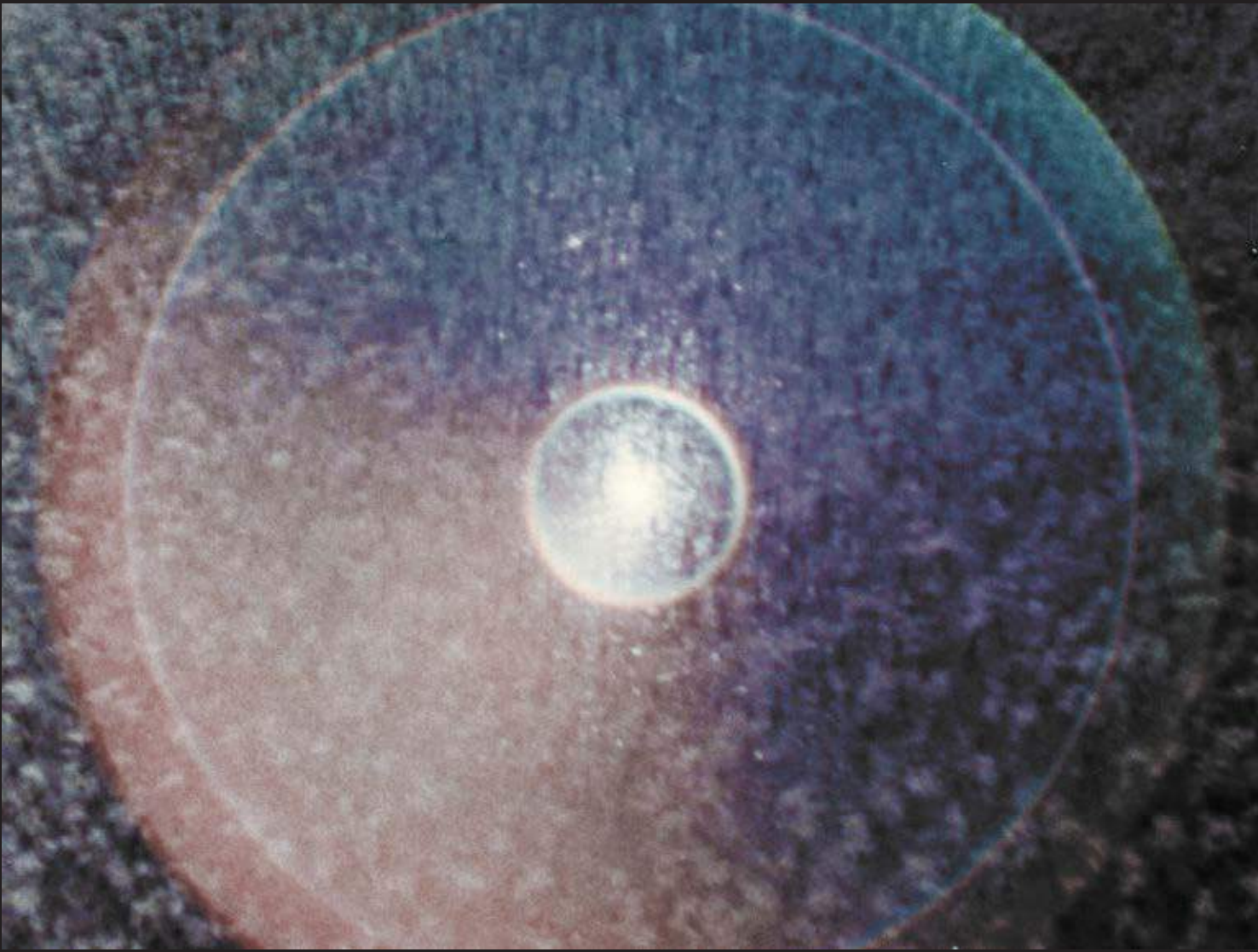


Dreams of Unknown Islands



Sasha
Wortzel

Sound installation,
polymer PLA filament
9.5 × 9.5 × 18 in.
7 min
Photo courtesy of
Pedro Wazzan

Dreams of Unknown Islands ²⁰²¹

Cover:
Big Cypress-Partnership
with Nature
Year unknown
Film still
Courtesy of the Everglades
National Park Archives

2



Kristan Kennedy

The Museum of All Possible Shells¹

Let us begin with “seashell resonance,” the folk myth or phenomenon claiming that when you place a conch shell against your ear, you can hear the ocean. In actuality, the undulating and rushing sounds are generated by ambient noise passing through the shell’s spiral body into our spiral ears, creating an occlusion effect. It is, in this moment, that the imagined sounds of waves and the very real blood flowing through our curving veins start to sing to each other. We feel connected, transported—transmuted! We are the ocean.²

In their solo exhibition *Dreams of Unknown Islands*, Sasha Wortzel proposes similar plangency between the natural, political, corporeal, and metaphysical world(s) we inhabit. The artist manipulates voices, recorded sunsets, snake skins, shells, color, and light into new video, sound, and sculptural works that act as stand-ins for shorelines, boundaries, horizons, endings, and beginnings. The installation references cycles of life—be they natural, influenced, extracted, or, at times, accelerated by human interference—and creates an atmosphere conducive to contemplation, stillness, and questioning. There seems to be a shifting positionality at play: the things we are looking at are familiar but also skewed. The things we are hearing are somewhat comforting but at times gut-wrenching. The tone and mood of the room is seductive and peaceful, all the while asking, What is beneath? What has brought us to this place? Are we here seeking rest and solace, or a reckoning? Is this a place to breathe or to mourn—or both?

