

To Live in the Imagination

Organized
by Sara
VanDerBeek

6.28–
8.31.2024

Pratt Exhibitions

Pratt
Manhattan
Gallery

Cover:
Baillie Vensel
Ana 1, 2024
Inkjet print
49 × 33¹/₂ inches
Courtesy of the artist

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Interview

Sara VanDerBeek in conversation with Sara Greenberger Rafferty

To live in the imagination, as an artist in the 21st century, is a dream and an imperative. In this time of increased imaging and rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning, how do artists working with photography continue to imagine, experiment, and explore this essential form of communication?

Organized as a conversation between seven 2021–2023 alumni of Pratt Institute’s nascent Photography MFA program and a selection of singular works by the six graduates of the class of 2024, *To Live in the Imagination* presents a continuum of practices from an evolving cohort of artists in dialogue across disciplines, sites, and experiences. Existential essentials—such as memory, landscape, home, family, and the body—are shared subjects of inquiry and exploration among many of the included artists, while others address the shifting field of photographic representation. Throughout the exhibition, care and criticality are of equal importance.

In the following interview, Sara VanDerBeek, curator of *To Live in the Imagination*, speaks with Sara Greenberger Rafferty, inaugural director of Pratt’s Photography MFA, to discuss the program’s history, ethos, and evolution.

Sara VanDerBeek: I want to start with a discussion about community. I have learned through working with you how important engaging and supporting community is to a pedagogical atmosphere, and how significant it is to our own existence as artists. Community was and is critical to the development and ongoing evolution of the MFA in Photography at Pratt. Can you speak to me about your thoughts on community at this time of increasing isolation and lack of imagination due to technology’s ongoing impacts upon our experiences and sense of the larger world?

Sara Greenberger Rafferty: I think there are tentacles to that question that intersect with this moment in time, as you say, technologically. We started the Photography MFA program at Pratt in the 2019/2020 school year, so you can imagine

that pretty much all aspects of what it means to be in community were stress-tested almost immediately.

We kicked off the program with a symposium called “Teaching Photographs,” which I co-organized with Shannon Ebner, with a major administrative assist from Anna Collette. The idea was that we were going to convene artists, curators, writers, students, and non-students together, and that there would be a non-hierarchical organization. Every single person participating would get the same honorarium. And we also wanted there to be social time that was equal to and horizontal with the more structured program and symposium time.

That the organization of the symposium was flat in terms of artists in the program and artists in the wider community was the opening statement for the program. It was at that point that I started to test out our ethos. It was simply: “Be cool, be generous.” That’s really how I thought about both the pedagogy and the community.

SV: To be an artist, as challenging as it is at times, is also an incredible privilege. I am grateful to be able to live in the imagination and work with others to encourage creativity and criticality. There is something important in what you were sharing, about being in community spaces outside of the strict conventions and definitions of the “art” space or the “teaching” space.

I think we both appreciate experimental practices and performance. Many of the contemporary practices involved in an international milieu of postmodernism and post-Internet are also of interest. I think that you and, in turn, the program have synthesized these different histories along with contemporary experimental practices into a dynamic and inclusive approach to the expanded instruction of photography. Can you talk more about your experience of the program, as it has evolved since the first years, and perhaps post-pandemic when we were convening again in person?

SGR: One of the biggest things for me, besides being cool and being generous, is engendering

trust and being as transparent as possible. It's very difficult for me to extricate the impact of the pandemic from the identity of the program. Of course, it was devastating. It preyed on everything good, the close quarters and the mixing of people. And it also laid bare the essential worker versus work-from-home dichotomy of the city, which obviously was always there before the pandemic, but became acute. There was so much American distrust of authority mixed in with that.

By keeping to the touchstones of expertise, research, and the best interest of students, the idea of a culture of care and of trust permeates. One of the things that's amazing is that our program is not like a nanny state. There's a level of independence that I think is above and beyond that of other MFAs around the US. There's a lot of scaffolding around our program, around the studios, around working. But then there's a lot of freedom. I am not someone who's going to send artists reminders that they have things due or something. I'll tell them once and then let them take it over, which is a little bit more in keeping with how it is after school.

SV: I'm glad that you spoke of the pandemic's continued impact. Especially on vulnerable communities, including creative communities.

SGR: One of the things that was accelerated in the wake of the pandemic was a recognition that the educational landscape no longer has the categories 'curricular' or 'extracurricular.' And this relates to creating community and socializing, and to your question about technology and being in bubbles. This was a collaborative realization by all of us who held academic institutions together in the (disembodied) classroom during COVID.

Previously, it was assumed that when we're in class we're going to talk about work, read art criticism and art history, and look at "slides." On your own time, you're going to go see all the shows in New York City. You're going to know what your colleagues are up to, and the faculty, what galleries they work with, what museum shows they've been in. These are all the things that were implicit when we were in school.

