

Breaking and Mending

Stephanie Alacon

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington  
2026

Committee:  
Henry Jackson-Spieker  
Andrew Fallat  
Natalia Arbelaez

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
School of Art + Art History + Design

©Copyright 2026  
Stephanie Alacon

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Breaking and Mending

Stephanie Alacon

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Henry Jackson-Spieker

School of Art + Art History + Design

Breaking and Mending presents an MFA thesis that embodies the format of a meandering interview between the artist, a loved one/themselves, choosing to forego a conventional academic statement. It treats the work's refusal to resolve into a single, legible meaning not as a problem to be solved, but as a condition of taking it seriously. The practice rests on one unresolvable premise: that breaking and mending is a cyclical act. The sculptures bow under strain, work against their own materiality, and carry the visible and invisible evidence of the labor that made them. The conversation moves through the studio, that invisible labor, and what it means — as a queer, neurodivergent artist of color — to make work that declines to perform legibility. Interleaved cited fragments respond to the interview in a second voice, placing their practice within a wider field of thought on care, abstraction, and refusal.

## Preamble

Breaking and mending started as two points, connected by a strand. A line. A line that formed a circle, when I realized that it wasn't a circle, but that breaking and mending actually came in waves. And they came in waves for me. Grief, rage, hopelessness, buffered by moments of gratitude and awe for loved ones who stood to cocoon me. I looked to my left and to my right, to watch their waves too, ready to brace for the swell that came for them, but what I saw in front of us, were not waves. Strands. A rippling network of lines, a lattice, a web, a net. Connecting you, to me, to them, to us and I knew then that we could not, would not be unmoored.

## Interviewer

Stephanie is [REDACTED] built on a simple, unresolvable premise: that breaking and mending are [REDACTED] the same continuous act. Her [REDACTED] bow under strain, defy their own weight, and carry the visible and [REDACTED] evidence of the lab [REDACTED] that made them. She tests her materials, using them contrary to their intended properties, so that what remains is always a [REDACTED] pressure, [REDACTED] compromise, [REDACTED] survival.

He [REDACTED] operates in [REDACTED] abs [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] he has little [REDACTED] man [REDACTED] that it resolve into a single legible meaning. As a [REDACTED] rod [REDACTED] ent artist [REDACTED], [REDACTED] he knows that [REDACTED] man [REDACTED] well — it is the same one that has followed her through every institutional space she has occupied. To package the work neatly is to f [REDACTED] it. [REDACTED] he has no interest in that.

What follows is a conversation about all of it: the physical realities of her studio practice, the [REDACTED] labor that [REDACTED] in the final object, and what it means to make work that refuses to perform legibility for audiences who expect it. Stephanie is generous, funny, and precise — and entirely clear-eyed about the systems she is navigating.

### *An interview with Stephanie*

## Interviewer

**Tell me about your thesis — what's the overall goal?**

## Stephanie

Breaking and mending. Because I'm broken.

*I have to say: I am also profoundly broken. My father and the cell of perpetrators to which he belonged shattered my body-mind. The violence they inflicted winds through me. I could quibble over words and call myself damaged. But the starker, blunter broken calls to me. It speaks of fragments and shards, an irrevocable fracturing.<sup>1</sup>*

## Interviewer

**Where does the mending come in?**

## Stephanie

That's a very broad question.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 159.

**Interviewer**

**What would be a more specific way to ask it?**

**Stephanie**

I thought you were the interviewer.

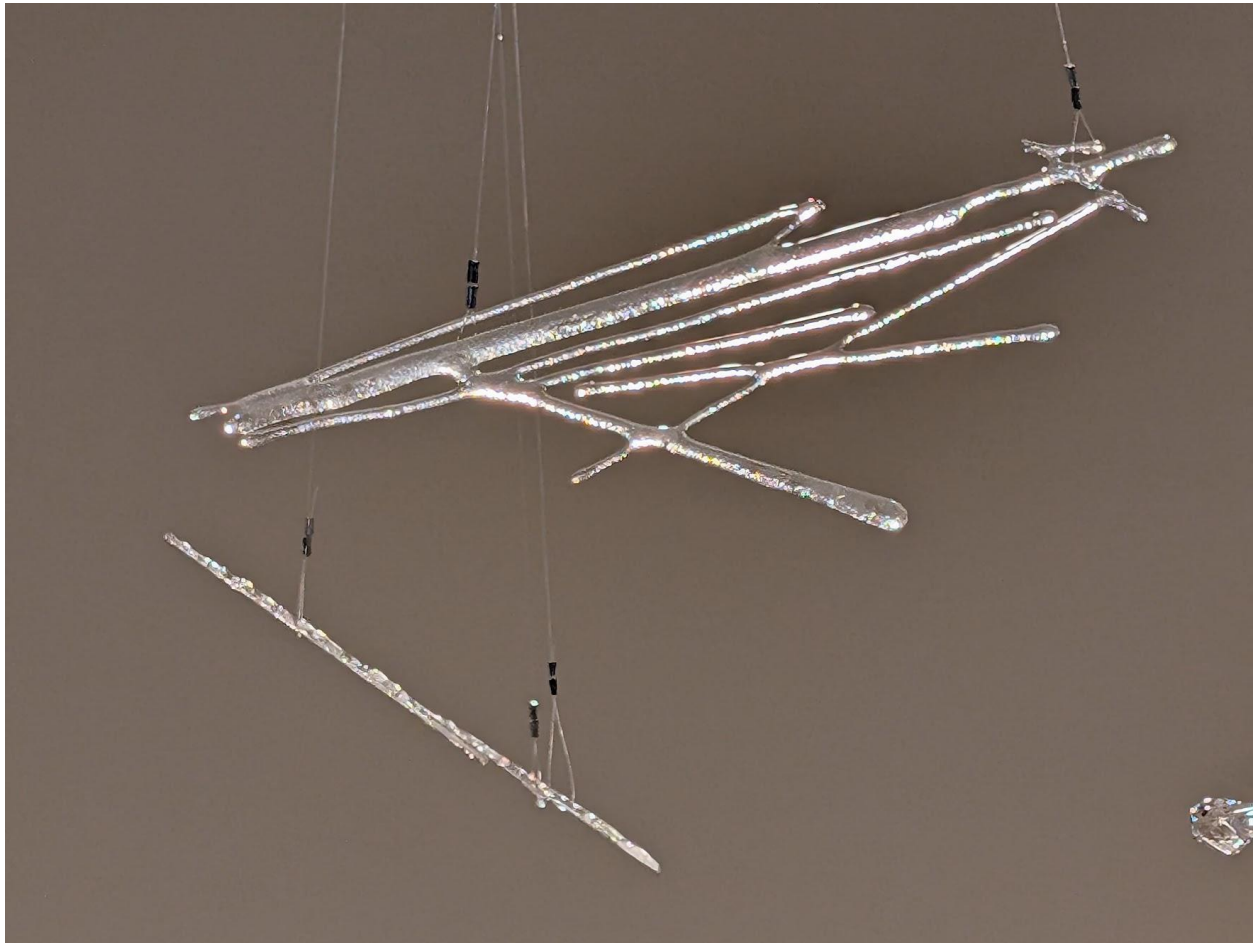
*Rail: Can you speak about that? — Nengudi: No, you just did.<sup>2</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**How is breaking part of your making?**

**Stephanie**

I think I'm constantly having to deal with [REDACTED] breaking. There's this layering that happens, [REDACTED] making structures precarious, or under such strain that the material starts to visibly bow, or takes command of the space.



---

<sup>2</sup> Senga Nengudi, interview by Amadour, *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023.

