

JONATHAN  
FERRERA SOTO  
**TWICE**  
**THE LEGAL**  
**MINUTE**

JOSELOFF GALLERY  
**2.22.24 TO 3.23.24**

THE BROKEN  
MIRROR  
A REFLECTION ON  
JONATHAN  
HERRERA SOTO'S  
EXHIBITION  
TWICE THE LEGAL  
MINUTE  
BY CARRIE  
CUSHMAN

One of the highlights of my role as Gallery Director and Curator at the Hartford Art School is organizing the Georgette and Richard Koopman Distinguished Chair in the Visual Arts Exhibition. Each year, the prestigious teaching residency rotates through the School's departments; the faculty choose the Koopman Chair and determine what they will teach, and it is my job to put together an exhibition, which can range from career-spanning retrospectives to community-based collaborations to more straightforward displays of new work. Having recently completed his MFA at The Yale School of Art, I anticipated that Jonathan Herrera Soto's exhibition would be the latter. While the work on view in this exhibition is indeed quite new, I have since learned that (in all the best ways possible) there is nothing straightforward about his art and his practice.

## **(MIS)TRANSLATIONS**

**“THE BROKEN MIRROR MAY ACTUALLY  
BE AS VALUABLE AS THE ONE WHICH IS  
SUPPOSEDLY UNFLAWED.”  
— SALMAN RUSHDIE**

During one of our first conversations, I was surprised to learn that Jonathan Herrera Soto had already settled on a title for his exhibition—*Twice the Legal Minute*. I was even more surprised (and if we’re being honest, somewhat skeptical) when he told me that the title was taken from a viral Internet video. The video comes from the body camera of a police officer as he informs a young man that his blood alcohol level is over twice the legal limit, to which the man responds in disbelief, “Twice the legal minute?!” The blunder, coupled with the arrestee’s genuine perplexity, is undoubtedly funny. Yet, the power dynamic—young Hispanic man vs. the police—and the



A House to Hold Everything, 2024  
Clay and power steering fluid on panel, blanket, 50" x 60" (8" x 10" panel)

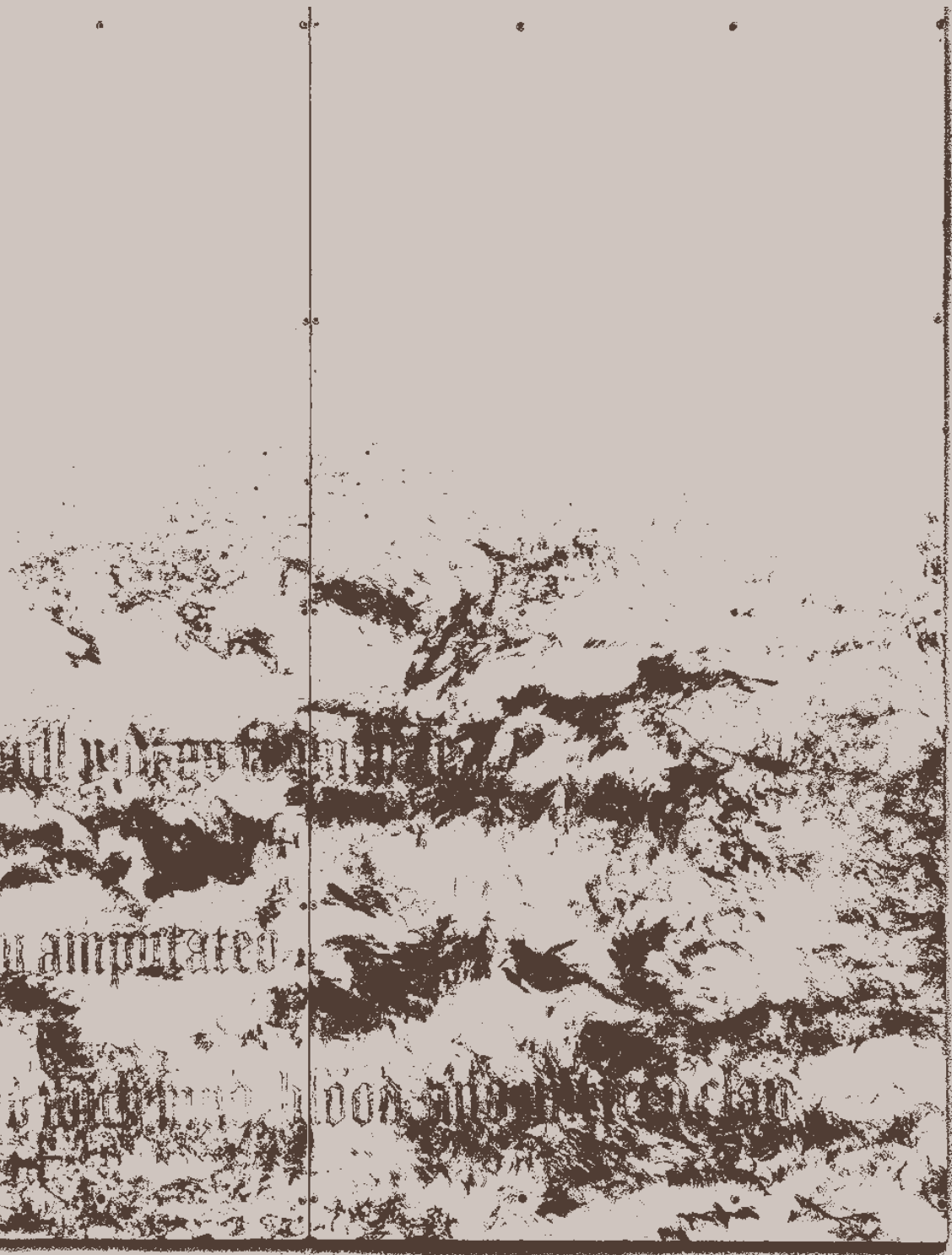
context—post-George Floyd America—also conjures emotions ranging from pity to grief. Within this tragicomedy, Herrera Soto finds inspiration. In the miscommunication, he recognizes a fleeting moment in which two realities compete for legitimacy, asking what can be learned when a slippage in language creates a fault line in social space. The two realities are paradoxical and yet plausible, and, in that plausibility, alternate worlds open up.

