

RHONDA HOLBERTON | PRESS

Group Exhibition: Show Me as I Want to Be Seen Contemporary Jewish Museum

Feb 7, 2019–Jul 7, 2019



Water Striders, 2015 (installation view, foreground). Platinum cure silicone, nylon power mesh, and polyurethane foam. *The Italian Navigator Has Landed in the New World*, 2014 (installation view, background). Single-channel HD color digital animation. Photo by Johnna Arnold.

Assistant Curator Natasha Matteson of the Contemporary Jewish Museum included 9 pieces of my work in a group exhibition of 10 contemporary examining presentation of self and fluidity of identity in conversation with artist and writer Claude Cahun (1894–1954) that ran from Feb 7, 2019–Jul 7, 2019. The exhibition is accompanied by a 112-page, fully illustrated hardcover catalog published by The CJM.

In addition to the installation and catalog, the museum also produced a video interview with me, asked me to give a presentation of my work to the museum's directors and staff, and published a conversation I had with the director of marketing on the museums' website.

Curatorial Statement for the Exhibition

How do we depict “the self” if it is unknowable, inherently constructed, and ever-changing? How does the concept of portraiture shift when categories are in crisis and visibility itself is problematic? Jewish thought on performed and fluid identity can be interpreted in the Book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible, an archetypal story of an empowered declaration of Jewish identity. Likewise, the Talmudic notion of *svara* is a potent entry-point to Jewish practices of self-determination, themes that animate *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*.

Taking the work of French Jewish artist and writer Claude Cahun (1894–1954) and her lifelong lover and collaborator Marcel Moore (1892–1972) as its starting point, *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen* examines the empowered representation of fluid and complex identity. Cahun (born Lucy Schwob) and Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe) were pioneers in their bold representations of an unfixed self. This exhibition positions their work in dialogue with ten contemporary artists working in painting, sculpture, photography, video, and 3-D animation. The contemporary artists in the exhibition—Nicole Eisenman, Rhonda Holberton, Hiwa K, Young Joon Kwak, Zanele Muholi, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Gabby Rosenberg, Tschabalala Self, Davina Semo, and Isabel Yellin—also address notions of the opaque, constructed, and shifting self.

Press Extracts

[**A Probing Look at How We Perform and Present the Self, Harry Tafoya, Hyperallergic**](#)

“Rhonda Holberton is uniquely attuned to the weirdness and multiplicity of performed selves online and offers some of the show’s best work with her uncanny, half-scanned animated pieces.”

[**Show Me as I Want to be Seen @ CJM, Square Cylinder**](#)

Tirza True Latimer, Associate Professor and Chair of the Visual and Critical Studies Graduate Program at California College of the Arts

“FOIL, one of my favorite pieces (again by Holberton), takes aim at state sponsored systems of surveillance and control. Research conducted by the CIA in the early 1990s acknowledges human scent as a highly accurate biometric, more failsafe than fingerprinting, facial recognition or retinal scanning. Holberton created FOIL, a fragrance line distilled from smelly T-shirts donated by friends. She bottled the fragrances in atomizers, which can serve to mask a person’s signature scent and foil this form of olfactory surveillance.”

[**Artists Explore Self with Nuance and Complexity, SF/Arts**](#)

Jean Schiffman, Arts Journalist

“Rhonda Holberton’s large digital animations are particularly unsettling: In one, a headless, fragmented and disintegrating body is doing yoga asanas; Holberton scanned her own body to create a model, then animated it. “She’s posing questions about whether and how we might be able to represent ourselves in virtual space with avatars,” points out Matteson.”

[Gender fluidity & mutable identity, Bay Area Reporter](#)

Sura Wood, Arts & Culture Critic

“Oakland artist Rhonda Holberton is represented by nine installations, each more fascinating and mind-boggling than the next. Too bad there weren't more. Among other things, she envisions a world where the human body is obsolete, a relief or a disaster, depending on one's point of view, but at least there'd be no hay fever. For the digital animation "The Ground Was Never Stable in the First Place" (2015), she tried on football padding and riot gear, 3-D scanned her body, then animated the scan walking forward, combining movement of soldiers marching and fashion models strolling down the runway. The result: a plaster-white, robotic space soldier of indeterminate gender, wearing breastplate armor and arm and shin guards, its face half-blown off a la "The Terminator" on a bad day. Soulless and unstoppable, it strides relentlessly toward the viewer. Even spookier is "The Italian Navigator Has Landed in the New World" (2014), for which Holberton also used keyframe animation techniques similar to puppetry or stop-motion. Headless, missing part of an arm, and the flesh-tone of raw chicken, a limber figure resembling a ripped egg carton goes through the paces of a virtual yoga routine, a spectacle disturbing in a way that's difficult to overstate.”

[‘Beneath This Mask, Another Mask’: Identity is Unfixed in CJM’s ‘Show Me’, KQED Arts](#)

Sarah Hotchkiss, Visual Arts Editor, KQED Arts

“Rhonda Holberton’s Just This One Thing—part of the show but only visible to those who have the wherewithal to scroll through the Oakland-based artist’s Instagram feed—skewers the spare, ecru-hued “Instagram aesthetics” of influencers’ lifestyle posts.

A croissant, a stack of baskets, handmade ceramics—Holberton creates the images by 3D-scanning actual objects and staging them in virtual space. In a quick scroll-by, the digital fabrications appear innocuous, ordinary. Only close inspection reveals them to be oddly pixelated approximations. Tagging each image #stilllife, along with hashtags like #rainydays or #sundaymorning, Holberton launches these interruptions into the stream of “real” Instagram posts, themselves approximations of actual lives.”

[‘Show Me as I Want to be Seen’ examines artistic and gender identity, SF Chronicle](#)

Charles Desmarais, Art Critic for the San Francisco Chronicle

“Rhonda Holberton, who lives and works in Oakland, makes a particularly strong showing with works that make coldly poetic use of video and digital media.”

[LINK TO FULL ARTICLES \(PDF\)](#)



As Rhonda Holberton talks about her process—describing with her hands the arrangement and heft of the objects that appear in her images—it's hard not to think of those things and that space as real. But everything, from the objects themselves to the flawlessly diffuse lighting and cool white marble ground, is digitally produced. Holberton makes 3D scans of real objects, then places them in virtual spaces of her own creation using Blender, an open source software suite. Her recent series, *Still Life*, braids together the real and virtual worlds so tightly that it becomes nearly impossible to separate one from the other.

In the twenty-first century, most people navigate between real and virtual worlds dozens, if not hundreds, of times daily. We project ourselves into GIFs maps, have face-to-Facetime conversations, wear Snapchat filters like masks, or send avatars to explore virtual spaces online. We don't often mistake the stuttering of a Skype call or the low-resolution of a picture on Instagram with failures of perception in the real world. But, Holberton's presses on these limits in representation, challenging us to recognize digital noise, to make meaning from it, rather than filtering it out. The 3D scanning process is often imperfect, so while her creation of the surrounding space is utterly convincing, the image of the original object displays glitches. The artifice in her images makes literal the raggedness of this movement between the real and the virtual; it is this haphazard, improvisatory character that tips her images into the uncanny. They are too close to real.

