INTRODUCTION

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THIS CATALOG IS TARDY.
BUT THIS CATALOG IS HAPPENING! WE REMAIN
INDEBTED TO THE COHORT OF 2020
FOR THEIR SPIRIT IN THE FACE OF SOME
BIG STUFF. The cohort of 2020:
JOSH BELISO, DULCE SOLEDAD IBARRA, CASEY KAUFFMAN, PAULSON LEE,
ALEXIS C. MCDONALD, AND JOHNNY FOREVER NAWRACAJ had to undergo
the relocation of the studios to a new MFA facility, then survive a
worldwide pandemic and find the language to engage a tsunami of
ongoing social justice actions. All this while staying on track to get
that Master of Fine Arts degree and mount graduate exhibitions that
were largely showcased via social media. One exception being Beliso,
who found it more palatable to host his graduate exhibition in his
yard, with wonderful vinyl lettering on the garage door. This cohort
graduated into a world that was teetering on full collapse with a lack of
employment and so many art spaces closed. Still, they persevered and
found ways to continue making work, supporting each other, hosting
online panels, and finding comfort in their art practices, fortunately. At
the same time, students were also the beneficiaries of opportunities
that were brought to us or supported by our dean, HAVEN LIN KIRK,
including an Artforum MFA Spotlight, the online exhibition at the UTA
Artist Space, and an exciting open studio that was in conjunction with
Frieze Art Fair LA, held in February, just before everything shut down.

During the first COVID-19 wave, we thought that it might subside by
the summer of 2020, so we put off most of the graduate exhibitions.
It was painful at times to stop the momentum. We were all in
limbo together, trying to find our way through. All the art program
graduates held zoom meetings through the summer. We cried
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Like a stalling engine, the day the world shut down came as a sudden yet gradual stop. Under Los Angeles County’s new “Safer at Home” ordinance, all business would cease in-person operations and remain closed to the public, except for those newly defined as essential. As such, the planned exhibitions for the graduating class of artists were to be postponed indefinitely. Many of us can recall those final few days before those that could take indefinite refuge at home. I was, in fact, together with some members of the 2020 MFA cohort leading up to that time, installing Johnny Forever Nawracaj’s thesis exhibition. And while I had the personal pleasure of curating one of the exhibitions that year, all shows, including that one, were collaborative efforts between current and past students, artists, curators, art handlers, fabricators, staff, and friends. ONE OF THE MANY THINGS I LEARNED AND PRACTICED DURING MY TIME AT USC ROSKI WAS THAT ART MAKING IS BEST DONE AS A COMMUNITY EFFORT.

Surely what I learned in the classroom from my brilliant professors and mentors has been instilled into my politics and practices of curating, but what has been most formative is learning alongside artists and friends, building connections that transcend the exhibition space.

So unlike most writers and curators who would typically write this catalog essay for the graduating class, I have been privy to many conversations over the last few years with the artists about their practices, their hopes, their collective and individual struggles, and what I cherish the most: their lives outside of art making. As I reflect on the 2020 MFA thesis exhibitions, it is nearly impossible not to think of that night as we apprehensively worked together on Nawracaj’s exhibition, unsure whether it would be postponed.

While the exhibition did indeed have an attended opening and performance night, what set the boundaries for a viewing public shifted in the following months. Save for Alexis C. McDonald, whose exhibition marks the end of our so-called pre-COVID “normal,” the rest of the four out of six artists, Casey Kauffmann, Paulson Lee, Josh Beliso, and Dulce Soledad Ibarra, unexpectedly put their culminating projects on pause in order to readjust to online or socially distant formats. As if attending graduate school was not mentally, emotionally, and financially precarious enough, the artists now had the challenge of navigating these difficulties during a global pandemic that made visible various forms of heightened insecurity and injustice. In Los Angeles...
in particular, the summer of 2020 marked a resurgence of powerful and effective uprisings. Calls for defunding the police alongside the end of mass detention, incarceration, and state-sanctioned violence met forces with calls for food and housing justice as mobilized through the Los Angeles Tenants Union’s slogan “Food Not Rent.” For some, these galvanizing calls revealed injustices often made invisible; but for many others, these calls were only reiterations of a daily struggle for resistance.