This line of thinking belies Herrera Soto's interest in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and fantastical realism. In another early conversation, he referenced the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez's acclaimed novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and the imperative of fantasy to, in the author's own words, "render our lives believable."<sup>1</sup> Here, fantasy is understood as a hyper reality rather than beyond reality. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes (in yet another

beautiful essay proffered to me by Herrera Soto), “Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.”<sup>2</sup> In the short time in which I’ve known Herrera Soto, I’ve come to understand his art as a humble portal to this unending story. The objects, prints, found materials, and drawings that make up this exhibition—and their careful arrangement over the terrain of the gallery—generate overlapping narratives that challenge the aesthetic and political stories that we tell ourselves about art.

The power of fantastical realism brings to mind one of my own author-heroes, Salman Rushdie, and particularly Rushdie’s short essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” in which he asks what can be





A City Amputated, 2021-2023  
Charcoal transfer on three sanded homasote boards, 144" x 96" x 1/2"

gained (rather than lost) in translation. A reflection on what it means to be writing about his homeland of India from outside of India, from memory, Rushdie learns to embrace fantastical realities and fragmented pasts—"the broken mirror"—as inevitable. Not only is fiction inevitable, but it is essential. Rushdie writes how his own "shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities."<sup>3</sup> He draws a connection between his literary excavations and archaeology. In a similar vein, Herrera Soto speaks of an archive collaged together from experimental fragments, failed attempts, and unconscious scribbles—parcels of (mis)translations that are illuminating precisely because of the gaps within and between them, because they do not come together to form a coherent whole.

## FRAGMENTS

**“THE PURSUIT OF THE  
NEW DEFINES IMPERIALISM.”  
– ARIELLA AISHA AZOULAY**

Herrera Soto describes his archive as having a visual language of accumulation, debris, and neglect. Visual language, yes, but it would be a mistake to assume that the objects in this exhibition have been subjected to (or rescued from) states of neglect. Here, the closest he's come to that is a childhood blanket, which, despite its resurrection from the margins of his mother's home, might be the most pristine object on display in the show. Somewhat paradoxically, Herrera Soto applies great time and care to generating materials and aesthetics that society has come to associate with neglect. For instance, he manufactures rust by wrapping metal objects in fabric and submerging them in vinegar for days. The chemical reaction

results in an abstract composition, markings that he describes as a form of holding or caress. In other cases, he paints or prints with materials like clay, dirt, and motor oil. His brother, a car mechanic, collects old, oil-soaked rags for Herrera Soto's use. Motor oil begins as the color of olive oil and turns a deep umber only through friction, reuse, and overwork. When viewed in this context, the entire exhibition takes on a warm, haptic energy. That warmth is conveyed through the color palette—everything is the color of earth—but it is affected through the labor of care and repair.