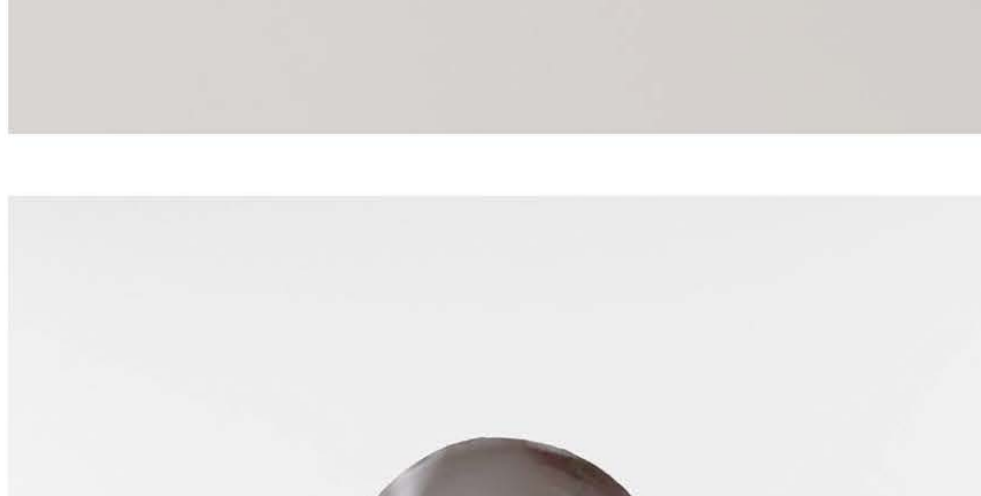
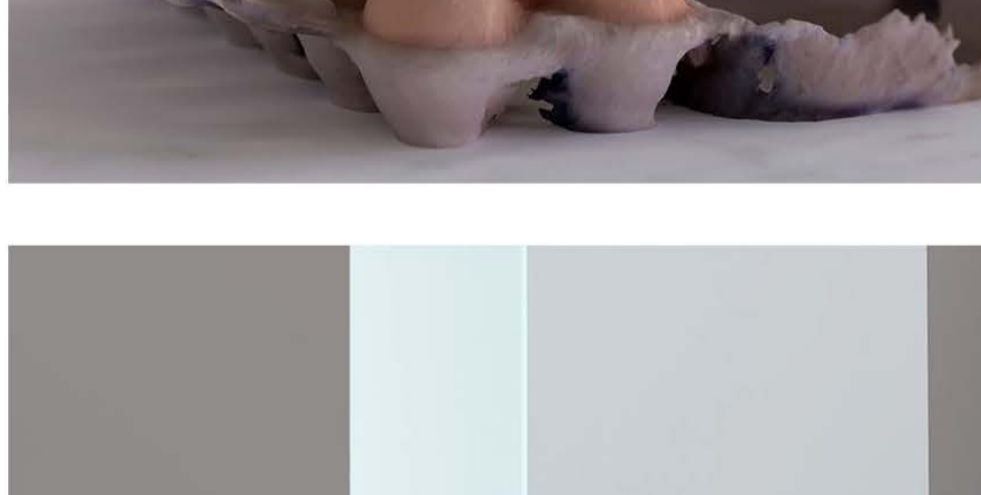
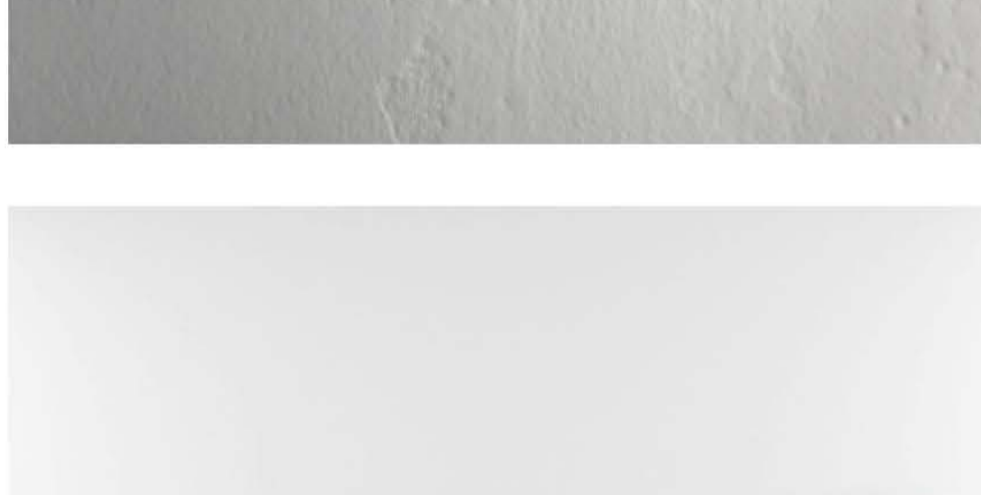
THE QUESTION RAISED BY HOLBERTON'S WORK IS NOT JUST LOOK HOW MUCH THESE PICTURES LOOK LIKE EACH OTHER, BUT LOOK HOW MUCH THE REAL WORLD HERE LOOKS LIKE THE REAL WORLD THERE AND THERE AND THERE.

The genre of still life painting, to which the title of Holberton's series alludes, has historically demonstrated a cunning awareness of the differences between things themselves and their images. The Roman *xenia* motif symbolized a host's generosity through a display of painted foodstuffs, which could not be consumed. The depiction of opulence in the Dutch vanitas genre was a warning about excess, even as excess was made present through the pictures. William Harnett and John Frederick Peto's popular nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil paintings were sought out precisely because viewers delighted in deconstructing their experiences of deception by picking apart the difference between the real world and its copies.



It is harder to identify the gap between still life in the contemporary vernacular and the things these images represent. The images that inspired Holberton—minimalist stagings of art books, succulents, and ceramics found in publications like *Cereal* and *Kinfolk*—seem merely to be beautiful photographs of covetable objects. Yet, unlike Harnett or Peto admirers, viewers of Holberton's images on Instagram are often stumped by her "Still Life" pictures. Some commenters read the pixelation or artifice as a unique ceramic glaze, even as bits of apparently three-dimensional objects crumble in front of their perfect white backgrounds. While recent criticism has focused on social media's sleight of hand, where messy, unfiltered life is distilled into enviable images, what Holberton's work brings most startlingly to light is the very constructedness of contemporary life itself. Baudrillard would agree that there are few surprises IRL, walking into boutique hotels, staged homes, and restaurants around the world seems more and more like Instagram come to life. They have become living images of themselves.

The question raised by Holberton's work is not just look how much these pictures look like each other, but look how much the real world here looks like the real world there and there and there. Doesn't that make my little shrine to potted succulents or kilim carpets as much a reproduction as any photograph? The more layers of mediation that Holberton inserts between the putative real object and her image of it, the less any of these distinctions seem relevant. Is this cute little hand-woven basket one that Holberton owns? Or is it a picture of one found online? And, most importantly, where can I buy it? Holberton's dissembling images, that pixelated glaze that seems a cross between Heath ceramics and sci-fi horror, reveal the yawning emptiness that retail therapy struggles to fill.