Interviewer

**What happens when you break something and then mend it?**

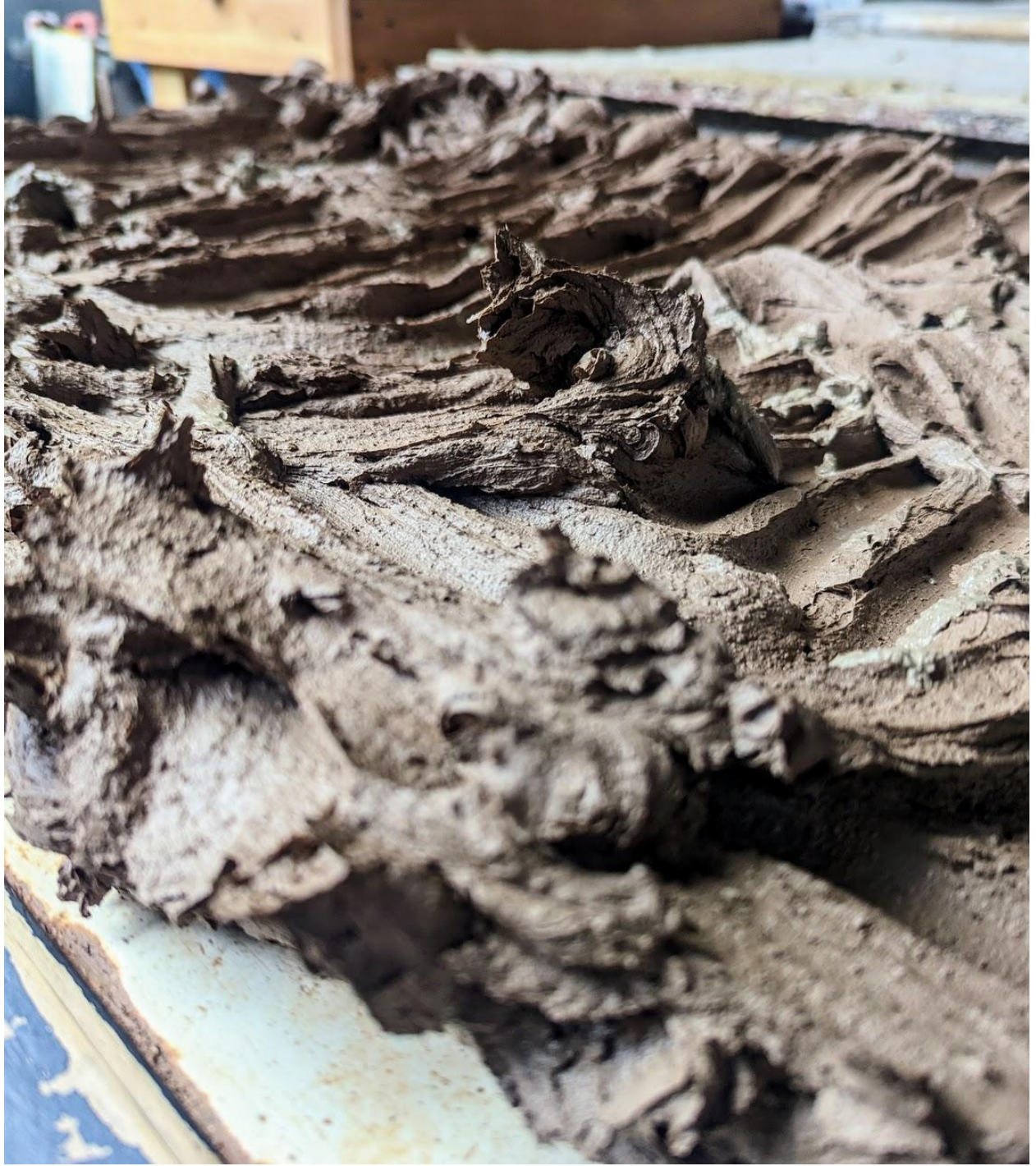
Stephanie

It depends [REDACTED] With raw clay, I push soft clay [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] and it creates these sorts of shards as they dry.  
I've been experimenting with being able to adhere these fragments or shards together  
[REDACTED]

*Hammond's works also navigate art objects as sites of damage. Common terms used to describe her paintings in particular include "wounds" and "sutures," such that a language of physical damage and repair circulates around the objects but typically treats those surfaces as skins.<sup>3</sup>*

---

<sup>3</sup> Lex Morgan Lancaster, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2022), 122.



**Interviewer**

**And what does that layering look like — when you mend something, how does it show?**

**Stephanie**

There can be evidence of a compromised structure — remnants of old attachments, old attaching points. And that builds the texture and the age of the piece.



Interviewer

**Do you think viewers see those traces, or do they only see what you've built on top?**

Stephanie

I do n't

*Thus, in its inclinations and dispositions, its regularities and imperfections, the string retains a complete and unflinching record of the gestures that went into its formation. Nothing escapes it.<sup>4</sup>*

care

*Without any explicit calculation, a woman maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it; she senses where the feather is, just as we sense where our hand is. ... Places in space are not defined as objective positions in relation to the objective position of our body, but rather they inscribe around us the variable reach of our intentions and our gestures.<sup>5</sup>*

---

<sup>4</sup> Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012), 144.



Interviewer

**It sounds like you do know what you're doing.**

Stephanie

I can [REDACTED] keep a straight thought.

My working memory is really [REDACTED] hot. And so I think I'm compelled to make this sort of work because it reflects my state of being. I'm responding to the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] US, [REDACTED] baldly lying [REDACTED] fast [REDACTED]. I feel like that is an experience [REDACTED].

*The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there.<sup>6</sup>*

Interviewer

**I was drawing a connection — the glass chipping no matter how carefully you attend to things, because there's always something you're not quite accounting for.**

Stephanie

I don't know if I see [REDACTED] myself. [REDACTED] I am a steward, and they are objects in my care. They're not representational forms — they're pretty [REDACTED] and simple [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] They're [REDACTED] labor that I participate in when I go to the glass studio.

*Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.<sup>7</sup>*

The way I was seeing them [REDACTED] so fragile [REDACTED], and when they're [REDACTED] into each other, they create this [REDACTED]. I was thinking of them as [REDACTED] — a kind of [REDACTED]. I think that metaphor is pretty legible to me, but [REDACTED].

*I think of feminism as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care.<sup>8</sup>*

---

<sup>6</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 17.

Interviewer

**Is that because of the push toward more didactic, narrative-led work?**

Stephanie

A lot of artists are really [redacted] eating work [redacted]  
[redacted] that kind of spur [redacted]. But when [redacted] in  
abstraction, [redacted] opens up.

*the art that we now invest with any hope for social and political change is typically the most didactic, narrative, and representational (because it seems the most transparent).<sup>9</sup>*

*one of the major useful possibilities of abstraction is its ability to gesture out in uncontrolled ways and proliferate multiple meanings from a single form<sup>10</sup>*

The way my mind works, I need to find connections — some people describe them as finding patterns, but for me they're these connection points, nodes of seemingly dissimilar ideas that have a relationship with one another. The abstract work I make tends to refuse to stay into one decipherable meaning. [redacted]  
[redacted]

*Einstein's lectures were scattered and sometimes incomprehensible. Students would often be confused because they could not see associations between some of the specific examples he gave and general principles. The association was obvious to Einstein's visual mind but not to his verbal-thinking students. ... The tendency for scattered thought is due to associative thinking.<sup>11</sup>*

---

<sup>9</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, 2nd ed. (Vintage Books, 2006), 212.

Interviewer

**Do you think people could read your work as allegorical, even if you don't intend it that way?**

Stephanie

something I don't use it for its material strengths, and don't use it as it's necessarily intended. That initial curiosity, that visual hook, is my bid to draw the viewer in.

too accessible, too easily dismissed.

*Proximity, feeling, identification, and collaboration are lumped together as synonyms for each other, as complicit, “naïve and facile” — as, in other words, too easy.<sup>12</sup>*

---

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2013), 95.



Interviewer

**And learning how to appreciate abstraction doesn't come naturally to everyone.**

Stephanie

I know —

*To abstract means to 'withdraw'; to 'take away secretly'; to 'draw off or apart'; to 'disengage from'; to 'separate in mental conception'; to 'consider apart from the material embodiment, or from particular instances.'*<sup>13</sup>

Abstraction is multilayered, there's a lot more potential to reach an audience, and part of that responsibility is on the viewer — their own personal experiences, their own lens. It's not me conveying my own ideas of what the art is necessarily.

*Seriously, though, there is something powerful in Minimalism's move of denying the artist's hand and the concomitant refusal of the artwork as an autographic expression of the artist's psychology or, indeed, as referential in any way. Instead, Judd, Andre, Morris, et al., opened the meaning of the sculptural encounter to viewers and their real-time spatial and bodily relations. That relinquishing of control becomes unruly because it places value on the audience as a source of meaning.*<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1971), s.v. "abstract," v.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Doyle and David J. Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2013): 62.



Interviewer

**It sounds like breaking and mending isn't only about the physical process — there's also a layering of meanings, personal and political, that fuse together.**

*This is what I am really interested in these days — how abstraction is being used as a resource by young trans and queer artists because it allows for a less prescribed capacity for artists and viewers to see themselves in it.<sup>15</sup>*

Stephanie

I can't help not thinking of these ideas as separate, because the way I process things, the way I make sense of the world, is so much more fluid.

*I argue that abstraction is ethically, socially, and politically useful because it can distance the operations of form and matter from bodily coherence, and stage new spectatorial possibilities instead.<sup>16</sup>*

At the University of Washington I've learned that there is still very much a canon, [REDACTED] that just isn't accessible to me. The struggle [REDACTED] I experience art and my motivations for doing it are seemingly so disparate [REDACTED] other [REDACTED]

*Linearity imposes ideas about causality or origins, both of which are generally also obscuring many of the other meaningful relationships between places, spaces, events, people, and communities. And it traps subjects who are literally held in place, skewered by multiple discourses.<sup>17</sup>*

Interviewer

**That's why I asked whether people could read your work as allegorical rather than you intending it to be allegorical. Someone could look at your work from one angle and see one layer of meaning, and then look again and see another — they may never see the work the way you do, but they might sense that wholeness while they're viewing.**

Stephanie

Yeah. And when I speak about the work in such a fluid way, it can come off as disingenuous or flighty. But I think those are [REDACTED] for people who [REDACTED] other marginalized group. That's why the work also tends to have this [REDACTED], because this is the way I'm seeing these structures and their systems replay over and over again. It's the same story.

*It would be wrong to attribute this claim to arrogance or disingenuousness. It is not easy to recognize one's complicity in preserving a state of critical hegemony, for that one's aesthetic interests should be guided by conscious and deliberate reflection, rather than by one's socioculturally determined biases, is a great deal*

---

<sup>15</sup> Doyle and Getsy, "Queer Formalisms," 64.

<sup>16</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, quoted in M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Duke University Press, 2018), chap. 1.

*to ask. But by refusing to test consciously those biases against work that challenges rather than reinforces them, a critic insures that the only art that is ontologically accessible to her is art that narrows her vision even further.<sup>18</sup>*

*Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that survival is not an academic skill.<sup>19</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**How much do you think the resistance to your work is grounded in an expectation of a single objective truth — that even people willing to accept there isn't one objective meaning still want your work to commit to one?**

**Stephanie**

Part of it is: [REDACTED] if it's easily digestible, it's easier for people to buy in — whether that means giving [REDACTED] space to exist, or literally buying it. It becomes a commodifiable product.

