

THICKETS

March 1 — April 6, 2018

Art Space Gallery, Fresno City College

A thicket can be thought of as a site of entanglement and hiding — and as an organic network spreading messily. Like the thicket, how can art, with its infinite feedback loops, historical call backs, and intergenerational connections, be a place of refuge? How can it hide, heal, and connect us?

Thickets draws connections between women artists of different generations and geographies, and at varying points in their careers. Included are artists working in Fresno, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, PA, and Columbus, OH. Across media, the exhibition focuses on works that code or obfuscate images, text, and bodies, while playing with mapping and spatial relationships.

The medium of quilting, with its useful history as a coded messaging system, its inherently collaborative ethos, and relationship to mathematics and pattern, holds things together here. The inclusion of Judy Chicago (Belen, NM), who established the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State in 1970, acknowledges the vibrant history of collaborative, supportive, and practical

feminist thought in Fresno. It is also a small and non-definitive attempt to center young artists and artists of color within the feminist art lineage of the city.

The thread of quilting is again picked up by Teresa Flores, who includes in her installation a large quilt made by a collective of women at the Fresno Learning Center. Acquired by Flores' mother, it is a beloved item that has been in the family home for years, and bears the names of all the women involved in its making.

The artists in **Thickets** maintain practices which branch out from the studio in different directions; engaging communities and the landscape; tangling, ultimately, with life. The concept of "rasquache" — of making do and making art from the materials found lying around, is also an important reference; all of the works in the show have a DIY sensibility or a relationship to handwork; several incorporate materials found in the landscape here, rooting them firmly in place.

TINA WILLIAMS BREWER

Unpacking *The Harvest*, one of Brewer's quilts, I came across a sewing needle threaded through the seam at the top. The quilt, which references the transatlantic slave trade, is long finished - it dates from 1989 - and yet the work is ready to be taken up at any time. This quality of availability speaks to Brewer's sense of time and perspective - as she says, "I see everything from the air." In this way, Brewer's quilts operate as open ended maps plotting a route through histories of migration and trauma.

Through, and beyond. In Brewer's dense, layered works, colorful, abstract forms swirl towards coalescence, as if journeying towards a celestial body. Quilts, even those only ever intended as art works, always relate back to the human body, through their sense of scale and proportion. They retain a relationship to collective use-memory, remaining bedspread or baby blanket-sized.

The potential to cover and enfold the body is powerful protection: undercover, the self-forming form can do the work of becoming itself. In this way, Brewer's work participates in the Afrofuturist tradition of speculative art, literature and world building. Reconstituted Black cultural forms, icons, and material culture, refracted and fragmented through the prism of Diaspora, move steadily, insistently, towards the future.

JUDY CHICAGO

Judy Chicago's early work is minimal and simple. In the late 1960's to early 1970's, she created a series of experiments with color, using prismacolor pencils. Vibrant and rainbowed, *Dome Drawing* (1968) is one of these, finished around the time she was planning the first Feminist Art Program at Fresno State University. They reference color wheels and diagrams, and would eventually lead to her works with auto-body spray painting techniques.

Judy Chicago catalyzed a feminist movement that was collaborative and supportive, and which relied on the collective labor of its members to take up tools and rehab an old building on the outskirts of town, as detailed in Jill Field's introduction to "Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists," which details its history and legacy.

TERESA FLORES

Flores' experimental video and public interventions examine class and regional cultural experience, centering the landscape and human stories of the Central Valley. Recently, she developed a series of yoga postures, *Fresnyoga*, which reference places, people, and attitudes of the Fresno area - one pose, which can only be described as a defensive posture, is named after Blackstone Avenue, the central artery and commercial strip of the city. Another, a warrior pose, is named after Dolores Huerta, UFW activist and civil

rights leader. Flores has held yoga classes at rest stops along highway 99 made up of members of the public. Hilarious and poignant, these public performances elevate highway 99 to the status of place.

Another ongoing project, the Experimental Quesadilla Lab, engages the long history of this food item as a way to talk about colonialism, and the continued issue of food injustice in the Central Valley, the most productive food landscape in the world. Many recipes from past events are on view in the gallery, along with drawings and the quilt mentioned in the introduction.