The work contained in this show is the result of long-term research, observation, and recording by Wortzel of the South Florida coast. More recently, this surveying has run alongside navigating the day-to-day news of collective loss, ecological collapse, and political uprisings. Wortzel made this exhibition while in residence at Oolite Arts during a global pandemic, a political regime change, and while living and working in various sites on land that is the ancestral and traditional territory of the Calusa, Tequesta, Mayaimi, and the unceded ancestral homeland of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, and the Independent Miccosukee-Seminole. Additionally, they are in the process of making a film, titled *River of Grass*, which seeks to reimagine Marjory Stoneman Douglas’s³ groundbreaking nonfiction book *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947), while exploring how Florida’s climate crisis is historically rooted in the Everglades’ ongoing legacies of colonization. In a recent conversation with the artist, they admit that the exact meaning of this exhibition has yet to reveal itself but that they know it has something to do with this precarious time. They mention that in their filmmaking they almost always have a clear direction, plan, and intent but that right now they are comfortable with this new work being more abstract, open, and unmediated. They go on to say, “I think I am creating a wider container to hold

more things, and therefore it’s been harder for me to articulate specificity. I am thinking about different binaries around gender and around time—around people, plants, and animals being labeled as invasive versus native—about queer ecology and queer communities and histories.”⁴ We spent some time talking about Hito Steyerl’s writings and her use of the term “free fall,” where the artist/author describes the mixed-up-ness one feels in times of disorientation or when there is a lack of an orienting horizon in the distance. Steyerl expands on the potential space of unknowing when she writes, “Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise.”⁵

At the center of *Dreams of Unknown Islands* is a sound installation comprised of seven 3D-printed polymer PLA filament sculptures designed by Wortzel. They look as if they have been thrust into real space from what is referred to as the “Museum of All Possible Shells,” a sort of running computer-generated database of potential spiral shell forms started by scientist David Raub in 1966. However, these sculpted shells are intentionally weirded with sharper edges, somewhere between something real and the ghost image of the familiar. Their morphoscopic structure is skewed; they are not natural but rather represent and amplify difference and change. Serving as speakers, they broadcast a mashup of voices that act as a meditative rallying cry, their soundwaves flowing through the gallery and filling the space with an ethereal presence. The artist, in their consideration of how to process the crushing weight of the current sociopolitical climate, turned to the Mourner’s Kaddish,⁶ a thirteenth-century Aramaic prayer, as a primary source. They reached out to members of their extended community of friends, activists, and artists and asked them to send back readings of this sacred text. Wortzel then wove the audio files into a soundscape inviting visitors to come together into this collective process that moves grief towards healing. While the prayer makes no mention of death, it does call for peace, both personal and universal. Wortzel remarked that the recordings took many iterative forms in which people took the prayer and made it their own. The invitation to participate was a kind of offering for people to use during this time of pandemic, in whatever self-determined way they wanted, in whatever way made sense. Wortzel says of the recordings, “I feel like I am collecting the specter or the energetic remains of these private performances and then bringing them together to create something collective. I hope that it links up with visitors to the exhibition who can then become a part of something evolving and morphing, so that we may not feel alone in this moment when gathering is forbidden or layered with risk.”⁷

In a lecture Wortzel shared with me by Dr. Kim TallBear, Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Indigenous Peoples, Technoscience & Environment,

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the scholar talks about our obsession and reliance on forward movement and progress (she goes so far as to call it “our religion”) and that the greatest struggle right now is that people are grappling with the idea of “end times” or perhaps the end of an empire.⁸ For many months, Wortzel has been livestreaming a view of the sunset each night. Looking out at the horizon, there seems to be no end in sight. We return to these spaces, the water’s edge, the sunrise and sunset, to feel in tune with the world’s clock, forever ticking in the form of slow-shifting light and tides. These kinds of constants bring us comfort, but, as TallBear suggests, our obsession with the never-ending future, or the idea that things will and must always go on, acts as a numbing drug allowing us to ignore the upsetting truth. We have become dominant, affecting the environment in catastrophic ways. We cannot expect things to always go on if we do not help correct the imbalance we have brought to the world. Wortzel has placed three discreet videos on a constant loop in the alcoves of the gallery. In one alcove, a sunset and a sunrise face each other, both featuring bobbing suns creeping along their natural path with equal parts anxiety and grace. And in the other alcove, a dreamy, pink-hued sea turtle lays its eggs, carefully depositing them into the sand one by one. These real and yet digitized, colorized, edited, and spliced realities—or glitches—are something perfectly imperfect to reflect upon. Here, the artist shares with us their acute eye. Pay attention! We are receiving downloads from the Anthropocene! There is hope.