*If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce. Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh.<sup>20</sup>*

It's a trend [REDACTED] — people describing the things they make, or themselves, as brands or products. It's distressing [REDACTED], when I think we all know that humans are so much more [REDACTED], our experiences so much more [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Being willing to [REDACTED], despite [REDACTED]

*In her essays and poems, Boyer contemplates all the work that women and their creativity are obliged to do in the service of a world and an economy that promised liberation but in actuality makes everyone "sick" where sickness is both an individual and social and systemic condition of existence under the neoliberal racial capitalist order. An order that demands of the poet to comply with the given structure of thought and feelings that exploits her commercial value, her resistance, her anti-systemic thinking.<sup>21</sup>*

---

<sup>18</sup> Adrian Piper, quoted in Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 300.

<sup>19</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 99.

<sup>20</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

<sup>21</sup> Federica Buetti, *Critical Poetics of Feminist Refusals: Voicing Dissent Across Differences* (Routledge, 2022), 79.

Interviewer

**Is there any work of art — fine art, literature, film, anything — that you feel has captured that multifacetedness?**

Stephanie

*Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness.<sup>22</sup>*

*Before we can argue successfully for the necessity of work that pushes most people past their comfort zones, we need to acknowledge what that work actually does. ... If we want to hear what this work is about, we need to listen to it more carefully and allow ourselves to be moved.<sup>23</sup>*

---

<sup>22</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, xvii.

Interviewer

**Can't see the forest until you've stared at the bark on the trees.**

Stephanie



It's much more anchored in the body, and I think that's why I'm so interested in work that is either made to relate to the body — through someone's movements, or the way things look.

*I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures.<sup>24</sup>*

*To understand is to experience [éprouver] the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization — and the body is our anchorage in a world.<sup>25</sup>*

Interviewer

**You're a visual artist primarily, but people tend not to hear, or taste, or smell your work in a gallery.**

Stephanie



*the experience of tactility was all about grain and texture, about the feeling of contact between malleable substance and sensitive skin, about dry sand cupped in the palm and running through the fingers, wet mud sticking and caking as it dries out, the rough abrasion of gravel, and so on. ... the way in which they registered the traces of movement and flow: on the one hand the manual and bodily gestures of ourselves, as practitioners; on the other hand the particular flow patterns of the mixtures we had made.<sup>26</sup>*

*I take a materialist approach to formal analysis by attending to the processes of formation and haptic vibrancy of the object, how media take form and interact, and how an object might feel to touch.<sup>27</sup>*

---

<sup>24</sup> Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Ingold, *Making*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 33.



Interviewer

**Is the way you make and display your work an attempt to invite the viewer to imagine touching it — to imagine that your hands are their hands, feeling the work become molded under them?**

Stephanie

I think so. Because the work does relate to my body, and so I think that's the easiest access point. That is the most natural throughway someone may have to experience my work.

*The visceral is not divorced from the abstract; both are folded together and flexibly intertwined, as forms and processes of abstraction can also evoke or invite touch and have implications for ways of being in the world.<sup>28</sup>*

the way I skew is a little off-putting. And I think that's the part that either elicits a sort of reaction.

*The rigours of structural art would seem to preclude entirely any aberrations towards the exotic. Yet in the last three years, an extensive group of artists on both east and west coasts, largely unknown to each other, have evolved a non-sculptural style that has a good deal in common with the primary structure as well as, surprisingly, with aspects of Surrealism. The makers of [eccentric abstraction], refuse to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non-objective art.<sup>29</sup>*

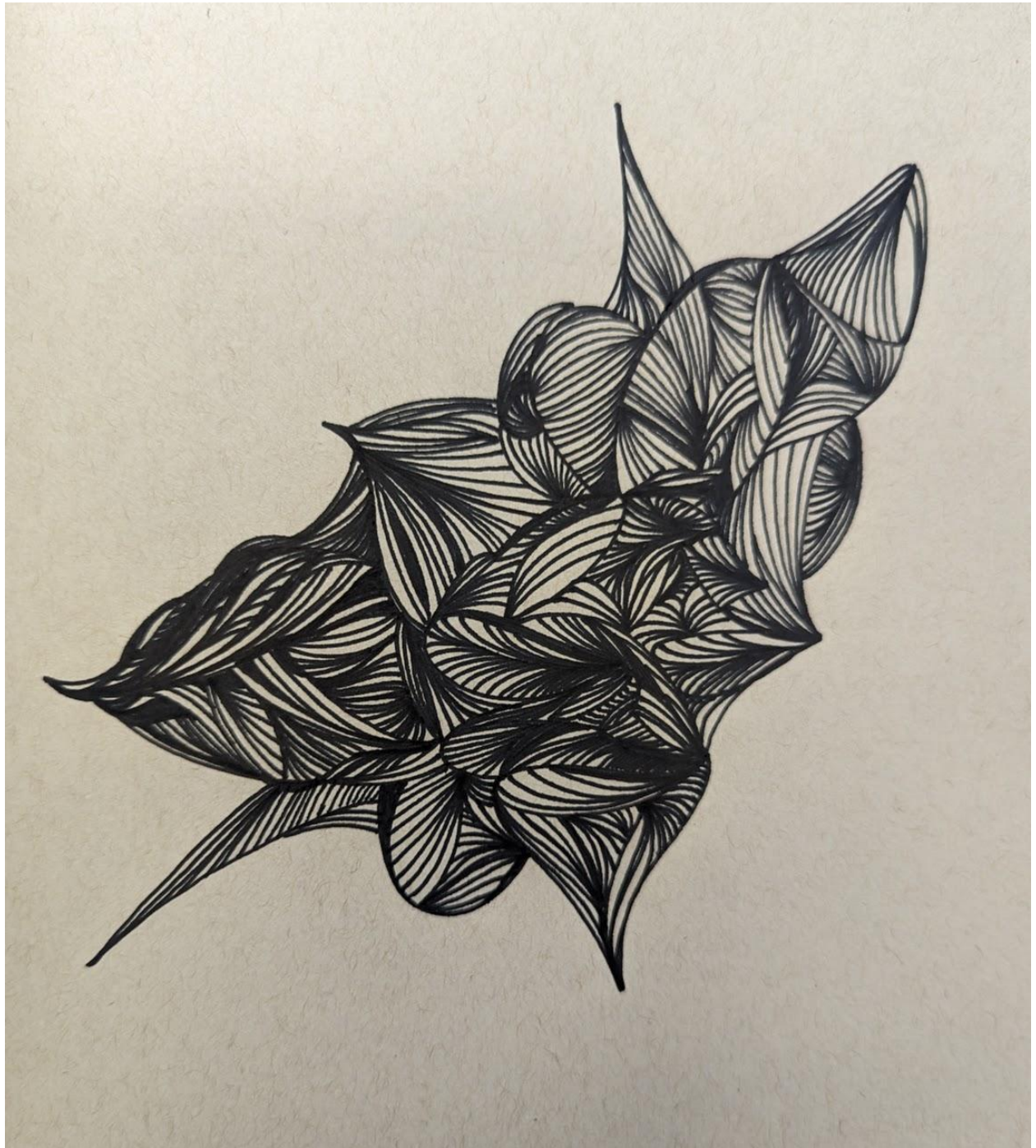
*In the double sensation my right hand is capable of touching my left hand as if the latter were an object. But in this case, unlike an object, my left hand feels the right hand touching it. My left hand has the double sensation of being both the object and the subject of the touch. It is not the case that I have two contrary sensations at the same time (as one might feel two objects at the same time); rather each hand is in the ambiguous position of being capable of taking up the positions of either the toucher or the touched.<sup>30</sup>*

---

<sup>28</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," *Art International* 10, no. 9 (1966): 34-40.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 100.



Interviewer

**Whether they like it or they don't — how would you characterize that reaction? Uncanniness? Viscerality?**

Stephanie

I think it's a visceral experience. People mention that my work makes them uneasy or anxious. And oftentimes I find it comforting [REDACTED]

*Consuming this work might make a viewer queasy: the synthetic matter suggests a processed sugary substance that might be difficult to chew and digest; Besemer's rippling color patterns provoke motion sickness; and Benglis's work threatens to melt and flow out to consume us.<sup>31</sup>*

I've made work before that does do that, that is formally attractive. But that work I have no investment in. It's window dressing. It felt good to make it, but if it doesn't charge the space, if it doesn't have a sort of lifespan, then it's not work I continue to make — [REDACTED]

*Now what are the psychic presuppositions for the urge to abstraction? We must seek them in these peoples' [artists, writers, philosophers] feeling about the world, in their psychic attitude toward the cosmos...the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions.<sup>32</sup>*

*These dynamically textured objects disrupt an easy gaze. As much as they act as screens/scenes for the projection of desire, they express a desire of their own.<sup>33</sup>*

Interviewer

**If you want to express yourself through art, making other people feel joy and happiness isn't necessarily expressing what you're feeling.**

Stephanie

Maybe I'll be able to make happy [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] work that is complex, complicated, and difficult to pin down is what makes me happy. The tone of the work, the tenor of it, is not from a place of joy — but it is from a place of honesty, of earnestness, of wanting to connect.

*The artists I work with turn to emotion because this is where ideology does its most devastating work. As Theodor Adorno once observed, "the supreme independence" that we experience as pure feeling, unadulterated passion or joy is "precisely the tool of society."<sup>34</sup>*

---

<sup>31</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Adrienne Edwards, quoted in Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, xi.

