

THE 46th ANNUAL UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
MASTER OF FINE ARTS GRADUATE EXHIBITION
June 29–August 7, 2016

ISAAC VAZQUEZ AVILA

MICHAEL BERENS

LARK BUCKINGHAM

JOSÉ JOAQUIN FIGUEROA

CLEMENT HIL GOLDBERG

JIN ZHU

ESSAYS BY JEZ FLORES GARCÍA

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The 46th Annual University of California, Berkeley Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition

Every year the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) presents the work of students graduating from UC Berkeley's Department of Art Practice in the **Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition**. This year we are delighted to introduce our audiences to the work of six talented artists who bring their innovative perspectives and approaches to art making: Isaac Vazquez Avila, Michael Berens, Lark Buckingham, José Joaquín Figueroa, Clement Hil Goldberg, and Jin Zhu. While the diverse approaches of these artists cannot be categorized under a single theme or style, many of the works in this exhibition use tactics of humor and "world making" to comment on serious contemporary issues, such as extinction, personal trauma, gentrification, and social and cultural melding.

For this brochure, we extended our collaboration with Berkeley students by inviting Jez Flores García, a PhD candidate in the History of Art Department, to write interpretive essays on each of the artists' practices. Flores García's essays offer an alternate avenue for engaging the artworks on view by positioning them within the expansive dialogue on contemporary art.

It has been a pleasure to work with faculty from the Department of Art Practice who have mentored these six artists over the last two years. We invite you to explore the work of these emerging talents in the first MFA exhibition to be held in BAMPFA's dynamic new building in downtown Berkeley.

Lauren R. O'Connell

CURATORIAL ASSOCIATE



ISAAC VAZQUEZ AVILA

In his current work, Isaac Vazquez Avila blends sculpture, painting, and collage to create figures that are at once formed and unformed, forever in a state of emergence or disappearance. Using the pages of magazines as his canvases, the artist obscures the printed image and yet simultaneously uses it to inform the composition of his paintings. The blob-like figures' poses suggest human gestures and expressions, albeit blurry and easy to misinterpret. Instead of glossy magazine models, Vazquez Avila presents handmade, messy, and untranslatable complexities—one cannot help but look for some hints of human form in what is now illegible. Recently, Vazquez Avila began painting murals both in his studio and on building exteriors. This practice allows the artist to play with scale and utilize disruptions on the surface of the walls, such as outlets, switches, and other building fixtures. Rather than ignore these interruptions, Vazquez Avila incorporates them into the mural, transforming them into small wall sculptures.

Vazquez Avila uses the neglected debris of daily life as the foundation for his collage works, which use presence and absence to reflect on the oscillation between Mexican and American cultures: born in Mexico City, the artist spent most of his childhood in Salt Lake City, navigating two identities. The repurposing of materials has specific cultural resonance for Vazquez Avila: the Mexican concept of *rasquache* (crummy), defined by Chicano scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto as the perspective of “the underdog,” is characterized by making due with less-than-ideal materials. More tactic and attitude than style, *rasquache* operates as political resistance by using appropriation, reversal, and inversion. For Vazquez Avila, this approach liberates his work from traditional definitions and allows him to evoke the power of one living between cultures.



MICHAEL BERENS

Sculptor Michael Berens creates installations, videos, and drawings that celebrate weightlessness and the precariousness of objects within space. Although sculpture traditionally favors static mass and monumentality, Berens's work playfully engages audiences with motion, or suggested motion, and slapstick-like comedy. His practice relies on relinquishing control and embracing accidents.

