

I Think We Meet Here



Shana Hoehn / Yue Nakayama / Felipe Steinberg

Interviews by Jessi DiTillio

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January 26 – February 23 / 2018

Visual Arts Center

Department of Art and Art History
The University of Texas at Austin

Shana Hoehn, Yue Nakayama, and Felipe Steinberg are second-year fellows in the prestigious Core Program at the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

Though these artists met by chance in the residency program, their practices came together conceptually for this exhibition. *I Think We Meet Here* sees each artist engaged in a search; their works explore the complex relationships that emerge from these searches.

As the 2017–18 Curatorial Fellow for the Visual Arts Center, I proposed my own search. I traveled to Houston to visit each artist in their studio and discuss their work for the show in greater depth. I found three artists engaged in very different practices, yet all deeply interested in the affective subtleties of their projects. Each artist was thinking through the complexities of interpersonal connection and its barriers—how they might connect to their viewers, how film and technology mediates connection, but more generally how people connect to one another across the chasms of culture, context, and point of view. Following is an edited version of my conversation with each artist.

Jessi DiTillio / Curatorial Fellow, Visual Arts Center



b. 1991 / Texarkana, Texas

Shana Hoehn

Shana Hoehn creates videos and installations that are informed by her experiences inside spaces that exhibit social regulation and unexpected forms of agency found within them. She is a Core Fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and a Fulbright Research Fellowship alumna. Hoehn holds a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art in painting and an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in sculpture and extended media. She has participated in residencies such as Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Acre, and Soma Summer. Hoehn has received grants from the Idea Fund, the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation and the Foundation for Contemporary.

JD: *Boggy Creek* features three main characters: the Fouke Monster, a mythical sasquatch-like creature specific to Texarkana folklore; a young woman traveling in search of this monster; and the unusual mermaid figurehead that tops her boat. We discussed the monster and the mermaid as icons of the unknown or the monstrous feminine—shadowy creatures that are usually crafted as foils to the male explorers in films and literature. How does feminism play into *Boggy Creek*, and your work in general? What sort of relationship do you think emerges between the three characters over the course of the film?

SH: I don't think Sasquatch is a monstrous female, but actually is fictionalized as an other-ed male. Throughout history he has been a character that kind of lives on the fringe of society, in the wild, but is still part human and wants to belong. I have designed my mermaid figurehead with references to Medusa, the embodiment of female rage. In my video, the large statue of Bigfoot at the local gas station, Monster Mart, is depicted as angry. I like this duality of anger and misunderstanding. I think it's interesting and suiting that Bigfoot also has numerous references in the music world in terms of festivals and band names. The mermaid is also often mistaken for a siren, the mythological feminine creatures who use their musical abilities to lure in lost sailors. In my video, I worked with the indie-pop singer Zahira Gutierrez to make a version of

a song, Lonely Cry, from the 1972 Legend of Boggy Creek. It is laid in the video as diegetic sound possibly coming from a siren. Each of these characters is mysterious and threatening to mainstream society because of that mysteriousness.

In this work, I wanted to have the mermaid and Bigfoot together, as creatures both fabricated from this male-explorer fantasy to meet and form alliances. I have been interested in female rage and the history of female hysteria as something to be put out of sight. Women have a reason to be angry. I'm angry, but anger in my work mostly manifests in emotional suppression and stoicism with moments of rupture.



Concerning the relationship between these three characters, I am not sure if they find each other... I think the twist in the fantasy is key. Instead of being the ones stalked and hunted by male explorers, they are the ones who are searching. This evokes a sense of camaraderie instead of exploitation.

JD: You typically work with film and video, but in experimental ways, often using unconventional display structures. Your new piece, *Boggy Creek*, combines multiple projections on a custom designed platform that allows the viewer to walk around it and see the film from different angles. How are you thinking about your films in relation to the physical space of the gallery?

SH: I've been thinking about anamorphic paintings and illusionistic ceiling paintings that imply an ideal viewing location, and the possibilities of this bodily experience in narrative, time-based work. These kind of perspective shifts have historically been used to camouflage erotic images or dangerous political statements. A famous example of this is the skull in *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein. The skull in the bottom of the image was painted with distortion so that it only appeared when you approached from a certain angle, making it necessary to move one's body in a certain way to see the whole painting.

I am interested in referencing this history within the specific context of the rural, conservative environments in which the video is shot. In other words, thinking through how someone might need to alter their perception in order to see things differently in this kind of landscape. But this is also meant to invite the viewer to move from one side of the screen to another, and even above in the balconies as well. I am interested in confronting the viewer with a choice in what to see.