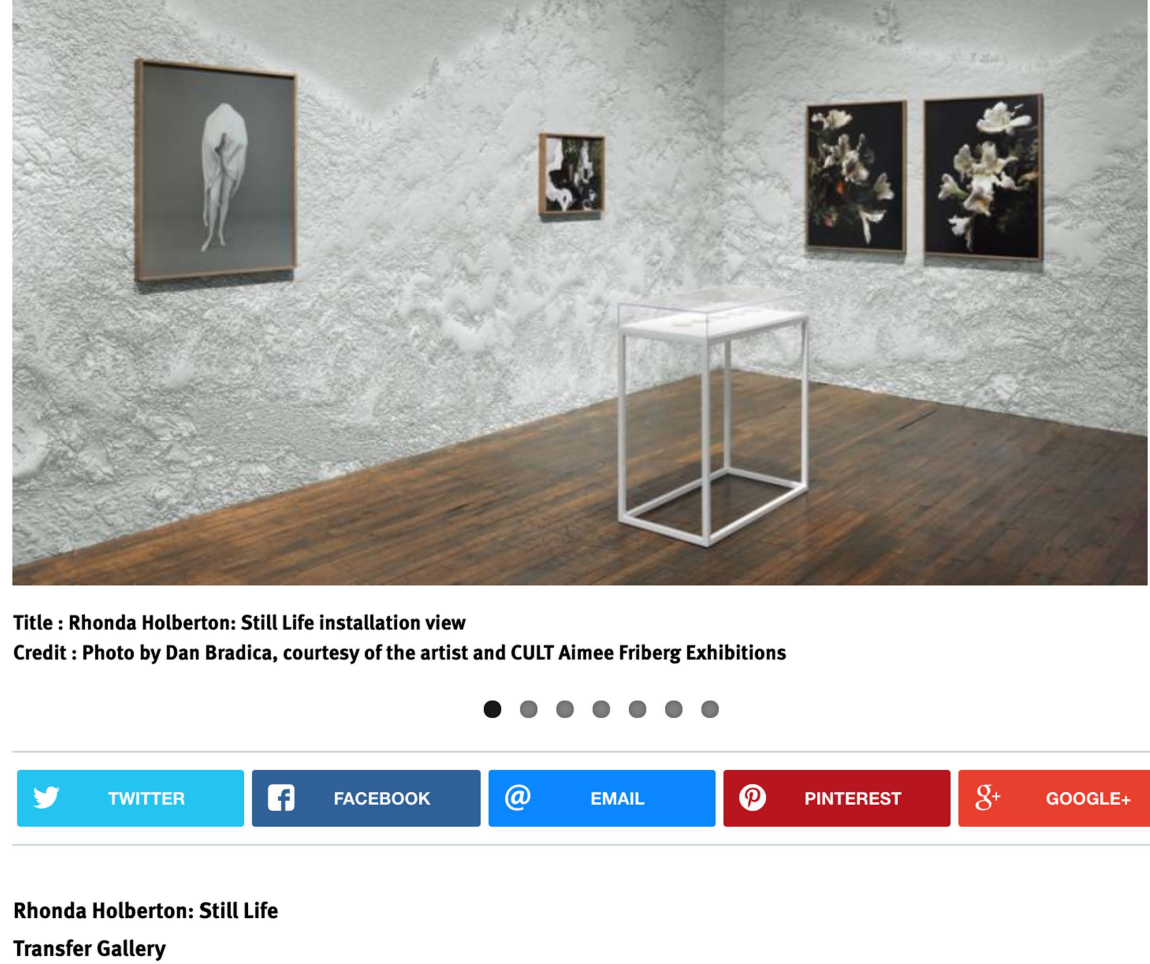
www.rhondaholberton.com

Written by Kim Bell

Kim Bell is the Associate Director for ITALIC, an interdisciplinary arts program at Stanford University, where she also teaches courses on the history of photography. She received her PhD and MA in Visual Studies from the University of California, Irvine and her BA in Comparative Literature from Brown University. Her writing appears regularly on Artforum.com, in x-tra: contemporary art quarterly, Visual Resources, and Afterimage.

Transfer Gallery, 1030 Metropolitan Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11211

Rhonda Holberton: Still Life



Title : Rhonda Holberton: Still Life installation view
Credit : Photo by Dan Bradica, courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions

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Rhonda Holberton: Still Life

Transfer Gallery
7 April - 26 May, 2018

Review by Grace Storey

'Still Life' is the second iteration of San Francisco-based artist Rhonda Holberton's exhibition - first presented at CULT | Aimee Frelberg Exhibitions in 2017 - featuring a networked video installation, prints captured from augmented reality simulations, wallpaper embossed with textures derived from CGI techniques, gold dust mined by hand, and video tracking a swarm of mosquitoes housed in the artist's studio. Contrary to the exhibition's title, which suggests a state of stasis, Holberton's work oscillates between analogue and digital, animate and inanimate, in order to destabilise the notion of these binaries, and explore the possibility of a third space.

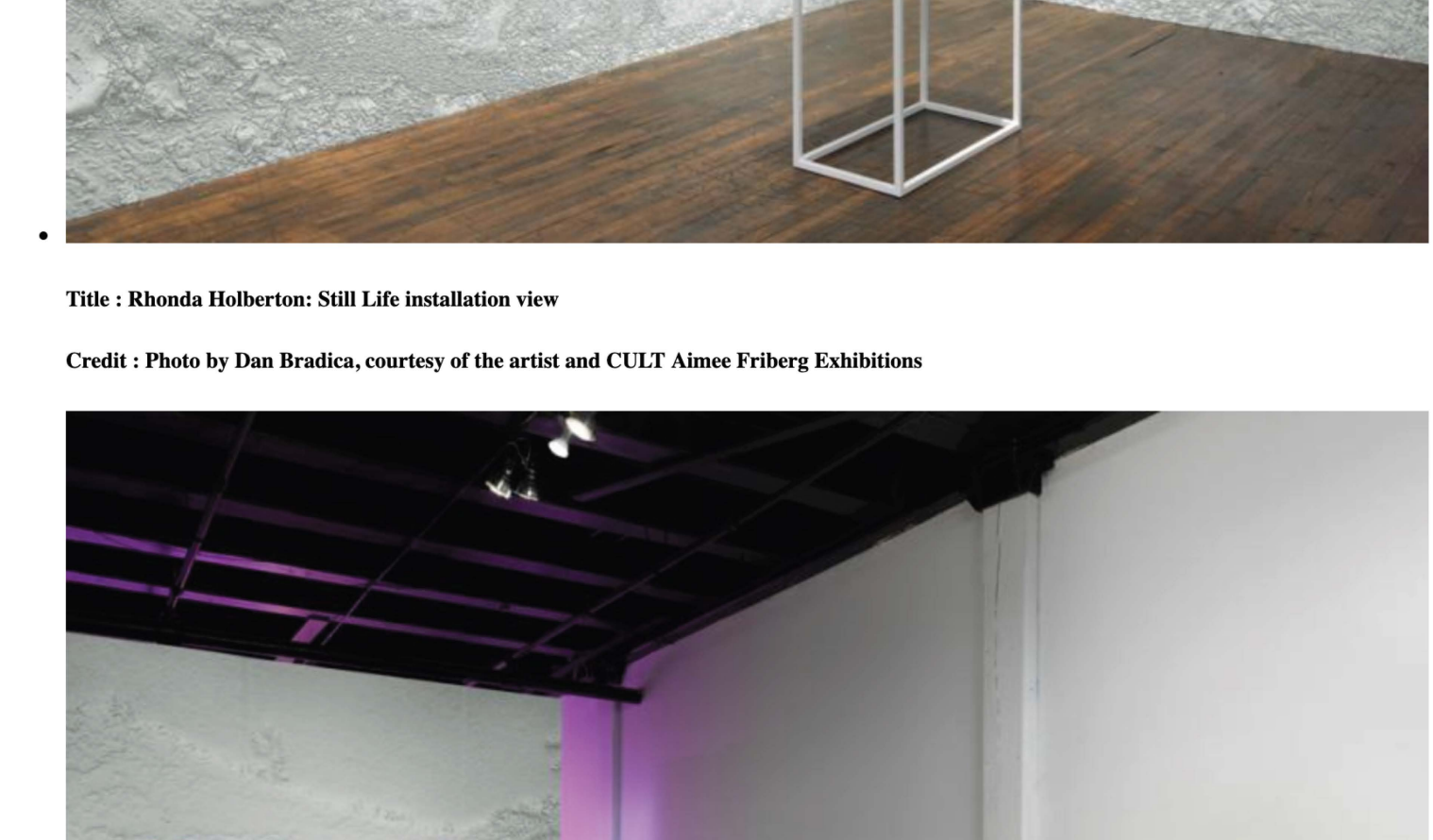
'Still Life (Vanitas)' (2017), is an archival pigment print of a digital simulation which draws a parallel between capitalist systems of exchange, the currency of digital aesthetics and 17th Century Dutch still life painting commissioned by the mercantile class, which can be regarded as some of the earliest social imagery. Holberton's still life depicts a fragmented bust modeled on a mannequin salvaged during the liquidation of clothing manufacturer American Apparel, who gazes at her reflection through the screen of an iPad. The protagonist is positioned against a backdrop which mirrors the wallpaper covering the gallery walls, and is surrounded by a vase of flowers, a lone croissant, and a weighty 3D printed mug, copies of which are displayed on shelves opposite. Unlike the hand thrown original by ceramicist Eric Bonnan, part of a set purchased for the artist's partner, the copies, entitled 'Vessels', have a rough, uneven texture, as a result of the inaccuracy of the 3D scan. Holberton's quivering objects do not carry a single meaning, but rather, exist as allegories which carry a coded memory of their personal, material and cultural history.

In two performative works titled 'Dust to Dust' (2017), Holberton uses her body to 'engage corporeally with a global metabolism represented in the concept of the Anthropocene / Capitalocene.' She asserts that 'the metaphors and histories of material things cannot be divorced from globalised networks of digital technologies, the environment, religion and politics.' In the first work, Holberton utilises technology to live-stream a scourge of mosquitoes bred from her own blood. This action alludes to the threat to fertility posed by the Zika virus, and the migration of mosquitos as an indicator of Climate Change, challenging the conception of an omnibenevolent Mother Earth. By inserting herself into a local system indexical of a much larger system, Holberton's diptych alludes to Timothy Morton's concept of the Hyperobject; something too large and complex to be understood by a single human processor. This micro / macro relationship is also at play in the second work, which comprises 5 grams of gold displayed within a vitrine, panned by Holberton from the Californian landscape. Referring to the frequent association of 20th Century gold rush pioneers and Silicon Valley as the epicentre of the 21st Century US tech economy, the work draws attention to a male-centric entrepreneurial ideology, and questions the role of physical labour in an increasingly dematerialised society.

