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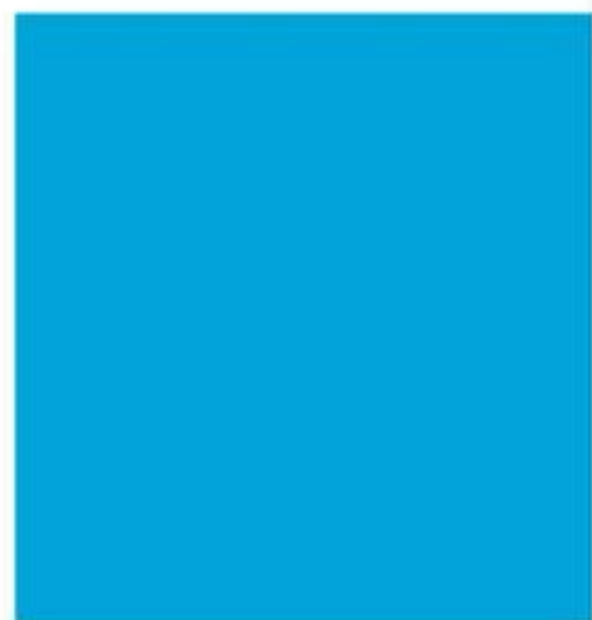
PETER BUGGENHOUT ▶
BILL ALBERTINI
JULIANA CERQUEIRA LEITE
YUKO MOHRI
MARTIN BOYCE





Curl 3,
2021.
Plaster, plaster
bandages,
and glass fiber,
67 x 76 x 29 cm.

q/a



Pushing into
New Territory:

A Conversation
with Juliana Cerqueira Leite

by Jonathan Goodman

JULIANA CERQUEIRA LEITE

Juliana Cerqueira Leite's large-scale, tactile sculptures occupy a place of possibility between abstraction and figuration, exploring the parameters and constraints of the human body. With an approach as formal as it is political—merging exploratory form with social practice—she considers the creation of “new forms [as] a mission...a way of not reasserting the world as it is, but of positing a transformation.” Using her own body as a tool and often working from the inside out, Cerqueira Leite shares control with the material, digging, scratching, and pushing her way through clay and plaster to produce strikingly original works that double as “indexes of movement.” The resulting forms,

which retain imprints and impressions of her legs, arms, and fingers, resemble skeletal structures, bodily organs, or hybrid artifacts with only a residual relationship to the human. Like Cerqueira Leite's drawings and videos, her sculptures engage moments “in which bodies exceed their material, socio-political and cultural containers, becoming disintegrated in all senses of the word.” The new complexities that she achieves transcend physical boundaries.

THIS PAGE:

Blind Spot 2,
2015.

Aqua-Resin, steel,
aluminum, glass
fiber, and pigment,
80 x 80 x 84 in.

View of work
at Lustwarande
2015, Tilburg,
the Netherlands.

Jonathan Goodman: You were born in the United States, but then your family moved to Brazil, where you grew up. While studying at the Chelsea College



OPPOSITE,
FROM TOP:
SHEE,

2018/2024.

Wood, cardboard,
enamel paint, plastic,
and plaster, view
of work in progress.

CALCIFY,
2019.

Aqua-Resin, Hydrocal,
steel, glass, limestone
sand, glass fiber,
pigment, and clay,
140 x 45 x 100 cm.

of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, where you earned your MFA in sculpture, you lived in London, and now you are in New York. How did these places influence your image-making? Did the different styles of education in Brazil and London also affect you?

