

THE 45TH ANNUAL

**University of California, Berkeley**  
**Master of Fine Arts**  
**Graduate Exhibition**

MAY 15-JUNE 15, 2015



Leslie Dreyer

Tanja Geis

Lee Lavy

Michelle Ott

Sofie Ramos

Matt Smith Chavez



# The 45th Annual University of California, Berkeley Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition

Each year the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) showcases the work of students graduating from UC Berkeley's Department of Art Practice in the **Annual Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition**. This year we are delighted to introduce our audiences to the work of six talented artists who bring innovative perspectives and approaches to art making: Leslie Dreyer, Tanya Geis, Lee Lavy, Michelle Ott, Sophie Ramos, and Matt Smith Chavez. While they utilize a diverse range of media, styles, and methods, these artists all display an overarching concern for their environs in their work and inventively probe their material surroundings.

This year we have joined forces with the Berkeley Art Center to present the exhibition while BAM/PFA is in the process of moving to its new building in the heart of downtown Berkeley. We thank Aimee Le Duc and the staff at the Berkeley Art Center for collaborating with us on this undertaking, and we look forward to welcoming everyone to our new home in January 2016.

As always, it has been a pleasure for members of BAM/PFA's staff to work with faculty and staff from the Department of Art Practice who have mentored and worked closely with these six artists over the course of the last two years. In BAM/PFA's curatorial department, Lauren R. O'Connell has written incisive texts on each of the artist's work, articulating how they contribute to broader dialogues circulating in the ever-vital field of contemporary art.

**Apsara DiQuinzio**

CURATOR OF MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

# Leslie Dreyer

Through a combination of art and activism, Leslie Dreyer exposes neoliberal capitalism's commandeering of public spaces and symbols for its own promotion and expansion. Following the strategies of *détournement* practiced by the Situationist International, and contemporary culture jamming utilized by artists such as The Yes Men, Dreyer's recent tactical performances and sculptures disrupt and subvert the capitalist systems that have appropriated San Francisco's public infrastructure. Dreyer designs and organizes performances, protests, and interventions in response to the Bay Area's rapidly growing tech industry and venture capitalist-supported start-up companies, and the resulting gentrification and displacement of existing residents.

On April 1, 2014, *Gmuni: Free Luxury Free Market Free for All*, designed by Dreyer and performed with the Heart of the City Collective, stopped a Google luxury shuttle picking up private passengers at a public MUNI bus stop. The parodic performance announced a new "Gmuni service" offering free and public use of the luxury shuttle, highlighting the misappropriation of public services and tax dollars. For *Reclaim Disrupt* (2014–ongoing), Dreyer rolled a vending cart to the center of two large events—*Tech Crunch's Disrupt* conference and *No Monster in the Mission* march and festival for affordable housing—and sold bricks with the word "DISRUPT" etched on one side and phrases, such as "For the 98-year old who is being evicted from her home of 50 years by real estate speculators," on the other. Dreyer's interventions aim to influence policy change and to reveal the everyday injustices that often fall beneath the radar of the common citizen, and yet directly affect their lives. Her work produces a sense of awareness in order to inspire a collective pursuit of justice, virtue, and equality "for a world in which people are valued more than capital."

Leslie Dreyer: *Reclaim Disrupt*, 2014-ongoing; public performance with vending cart and etched bricks; courtesy of the artist.



# Tanja Geis

The ocean is an unregulated, and mostly unseen, dumping ground, depositing on the beach various bits of human debris alongside knotted piles of seaweed, broken shells, round stones, and driftwood. In this liminal space between land and water, each found object, morphed and eroded by the ocean's currents, is evidence of both natural and manmade forces. Tanja Geis produces her large-scale mud paintings, hand-sized clay sculptures, and underwater videos in response to the toxic pollution found in these natural environments. Geis, who studied coastal and marine management in addition to fine art, makes her work from an ecopsychological perspective—the study of the human-nature relationship using a combination of ecological and psychological methods. Her work exists somewhere between waking and dream states, and delves into the unconscious to make meditative connections between human beings and nature—a sort of ecological surrealism.

In works such as *Littoral Daemon III* (2015), Geis uses marshland mud from the San Francisco Bay to paint intricate entanglements of feathers, shells, sticks, seaweed, and human refuse, forming symmetrical, life-size zoomorphic figures. Faces of mythical creatures emerge from and retreat into the intertwining shapes and shadows of the totemic mass. Geis refers to the figures as “daemons”— combinations of gods, mortals, and animals that protect the body and mind. Recently, Geis started bringing her camera with her while free diving in the Pacific Ocean. In the digital underwater videos, the water's surface inverts and transforms into an undulating terrain of floating objects and streams of light where the logic of time seems to disappear. The unfamiliar, shadowy landscape swells and contracts as muffled underwater noises reverberate. Suspended somewhere between fantasy and truth, Geis's work proposes a reconciliation between humans and the marine landscape through reverence and a little mysticism.