Everything that was extracurricular in the 20th century I now try and make as curricular as possible, meaning if I expect you to see all the shows up this month, I'm going to name it as part of the coursework and allot time, so that even students with families or jobs can get the full experience. That is also a particularity of the

program at Pratt: a lot of people are coming from outside of New York, from outside of the US, from possibly even outside of a deep art school environment. And I think that is good. It's more access to knowledge and to the field, and you don't need this specialized language. But on the flip side, the specialized language that might come up needs to be explained and explicated. And it needs to be explicit. It can no longer be only implicit. And like all things that concern access and accessibility, at first it seems like something that is being done for a small percentage of people to make their lives easier, but you quickly realize that it makes things better for the whole community.

SV: I want to go deeper into the idea of mutual and reciprocal care. The pandemic was a personal reckoning for me. With the systemic and continued discrimination within many of our institutions laid bare, I began to understand that a passive approach to engaging with institutions is not effective nor helpful for the larger community. The reason I bring this up is that I feel the pandemic and its after effects was one aspect of a collective transformation. Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and the many recent campus demonstrations against America's institutional investments in war are integral to this time being as transformative as it is.

In the summer of 2020 and beyond, I was in mourning. I began considering how, as a society and more personally as an artist and educator, do we care for those who are not able-bodied, and those who are sick. How do we care for those who have been marginalized and discriminated against? How do we continue to fight as women for equity and parity within our respective fields? And it became important to me at the same time that I was questioning institutions to also believe in supporting and engaging with them to enact change.

When I speak of institutions, I am speaking of government and societal structures, but I am also speaking of the museums and educational institutions in which I work as an artist and educator. So this is a two-part question: (1) How do you, as an artist and educator, navigate this moment of transformation, and (2) how do you think we move forward in this transformation?

SGR: Within months of starting at Pratt, in the fall of 2017, I was looking at the extant curriculum (ported over from when the MFA in Photography was part of the Fine Arts Department) and I saw

there weren't any required classes on the history of our medium that spoke to identity as a tool of subjection or its relationship with truth and witness. That was the first foundational tweak that I made to the curriculum.

I commissioned the artist Ka Man Tse to put together a speculative syllabus about photography, representation, and ethics. It was really important that it be put together by an artist as opposed to by a philosopher, an art historian, a photo historian, or a media studies practitioner. And it had to happen quickly. So, I commissioned Ka Man to do it because she had been teaching a similar class at Yale. And we worked together to incorporate the needs of the curriculum. The premise was: What are the essential concepts, practitioners, and texts that every artist getting an MFA in Photography must know? And that became the signature class *Acts of Recognition*, which has now also been adapted for undergrads at Pratt. It is about race, representation, and ethics. It is essential to start with a baseline so that everyone has a thoughtful framing device for working with images or the photographic. And even for an international group of artists—our program has been 30 percent to 90 percent international—it's important to frame the site-specificity of the MFA in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, NY, USA. Pratt Institute was founded in 1877, perhaps coincidentally also the year the (first) attempt at radical US reconstruction following the abolition of chattel slavery ended in failure after a disputed presidential election.

The construction of race and, therefore, the construction of racism, are photographic projects and have been photographic projects since the beginning of photography. Anyone working with the photograph, even if it's "abstract," should be aware. In the same way, anyone who is painting even abstract oil paintings knows the history of oil paintings, whether it's religious, or court, or landscape. I didn't study photography at the graduate level, but I did study it at the undergraduate level. And we had a one-year history of photography class that was taught by Deborah Bright, which laid a foundation for how to think about photography and where we came from. That was very influential to me as a young person. And I think the 30-year update is the class *Acts of Recognition*.

I think that photography is a 'universal donor' to the field of art. Sculptors, painters, performance artists—everyone is pulling from photography, potentially without even knowing its histories and particularities, or the way it constructed

reality and truth, or the ways it still has a hold on ideas of truth, which can be harnessed for good or evil, to put it very starkly.

SV: I thought it would be interesting to turn a question that we have used in admissions around onto us: Why pursue an MFA in Photography now?

SGR: Even when we started the program, I was skeptical, to be honest, because it was confusing to me. Especially given my work and the way that I identify, to quote Sarah Charlesworth, as an "artist who uses photography." I feel and always felt a little bit like a misfit. And yet I did start my artistic education and career in a photo program in the 90s at RISD. So, it was a little perplexing to me even when I saw what they were trying to do and why they hired me.

It is important here to note the history of the program at Pratt, much of which concerns administrative designations. When I came to the program and started as a newly-hired professor, who was also the director of the soon to come MFA in the Department of Photography, the program existed within Fine Arts as a photography concentration. Previously, there had been a Media Arts Department with BFAs in Photography, Film/Video, and Digital Arts, which are now three separate departments. There were faculty who were long-time "photo" MFA faculty: Ann Mandelbaum, Allen Frame, and Carla Shapiro specifically. But administratively, the department needed tools to even get to the robust questioning of "why photography." Like so many institutional answers, it's based on structures that were implemented by individuals long before you got there. Vestigial logic.