In Legacy Russell’s book *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*,⁹ the author writes that the word “glitch” finds its roots in the Yiddish “*glitsh*,” meaning slippery area. In the remaining works in the exhibition, Wortzel plays with this in-between space. Her sculpture, *Sitting Shiva* places two ubiquitous aluminum beach chairs side by side, empty and waiting for bodies. Wortzel is thinking here about the space between leisure and trauma, ecological destruction and regeneration, in addition to the absolute joy, respite, and pride in place experienced by Indigenous peoples, Holocaust survivors, Cuban, Haitian, Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan, Jamaican, and other immigrants and peoples who have made Florida their home. The empty chairs also reference the void left after the great loss in Miami Beach’s Queer community during the height of the AIDS epidemic, the ecological shock from dredging in order to create beaches, or from the damming of the Everglades in the name of real estate development, and the consequent toxic algae blooms and red tides. Layers and layers of meaning, interconnected and interdependent histories, are woven together in the seats of these chairs. In a telling gesture, Wortzel has replaced the chairs’ traditional nylon webbing with skins from the Burmese python, a stunning beast that is also considered a dangerous invasive species and wreaking a particular havoc in Florida.

According to Russell, “glitch feminism” suggests that “to exist in the in between is a core component of survival.” Wortzel’s work sits in this liminal space, quietly building a new world that does not eschew the messy stuff but, rather, acknowledges it, traces it, records it, and plays it back for us to absorb. Shouting out that a new world is possible if we would just pay attention. If we would just tune in to the details and subtleties and ask ourselves what kind of place we would like to rebuild. Whispering, shell-to-ear messages about how we might partner with the natural world to do so. As voices and sea levels rise, Wortzel marks and distorts time, all the while calling out for some semblance of peace, care for the land and each other and eventual liberation, imploring us to fight for survival.

1. “The Museum of All Possible Shells” is a name coined by Richard Dawkins for what is commonly known as the “shell morphospace.” This computer-generated space contains a set of all possible outcomes of spiral shell formation from a given geometrical/mathematical model. The geometrical analysis of coiled shells was developed by David Raup in the 1960s and has been continued by many scientists, including Dawkins. Raup continued to explore variations of spiral shells long after his retirement, eventually moving into making computer-generated artworks. See Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable* (New York: Norton, 1996); Dr. M., “Digital Seashells and David Raup,” *Deep Sea News* (July 16, 2015), <https://www.deepseanews.com/2015/07/digital-seashells-and-david-raup/>; and Helen Scales, *Spirals in Time: The Secret Life and Curious Afterlife of Seashells* (London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015).

2. In Stefan Helmreich’s article “Seashell Sound” for *Cabinet* magazine, the author uses poetic reasoning to talk about “a model of subjectivity in which people could imagine themselves sensing themselves sensing,” and rolls around several theories as to why we hear the ocean when we press a shell to our ears, including the idea that we are hearing our own blood rushing through our veins. He also speaks to how this phenomenon starts to transmute the shell itself into a metaphor for the heart and even more to illustrate a connection to

the sounds of our own longing and at times mourning. See Stefan Helmreich, “Seashell Sound: Echoing ocean, vibrating air, brute blood,” *Cabinet*, no. 48 (Winter 2012-13), <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/48/helmreich.php>.

3. “You have to stand up for some things in this world.” –Marjory Stoneman Douglas, see https://www.inspiringquotes.us/quotes/twd2_91tvzpPo.

4. Conversation between Kristan Kennedy and Sasha Wortzel on October 31, 2020 via Zoom.

5. Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 24 (April 2011), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

6. Kaddish Prayer illustrated by Ray Himmelman Le Blanc and published in *Siddur HaKohanim: A Hebrew Priestess Prayerbook* by Jill Hammer and Taya Shere.

7. Conversation between Kristan Kennedy and Sasha Wortzel on October 31, 2020 via Zoom.

8. Kim TallBear, “A Sharpening of the Already Present: Settler Apocalypse 2020,” *Speaker Series*, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta (October 9, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e014od9mlTA>.

