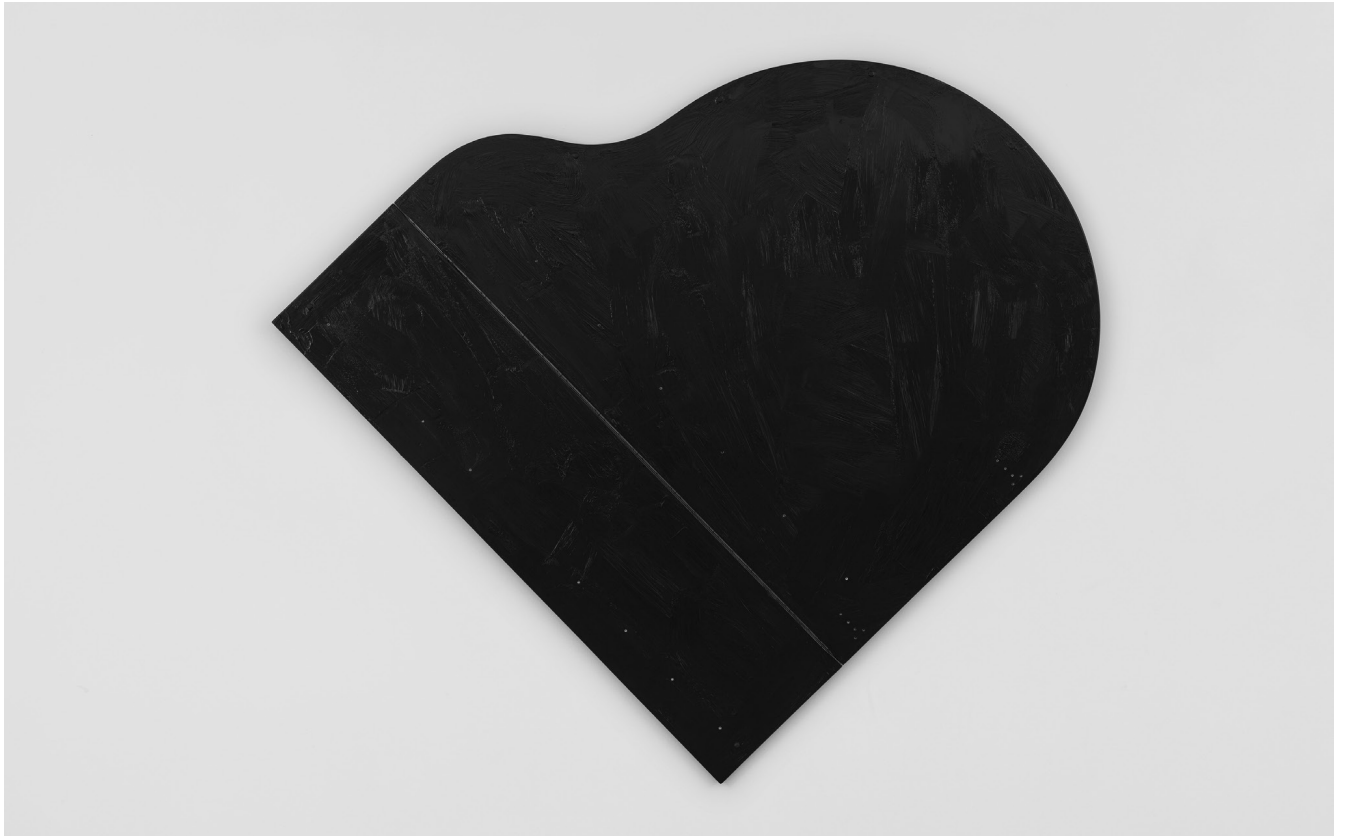


I Want for My Work to Have Several Lives

Text by ALEX BENNETT



Torey Thornton

AB In the accompanying text for your show *Subdominium Edges Y Assumed Legalities* (2019), at London's Modern Art, you come to the problem of naming. 'Shaping,' 'abstraction,' and 'nonrepresentational' all fall short. You write: "content, context and presence in space and time are more fun and complicated versus an umbrella term for capitalistic and historical ease." Do you see the practice of collage as enabling this fun, and as a means to avoid genre?

