
Matta and performed by Jeff Kasper



Mia Karlberg-Levin

Anxiety Totem, 2016
Ceramic (48" x 7")



Alan Lien

Untitled, 2016
found hardware, aluminum pipe,
cement, steel chain, artificial grapes
(23" x 14" x 65.5")



Jenna Makuh

Trains Are Operating On Time, 2016
India Ink and Micron on Wood
(8'' x 4')

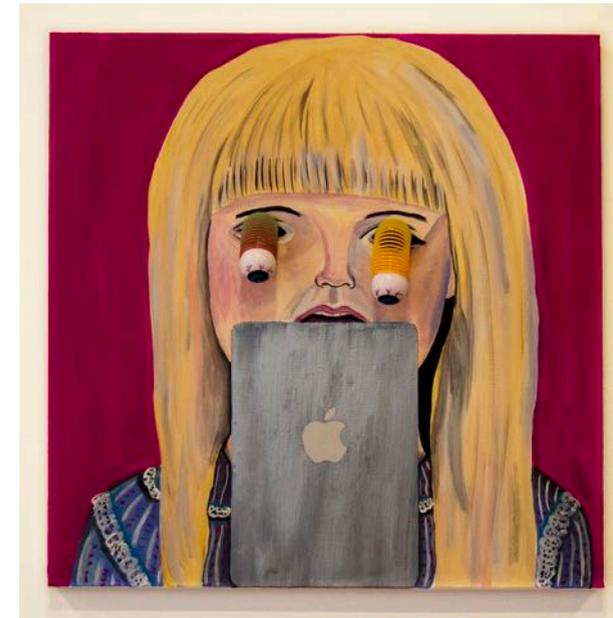
The Next Stop Is...Jamaica, 2016
Oil on Wood
(8'' x 4')

Watch the Gap, 2016
India Ink and Micron on Wood
(8'' x 4')



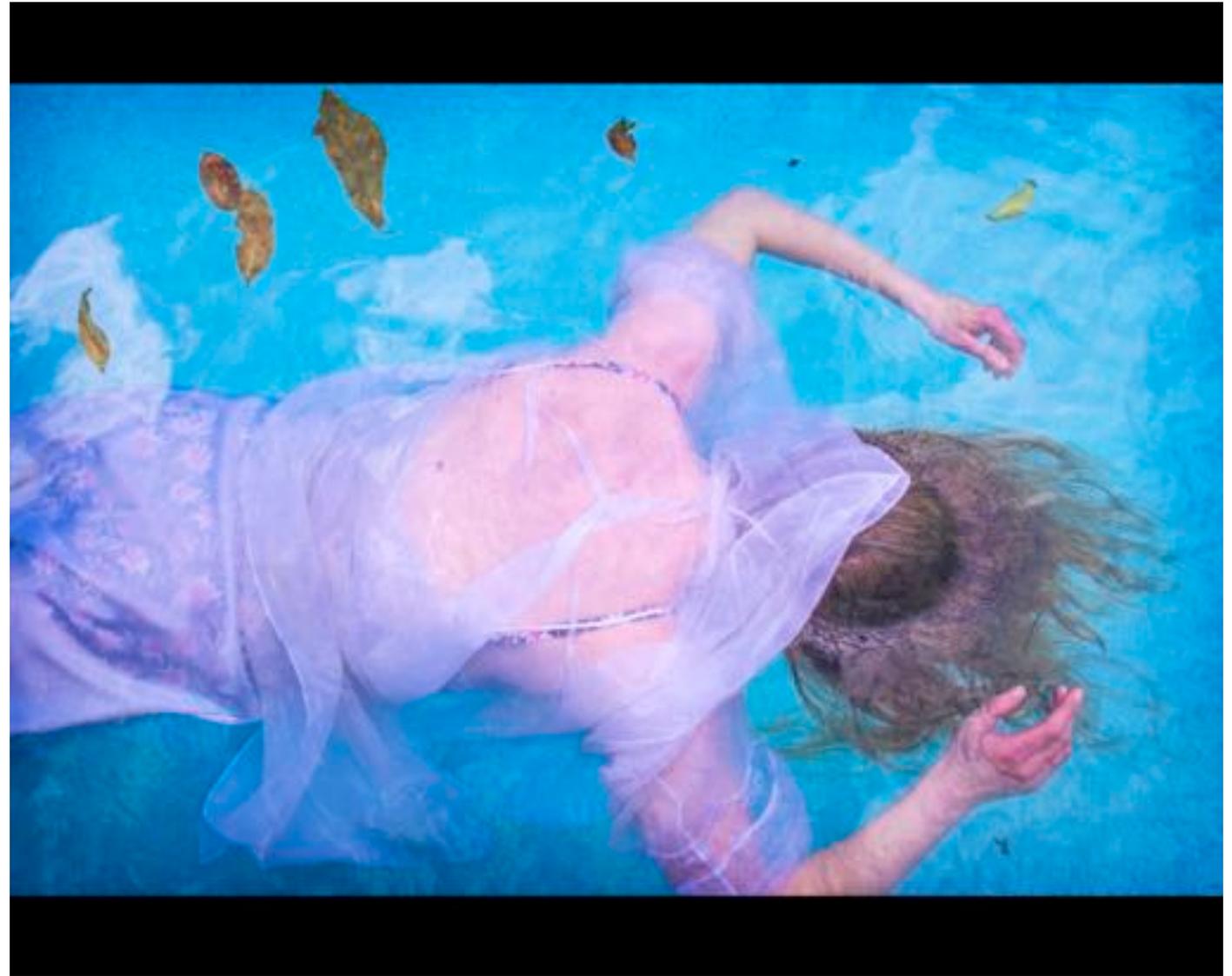
Raina Panagiotopoulos

A New Possession, 2016
Acrylic paint, mixed media on canvas
(20" x 20" each)



Gina Minielli

Suicide, 2016
Digital Print on Watercolor Paper
(16" x 20")



Nicole Mourino

9-5 or All Your Needs, 2016
Ink, wax, oil, and pigment on canvas
(50" x 40")



Uno Nam

Mondo Cane, 2016
video, photographs, paintings,
audio, clay sculpture
(100" X 120")



Tabitha St Cyr

Deja Vu, 2015
Porcelain and glass
(10" x 8.5" x 12.5")

Prowler, 2015
Porcelain and glass
(10" x 8.5" x 12.5")

Mystic, 2015
Stoneware and glass
(10" x 8.5" x 12.5")



Erin Turner

Oak Flat, 2016
neon, burned masonite,
and inkjet photograph
(30" x 30")



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©2016 Queens College, CUNY
Department of Art, Division of the Arts and Humanities
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and Social Practice

Curated by Sarah Fritchey

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Christina Gonzalez, Coordinator of Art Billing
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Located in Flushing, New York – CUNY's Queens College
MFA in Studio Art is a comprehensive, studio-based graduate
program focused on contemporary painting, sculpture,
installation, digital media, critical theory, and a specialization
in social practice (Social Practice Queens).

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