PRESENT TENSE

2018 ART STUDIO MFA
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS
Present Tense, the 2018 Art Studio MFA Thesis Exhibition, represents the culminating work of eight artists committed to grappling with the complex and wide-ranging world(s) they inhabit. Approaching each practice through strikingly varied media—from sculpture, video and painting to installation, performance and photography—their art merges diverse material processes with conceptual concerns distinct, personal and abruptly intersecting.

The essays in this catalogue were written by:

Madeline Gobbo for Emily Clark-Kramer
Martha Stromberger for Noah Greene
Ryan Meyer for Ryan Meyer
Aida Lizalde for Tavarus Blackmonster
Meredith Arena for Jodi Connelly
Brendan Higgenbottom for Doug Loree
Ann Jastrab for Darcy Padilla
Michael Mlekoday for Joy Miller

The Master of Fine Arts Degree in Art Studio, established in 1969, is a two-year, critically engaged studio program that provides an opportunity for interdisciplinary study in the visual arts. As part of a small tight-knit community, students explore a wide range of media and approaches to studio practice. The Art Studio Program faculty share responsibility for the graduate program. Current faculty members engage in a broad range of disciplines including sculpture, photography, time-based media, painting, drawing, printmaking, ceramic sculpture, and include Darrin Martin, Hearne Pardee, Shiva Ahmadi, Lucy Puls, Annabeth Rosen, Young Suh, Robin Hill, Tim Hyde, Graham McDougal and Gina Werfel.

For more information
arts.ucdavis.edu/art-studio-graduate-program

Professor Shiva Ahmadi
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Professor Annabeth Rosen
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Heat and Weight

It is with the act of play that you are encouraged to look and with sincere, intense passion I aim to seduce the viewer.

I take bright and bold colors, use them, ring them out on the canvas in drips and splashes. I repeat forms, images and motif’s with paint and digital processes to heighten the emotion of my work and reiterate the obvious, like a raw deal turned inside joke. It is a punch and knock-out, a drop-dead-beauty that inspire me. I want to lay before you the delicious, the desired. But just to watch you salivate in waves as the reciprocation of energy that is the experience provides repose.

And, just as to care-take the work is to parent an emotion, my work is guardian to viewership.

Both the aesthetic and social means of visual communication are areas of my investigation. I want to make work that appeals to my taste and I want to make art that appeals to a Universal Truth, and sometimes this work will intersect.

Painting inspires and poses questions that with brushes, marks, movement and rhythm I propose complicated imagery to further the inquiry of what painting can be. I think about the Kitchen, the Master Bedroom, Space. What about domesticity that intrigues me are my personal struggles with relationship. I slide to the canvas, I hold my family close, I poke pins in fabric and imagine space through installation held together by the binds of craft.

The Mother, the Child, Family, a Father’s complex psycho-sexual anxieties: Contemporary Art never seemed so banal. This is a joke, as if to say that when you see my work it is screaming through your eyelids. I like to poke holes in and tear paper, like I rearrange the studio to create something new, something touching. I want to excite and inspire. My work is alive with color, energy, Heat and Weight. Life itself is dangerous and exciting, and as I’ve spent decades care-taking the subjects of my work, I aim to take care of those inclined to the colorful, the poignant and the utterly rash expression.

To pull you in is to share the desire to pull away.
Tavarus Blackmonster is a Sacramento native, born of an Irish-Italian mother and an African-American father. He studied at Sacramento City College and Sacramento State before becoming an MFA Candidate at the University of California, Davis. His work consists of psychedelic multimedia paintings and installations, brimming, bright and colorful spacescapes of collage, painting and video. His art is that of someone who lives in a pluralist world and a person who cares deeply. It challenges the academic whiteness-aesthetic, in multiple notions of the phrase.