TT The way I used the term "fun" there wasn't in the sense of talking about making things easier or more playful – what I meant, in short, is that that multidimensional reference and thinking tend to give more back to both the maker and the viewer. That's what I imagine, anyway, although everyone has their own approach to working. Collage, in terms of the marriage of material reference and time, is the only way I can conceive of working in 2019 and onwards; but as soon as you can name something with one or two words, or describe a practice with a catch phrase or simple sentence, it's most likely a little dated or sleepy already, whether that's the thing's intention or not. Of course, there are always examples that go against this. But I'm speaking more generally here. I want for my work to have several lives, and for the re-watch value to stay at a high level.

AB Across your painting and sculpture, I think there's a queer approach in seeing debris as a resource – an appreciation of the ways in which the detritus around us can reflect an autobiography. In your aggregation of disparate material, you question what constitutes 'content.' Are you interested in using material minutia to speak to, or evoke, an autobiography? Does material express your subjectivity?

TT Material is loaded with sign, signifier and connotation, so I do have a relationship to certain materials, and to what they might mean; but beyond myself, I'm more interested in issues and complications that are involved with everyone who stands in front of my work. Some of the materials and references are pulled from spaces that are less common, or are more hidden from the general pub-

lic, but even within the collation of those materials there's something to be seen or absorbed by most viewers, I would hope. Most works that I make aren't explicitly autobiographical. At times I *do* fall very close to the work and its concerns in a literal sense, and I can be a mirror of the things that I have made. But I feel that most of my work over the past three years speaks about the complexities and ignored issues of many people that are alive today. There are ideas carried through; there are references that many choose not to see because they hit too close to home, or ignite a slight discomfort. We all relate to dirt in one way or another, for instance – but in how many ways do these relationships unfold?

AB It feels appropriate to consider your works individually. In *Subdominium Edges Y Assumed Legalities*, they appear to be almost relational, like an archipelago. Letters and cell numbers are air-brushed; a giant palette of brown-pink-grey echoes another colour wheel, a grand piano's flipped lid, a straw hat's curl; I think: volume, instruction, chromosomes, praxis. Were these works produced at successive points, and do you see them establishing relationships? Some forms have twins, while others feel very distinct...

TT With this show, I started with certain concrete ideas and focuses. After certain works are made, there are then new concerns or opportunities to expand on. I often do not work serially in an explicit sense, but in this show I did think about expanding conversations between works in order to complete sentences, or paragraphs. Most of the outer edges of the paintings were very specific to the content of the piece in question; in other moments, the centre of the piece is the main focus and the bearer of most of the content and information. In these situations, the outer edge becomes a container for what's living in the centre. Many of the formal relationships were afterthoughts, or a result of happenstance in relation to certain rules and guidelines I had set for myself. I chose the piano lid as a surface, and that is shaped the way it is shaped for a reason – I just turned it to play with the poetics of it. With most of these works, the ideas came, and then I built, sourced or had built to specific dimensions the surfaces I needed in order to attempt to carry on these ideas.

AB Your choice of material often muddles the relationship between painting and sculpture. For instance, in *Painting* (2017), painted stones are there to anchor the steel of the saw blade. Padded mattresses become crossed canvas, a grid. Volume, texture and structure all have their place. Do you have self-imposed rules to discipline your material curiosity, or do you trust your eye to guide the edit?

TT There are some specific materials that I've been collecting for years. When I first started collecting them, I didn't understand my draw towards them. In those kinds of moments, it's best not to rush things. Now, I have learned what those materials mean to me and others, and subsequently how they can be used with and against those meanings. Generally, at this point in my practice, I think about which materials can help me project certain thoughts, and build a dialogue around a concern or interest. Often I'm seeking – or making – materials that allow the most fruitful expansions within my work. Usually, there's an idea to begin with, and then I figure out which materials to work with, what scale to work at so on, with the aim being to present it in the most interesting way, without preaching or exposing everything at once. There are so many rules that I have made, but I won't go into those specifically. Some of them change from piece to piece. In the Whitney Biennial, the mattress work titled *What Is Sexuality, Is The Scale Infinite Similar To a Line* (2017) was conceived in almost its entirety, and then I sourced the materials. The saw piece, *Painting* (2017), came together in the complete opposite way. I'd been collecting the painted stones for years, and they were slowly accumulating; then I saw the saw blade in a window here in New York, and purchased it. I sat and contemplated what the blade said on its own, and eventually, I realised that instead of applying my painting to the blade and having it sit in a space of scaled up kitsch, adding these found stones to it would still allow me to question painting and its contradictions, while also evaluating modes of authorship and other more globalised topics.