*They [three works by Ron Athey, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Wojnarowicz] are unnerving, depressing, or upsetting; none offers the positive message one associates with political art, and they each (differently) reject the basic geometries of identity and politics that normally ground discussions of art, identity, and politics. They leave us in a strange space: like Mitchell's Death, each work pushes the spectator away and draws her in at the same time. And as hard as they are (in subject and in tone), all three are deeply moving (for some, including myself).<sup>35</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**Would you say that someone has connected to your work if they're shifting through multiple interpretations and feelings and stories in the work, and never settling on one?**

**Stephanie**

[REDACTED] the way I see and experience it, is possibly clearest for people who think differently — people who experience things similarly to me. So I'm making it for people like me. And that can be alienating for some, but — I mean, that's fine. [REDACTED]

*The price of the ticket is this: to find self within the dominant public sphere, we need to deny self. The contradictory subjectivity one is left with is not just the fragmentary subjectivity of some unspecified postmodern condition, it is instead the story of the minoritarian subject within the majoritarian public sphere.<sup>36</sup>*

*Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.<sup>37</sup>*

---

<sup>35</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, xi.

<sup>36</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>37</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

Interviewer

**Do you think that sense of alienation — of people who won't directly connect with your work — is actually a desired outcome, a way of pushing some empathy for how you feel in other spaces?**

Stephanie

I think so, but it's a stretch to get people there. It's ■■■ a call for empathy — it's ■■■ visibility. Acknowledgement. We all come in a different package. Whether that resonates with people or not is not my problem. ■■■

■■■ not my intention, to deliver a clear message or a moral. That's not what I'm doing.

*'Opacity' describes a tactic of resistance as well as an incompleteness of visual categorization. This section deals with the vexing of transparency and legibility, and it offers examples of the ways in which trans subjects evade or jam the diagnostic protocols that would survey and delimit them. The opaque is often a direct response to heightened situations of the violence of scrutiny, and its limited cases throw into relief systems of categorization and control. Forms of opacity (for instance, nondisclosure, illegibility, dissemblance, interiority, unrecognizability, or excess) challenge the visual as a means of knowing. Art history and art, which tend to privilege visual interpretation and evidence, must grapple with the right to opacity and the refusal of immediate legibility.<sup>38</sup>*

*Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity.<sup>39</sup>*

*Several years back, if I made the statement, "We demand the right to opacity," or argued in favor of this, whoever I was speaking to would exclaim indignantly: "Now it's back to barbarism! How can you communicate with what you don't understand?"<sup>40</sup>*

*I could end this story right here; let my insight about shame and self-love be the resolution, the answer to my presurgery ambivalence. But I actually want something less neat, less resolved, because even today as I run my hand over my pecs, adore how my shirts fit, and feel immense comfort inside my skin, I hear echoes of my earlier self-doubt. ... Or I could quiet myself and sit with what I don't understand.<sup>41</sup>*

---

<sup>38</sup> David J. Getsy and Che Gossett, "A Syllabus on Transgender and Nonbinary Methods for Art and Art History," *Art Journal* 80, no. 4 (2021): 108.

<sup>39</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

<sup>40</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

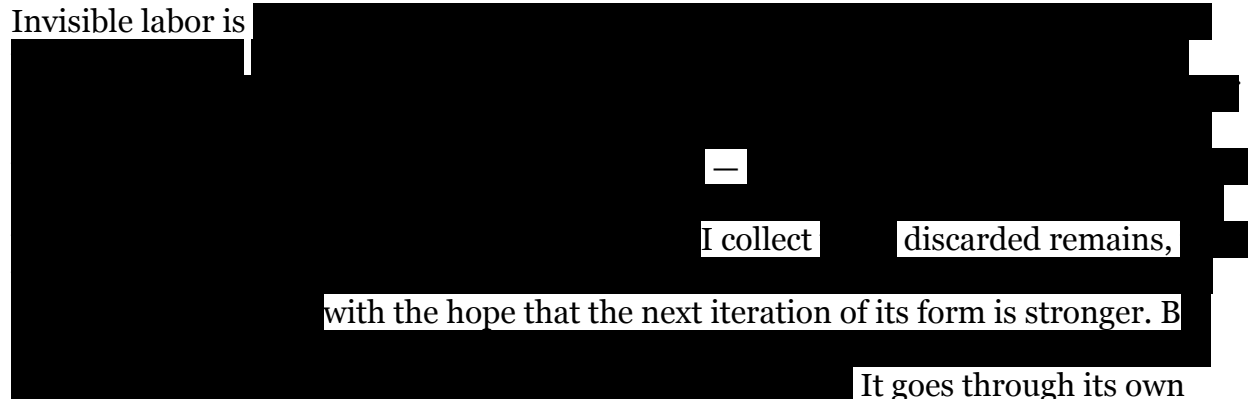
<sup>41</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 175.

Interviewer

Can you tell me about visible and invisible labor in your work?

Stephanie

Invisible labor is



It goes through its own transformation, its own lifespan, holding on to the debris and detritus of another process.

*They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work. They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism. Every miscarriage is a work accident. ... More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile.<sup>42</sup>*

*But I remain, with many other femme and feminine people, harmed by misogyny—where endless free care work and emotional labor is simply the role my community and the world has for us. We are supposed to wipe the asses of the world without ceasing.<sup>43</sup>*

The visible labor — things I've started to incorporate — includes spinning my own yarn using wool roving and my own hair to create threads or strands that I then use to tie broken pieces together. Symbolically showing that I'm putting myself into the work. Something that stays with the sculpture that is a part of me — because the sweat, the grime, the blood either gets burned off or washed off. It lets me reflect on the invisible labor that people assigned female at birth are conditioned to provide for their communities — emotional labor, hypervigilance, making sure they don't step on anyone's toes, being as easy and genial as possible. Those are the things I'm referencing that maybe aren't so clear in the work.

*The expectation that she will smooth things over or keep smoothing things over is how she is required to maintain a relationship that is damaging. ... If she does not return the desire for reconciliation, if she is not willing to smooth things over, moving on, getting along, getting on, she becomes the one who has not only broken a connection but refused to repair it.<sup>44</sup>*

---

<sup>42</sup> Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Power of Women Collective / Falling Wall Press, 1975), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), "A Modest Proposal for a Fair Trade Emotional Labor Economy".

<sup>44</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021), chap. 5.

*Women are persuaded from infancy not to take decisions and to depend on a 'capable' and 'responsible' person: father, husband, brother. The female image with which man has interpreted woman has been his own invention.<sup>45</sup>*

*Women worked in the fields, in addition to raising children, cooking, washing, spinning, and keeping an herb garden; their domestic activities were not devalued and did not involve different social relations from those of men, as they would later, in a money-economy, when housework would cease to be viewed as real work.<sup>46</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**Are there other aspects of your identity — as a brown, neurodivergent, queer-identifying woman — that you feel the labor goes unrecognized?**

**Stephanie**

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I had never been questioned, pressured, or discouraged so much about the way I think about my art. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] "that's just, like, your opinion. man." It's abstract work. There are no didactic markers that people can collectively agree upon.

*By not recognizing herself in male culture, woman deprives it of the illusion of universality. Man has always spoken in the name of humanity but half the world population now accuses him of having sublimated a mutilation. Man's strength lies in identifying with culture, ours in refuting it.<sup>47</sup>*

It has been so much more apparent that I see things differently. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I've spent two years here trying to find ways of gaining some clarity for people who are insistent on learning more [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I have spent too much time trying to appease minds [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] A lot of the labor has gone into that. I feel like I could have gone further with more support.

*cultures that have been historically oppressed and marginalized within modernity tend to develop different forms of disidentification with dominant (often white, middle class) sensibilities as a form of resistance. This includes resistance to dominant forms of credibility and legitimacy building, especially*

---

<sup>45</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*, trans. Veronica Newman (Secunda, n.d.), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel," 2.

*for those engaged in high-intensity struggles who can identify the hypocrisies and harmful impacts of modernity from miles away.<sup>48</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**Is there something in how you're reflecting on those attempts to account for yourself that you're thinking about differently now — in terms of invisible labor or the expectations placed on people assigned female at birth?**

**Stephanie**

Something tangible and good [REDACTED] is really trying to pick apart my people-pleasing habits, and diving deeper into women's studies, philosophy, future studies [REDACTED]

It's so draining and demoralizing [REDACTED]

when I'm not really getting feedback, only criticism. I've been told I have too much going into these pieces and that the work could benefit from picking one or two ideas and making more work that aligns with those. That is one way of working, and it is the way that has been legitimized [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] there are multiple art movements [REDACTED]

I am a big believer that what you think bleeds into the work — what you spend your time really mulling over bleeds into the work. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The way we're talking about neurodivergency now — not as a disability but as a difference — is powerful, and I think within the coming years we're going to see more artists embracing the way they work, not sticking to something that actively works to exclude them.

*The [neurodiversity] movement's central premise holds that differences in neurological functioning and development are a part of natural human variation, and there is no one normal or healthy type of brain or one right style of neurocognitive functioning.<sup>49</sup>*

*Equality is a juridical principle. To the common denominator of all human beings justice should thus be rendered. Difference is an existential principle which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one's own experiences, goals, possibilities, and one's sense of existence in a given situation and in the situation one wants to create for oneself.<sup>50</sup>*

*Within modernity's hierarchies of worth, difference is understood either as the deviation from a desirable norm (i.e., difference perceived as a liability) or something that can be selectively consumed by the dominant population for*

---

<sup>48</sup> Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (North Atlantic Books, 2021), chap. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Rachel A. Rivera and Loisa Bennetto, "Applications of Identity-Based Theories to Understand the Impact of Stigma and Camouflaging on Mental Health Outcomes for Autistic People," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14 (2023): 3.