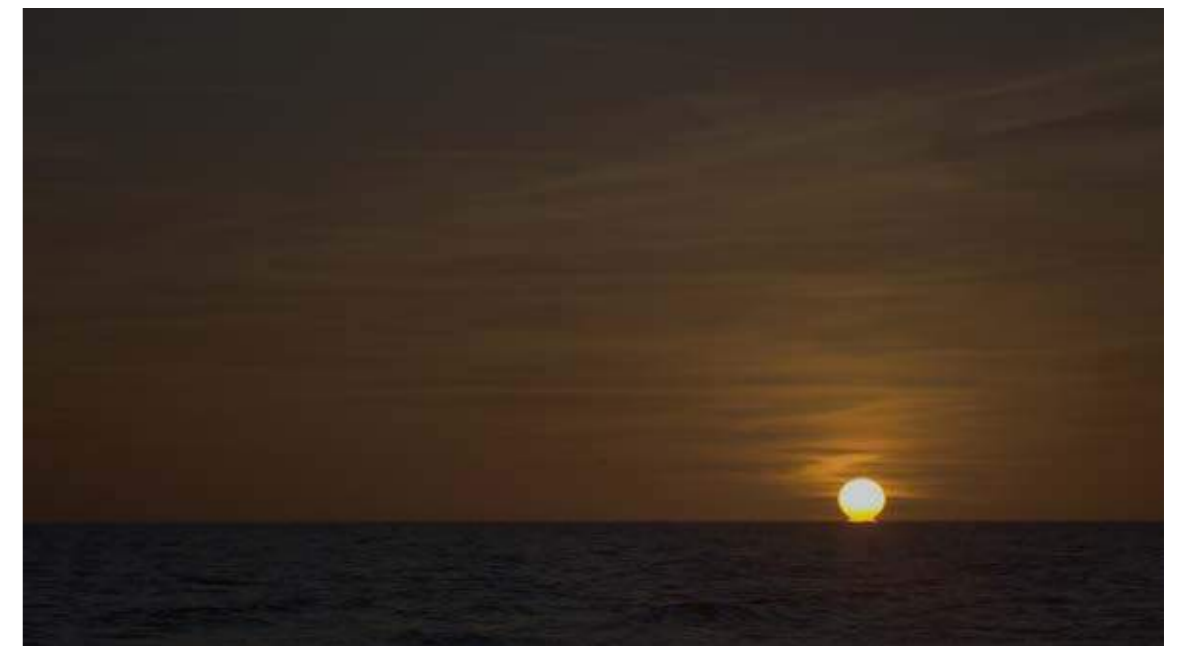
9. Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2020).

