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If the Shoe Fits

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June 21, 2019

Willie Cole's shoe

sculptures are like warped, grinning Rubik's cubes, complex goblins that feel like guardians of a wizardly secret—a password lies on the tips of their tongues, one that could open a gateway to a fabulous realm or, conversely, a trapdoor to a chamber deep below the gallery floor, where they keep curious gawkers who ask too many questions.

To complement and enhance the gargoyles are pictures where the masks become the faces on elegantly posed women, as well as a splaying round wall sculpture exposing only the soles of the feet—a medallion that feels like

the aforementioned gateway. In the opening of the show is a brilliant figurative bronze sculpture whose basic forms are high heel shoes, but whose composite effect is that of a partly graceful, partly leering, partly animalistic female form—a fantasy that high heels have always made it their business to promote.

Interview by John Martin Tilley

office caught up with the artist to discuss the wondrous possibilities of footwear, art, and puzzles.

Tell me about your work.

My work in general, since about 1989 or 90, has been about taking objects that clearly from Western culture and recasting them in a tribal narrative, often with things that look African art, but because of the idea of tribal, they start to look like other cultures as well, especially Mexico and Asia. In my mind or the back of my imagination I proceed as if I'm trying to extract the spirit from the original object, so I don't work with a sketch or a plan, I just play with them for hours until something emerges. So in the case of the shoe masks, I feel that each shoe had the personality and the history of the person who wore them—they're all used shoes, gently used I should say—and they kind of make their own personality, I just have to remain open to that and put them together.

Another aspect of that same work is that I'm very interested in making work that looks like they come from the past, the present, and the future—I call that collapsed time, where everything comes into a single point called the now. And that makes them look very futuristic, but they might be put together in such a way that reflects a more ancient tradition. I'm also interested in multiplying objects, so I do a lot of work with water bottles, which is the probably the most exact on my formula for analysis—I take a single water bottle and multiply it, so now it's a thousand or three thousand water bottles, and it becomes something else. In that case, I tell myself that I'm doing what nature does by taking a single molecule and multiplying it to make something completely new.

I didn't even think of it as being tribal, but now that you say that it makes sense. I just saw the shoe faces and thought they were silly and refreshing.

Yeah, they just popped out. In the front of the gallery, I have a bronze, full-bodied figure. I think of them all as female because the shoes were females, so there's a female energy that I'm extracting from these objects.



Above: 'Eye Candy' and 'Black Panther'.

Yeah, it's amazing what you were able to create—it doesn't seem forced at all, either. Did you set out to make faces or a body, or is that just how it ended up? That's just what the shoes spoke to you?

In the beginning of the process, back in the late 80s or 90s I had a show in Philadelphia, and I wanted to make a bodysuit—my friend had given my five pairs of his sneakers and I needed so many more to cover the entire bodysuit, these were high-top, quality sneakers, I wanted the wearer to bounce up and down and see the shoes kick. So I went to a thrift store and I saw the high-heeled shoes. So, right away I switched from sneakers to high heels. I didn't know what I was going to make with them, but I knew they had great potential because they had great color, they had great shape, great history, great symbolism. I

collected probably around 100 pairs at that time, and I played with them for about a month or two before I was able to recognize that the stiletto heel could be like a fang. And that led to the face aspect of it.

Now, at that time I made a chair out of high-heeled shoes because of Imelda Marcos, she had so many shoes, she was the wife of the President of the Philippines, so I made a throne for Imelda out of high-heeled shoes. And I made two faces, not masks for the wall but free-standing faces, and then many years went by, but in 2005 I received a fellowship at the University of Georgia—I was on campus for four years, they gave me a stipend, etc, but I didn't take any art supplies with me, not even paintbrushes. So while sitting at my empty studio there, I said, 'Maybe I'll take up the shoes again.' So I went to the local thrift store and told them that I wanted to make things out of shoes and that I would buy every shoe they had for fifty cents a pound, and they gave me like a million shoes, and the University of Georgia paid for them all at fifty cents a pound. So I continued with the shoes in 2005 with no real intention in mind. By the time this show came along, I knew I could make faces out of shoes—so I intended to make faces, I just didn't know what the faces would look like.

I would go into my studio and be confronted by rows and rows and tables and table of shoes, and I don't know what my intention is going to be, but I know I'm going to be there for three hours playing with the shoes. And some shoes suggest, perhaps a very long heel or a platform shoe might suggest a body, where as a pump might suggest a nose or an ear. So I let the shoes lead me to the final result.