Painters Peter Saul and Robert Colescott inform his work in the way they represent American culture, chaos, race, sex and violence. Like them, Blackmonster creates visually raw and feverish scenes with high chroma, humor and struggle, but with a little more punk and noise than his predecessors. His work is not a call for help; it embraces anguish as an inevitable part of life and bombards the viewer with an overwhelming sense of awareness of the world. Through the image of the stove, Blackmonster reclaims space in the kitchen as a husband and father, but also as a feminist-sympathetic male. The stove is a source of power and nourishment with both masculine and feminine qualities. The Gingerbread man, an imaginary brown figure made of southern molasses, represents the self. When I asked him about it, he explained it in relationship to Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown. I believe now the gingerbread man also represents Stephon Clark, a victim of police brutality recently murdered in his own backyard in Sacramento.

The sincerity of Blackmonster’s work has not been corrupted by the institutions of the gallery or academia. The artist navigates these by creating transgressively saturated visual spaces, without asking for admittance in a world of art in which artists like us are still the other. His practice is part of a conversation in which he ignores the antiquated notion that political art is bad, and accomplishes making deep and potent work about current personal and public histories.

Aida Lizalde

Last year Blackmonster’s studio space was charged with anguish. It reminded me of being a disappointed child, of watching cartoons and coloring books while my parents argued. In his video work Friendsy, Blackmonster’s portrait as a child is superimposed on the opening scene from the 90’s TV show Friends, while his face morphs into that of Brandon Teena, Ana Mendieta, the Aleppo child and Emmett Till as interpreted by Dana Schutz. Friendsy shows his empathy and connection to victims of violence by war and white supremacy, while white people dance around unaffected.

The first time I visited Blackmonster’s studio, I heard him talking to another visitor about horror vacui, the fear of empty space, represented in the work. But his more recent paintings and installations inhabit a space of instinctive and relentless representation, and his kind of personal expression is antagonistic to fear. His work is not intended for a calming and comfortable experience, but an exclamatory one, an overload of horrible things, of memories and struggle, power, sex, fatherhood, and even love.
I play seriously.
I draw, paint, and assemble ephemera on paper scaled to my height.
I record the pulses squeezed from my brain to the surface, forming
intuitive portraits of my interior realm.

These compositional emissions are reactions to momentary fixations
like emotions, new haircuts, physical sensations, or conversations.
They suggest visceral impressions of anxiety, weight, bodily functions
and organs.

Through my process, I develop a vocabulary of mark-making and
symbols that communicate what words cannot express with fluidity
or accuracy. Are some states of being best articulated in a line, and
understood intuitively, rather than explicitly?

These urgent expulsions of my interior burst into forms of visual diary
entries that record my existence as a record of the quotidian mundane
and the unusual.
Imagine: sneaking into your sister’s room, hunting for her secrets. You rummage drawers, dig through her closet, toss pillows. You find her diary buried in a pile of dirty socks. But the diary (pink, with a soft cover, and a doll-sized lock in the shape of a heart) is locked. You could pick the lock, pore over earnest scribbles, and in this way come to know her better. Or you could, instead, put the diary back where you found it, hide traces of your violation, and wait (maybe months, maybe years). You could wait until your sister brings the diary out of her own accord, until she draws the heart-shaped key from the chain around her neck, turns the lock, and, sitting beside you on the bed, reads aloud.

Her diary is not a place for secrets, anymore.

Clark-Kramer’s paintings are Emily-sized. She writes them with her body (a slash of the hand, bent knees, leaning in, balanced, to reach as far as her wingspan allows). Her body is on the canvas, in it, all around. She sleeps peacefully,dreaming of Disneyland, digesting vegetables, growing 2.5 inches per year, with the diary left open on her bedside table. Sit beside her on the bed. She wants you to read it.

*Madeleine Gobbo*
work explores the interstices between my internal terrain and the ecology of the land around me. It is an index of imprints, created either by natural phenomena or through interactions with the landscape.

Through the physicality of working directly with the land, I explore the effects of human presence in the environment and how our migrations and activities have changed it. These actions are recorded through direct casting of the earth, photography, gathering natural objects and site-specific works. I view these activities as a series of meditative environmental interventions that explore my relationship with nature in all of its contradictions.