A similar distortion is applied to the sculptural figures in this show, *Cadillac Goddesses*. These goddesses originate from hood ornaments on luxury cars popular during the 1930s–50s. I digitally skew them in various ways that provide no ideal perspective. These hood ornaments, a kind of obsolete sculptural form, together with their low, unfinished fiberglass platforms, refer to the demise of the American dream.

JD: Your work has referenced film history in the past, such as the pre-cinematic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge that appear in your work *horse race*. In *Boggy Creek*, there seems to be visual reference to horror genre films. What role do you think this genre plays in the work?

SH: Horror is a genre that is significant in Texarkana; specifically docu-horror, or films based on true events. Most famous is *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* from 1976, based on the “Texarkana Moonlight Murders,” as well as a number of films about the Fouke monster and Boggy Creek specifically. In this context, horror based on true stories and reenactments adds to my exploration of “the real.” Religion, extreme conservatism, cults, digital manipulations, and mythological creatures are a part of our reality and share space with what we see as “normal” in our physical world.

IMAGES

Boggy Creek / 2017–2018 / video installation



Yue Nakayama

b. 1989 / Shanghai, China

Yue Nakayama stages imaginative exchanges between moving images and writing. She archives daily quotes from interpersonal conversations among acquaintances in the context of larger political incidents around the globe. Disruptions and eerie associations made from navigating mismatched narratives lead to a queer environment of contemplation and meditation. Communication and exchange among human beings and their inability to do so are humorously portrayed with existential overtones. Nakayama has participated in various exhibitions and screenings around the United States and Europe. She holds a MFA from University of Pennsylvania and a BFA from Denison University. Residencies she has been awarded includes Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and Anderson Ranch Art Center.



JD: Text and language play central roles in your films. You often use subtitles in your videos, though the language of the subtitles doesn't necessarily relate to any sound occurring in the video. Could you talk about the ways that you work with text, appropriated text, and how your process transforms your source material?

YN: Many of my videos stem from writing practice. Each piece starts from written prose/scripts that function as the core structure of the narratives in the video. The writing practice takes several different forms, including free-writing and editing/rearranging found text from various sources depending on the content and structure of each piece. The writing process is very similar to writing free-form poetry, whether with my own words or with found texts. I have an archival practice of taking notes from daily conversation with friends, a paragraph from bizarre news articles, and interesting quotes from books. The video production usually happens after I finalize the texts.



Both the writing and the video-making/editing share a similar method of collage-making. The sound and music in the piece become part of the collage as well. The editing process is actually quite intuitive.

My video practice was initially influenced by the form of narrative film. It has evolved into playing with the communication system of video. I experiment with different combinations of subtitles, narration, and visual and audio elements to form peculiar ways of perceiving and puzzling symbolism or signification. I'm interested in rearranging different elements of video to form strange and absurd ways of viewing that question the standard structure of perception and recognition in our belief system.

JD: You have a number of different material sources for your video in this show, *Love in the Time of True Blue*, including a short story you wrote, a love letter between Karl Marx and his wife found on the internet, and a series of questions developed by a psychologist named Dr. Arthur Aron to make people develop intimacy or interpersonal closeness. How did you connect these different sources?

YN: Systems of belief, alienation, human emotions, and the politics of these subjects have all been recurring themes in my work. The video and audio in the installation are mainly composed of the interpersonal experiment I performed with multiple participants, in which I didn't have any control besides the editing. But the experiment is based on the short stories on the wall, which contemplate and question human closeness in relation to our backgrounds and belief systems. The viewer's active participation in reading, listening to, and viewing these different sources becomes part of the piece and is necessary in order to complete the project. This is a big shift in my strategy from previous works, in which I combined everything into one video.

JD: You describe this work as a personal fiction, despite the fact that you are documenting real events, (you sourced strangers to perform in the video who are not actors). How does your artistic/directorial process alter the events in front of the camera, or transform nonfiction into fiction? How do the two genres intertwine for you?

YN: I think I have a problem framing a piece into a genre. I suppose it's more of a personal documentary fiction. Part of the piece is documentary, and I'm hiring multiple participants to perform this interpersonal closeness psychological experiment with me. However, the piece is still evolving around stories of my grandmother in relation to communism, love, and relationships. As I performed this psychological experiment with different participants, I realized my answers and interactions depended on my mood, day, and the personality of the participants, so their performances were also influenced by my presence. Instead of capturing a natural or real scene, I'm taking part in the manipulation process from the beginning. Then I'm editing the images and recording the conversations as I often do with my found texts—in a collage form. The editing process is poetic and mainly plays with the linguistic part, as well as the thematic parts, which transform the entire process of documentary into fiction. The priorities in my piece are altering reality and questioning the existence of real, universal truth.