While Holberton's practice frequently incorporates performance, seen by way of objects and simulations which evidence a discontinuity between the visual sign and its meaning. This constant fluctuation between physical and digital generates a hybrid space, which permits a consideration of the abject, the gendered body, and the conception of labour within contemporary society, invoking Homay King's idea of 'Virtual Memory', whereby he contends that virtuality is not a contranym, but rather, can be regarded as a metaphor to navigate lived experience. Likewise, the traces of past and future images which reverberate throughout Holberton's body of work coalesce at the site of presentation to propose a new reality inhabited by the viewer.

Transfer Gallery, 1030 Metropolitan Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11211

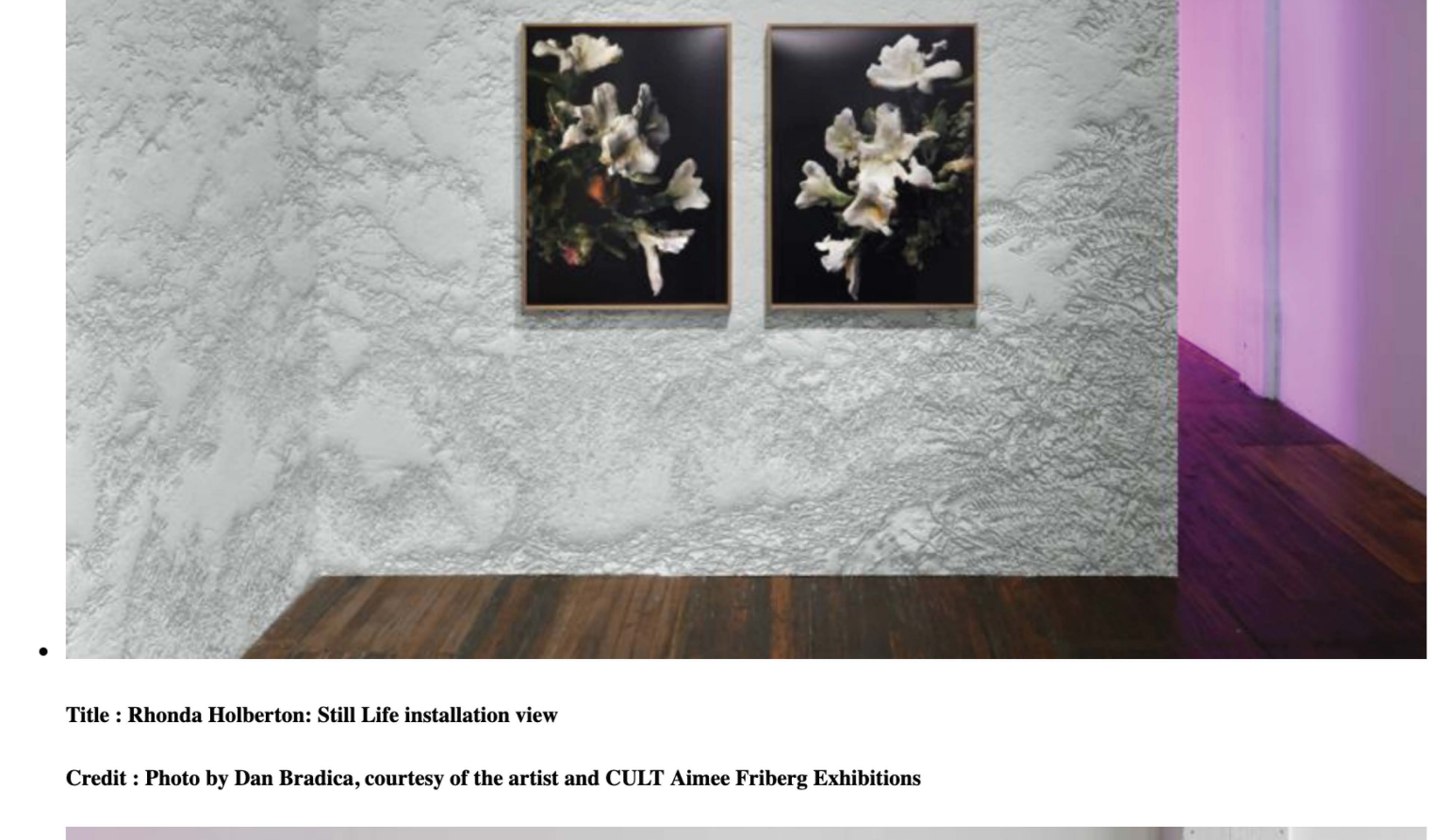
Rhonda Holberton: Still Life



Title : Rhonda Holberton: Still Life installation view
Credit : Photo by Dan Bradica, courtesy of the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions



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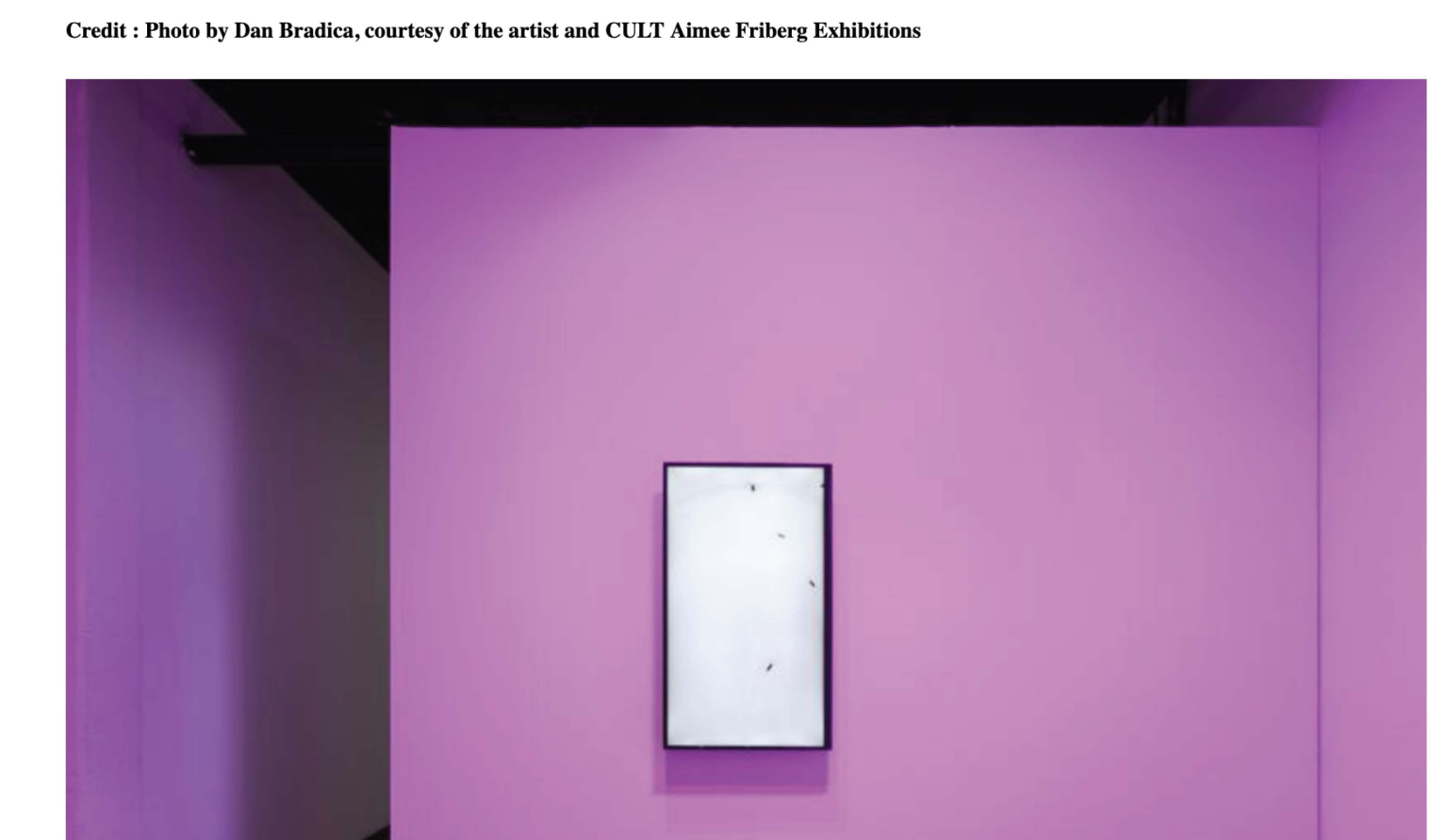
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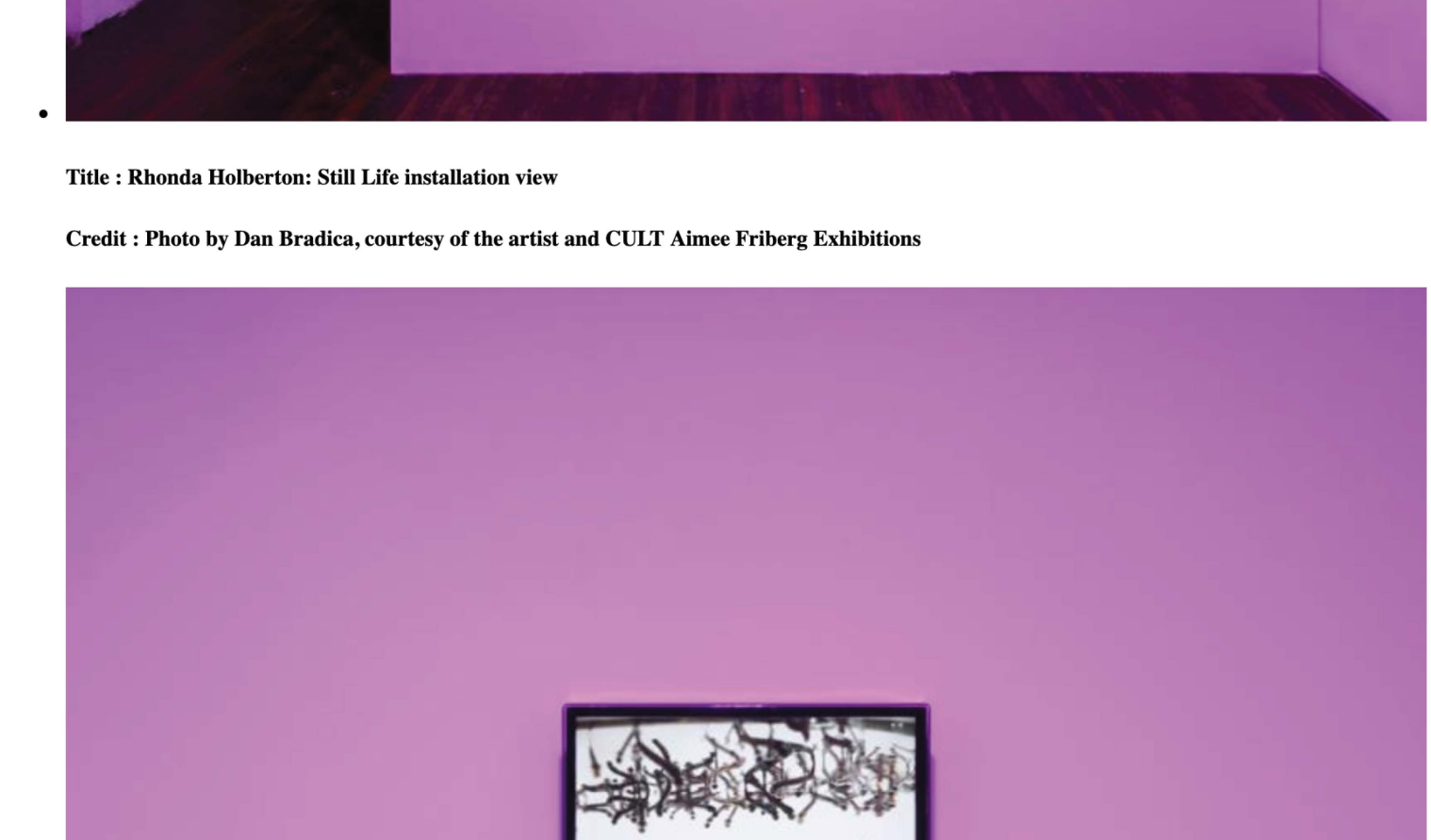
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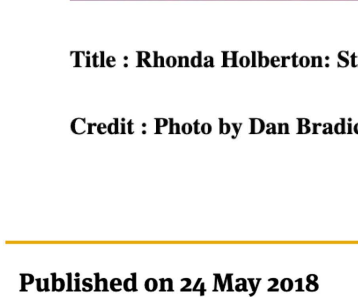
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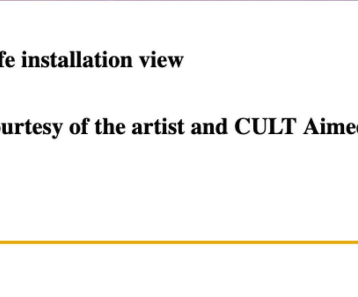
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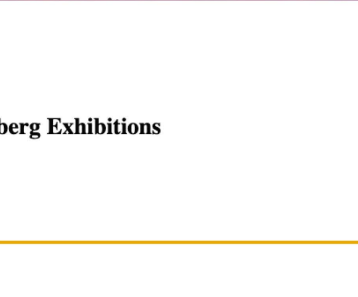
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FIRST LOOK



Rhonda Holberton.
>QR CODE< (FOIL),
2014, fragrance in glass
atomizers, 6 by 1½ by
1½ inches each

Rhonda Holberton by Ceci Moss

RHONDA HOLBERTON examines military practice in order to consider how technology is used to view, read and track humans. In her earlier works, Holberton, who lives in Oakland, Calif., attempted to collapse the distance between herself and obscure sites of nuclear testing and research. For *As Close As I Can Get* (2012), part of the body of work she produced while pursuing an MFA at Stanford, she rolled soft resin beneath the gates of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL). The pliant material cured into long rods imprinted by the pavement and the gates. To make *Displaced Holes* (2012), the artist dug large holes in the earth at LLNL and similar locations and cast them in foam and plaster. This process allowed her to map largely cordoned-off places through their physical impressions, an investigation that led the artist to elaborate other means of accessing the sites and the surveillance tools of the military-industrial complex.

For her 2014 solo exhibition "YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW" at Pro Arts in Oakland, Holberton

rerouted technologies developed for military purposes into everyday items. Her perfume >QR CODE< (FOIL), 2014, for example, uses CIA-developed methods of detecting genetically unique human scents to distill a fragrance from T-shirts worn by anonymous volunteers, that would cloak the scent of the wearers, making them undetectable to olfactory surveillance. Across a large wall of the gallery, Holberton affixed repetitive black-and-white wallpaper with a pattern that, when printed on streetwear, would help people hide in an urban landscape. In front of this wall stood two identical mannequins wearing unisex clothing made from a fabric complementary to this visually dazzling display, their silhouettes suggesting bodies beneath the camouflage. By integrating dubious techniques of tracking or disguise into mundane items such as clothing and perfume, Holberton signals the subtle ways in which military research filters into civilian life, posing a threat of pervasive military control through biopower. ○

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James Cordas and Rhonda Holberton, *Cold Storage*, 2015. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artists and City Limits. Photo: Kristine Eudy

DISPARATE MEASURES FOR TWO SOLO SHOWS

LEORA LUTZ — DECEMBER 19, 2015

City Limits is presenting Rhonda Holberton and James Cordas, featuring their new work as a two-person show; the pairing juxtaposes both quiet and loud visual and sensory experiences—singularly titled *Cold Storage*. The room is a bit crowded, so seeing the two for their individual merits is difficult. Not that there needs to be the same number of pieces by each artist, but leaving space to breathe between the two would have been beneficial for visitors to be able to experience the work more fully. The work of each artist is in conversation with the other, but more evident at first are their differences.

Holberton's work is more subtle, visually speaking, in her predominantly white color palette and several understated sculptures, whereas Cordas's works incorporate a rainbow of colors, spatially dominating sculpture, as well as an audio piece that overshadows the entire space and therefore the whole show. Both artists also include film in their work: Holberton's monochromatic white film of one subject occupies one wall, whereas Cordas offers two films of multiple images on two monitors. Additionally, the gallery chose to, with the approval of the artists, scatter the floor with fluorescent light tubes in order to illuminate

the space from below, rather than from above, so that the space was dimmer than usual and more conducive to viewing the films in conjunction with providing ambient lighting for the sculpture. These can be somewhat easily mistaken as art objects, creating some confusion amongst the work.