Working intimately with the landscape has illuminated the complex political and ecological systems at play in the Anthropocene, the period of time during which human activities have the most powerful environmental impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems. Our society may no longer be able to mitigate the widespread ecological impacts of global warming without significant changes in our lifestyles and policies. By placing an ecological issue in an artistic context, my work dramatizes the fragility of our environment.
The place where this work begins is not Jodi Connelly’s place. For eight thousand years, it was stewarded and sustained by Native Americans—the Lake Miwok and Hill Patwin. In later periods, the land around the McLaughlin Reserve near Knoxville was settled by homesteaders, and used for mining, mercury and then gold. The last of the mining ended in 1996. The land technically belongs to the Homestake Mining Company of California and has operated as the Donald and Sylvia McLaughlin Natural Reserve since 2002. It is lovingly and carefully managed by Cathy Koehler (who provided invaluable insight and information to both Jodi and this writer) and Paul Aigner.

Ninety percent of grasses in California are non-native. Many are invasive. In order to make this work, Jodi approached the landscape with curiosity: What did this landscape look like 400 years ago? What would happen if I removed the non-native plants and planted native seeds? She was driven by a question that had been posed to her during a studio visit by a Native American artist: “Does this land know you?” It did not.

Reparations are tricky and Jodi’s experiment is fraught with all the complications that come with reparations between humans and land, but also between humans and humans. It is difficult for me to view this project without thinking about how hard many of us are working to make reparations. From dam removal to the repopulation of animal species to the many social experiments in which we (white folks) try to relevel the playing field between ourselves and the many populations from whose suffering we have profited.

What you see in the gallery is a small sampling of the invasive plants that Jodi removed. Dry star thistle and avena; plants that came to be in that place through many years of migration and resettling after the native dwellers were pushed out, slaughtered or perished from the diseases the colonists carried across the ocean and then the continent. In their place, Jodi seeded native plants: Mountain dandelion, milkweed, dove weed, blue dicks, wild hyacinth, narrow tarplant, slender cottonweed, bunch grasses like blue wild rye, one-sided bluegrass, purple needlegrass. In the relatively short span of this project, these plants did not germinate, which does not mean that they won’t at some point. As Cathy explained to me – the seeds are darned resilient and don’t just germinate when you think they should. The seeds of the native plants are extremely good at holding out (remaining dormant) until they experience just the right conditions.

I wonder, how long will they hold out and I am in awe of the resilience of living things. The original path Jodi made on the land resembles a scratch in the landscape, lined with pink surveyor tape. The invasive species continue to grow back, for now.

Jodi’s work walks a line between land art and land management. What can we, as consumers of artwork, glean from it? For me, this process is about how we strive to repair damage. But the larger question is about the impact on the land. And the absence of an answer points to our smallness in comparison to it.

If you don’t see the photos of Jodi in a Tyvek suit spraying herbicide on the invasive species, in order to make room for the native ones she hoped would make a home there, her small body looking like a space man, you might think she was a benevolent nature lover. But there is no such thing. We are always interacting with the land. It is my understanding, and it may be a generalization, that the indigenous peoples of this continent were better at it than we are, more reciprocal. Jodi was striving to alter the land, to repair it. What was revealed to her might be the difficulty of our short life spans, relative to the cycles of the land. But the timely human metaphor revealed by this work is how tough it is to heal from the damage that colonization—and here I mean to include indigenous peoples and the Africans that were brought here forcibly—has caused to our fragile human ecosystem.

For me, these images demonstrate the complicated work of trying to seed and root ourselves without taking over the whole ground. This work here is how the land starts to know Jodi. It is their discourse, their refrain which spans generations and the chorus is repair, reveal, heal and repeat.

Meredith Arena
My work is fractured narrative, material language in peripheral America. I want to expose disquiet in the mundane; presence in absence.

I came up in stagnant lumber towns and the fringes of dried up cities, places that echo alongside. Temporary structures age into permanence as the purpose hollows out. I try to press into obfuscation, to bury my hand in accrued marks and abandoned function.

