

HYPERALLERGIC

Our Favorite MFA Work From Yale and RISD

For Hyperallergic's final installment in a series dedicated to highlighting exciting MFA work, we looked to students from Yale University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

Dessane Lopez Cassell
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As the new school year kicks off at art schools around the country, we at Hyperallergic are rounding out our summer series dedicated to highlighting exciting work produced by graduating MFA students. For this final edition, we looked to students from Yale University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

At Yale, students from the sculpture, painting, and printmaking programs showcased their projects via virtual exhibitions with M 2 3 and Perrotin galleries, respectively. The M 2 3 exhibition features an introduction by fellow Yale alum Holly Bushman, while the Perrotin presentation is introduced by Alexandra Thomas, a PhD student in Yale's History of Art and Africana Studies programs (who is also a Hyperallergic contributor). Highlights from the two presentations include a conceptual project focused on conducting rocket science, "both technical and social," as well as notable projects which made compelling, innovative use of materials such as textiles and advertisements.

RISD presented a virtual grad show featuring work from students enrolled in all 16 of its MFA programs — from architecture to textiles — in a website jointly stewarded by the RISD Museum Digital Initiatives team and the offices of Graduate Studies and Exhibitions. While less user-friendly, the site offers access to a wide array of student projects, including particularly strong works from the ceramics and painting departments, including frescoes on concrete, sumptuous pottery, and brightly hued, culinary tableaux.

Scroll away below for a roundup of some of our favorites.

Jarrett Key, RISD (Painting)

With their lushly patterned and vibrant frescoes, Jarrett Key aims to challenge perceptions of what Black leisure can look like. Raised in rural Alabama, their series *Leaving the*

City grew out of a few experiments they conducted with visitors to their studio. “I ask them to close their eyes and imagine a Black person in an environment. They — predominantly white artists, curators, and educators — imagine Black bodies in urban spaces, landscapes defined by cement,” Key explains in a statement on the RISD website. Their resulting works feature friends and others they know, such as their friend Dee Walls in “Warrior at Rest,” in pastoral landscapes “literally held by a substrate of cement.”

Though the flattening effect of virtual presentations is less ideal for Key, they’re at least heartened by the fact that more viewers will have access to their work. “Zoom in, take your time, see if you can distinguish shadows from color,” Key encourages.

Kopal Seth, RISD (Ceramics)

“The farther I am from my roots, the more I want to strengthen my connection to India,” writes Kopal Seth in her artist statement. Lately, her ceramics practice has drawn inspiration from various Indian terracotta traditions, with her research currently focusing on “matka” pots. Though now falling out of use, these earthen storage containers were once commonly employed to keep contents cool in the heat. “I used this forgotten vessel as a canvas to project my observations gleaned from a fast and changing world,” Seth explained over email. Patches of black, red, white, and yellow chalk adorn the surface of her work “Cause to Continue” (2020), demarcating shadows and the waning glints of light cast on roadside stacks of these pots, once a common sight around her hometown of Khurai.

“Spontaneous hit and tries are a really important part of my process,” Seth mentioned, noting how tricky this period of little to no studio access has been for her practice, especially given the surplus of time she’s had on her hands. “It took me a while to adjust to the new mediums and get used to slowing down, planning and recontextualizing things and my ideas in more detail than I was used to. I started deconstructing the work I already had and reassembling them with more thoughtful intentions.” Seth notes that she’s been lucky to receive significant support from RISD’s ceramics faculty: “They supplied materials and [...] our head of the department Katy organized weekly presentations where she would talk to us about artists and their process to keep us motivated [...] This definitely opened up new mediums and ways of doing things.”

Kate Pincus-Whitney, RISD (Painting)

Kate Pincus-Whitney has long been fascinated by the theatricality of shared meals. “For me, the table acts as the stage for the dramas of human life,” she explains of her ongoing series *Theater of the Dinner Table*. Each large-scale acrylic painting, rendered on a wooden door, is an attempt to gauge the myriad ways the objects we consume and surround ourselves with become part of “our cultural and psychological understanding of self.” At the time she began creating “Dionysian Drinking Games” (2020), Pincus-Whitney was thinking a lot about the Eleusinian Mysteries, the secretive ancient Greek initiation rituals held yearly by the cult of Demeter and Persephone, as well as about Dionysus, Carl Jung, and the writings of Joseph Campbell. Populated by eccentric accoutrements and brightly colored textiles, the dense painting gestures toward the layered mythologies and rituals she associates with food and the figures mentioned previously.

“Although I consider myself very much an optimist, it’s saddening when you devote all your time and energy making a physical object with your hands, focusing on materiality, and on craft. [...] It’s not just about the image of the thing, but the thing itself,” Pincus-Whitney lamented when asked about how she’s navigated the challenges of presenting her work online. “I am very dyslexic and also stereo blind (meaning I cannot see depth), so much of my work formally plays with neurological perception of depth cues, illusion, and materiality which gets lost when viewed solely on screens.” Still, Pincus-Whitney is optimistic about the wider reach enabled by virtual platforms, and hopes her work will inspire viewers to consider more consciously the histories of objects surrounding them.

Tiffany Tang, RISD (Ceramics)

“When it comes to ceramics, you can never fully control things,” explained Tiffany Tang over email. When RISD shut down access to studio space, Tang was in the process of planning an interactive installation which would bring together numerous of her ceramic works for viewers to touch, use, and otherwise interact with in the gallery. “The space was to be built with layers from the ground up — from a tufted rug on the floor, wooden tables at different heights, porcelain pedestals, and stacks of porcelain work — all meant to come together to create a larger landscape.” These “tablescapes,” as she refers to them, were meant to display functional works in a manner that mimicked natural elements such as rivers, mountains, and clouds, while inviting hands-on engagement.