Rhonda Holberton, *A Fallen Pixel: #3*, 2015. Polyurethane foam, plaster, acrylic paint (Printed from stock 3d model), 18 x 10 x 10 in. Image courtesy of the artist and City Limits. Photo: Kristine Eudy

There is potent work here that utilizes digital source materials and tangible objects. Holberton's series *A Fallen Pixel* consists of three sculptures, each created using the same downloaded object from a publically sourced website (which Holberton prefers to leave anonymous) and made on a 3D printing device. This unobtrusive shape is iterated in graduating sizes from 28" to 22" to 18," echoing notions of public accessibility, fair use, and commodification. Upon some Internet sleuthing, I learned that there are at least four dozen sites that offer files (basically templates) for making objects on 3D printers. There are also over 35 sites where people can share, buy or sell file creations, and display the things they make and accumulate friends and followers who also enjoy or make 3D files and objects. Holberton has chosen a rock for her object—which is humorous to say the least, and at once too strange to laugh at. The title implies that the works could have fallen from the sky, as if during a meteor shower or alien invasion. They

are coated with plaster and painted with white iridescent pastel sheen, accented by shades of mint green and pale lavender, reiterating a science fiction quality as if they are relics from another planet's landscape brought back from space exploration. These qualities are in keeping with her history of engaging with [the intersection of nature and military operations](#), particularly the sites of nuclear testing. In doing so, she explores human destruction of Earth, and the previous dealings of volatile measures that are taken to protect the populace.



Rhonda Holberton, N-O U-N-R-E-A-L T-H-I-N-G E-X-I-S-T-S, 2015. Powder coated steel, polyester resin cast, acrylic mirror, media player, 66 x 12 x 12 in. Image courtesy of the artist and City Limits. Photo: Kristine Eudy

Projected on the largest wall of the gallery is her film *Knights of the Sky*, which includes footage of sand dunes from the POV of the camera operator walking over and down the crests of sand. The title references WWI combat [aerial fighter aces](#) (though a reference to the simulator game of the same name created in 1990 is also an interesting interpretation). Holberton's film is projected on an entire wall, creating an immersive effect as the camera jostles slightly, bobbing so that the viewer can share in the journey. For Holberton, sand dunes are desolate and contemplative but are also politically charged sites

for testing weapons and surveillance. Nearby, her sculpture *N-O U-N-R-E-A-L T-H-I-N-G-E-X-I-S-T-S* features a clenched fist in polyester resin, as if in defiance against government or military violence. Holberton's poetic works are simple yet powerful statements about government control that require one to read between the lines—like haiku for insurgent radicals.



James Cordas and Rhonda Holberton, *Cold Storage*, 2015. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artists and City Limits. Photo: Kristine Eudy

Meanwhile, Cordas's elephant in the room is the cage-come-jail-cell sculpture that includes panel strips printed with imagery, a monitor inside showing a 23-minute looped video, and a row of small red fire extinguishers that lead from the inside out. Titled *A mason jar full of wasps*, the video inside features arms painted bright red reaching into a jar with a drowned wasp, including cuts to a mangled wasp nest being handled without gloves—a dangerous innuendo. The sound is foreboding and urgent, with loud shrieks and white noise hushes. Another sound work, *WW Alien 3* (1992) and includes a monologue performed by Charles Dutton during a eulogy scene. The audio has been completely altered using a granular sampler that alters the sound to create a loop. In an email exchange with him, Cordas shared that the first music CD he purchased as a youth was the *Alien 3* soundtrack, bypassing the popular skater punk, grunge, and Brit-Pop of the '90s for something that scared him—prompting him to seek answers as to why he was, and clearly still is enamored by the orchestration of Goldenthal's music.



James Cordas, *Chair*, 2015. Brushed steel, LED monitor, book, James Gendron, perforated vinyl, chair, 36 x 23 x 17 in.; human, 5 ft. 11 in. Image courtesy of the artists and City Limits. Photo: Kristine Eudy

The act of sampling music is a regular practice for Cordas, whether with music, images, or language—and he more frequently has been working on collaborations, including writing and reading poetry. For this show Cordas invited writer [Kevin Killian](#) to rewrite poet James Gendron's *Sexual Boat (Sex Boats)* (2013), into a limited edition hard-bound book, which includes several solid single-color pages that act as an artist interlude by Cordas. During the opening reception, Gendron himself sat in a piece titled *Chair*, which includes an embedded video monitor that screens over 100 original photos of lily imagery, also reiterated on the jail cell bars. Gendron stared at the monochromatic pages during the exhibition in order to alter his vision perception of light after staring at color. Throughout Cordas's work, there are multiple layers of repetition, be it bars, flashing imagery, or painted, perforated surfaces. Thematically, Cordas grapples with many emotions of love, of color perception, feelings of containment and ritual, as well as issues of altered states of awareness.

Together, Cordas and Holberton reconsider the roles people play in relation to each other, be it through government control or with language and imagery, each using their own very personal interests to channel these ideas. Conceptually, they both tap into the frightening world of information sharing that blurs public and private space. Aesthetically, the work is disparate on the outside, but in the end it is the human condition that they both seek. Their work is loaded with complex backstories that are not easily accessed without inquiry (or further research)—not unlike the privacy many people seek in their own lives.



James Cordas and Rhonda Holberton, *Cold Storage*, 2015. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artists and City Limits. Photo: Kristine Eudy



Temporary Art Review
Rhonda Holberton at Royal NoneSuch Gallery
E. MAUDE HAAK-FRENDSCHO
December 15, 2014

Rhonda Holberton, in her exhibition *The Italian Navigator has Landed in the New World* at Royal NoneSuch Gallery, “imagines the body as seen by the machine on the other side of the screen.” Utilizing the hollowed out forms of casts, imagery of the silicon molding of the CPR dummy Resusci Anne, and body scans of herself animated into yoga practice, Holberton addresses mediations between body and mind, through technology and across time. Through material and technological reproductions of bodily forms, she problematizes how bodies are sensed—and known.



From the gallery window pristine white casts of limbs and other body sections are arranged like a collection displayed for emerging doctors, a display I imagine might be called “Best Practices in Osteopathic Medicine” in that context. Holberton titles the work *Something of the Same Feeling to Everyone*. The cast-encrusted body is echoed in a projection on the rear wall of the gallery, a single-channel video created using Microsoft’s Kinect technology, which uses infrared dots for position tracking and facial recognition. For *The Italian Navigator has Landed in the New World*, Holberton scanned her body to create a 3D model, later animated to recreate her yoga practice. It’s jarring to watch; no smooth Vinyasa, just halting and modulation on a loop. The incompletely rendered Holberton is headless, handless, and dons a cast that breaks open, revealing no body inside, when moved in positions that exceed the boundaries of the cast—a trick reserved solely for the realm of the virtual.

Adjacent in the gallery is a large photographic reproduction of a partial face, a stack of silicon molds, in fact, of a CPR dummy. Holberton tells us in the exhibition statement that Resusci Anne, the name of the training mannequin, has been in production and use since 1958. The face belongs, ironically, to L'Inconnue de la Seine, an unidentified woman who drowned in the River Seine near the end of the last century. In circulation and reproduction so long, she has the most kissed face of all time; she is known, and now belongs to all of us. Through the distance of reproduction and the intimacy of mouth-to-mouth, she has found a name but not an identity.

These medical technologies are not neutral in their masking of the unknown and broken aspects of our fragile bodies. Always striving for an ideal state of health—a set-up that denies a range of bodies, and death—the biomedical model in general, and its support technologies specifically, continue to study and train for medical health interventions through body reproductions and artifacts. The technologies to facilitate a functioning body as breathing, whole, unbroken also impart distance from actual bodies, from actual breath, skin, and bone. The armature can be described and articulated, but can it really be known?



Holberton cuts to the quick; the technology she uses is tellingly called PrimeSense, for Microsoft Kinect. “Sense” has taken on new connotations in new technology. It’s no longer the sole purview of people to perceive their worlds; the television show *Shark Tank* tells me that sensor technology is the future, and a good one to invest in. What does that mean for the primacy of our embodied sense experience? Or closer: who knows it better, your body or the machine? Historically, philosophical debates have privileged one or the other, sense knowing versus abstract or theoretical knowing. There is a gap between the two, one beautifully addressed by poet and software engineer Maged Zaher from his book *If Reality Doesn't Work Out*: “In my fantasy, you are / In the distance between the mathematical model and the physical object / This accurate inadequacy this inadequate accuracy.” The reproductions made by a computer may be credible, but they can’t universally capture embodied experiences for the infinitely diverse set of humanity. There is a space between embodied sense knowledge and the sensor knowledge of medical technologies.