I think the answer to why Photography MFA now is because photography is the location of grappling with ideas of image proliferation. We are a culture of images. Being able to understand and read pictures is essential to any citizen and especially to artists. I do think that the history of photography is a utility and also an art, one of the most interesting contemporary forms of art. I do believe my idea of it being a universal donor to culture. There's hardly an angle of culture that doesn't include the photographic in it. It warrants dedicated study. It has one foot in material reality, or observation of material reality, construction of reality. It has a lot of ways of manipulating and critiquing the world around us, and also, of course, observing it. You talked about imagination. That's the other side of it. I think for me it's more a reflection and commentary.

SV: Yes. And that's why I think photography is the medium of our time. I agree it absolutely requires in-depth study of its origins and its evolution, because it is omnipresent and inclusive. It can be observational, rooted in the history of documentary or street-based practices, and social concerns. It can operate within the indexical and mechanical. It can also be lyrical. Its physical presence is as important as its "abstract" or informational nature. All communications are influenced by photography, yet its importance does seem to be at times undervalued. As you said, it's a universal donor. Perhaps it's taken for granted, and I want to rectify that. Photography can translate our lived experience and communicate with others in a myriad of ways, including now in collaboration with computational assistance, AI, and machine learning, all of which are increasingly augmenting and expanding photographic practices, and our collective understanding of photography.

SGR: Well, that reminds me, I've been trying to get a computational elective up and running for many years. It got sidelined by the pandemic. But I hereby pass that on to you, and I hope that you guys do it. And again, learning to use the tools the right way so that you can then use them in an irreverent way is one of the best things about being an artist.

SV: I have such deep appreciation for your incredible work as an educator in developing this program. I hope that we can recognize in this exhibition the contribution this program has had on the larger field, and on the artists who have graduated. It puts forth a model for many other programs and many other individuals to see how we can further photography, and present to the larger community why it is so important. I can't thank you enough.

Sara VanDerBeek is an associate visiting professor of photography at Pratt Institute. VanDerBeek's work investigates our collective and evolving relationship with photography and the photographic image. Her recent work has focused on contemporary museological practices of collection and display. Within this context VanDerBeek highlights women's ongoing contributions to the larger material and visual cultures upon which institutional collections and art historical narratives are built. Her photographic works and intermedia installations address the complex nature of contemporary female existence in which reproduction in all its forms—from the physiological to the photographic—becomes a creative act of reclamation and intergenerational dialogue.

VanDerBeek's solo exhibitions include *Lace Interlace*, The Approach, London; *Chorus*, Altman Siegel, San Francisco; *Women & Museums*, Metro Pictures, New York; *VanDerBeek+VanDerBeek*, Black Mountain College Museum, Asheville; *Women & Museums*, Minneapolis Institute of Art; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; The Approach, London; Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland; Fondazione Memmo, Rome; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and Whitney Museum of Art, New York.

VanDerBeek's work is included in art collections worldwide including Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum; Guggenheim Museum; Hammer Museum; ICA, Boston; MoCA, Los Angeles; MoMA, New York; and The Whitney Museum of American Art. VanDerBeek is a 2022 recipient of a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship and a 2023 recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant.

Sara Greenberger Rafferty is a multidisciplinary visual artist based in Brooklyn since 2000. Before joining Pratt as associate professor and the director of graduate studies in photography, she held teaching positions at Suffolk County Community College, City College, Columbia University, RISD, Parsons, Amherst College, and Hampshire College, where she was associate professor of studio art. In fall 2024, Rafferty will join Hunter College as the inaugural Ruth Stanton Chair of the Department of Art and Art History.

The artist was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial and the 2014 Hammer Biennial, as part of Public Fiction's programming, in addition to group shows at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Oregon; Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, California; and The Jewish Museum, New York, among many others. Her work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, and the Yale University Art Museum, among others.

Stephanie Espinoza

I made these images thinking about labor and the struggle of making art amidst labor. For the last few years, I have been using a pinhole camera as my primary tool of capture; first as an attempt to subvert the decisive moment, and later as a way to make work while working. The long exposures of the camera grant me time—an image is being made as I lay around and read, as I answer emails, as I lesson plan, as I try to maintain my little life in order. I point the camera's aperture to mundane details around my bedroom: a page from my journal, a leftover peel, a gathering of debris, the textured walls that hold it all together. The space acts simultaneously as shelter, office, and studio. With Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in mind, I consider my bedroom and the modern-day trials of being a woman artist and the further complications of being a woman-of-color artist. In this room I have given myself with hard-earned income, I make art in the cracks of labor. As I lay in bed or sit at my desk, time doubles. The pinhole camera slowly feeds light to the photo-sensitive surface of my film. It creates an image. It captures an accumulation of time. It works, even as I rest.