For those of us who live at the shoreline

2021



(sunrise), 1:01 min



(sunset), 5:21 min



(sea turtle labor), 16:01 min

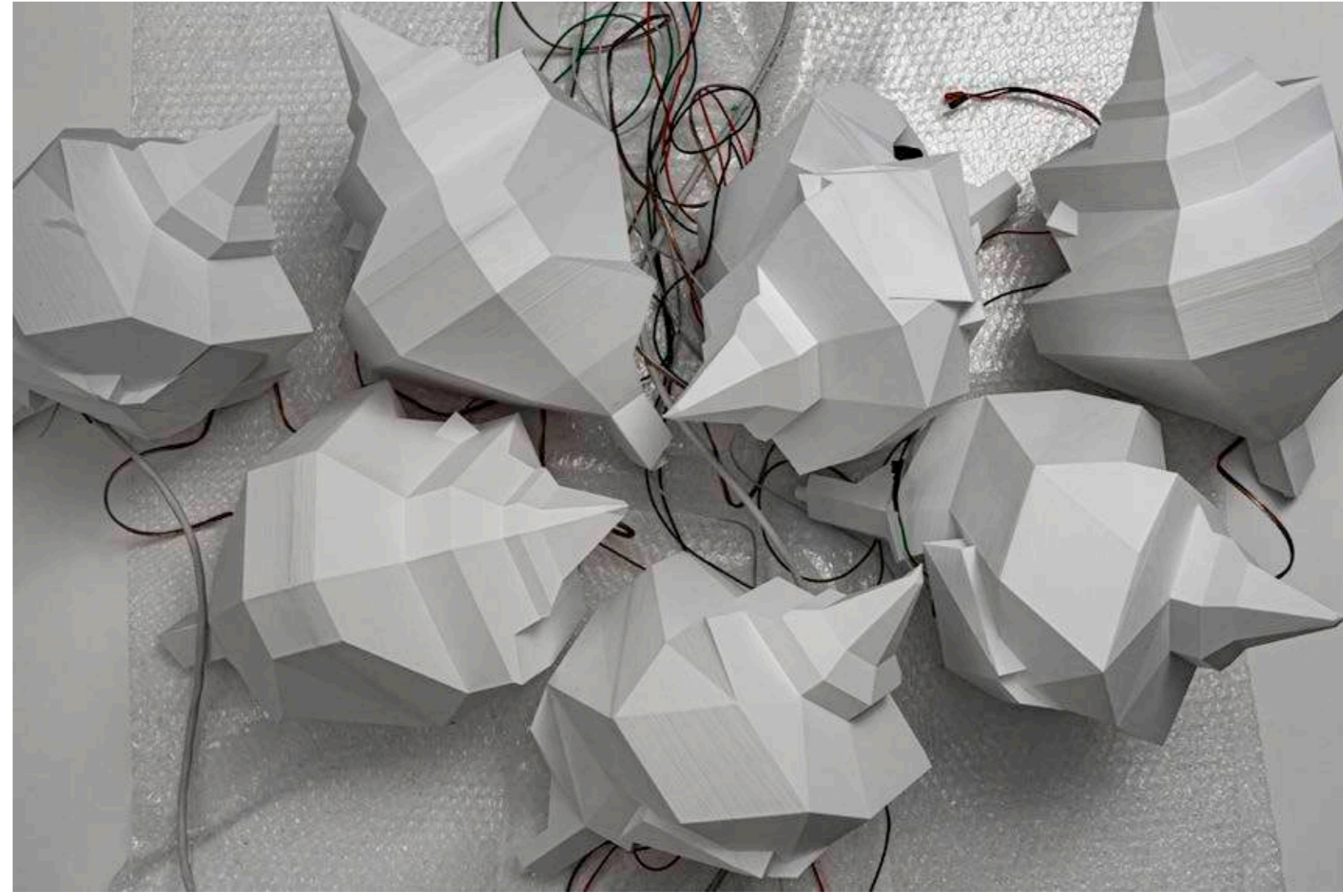
Sitting Shiva ²⁰²¹

Invasive Burmese python skin, vegetable tanned hide, aluminum, plastic
23 × 36 in.
Photos courtesy of Juan Matos



Dreams of Unknown Islands ²⁰²¹

Sound installation, polymer PLA filament
9.5 × 9.5 × 18 in.
7 min
Photo courtesy of Pedro Wazzan



2017 Lost in the Music

Video installation
Sound, color, mirrored acrylic,
wood, muslin
243 x 144 in.
4:20 min
Trigger: Gender as a Tool
and a Weapon exhibition view:
New Museum, New York
Photo courtesy of Maris
Hutchinson / EPW Studio



8

Happy Birthday 2018 Marshal!



Video, color, sound
15 min

9



Performance, The Kitchen, New York, 60 min, Photo courtesy of Paula Court

Video installation
Color, sound, pressure
treated timber, and MDF
120 x 85 in.
6:25 min

2019

Somewhere Between

10



Installation, *Transitional Nature*, Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum, Miami, Photo courtesy of Zachary Balber

