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**a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end**

curated by Avalon Mott

Featuring works by Ella Gonzalez, Meichen Waxer, and Meg Ross

March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023 - April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023

To tell you about the works in this exhibition, I must first talk about a work that isn't in it—piece-x. I won't give you the expected specifics about piece-x; no title, didactic or dimensions. I won't provide a medium or colour palette to envision. I can't describe piece-x to you, because for each reader of this essay, piece-x is different. Piece-x is an enigma, a work that you've already encountered that spoke an untranscribable language which felt as if it was only spoken between the two of you. You might've encountered it visually, it might've had sensory components as well, but you knew you were in front of piece-x when the hair on your arms stood on end, when the pace of your breath might've altered, when your eyes might've misted. Piece-x is an artwork that has channeled exhibitionary affect to move you at your core.

There is no formula for piece-x, although artists and curators alike are in perpetual search of its outcome. Throughout this exhibition, *a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end*, I'm examining how curating for exhibitionary affect can create the conditions to allow for piece-x to reveal itself to the viewer. Exhibitionary affect is a curatorial methodology focused on generating emotive responses towards art through strategic arrangements and relationships between works in the gallery space, and an acknowledgement of the atmosphere of the exhibition. When scholar and curator Jennifer Fisher writes about exhibitionary affect, I can only imagine that piece-x is her prototype. As she states, 'curatorial initiatives that engage the communicative function of affect embrace not only relational, but also somatic and cognitive ontologies of exhibition experience'<sup>1</sup>, which in turn extend the artworks' ability to communicate beyond its representational self (Fisher 28). I have defined affect as the charged space of potential between the artwork and the viewer; a space that when entered, can lead to curiosity and learning. This challenges the traditional hierarchy of a viewer's experience in a gallery, in which they are made to feel as though they must understand the work through a particular lens.

Exhibitionary affect is integral to art's accessibility; it acknowledges that works communicate to a varied public through many languages. It recognizes different ways of knowing and seeing and leaves room for the viewer to form meaningful and resonant relationships with works. *a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end* is an exhibition of three distinct, site-specific works by three artists—Ella Gonzales,

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Fisher, "Exhibitionary Affect," in *n. Paradoxa*, vol. 18, 2006, pp. 27-33.

Meg Ross, and Meichen Waxer—which channel affect in various ways. The Irish critic Brian O’Doherty writes about the convention of ‘hanging’ in his text *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* warning that, ‘the way pictures are hung makes assumptions about what is offered. Hanging editorializes on matters of interpretation and value’<sup>2</sup>, which would have immediate effects on the transmission of exhibitionary affect (O’Doherty 23). The exhibition seeks to disrupt traditional ways of display to spark and uphold affect. By turning towards site-specificity, the works ask for relational readings that privilege viewers’ individual curiosity, rather than one of detachment reinforced by an absence of conversation between the works on view and the stark gallery space.

Meichen Waxer’s installation *...and the sky* (2023) evokes an air of enticement. In the middle of the Main Space, the artist has partially covered a load-bearing column in a skin of thin, mirrored adhesive. By hanging the adhesive only between where crown molding and chair rail would be, Waxer invites a specific reading of Western domesticity and class. This calls us to think of colonialism’s tradition of ornamentation motifs, and how they rely on illusion, as they are not able to provide anything deeper than the surface they present. On the four opposing walls, Waxer has applied strips of mirrored adhesive at the same dimensions as the column, and installed a temporary baseboard below them. The column which Waxer has covered is the prominent architectural feature of the otherwise rectangular space. Dividing the room into quadrants, this intervention disrupts the pristine character of the gallery’s white walls. In the corner of the gallery, the circular beeswax

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<sup>2</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

candle (*Hours*, 2022) gently glows (when its wick is lit) from atop a mirrored plinth. As *Hours* melts away throughout the duration of the exhibition, the mirrored surface below it emulates the reflective surface elsewhere in the space. As viewers move through the exhibition, they're made aware of themselves and the other works in the gallery as their fragmentary reflections create a moving 'wallpaper' which destabilizes the wall space. Fracturing the viewer's expectations further, the mirrored skin articulates the texture of the various surfaces that it's been applied to; rough, inconsistent and irregular, and distorts any objects which are reflected. The irregular reflection denies the viewer the pleasure of feeling the gaze directly reciprocated, and ignites an obsessive desire to see what won't be fully mirrored: the self. Affect lies in the unrequited desire to be seen by ...*and the sky*, the audience's presence acknowledged by a reflected soft-self which will never crystallize into a recognizable form. In the space created by exhibitionary affect, Waxer asks what preconceptions we subconsciously bring into the space that surrounds us and our way of seeing.