Flopped on the middle of the gallery floor is a normative white person BandAid flesh colored yoga mat. It is laid out with a twist in the middle of its flesh, and is the thickness, density, and texture of human skin. It is somehow quite disturbing to imagine touching it, in a way that actual skin-to-skin contact is not. It’s an alienated production of a part dissociated from the rest of its non-being. The visceral reaction to this oversized skin flap perfectly captures the tensions that Holberton explores: alienation from our bodies and loss of identity to reproductions of our physical selves.



Rhonda Holberton: *The Italian Navigator has Landed in the New World* is on view at *Royal NoneSuch Gallery* in Oakland, CA through December 14th, 2014.
Images courtesy of Royal NoneSuch Gallery. Photos: Rhonda Holberton

Rhonda Holberton: YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW at Pro Arts Gallery Amanda N. Simons

September 14, 2014

Pro Arts Gallery in downtown Oakland is currently host to *YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW*, a 2 x 2 Solos exhibition of work by Rhonda Holberton, curated by FICTILIS.[1] Mere footsteps from the former epicenter of Occupy Oakland's nightly clashes with police, Holberton's work serves as a critical commentary and an eerie reminder of the (sometimes camouflaged) structures of authority that govern civilian life. The exhibition is a series of visual iterations on military technology, consumer culture, and concealment, in the form of textiles, video and sound installations, computer-aided sculpture, and product design.



Rhonda Holberton. *YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW*, 2014; installation view; Pro Arts Gallery, Oakland, California.

All the Actors Have Withdrawn (2014) is a digital video projected onto a frosted acrylic panel placed upright on a pedestal. The video depicts a gray-toned, three-dimensional rendering of what appears to be three nude female figures melding into a single conjoined form. Arms, elbows, and fists protrude outward at various angles in combat-like stances. The image rotates upon a central point to reveal a 360-

degree view of this grainy, broken, and disintegrating form frozen in space. While the pedestal, figurative form, and rotation at first call reference to classical bronze sculpture, the momentum of the rotation suggests a deeper intent that challenges classical conventions. With less emphasis placed upon the aesthetics of the object, *All the Actors Have Withdrawn* depicts, rather, a violent conflict carefully paused at an opportune moment.

But the piece itself is only half the experience. The projector from which the video emanates is mounted above the piece and is directed at the viewer. Its lens is carefully taped to reveal just a slit of light that shines and flickers uncomfortably downward. As I stood there, I found myself conflicted. Instinct and experience said to move away from the voyeuristic projector lens, at the risk of being unable to experience the work, but the video's movement called me to stay put. Such a conflict raises the question, at what point do we sacrifice our personal privacy for the sake of participating in or even simply experiencing contemporary culture? Or, in light of contemporary government surveillance, are we even afforded such a choice today?

Like the content it addresses, Holberton's work is surprisingly subtle and strategic in its execution. The exhibition's carefully curated objects—flowing ponchos, perfume bottles, and digitally rendered wallpaper—reference our everyday lives with a comfortable familiarity. With time, the initial ease one might feel dissipates as the camouflaged works reveal themselves: video masked as reality, war marketed as fashion, and an installation that brands gallery-goers not as passive recipients of the works' messages, but rather as active participants, implicated by their very presence in the space.

YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW is on view at Pro Arts Gallery, Oakland, California, through September 19, 2014.

Amanda N. Simons is an artist, writer, and educator who lives in Oakland. She received an MFA in Studio Art and an MA in Visual and Critical Studies from California College of the Arts, and is the Exhibition Coordinator for San Francisco's Queer Cultural Center.

[1] FICTILIS is the collaborative practice of Andrea Steves and Timothy Furstnau.



Issue 3/2015

GLOBAL SCANNING REVIEW

INCLUDED INSIDE

This issue looks at augmenting creativity, collecting algorithms, regressive innovation, biological concrete, knowledge multipliers, crayon therapy, unfinishedness, digital hygiene, micro-moments, earthscrapers and the underground, the smell of security, sentient workspaces and much more.

FUTURE OF SOCIETY & GOVERNANCE

DESIGNING BY DATA

Taking mass-customisation to a new level with data and the power of the crowd

Swedish architecture firm Tham & Videgård have been commissioned by property agency Hemnet to design the most sought-after home in the country using data. The 'Hemnet Home' project is an experiment in the use of consumer data to lead architectural design. Drawing on statistics and analytics collected by Hemnet, the designers were able to find the most desirable size, price and layout of homes in Sweden. 86,000 online property advertisements were measured in terms of popularity, with 200 million user clicks analysed. The result is a new home archetype 'for everyone by everyone'. The use of individual data to lead design is being taken to new heights. Projects such as this look at the power and wisdom of the crowd to determine designs that will be well received. Tracking online behaviour and observing desire lines allows organisations and governments alike to analyse and gain insights into consumer-citizen preference and potentially improve the user experience or citizen journey. *Source Link*

DIGITAL HOSPITALS

Full digitisation enables the optimisation of resource and increase user satisfaction

Toronto will soon open the first fully digital hospital in North America. It was designed with the efficiency of an airport in mind and will enable a smooth flow of data, people, and materials. The construction has been based on five principles – lean, green, digital, patient care, and community. Digital capabilities bring interoperability to improve efficiency, accuracy, reliability and safety, while the unrestricted flow of information provides access to care providers, patients, and community partners. Some of the features include voice recognition for immediate bedside charting, robotic blood testing completed within minutes instead of hours, immediate charting of diagnostic images, allowing real-time remote consulting with experts 24/7, robotic delivery of non-narcotics and supplies, and patient ability to order food, control lights, use the phone and access materials online through a centralised panel by the bedside. *Source Link*

THE SMELL OF SECURITY

New security considerations with the proliferation of bio-information

Rhonda Holberton is an American artist who, as a part of her creative production, developed a perfume called FOIL. The scent is derived from t-shirts worn by three complete strangers. Rhonda has done this by using techniques, deployed by the CIA and the FBI that can detect human beings by their scent. The idea of the perfume is symbolic. Rhonda wants to put attention on the fact that anyone can spray on the perfume and adopt someone else's scent to mask their own. There are parts of a scent that remain completely unique and unchanged for each individual throughout life. Now researchers are trying to find out what part of the human odour can be broken down into a specific DNA, using biometrics. If this method can be standardised, odour can be used as a part of a personal ID. *Source Link*

BIOLOGICAL CONCRETE

Improving the sustainability of urban centres with new materials

Henk Jonkers is a microbiologist at Delft University of Technology, who is working on a concrete with built-in bacteria that can fill in cracks as they form. The bacteria are packaged in minuscule pellets, which together look like a fine, white powder. These pellets contain dormant *Bacillus* and/or *Sporosarcina* bacteria, as well as their food source, calcium lactate. The powdery substances are then mixed into wet concrete before it gets poured into place. When a crack forms and water seeps in, the bacteria "wake up," and start eating the food. As a result, the bacteria excrete hard limestone filler, which fills in the crack and prevents the water from doing more damage (such as rusting the steel bars that are present in a lot of concrete structures). While many forms of concrete start breaking down after 20 to 30 years, these bacteria can stay dormant for 200 years without food, thus extending the life of a concrete structure for decades past its expiration date and saving money. *Source Link*

YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW

By Leora Lutz

Rhonda Holberton's exhibition *YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW* politicizes identity and desire. The title takes its cue from a list of the five most influential marketing words in the English language.¹ The scene presented in the gallery is reminiscent of a retail store, and as with advertising, there is something of a dream being offered here: an augmented reality that is newer and more necessary than the present. In this case, militant police states and one's personal identity and privacy collide with basic instincts to survive—and to be loved.



In general, Holberton's investigative art practice remediates technology and human interaction, situating historical events, procedures or techniques as groundwork to create narratives that shift perception. To compare, some artists and projects that come to mind are Trevor Paglan's *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, which documents clandestine military operations and Michelle Jaffe's *Neural: Soul Junks*, which takes a poetic audio stance on corporate political influence. Additionally, Holberton acknowledges

Sanaz Mazinani's work as a counterpart to her own work, where the body acts a means of activism and Mai Thu Perret's psychological ensemble installations.

Holberton's work falls into the category of conceptual work that implements actual findings as a means for discovering plausible hidden agendas, activating speculation and intervening on known truths. Her sculpture, film and installations have centered on conceptual networks within environmental concerns, particularly military encroachment in everyday lives, the mystery of the cosmos and the space between materiality and the cerebral.

Throughout her varied approaches one element is constant: location. How one locates themselves in the scenarios that Holberton creates is the crux of her diligent outcome. *YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW* is no exception with its selection of considerations that questions the very nature of politics and the body as a subject of consumption.