This practice is a looping sequence of observation, collection, alteration and arrangement—sculpture always shifting to fill the space it inhabits. Aspirations go to seed and implicate the whole place.
The measured use of empty space in Noah Greene's work engineers a subtle influx that — like the eddy catching trash on a stream bank, or the dead-end cement corridor that functions to corral the wind — seeks to pull in abandoned bodies. The shapes that accumulate here are written and overwritten in muted phrases of utility and of its undermining. Letters formed by the fingers of rust, rain, mold — and by unknown hands encased in work gloves. Greene's hands are also at work here — in ambiguous and often self-eclipsing ways, sometimes pressing as question up against the absurd. The temporary presence of the viewer's body in this slow vortex — where it has been abandoned to the pull of the visual — instigates an additional process of living and invisible inscription. A marring by resonance is incurred; a trace is left.

Martha A Stromberger
My current work explores perceptions of the obese body. In particular I am looking to emphasize and exaggerate the praise I “earn” by making even the faintest healthy choice. Sometimes it can be as small as touching a vegetable in the grocery store, or simply taking a casual stroll on a nice day. In these moments it is not entirely uncommon to get looks of approval, or often in the case of physical activity, actual audible praise. In order to show the absurdity of these gestures, I bring in catholic iconography as a way of representing the narrative of redemption that is placed upon me in these interactions. In addition to this “redemptive” arc, I am also often seen as nothing more than my body. They are rarely, if ever interested in my life as a human being. The conversation when it does happen always revolves around the weight, as if my mind will only be noticed if my physical presence reaches a certain and yet undefined level of acceptability. In my current body of work, I am exploring the language used to define my body, and how I’ve internalized it. Through the lens of Homeland Security language and obesity related language I am depicting my body in a way that is rarely seen as acceptable.

Humor has the potential to take away power from those above, by marrying my interest in humor and my art, I hope to paint a complete picture of myself, rather than fragment myself into categories. It is not uncommon for obese people to think of the mind as a separate entity from the body as a result of cultural moors around fatness, I seek to remarry my mind and my body in order to show a more complete image of myself, taking back some power, in some way.
“If what fills your attention are the great works that have been written... nothing is left to be done. You couldn’t possibly make anything as inventive or sophisticated or complex. But if you turn from them, and what you look at is your life: NOTHING is figured out; NOTHING is understood... Ulysses doesn’t describe your life. It doesn’t teach you how to lead your life. You don’t know what love is; or hate; or birth; or death; or good; or evil. If what you look at is your life, EVERYTHING remains to be figured out, ordered; EVERYTHING remains to be done...”

The self as subject is something many people have many things to say about, but I am quite fond of Frank Bidart’s formulation. Doug’s work is expressing something similar, but it is also asking the questions “Subjected to what?” and “Under whose subjection?” The work is also pointing to what are maybe the two main parts of “self,” body and mind, and how a failure to consider these two elements together, to focus solely on the body in this case, is at the basis of what allows for so much hate/hurt people inflict on people. Or rather, the degree to which we let one “part” of the self inform our understanding of the other.

So it’s not so much the self but rather the part of the self subjected, and the “understanding” of an individual’s whole self that this produces that, this work takes as its focus. In this there’s a sort of empowering reclamation, but Doug’s work is not just a presentation of the subjected self on its own; there is more of argument to be made. I cannot imagine a better word for this force behind Doug’s work than “sanctification.” The figure in these works, an abstracted and subjected self, is made into the Body of Christ. “One of the soldiers took their carrot and pierced his side.”

Christ’s body became a threat out of the mind it contained. Doug’s work goes in the opposite direction; these figures are a threat because of the mind that the body proposes, a mind that would allow for, for whatever reason, the body to look differently than what is accepted. The provocative pose that these figures take is then doubly dangerous, to assume that it is both allowable to be heavy and to be sexualized at the same time. The horror!

Sacrifice is latent in sanctification, one part of the process of setting something aside for special use. Like any good messiah, Doug’s work has come to give us a lesson in sacrifice. Being, existing as you do, is the most vulnerable way anyone can live their lives. The artist, in taking themselves/a part of themselves/parts of themselves subjected by others and present it to the world, sacrifice themselves for the sake of others.

