

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Rowan Renee, *Airport Beach*

November 20, 2021 - January 2, 2022

Opening Reception: Sat. November 20, 5-7PM



Airport Beach is a site-specific, immersive installation of weavings, sculpture, and a handmade accordion book by artist Rowan Renee that spans Smack Mellon’s main gallery space. Created over the past year and a half, the artworks in this exhibition use imagery and information documenting the impact of the Lavender Scare on the artist’s home region of South Florida. A term coined by historian David K. Johnson, the Lavender Scare classifies the public outing and persecution of the LGBTQ+ community by the Federal Government during the McCarthy Era. Renee draws on publicly accessible records from the State Archives of Florida about the Johns Committee—an investigation committee established by the Florida legislature in 1956 to investigate the “subversive” activities of the civil rights movement, homosexuality and communist political groups, as well as local newspapers, and the Wolfson Archives, which are housed at Miami Dade College. Through these documents, the exhibition looks at the historic role of news media and jurisprudence in a time when legislation is currently being passed restricting the rights of queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people in conservative states like Florida.

In contrast with the stark text and imagery in the archival documents, the artist constructs the installation from sensuous materials, such as silk, linen, suminagashi marbled paper, copper hardware, and stained glass, as well as durable materials such as security glass. Through slow and meditative responses using weaving, book-making, and stained glass, Renee distorts the text and images, rendering them unrecognizable, and craft becomes a practice of embodiment, care, and repair. Suspended from Smack Mellon’s 18-35 foot ceilings, the monumental scale of the transformed documents evokes the overwhelming weight of history. Installed diagonally across the main hall of the gallery, obstructing clear passage, is a 30-foot long sculptural table supporting an 86-page accordion book that contains redacted excerpts from one “list of homosexuals” published by the Johns Committee. The content, form, and placement of these materials within the installation embody the complicated pleasures that exist alongside pain or shame, where records created with the intent to criminalize double as affirmations of the presence and persistence of queer joy through this era.

Through this installation, Renee acknowledges the complex negotiations of visibility and discretion that were necessary for survival, and also honors the determination of those who took tremendous risks to pave the way for the gay liberation movement. In an era of expanded LGBTQ+ civil rights, Renee underscores the fragility of these accomplishments and highlights those left on the margins as mid-century conservatism adapts its rhetoric to the current discourse in politics, culture, and the courts.

Smack Mellon

In conjunction with the exhibition, Smack Mellon will host two public talks with the artist, the first with writer and researcher Stacy Braukman and the second with Gabriel Arkles, a litigator who works with the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. Both events will illuminate the artist's research into the pre-Stonewall time period through legal and historical archives.

Rowan Renee (b. 1985, West Palm Beach, Florida) explores how queer identity is mediated by the law. In their research-led practice, they collect imagery, text and documents from State records and family archives to understand the intergenerational impact of gender-based violence, incarceration and family secrets. Through craft techniques – including kiln-formed glass, printmaking and loom-weaving – they bring personal themes of memory, grief and shame to bear on larger issues of harm and accountability in order to dismantle carceral logics of punishment and create a more nuanced framework for understanding what transformative justice asks of us.

Their work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions at the Anchorage Museum of Art (2021), Five Myles (2021), Aperture Foundation (2017), and Pioneer Works (2015), with reviews in publications including VICE, Huffington Post, Hyperallergic, and The New York Times. Currently, their project *Between the Lines*, in collaboration with We, Women Photo, runs art workshops by correspondence with LGBTQ+ people currently incarcerated in Florida. Their installation, *No Spirit For Me* (2019), was included in the critically acclaimed exhibition *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, curated by Dr. Nicole R. Fleetwood at MoMA PS1.

Image: Rowan Renee, Detail view of weavings from *Airport Beach* site-specific installation. Screen Printed text on the warp from archival newspaper articles: *75 Nabbed in Raid on "Gay" Joint*, Miami Daily News, March 2, 1957; *Raiders Seize 19 in Pervert Roundup*, Miami Daily News, August 14, 1954.

This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Stephen Levin, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.

Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, Jerome Foundation, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., and Exploring The Arts. In-kind donations are provided by Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.

Smack Mellon would like to extend a special thanks to all of the individuals, foundations, and businesses who have contributed to the NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund. Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management.

Airport Beach is sponsored, in part, by the Greater New York Arts Development Fund of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, administered by Brooklyn Arts Council. The artist would also like to thank the Textile Arts Center and the Center for Book Arts for their support in the production of this project.