Here, DIY strategies (a pair of patched trousers, for example) might represent economic precarity or “the art of making do,” as Herrera Soto puts it, but at another level these strategies demonstrate a way of art making (and “making it” as an artist) that flouts the shiny, the new, and the rarified. While there is certainly an affinity with the

aesthetics of the everyday championed by Minimalism and Happenings, I think of Herrera Soto's praxis as adjacent to these twentieth-century art movements. His approach to art making is more subtle but no less heroic, as he concerns himself with the pressing issues of the (art) world in the twenty-first century. In the critic Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's groundbreaking tomb *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, she unequivocally connects the contemporary world's appetite for newness with the legacies of fifteenth-century imperial projects: "The new unfolds in a particular temporality—that of historical progress—without which nothing can be announced as new. The principle of the new has become the source of its own authority; the newness of the new has become its sole *raison d'être*, and—like colonial expansion and capitalist growth—it has become voracious and insatiable."<sup>4</sup> In this light, Herrera Soto's

precise choice of palette and materials, combined with his aesthetic and conceptual preference for fragmentation, appears to forecast the inevitable result of this relentless historical churn: destruction. His intervention, however, is not to portray or portend destruction, but rather to show us what it looks like to build a shared world based on the values of care and repair within the ruins of modernity.

In another important twist, Herrera Soto's work relies on one of the organizational foundations of imperialism—the archive—while committing to Azoulay's imperative to unlearn it. How exactly do you unlearn an archive? In Le Guin's essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," she grapples with the theory that containers—rather than tools or weapons—were the first markers of human civilization:

“If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful,



In-progress study of "A Cue for Closeness" series, 2024  
Rust dye on hotel bed sheets, found objects, Measurements vary



In-progress study of "Wreck" series, 2024  
Clay and vinegar on hotel gym towel, pillow sheet, 2024  
Measurements vary

edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then the next day you probably do much the same again—if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.”<sup>5</sup>

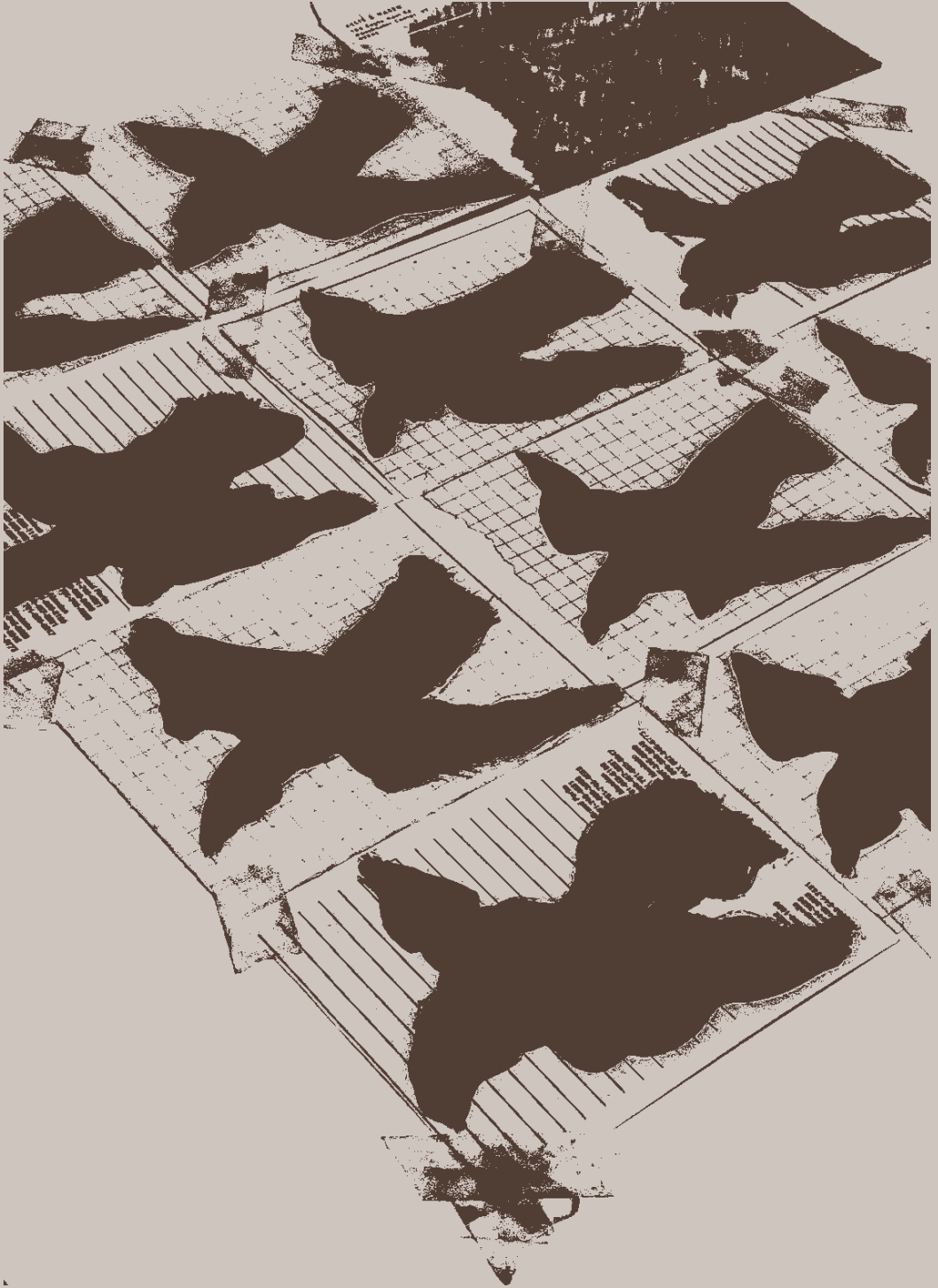
This theory reclaims what is human(e) about the act of collecting, an act that otherwise has been tarnished by centuries of looting and pillaging objects only to sterilize them through artificial processes of categorization and display within institutions of higher learning, such as archives, libraries, universities, and