Juliana Cerqueira Leite: My parents moved back to Brazil when I was an infant, at the tail end of a long military dictatorship. The economic turmoil meant growing up in a very violent city, witnessing a lot of financial struggle and inhuman destitution, but also rapid transformation, and these experiences informed my interests. I grew up visiting the São Paulo Biennial and seeing the work of Cildo Meireles, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Helen Chadwick, Bruce Nauman, and Louise Bourgeois, and I knew I wanted to be an artist. But when I went to art school in São Paulo, I was disappointed with the rigid academy-style art education. So, I moved to London in 2000, and there, art school was extremely liberal and self-directed. Chelsea College of Art provided free plaster and clay, so I started working with those materials, and I was also taught welding skills to make large installations. I don't think working with plaster would have happened if I hadn't studied sculpture in England. I became interested in mold-making and modeling new forms, how positives relate to negatives. In London, I began thinking like a sculptor and became interested in the work of Dorothea Rockburne and Eva Hesse. Color was sapped from my work. It took moving to New York in 2009 to start questioning the practice of being true to materials and to start working with pigments. I was shocked by the way that art in New York was wildly colorful and formalist at the time, in sharp contrast to the austere intellectual ambitions of the work that I saw in Europe.

JG: Do you think a highly focused art education—academic training—is useful anymore? Alternatively, is the freedom offered by many schools too much? Have you found art education today (you currently teach at Yale) to be overly politicized?

JCL: I feel lucky to be surrounded by a brilliant, diverse student body, and I learn a lot from them. Art school at its best is a place for community-building, as well as for learning technical and critical skills. I went to a school where if you didn't turn up, people might not notice for days, and I learned to be self-directed.