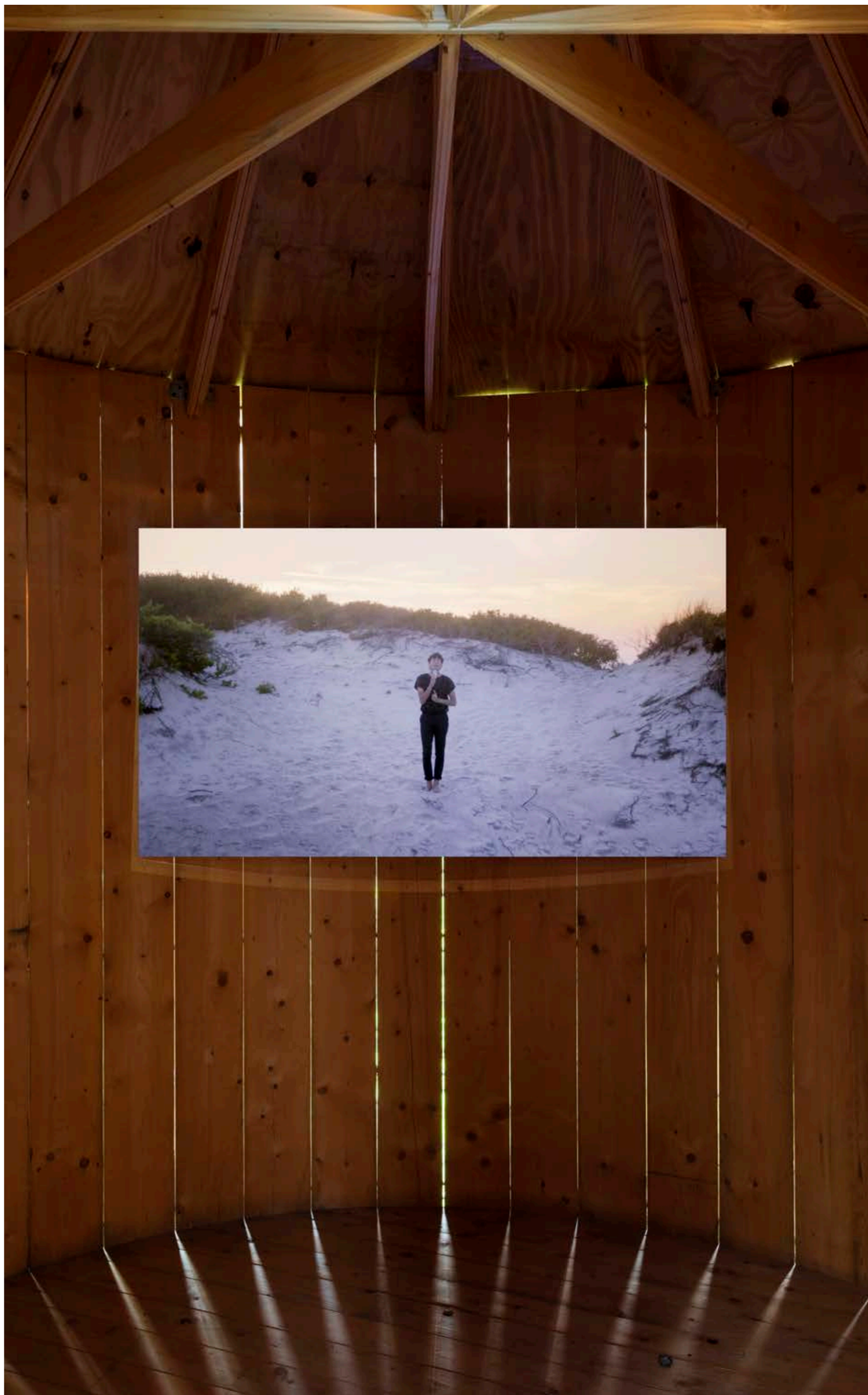


We Have Always Been on Fire

2018



Installation, *On Fire-Vulnerable Footage*,
SALTS, Birsfelden



Interior view

2019-20
This is An Address



Two-channel video installation, *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, courtesy of Jonathan Dorado



Monica Uszerowicz

Like Horizons at Sunset: Sasha Wortzel's Dreams of Unknown Islands

Kaddish Prayer

yitgadal veytkadash shemeh rabbah
be'almah di'vra chirutei veyamlich malchutei
bechayeichon uveyomeichon
uvechayeichon dechol veit yisrael
ba'agalalah uvizman kariv ve'imru amen.

yehei shmei rabbah mevorach
le'alam ulalmei almaya.

yitbarach veyishtabach
veyitpaar veyitroman veyitnasei
veyithadar veyitalei veyithalal,
shemei dekudsha brich hu
le'eilah min kol birchata veshirata
tushbechata venechemata
da'amiran be'alma ve'imru amen.

yehei shlamah rabbah min sh'maya
vechayyim aleinu ve'al kol yisrael
ve'imru amen.

osah shalom bimromeha
hi taaseh shalom aleinu ve'al kol yisrael
ve'al kol yoshvei tevel ve'imru amen.

יִתְגַּדַּל וַיִּתְקַדַּשׁ שֵׁמֵהּ רַבָּא
בְּעֵלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְרֵוּתֵיהּ וַיְמַלִּיךְ מַלְכוּתֵיהּ
בְּחַיֵּיכֻן וּבְיוֹמֵיכֻן
וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּעֵגְלָא וּבְזִמְנו קְרִיב וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

יְהִי שֵׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבֻרָךְ
לְעָלְמָא וּלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא.

יִתְבָּרַךְ וַיִּשְׁתַּבַּח
וַיִּתְפָּאֵר וַיִּתְרוֹמֵם וַיִּתְנַשֵּׂא
וַיִּתְהַדָּר וַיִּתְעַלֶּה וַיִּתְהַלַּל,
שֵׁמֵהּ דְקֻדְשָׁא בְרִיךְ הוּא
לְעֵילָא מִן כּוֹל בִּרְחַתָּא וְשִׁירָתָא
תּוֹשְׁבַתָּא וְנַחֲמַתָּא
דְאִמִּירָן בְּעֵלְמָא. וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

יְהִי שְׁלָמָה רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא
וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

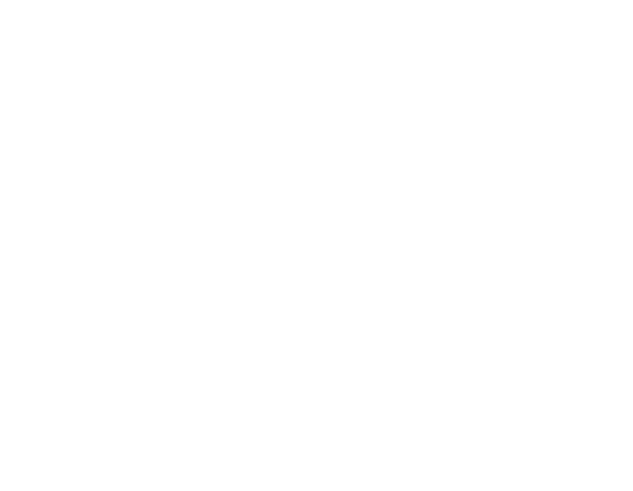
עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרְמֵיהָ
הִיא תַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֵל וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן

May the great name, which includes all names that have been and will be,
Be blessed in this world and in all worlds, Amen.
May the One who makes peace in high places make peace for us and all the world. Amen.