museums. When we unlearn the archive as a technology of control, collecting becomes the most basic act, encompassing humankind's necessary resourcefulness but also our plain curiosity. It's like the old labor union saying: people deserve bread, but they deserve roses, too. Within Herrera Soto's archive we can find the bread—the toiling, the making do, the strategies for survival—and the roses. For, who doesn't find joy, humor, or intrigue in the false starts, the incomplete bits, the repeated mis-takes? Rushdie drives home the value of fragments: "The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects."<sup>6</sup> In reconstructing his archive in the space of the gallery, Herrera Soto honors that thrill of discovery by mapping out the conditional nature of his art and his work.

# RECONSTRUCTIONS

**“SHAPES ARE HOW YOU MAKE  
DISTINCTIONS, GET THE LAY OF THE  
LAND, OR EVEN TELL TIME.”  
— AMY SILLMAN**

Herrera Soto speaks of his approach to installation as creating a “constellation of things.” The word constellation brings to mind clusters or bits of matter operating in relation to the gravitational pull of a central mass. Yet, he is more interested in moving our attention to peripheries and edges rather than to centers—to the edges of the art object, the frame, the wall, or the entire social system in which the gallery came to be. He does this through the careful study of spatial relationships à la Amy Sillman. In the essay “Further Notes on Shape,” she writes that “basically everything in the world is a shape. It’s so mundane and so ubiquitous: every edge, corner, blob, form, silhouette,



In-progress study, 2024  
Clay, graphite, and motor oil on paper, masking tape, and envelope  
Measurements vary

or negative space is something you have to navigate to get through a room. If you think of shape as figure/ground, then every shape is a figure and the ground is the whole world. Shapes are how you make distinctions, get the lay of the land, or even tell time.”<sup>7</sup> In treating the entire space of the gallery as compositional terrain, Herrera Soto takes a bird’s-eye view of that figure/ground relationship and obscures our assumptions about how it is meant to communicate.

Broad open spaces punctuated by moments of density become a visual metaphor for the medium of printmaking (but also archaeology, translation, memory, literature...), in which the artist must redact certain information in order to reveal other information. Herrera Soto pushes this metaphor in other artistic processes, such as stenciling, freehand attempts to re-paint the same shape (in this case, the silhouette of a bird), or the gel medium transfer process. He uses parallel

lines to direct our attention across space followed by tactics of doubling, splitting, and repetition to halt it. The pairing of framed works of art with found objects, of paintings with sketches, calls into question the hierarchies, both conscious and unconscious, that we abide in our art making and art viewing. What forces legitimate these hierarchies, and how can a specific recipe of materials, aesthetics, and processes come together to reveal the fault lines beneath them?