AB Let's talk a little bit more about your contribution to the Whitney Biennial in 2017. You see this as something of a turning point for your practice – how so?

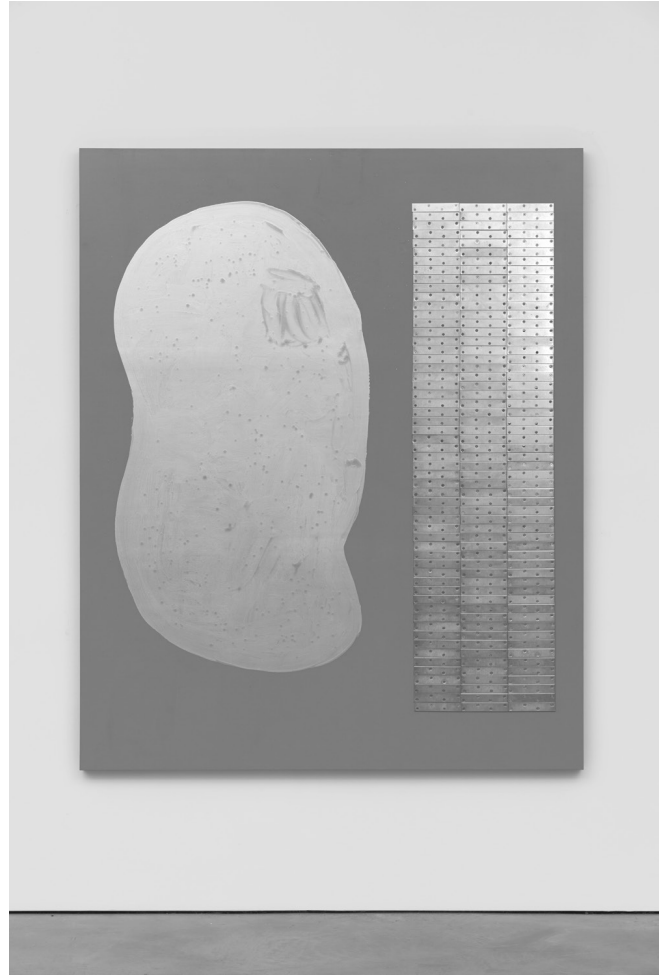
TT Before participating in the Whitney Biennial, I was less engaged in exploring a rigorous marriage of content material, and the ways in which their interaction can complicate the work further. Lots of my ideas before this point were vaguer and more arbitrary, comparatively speaking, even though I've always worked with an idea in mind. The works in the Whitney came from very specific research and planning, in a manner of working that I hadn't been entirely used to before then. I was also starting to move even further into a non-representational space with my work. I was sort of at the end of the line of interest with the way I had been working before this, so all I had were these two works that I could really believe in, stand behind, and strive to make. That shift, mixed with fear and the determination to expand my practice, is what made those pieces in the Biennial. These two works allowed for much more complicated growth for me, and I'm so thankful things happened the way they did. Now, the work is much more complex, coded and layered. People just have to give it some time, versus wanting a spreadsheet of facts and details, or a spoiler spiel.

AB Your show at Essex Street, New York was populated with floor-works and commodities such as niche publications: *America Online for Dummies*, *WOOD Magazine*, and Val Hennessy's punk photo book *In the Gutter*. Under Perspex, they look more like images or artefacts, a lament to capitalist valorization. What made you choose these objects?

TT You are onto a lot of what I was playing with and thinking about with your statement, there – I was interested in creating a slightly more literal sculptural text piece, and thinking a lot about sentence structure and meaning. There are certain linguistic puns there in the titles, and also in the content of the work itself. There are also underlying relationships between myself and the reading materials chosen. Most of the subjects combine together to create – or mirror – a tension that exists between various issues and complexities that are surrounding us right now.

AB This show also looked more explicitly at gender. For *Untitled Political Aliens (Top Fif-*





All images from below exhibition: 'Subdominium Edges Y Assumed Legalities', courtesy the artist and Modern Art.