# Lee Lavy

The word monument brings to mind a grand, immovable edifice that is impermeable to the passing of time. However, Lee Lavy's works—simultaneously installations, sculptures, performances, research projects, and quasi-experiments—are monuments that rely less on a fixed position and more on the potential to index past, present, and future within natural and artificial landscapes. By unearthing the forgotten or hidden—such as dried buckets of paint found in the basement of a painting company in Sacramento, San Francisco graves exhumed and relocated due to urban growth, an abandoned 1910 homestead in rural Montana left relatively untouched by time—Lavy reveals social and temporal narratives of a given place.

In a series of recent studio experiments, Lavy explores the foreboding presence of the numerous fault lines that run throughout the highly populated coastal regions of California. In the video *Training Break* (2014), he tests the breaking points of various objects—from using his hands to break a pencil to carefully stacking chunks of asphalt on a solid plank of wood that spans two sawhorses—as mental preparations for the next seismic shock. The creak and bow of the wood under the increasing weight of asphalt warn of its impending rupture, an abstract representation of what has and will happen to California's coastal cities during a massive earthquake. For *6.0* (2014), Lavy reconstructed a section of sidewalk with two three-ton car jacks underneath in an attempt to simulate an earthquake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale. Instead of fracturing the top layer of concrete, the lifting force crumbled the base layers of dirt, plywood, and cinder blocks. While the same destructive forces found in nature cannot be replicated within the tabula rasa of the studio, Lavy's speculative sculptures and performances do produce monuments to the collective anxiety of the uncertain, yet inevitable, future.



# Michelle Ott

In Michelle Ott's studio, a bare and empty plastic water bottle sits atop a light box traditionally used to view x-rays or photographic negatives. Its worn, transparent body lights up from below and registers faint shadows along its bends and creases. Ott uses plastic and light as both subject and apparatus for her photographic installation series *Redirected Objects* (2014). Like contemporary photographers Uta Barth and Miram Böhm, Ott is concerned with light and focus, as well as in balancing the illusion of absence and presence. Using a scanner as the camera, and plastic containers of various sizes and shapes to filter the light source, she makes images of almost indistinguishable levels of luminosity and shadow. She casts another layer of shadows across the flat surface of these photographs by cutting into the printed image with a thin blade. By layering light and shadow in the two-dimensional plane of the image, as well as within the three-dimensional space of the installation, Ott investigates the slippery terrain between abstraction and visual perception.

Ott's work, however, goes beyond aesthetic concerns and leads to a larger consideration of the complex relationship between humans and nature. In some of the prints from the series *Antarctica With/Without* (1999–ongoing), Ott traces with a knife the outline of any manmade objects—workers, equipment, buildings at a scientific research station in Antarctica—and peels away the glossy surface of the photographic paper to reveal the fuzzy white inner layer. This refocuses the image on the natural landscape and emphasizes how out of place humans are in Antarctica's desolate terrain. Like the accumulation of plastic containers in her studio, Ott does not seek to remove all human evidence from nature, but rather tasks herself with suggesting a secondary meaning for its presence.

Michelle Ott: *opacity and accumulation*, from the series *Redirected Objects*, 2014; archival ink on paper with hand-cut surface; 40 × 30 in.; courtesy of the artist.



# Sofie Ramos

Sofie Ramos describes her installations, which often cover the entire surface area of a given room, as “layers of paintings within paintings.” The complex relationships she builds through her totalizing environments generate optical and spatial illusions that expand and then flatten the space. The artist contorts the clear lines of a room by constructing protrusions that jut out of the walls, which she then paints with colorful, abstract patterns. She then introduces multi-edged sculptural objects into the composition, which also become surfaces to paint and cover with fabric. In these three-dimensional paintings, or abstract environments, Ramos sets into motion an imaginary, ever-changing world where formal elements, such as line, color, and shape, come to life in a hallucinatory diorama.

While constructing these environments, Ramos captures the progression on camera through stop-motion animation, so that, in effect, her installations go beyond the second and third dimensions to enter the fourth dimension of time. This sets her work apart from other artists, such as Katharina Grosse and Jessica Stockholder, who similarly use sculpture and architecture as painterly devices. The brightly colored patterns and objects oscillate in a stop-and-go manner in the video *decorate/defecate* (2014–ongoing), creating a disorienting, manic sensation. The formal qualities circulating in and around the space straddle a terrain of order and chaos, harmony and unrest, a stream of visual information that turns the aesthetically pleasing into the optically dizzying. Ramos herself appears sporadically throughout, frozen in time, slightly bent forward in the middle of a space that seems to contort around her; she looks directly at the camera in one instance. Her presence offers the viewer a moment to recalibrate a sense of scale and perspective, as well as a portal into the private visions of the artist that animate the physical world.