It's interesting that it started out as sneakers and became high heels, because I feel like right now a lot of people who used to wear high heels are now wearing sneakers instead. You said the high heel has a lot of symbolism and power, what do you think those are?

The high heel for some women becomes a power shoe. This morning, I was at my fiancé's house and she gets up to go to work and I could hear her shoes coming down the hallway. It's almost like the drum announcing the coming of the king or queen. Even today with her colleagues it's like she can say she's high because she's wearing the high-heeled shoes. Those are some of the more positive symbolisms of the high-heeled shoe, but it also has the opposite suggestions as well. It could inhibit one's ability to run. And nowadays, with the branding and the depending on the maker of the shoe, it becomes a status symbol related to economics, like, 'Oh, she's wearing Jimmy Choo,' or whatever. And the designers sometimes do things to the shoes to suggest power or domination.



Above: 'Happy' and 'Street Dragon'.

Do you think you're playing into that with your tribal faces?

Well I'm letting the shoe lead me. If the shoe is pointing that way, I go that way. I'm pulling out the spirit of the shoe, or the wearer of the shoe. I'm not really dictating anything. When I was a kid, I played with Erector Sets and Tinkertoys and things you put together, and these were essentially the same thing—it's like a puzzle but the box has no picture on it. I know there's something in there, so I'm just looking for what that is.

I can feel that from the sculptures. They look like puzzles almost.

Yeah, I really move them around until they fit perfectly on their own. I don't cut them or change them in any way. So if two fit together and suggest something, I go with that. I work on several at once, so I'm able to just move around the room and if it doesn't fit here, okay, move on to the next one. Another thing that attracted me to shoes, was in high school my major was fashion design, so that helped me to appreciate the beauty of the shoes as well.



Above: 'Woman In Heels' and 'Sole Flower'.

It's funny about shoes too, because they're definitely fabulous but of the articles of clothing that you wear they're kind of the grossest. That's the thing about shoes.

The good thing is that women will buy shoes and wear them twice with an outfit, and then not wear them a lot. So when I went to buy shoes, I looked for the ones that had been worn the least. I live in New Jersey, and my local thrift store gets new shoes from one of the chain stores that gives them to the thrift store—so I was able to buy a lot of new shoes as well for a really low price.

But they are the foundation. They're close to the Earth. And they have memory. I can see the shoe take the shape of the foot that's in it sometimes. So all those things are feeding my choices. Also, I'm not the first artist to use the shoe. Dalí made a hat out of a shoe. It's almost like a readymade with a history. I make a lot of pieces out of steam irons, and Man Ray did the famous piece with the flatiron.

'Bella Figura' is on view at Alexander and Bonin through June 22nd, 2019. All images courtesy the gallery. Lead image: 'Ashley Bikerton'.

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Under the Scalpel with Panteha Abareschi

— Art

November 09, 2020

With the violent precision of a scalpel, LA based artist Panteha Abareshi is steadfast in their commitment to unflinching brutality. Living with sickle cell zero beta thalassemia, a genetic blood disorder that causes debilitating pain and bodily deterioration that both increase with age, Abareshi creates work that is carnal in its refusal of the sentimental.

Their latest residency at Human Resources aims to explore the complexities of living within a body that is highly monitored, constantly examined, and made to feel like a specimen. Abareshi gave *office* a call to discuss their artistic process and latest projects.

Interview by Oliver Misraje

Photos by Justine Chen

Can you talk a bit about your latest residency with Human Resources?

The residency itself is called the Time, Space and Money Residency. It's been almost exactly a year since my last solo show, HIPAA Violations, so it's interesting to note how markedly different my work is now. So much of the past was about imbuing my own identity into performance pieces. Now, instead of exploring illness as it relates to my body, this latest project is more a study of The Body—capital T, capital B—and its abstraction. I'm trying to approach this expression of the human body as defunct, restrictive, and inherently violent idea—from a place removed from references of my own hyper specific emotions and memories.

What does that look like in your work now?

I'm doing more sculpture—a lot of my past work involved integrating medical ephemera used on my body, and turning that into sculpture—whereas now I'm actually fabricating things. Specifically taking medical devices, like mobility aids, and taking them apart and making them into new things. So, still in the same vein that I was doing it before, where I'm using all sorts of medical materials. The difference is now I'm actually turning them into materials instead of recontextualizing them into sculptures.