Last spring, amidst the perpetual solitude of a citywide lockdown, Sasha Wortzel started taking long, meditative walks to the beach at sundown. Miami sunsets are remarkable, granting a brief quietude and drenching spectators in a gradient of peach-pink-purple-green, though the term alone is illusive—by the time the sun seems to disappear below the horizon, it already has. Atmospheric refraction allows us those extra, sanguine moments. “I was deeply sad,” says Wortzel. From her perch on the sand, she began recording and live-streaming the skies. She privately mourned the mass death of the pandemic and the lives lost to police brutality and other systemic cruelties, in recent public instances and those never reported—“the people we don’t see.” Parts of Miami Beach, where she sat, were once dredged from beneath the sea during the mechanization of Florida’s Everglades, a process that drained the land, established settler-led industries responsible for toxic runoff today, and ripped apart Indigenous communities—from the Tequesta and Calusa to the Miccosukee and the Seminole—while threatening their sovereignty.

“The ritual of watching the sunset did something for me,” she says. “I was thinking, *What do I want to leave this world? What do I want to dismantle? As the sun set, I imagined that more.*” There’s a passage by José Esteban Muñoz, from *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, in which Wortzel finds loving solace, a quote that manifested itself into tangibility on the beach: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” The sunset reminded her, she says, “to feel the warmth of the possibility of this moment. It’s been devastating. As the world comes undone and things crumble, there’s power in asking what we want to usher in next. To get there, first we have to mourn.”

After walking back home, Wortzel would participate in an online Kaddish session—a nightly video call collectively organized by the Kaddish Call Constellation, a rotating group of ritual leaders—which allowed Jews and Gentiles alike to mourn the pain of this moment and its uncountable historical precedents. To speak of the Kaddish is



synecdochical—the name typically refers not to the hymn sung at Jewish prayer services but to the Mourner’s Kaddish specifically. And for whom is the Mourner’s Kaddish? The Aramaic prayer—recited monthly following the death of a loved one, and again on the anniversary of their passing (the Yahrzeit)—never mentions death or loss, only life and the entity who purportedly created it: “Glorified and celebrated, lauded and praised, acclaimed and honored, extolled and exalted ever be the name of thy Holy One,” says one translation. In keeping with the tradition that a minyan (a group of 10 or more people) is required for the Kaddish’s recitation, when Jews partake in shiva—a secluded, weeklong mourning ritual that begins immediately after the passing of a beloved—family and friends come to the mourner’s side to chant with them. Mirrors are covered, chairs are replaced with stools; you weep, you eat, your body remains close to the ground. You look only at your loved ones. You praise the creator who holds your prayers and dreams and gifts the breath to render them, newly, with your people. The Kaddish is not really for the dead, but for the living. “The Kaddish and shiva,” says Wortzel, “are about acknowledging our loved ones’ ascensions from this world. You can think about that in terms of people, but also the current world as we know it”—the land, the people we don’t know, past and present. Such grief yields space for new beginnings: at the conclusion of shiva, the mourner, who has spent seven days in the interior of their home, often returns to their neighborhood with a ceremonial walk, to feel the sun on their skin, the presence of their community, a gratitude for possibility.

Sounds emanating from the shell forms composing the work *Dreams of Unknown Islands* are in fact many Kaddishes—that is, recordings by Wortzel’s friends and family reciting the hymn during their own personal rituals. Stretched and transmuted, the prayers divulge the hidden residue of the colonization that shaped Florida’s current landscape: Wortzel has crafted these soundscapes to match recent data of toxic algae blooms, which are worsened by increased development and the effluence of major sugar industries. This history is intoned everywhere in the exhibition, even in the chairs that comprise the work *Sitting Shiva*, upholstered in python skin by artist Elle Barbeito. Early settlers wrote of Florida’s landscape as they wrote of its people, perilous and unknowable, “an evil place looped about with giant snakes,” says Wortzel. There were no large snakes. The Everglades’ current population of massive Burmese pythons, an epic creature, is born solely from released pets—humans are good at fulfilling their own myths—and dangerous to endemic species like alligators. Today, local collectives like the Swamp Apes, veterans who engage with the Everglades as part of wilderness therapy, are tasked with their removal.

The chairs rhyme with the Kaddish in their invocation of homage. Here, it’s to Miami Beach’s

queer ancestry—once profoundly affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, “a whole generation of queer elders, a lineage I don’t get to know,” says Wortzel—and to its former thriving Jewish community. “My relatives and many Jewish people who survived genocide came here and first experienced leisure and rest, looking at the ocean. *That* is a form of sitting shiva.” The chairs are for ghosts, for the many bubbes who found refuge on the sand, who sang the hypnotic rhythms of the Kaddish for their people.