The retail setting of Holberton's 2 x 2 Solos exhibition at Pro Arts prompts the viewer to metaphorically buy into what it is being "sold." The commodification of art is nothing new, as the philosopher Herbert Marcuse pointed out in his essay, "Art as Form of Reality" (1969). But rather, "From the position of today's rebellion and refusal,"—which still rings true today—"art itself appears as part and force of the tradition which perpetuates that which is, and prevents the realization of that which can and ought to be." In essence, art is a camouflage of reality. As Marcuse continues: "in this universe, the work of art, as well as of anti-art, becomes exchange value, commodity: and it is precisely the Commodity Form, as the form of reality, which is the target of today's rebellion."² By presenting the double entendre of object commodification available for purchase within the context of a fictitious society, Holberton invites the viewer to exchange the here and now with the notion of a not so distant future.

For this particular exhibition, Holberton draws from military combat ideology and objects, such as operational manuals and camouflage. She offers up these solutions as survival alternatives in the utopic/dystopic scenario she has constructed. The multi-media assortment of works including sculpture, film and audio, contain elements of the figure, alluding to people navigating the politically charged social landscape. In preparation for such dark habitation, helpful audio files guide the listener to think about how to approach an issue, be it love or other covert operations. Garments are presented to blend into the hostile metropolitan surroundings while custom fragrance is offered to ensure one's existence. Moody silhouettes of tree shadows cast on the sidewalk are projected through the window, shifting viewers' perception of the locale. A large dream catcher fashioned in the manner of a parachute remains a hopeful symbol for the delicacy of aspirations. Together these works weave a complex and

overlapping conceptual quandary of the relationship humans have with the environment and with one another.



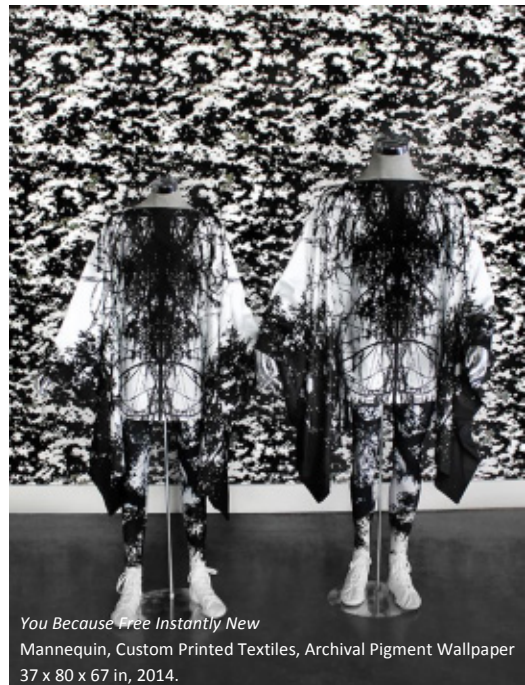
By coupling military components with human conflicts of self-worth and desire, Holberton integrates real and actual things and spins them toward science fiction story-telling. To use the adage: *Reality is stranger than fiction*. Holberton has situated the viewer within a story where they themselves are the protagonists who find themselves struggling with belonging in a place where the choice to conform or become radically invisible seems inevitable. The science fiction theme is pronounced in the audio work *Now We Have Division*, installed above a cushioned bench. The concept is similar to the hypnodædia in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which involved the conversion of text into soothing voices that subliminally influenced the listener. Using similar technology available in text to speech applications, Holberton transliterated hundreds of phrases from self-help books and military operation manuals into a convincing woman's voice. The phrases are carefully chosen yet delivered at random to coincide with what the viewer sees in the gallery while sitting on a bench listening:

*Power-struggle, like any addiction, intensifies over time. A single interaction between two people might now affect an entire department. Balance security and synchronization. Insufficient security may compromise a mission. Excessive security will almost always cause the mission to fail because of inadequate coordination. There are three categories of products associated with PSYOP and/or propaganda: white, gray, and black.*³

Against one wall of the exhibition is the signature piece of the show, *You Because Free Instantly New (An Army of Lovers)*. The subtitle, *Army of Lovers* references a speculative resistance movement. In this scene, as Holberton notes, "civilians are agents of capital and soldiers of resistance."⁴ Two mannequins, one male and one female, are set in front of a wall covered in black and grey-tone Digital Camouflage wallpaper. Digital Camouflage is designed so that the people wearing it will blend into the silvery angles

and asphalt laden metropolitan landscape. The mannequins wear identical, unisex garments similar to the purposeful homogeneity and efficiency necessary for soldiers to wear. The garments' fabric pattern is generated from photographs that Holberton took at Point Reyes. The contrast between the natural patterns against the digital wallpaper implies the poetic juxtaposition of humans' imposition and destruction of nature. Traditionally used for hunting or for combat, the purpose of camouflage takes a socio-sexual turn when perceived in conjunction with other works.

All of the Actors Have Withdrawn is a grey scale video of three bodies engaged in a variety of street combat poses,



locked in a shattering embrace. Layered across each other, the poses could be any movement—combat, dance or copulation. The bodies are collapsing and disintegrating like crumbling marble, suggesting the falling of

tradition and normativity. The provocative and sexually charged scenario romanticizes both sex and combat-violence—both are overtly physical acts that require bodies to touch each other.

In contrast, the sculpture titled *toward_a_more_pure_profile* suggests an idealized human exchange, albeit tinged with loss. The structure is comprised of two three-dimensional scanned, CDC routed foam models of Holberton's vertically bisected torso that have been adhered together. Here, the coupling melded into one body signals the idealized notion of romance—each one sacrificing their individual identity to be conjoined as a single pair.

Conversely, *FOIL* is the name of a professionally packaged "perfume" that Holberton created using an alcohol distillation process that gleans individualized scents comprised of a person's DNA. Modeled after military scent detection technology, *FOIL* replicates a product that is meant to safe-guard one's identity. Political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri posit, "The question is really how the body of the multitude [the public] can configure itself as a telos."⁵ Telos, as in teleology, is the study of an object's intention or purpose. Just as with any strategic operation, foiling one's opponent through appropriation gives "power adequate to the destruction of the enemy and the



construction of a new society.”⁶ On the coinciding title sheet for the exhibition, Holberton replaced text information for *FOIL* with a QR code.



Visitors can scan the code, which leads to the title of the actual piece: *AN ARMY OF LOVERS*, which is taken from a book co-authored by David Buuck and Juliana Spahr of the same title. The characters of their story attempt to reconcile capitalism through corporeal experimentations and performative activities.⁷ Attune to the strangeness of their book, the society that Holberton proposes has converted identity into a product, reiterating the notion that one could be instant, though never free, and never new.

YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW draws attention to the conflicts of personhood, place and ardor. The history surrounding the venue of Pro Arts happens to be completely aligned with Holberton's continued investigation with government activity as a means to address the unpredictable and immobilizing aspects of everyday life. Pro Arts is located in Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, directly opposite City Hall, in Oakland, California; the same plaza where citizens gathered for the Occupy Movement. The Occupy website states: "The purpose of our gathering is to plan actions, mobilize real resistance, and defend ourselves from the economic and physical war that is being waged against our communities."⁸ Somewhere in this science fiction that Holberton has presented lies the proposition that reality is nearer than comfort zones may allow, and acceptance of all that is possible is inevitable.

¹ Gregory Ciotti, "The Five Most Persuasive Words in the English Language," *Huffington Post* (December 12, 2012).

² Herbert Marcuse, "Art as Form of Reality" in *Art and Liberation*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 1969), 148.

³ The bibliographic list for the appropriated text includes:

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Army Doctrines published by the Federation of American Scientists, including "ATTP 3-34.39 (FM 20-3)/MCRP 3-17.6A: Camouflage, Concealment, and Decoys" and "FM 3-05.301(FM 33-1-1)/MCRP 3-40.6A: Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures;"

Buddha's Brain: The New Neuroscience and the Path of Awakening Inquiring Mind by Rick Hanson, PhD; and *Hope and Healing: Peaceful Parenting in an Uncertain World* by Naomi Drew & Arthur Caliendo.

⁴ Notes from the artist.

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 404.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ David Buuck and Juliana Spahr, *An Army of Lovers* (San Francisco: City Lights Books), 2013.

⁸ *Occupy Oakland*, occupyoakland.org/about/

All images courtesy of the artist, <http://www.rhondaholberton.com/>

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