1. EMMALIAM
2. OLIVIANOAH
3. AVAOLIVER
4. ISABELLALOGAN
5. SOPHIAMASON
6. AMELIALUCAS
7. MIAETHAN
8. CHARLOTTEELIJAH
9. HARPERAIDEN
10. MILAJAMES
11. ARIACARTER
12. EVELYNALEXANDER
13. ELLASEBASTIAN
14. AVXERYJACKSON
15. ABIGAILBENJAMIN
16. RILEYJACOB
17. CHLOEMICHAEL
18. SCARLETTWILLIAM
19. EMILYLUKE
20. LUNADANIEL
21. LAYLAGRAYSON
22. SOFIAOWEN
23. ELLIEJACK
24. LILLYWYATT
25. ZOEYXXHENRY
26. ELIZABETHJAYDEN
27. PENELOPEGABRIEL
28. GRACEJULIAN
29. MADISONMATHEW
30. VICTORIALEO
31. AUBREYDAVID
32. CAMILALEVI
33. BELLAJAXON
34. NORAMATEO
35. HANNAHSAMUEL

36. AURORAMUHAMMAD
37. PAISLEYLINCOLN
38. STELLAISAAC
39. SAVANNAHISAIAH
40. ADDISONRYAN
41. NATALIEADAM
42. SKYLARJOHN
43. HAZELNATHAN
44. EMILIAASHER
44. 45. NOVACALEB
45. NO. 6. MAYAJOSEPH
47. EVAANTHONY
48. VIOLETTJOSIAH
49. ELENAHUNTER
50. NIAMEYLANDON

ty *US Babies 2018 Gender Mashed To Make My New) (Charming)* (2018), 50 gourds were linked together, branded with a unique name by combining the fifty most popular American male and female baby names in 2018 such as AMELIALUCAS, ELLIEJACK, and STELLAISAAC. Presumably imported, the gourds appear as hosts for trendy white American names. Can you tell me a little about the process of making this show?

TT The sculpture that you are referring to was constructed alongside the painting that's currently hanging in my current show at Modern Art. That painting is titled *Untitled Political Aliens (Top Fifty US Babies 2018 Gender Mashed To Make My New)(2018)*. My Essex Street show, *Sustenance Traversing Foundational Urgencies (STFU [some])(Re-Faux Outing)*, worked from many different points, and then merged together to become a sort of public introduction to my sculpture in a larger, more concise sense. That's where the "Faux Outing" comes in also – my show a few months before with Jeffrey Stark had these words in its title as well, playing on the outing of a subject or a person. Even through that there are strong ties to the analysis of social stigmas and habits, and gender compartmentalisations fall under that heading quite heavily. I was interested in really highlighting or unpacking how easy it is to follow tradition, and the way that this ease has inevitably caused many issues for us all, even if we don't realize explicitly. Originally, I didn't know that some works in the show would eventually have so much engagement with my personal and interior life; but some months after I produced that show, I realised my own non binary gender to a fuller capacity. That's something that's always evolving, of course.

AB Your work often feels carefully distanced and slightly encrypted. *The Faux Outing*, then, creates an interesting friction—something is given over, something dropped. In the show at Jeffrey Stark, you included a collection of photographs of empty beds mounted to a mirror, like a display board that implicates the viewer. It's interesting: the bed as site, symbol, proof. The floor was also raised to compress the space. This show seems to address a politics of

viewing that directly enfolds the viewer. What were your motivations for this show?

TT This show was in the works for a few years, and went through many iterations, as this was one of the toughest spaces to deal with, for me. Everything needed to be very concise, because space is limited. I decided to show three works that dealt heavily with the senses, and with viewers' navigation in the space. Essentially, if you were to describe the show bluntly, there's a mirrored photo piece, a moving floor, and a bordering, sensorially-frenetic video. I hoped that the senses were occupied and confused in a way that's very hard to achieve in most spaces. The mirrored piece you are describing, *Voyeur's Chameleon (The Rest)* (2017-2018), is a work that's comprised of mirror-finished stainless steel, which mats the prints; then that sits inside a polished aluminium frame. So the photos are inside of these laser cut windows. The bed is a strange and loaded object and/or tool, but it is also universal for the most part, and therefore allows for many personalities to interact with – and to alter – the space. I like thinking of the subjectivity of the term 'rest.' Sleeping is resting in some ways; and to stand is to rest in another way, as you may be pausing motion. But as with many words that I'm attracted to in relation to my work, rest is often attached to 'the rest,' meaning shorthand for 'the rest of something.' This idea is one that I relate to when thinking about a broad generalization. I still haven't figured out how much information to give on this portion – but I had Angelo, the owner and operator of Jeffrey Stark, photograph his bed just after he woke up, so that I could include it with the found images. I like the strangeness that is generated when there are no bodies in these images, and I like the implications of that absence. To look at this piece, you have to see your own reflection. It's also very difficult to photograph this work. The floor sculpture, *Benching Hierarchy (JS)* 2018, is both a place of rest, under the umbrella term, and more specifically a floor. As you mentioned, the piece shrank the amount of space that is available for a body to move in. Since it's made of foam, it's soft and possibly more comfortable than the floor, but it also creates a less stable feeling under the body