Also in the gallery, an orange neon sign, flashing intermittently, perches somewhat precariously on a scaffold of scrap wood. On close inspection, the construction is makeshift: held together by globs of hot glue, covered in pencil marks. It is defiantly *rasquache*. In looping, spidery script, its statement is at once encouraging and imperative: *we can make our own*.

RONDA KELLEY

Ronda Kelley's work is meant to be experienced directly; often, it is to be worn on the body and direct the wearer's experience or thought, as with *Seeing Through the Heart* (2018), a neck piece intended to encourage the wearer to see using the spiritual and emotional center of consciousness. Woven into the piece are personal references: sitting at the center of the chest is a makeup compact formerly belonging to Kelley's grandmother.

For *Transforming into Light* (2018), Kelley assembled a small altar intended to be a place of meditation and healing. Viewers are invited to remove their shoes before stepping onto the hand woven, colorful rug that is placed on the floor. The rug is circular, and references the four moments of the sun, corresponding to the four stages of life; birth, youth, older age, and death, and the repeating of the cycle. *Basin* (2018) refers literally to the anatomy of the pelvis, which sits like a bowl in the hips of the body.

ADRIANNA ALEJO SORONDO

A self-taught painter who trained as an anthropologist, Sorondo's work is rooted in symbolism, language, and performance. Her paintings often feature highly stylized symbols of fresh and ripe fruit as symbols of oppression and power – referencing local food injustice, and also Banana republics in Latin America. Their compositions and forms reference Mesoamerican art and design principles, such as rhythm, color symbolism, geometric and abstract forms.

Sorondo's ephemeral performances and installations engage all the senses – often they include cleansing and healing rituals. Her *Fuck Boi Limpas* are a specialty: a common sense cleansing using sage smoke and fresh cut plants for those stuck on someone who won't commit. This kind of irreverent play is typical of her work: combining traditional cleansing rituals with contemporary concerns and vernacular.

Sorondo salvages many of the materials for her works from the empty lots, construction zones, and markets of Fresno and the surrounding area. Her work embodies a resourceful way of looking at things, and of processing the city's rich visual material. She combines the things she finds with a light touch: a palm frond becomes the broom to a dollar store dustpan, an old fashioned hurdle becomes a sign bearing words borrowed from a roadside advertisement: HIGH SPEED RURAL INTERNET (*Cross Country*, 2018).

In her installation *Home Sign (an ode to Diane Alejo Sorondo)* (2018), we see Sorondo's mother's hands braiding her hair – interrupted as she breaks off to briskly sign something to Sorondo's sister, out of shot. "Home Sign" is the name Sorondo has given to the idiosyncratic and improvised sign language that her family uses at home. The installation references Sorondo's status as a coda – the hearing child of a deaf parent, the embodiment of a codebreaking instrument; someone who must inhabit and interpret different worlds.

CARMEN WINANT

Winant's collages address the consumption of the female body in contemporary culture. She uses images of women published in popular magazines as an archive. Interested in the repeated gesture, she sorts and collects images of women performing a specific pose or activity – such as waving, smiling, turning, or working – and uses them in densely layered, yet delicate works.

In *Anita Told the Truth* (2017), Winant takes an excerpt from Anita Hill's 1991 testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington, D.C. In it, Hill spoke out about alleged sexual harassment by then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, (later confirmed as a Supreme Court Justice). Hill endured ridicule after she spoke out publicly; she was victimized and discredited by the press.

Today, it is widely acknowledged that the hearings were mishandled: Hill was asked to describe in great detail each charged encounter with Thomas in a public setting. Many survivors of harassment in the workplace often cite the pain of reliving the harassment as a key reason why they do not report it in the first place.

Reading the words of her testimony takes on particular resonance now, as the #METOO movement has empowered many women of different backgrounds to speak out against sexual harassment at work and in public life. Decades later, Hill's testimony stands as a courageous record of protest and witness.

In the collage, certain letters are omitted, and the spacing is uneven, reminiscent of a word search puzzle – a visual metaphor for the way patterns of abuse become naturalized and made invisible. This intentional muddling of the wording can also be interpreted as a supportive or protective gesture made by the artist towards Hill; solidarity.