

**Laugh Back**

Curated by Lindsey O'Connor

July 14–August 19, 2018

Opening Reception: July 14, 6-8 PM

---

**Deborah Castillo**

*Slapping Power*, 2015/2018

Clay, performance, and high-definition video;  
5:49 min.

Courtesy of the artist

In her performance *Slapping Power*, Deborah Castillo mauls two male busts representative of patriarchal authority. Using her hands to sculpt the clay figures, and then subsequently disfiguring them, Castillo's body becomes a transgressive site capable of generation and obliteration. With each punch, the wet clay records her darkly comedic attack on misogyny, colonialism, and totalitarianism.



---

**Luis Mejico**

*I Don't Know Why! ...I Just Am*, 2017

Fiber

Courtesy of the artist

**Luis Mejico**

*How About Now? Is This Alright?*, 2017

Fiber

Courtesy of the artist

Luis Mejico's fiber works from the series *Too Embarrassing To Say Out Loud* convey the artist's feelings of dysmorphia toward her transgender body through subtly sarcastic bursts of diaristic text. The self-conscious works lay bare the absurdity of rigidly defined bodily expectations while simultaneously communicating the unseen author's ambivalence and frustration at having an unruly body. In her appeals for understanding and intimacy, Mejico exposes the complexities of reconciling physicality and self.



**Farah Al Qasimi**

*M Napping on Carpet*, 2016

Digital photograph

Courtesy of the artist and Third Line, Dubai



**Farah Al Qasimi**

*How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Room*, 2016

High-definition video; 3:30 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Third Line, Dubai



**Farah Al Qasimi**

*S Eating Watermelon*, 2016

Digital photograph

Courtesy of the artist and Third Line, Dubai



**Farah Al Qasimi**

*S Folding Blanket*, 2016

Digital photograph

Courtesy of the artist and Third Line, Dubai



Farah Al Qasimi's richly textured imagery documents women of Gulf Arab descent grappling with the lingering influence of colonialism. Plagued by advertisements for skin whitening creams and hair relaxers, Al Qasimi's subjects are simultaneously hidden and on full display; their faces are obscured but their vibrant, willful attitudes are clearly articulated. Al Qasimi's lush photographs are juxtaposed with a lo-fi punk music video set in a replica of the artist's teenage bedroom in which she lobs complaints at society, the government, and popular media with equal force, crafting a clever and satirical cultural commentary from an unlikely source.

**Jesse Harrod**

*Touchie Tender*, 2018

Photographed drawing on paper, pen, pastel, oil, marker, and crayon

Courtesy of the artist

Evoking the language of a vintage paper dollhouse, Jesse Harrod pays homage to Esther Williams, a competitive swimmer turned movie star in the 1940s, when she starred in a number of Hollywood “aqua musicals.” Williams’s films often featured dozens of women swimming in synchronized configurations; Harrod queers this motif, depicting the women nude and engaging in various acts of pleasure. Thusly, the artist engages Williams’s dual status as both a wholesome American icon and a sex symbol to the LGBTQIA community with playful irony.



**Madhini Nirmal**

*Tastes OK, feels great*, 2018

Monotype and collage on paper

Courtesy of the artist

**Madhini Nirmal**

*Poster food and poster poop*, 2018

Monotype and collage on paper

Courtesy of the artist

In her painterly monoprints, Madhini Nirmal re-envision her hometown of Chennai, India, as a subversive playground in which mischievous goats undermine oppressive political and caste systems. Invoking philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, Nirmal’s rummaging, urban goats reverse structures of power by laughing as they eat and defecate Tamil political posters, inverting hierarchies and creating chaos. While Bakhtin stated that laughter is man’s highest spiritual privilege and Aristotle noted that no other animal but man laughs, Nirmal’s dissident goats prove to be tricksters privy to the privileges Western male philosophers have attributed to laughter.



# S m a c k M e l l o n

## **Katherine Simóne Reynolds**

*Structural Humor: Vaughn on the Basketball Court*, 2016

High-definition video; 6:23 min.  
Courtesy of the artist



## **Katherine Simóne Reynolds**

*Structural Humor: Todd Outside the Gate*, 2016

High-definition video; 5:49 min.  
Courtesy of the artist

Through a series of uncanny videos, Katherine Simóne Reynolds exposes the impacts of structural racism on Saint Louis's social and physical landscapes. In scenarios that initially seem comical but quickly devolve, Reynolds films black men (Vaughn Davis Jr. and Todd Anthony Johnson) cackling uncontrollably in response to everyday microaggressions inflicted through inadequate access to education, transportation, and public space. These ingrained environmental inequalities are latent communications of hostility toward non-white citizens, whose uncomfortable responses throw systemic imbalance into sharp relief.



---

## **Kameelah Janan Rasheed**

*An Alphabetic Accumulation of Approximate Observations*, 2018

Installation  
Courtesy of the artist

Kameelah Janan Rasheed's collection of aphoristic, alliterative statements exposes racial injustice, political corruption, and pervasive apathy as aspects of larger societal malady. The absurd combinations of text are both enigmatic and provocative; they conjure associations and images without definitives. Creating a type of dystopian poetry, Rasheed's axioms are pessimistic evocations of gross abuses of power met with indifference.