How do you integrate violence into your performance pieces?

The idea of brutality and violence is so deeply rooted in my work. I think that violence is in every part of language; it's written into the way that we are intimate with one another, in the ways that we have standards around care. Even separated from illness—separated from the body as something that's experiencing violence at the hands of the the Western medical world or at the hands of its own biological system attacking itself—but completely removed from all of that, just being able to acknowledge that humans are so inherently emotionally carnivorous. I want to be able to express that without it being moralistically tainted, it's not about whether it's right or that it's wrong, it's beyond that.

Do you mind talking about how anger functions within the process?

Definitely. For a long time there was so much anger behind everything that my body was experiencing and is still experiencing. I felt really

inclined to create pieces where I was basically just telling the audience that they had to sit there and endure what I was going to show them and that it was going to be really uncomfortable for both of us, for everyone involved. They just had to shut up and take it basically. Most of my first video and performance pieces were so tangibly violent. Not only violence against my own body, but I was also bringing in archival footage of surgeries and these really grotesque sort of things that are unquestionably difficult for some people to watch. There was even a particular performance piece where I burried myself under scalpels that I ended up catching a lot of slack for.



**You talk a lot about being monitored and probed.
How does the gaze, medical or otherwise, affect**

your work?

Yeah, the medical gaze is interesting because I have so little distance from it, regardless of how truly critical I am. I'll be making a piece tapping into the emotional anguish of hospitalization and then, boom, I'll be hospitalized the next day and I'll lose two weeks in the hospital. I'll come out and I'll go back to that piece and I'll be like, no, no, no, it's all wrong. I have to completely redo this. There's a collapse of the boundaries between my bodily autonomy and the medical complex, so there's practically no way to exist right now in the United States with a life threatening degenerative illness in a way that you are not absolutely trapped under the thumb of doctors and big pharma. I'm still learning every day the ways in which not only am I being surveilled, but that I'm surveilling myself and that people in my life are surveilling me.

There's a proliferation of the term 'body' in the art world— 'black bodies,' 'disabled bodies,' 'queer bodies,' etc. What is your relationship to the term? Is it dehumanizing?

I think that we are so comfortable with using the word body when talking about blackness, queerness, transness, all these things, because to objectify the other is also written into our language super conveniently. When I say "body" I am fully referring to my body as a proper noun, like an object. There is no purpose in denying the fact that there is such an immense amount of objectification that my body is going through. I always have to capitalize The Body because it's something that I'm observing and collecting data from. It's so much more than just being inside of it.

"Violence is in

**every part of
language—it's
written into the
way that we are
intimate with
one another, in
the way we
have standards
around care."**



1/1



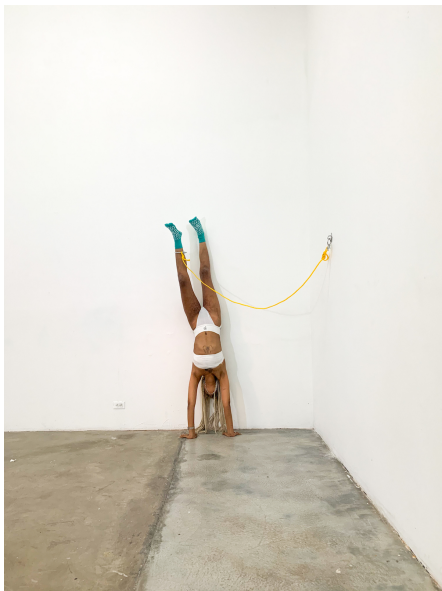
I understand that with your condition, you have a shortened life expectancy. How does that awareness affect your work?

Since I was about 5, I was first made aware of the fact that I would be dying young, so growing up in the medical complex has removed any

rose-tint about the matter. In a lot of cases, especially when my health is the worst, death is a comfort. There's nothing more comforting to me than the finality of life. I've medically died and been resuscitated roughly 5 times now. So "recovery" or resuscitation is such a nuanced concept, because dying was such an innately peaceful experience that I don't want to return to my body when it happens.

Are you comfortable talking about your experience dying?

Yeah totally. Again, I'm pretty detached about death, but essentially they overdosed me on painkillers just trying to treat my pain. They just titrate it too high and then all of a sudden I'm code blue. My heart is stopped. It's like there is nothing, every time it has happened. It's so hard to articulate the feeling of literally being brought back into a body that is so hostile and just wishing that you didn't have to be.