Brendan Higgenbottom

I want to live sustainably, simply, gratefully, I want to live peacefully, hospitably, joyfully. I do not want to be a household name. I want to resist the fetishization of technological progress and the avant garde. I do not want to consume too much. I do not want my quality of life tied to acquiring objects. I want to love and give. I want to show a better reality by my every word and action.

I hope my art practice reflects my values. I hope I never run out of experiments or discoveries. I hope I can make enough money to stay close to my future family. I hope my art inspires sustainable behaviors. I hope someone sees a mirror when looking at my self portraiture. I hope my art comes from truth and shows truth.
If this mtg is built entirely on a premise of universities saving us, opportunity missed. What can “out there” do for universities? #AcadEng

--- Ryan Meyer (@ryanmeyersf)

I’ve made two successful pairs of cutoff shorts out of pre-existing jeans, so YES there is a section on my résumé called “Clothing Design.”

--- Ryan Meyer (@rynmyr)

Knowing is not enough; you must apply. Willing is not enough; you must do.

--- Ryan Meyer (@ryanmeyer96)

This might be the greatest college football game of all time. Two future heisman candidates going at it makes for great entertainment

--- Ryan Meyer (@rynmyr)

Don’t surround yourself with yourself.

--- Ryan Meyer (@ufryan)

Wild hogs, ride hard or stay home

--- Ryan Meyer (@therymy)

Time to move on

--- Ryan Meyer (@ryanrymy)

An eye for an eye. Is that the best way to live? Join us this week for a great conversation.

--- Ryan Meyer (@meyerrsm)

And I found you while I found me

--- Ryan Meyer (@ryanmeyer95)

103 buckets of corn equals 3300 pounds #hogfeed

--- Ryan Meyer (@rdmeyer15)
Words say a thing while the thing does another thing. And so, words and things are in infinite chase. The world passes by at the same time it spins, at the same time it lurches forward and all the astronauts orbit and all the kaleidoscopes twirl and all the men and women bicker until sundown or until someone looks up to point and say, “sky,” but there is only darkness and stars.

Oh, that infinite chase and the pleasures it affords, the errors and the evaded expectations… the gaps! I love the gaps and it is from them and their rippling uncertainties that I pluck the motions and language for my performances (to which my sculptures and installations are subservient). Can I actually thwart the human compulsion to interpret and in so doing, somehow reach into that gap and linger there? Crafted ambiguities, isolated miscommunications, decontextualized gestures, foreign or invented languages: these are the scaffolding of my performance work, striving to make viewers lean in, giving them enough of a sense of a sense (and a sense of the gap in between them and the sense) to grasp after the sense and to reach into the gap.
Joy Miller’s work is performatively material, or materially performative. She combines ceramics, mixed media, installations and performance to create feedback loops of matter and interpretation. Donna Haraway writes, “It mat-ters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges.” Thinking with Joy Miller’s work, we might add that it matters what media mediate media; matters matter, and different matters matter differently.

Miller’s performances, installations and sculptures are animated by a restless discontent and it is through them that she aims to impress upon viewers the world’s overwhelming unintelligibility. Insisting on the absurdity of the human persistence to carry on creating and staging and interpreting, her work both represents and performs the problem of meaning-making in an unintelligible world. For example, while frustrated by the difficulty of working, Miller created an installation of plastic wrap that essentially walled off most of her workspace. As a representation of her frustration, this read quite literally. But, as a performance that recreates or exacerbates the occasion of the art’s creation, it resembles more an ecological feedback loop. It also reminds the viewer that visual art is always, also, a material and tactile engagement. Sitting with the installation one evening, I marveled at how the color, and the whole effect really, slowly changed as the sun went down and the lamps she used for backlighting became starker. The tableau evoked in turn a construction site, a web of cotton candy, and a ghastly medical quarantine zone—until we smelled burning plastic and the artist rushed to unplug the lights.