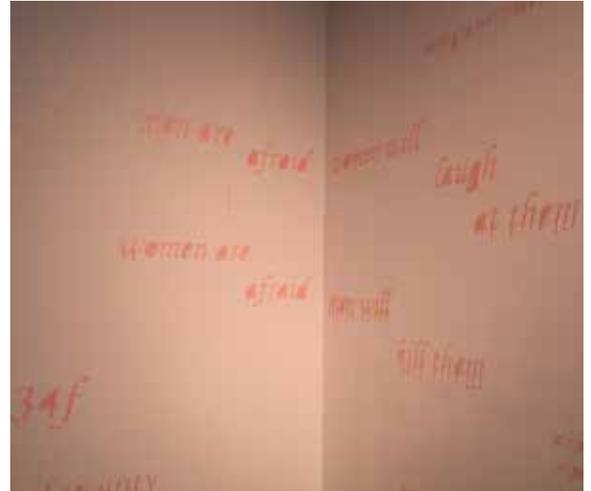
## Kristina Davis

*backpage.eulogy*, 2018

Royal icing, wall, and text

Courtesy of the artist

Using icing as her medium, Kristina Davis collages the diverse voices of women working at the intersections of sex work, feminism, and queer theory. Drawing from the archives of the now defunct *backpage.com* and *The Color of Kink* by Dr. Ariane Cruz, as well as a number of other sources outlined in the adjacent bibliography, Davis exposes the conflicting representations of and unreasonable standards for women's sexuality. Her sickeningly-sweet domestic material, which signifies traditional and acceptable expressions of femininity, melts and drips upon application, distorting the appropriated texts.




---

## Jen Liu

*Pink Slime Caesar Shift*, 2018

High-definition video and 2-channel sound; 24:20 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam

Jen Liu's *Pink Slime Caesar Shift* features a series of four speculative proposals to use stem-cell hamburgers as a vehicle to covertly transmit messages of labor insurrection to Special Economic Zone (SEZ) factory workers in China. A strange combination of plausible and absurd, the deadpan film outlines two recurring problems: widespread beef shortages and ineffective grassroots labor organization. The solution for each issue resolves the other—industrially manufactured stem-cell meat is ideal for manipulation of DNA messaging, in turn providing a new meat source and creating alternative channels for communication and political organization.



Connecting her speculative proposal to the lived realities of SEZ workers, Liu interweaves appropriated texts from SEZ labor activist manuals, science equipment advertisements, and documentary recordings to elucidate the legal, environmental, and safety concerns surrounding factory labor.



**Dynasty Handbag**

*FASCIST DICTATORSHIP MAKEUP TUTORIAL*,  
2016

High-definition video; 6:20 min.

Courtesy of the artist

Posted on YouTube immediately following the 2016 presidential election, *FASCIST DICTATORSHIP MAKEUP TUTORIAL* is performance artist Dynasty Handbag's absurd comment on the current political climate. Using her physical appearance as a site of resistance, the artist transforms the ubiquitous, vapid makeup tutorial into a combative tool. The result is funny, aggressive, and grotesque; Handbag laments the crumbling façade of liberalism and prepares her physical self for conservative backlash.

---

**Rachel Mason**

*FutureClown's Inaugural Address*, 2016

High-definition video; 17:03 min.

Courtesy of the artist

In an unsettling 2017 performance, Rachel Mason's avatar FutureClown lip-synched Donald Trump's ominous inauguration speech as it was happening and live-streamed the video on Facebook. Mason's version of the address was featured in lieu of the actual broadcast in various galleries, art platforms, and museums across the country as part of the nationwide #J20 culture strike, in which diverse sectors of the arts pledged resistance against the hyper-conservative direction of American politics. With FutureClown's garish appearance and exaggerated gestures, Mason created an alternative that, in some ways, felt less bizarre than reality.



**Natalie Baxter**

*Severed and Growing*, 2017

Five components; fabric, polyfill, and fringe  
 Courtesy of the artist

Natalie Baxter’s severed, flaccid American flag is a wry comment on the divided and discordant nature of political ideology in our current cultural climate. Quilting with overtly feminine fabrics, Baxter creates a swollen signifier representing an uncomfortable combination of American pride and xenophobic shame. Soft, gendered, and approachable, the flamboyant caricature cunningly subverts nationalistic associations.



**Jan Mun**

*Comic Relief*, 2018

Previously used chairs, table, and lamp, micro-controller, sensor, and speaker  
 Courtesy of the artist

Jan Mun’s interactive installation considers the lived experiences of women working in the direct line of secondary trauma: human rights workers, public defenders, and emergency room nurses, among others. Through the adjacent printed materials, Mun identifies laughter as a key coping mechanism or survival tactic for these women whose unseen labor supports others in times of extreme need. In Mun’s non-descript tableau evocative of a municipal or medical waiting room, laughter is transformed into a radical and hopeful act of self-care.