So what place does death occupy for you in your life?

My relationship to death now is so tied to other people, it's not even about me at all. Death is about my father—the thought of my father outliving me makes me so sad because I know that that would devastate him. And so when I end up talking about death, it's always like a conversation about love. It sounds saccharine. But it's like that. It's true. It's true.

You've talked about the separation you experience of the mind and the body. According to your belief system, where that does that leave the soul?

As I've gotten older I've had to reconcile that gap between body, mind and soul. For me, it's the hyper evolved part of the human mind that is so lost in its vast consciousness. That is what the soul is to me. It's that space, that cavern between body and mind where I have to be just to like survive the pain to survive it every day. The concept of the soul

ties so much into the holistic thought process that I had to develop around pain just to survive it. It's a place down. Very, very, very, very down. That's where it exists for me. I wouldn't use the word soul, but it's that's where real consciousness is.

**“There's nothing
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I've medically
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**(FOR PARTS)**from **Panteha Abareshi**

04:33

(FOR PARTS) from Panteha Abareshi on Vimeo.

Just to close, do you have any upcoming shows or projects we should keep an eye out for?

Yes! I have a solo show at the Barnsdale Museum here in LA in February. It's going to debut first digitally, then half way through the show it'll open physically at a limited capacity.

Thank you for your time. This was a fascinating interview.

Thank you, I really enjoyed this conversation. I appreciate being able to talk about these topics with someone I trust.

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The reveal of Wolfson's recent work at David Zwirner.



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Urs Fischer's Rotten Foundation

Almost accidental politics by Urs.

On Monuments

— Art



October 28, 2020

Iván Argote makes art for those who feel the thorns of the land we step on and choose not to ignore the bleeding. His works, which have been created for over fifteen years, have negotiated with power, place, and iconography in ways that contest colonial notions of honor and progress. And, at its heart, his works employ irony, humor, and nuance in ways that invoke, above all, questions for how we got here rather than answers for where to go next.

Born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia, and based in Paris, Iván's work and considerations span across the western imagination in its manifestations in the Americas and western Europe. His near-obsession with monuments to colonial histories and their implications as tumors on continuously stolen and pillaged lands derives from a life-long history in leftist considerations.

Interview by Saam Niami**Lead photo, *Turistas (Don Garcia)*, 2012.****C-print. Unframed: 160 x 120 cm | 63 x 47 1/4 in. Framed: 165 x 125 x 5 cm | 64 15/16 x 49 3/16 x 1 15/16 in.****Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.**

His pseudo-realist installations, which involve colonist statues covered in South American ponchos, grand statues of horse-riding conquerors, sans-the-conqueror, and flaccid depictions of obelisks drained of their origin, stand in defiant contrast to colonial imaginations of superiority and divine greatness. And, at the end of the day, he seems to just be having fun with it.

His show, *On Monuments*, is on display at Perrotin's Viewing Salon through November 6th. Iván and I spoke over email about Parisian rain, t-rex sized pigeons, and being a cultural entity.



Left — *Turistas (King Charles III of Spain)*, 2013. C-print. Unframed:

160 x 120 cm | 63 x 47 1/4 in. Framed: 165 x 125 x 5 cm | 64
15/16 x 49 3/16 x 1 15/16 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Right — *Empire*, 2020. Concrete, wood, gold leaf. 211 x 124 x 55 cm
| 83 1/16 x 48 13/16 x 21 5/8 in. Photographer: Tanguy Beurdeley.
Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Hi Iván, how are you doing?

Good!

Where are you now?

In my studio, in the north of Paris, in the office. It's raining today.

What has been on your mind?

Oh, so many things. I've been thinking about a public commission, of which I'm a finalist, for the Urbanism Research Center in Marseille. I want to create something inspired by Trisha Brown's performance, titled *Roof Piece*. I've been thinking about a new way to manage my studio—my studio manager left and we just hired a new person. I want to change the way we work, maybe collaborate more with other teams. My girlfriend and I are thinking about moving to a bigger apartment. I've been thinking about Covid, and that it will likely last. Thinking about my family in Colombia; it's very difficult right now, violence has increased, the government is negligent and corrupt. I've been thinking about the US election.

What are you working on now?