Beyond the formative experience of the pandemic, in many ways, I tend to think of this group of artists as representative of our various yet collective generational concerns. Their work together bridges a variety of shared but distinctly individual topics of which couplings I will didactically make:

Representations of FEMALE SEXUALITY are explored by both Alexis McDonald in her guilty pleasure series (2020) that at once archives yet effaces (re)presentation of Black female objecthood in hip-hop visual culture as well as by Casey Kauffmann in her exploration of tropes of female hysteria in art and visual culture as seen in her series of drawings Who is She? (2019–2020);

MASS MEDIA AND NOTIONS OF ONLINE PRESENCE are depicted in Paulson Lee’s world distorting paintings of which The Hills (2019), Stage Fright (2019), and About Town (2018) are only but a few that play on the digital and escapist language of the internet and likes-based social media, and again in Casey Kauffman’s ongoing video collage of found video entitled Knowing Others and Wanting to be Known that draws on viral reality television and social media clips;

GRIEF AND HEALING are grappled with in Paulson Lee’s Let’s Go Home neon series (2019), wherein he replicates his late father’s handwritten note as a flickering whisper of a last wish as well as in his digital video Boys Don’t Cry (2020), and in Dulce Soledad Ibarra’s SOBREVIENTES (2020) piñata sculpture that literally translates to survivors but can be interpreted through its colorful tissue paper as those who defeat the odds;

(DE)CONSTRUCTIONS OF FORM AND MATERIALITY are explored by Johnny Forever Nawracaj throughout their work, from their sculptural assemblage series OMG Shoes (2020) to their disembodied prints Studs I, II, III, and IV (2019), as well as by Josh Belisoso in his marble oversized sculptures as he gives mundane consumer products the pop treatment as seen in Banana Splits (2020), D’s Nuts (2020), and Groucho Knows (2020);

LABOR is evoked by Johnny Forever Nawracaj through their bubble wrapped and steel studded video installation of their Shoes video series (2019–2020), and Dulce Soledad Ibarra directly engages it in their ongoing virtual project 9th to Olympic that documents the Piñata District of Downtown Los Angeles on Instagram.
Each of these couplings may seem odd to some (perhaps to the artists themselves), but they are not definitive of each other—they do not define any limitations or set any boundaries. Their six individual practices speak across the group, and often-times there are overlaps of interests and concerns that facilitate mutual understanding and development. These topics are only a few of the many that may constellate throughout and certainly cannot encompass the ones viewers may draw on as they view the work.

Perhaps then, in the following pages, we can keep these points of connection in mind and simultaneously search for new ones.

ANA BRIZ
Josh Beliso is a contemporary artist known for his unique adaptation of the classical stone medium. He was born in the South Bay of Los Angeles, immersed in the sleepy, sun-kissed lifestyle of beach culture. As an LA native, Josh pursued his creative ambitions by attending two of the city’s top programs in the arts. He studied under Meg Cranston during his undergraduate program at Otis School of Art and Design and later Nao Bustamante as his program director during his time at the USC Roski Graduate program. Mundane objects act as muses for his fluid, theatrical interpretations of the everyday. Hairstyles, accessories, and the foods we consume throughout passing centuries are immortalized through the archaic medium of stone—creating relevance and permanence out of fleeting moments, objects, emotions, and eras. Using an archaic medium such as stone to embody mundane objects is a love letter to materialism and a subtle critique. Stone is powerful by design and exudes a monumental quality even before the artist or craftsman touches it. Marble is earth in its most pure state, forming from calcium rich limestone containing the shells, coral deposits, and bones from ancient organisms. The aesthetics of stone and marble can be manipulated, but its essence remains untouched. The alchemy of this material transcendence is to turn stone to milk, or a lush wig of hair, as Josh has in previous works. Along with stone materials, he has begun to incorporate mass produced objects, painting, photography, and documented performance in his current pieces.
Dulce Soledad Ibarra is a multidisciplinary artist, educator, activist, designer, and curator with investments in community and identity-emphasized arts and opportunity. As a practicing artist, Ibarra discusses issues of generational guilt and cultural identities in videos, installations, and performances and recently has been inviting the public to partake in the dialogue via workshops and participatory work. Looking through queer Xicanx perspective, the work is fueled by emotional labor, personal research, and analysis. Currently, the work is centered around the Piñata/Party Supply District of Downtown Los Angeles, engaging in the means of sustaining as a community of businesses and as a place of cultural familiarities and commodities. Ibarra has exhibited, screened, performed, and programmed at venues across Southern California, including Angels Gate Cultural Center, Charlie James Gallery, Consulado General de México en Los Ángeles, Craft Contemporary, Echo Park Film Center, Guggenheim Gallery at Chapman University, Human Resources Los Angeles, ONE Gallery, West Hollywood, Ontario Museum of History and Art, and Pieter Performance Space, among others. Ibarra holds an MFA from the University of Southern California and earned a BFA in Sculpture from California State University, Long Beach.
REVIVIR
CON GANAS
¡JUNTOS!
Casey Kauffmann is an interdisciplinary artist whose digital and drawing practices address the contemporary performance of self related to her experience of femme representation, social media, and reality television. She received her MFA from the University of Southern California and her Bachelor of Arts from The Evergreen State College in Washington. Kauffmann’s work has been featured in LA Weekly, The New Yorker, I-D Vice, Hyperallergic, Tush, and has been exhibited in galleries including Transfer Gallery, the Brand Library in Glendale, Leimin Space, and Coaxial. Her collage Instagram project @uncannysfvalley, which she started in 2014, features digital collage works and GIFs created using only her iPhone. The pieces Kauffmann posts to this account are an ever-accumulating collection of material from all corners of the internet, sourced from Tumblr, Instagram, and Google. Her drawing practice functions as an inquiry into the representation of femme emotion and hysteria in both art history and popular culture.
Paulson Lee is a Los Angeles based artist who explores the performative self, the exchange between material and immaterial, and the digital landscape of the internet through his painting, installation, and video practices. Coming from a background in illustration and design, he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where he cemented his narrative-based practice focused on the act of suturing into multiple identities, personas, and affects.