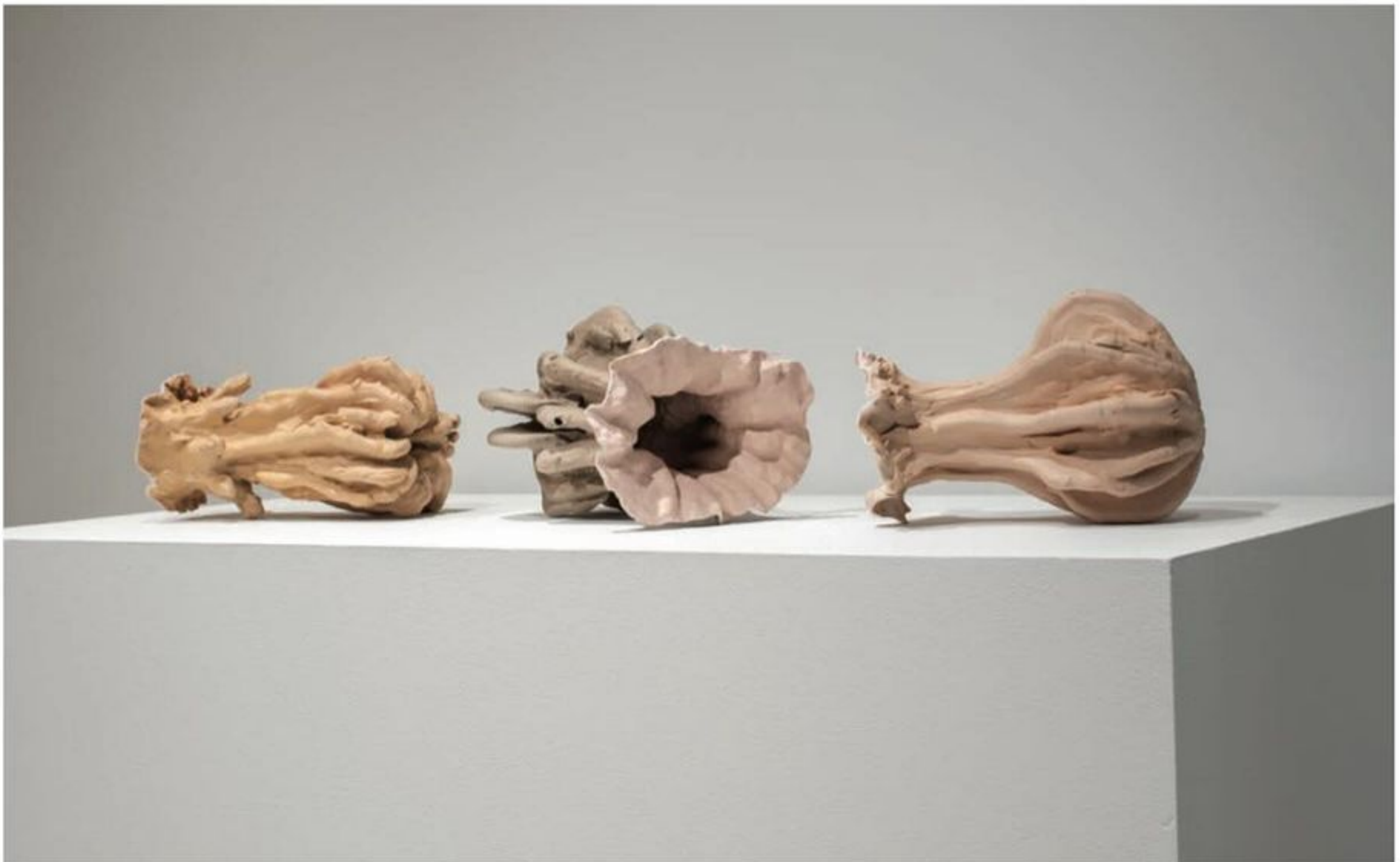


I have a deep respect for artists who began working later in life, without an art education, and I don't see art school as the only pathway to art-making. Having grown up in a country undergoing rapid political change, I recognize the moment we are living through as an important, if painful, part of change. Political polarization, violent racism, sexual and gender oppression, environmental crimes, and xenophobia have been normalized for too long, and the de-normalizing attention they are receiving right now is late in coming. I see students questioning their own cultural standpoint.

JG: Should artists teach? Or does teaching take away from an artist's creativity?

JCL: Brian Eno gave a talk at Chelsea College of Art while I was a BFA student, and as a word of advice to young artists, he said, "Whatever you do, don't get a job." At the time, I thought, "What a jerk." Survival and being able to make art require a lot of difficult choices. Learning to navigate financial instability is part of an artist's life. It is a full-time job, and ideally you don't have two full-time jobs. It is useful to have a gig, family, or partner who can help—especially when a gallery

“ I'm deconstructing the historical development of figurative representation, while also speculating about the futures of how a human being can be depicted.”



THIS PAGE: JULIANA CERQUEIRA LEITE / OPPOSITE: GREG CARDEO



takes six months to pay. Teaching at an institution can help greatly with expenses. I've had many odd jobs, from filming weddings to serving canapés, and teaching by far requires the most emotional and mental investment. If you thrive in the academic environment, then teaching is a privilege and does not take away from your creativity.

JG: How important to you are the many gallery and museum shows in New York City? Is it essential for young artists to see as much art as they can?

JCL: Exposure to images of art is ubiquitous. There is no need for artists to see exhibitions constantly or to read art magazines as if the quality of their work depended on it. For me, it's necessary to take a break from looking at other work in order to tease out hints and subtle

intuitions taking place in my own efforts. I do read a lot of art theory. New York is a city where I can see my friend's latest exhibition at a small gallery in the morning and spend the afternoon looking at the brutally displaced frescoes from Pompeii at the Metropolitan Museum. It's all an anachronistic jumble online as well.

JG: Do you feel like you belong to an international community in New York?

JCL: I grew up bilingual, actually trilingual, because my father is Uruguayan, and I was aware of my family's many different forebears, with mostly European, Sephardic Jewish, and also Indigenous and Black ancestry. In many ways, I've always thought of my place in the world as very global; I feel most comfortable in a mixed crowd, and this is reflected in my

OPPOSITE:
Head 6, 7, and 8,
2022.
Aqua-Resin, glass
fiber, and pigment,
dimensions variable.

THIS PAGE:
Shee,
2018.
Wood, cardboard,
enamel paint,
plastic, and plaster,
installation view.



community. New York makes it easy to feel less like an immigrant because there are so many people from all over the planet. Having lived in London for 10 years, I'm in regular contact with artists who live there, as well as artists from Berlin, and, of course, the amazing community of artists from Brazil, who live in or pass through New York.