Beside the Marseille project, I've been planning for my next solo show at Perrotin New York (September 2021), which will be a continuation of our Viewing Salon, *On Monuments* — a reflection on the value,

use, and pertinence of monuments. I want to generate proposals for a critical approach to monuments, monuments that criticize themselves. I am also working on a solo show at Dortmund Kunstverein, where we will organize protests every week.

I am working on a public commission for Sciences Po (Political Science School in Paris)—six massive concrete arches with the text engraved. Also, a commission for a public park in Berlin—a large-scale permanent project, consisting of different bridges around the park, so I am in touch with engineers and landscape artists solving some details of the project. Lastly, I was picked as a finalist for the Plinth project on the Highline in New York—I proposed a pigeon in the scale of a Tyrannosaurus Rex (20 ft high), so I've been scanning pigeons in 3D and creating a model about two feet high, that's a funny one.





Left — *Horse (New York, Union Square)*, 2011. C-print. Framed: 70 x 50 cm. | 27 1/2 x 19 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Top right — *Etcétera: en couvrant avec des miroirs Francisco de Orellana, le soi-disant découvreur de l'Amazonie. Parc national, Bogotá (Etcétera: Cubriendo con espejos a Francisco de Orellana, supuesto descubridor del Amazonas. Parque Nacional, Bogotá)*, 2012 – 2018.

C-print. Unframed: 158 x 158 cm | 62 3/16 x 62 3/16 in. Framed: 161 x 161 x 5 cm | 63 3/8 x 63 3/8 x 1 15/16 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Bottom right — *Horse (Paris, Louvre)*, 2011. C-print. Framed: 70 x 50 cm. | 27 1/2 x 19 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

I had the pleasure of looking through your works in the Perrotin viewing salon with the *On Monuments* series. You've been engaging and negotiating with the idea of the monument for

years, but the world had a recent reckoning with monuments over the summer with the Black Lives Matter movements as those in the Americas and Europe vandalized and destroyed monuments to colonial settlers. How did you react to this movement? How did you feel it connected with your work?

Well, the idea of monuments and their meaning is something I have been focused on for the past fifteen years. So, when I saw the current movement going this way, I was very glad. I feel we need to be more critical not only towards the monuments that exist but also towards the idea of the monument itself. Lectures on history and governments' narratives need to include critical teaching. We cannot continue simply adulating our supposed heroes, we need to have a critical lens on our own past if we want to conciliate our present and create a more inclusive future.

Clearly, 'Monuments' is a theme that has permeated throughout your works for years. What is a monument to you? Does the power of a monument change for you within its context and environment? What monuments would you like to see in the world?

Historically, monuments have been created to write a certain history into our urban spaces—they celebrate power, a particular vision; they are propaganda. I feel we should have conversations, create negotiations, modifications to the monuments that exist, and create others that contribute to a different narrative, different perspective. For example, Christopher Columbus... I don't feel we need to take down Columbus's sculptures, I feel the sculpture should be changed, moved, or that other sculptures should be added—texts, objects, different kinds of interventions, so we can include the perspective of

people who feel he represents the abuse, slavery, and domination of American colonization.

I also had the great pleasure of reading through your book, *Let's Write a History of Hopes*, and it mentioned that you grew up in one of the communes formed in Bogotá during the Colombian revolution, and I read somewhere else that your father was a part of the revolution. How did experiencing revolution during your formative years, especially a leftist revolution, influence your practice?

I grew up in a very politically engaged family, true believers of change, and yes, revolution. I learned as a kid that there were many unfair things in the world—against the most fragile and humble people, but also against indigenous communities, Black communities, women, LGBTQ communities. My family talked to me about colonization and about different religions with a critical eye (we are atheist). This was since I was four or five years old. It was truly the way I was raised. For example, my family's passion is to talk about macro and microeconomics—my mother is an economist, my father an elected politician—we talk, argue, and also have fun talking about all this. So, of course, I see the world with that filter. My years, experiences, travels, and the people I have met have given nuances to that. I have enriched or changed some visions, maybe elaborated on others in a more precise way.



Left — *Turistas (Carlos I de España y V de Alemania, Madrid, Parque el Retiro)*, 2012. C-print. Unframed: 160 x 120 cm | 63 x 47 1/4 in. Framed: 165 x 125 x 5 cm | 64 15/16 x 49 3/16 x 1 15/16 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Right — *Horse (Paris, Pont Neuf)*, 2011. C-print. Framed: 70 x 50 cm. | 27 1/2 x 19 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

There are many people, whom I believe are wrong, that believe that political art or political art installations are not art. What are your views on politics in art?