<sup>50</sup> Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel," 5.

individual self-actualization or institutional branding (i.e., difference perceived as an asset).<sup>51</sup>

Interviewer

**There's a way in which the simple narratives that get told are actually just a lie — the extra layers that aren't told are the institutional and societal assumptions.**

Stephanie

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] The way we're taught to know, to legitimize what you're experiencing, in a very specific format — if you aren't able to do it in that capacity, it is so infuriating and disappointing to not be believed, to be delegitimized or dismissed. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

*At the heart of debates about self-identification is often a question of power: who gets to define neurodivergence, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate? ... this dismissal is itself a form of epistemic injustice—a concept describing how certain groups are systematically disbelieved or denied credibility.<sup>52</sup>*

*Epistemological critiques identify how our dominant frames of reference favor certain ways of knowing over others and thereby determine what is intelligible, desirable, and imaginable.<sup>53</sup>*

[REDACTED] those  
[REDACTED] complicated and emotionally burdensome. That is a lot of the work people aren't privy to. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I'm not interested in catering to or changing my voice or tone for the viewer. The viewer is a witness, not a customer. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

*There is an expectation that people from oppressed and marginalized groups in mainstream society will tell their stories for other people's consumption, usually as a part of the tax and toll for "being included" in specific spaces. What is generally expected is a story of trauma and of heroic overcoming of trauma that legitimizes the person as worthy of being included, as a role model that can inspire others to "get over it" and "move on."<sup>54</sup>*

---

<sup>51</sup> Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, chap. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Alice Newton et al., "Rethinking Self-Identification in Neurodivergent Communities: Barriers, Harms, and the Need for Change," *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 4 (2025): 4.

<sup>53</sup> Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, chap. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, chap. 6.

*Our character affinity to artists arises from the direct link which exists for us between what we do and its meaning, free of the anxiety which all the others feel about guarantees of cultural worth.<sup>55</sup>*

*I am not writing anything that anyone has requested of me or is waiting on, not a poetics essay or any other sort of essay, not a roundtable response, not interview responses, not writing prompts for younger writers, not my thoughts about critical theory or popular songs.<sup>56</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**The refusal to narrate a simple story — is that itself a kind of confrontation, given the societal expectations of people-pleasing and geniality placed on people assigned female at birth?**

**Stephanie**

I don't think these ideas are shocking or revolutionary

I am confronting them with it —

look at their own culpability.

Once I stopped trying to appease, I feel like there was a pretty radical shift.

*The refusal to narrate remains a relation to narrative and to the scene of address. As a narrative withheld, it either refuses the relation that the inquirer presupposes or changes that relation so that the one queried refuses the one who queries. Telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself.<sup>57</sup>*

*I argue that, far from being new, refusal as an ethico-political-poetic concern has a distinct history in the practices of women writers, artists, and poets who created works that defy genre and categorisation; women artists, poets, writers who are part of a robust tradition of feminist refusals, and who, through an attentive scrutiny of the conditions of their lives and creative work, have challenged the status quo of culture, conceiving of art and writing as a 'springboard for subversive thoughts' and cultural transformations.<sup>58</sup>*

*We understand the mystifying character of all ideologies, because through the reasoned forms of power (theological, moral, philosophical, political) they have constrained humanity into an inauthentic condition, suppressed and consenting. Behind every ideology we can see the hierarchy of the sexes.<sup>59</sup>*

*These stories of successful overcoming of trauma and subsequent inclusion are perceived to absolve institutions from their complicity in systemic harm.<sup>60</sup>*

---

<sup>55</sup> Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel," 7.

<sup>56</sup> Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (Ahsahta Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>58</sup> Federica Bueti, "Poetics of Negation: The Personal in the Writings of Carla Lonzi, Hélène Cixous, Moyra Davey, Frances Stark, and Anne Boyer" (PhD thesis, RCA Writing Programme, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel," 2.

<sup>60</sup> Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, chap. 6.

Interviewer

**So there are elements of your work and your labor that you are deliberately refusing to make visible to people who are not like you — and that in some ways holds up a mirror to how existing institutional spaces are not made for people like you.**

Stephanie

not for people like me.

*Systemic violence is complex and multilayered. One thing that cuts across layers is the disproportionate amount of labor that Indigenous and other visibly racialized bodies bear when they are expected to teach other people about systemic colonial and racial violence in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.<sup>61</sup>*

*Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. It is the principle through which those with hegemonic power continue to control those without. The world of equality is the world of legalized oppression and one-dimensionality.<sup>62</sup>*

Interviewer

**It's almost like hazing — they're reenacting the rituals they endured on others.**

Stephanie

others will proudly tell you how hard their academic experience was and how much better they came out for it. Often, humiliation and/or coercion can be mistaken as rigor. And those are usually the same people who adopt the same strategies, not realizing how these “tools” designed to shake you up, break you down so you could build yourself back up are tools of oppression

Ideas that work to further separate that have's from the have-nots. They've reconciled with themselves that this is the norm, “elite group” of intellectuals go through the same pain and humiliation they went through.

It's easier to commit these acts on others so that you yourself aren't targeted.

*When you are rewarded for silence, you are rewarded for compliance. The word reward derives from warder, to guard. Think reward, think warden: to be*

---

<sup>61</sup> Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, chap. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Lonzi, “Let's Spit on Hegel,” 6.

*rewarded as to guard or to be under guard. You are rewarded for watching what you say or do or watching what others say or do.<sup>63</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**And as a professor you have the power to do that to a grad student — but you don't have the power to change your colleagues.**

**Stephanie**

[REDACTED] it's hard to be the one who advocates for change [REDACTED], knowing the wheels of change are slow and it may not be worth facing the fire.

*If you are lower down within an institutional hierarchy, you will need the support of those who are higher up to move up, which means there is so much that you cannot say or do without compromising your own trajectory. Of course, many of us know this, but knowing this is not sufficient to changing this.<sup>64</sup>*

*what you are told you need to do to progress further in a system reproduces that system. Those who do not reproduce the system risk not passing, let alone not progressing.<sup>65</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**It's a trauma cycle — reenacting the trauma they received on others.**

**Stephanie**

[REDACTED] We're all culpable of participating in these behaviors in order to assimilate. The pressures aren't lost on me. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

*Rewards are tied not only to surveillance but also to reproduction. A system is reproduced by rewarding those who are willing to reproduce the system. When you are unwilling to reproduce that system or when you refuse not to watch what you say, when you disclose sensitive information, it is made harder to get anywhere.<sup>66</sup>*

*I began to realize what I already knew: that patriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, to the letter, to the bone. I had to find ways not to reproduce its grammar in what I said, in what I wrote; in what I did, in who I was.<sup>67</sup>*

---

<sup>63</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, chap. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, chap. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, chap. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, chap. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 4.

Interviewer

**How have you seen that show up in your own teaching?**

Stephanie

[REDACTED]

It's really about stoking that ember of a creative approach to problems and decisions.

*Part of the problem with the kind of education we receive at university and schools is that we forget how to scale up the important things. We scale down things like generosity, compassion, and humility in order to be able to participate in a system that has given us few gifts, but that depends on violence and unsustainability to be maintained...this encounter gave me deeper insights into how our modern system of education makes us want the world—which is complex, dynamic, and plural—to fit the predefined scripts in our heads that we use to interpret reality. The modern/colonial desire to know the world in order to control it leaves us unequipped to encounter it in its full complexity, plurality, movement, entanglement, and indetermination.<sup>68</sup>*

Interviewer

**It sounds like your approach as a teacher is a mixture of that — but also taking on the role of learner yourself.**

Stephanie

[REDACTED] I don't pretend I know so much more — there are so many other forms and artists out there. I encourage my students to talk to me about what they're interested in, what kind of music they listen to. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] collaborated [REDACTED], no ego, no arrogance — that can hinder progress and discourage someone from pursuing art. I think everyone is capable of thinking and working like an artist [REDACTED]

---

<sup>68</sup> Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, Chap. 4.

*the role of the student is not to take on board a corpus of authorised, propositional knowledge issuing from a superior source in the academy, but to collaborate in the shared pursuit of human understanding.<sup>69</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**The way you think about media and the forms you work in — there's not a separation between your body and your mind, it's an embodied sense. That feels at odds with the narratives you've described, with their striving for objectivity and mind-body dualism. Do you think that's why abstraction is so important in your work?**

**Stephanie**

I think abstraction is the vehicle for capturing multiplicities. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] the mind and body don't function independently, they're interdependent systems, they inform each other. Art-making for me is about expressing life experiences, sharing those life experiences with each other. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

*But our body is not merely one expressive space among all others, for that would be merely the constituted body. Our body, rather, is the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes.<sup>70</sup>*

*Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable.<sup>71</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**Do you think that embodiment is inextricably tied up with the abstraction you do?**

**Stephanie**

Yeah. And it's something we're all still coming to terms with.

*Rethinking the body implies major epistemological upheavals not only for the humanities, which have tended toward idealism, but equally for the natural and social sciences, which have at least aspired to materialism. Both broad "types" of knowledge are implicated in and in part are responsible for prevailing understandings of bodies and are thus vulnerable to transformation and upheaval in challenges to these prevailing models.<sup>72</sup>*

---

<sup>69</sup> Ingold, *Making*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 147.

<sup>71</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, xi.

<sup>72</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, x.

Interviewer

**You've talked about your work as queer abstraction before — where does that come in, in the abstraction and the embodiment?**

Stephanie

It's a descriptor that a lot of queer artists have used to describe both the way they work and the work itself. [redacted] no unifying aesthetic — [redacted] non-figurative, but it spans multiple disciplines [redacted]

[redacted] refusal to signal queerness through aesthetic shorthand — glitter, or being co-opted by kink or fetish culture as markers of being gay or queer. Queer abstraction is rooted in the artist's identity and their desire not to be packaged up in a nice little box, to retain autonomy and agency to make the work they want to make.