Lee uses painting, video, and mixed media to create an immersive world that addresses loss, grief, unease, and healing translated through the escapist languages of pop culture, mass media, and Southern California aesthetics. Constantly flickering between satire and sincerity, Lee’s work highlights the dual nature of identity and the tension that this multiplicity creates—the veneer and what lies just beneath the surface. He often describes his own work as a sad pop song while visually taking cues from anime, 1980s and 1990s nostalgia, and nightlife culture. Lee invites his audience into a fantasy of material pleasure and immaterial anxiety.
Alexis C. McDonald is a visual artist from Atlanta, GA, that uses installation, video, collage, and found materials to explore her relationship with Hip Hop, sexuality, visibility, and capital. Growing up in Atlanta, where McDonald was exposed to hip hop very early on, she has seen Hip Hop as a site for self-expression and sexual liberation. McDonald's works demonstrate how black women integrate their affinity for hip hop with a politics of resistance. She recognizes the agency these women possess and encourages the audience to confront the limitations placed on black women, preventing them from accessing and capitalizing on their sensuality. In May 2020, McDonald received her MFA from the University of Southern California's Roski School of Art and Design. She is currently based in Miami, Fl.
Johnny Forever Nawracaj is a nonbinary Polish-born multidisciplinary artist working primarily in performance and video. Coming from the social realist settlement of Nowa Huta, Poland, they were a childhood immigrant to Tkaronto/Toronto. Nawracaj developed their art practice in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, where they received an MA in Art History from Concordia University. Forged on DIY queer cabaret stages, their work weaves a surrealistic narrative through video, installation, and femme-inflected performance to reflect on labor, loss, and identity. Nawracaj is particularly invested in exploring these themes in relation to queer and nonbinary cultural production. Much of the artist’s current practice examines the body in the built environment. Having supported their art practice through various precarious forms of labor—including home renovation—Nawracaj strives to make work that symbolically links the precarity of the contemporary built environment to the insubstantiality of prescriptive gender categorization. Combining decontextualized architectural elements and ubiquitous construction materials with queer femme tropes, Nawracaj’s work forms fantastical new configurations, building metaphors around the vulnerability of structures both physical and theoretical.

Nawracaj has shown work internationally, recently appearing in group exhibitions in Los Angeles at Human Resources, at Meinblau Projektraum in Berlin, and in Mexico City as part of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ 11th Encuentro. They are currently developing work with their partner and collaborator, sound artist Gambletron. The duo experiments with live radio transmission in combination with digital media as a means for public engagement.
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