while viewing the work. The video is very loaded, so I don't think I can unpack that one cleanly without revealing too much – but there's lots to do with subjective taste, conflict and contradiction, alongside a type of fetishistic object-observation, and memorization via touch.

AB The mirrored work reminds me of the use of presentation in *How Many Ways To Understand Moving Image, How Many For Vanity* (2018), where an LED TV package hosts photographs in mirrors, the overexposure obscuring the scene. The work is a strange composite where vanity and screen appear co-operative, but also deflated—the package is flattened and scrawled on. Your use of photography asserts an existence but eludes the category of documentation. What does photography enable for you?

TT Yes, these two works are very closely related. The marked TV box and all the photo prints are found. I was interested in the idea of vanity, and its many definitions – to what degree are you and I vain? What kinds of lifestyles and career paths are the most vain? – and the impossibility of its literal presentation in these images. There's also everyone's current relationship to the mirror, which is one that has changed since the introduction of the smart phone to the masses. Video is also made up of many discrete frames, so there's that. Photography is in a very complicated and fraught state right now, for the same reasons that our brains have the image of what the backside of a cell phone looks like in a mirror burned into them. But in photography, there seem to be those holding on to tradition very tightly, and attempting to ignore the reality of time, and then there are others who play with scale, or with framing and printing techniques, to bring in rigor from a production level. There are good photographs made in all corners, obviously, but still – once Apple released the “this was shot on iPhone 10” ads or whatever, that was almost the answer. I am pretty positive the first of these advertisements that I saw was a giant billboard photo in Chelsea facing the Westside highway in New York. It was of rows of USPS trucks, I think. I currently have a very hard time shooting photos myself, outside of those captured on my phone, but I do have a few

plans for some very specific photographs that I want to make. The fact of these prints being found brings in a communal conversation, and a diversity of being that I'm very interested in, but I was also very specific about acquiring photos that had no bodies in them. For me, that created an eeriness. That said, in the case of each of these photo works you mention, I enjoy the fact that they are just as much photography as they are sculptures, which is why I just called them wall works.

AB You ‘unofficially’ transcribed Gina X Performance's lyrics for Video Dragueur. They're mesmerizing; and the lyrics are so smooth and cyclical, but then we bump into your personal interpretations in parenthesis – “(I don't understand this part)” etc. I love their haunting evocation of “super vision...omnipresent like a hawk.” The tone is kind of prophetic. Music is a very useful tool to immediately transform the way a person feels, but the way you refer to music appears almost solemn, like something has been lost. Do you agree?

TT Ah yes, Gina X, wow! Their songs and words are some of my earliest memories of wanting to be inside someone's brain or feel what they felt, while also feeling many aspects of their lyrics quite literally. I couldn't find the lyrics for this track anywhere – which makes sense because I first started downloading the music when I was 18, and you couldn't even find most of it on Limewire, or anywhere else online. There are only a few images online of the lead vocalist, Gina. So I listened to the song over and over, and transcribed what I could, but some lyrics are so inaudible; and in other instances, things switch and play on your memory, so instead of hearing “video dragueur,” there's “video voyeur” in its place in the chorus. This is one of my favourite bands, and the song is so contemporary now in its concept, so I was very excited to realize its relation to the show and some of its tendencies. To watch a mirror, for instance, is voyeurism of a sort, even if you are alone looking at you. The mirror seems to be the new video, in a way, although it's so old. Also, the Jeffrey Stark space is always under 24hour video surveillance which feeds to its website, so I wanted to close the loop a little with that text.