Berens's ongoing interest in materials, their properties, and the space they inhabit allows the simplest of actions to build into subtly complex installations. In his most recent project, Berens draws on his interest in optics technology and its impact on shifting social interactions to explore how refractions and reflections operate as centerpieces for social interplay. On a two-channel video, the artist presents the adventures of a mobile camera obscura on one screen and a massive roving mirror ball on the other. The camera obscura uses a lens to project live images into a darkened, lightweight, wearable chamber. Berens wears this chamber while riding a skateboard, maneuvering, albeit awkwardly, through public spaces. This mediated relationship to the screen and mobility references the proliferation of video screens on mobile devices today, which permits viewers to be physically together while immersed in their own viewing experiences, or physically apart while connecting through technology. The second video stars a 111-pound mirror ball on a cart. As this oversized object moves around, it reflects light back onto its surroundings from multiple perspectives. Berens positions the mirror ball and its reflections in contrast to the lens/screen relationship. This peculiar, giant, shiny object clashes with the mundane public spaces it passes through, seemingly of its own volition. As with the precarious sway of the skateboarding camera obscura, the mirror-ball uses farce to enchant. Incongruent with their surroundings, both mirror ball and camera obscura suggest distinct modes of interacting with the world around us.



LARK BUCKINGHAM

Lark Buckingham's films investigate the institutional monitoring that threatens one's body and individual privacy, and consider society's fraught relationship with technology. The artist approaches these topics through critical design projects coupled with an artist-initiated business start-up, which address surveillance and social media sharing.

Buckingham's current film project, *Tattletale Heart*, utilizes heart-rate monitoring technology as part of a conceptual intervention. The artist created three types of monitors that reveal how digital devices as simple and ubiquitous as heart-rate monitors expose the body to surveillance. The first, *Babump*, is embedded in a business-card holder, allowing employers to track employee heart rhythms during meetings, revealing information about stress levels. The second, *Tattletale Heart*, is available as a necklace, mobile video game, and phone app, each able to post cardiac rhythms to social media. Buckingham's film of the same title features the device amid a dystopia where new technologies blur privacy boundaries. The final piece of the *Tattletale* trilogy, *Meeglo*, is a hand-held meditation aid for those dealing with anxiety or posttraumatic stress disorder. Its changing colors provide biofeedback, helping users calm their breathing. Buckingham brands and creates an online presence for each device, presents the devices at conferences, and, with *Meeglo*, embarked on real-life product development. Buckingham's concern for personal autonomy, privacy, and accountability are evident in each project. These fully functional monitors employ satire to focus attention on our contemporary acceptance of technology and embrace of sharing via social media. They remind us that information is power, and power invites abuse.



JOSÉ JOAQUIN FIGUEROA

Working with media ranging from glitter to bouncy houses, José Joaquín Figueroa juxtaposes the sacred and the profane in installations that invite careful looking. He views his role as part-artist and part-shaman, guiding the viewer through a transformative, spiritual experience, however fleeting. Like Brazilian Neo-Concrete artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, Figueroa seeks to unite the corporeal and the visual. The artist states that he “resists reliance on specific forms,” instead favoring a general aesthetic sense that is perceived only through experience.

For this exhibition, Figueroa examines quintessential elements of our postmodern condition—the unapologetic cultural appropriation of traditional forms and rituals to create new objects and customs. In this process of recycling, the sacred is emptied of original meaning and transformed into a commodified trinket. An experienced traveler, the artist has observed the capacity of objects to root one in time and place, while also witnessing how colonization and imperialism have diminished cultural distinctions and thereby flattened experience. Recognizing his own social and cultural privilege as key to his ability to travel, Figueroa addresses our contemporary capability to be everywhere and nowhere at once. In one installation, the artist presents a theme park as a site of devotion, using the Catholic concept of limbo to parody the general malaise of postmodern spirituality. With icons from world religions and references to a nature-filled paradise, the theme park reveals a false promised land existing within a liminal space that spans both pleasure and torture—a quasi-limbo suggesting dystopia rather than nirvana.



CLEMENT HIL GOLDBERG

Clement Hil Goldberg has worked with film and animation for more than a decade. Using the labor-intensive technique of stop motion, Goldberg explores themes of extinction, identity, and otherness, often inspired by personal experiences. In *The Deer Inbetween* (2012), the artist examines the role of queerness within the spectrum of biological diversity. This diversity echoes Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, which argues that genetic variation allows species to adapt. Goldberg's anthropomorphic characters, voiced by local artists, illustrate animals' struggle for survival while interrogating a human-centric world.