*Often, artwork is described as queer when it depicts LGBT subjects or figures, is produced by a self-identified LGBT person, or references gay culture through recognizable motifs, references, or aesthetics. I call this the glitter problem. Or the leather problem. Or the pink-yarn, 1970s-crafts, iconic-diva, glory-hole, pre-AIDS-sexuality, post-AIDS-sexuality, bodies and body-parts, blood-and-bodily-fluids problem.<sup>73</sup>*

*The deployment of abstraction within the genre of queer abstraction is understood as an intentional act of power as it gives the artists full control over how their subjecthood is viewed and understood<sup>74</sup>*

A lot of queer artists and artists of color feel this sense of responsibility to talk about the hard things in life, in a way that can feel exploitative or just torturous. It's a movement that wants to be freed of that responsibility [redacted]

[redacted] We have to find our way toward that agency ourselves, and we need to be the drivers of that change.

*Queer abstraction has thus emerged as a crucial site of experimentation and resistance in contemporary art, but it does not have a singular definition or agreed-upon style. Rather, this contested terrain is marked by active tensions between methods and materials that reference the body and those that exceed it<sup>75</sup>*

For me, a way of doing that is through queer abstraction. [redacted]

---

<sup>73</sup> Gordon Hall, quoted in Joseph Henry, "Queering Queer Abstraction," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Rachel Trusty, "Embodiment and Agency within the Artistic Genre of Queer Abstraction" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2022), 22.

<sup>75</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 8.

*Julia Bryan-Wilson has referred to queer abstraction as "a resource for all those in the margins who want to resist the demands to transparently represent themselves in their work."<sup>76</sup>*

*Looking at a Martin Puryear sculpture, for instance, I just get so excited that, in this beautiful abstract form, I can feel and identify a shared lineage.<sup>77</sup>*

---

<sup>76</sup> Ashton Cooper et al., "Queer Abstraction: A Roundtable," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 287.

<sup>77</sup> Cauleen Smith, interview by Leslie Hewitt, *BOMB*, no. 116 (Summer 2011).

Interviewer

**Our first interview started with you telling me you're broken, and that's why you're doing breaking and mending.**

Stephanie

That's not why I'm doing breaking and mending. It just happened to me that way.

*It is usually someone's mother with cancer, at least in books, or their sister, or lover or wife. In literature, one person's cancer seems to exist as an instrument of another person's epiphanies, and sickness takes the form of how a sick person looks.<sup>78</sup>*

Interviewer

**But now you're mending yourself.**

Stephanie

I'd like to think so.

*A fluid, responsive process, restoration requires digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present. And the end results rarely, if ever, match the original state.<sup>79</sup>*

Interviewer

**How has that shown up in your work?**

Stephanie

[REDACTED] aren't glass, and that is a very purposeful decision.

Sisyphian task — being so present with the objects so that they wouldn't break from my carelessness. And the breaking: I didn't want it to come from me. I wanted the objects to interact with their environment.

Now I'm spinning my own wool, dyeing it, creating these masses that remind me of a net, or a cradle, or a matrix — neural synapses. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] moved into different materials is that my body was physically starting to fail me. I [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I kept ignoring the earlier signals, thinking I could keep toughing it out.

*Queer people of color never say we are disabled if we have any choice about it. We come from families who believe in being tough, in sucking it up.<sup>80</sup>*

---

<sup>78</sup> Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

<sup>79</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, "So Much Time Spent in Bed".

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I wanted to fall back in love with the process of making. I would do drawings, watercolor sketches — and my faculty didn't like that. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Another comment was: I get being sick, but you still have a responsibility as a second year to do your work.

*How could I write about the world as it is when it is the same world that was guilty of this body (mine), which in all of its senses felt only like the animate form of its own betrayal?<sup>81</sup>*

**Interviewer**

**You mentioned attention as the key differentiator between working with glass and working with fiber — and with ADHD, attention is a key resource. Is there an element where your choice of material is recognizing the limits of what you can do, and by making that visible in the work, you're also asking others to see it?**

**Stephanie**

I didn't really clock it as that — maybe on a subconscious level I can see it now. A friend came to my critique in my first year and almost flippantly read the ceramic objects I was making — fragments and shards glued together in the kiln with glaze — as me masking, using the glaze as an adhesive but also as a protective shell. I was really shocked. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] But in a lot of ways it's true. The patterns of making these fragile, gravity-defying objects that exist in a kind of stasis — I probably do recognize myself in them [REDACTED]

The fiber work, the watercolor studies, the large-scale drawings are all things that keep me tethered to the present and help me soothe myself. I struggle with recognizing the signals in my body when I'm struggling [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] But these materials are portable, they still record gesture, and I can be with them within my current limitations.

*I listened to my body, but I had to fight to do so.<sup>82</sup>*

---

<sup>81</sup> Boyer, *The Undying*.

<sup>82</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, “Prince, Chronic Pain, and Living to Get Old”.



Interviewer

**In Slow Hands, as you enter the room, if you want to engage with the work you have to duck, squat, weave around it. You've always bent over backwards to accommodate others, and here you're forcing them to bend over backwards to accommodate you. It feels like the mending isn't just about recovery — it's about the recognition of that shift in perspective. Was that deliberate?**

Stephanie

[REDACTED] felt demeaning, being punished for not complying. And I had really tried, again to my own detriment. What it came down to was that they had completely eroded my trust.

*You can't go back to the person you were before the complaint; you can't unsee what you have come to see through complaint.<sup>83</sup>*

[REDACTED]

*So much of the inventiveness of student activism comes from an intimate knowledge of how institutions work to protect themselves, comes out of an experience of being obstructed, whether by procedures or by people.<sup>84</sup>*

Initially I was thinking: make them crawl. Put all the threads on the floor, just tall enough where I could shimmy through, and if they wanted to join the space they'd have to get on their knees. I decided against it at the last minute. It felt too demeaning. I didn't want my frustration to be the overarching message.

*making a complaint is never completed by a single action: it often requires you do more and more work. It is exhausting, especially given that what you complain about is already exhausting.<sup>85</sup>*

---

<sup>83</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, introduction.

<sup>84</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, introduction.

<sup>85</sup> Ahmed, *Complaint!*, introduction.



Interviewer

**My sense looking at the work is that it's asking the viewer to make a reasonable accommodation. I ducked down, got on my hands and knees, sat under it — and I was able to enjoy the whole thing, from end to end, top to bottom. It just required me to move a little.**

Stephanie

[redacted] being held rather than confronted. [redacted]  
[redacted] closest to something representational. Using the Venetian blinds, [redacted]  
[redacted] And it felt  
ham-fisted for my instincts, my habits in making.

[redacted]  
[redacted] I remember being so exasperated, saying: look at this  
shitty thing, I feel like I've stooped so low, like I've come to the lowest hanging fruit to  
try to get these people to understand. We both had a laugh at that.

[redacted]

[REDACTED] I was hoping for mentorship, for guidance from artists who've been doing this longer than I have. But it's honestly just been an experience that made me give too much, and nearly really broke me.

*Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings.*<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

Interviewer

**You've noted before that glass is a very male-dominated craft. How deliberate was it that in finding something healing and restorative, you switched to a traditionally feminine medium — fiber and wool? The piece even looks like a loom, like a weaving apparatus. And you described it as cocoon-like, it's red — there are womb overtones. How conscious were you of that when making it?**

Stephanie

When I set out to do something, my first steps are figuring out what material I'm going to use and what process — and I tend to oscillate between techniques that carry societal weight, traditions. [REDACTED]

I'm very aware of the traditions I'm harkening to. I feel it in my body.

[REDACTED] identity has been placed upon me since I was a child. But I'm not just a woman, I'm a person that embodies a lot of things. I remember being shamed at around nine years old by a hackney driver in the Philippines for not riding a motorcycle side-saddle — which felt so much more unstable. Looking "like a lady" superseded my safety. I really felt my girlhood/womanhood then. So with a lot of the work I do, I'm conscious of what my body is doing, what role it's playing. It feels a little silly, but also freeing, to work within all of these spaces and not be limited to my presented gender.

*The body is neither—while also being both—the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined.<sup>87</sup>*

*Bodies and genders, too, are constituted through material constraints and possibilities.<sup>88</sup>*

*Hammond's crucial role in theorizing the political potential of abstraction in the 1970s, asserting queer difference into the masculine sites of abstract form, cannot be overstated as foundational to the contemporary field of queer abstraction. Her ongoing refusal to take for granted the hetero-male established forms of art, forging the creative processes and formal experimentation that she defined as distinctly feminist and queer, have dragged the art object itself by defying categorical conventions and incorporating the mess of everyday matter and feeling.<sup>89</sup>*

---

<sup>87</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Getsy and Gossett, "A Syllabus on Transgender and Nonbinary Methods for Art and Art History," 109.

<sup>89</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 119.



**Interviewer**

**Your glasswork is currently hanging in the Henry — that's the more public-facing version of you as an artist. *Slow Hands* was a limited viewing, seen mostly by people who know you. Does having your name, Stephanie Alacon, on the wall of the Henry, as a glass artist, make you feel conflicted, or pigeonholed?**

**Stephanie**

[REDACTED] I'm happy to be known as an artist who works with glass, but it's not the only thing I do.

[REDACTED] It's a material. It has its time and place. It's another tool in my large arsenal when it comes to material fluency. I'll always be making glass work in some capacity, given my roots in ceramics and glass together. But it's not the only thing I'm making.