Stephanie Espinoza
it doesn't have to be something until it is: untitled - untitled x (detail), 2024
Archival inkjet print, ten parts
35 × 28 inches each
Courtesy of the artist

it doesn't
have
to be
something
until it
is

Rachel Handlin

I have devoted myself to making large-format portraits of other Down syndrome college graduates around the world, traveling from Peru to Ireland and many other sites in the process. My project has imaged many individuals in my community.

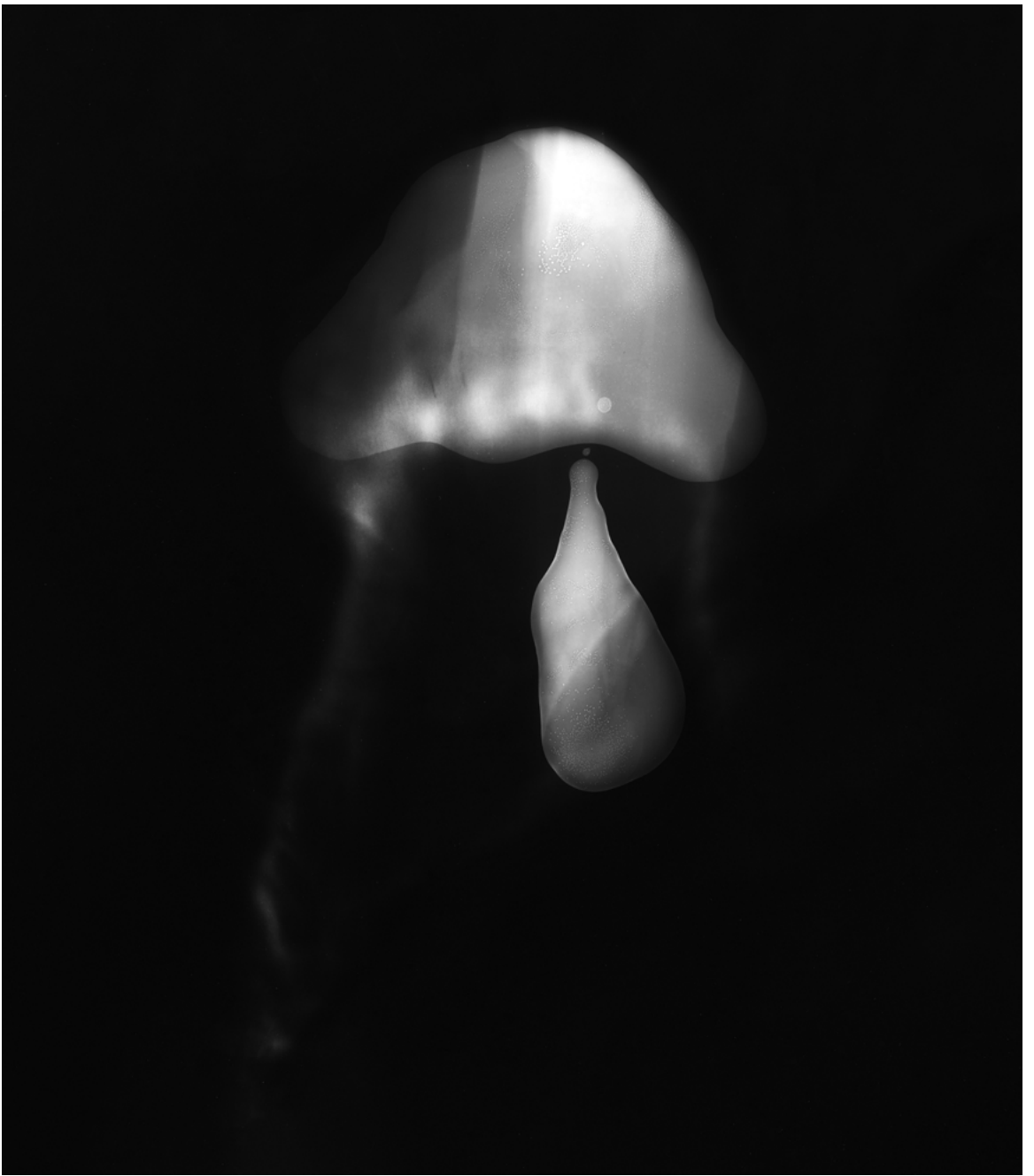
Rachel Handlin
UNTITLED (Ezra Roy), 2024
Installation of silver gelatin prints and cyanotypes with text (artist statement by Ezra Roy)
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist



Katharina Kiefert

I fix liquid states of body fluids in the darkroom. The liquids' encompassing movements are captured on silver gelatin paper. After exposing and flooding the substrate with light and recording the interferences for seven seconds, I drown the images in developer to be cracked open and to then be scanned and reprinted with an inkjet printer. The process and the performance of bodies in the darkroom give the content of the images their forms.