In his exploration of the possibilities within the figure/ground relationship, Herrera Soto focuses not only on the edges of the artworks but on *the edges of how art works*, drawing attention to the peripheries of the art world, where resources are scarce. He asks what the visuality of lack is and attempts to answer that question through spatial relationships that embrace the borderlands, creating yet another metaphor: in this case, for the political workings of the art world.



Detail of "Untitled (flag)" 2024  
Shellac, clay, rust, graphite and vinegar on drop cloth, 10" x 8"





Artist in studio on a sunny morning, 2024

In this way, I believe that Herrera Soto responds seriously to the filmmaker Hito Steyerl's call for contemporary artists to forgo the representation of politics (which can be so overly didactic) and instead to explore "the politics of the field of art as a place of work. Simply look at what it does," she writes, "not what it shows."<sup>8</sup>

It is my sincere hope that visitors to this exhibition take the time to explore what Jonathan Herrera Soto's art *does*, to come to understand the capacity of aesthetics, of form, of figure and space to foster new patterns of critical observation (by which I mean seeing but also feeling and thinking) that can be applied to political revelations and, if we are lucky, action. Again, Steyerl: "Art is not outside politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution, and its reception."<sup>9</sup> Here, the archive of (mis) translations as reconstructed fragment by fragment in the gallery hits all those points: production, distribution, and

reception. For Herrera Soto, operating at twice the legal minute is a labor of love, a labor that gives shape to alternate, plausible worlds, worlds of broken mirrors, of new figure/ground relationships, of bread and of roses.

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, “Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America,” *The Nobel Prize*, December 8, 1982, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1982/marquez/lecture/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” (1986), in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands” (1982), in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London; New York: Verso, 2020), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Le Guin, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Sillman, “Further Notes on Shape,” *The OG #14* (Spring 2020), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” *e-flux journal 21* (December 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67696/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



Studio experiments and work in-progress, 2024

### About the artist

Jonathan Herrera Soto (b. 1994, Chicago) lives and works in New Haven, CT. He received an MFA from The Yale School of Art in Painting & Printmaking and a BFA from Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Solo exhibitions of Herrera Soto's work include "In Between / Underneath" at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and "All at Once" at Cohen Gallery, Brown University. He recently received the Yale Prison Education Initiative Fellowship, Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship, Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship, and is currently the Koopman Distinguished Chair in the Visual Arts at the Hartford Art School. His work will be featured in the upcoming group exhibition "No Bodies" at Real Art Ways in Hartford.

### About the HAS Galleries

Located at the University of Hartford in central Connecticut, the Hartford Art School Galleries encompass the Joseloff Gallery, the Donald and Linda Silpe Gallery, the Helen S. Kaman Print Study Center, and the Art on Campus initiative. Our purpose is to launch conversations, expand creative thinking, and kindle engagement with our community through the lens of contemporary art. From renowned visiting artists to faculty and student shows, a variety of exhibitions are on display for all to experience year-round. We are free and open to the public—a hub for everyone in the community to gather, learn, and imagine through art.

## About the author

Carrie Cushman serves as the Edith Dale Monson Gallery Director and Curator at the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford. Carrie is a distinguished museum leader, curator, and educator with a Ph.D. in art history from Columbia University in the histories of photography and contemporary Japanese art. Prior to coming to Hartford, she was the Linda Wyatt Gruber '66 Curatorial Fellow in Photography at the Davis Museum, Wellesley College. Recognized for her prolific scholarship, she has curated exhibitions, published catalogues, and received prestigious grants and prizes, including the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Grant and the Chino Kaori Memorial Essay Prize. Carrie contributes to scholarly journals, nurtures emerging talents in photography, and co-created the educational website, "Behind the Camera: Gender, Power, and Politics in the History of Japanese Photography." Her recent publications include *Going Viral: Photography, Performance, and the Everyday* (2020) and *Komatsu Hiroko: Creative Destruction* (2022).

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Land Acknowledgment Statement,  
University of Hartford

We acknowledge that the University of Hartford resides on the historic homelands of the Sicaogs, Poquonocks, Wangunks and Tunxis; and that what is now called Connecticut encompasses the homelands of the Wappinger, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Nipmuc, Quinnipiac, Niantic, and Lenape, as well as other Indigenous Peoples. We honor, respect, and appreciate the relationship that exists among these communities, nations, lands, and waterways, and aspire to uphold our responsibilities according to their example of stewardship.

Anti-Violence Statement

All ceasefires are humanitarian, and the artist supports every effort to prevent the loss of civilian lives at the hands of military force, in Palestine, Congo, Sudan, and elsewhere.



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