JD: For *Love in the Time of True Blue*, you recorded the audio track first and then the videos. There is often a tension between spoken and written language, and how the two make meaning in different ways. How did the movement between these forms alter the meaning you were making with the text?

YN: Spoken language carries authenticity between the voice and the language or sentence that is spoken. There is a certain voice that narrates in every person's head when they read written language. When audio narration is produced with existing writing, the voice of the narration interferes with the meaning of language because each voice carries gender, age, and a different accent—voices carry identity. My piece explores the stereotypes and judgment that come into play in the development of interpersonal closeness. Mixing language, voice, and visual images in non-coherent ways confuses the sources of the voice, the sentence, and our judgment system to form an unfamiliar understanding that challenges our views.

IMAGES

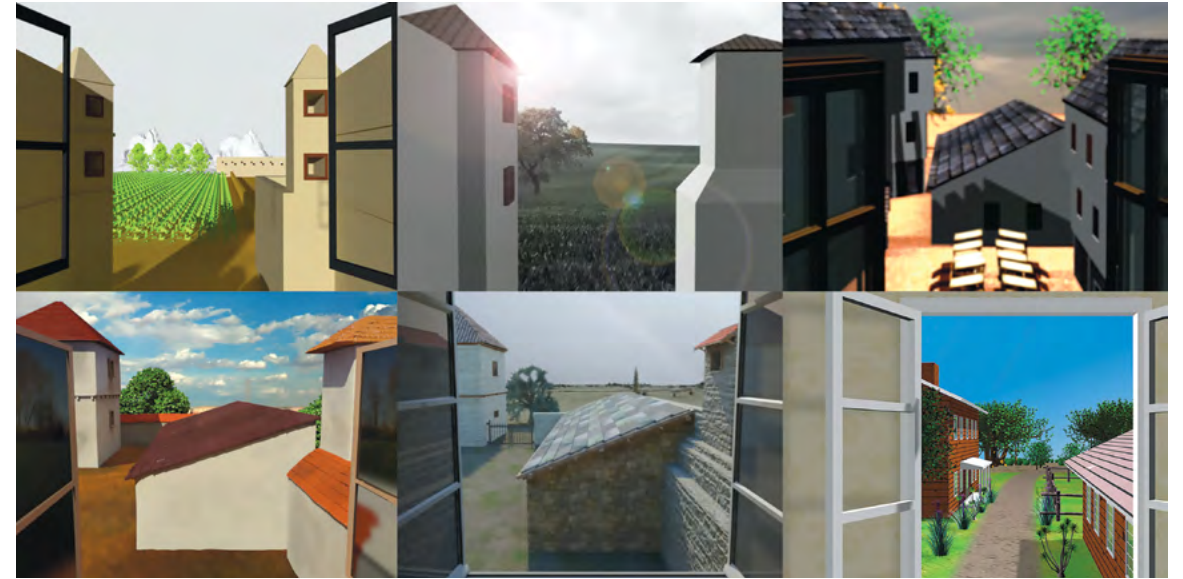
Love in the Time of True Blue / 2018 / three-channel video installation with framed text



Felipe Steinberg

b. 1986 / Campinas, Brazil

Felipe Steinberg's works relate to an examination of global political structures explored through the micro-relationships expressed in daily life and culture. He attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2014 and received his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016. He has had exhibitions at the Anthology Film Archives in New York, Grimm Museum in Berlin, SESC Sao Paulo, and the Museu Oscar Niemeyer in Brasil.



JD: Your video installation *The Pitch* is kind of two artworks in one—there are the videos themselves, and then the process of making them, which is staged as a kind of performative frame around the films. To produce the videos, you crafted an advertisement requesting animations of three moments in history that relate to the air conditioner and windows. How did you come to research the air conditioner? Does the link between these different moments in time and space create a poetic structure for you?

FS: I am trying to suggest a possibility for writing history that undercuts the idea of history as a chronological series of movements and developments. When I moved to Texas last year, I felt the air conditioner was a protagonist in life here. One might think that was something that was meant to make human life more comfortable, but, digging into history, its first successful use was actually to increase the production capacity for an image-making process. Dr. Willis Carrier was hired in May 1902 by the Brooklyn based printing company Sackett & Wilhelms to create a machine that could control the humidity that was playing havoc with the register of their four-color printing process.

Later, the air conditioner provoked a traffic jam in Oakland, which was filmed from a window and posted on YouTube. Years before, Niépce made what would be historicized as the first photo ever taken. People around the world achieved similar results before this, but he was the one consecrated as *the first*. This early example of image-making through a window is held at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, which was a weird coincidence.