Katharina Kiefert
Out of Body Series (detail), 2024
Inkjet print, ten parts
8 × 6 inches each
Courtesy of the artist



Ethan Li

Business and religion have a very complex relationship, both diverging and converging. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Ethan Li
The Skyline #2, 2024
Vinyl print
15 × 65 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Megan Mack in collaboration with Abby Waters

Abby Waters and Megan Mack met in Moscow, Idaho, in 2021. Abby was in Idaho pursuing her MFA in writing at the University of Idaho at the time. Megan had moved across the country from Brooklyn, after finishing her MFA at Pratt, to be with her partner who was pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Idaho. After becoming friends, the pair decided to co-teach a class on photopoetry. Through this investigation of photopoetry, they began *Our Town* together. As transplants to Moscow, ID, they used their anonymity to delve into the small town. Megan walked around documenting as Abby wrote. And as they began piecing together their chronicle of the town, they found a narrative appearing that felt larger than its individual parts. The pairing of images and text revealed something beyond both the image and the text, answering the question on the periphery: “What is beyond the frame?”

Megan Mack in collaboration with Abby Waters
Our Town, 2022–24
Zine
6½ × 5½ inches, 36 pages + cover
Courtesy of Megan Mack and Abby Waters

Donna doesn't care what Steve says, the city limits sign should be surrounded by real flowers, not synthetic ones. She spends an entire day arranging the flowers, stepping back to imagine what they will look like, and then rearranging them again before digging their individual holes and planting them in the ground. So it just about breaks her heart to have Steve walk into the shop the next day and say, *the boss asked for COLOR around those signs and all I see is green.* Donna tries to explain to Steve that colors will appear once the flowers have a chance to bloom. He doesn't listen to her. Donna sits by the flowers all month, willing their color out of them. It is the wettest May on record. She knows they won't look their best. This morning she parks her work truck by the welcome sign and walks around to the passenger door that faces the flower bed so she can smoke without someone from the city seeing her. She exhales and turns her head away from the flowers. When Donna closes her eyes, she sees the hollyhocks growing up and around the sign until they cover it completely.



In the yoga studio above the coffee shop on Main Street, Sheila is taking the first class of her week-long free trial. She's spent the last hour in front of her mirror trying on different combinations of athletic wear, but she doesn't have much to work with. She called ahead to make sure the studio would have a mat for her to borrow and now she's here a half an hour early so she won't be embarrassed if she's turned away for her free session. She doesn't mind being turned away; she just doesn't want anyone else to see it if it happens. Sheila is let in; she is given a mat and she sets up in the back left corner of the studio. She is relieved. She closes her eyes as she lays on her back and waits for the class to start. She doesn't want the teacher to try to talk to her. And she gets her wish. Fifteen minutes into the class Sheila moves her legs into pigeon pose for the first time. She thinks, *I don't even believe in this kind of thing as she's leaning over her twisted legs, and finds she can't stop crying.*



Nina's three daughters step over piles of her clothing. The daughters have organized the wardrobe of her life: yes, no, yes for sentimental reasons and maybe. As the night goes on, all the individual piles turn into one giant pile, like a country on a map, and the girls decide to just give it all away. When you're given her blue blazer, the wool one with a few moth holes in the right arm, you'll find the lipstick "pirate" in the pocket—Nina's favorite. And after holding in your hands for a few moments, you'll take off the cap and put it on.



Kristina Naso

My process begins with my subconscious need to investigate and preserve memories. Obsessive thoughts and hyperphantasia compel me to create portals from which to view them. I depict my loved ones and past homes through a variety of mediums—*I'll let you go* and *Jumping out from behind the couch* are two videos using live audio recordings and screen-captured footage from *The Sims 4*. Recreating lived experiences and worlds from my mind's eye at the click of a mouse gives me the power to let a moment live on as an artifact.

My work grapples with gossip, addiction, relationships, pain, and loss. I use contemporary technology and the language of the Internet to place my work in familiar nostalgia; technology is often outdated by its successors, a faulty promise that what you have now may not last forever. I am a product of this environment, and to feel a sense of control, I project myself back onto these experiences in my own constructed arena.

Kristina Naso
I'll let you go, 2022
Digital video
7 minutes, 30 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

Kristina Naso
Jumping out from behind the couch, 2024
Digital video
2 minutes, 50 seconds
Courtesy of the artist



How am I supposed to care if she don't open up?



and that thing didn't happen eight years ago.