NO TONE TOO LOW, an installation-performance Miller staged in October of 2017, is another work that draws attention to its own layers of aestheticized miscommunication. In a white room lined with translucent white plastic, one performer sits atop a ladder, musing in an unidentified European language and tossing books to the floor, while another performer paces around at ground level, emitting bewildered and bewildering sounds and occasionally trying to work a tea kettle. Both performers are shrouded in white—angelic, if angels invented (or were invented by) poly-ethylene. The performance has a definite emotional narrative, but is constructed by sound and speed alone. It demands interpretation, even as it makes clear that your interpretation will be, to some extent, mere projection.

“That’s My Best Friend’s Wedding. One of these is River Rave. I have hella Mrs. Doubtfire,” Miller says, pointing out experiments in her studio: twists and clusters of VHS tape suspended from the wall, wrapped around old office furniture, in shapes sometimes floral, sometimes tentacular. If it’s just re-purposed material, does it matter that it is/was a movie? Should my experience as a viewer take into consideration how the artist obtained literally miles of VHS tape? Does it make a difference that this is VHS tape, instead of some other material? To the latter question, Miller’s answer is uncharacteristically definitive: absolutely. The VHS tape is extremely manipulatable, and, she notes with great delight, also magnetized, enabling her to interact with her materials in specific ways.

Spending time with Miller’s creations, one gets the vivid sense of an artist’s process being an integral part of the product: manipulating films, papers, tubes, plastics, is part of the performance, even if it happens before the audience arrives. Perhaps the ‘work of art’ is always merely the residue of art-making, just as many of Miller’s materials are the detritus of contemporary life.

Michael Mlekoday
My narrative photography is about struggle and the trans-generational effects.
A lot of us probably woke up in the middle of the night on October 8, 2017. I live in Marin County and smelled the smoke and stared out at the orange sky and wondered if my house was on fire, but everything was eerily quiet. Except the wind. The Northern California firestorm would devastate the area and Darcy Padilla would walk out into the aftermath and see not just the destruction, but something else.

When I met with Darcy to view her images from the past year, I saw the fields of charred structures and burnt remains of cars, belongings, buildings. I perceived the wide swath of the path of the fire sparing nothing and, what was left behind, what couldn’t be saved, what, despite digging and sifting, could not be resurrected. There was an awful beauty in the emptiness and the totality of the devastation. Then as Darcy continued to lay out the prints of the fire, interspersed were pictures of the canopies of trees with the needles burnt away and the wiry branches reaching toward each other beneath a slate blue sky. And then from her hands came the photographs of her mother. Young. Old. Beautiful. Still beautiful. Her hands sometimes holding her face or head. Looking out into the stark light. But with an expression on her face, like perhaps she was unsure of something.

Darcy and I talked of what was happening in these pictures, of her mother’s dementia, of her memories, her words, of their relationship, of change and time and loss and destruction. How these photographs could be woven into the framework of the great fire. The trauma of the landscape coupled with the personal narrative of her mother’s decline or really, I want to say the word alteration, because Darcy’s mother is still there, looking at her.

When Darcy walked among the debris after the fire trying to make sense of the scattered wreckage of people’s lives, she had an epiphany. She realized that this was the way her mother now understood the world, and even how she understood and viewed her daughter. The foundation of her mother’s life was devastated; the fragments of memories that made up her mother’s experiences were disconnected, scattered, confused, never to be reunited or fully recollected. There was no longer a room where her memories were stored intact. Darcy at first wondered at all her photographs of the canopies and then realized that the burnt trees reminded her of synapses. Darcy’s mother may or may not be able to access the past and the way things were, but she is making new memories, however limited, and becoming a new person. The land too is healing itself after the fire. The people, rebuilding and trying to create something out of the loss. As Darcy Padilla turns the camera toward these two narratives, I wait with bated breath to see how the stories intertwine and unfold.

Ann Jastrab, Independent Curator
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In memory of Freemond E. (Pete) Gadberry, a retired fine-arts teacher at Vintage High School, in Napa, California, who gave a $1-million bequest from his estate for the art department. Mr. Gadberry, who graduated from the university in 1967 with a master’s degree in fine arts, died in 2006 at the age of 69.