So, each of these moments is about a form of image-making, and the way image making has transformed through time and across the world. It is like travelling, or maybe circulating, around Brooklyn, YouTube, the Harry Ransom Center (where the Niépce photo is held), Oakland, and Saint-Loup-de-Varennnes in the same trip. It is playful and manipulative at the same time.



JD: The process of making the videos—a call to anonymous artists through an internet platform for tech freelancers—is dramatized in your installation as a key facet of the work. What interests you politically about this type of platform?

FS: By bringing together these image-makers, 3D animators that work all over the world (China, Sri-Lanka, India, and Macedonia), I am trying to think about history not only intellectually, but through manual labor, material history, and high and low culture. The internet has created a migration of labor without the physical migration of workers. I think initially people imagined, especially in left-wing environments, that the Internet would have a great emancipatory potential, and that it would allow a breakdown/ weakening of the authority of those who speak, eventually reducing the cultural industry's manipulative power.

Even though these freelance platforms claim that they produce better work conditions through flexibility, malleability, and individual agency (Uber recruiters use this approach, for example), what they actually produce is vulnerability and insecurity. People are monitored and subject to wage theft in various forms. Workers have to bid for jobs against competitors in a way that creates a loss in their capacity to bargain. Workers also get rated, and rating on online platforms can be pernicious—you can do a good job, but the customer can still give you a low rating. All this is bad enough, not to mention that there isn't any kind of regulation because it is a transnational business.

JD: The text of your chat room negotiations with the animators, read aloud in the installation, has this choppy, staccato feel to it, which is both humorous and a bit disconcerting. How was it to work with these animators? Did you feel you were able to connect to them in some personal way, despite the global distance between you?

FS: Initially I felt it would be a hindrance to mention that they would be part of an artwork, because I was not sure what I was doing and I thought they would express themselves artistically in a different way. For sure, they are skilled, creative workers, but somehow 3D animation in this online context becomes a sort of banal task, where precise aesthetic instructions are usually given for a certain work.

My advertisement was somehow vague, and this vagueness created a problem for us—for me and the animators—to find an aesthetic solution through dialogue. The resulting chat room conversation became a mix of financial and creative negotiation. For example, I learned that a more “realistic” rendering would cost more. During the conversation, some of the animators wanted to know where their work would be used, and as soon they realized it was an art exhibition, most of them didn’t want to charge for their labor anymore. The negotiation wasn’t a smooth and straightforward relation. As long as I am choosing and giving voice to them, I am this middle agent; I just wanted to see myself in them all the way. If the piece frames the animators as characters, it also frames me as a character. Our relationship was transformed during the process of negotiating our relative identities.

My focus is not only what is produced out of this relation, but the relation itself. Within our singularities, including my own, we get both distant and close. Because the dialogue I had with these freelancers was in the form of pure text, it was very hard for us to read each other. Nobody was a native English speaker, including myself. In the end, even with the works produced, I feel that something very dysfunctional happened. Maybe my aim was to try to register this productive dysfunctionality.



IMAGES

The Pitch / 2018 / animations by Hrishik Bagla, Kanishka Dissanayake, Ljupce B. Zitosanski, Lovepreet Singh Juj, Raj Berad and Yabin Li; conceived by Felipe Steinberg / six 20-inch monitors, six 10-inch monitors, 55-inch flat screen, text / dimensions variable

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jessi DiTillio is a doctoral candidate at UT Austin with a focus on modern and contemporary American art, critical race studies, and theories of humor, parody, and appropriation. She is the 2017–18 Curatorial Fellow at the Visual Arts Center, and has also held curatorial positions at The Contemporary Austin, The Warfield Center for African and African American Studies, and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. She is a co-founding member of Neon Queen Collective, a trio of curators working to support socially engaged feminist artists of color and their allies.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Amy Hauft is the Visual Arts Center’s Acting Director, however, usually she is the Leslie Waggoner Professor of Sculpture in the Department of Art and Art History. When she is not switch-hitting as curator of the VAC, she is an artist who creates architecturally-scaled installations that investigate haptic cognition and the idiosyncrasies of the designed world.

ABOUT THE VAULTED GALLERY PROGRAM

The Vaulted Gallery Artist-in-Residence Program invites emerging national and international artists to inhabit the gallery for three to five weeks to create new site-specific installations. Situated in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin, this dynamic residency fosters collaboration with campus and local communities and provides valuable educational opportunities to students.

ABOUT THE CORE PROGRAM

The Core Residency Program of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston awards residencies to exceptional, highly motivated visual artists and critical writers who have completed their undergraduate or graduate training and are working to develop a sustainable practice. Residents engage with a wide range of leading artists, critics, curators, and art historians who are invited to meet individually with the residents, lead seminars, and deliver public lectures.





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