Chloe Scout Nix

sorry for the mess is a series of images, sculptures, and video works all focused on a prolonged moment of performative intimacy. Each image included was made in the past year and explores how I grappled with togetherness during that time. Though people's forms take on new meanings once photographed, the figures in each image include myself, friends, and family. With each image, I am examining my personal desires and longings while reorienting my current circumstances. Focusing on bodies within domestic spaces, such as living rooms or backyards, the imagery was taken between New York and Texas at my current apartment, my childhood home, and borrowed spaces in between. I aim to reconstruct the figures, places, and gestures in my work to create scenes that are a mix of the familiar and the odd. Looking at comparisons between old and new bodies, moles and tattoos, shapes and shadows, the work lives within the duality of existence.

Chloe Scout Nix
borrowed trauma (brooklyn, ny), 2023
Fabric coated vinyl print on wood panel
40 × 32 × 6 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Erin O'Flynn

Particular Attention is a series of photographs and sculptures that reorient our relationship to New York's histories of nuclear production to show its continued effects today. By placing works free-standing in the space, I invite the viewer to reorient their body while viewing the works. Alongside this reorientation, I unground and reground space through abstract and concrete monochromatic imagery. This monochromatic color palette points towards the insidious nature of this history, and its often invisible or hidden environmental harm.

The images reference sites such as the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant, West 20th Street, Chelsea in New York, and The Hanford Site in Washington. One sculpture, *Current Siren No. 101, 102, 103, 104 (Emergency Planning Zone, Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant, Buchanan, NY)*, references the siren sites found throughout the Emergency Planning Zone around Indian Point. Through images of lighthouses, trees, beehives, and powerlines screen printed within the siren-esque cone forms, I reorient and confuse where and how these sites are viewed. This confusion of space points towards my method of reorientation for questioning our environment's histories. How and who do we hold responsible for harm now and in the future? How can we care for our environment and its histories going forward?

Erin O'Flynn

Current Siren No. 101, 102, 103, 104

(Emergency Planning Zone, Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant, Buchanan, NY), 2024

Screen print on aluminum, aircraft wire, cinder block, and turnbuckle

101 × 45 × 5 inches

Courtesy of the artist



Kunwar Prithvi Singh Rathore

The core purpose of my practice is to capture and convey the intricate relationships that gay men share with their fathers and lovers. My own father, who lives a concealed life as a gay man in a conservative society, has always had a deep passion for art. Strikingly, he's the very reason I've pursued a career in the arts.

I've never adhered to my father's expectations of what it means to be a "man" in our society, unlike my elder brother who fulfills the role of the ideal son our father had envisioned. This work delves into the themes of patriarchy and toxic masculinity within a conventional middle-class South Asian family based in India, specifically my own family. It sheds light on the complex power dynamics prevalent in such families, which often strain relationships among family members.

The second segment of the work takes place in New York and delves into my experiences as an openly gay man of color who regularly participates in brief, intimate encounters with other gay men.

I portray my father as a formidable male figure through photography and writing, integrating queerness with ethnic and traditional attire. This visual representation encompasses the intricate intersections of family dynamics, patriarchy, the father-son relationship, and queerness. Ultimate-

ly, I seek to illustrate how societal pressures can compel a strong man to disregard his own son's existence solely due to his queerness.

Family archives in the form of vintage family photographs also hold a significant role within my work. The frustration, anger, and love that I have for my father resulted in the making of these images.

I have a lot of questions for my father, and the answers to them translate in my pictures, I feel. This enables me to perceive him as more than just a paternal figure; he emerges as a human being with his own life story. In essence, these images humanize him, revealing his depth of emotions and experiences.

It's funny how I long for intimacy and connection with other men and then I long for a connection with my father, too. It's an endless loop of trying to understand his life, getting close to him for a while, and then again becoming distant.

Top left:

Kunwar Prithvi Singh Rathore
Mirror Selfie, 2024
Digital inkjet print
36 × 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Top right:

Kunwar Prithvi Singh Rathore
Another Mirror Selfie, 2024
Digital inkjet print
36 × 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Bottom left:

Kunwar Prithvi Singh Rathore
Dad in the 80s, 1985/2024
Archival pigment print from scan
5 × 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Jan Rattia

In these recent photographs, I expand on the work I have been doing since 2019, where I draw from personal histories of diaspora and constant movement, slicing and sculpting figures, and queering nature to consider identity and artistic lineage.

With grayscale urgency, I have been revisiting and rethinking my family album in an act of reclamation. At times, photographic forefathers of the male body are recalled, and figures, usually de-centered, play against canonical melancholy in chiaroscuro mysticism. Nature, the constant witness of our existence, joins in, reminding us of our humanity and anchoring us geographically with a sense of belonging.

I am interested in the meaning created through the arrangements and spatial relationships among the images with each installation, particularly with site-responsive opportunities, giving new possibilities to the selections.

These works specifically draw from two personal references. Growing up, my mother kept a small tin box with loose photographs that categorically didn't fit in any of her family albums. I remember a small one, created by her dad, where she appeared giving and receiving a flower at age three. It had deckled edges, and she occasionally retold the story about how my grandfather helped her co-star—with herself—in his carefully-crafted double exposure. The late 1940s

photo served as proof, albeit a sentimental one, of the make-believe potential of photography.