Mounted along the front wall of the gallery is Meg Ross's *Blue Read* (2023). At first glance, the work resembles a grouping of thirty-nine books on a metal shelf. As the viewer chooses and pulls one of the 'books' from the shelf to read, they may recognize the intimate feeling of selecting a volume at a library or bookstore. The covers of the books are made from cyanotypes—either digitally manipulated, or in some instances, entirely constructed with Photoshop. Ross has adhered the cyanotypes to MDF blocks which wear gently as the compressed pages of a book would. The artist's use of cyanotypes represents her ongoing investigation into photography's relationship with light. The blue-toned colour

fields are non-representational; they provide deep, indefinite contours to hold the viewer's gaze, highlighting colour, space and form. By using a photographic image as the jacket of the book, Ross presents the viewer with a rare opportunity to form a kinetic relationship with a typically two-dimensional medium. Viewers are able to touch the image and leave a trace of their presence through their fingerprints, stirring a visceral relationship to the art objects which couldn't be obtained by simply viewing the images. The work asks the viewer to *read* rather than *view*—a familiar act which leaves room for private contemplation and favors individual comprehension. By allowing the viewer to encounter a cyanotype in such an intimate way, Ross creates a space in her work for reflection at an interpersonal emotional level.

Hung on a diagonal from the ceiling in the main space corridor is Ella Gonzales's large-scale painting, *Reflection of a doorway* (2022). The work is an 9-by-8.5 foot painting made on semi-transparent jusi-silk<sup>3</sup> fabric sent to the artist from the Philippines by her family. At first glance, the painting depicts the architecture of Gonzales's former family homes, which lends to a reading of memory and nostalgia. Behind and through the painting, additional works by Gonzales become visible: a folded painting on a shelf and two small-scale paintings situated on the floor, all on piña-silk<sup>4</sup> fabric. In this deferred

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<sup>3</sup> Jusi-silk fabric is from the Spanish "jusi" and the Tagalog "husi". It refers to a delicate fibrous dress fabric, woven in the Philippine Islands. It is made with hemp warp and pineapple fibre filling or pineapple fibre warp and silk, cotton or fine abaca after filling. (<https://skosmos.silknow.org/thesaurus/en/page/298>)

<sup>4</sup> Pina-silk fabric (Piña-Seda or Pineapple-Silk) is a type of fabric that combines pineapple fibers and silk fibers. It was first historically used in the Philippines at the beginning of the 17th century. It is found in the province of Pampanga, which is known for its pineapple plantations. The Piña-Silk weaving was introduced to Pampanga by Spanish missionaries, where they were taught how to weave this type of

revealing, *Reflection of a doorway* provides a secondary viewing experience in which the creases and traces from human touch and the gallery space become subtly apparent. In her understanding of this phenomenon, Gonzales references Lisa Robinson's theory of soft architecture<sup>5</sup>. The organic creation of this soft architecture privileges form, shape and light—all qualities of which the transparent texture of the jusi-piña fabric is in concert. In this, the painting becomes a vessel which carries history in both its surface and imagery, while simultaneously addressing its present context. The jusi fabric is thin and semi-transparent, with a refined weave that allows for light to travel through the sheer coat of paint, while the imagery remains semi-opaque. In its opacity, the painting situates the viewer in Gonzales's domestic familial past. Yet in its transparency, *Reflection of a doorway* invites the viewer in on an intimate conversation about the shifting nature of diasporic movement and the longing for something that will never be as it once was.

The stage for affect has been set through the curated arrangement and relationships between the works. This creates a stirring atmosphere composed of textural elements, and opportunities for engagement. Affect also is roused through resistance—by leaning into the tensions between the viewer's expectation of the pieces to perform and their actual functions. Affect binds the three works together across their disparate subject

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material. The Piña-Silk fabric is not only beautiful to look at, but also very strong and durable. (<https://barongrus.com/barong-tagalog-fabric/>)

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Robinson uses the term soft architecture to describe the incorporeal aspects of architecture like memory, light, form, colour, furnishings, social space, etc, in her essay *Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture*. In speaking with Gonzales, and as discussed in her thesis paper, the heightened attention to these abstract forms give texture to her experience of having called 12 places home.

matter and mediums. In their display, the three works subvert the dominance of the two-dimensional picture plane and turn instead to three-dimensional site-specificity to facilitate feeling. What we're with are the sticky<sup>6</sup> remains of our experience with the works, the feelings we have after we leave the gallery, the images in our mind's eye. The active contemplation that is required in all three pieces to stimulate the works on display is also a home for affect. *a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end* is open to relational viewing through the lens of exhibitionary affect, and provides the viewer a supported space to feel inside the gallery.

-Avalon Mott

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<sup>6</sup> Sara Ahmed uses this term to describe the lasting feelings of affect in her essay *Happy Objects*.