Interviewer

**Do you see your desire to move fluidly across media as part of your broader push for abstraction and resisting legibility?**

Stephanie

Yeah — to me that's an obvious observation, but maybe it isn't to others. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] create *Brace*, this structure, object that sort of looks like a [REDACTED], like a [REDACTED], like [REDACTED] pulled in on itself, and he described the way it was built, the way it moved, and draped, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] using what's already embedded in the material itself, sensorial qualities, its perceived value in the society's imposed hierarchy, my own private hierarchy, and personal knowledge, my history with the material.

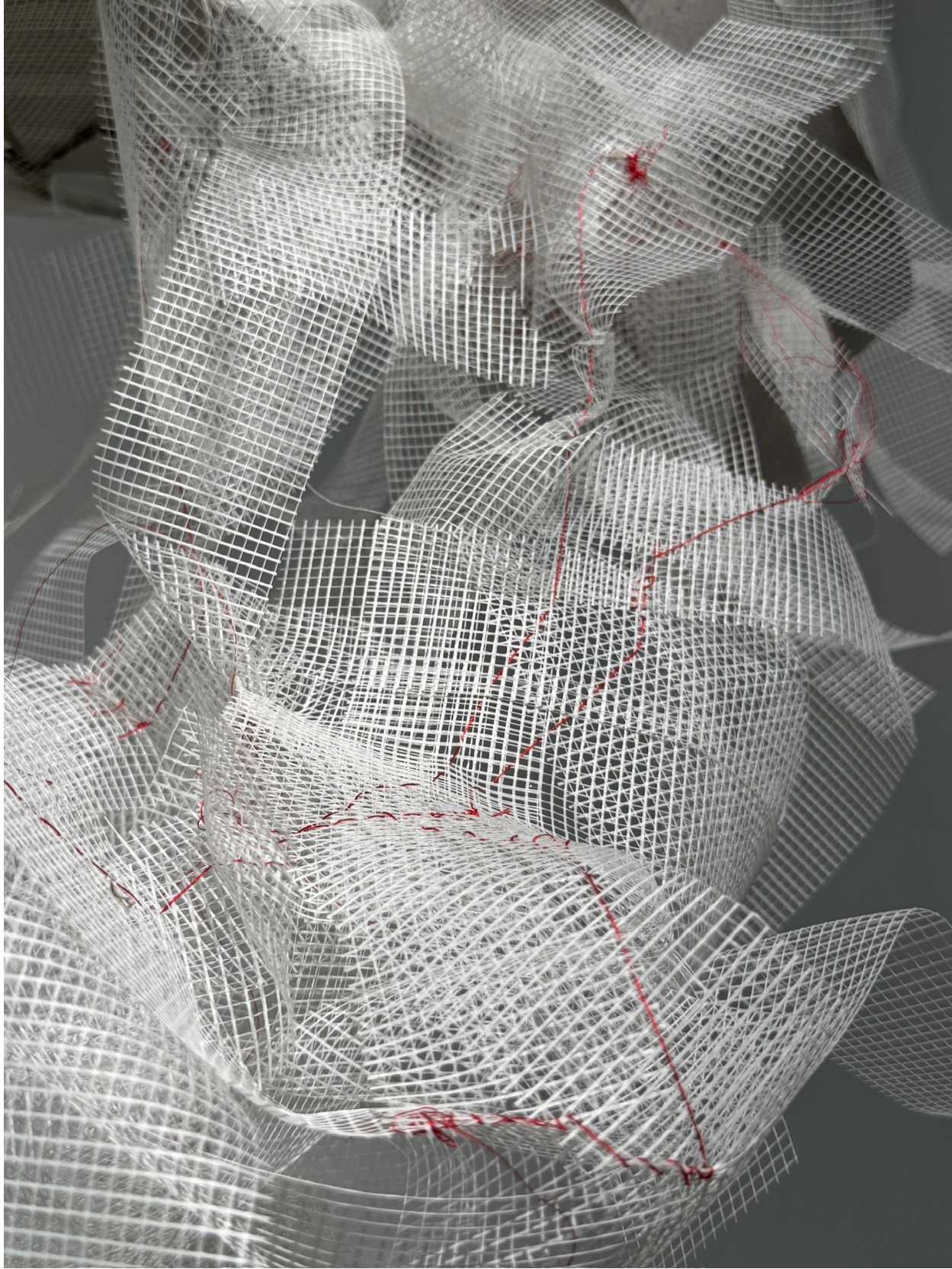
*I'm more about materials and process than I am about concepts. My approach is, 'The concept will show up. What am I working with here?'*<sup>90</sup>

*...eccentric abstraction is more allied to the non formal tradition devoted to opening up areas of materials, shape, colour and sensuous experience.*<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Making As Future Survival," interview by Lucy Cotter, in *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, ed. Lucy Cotter (Hatje Cantz, 2019), 42.

<sup>91</sup> Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction."



Interviewer

**Is there anything, as you've been wrapping up your MFA, that you felt you had to compromise on — had to explain — just to get by?**

Stephanie

Oh, fuck yeah. I feel like trying so hard [REDACTED] has made me stupider.

It was one of the things that was the tipping point for [REDACTED] we test for [REDACTED] Friends would ask me why I cared so much, and to just let it go. I wish I could let it go [REDACTED]

My patience [REDACTED] is very [REDACTED] now. You [REDACTED] engage with the art or you [REDACTED]. If you choose [REDACTED] to engage, then you're done — you don't need to think about it any further.

*Abstraction has become a tool of queer resistance by undermining the demand that artists who are marked by difference must “show up” in ways that are expected and by creating a site to generate alternative spaces and worlds.<sup>92</sup>*

I haven't struggled with critiques in any academic institution the way I've struggled here. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a good chunk of that is how we've been trained by the Academy. We're trained in the American way of seeing art, we have a shared language for analyzing work within its formal qualities, but I get it. Training only gets you so far, and it's a long crit. I think of abstraction as the prose of art. Or like, if we're talking about rock climbing, abstraction is the bouldering of visual art.

[REDACTED] I've said it time and again: maybe this work isn't for you, and that's okay. What's not okay is insisting on a story so you can connect the dots, because you won't — or can't — take a leap and try to parse out what I'm doing. I know I'm speaking the same language, because I don't have to do this for the people who are within my actual audience. There are no problems. So if you can't connect with it — if it's fear of being wrong, or whatever — that's okay. But don't expect me to make it easier for you.

*Usually the critic's mandate is to resolve difficulty when we encounter it, to write as if that difficulty doesn't exist for us, even as we produce that difficulty as a noble, productive challenge, worth confronting and working through.<sup>93</sup>*

---

<sup>92</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 8.

<sup>93</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, xii.



**Interviewer**

**You mentioned wanting to remake *Slow Hands* with more time and more space. What's unfinished about it for you?**

**Stephanie**

Installation is so defined by the space it's in — how the work exists within the space and how it interacts with the viewer. You have an idea of where things will go, but the decisions you make, however small, affect the read of the piece. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It's a collaboration

between me and the material.



*the role of the artist is not to give effect to a preconceived idea but to follow the forces and flows of material that bring the work into being. To view the work is to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world<sup>94</sup>*

I need more time. I need to be in a space where I feel safe and respected — time to really sit with the immense amount of labor I've put in, and to deal with the logistics of setting up and tearing down. I think *Slow Hands* has the potential

It's

time for new scenery, with friends — a community that can care.

*These installations never materialize the same way twice, changing according to their site of display and altering that site to drag on the white gallery walls or the cold minimalist architecture of many museum spaces, contaminating these sites with their visceral mess.<sup>95</sup>*

---

<sup>94</sup> Ingold, *Making*, 96.

<sup>95</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 117.

Interviewer

**You asked others in your work about the continuing motifs or decisions they keep making and striving for. Is there such a thing in your work — and if so, what is it?**

Stephanie

At the very start, when I began making work in my late twenties, I wanted [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] this desperate need to be a whole person, someone who could just do [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. There are these sweeping, lateral moves I make in  
how I describe the work — broad enough that people can take up and funnel deeper into  
it themselves. I'll talk about [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] These are all things that connect us,  
experiences that further describe the nuances of what makes us human. It's my story,  
but it could be your story too. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] a bid to get someone to care about it. I think of them as living creatures,  
beings that have to make their own way in the world.

*First, cure requires damage, locating the harm entirely within individual human body-minds, operating as if each person were their own ecosystem. Second, it grounds itself in an original state of being, relying on a belief that what existed before is superior to what exists currently. And finally, it seeks to return what is damaged to that former state of being.<sup>96</sup>*

*I claim brokenness to make this irrevocable shattering visible. ... There will be no return to the moments before my father first grabbed my body-mind. Cure dismisses resilience, survival, the spider web of fractures, cracks, and seams. Its promise holds power precisely because none of us want to be broken. But I'm curious: what might happen if we were to accept, claim, embrace our brokenness?<sup>97</sup>*

*Rather than picture particular bodies performing these kinds of labor, the work instead gives us the objects themselves as sites for possibility, for doing otherwise under precarious conditions.<sup>98</sup>*

---

<sup>96</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 160.

<sup>98</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 126.

Interviewer

**And that's how you see all of your work?**

Stephanie

Most of it, yeah. The ones that aren't ready are studies, but they have potential too, I think. One day.