Sofie Ramos: *decorate/defecate*, 2014–ongoing; video, acrylic paint, paper, fabric, drywall, plaster, wood, tape, and matboard; 92 × 75 × 125 in.; courtesy of the artist.



# Matt Smith Chavez

One could categorize Matt Smith Chavez as a painter, even though the artist uses very little paint and rarely makes painterly gestures, especially the kind applied by his own hand. However, it would be more accurate to call Smith Chavez a mark-maker. He utilizes the images of anonymous producers, or references the work of other artists, and arranges them on flat, vertical surfaces. Most of the elements in his paintings are actually appropriations of freely distributed material on the Internet, which allows him to loosen the boundaries of authorship and investigate the place of mimesis in art making. Once he prints an image onto the surface of his work, it becomes a representation of that image, or as Smith Chavez calls it, “a copy of a copy of a copy.”

While the first wave of appropriation artists in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, borrowed images of prominent people and commercial advertisements, Smith Chavez commandeers images of everyday utilitarian objects, such as a couch or an IKEA cup. Like the appropriation art of earlier generations, Smith Chavez’s work critiques the authenticity of authorship; however, it also presents a new critique of the authenticity of consumers within rapidly expanding networks of distribution (the Internet) that prompt a limitless accumulation of goods. Alongside the found and repeated image of a cup in *To consider images that understand us* (2015), Smith Chavez places random alphabet letters, graphic symbols, small moments of spray-painted color, horizontal strips of painted and unpainted muslin, and a line of graphite that looks more accidental than intentional. Smith Chavez resists finishing a work, or at least giving it a finished appearance, in order to keep it in a seemingly malleable state where it can simultaneously avoid being and exist as “a copy of a copy of a copy.”

Matt Smith Chavez: *Chaplin in his cell, pampered by his wardens*, 2015; mixed media on muslin; 48 × 43 ½ in.; courtesy of the artist.

FREE



FREE

LESLIE DREYER (b. 1978, Austin, TX) has presented lectures and workshops on art and activism at the University of California, Berkeley; San Francisco Art Institute; Jenin Refugee Camp, West Bank, Palestine; and Kukje Language Academy, Busan, South Korea. Dreyer holds a BFA in studio art from The University of Texas at Austin.

TANJA GEIS (b. 1979, Hong Kong, China) has exhibited at Root Division, San Francisco; Santa Cruz Museum of Art; Setouchi International Art Triennale, Megijima, Japan; Aichi International Art Triennale, Nagoya, Japan; and NES Artist Residency, Skagatrönd, Iceland. Geis holds a MFA from Edinburgh College of Art; a MA in resource management in coastal and marine management from University Centre of the Westfjords, Iceland; and a BFA from Yale University.

LEE LAVY (b. 1982, Houston, TX) is the cofounder of ICE Gallery in San Diego and has exhibited at Bread and Salt, San Diego; SOMArts, San Francisco; Worth Ryder Gallery, Berkeley; and Susan Street Fine Art, Solano Beach, CA. Lavy holds a BA from San Diego State University.

MICHELLE OTT (b. 1977, Milaca, MN) has exhibited at Embark Gallery, Root Division, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, all in San Francisco; McMurdo Alternative Art Gallery, Antarctica; Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA; Parsons School of Design, Paris; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Ott holds a BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

SOFIE RAMOS (b. 1990, Cincinnati, OH) has exhibited at List Art Center, Brown University, Providence, RI; Arts Benicia Gallery, Benicia, CA; Worth Ryder Gallery, Berkeley; and Carnegie Gallery, Cincinnati. Ramos holds a BA in visual arts from Brown University.

MATT SMITH CHAVEZ (b. 1978, Lima, Peru) has exhibited at Embark Gallery and SOMArts, San Francisco; Worth Ryder Gallery and Kala Arts Institute, Berkeley; Arlington Arts Center, Virginia; and Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Smith Chavez holds a MA from the University of Maryland, College Park and a BA from George Washington University, both in geography.

Essays by Lauren R. O'Connell, BAM/PFA curatorial project coordinator

The 45th Annual University of California, Berkeley Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition is organized by Apsara DiQuinzio, BAM/PFA curator of modern and contemporary art and Phyllis C. Wattis MATRIX Curator, and presented at the Berkeley Art Center.

The annual UC Berkeley MFA exhibition is made possible by the Wiltsek Endowment for the Master of Fine Arts Exhibition.

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