All art is political, all activity is political. Everything we do is an action and a decision that has to do with politics. Some art purposefully deals with political or historical issues. Art, for me, is a philosophical tool—we generate questions and think about the way in which we understand the world, our emotions, our ideas. That has to do with politics. I feel all different types of art are important, it is not one kind

or another. Those who say that art shouldn't be political are maybe afraid to question their own ideas and vision.

What have been your favorite reactions to your monument installations, both positive and negative?

Sometimes, I manage to have complicity from police officers. In Spain, for example, I was putting South American ponchos on statues of Spanish Kings in Parque el Retiro. After I put four ponchos on these big statues, the police showed up. I was on a statue and we started having a conversation, I made a joke. I said I was putting the ponchos on because it was too cold, it was winter. We laughed, and then for two to three minutes, we had a serious conversation about our feelings on the relationship between Spain and Latin America. Then, they asked me to remove the ponchos and let me go. Some rare times I have had problems, but most of the time I end up meeting people, like in Spain, talking about monuments, sometimes in a serious tone, sometimes laughing. Recently a guy insulted me in Nice because I climbed up and hugged a statue. They are very conservative down there.

Where would you like the future of art criticism and discourse to go? How would you want to influence that discussion?

I feel that sometimes in the arts we talk a lot about ourselves. I feel, instead, we need to open the debate and be part of larger conversations. I don't know if I can influence that, but I feel we should make an effort to use this tool, art, to explore and contribute to other fields. In the way we educate in schools, in the way we conceive our histories, in the way we organize our cities and economies. I believe culture precedes economy. I mean, I feel culture is at the base of everything, before being 'economical' entities we are 'cultural' entities. Today, in a general way, we think of the economy at the center of

everything and that's a sophism. We generate economies with our cultural behaviors. I feel we can generate change working on culture, thinking about culture in a deeper and more profound way than "cultural activities," understanding that culture is the engine of our societies.

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I Could Be Your Underworld

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Ascensions

— Art

October 25, 2020

Upon walking into "Ascensions" at Off Paradise Gallery, you feel an undeniable pull toward the far left corner of the long and open room, a desire to ascend through the space. The mostly monochromatic exhibition moves diagonally across the room, but color leaks in as you approach the finale, which offers an

optimistic pop of color.

The exhibit evokes a sleepless night in New York City... a warm, still evening in a time that isn't now. The multimedia group show, curated by Natacha Polaert, opened on the year anniversary of Off Paradise (September 17th) and aims to "ascend" until the end of this turbulent year. "Ascensions" is a black and white dreamscape, emanating nostalgia and ascending in color.

Text by Willa Rudolph

Polaert writes in the press release, "I felt the urgent desire to assemble a group of some of my favorite artists to reflect a deep sense of hope and optimism."

As you enter the eerie collection, you see a haunting, spectral Nastassja Kinski in Gregor Hildebrandt's *So nah so weit (So close, so far)* (2013), a melancholic photograph of a reflection in a reflection. The next piece, *Chinatown Voyeur* (1971), a film by Gordon Matta-Clark, "presents a long, static shot, out of the window of an apartment on Chatham Square," benevolently spying from dusk until dawn. The portrait of Nastassja Kinski almost overlooks this gently voyeuristic piece.

The works chosen for "Ascensions" are all in conversation with one

another in a nuanced and intriguing manner. A crisp cast of a partially collapsed step stool, created by Mitchell Charbonneau (*Step Ladder [Partially Collapsed]* (2020)), is like a left-behind sign of a construction worker's day, and Alicja Kwade's scattered fall leaves in *Time Machine* (2016) are sprinkled around as if contextualizing it.

You won't want to miss out on this eerie yet friendly exhibition that Natacha Polaert seamlessly formed, calling upon artists that are for the most part, dear friends of her's.



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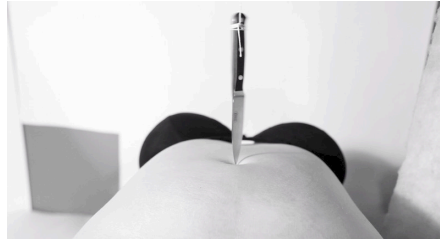
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■ ■ ■