While presenting her works virtually has proved challenging — with no touching, plating, or pouring allowed — Tang notes that the experience has stretched her practice in new ways. She has taken to sketching more of her designs ahead of time, and even ended up

creating a photo book documenting her works, all named after songs she listened to frequently while completing her degree.

Hangama Amiri, Yale (Painting & Printmaking)

Working between representational and abstract modes, Hangama Amiri seeks to “bring the experiences of Afghan women to visual art.” Her ornately textured works draw upon her own memories to emphasize place and color, and often take the form of large-scale canvases, replete with brilliantly hued, embroidered textiles. Her recent work “Jannah/Paradise #1” (2020) nods to the literal translation of the term from Arabic, which connotes something that is hidden or unseen. Likewise, here Amiri is referencing the Islamic conception of paradise, a place of “peace and bliss where the faithful and righteous are rewarded,” as she noted over email. Interested in the cultural symbolism of this space, Amiri imagined this heavenly site as “a space of refuge that is also unseen to us [...] an imagined space where women’s body, pleasure, and self-righteousness are only allowed to be neutral and free.”

Teasing out the rich textures of her works has been tricky amid the pandemic, given the blurriness and otherwise flattening effects of endless Zoom calls and screens. Challenges aside, she’s found virtual platforms such as Perrotin’s and Instagram to be helpful tools for connecting with audiences, noting the ways in which the virtual MFA show has broadened her connections with other institutions and curators. Amiri explained, “I guess for now I can only hope for the best to introduce viewers to follow my work on Instagram, since I’ll be using this platform more often these days to provide live artist talks, studio visits, and invitations to [...] my upcoming group/solo exhibitions.”

María de los Àngeles Rodríguez Jiménez, Yale (Painting & Printmaking)



L to R:

María de los Àngeles Rodríguez Jiménez, “Menina Y” (2020), linen, burlap, wax, cotton, glass beads, and indigo, 60 × 36 inches; María de los Àngeles Rodríguez Jiménez, “Menino O” (2020) linen, cotton, wax, oil, glass beads, and resin, 60 × 30 inches

“These works are offerings,” María de los Àngeles Rodríguez Jiménez notes in her artist statement. “Handled, staged, and witnessed in space, my offerings attempt [to] activate the subversive power of devotional practices.” Born in Holguín, Cuba, from which she later migrated to New Orleans, de los Àngeles Rodríguez Jiménez’s work often references spirituality and memory. Her sculptural works “Menino O” and “Menina Y” pay tribute to the Yorùbá orishas Yemaya and Obatala, the revered deities who preside over the water and sky, respectively, and reflect the artist’s deep interest in the symbolism of the womb, evinced here through her use of wax castings of coconuts. “I was thinking about clothes being hung to dry when making these works. But also clothes being remnants of bodies when they come off us, and thus still part of the body,” she explained over email.

“I want my audience to ask questions and keep the language and conversation going,” she continued when asked about her hopes for virtual presentations such as this one. She has a few ideas for how to best make this format work for her practice, which, like many artists,

relies on the ability to notice smaller details and rarely operates in 2D: “This means including more writing, more public conversations, videos, and the inclusion of non-conventional documentation of works. A lot is already removed from a work once it is reproduced, and I am interested in complicating that sense of loss.”

David Roy, Yale (Sculpture)

Amid the tumult of 2016, David Roy got to thinking, “What if there was a Black NASA?” A big believer in the old adage that art should never be estranged from the everyday, Roy went about answering his own question, eventually founding an agency devoted to conducting “rocket science; both technical and social, through the design, fabrication, and launching of rockets, as well as interventions in public space.” His endeavors with BLACKNASA sit at the forefront of “Peace Rocket” (above), a 2019 film made in collaboration with Vanessa Haddad and Adam Gundersheimer. Over the course of the film, Roy launches a small rocket inscribed with messages of peace, a small yet poignant gesture of good will amid an otherwise bleak landscape.

Given the nature of his work, which typically circulates through documentation, Roy is in a uniquely fortunate position amid the shift to virtual platforms. “I think that there is deep potential in the fact that this exhibition and it’s documentation are the same thing,” he remarked over email. “I also like the idea of sending my work into the cloud where it can go on and perhaps live forever. In this way, I think that uploading something to the internet is like sending it into space.” He seemed optimistic when we spoke, continuing, “I hope that with all of the problems and uncertainty in the world, art can provide some peace and positive energy.”

Kathia St. Hilaire, Yale (Painting & Printmaking)

Raised in a Caribbean community in South Florida, Kathia St. Hilaire uses her intricate canvases to intertwine references to Haitian Vodun, traditional weaving techniques, and consumerism. Materials such as cast-off advertisements, bits of aluminum, and oil paint might come together to render scenes inspired by her own relationship to the Haitian diaspora, such as in “A spirit watches over you” (2020), while a closer look reveals numerous richly layered pockets of abstraction.

These days, what St. Hilaire misses most are the conversations she used to be able to have in person. “I truly do miss engaging with the viewer and explaining my process and intent

behind the work,” she noted, though like many of her peers, such feelings have been tempered by the newfound ability to reach viewers coming to her work from greater geographical differences.