*These are not neat accumulations; instead, they overflow and threaten to exceed their wrappings. They do imply discarded materials, everyday stuff, but the form that the matter takes does not keep it controlled — Smith's process promotes its precarious self-forming, and the sculpture is seemingly ready to fall apart if a single ribbon were cut.<sup>99</sup>*

Interviewer

**Do you think that comes across to the viewer?**

Stephanie

[REDACTED] tendrils that keep coming into my work — they tend to have this cheeky, playful way of gesturing or reaching out, exploring the environment, whether that's the surface, the way they contort themselves in space, or clinging onto the metal pedestals I make for them. [REDACTED] I think people can sense something that is or was alive. [REDACTED]

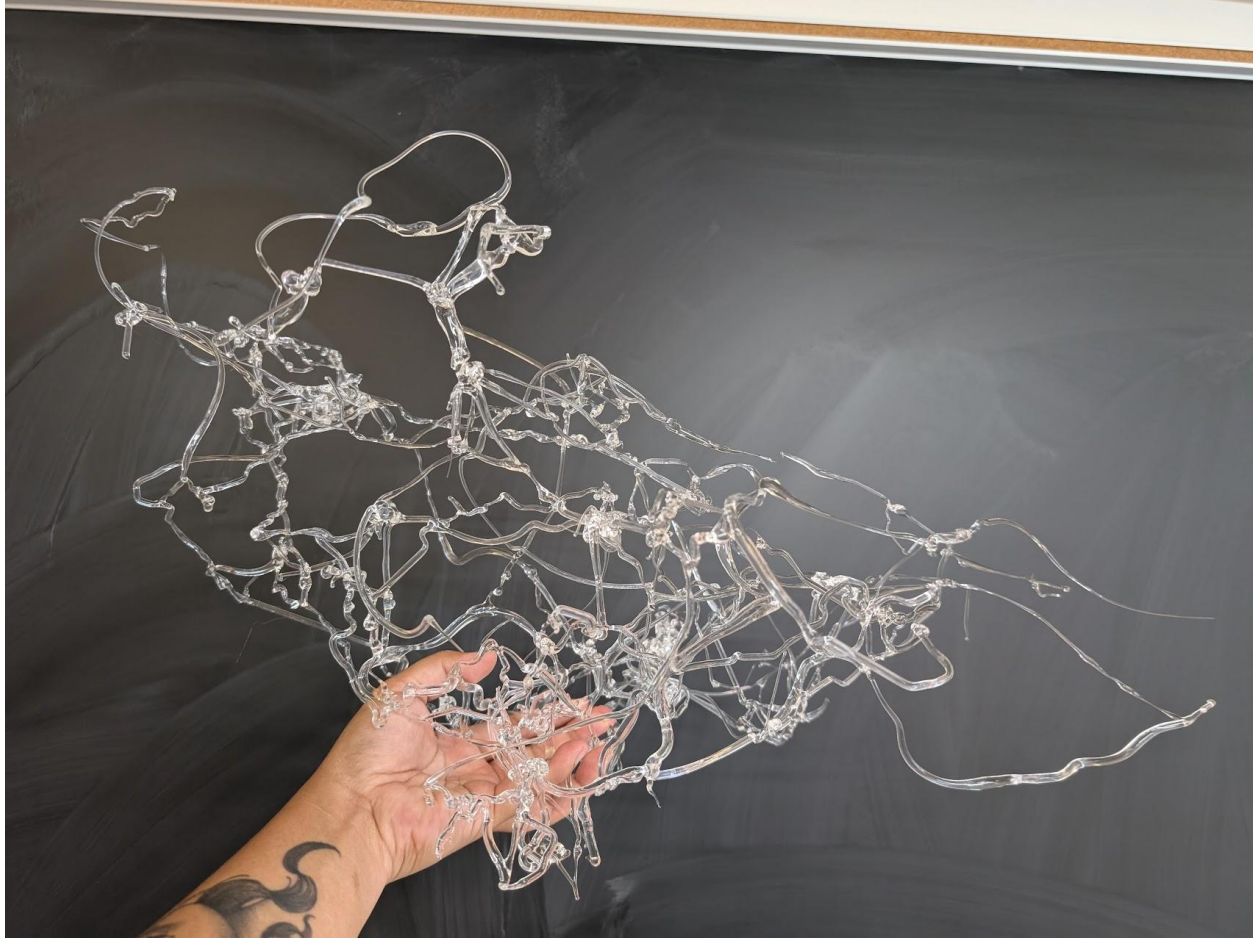
*Every few days, I had to plunge my gloved hands into it in order to rerandomize its slackening tendrils. During those moments, the sculpture was intimate and incontrovertibly just material at the same time. Despite its stubborn literalism, it became bodily. That was a great lesson in sculpture's physicality and the corporeality it could incite. I began to see sculptural presence as a site where unauthorized or disallowed relations could erupt.<sup>100</sup>*

---

<sup>99</sup> Lancaster, *Dragging Away*, 126.

<sup>100</sup> Doyle and Getsy, "Queer Formalisms," 64.





**Interviewer**

**The way you described the tendrils felt like a place where you reveal yourself in the work slightly — maybe unintentionally. There's something cheeky and impish coming through in them, this sense of creeping or clinging. Are there other recurring elements where you're subtly unmasking in ways that others might pick up on?**

**Stephanie**

The masses with tendrils

I put myself into that where I would want to go if I were these bundles of nerves or neurons, this sentient tumbleweed.

*one of the developments that has been exciting me most has been recent work by trans and queer artists who appropriate Minimalism and abstraction as resources for envisioning new ways to inhabit the body or to give an account of the self.<sup>101</sup>*

---

<sup>101</sup> Doyle and Getsy, "Queer Formalisms," 66.

Interviewer

**Is there a way in which those identifiable elements are a kind of radical legibility — in juxtaposition to the abstraction? The things you're making most readable are the very behaviors you've been conditioned to mask. Those are visible, while everything else you might otherwise be asked to show is abstracted away.**

Stephanie

[REDACTED] I'm very particular about what gets displayed. Things that have been sitting in my mental closet for years only come out in a certain way. I'm constantly building up a visual vocabulary, and these things sit stagnant until I give them a purpose. And in that purpose, legibility starts to bleed through.

*queer/feminist art practices will hover over the thingness of the body as a way of exploring the weight and history of that body, as a way of exploring the politics of making bodies into things, and things into bodies. ... We can experience those things as living and having agency. Sometimes they push back.*<sup>102</sup>

[REDACTED] They need a witness. Otherwise they're quiet, but their presence is still there. There's this proclivity, especially here in the US, to be bold and loud. [REDACTED]

---

<sup>102</sup> Doyle and Getsy, "Queer Formalisms," 63.

# Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!* Duke University Press, 2021.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Boyer, Anne. *Garments Against Women*. Ahsahta Press, 2015.
- Boyer, Anne. *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.
- Buetti, Federica. *Critical Poetics of Feminist Refusals: Voicing Dissent Across Differences*. Routledge, 2022.
- Buetti, Federica. "Poetics of Negation: The Personal in the Writings of Carla Lonzi, Hélène Cixous, Moyra Davey, Frances Stark, and Anne Boyer." PhD thesis, RCA Writing Programme, 2020.
- Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 1971. S.v. "abstract," v.
- Cooper, Ashton, Loren Britton, Kerry Downey, John Edmonds, Mark Joshua Epstein, Avram Finkelstein, Chitra Ganesh, Glendalys Medina, and Sheila Pepe. "Queer Abstraction: A Roundtable." *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 285-306. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0028>.
- Doyle, Jennifer. *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. Duke University Press, 2013.
- Doyle, Jennifer, and David J. Getsy. "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation." *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2013): 58-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2013.10792864>.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2004.
- Federici, Silvia. *Wages Against Housework*. Power of Women Collective / Falling Wall Press, 1975.
- Getsy, David J., and Che Gossett. "A Syllabus on Transgender and Nonbinary Methods for Art and Art History." *Art Journal* 80, no. 4 (2021): 100-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2021.1947710>.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Grandin, Temple. *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life with Autism*. 2nd ed. Vintage Books, 2006.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.
- Henry, Joseph. "Queering Queer Abstraction." *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2017.
- Ingold, Tim. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. Routledge, 2013.
- Lancaster, Lex Morgan. *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art*. Duke University Press, 2022.
- Lippard, Lucy R. "Eccentric Abstraction." *Art International* 10, no. 9 (1966): 34-40.
- Lonzi, Carla. *Let's Spit on Hegel*. 1970. Translated by Veronica Newman. Secunda, n.d.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 98–101. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983.
- Luger, Cannupa Hanska. "Making As Future Survival." Interview by Lucy Cotter. In *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, edited by Lucy Cotter, 42-63. Hatje Cantz, 2019.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Routledge, 2012.
- Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Nengudi, Senga. Interview by Amadour. *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023.
- Newton, Alice, Aidan Flinn, James Downs, and Laura Richmond. "Rethinking Self-Identification in Neurodivergent Communities: Barriers, Harms, and the Need for Change." *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 4 (2025): 1682129. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frcha.2025.1682129>.
- Machado de Oliveira, Vanessa. *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*. North Atlantic Books, 2021.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.
- Rivera, Rachel A., and Loisa Bennetto. "Applications of Identity-Based Theories to Understand the Impact of Stigma and Camouflaging on Mental Health Outcomes for Autistic People." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14 (2023): 1243657. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1243657>.
- Smith, Cauleen. Interview by Leslie Hewitt. *BOMB*, no. 116 (Summer 2011).
- Trusty, Rachel. "Embodiment and Agency within the Artistic Genre of Queer Abstraction." PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2022.

Worringer, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. Translated by Michael Bullock. Ivan R. Dee, 1997.

Yergeau, M. Remi. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Duke University Press, 2018.