JG: Does your sculpture reflect a historical tradition, a Modernist one, or are you aiming for something entirely new, without visible influence? Is your originality always a consequence of original thinking, or do you see your work, which appears to bear many influences, more as a matter of contemporary eclecticism?



LEFT, FROM TOP:

Anthropometry,
2019.

Aqua-Resin, aluminium,
glass fiber, steel,
pigment, and clay,
170 x 140 x 130 cm.

*"This is my country...
any country please,
where we can be
safe again...I think it
was a mine...but only
one consequence...
lack of attention,
bureaucracy...just
not quite a hurricane
yet...you can see how
massive the wall of
water was that
climbed up and did all
of this." [Pink one],
2017.*

Acryl Crystal Prima, steel,
pigment, and glass
fiber, installation view.

THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT: ENRICO FIORESE, COURTESY ALMA ZEVI / THIS PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT: JULIANA CEPQUERA LEITE / CENTER LUIS CORZO, COURTESY PROXYCO, NEW YORK / OPPOSITE: ROBERTO RUÍZ, COURTESY PRATS NOGUERAS BLANCHARD, MADRID/BARCELONA

JCL: A lot of the sculpture that influenced me early on was installation art, works with which I felt a bodily engagement, and which consisted of assemblage, or construction materials like glass, metal, wood, fabric, and also food. I decided that I was interested in creating new forms, not using existing objects or recognizable construction supplies other than for support structures like bases. This choice reflects my wanting to push into new territory, recognizing that when forms change, culture changes. The art theory, historical periods, and archaeological artifacts that I find important are often referenced directly in my work, which can involve intensive research into archives and archaeological collections. Perhaps the

CENTER:

Down 2,
2022.

Aqua-Resin, glass fiber, wax, stainless steel, pigment, and burlap, 218.4 x 86.4 cm.

THIS PAGE:

Wash Hands,
2023.

Stainless steel, plaster, jesmonite, pigment, and wax, 160 x 40 x 19 cm.





Installation view of
"Solaris," Alma Zevi,
Venice, Italy, 2017.

diversity of my production has to do with the fact that I'm deconstructing the historical development of figurative representation, while also speculating about the futures of how a human being can be depicted; in both cases, my underlying emphasis is less on producing figurative representation and more on the conceptual processes, indexes, and dynamics of change that inform this genre.

JG: Your materials are primarily plaster and clay. Why do you work with such fragile substances?

JCL: It's funny, I don't think of plaster as inherently fragile. I'd mostly characterize it as a very accessible material, and one of the most abundant minerals on earth. I'm interested in its mnemonic qualities, cheapness, and the fact that it can be hand-cast and directly shaped into new forms. It retains a sketch-like quality that I want—plaster makes an imagined tactile engagement with my work, an imagined making of my work, available to more people. It allows a level of empathic interaction that would be blocked by the awe derived from expensive-looking, high-production art. The same applies to clay, which I use as a mold-making material in very large push-molds that can weigh up to several tons. I don't let my clay dry, so I can reuse it for years, just rewetting it. I can cast forms from these large clay negatives, or directly from my body with plaster, which is non-toxic.

JG: Are there any contemporary sculptors who have made a marked impact on you?

JCL: I remember seeing Marguerite Humeau's degree show at the Royal College of Art in London, and her strange mammoth vocalizing sculpture. I wondered, "What is form in relation to the body?" I'm often asking this question with my own work, and I enjoy seeing how Marguerite deconstructs her design- and science-informed processes of creating. Thomas J Price and I went to undergrad together in London, and so I've been observing how he's built his practice. How should artists relate to their galleries, be committed to their practice, organize their working relations? I look to Tom for feedback on all of these things. Eva Hesse is an artist who haunts me and who makes me desire a New York that no longer exists. The experimental drive of her practice, her relation-

ship to process and materials, and also her writing, feel inspired and sadly interrupted.

JG: Would you say your work is figurative and abstract, or do those terms inadequately describe what you do? Also, is it fair to say that your sculpture moves in the direction of organic form, even your "Heads," which are so visually involved as to defy traditional figuration?