Another early impression for me was a studio photograph made in Manhattan. Two parents and their five children stood stoically before a fake backdrop. The eldest of the children, a tall teenage boy, was my grandfather. The family passport photo had been made right before their move back to Venezuela, well over a decade prior to his authoring of my mother's contrived photo.



The Medina Blanco family, c. 1930s

The 20th-century images from my family are now source material for contemporary photographs, which, beyond questioning the limitations of a medium, invite us to examine additional notions of identity and belonging.

Jan Rattia
Untitled (Fire Island Walkway), 2023
Archival pigment print
68 × 86 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Jan Rattia
Untitled (After the Two Loida's), 2023
Gelatin silver print
5 × 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Lena Smart

I am a multidisciplinary lens-based artist as well as a practicing resiliency-based landscape architect. My background gives me a unique three-dimensional and environmentally positioned perspective. My work focuses on the fascination of form and surface as an obsessive feature in both our bodies and environment. In my most recent series, *masses of matter distinct from other masses*, I use my own and my family's bodies in collaboration with the surrounding architecture of their home to accentuate the structural qualities of our bodies; structures that are unable to navigate the complexity of our being. The series challenges us to question the relationship we have between our own and others' exteriors.

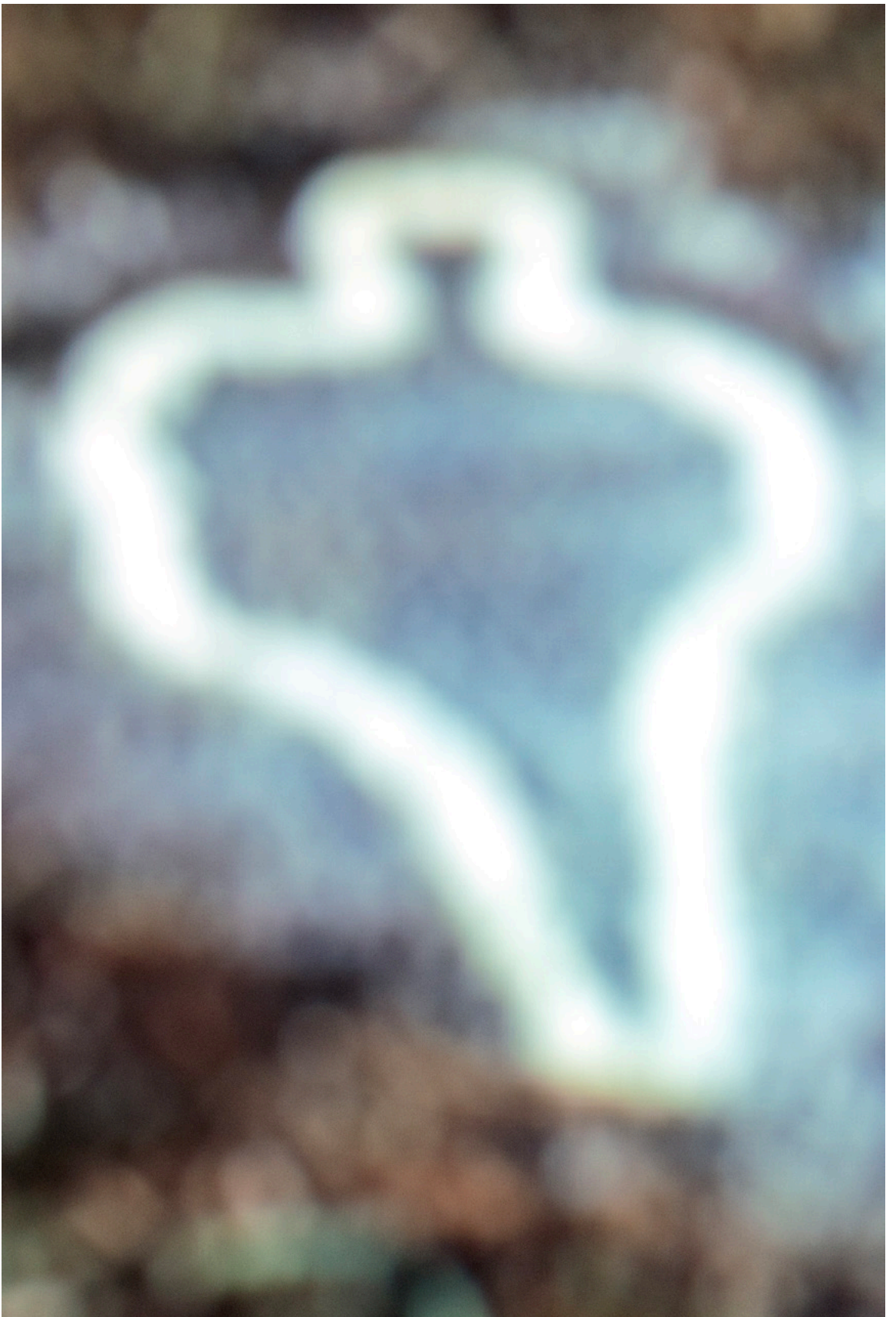
Lena Smart
A Shy Introduction, 2023
Archival pigment print
24 × 36 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Baillie Vensel