In this exhibition, Goldberg presents the stop-motion video *Our Future Ends* (2015–ongoing) as part of an installation project that explores the accelerated endangerment and possible extinction of the lemurs of Madagascar. Extending the lemurs' habitat into the gallery space with a minimalist crystalline structure that houses the video, the artist invites audience members to immerse themselves in the installation's environment and engage the video's message of survival, loss, and hope. The characters in the video are hand-crafted lemur puppets, whose distinct features are informed by Goldberg's extensive research into the numerous species of lemurs and their behaviors. In one scene, the lemurs attend a rehab session and partake in psychedelic drugs in order to find a way to accept the terms of their inevitable extinction. A particularly rapid decline in the lemur population took place in the 1980s at the same time that the AIDS epidemic emerged. By bringing into parallel the marginalized in human society and those endangered by human action, Goldberg's work speaks of a common responsibility to all living beings that share this planet.



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JIN ZHU

Documentary photography and video form the basis of Jin Zhu's creative practice, which addresses the vulnerability of the displaced. In past projects, Zhu has focused on water usage in California's Central Valley as well as challenges to the water rights of native tribes along the Colorado River. In the 2016 video *A Picture of the City*, Zhu surveys the trauma of San Francisco's gentrification and mass evictions brought on by the influx of tech companies and real estate developers. The artist became involved in housing equity while interviewing residents of 1049 Market Street, the location of an eighty-tenant eviction that began in 2014 in order to convert the property into a high-profit office space. *Picture of the City* unifies tenants' memories of homes lost, the anxiety of displacement, and capitalism's indifference towards its effects on the tenants' lives. In 2014, as Zhu continued to document evictions around the city, she was evicted from her home. The inclusion of her own personal documentation in *Letters to the City* serves as a *memento mori*, an expression of both her loss and nostalgia for her former neighborhood.

Zhu's installations position these current evictions within the historical legacy of property claims and displacement in California. In the sixteenth-century, Spanish invaders of Mexico used the *requerimento*—a formal declaration similar to today's eviction notices—to seize land in the Americas. Zhu employs text, images, and maps to evoke these types of legal maneuvers and claims over territory. As part of her research, Zhu examines Spanish and indigenous documents including codex images that represent concepts of space, both before and after the colonial invasion. Zhu's work connects mapping and knowing one's place in the world with the ongoing struggle to preserve one's right to make a home.

ARTISTS

ISAAC VAZQUEZ AVILA has exhibited at the Worth Ryder Gallery, Berkeley, and at Project One, Hotel Biron, and Guerrero Gallery, San Francisco. His work is included in the Terry and Melissa Wolfe-Powers Collection. Vazquez Avila holds a BA in Latino studies from San Francisco State University.

MICHAEL BERENS has exhibited at Pro-Arts, Oakland; Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley; Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco; Granoff Center for the Creative Arts, Brown University; Sculpture Key West, Florida; and the Armory Show, Flux Factory, and Socrates Sculpture Park, all in New York. Berens holds a BFA from SUNY Purchase.

LARK BUCKINGHAM has shown at Frameline Film Festival, San Francisco International Arts Festival, SOMArts, Luggage Store Gallery, and Artists Television Access, all in San Francisco, and Portland Community Media in Portland, Oregon. Buckingham received a BA in visual and environmental studies from Harvard University.

JOSÉ JOAQUIN FIGUEROA has exhibited at Southern Exposure, Embarc Gallery, and Root Division, all in San Francisco; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Bogotá, Colombia; and Longwood Arts Project in New York. Figueroa earned a BFA from Cooper Union and attended Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture.

CLEMENT HIL GOLDBERG has exhibited work at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, SOMArts, Luggage Store Gallery, and Artists Television Access, all in San Francisco, and at over fifty international film and arts festivals including MIX NYC, Hamburg International Queer Film Festival, and Cleveland International Film Festival.

JIN ZHU has exhibited at Southern Exposure, the San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries, and Artist Television Access, San Francisco; Cantor Arts Center, Stanford; and Kala Art Institute, Berkeley Art Center, and Worth Ryder Gallery, Berkeley. Zhu holds a BA from Stanford University.

JEZ FLORES GARCÍA is a PhD candidate at UC Berkeley studying contemporary and Chicano art. She has a background in studio art and served as associate curator of contemporary art at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