JCL: I believe in a place between these two notions that is a function of the inherent instability, and often the failure, of the structures on which abstraction and figuration rely. If you redefine process, figuration quickly becomes abstract and loses its recognizable features. Abstraction, in turn, is always tied to phenomena as experienced in life. The "Heads," like a lot of my work, are figurative not just because I say they are heads, but because they are made by performing a process that begins when a solid clay mass "eats" my hand. Once my hand is inside this "body" it probes the environment—I use simple actions like poking, pinching, and pulling. My hand defines the shape of the head while also being its "other." I aim to mimic the phenomenal world.

JG: You describe yourself as a feminist artist and participate in a feminist reading group. Why do you find this social affiliation necessary? How has this stance helped you in your work?

JCL: The reading group that I've organized with my friend and fellow sculptor Alta Buden is currently composed of 45 women-identifying artists, and we read texts that intersect the fields of feminism, art, and the environment. Feminism, for me, has been a way to understand myself politically and to understand the relationship of theory to practice. It's a pathway for breaking patterns of self-doubt and disempowerment, as well as for understanding the expectations and limitations projected onto my female body by male-dominated culture. Feminism has helped me to understand that I am operating in a field where women, especially Black women and trans women, are actively excluded and diminished. As a woman who has been sexually assaulted in the past, observing the choices that institutions make when confronted with the decision to distance themselves from, or protect, men accused of repeated predatory sexual assault and harassment is

THIS PAGE,
FROM TOP:

Stir,
2023.
Stainless steel,
plaster, jesmonite,
pigment, and wax,
80.5 x 53 x 24 cm.

Reaching 8,
2022.
Hydrocal, plaster,
stainless steel,
and pigment,
35.6 x 15.2 x 17.8 cm.





painfully degrading. Feminism is not just an inspiring field of study, it's also a tool for questioning the integrity of institutions that deny your humanity.

JG: Could you talk about your drawing practice? Does it amplify your sculptural work, or does it stand apart?

JCL: I've always drawn as a part of my practice, but I didn't exhibit my drawings regularly until early 2020. When I did show drawings, they tended to be very large-scale line works on board or canvas. They were motion studies, some of which included body-prints. I didn't really think of the drawings I made on paper, often using colored pencils, as works in themselves; they were more like studies or sketches that explored themes I could not engage directly with sculpture. Drawing, like photography, was a tool to make impossible sculptures. The motion-study drawings have now taken on a more important place in my practice, being informed by choreography. I see them feeding back into the sculptures. I'm also working on an artist book entirely composed of drawings.

JG: Do you have a sense that the art world is moving in any particular direction? Where does sculpture fit in? Is the art world advancing as a community, or has it become entirely pluralistic, given much more to the individual than to group movements?

JCL: I believe that the notion of a global, cohesive art world is unsustainable. What we have is a global industry of art, but the notion that there can be a global hegemonic hierarchy determining what is art and where it is headed is on its way out. As much as I value institutional critique and art that engages its globalized, capitalist entanglements, the notion that advanced art needs to progress in a specific conceptual direction or continue to develop as a commodity is just objectifying. Is atomization disempowering? I'd say so. But I also acknowledge that the era of group movements in art was marked by a very problematic homogeneity in who artists were, and a hierarchical idea about who were considered the "best" artists. We don't even really know what a human being is, because our definitions have been historically drawn from sources warped by prejudice and silencing. Having said all that, I have to admit that I believe sculpture is by far the most exciting medium, especially as the virtual can now be printed in 3D. ■

OPPOSITE,
FROM TOP:

Climb,
2012.

Forton MG and
urethane foam,
366 x 61 x 56 cm.

Urn 4,
2018.

Hydrocal, FGR-95,
plaster, glass
fiber, steel, burlap,
clay, pigment,
glass, silicone,
and plant life,
38 x 36 x 18 in.

THIS PAGE:

On Shipless Ocean,
2021.

Aqua-Resin, steel,
aluminum, glass
fiber, pigment,
and clay residue,
122 x 91.5 x 53 cm.