In my obsessively researched projects, I use appropriation and montage to question the systems of power at play in image production and circulation. My photographs and videos critique the process of imaging through the apparatus of the camera, the textures of imaging technology, and mass media. I am interested in “bad” pictures: the blurry, the out of focus, the pixelated. Increasingly, I am making images that puzzle the relationship between machine-made and human-made pictures. These photographs are my attempt at distilling what we can see as humans that machine learning models cannot recognize.

Baillie Vensel
Silueta 1978, 2024
Inkjet print
49 × 33¹/₂ inches
Courtesy of the artist



Jingge Zhang

My work is informed by my experiences both as an immigrant farm worker on an assembly line as well as a graphic designer in an e-commerce industry where output is accelerated for mass distribution. Using my own labor as an entry point, I examine the fabrication and circulation of images amid the current deluge of social media and content creation, ultimately questioning the machine of commodification and consumption.

Approaching my practice as a worker, I combine the digital methods of deconstruction and collage with the manual application of my photographic assemblages onto packing tape. Fusing replicated screen images with images of real life, via AI, my digital imagery encompasses a diverse range of sources found on screens or digital devices, from digital archives and stock photos to screenshots, emojis, ephemeral snapshots of other screens, and fleeting daily captures by phone. The tape transfer, a material of shipping and distribution, echoes not only the systems and visual language of mass production but also the invisible labor inextricably bound to these processes. By translating photographs and images into material objects, my work represents the commodification of image production, and the socio-economic significance within these processes along with the chaos, synthesis, and displacement that occurs across screens amidst our everyday experiences.

Jingge Zhang
Messages, 2024
Laser print transferred to packing tape on Plexiglass
20 × 15 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Additional artworks exhibited

Megan Mack

Our Town, 2022–2024

Twenty-five Polaroids

4¼ × 3½ inches each

Courtesy of the artist

Kristina Naso

Surviving comes easy when our dreams are strongest, 2024

Paper book

8 × 5½ inches

Late Editions in collaboration with Kristina Naso

Chloe Scout Nix

dad ear (waxahachie, tx), 2023

Fabric coated vinyl print on wood panel

40 × 32 × 2 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Baillie Vensel

Ana 1, 2024

Inkjet print

49 × 33½ inches

Courtesy of the artist

Baillie Vensel

Silueta en Fuego 1976, 2024

Inkjet print

49 × 33½ inches

Courtesy of the artist

Baillie Vensel

Silueta de Arena 1978, 2024

Inkjet print

49 × 33½ inches

Courtesy of the artist

Baillie Vensel

Ana 3 [went out the window], 2024

Inkjet print

49 × 33½ inches

Courtesy of the artist

Jingge Zhang

Drafts, 2024

Laser print transferred to packing tape on Plexiglass

20 × 15 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Jingge Zhang

Calendar, 2024

Laser print transferred to packing tape on Plexiglass

20 × 15 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Jingge Zhang

Subscribe Now, 2024

Laser print transferred to packing tape on Plexiglass

20 × 15 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Jingge Zhang

Home, 2024

Laser print transferred to packing tape on Plexiglass

20 × 15 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Jingge Zhang

Mails, 2024

Laser print transferred to packing tape on Plexiglass

20 × 15 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Acknowledgments

To Live in the Imagination showcases the outstanding talent of the alumni of Pratt's Photography MFA. I am deeply grateful to Professor Sara VanDerBeek for her dedication to curating a selection of artworks from the vast array of exceptional alumni pieces.

Witnessing the return of our recent alumni to the Pratt Manhattan Gallery to celebrate their achievements as professional artists is truly inspiring. I extend my heartfelt thanks to these artists for generously sharing their remarkable work.

This exhibition's success was only possible with the unwavering commitment of the Department of Exhibitions staff. I sincerely appreciate Ted Holland, assistant director; Shoshi Rosen, gallery coordinator; Travis Molkenbur, head preparator; Peter Schenck and Scott Whipkey, installation technicians, and our diligent student assistants.

Furthermore, I am grateful to my colleagues in the Photography Department: Shannon Ebner, chair; Sara Greenberger Rafferty, program director/professor; and Allen Frame, adjunct professor, for their invaluable collaboration and co-organization of this extraordinary exhibition.

Sincerely,
Nick Battis
Director of Exhibitions

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