When Marjory Stoneman Douglas wrote of “dreams of unknown islands” in *River of Grass*, her seminal work on the Everglades published in 1947, she was describing a threat disguised as potential, a dream that proved poisonous: “There is no reason to believe that the Indian world was not aware of a great change impending before news of that first sail went hurrying among the Florida coastal villages . . . Because for a longer time Europe, across the Atlantic . . . had been tossing with dreams of unknown islands west beyond the blank peril of Ocean-sea.” Douglas might be Wortzel’s cosmic ancestor, a palpable specter in the room, but it is not those dreams for which Wortzel named her exhibition. It is, instead, islands of the future, where the remains of settler-colonialism are dismantled and purged. “What are the unknown ways of living and being together in the world?” Wortzel asks. “An island may not be somewhere else,” somewhere distant. “We’re on it now.”

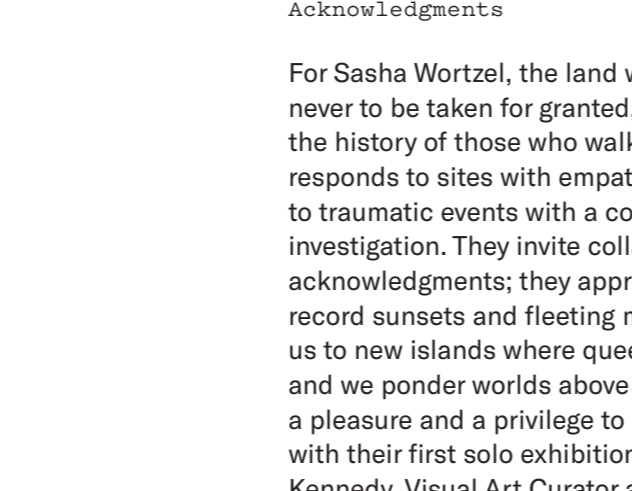
Perhaps the dreamers guessed the repercussions, that exploiting the land would upheave its natural cycles, the lives of the people who understood them, the immanent knowledge that human beings and nature were never separate bodies. As they sparked generations of human and environmental losses—deaths that reflect too plainly the racialized injustices governing us today, the dreamers’ fantasies made real—their paltry imaginations, keen to the myopic vision of profit, still could not have precluded such foresight. But they were unaware that the ancestors dreamed too, that all of us kept dreaming, that it is these visions—far more expansive than theirs, as bright and as sweeping as horizons at sunset—that bless us with memory and time to honor this land, return it to those who cared for it, the descendants of those who came first. “There are so many ghosts on this island,” says Wortzel. So many to grieve. With them, we build the island anew.



Acknowledgments

For Sasha Wortzel, the land we walk on is sacred, never to be taken for granted, and every place bears the history of those who walked before us. The artist responds to sites with empathy, often responding to traumatic events with a collaborative spirit for investigation. They invite collaboration on land acknowledgments; they appropriate archival footage, record sunsets and fleeting moments, and transport us to new islands where queerness is on the horizon and we ponder worlds above and below us. It is both a pleasure and a privilege to honor this prolific artist with their first solo exhibition curated by Kristan Kennedy, Visual Art Curator at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art in Portland, Oregon. We are grateful to Kennedy for her evocative exploration of sculpture and video as a place of reckoning.

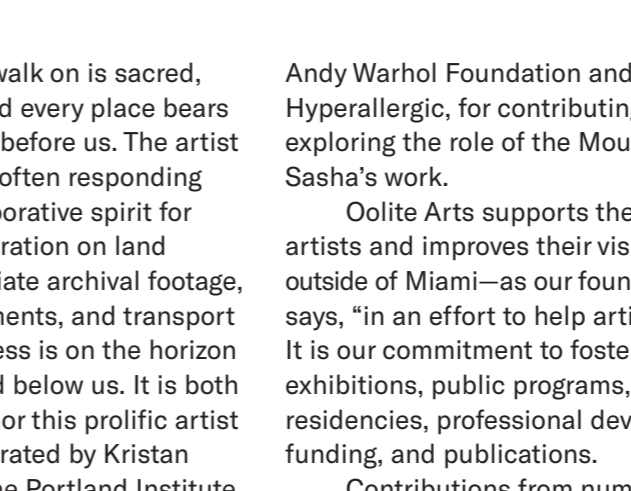
We are grateful to Monica Uszerowicz, writer and photographer who is a recent grantee of the



Andy Warhol Foundation and ongoing writer for Hyperallergic, for contributing her poetic essay exploring the role of the Mourner’s Kaddish in Sasha’s work.

Oolite Arts supports the practices of Miami artists and improves their visibility both within and outside of Miami—as our founder, Ellie Schneiderman, says, “in an effort to help artists help themselves.” It is our commitment to foster artists through exhibitions, public programs, short- and long-term residencies, professional development, direct funding, and publications.

Contributions from numerous talented individuals have made this exhibition and publication a success. Many thanks to Laura Marsh, Oolite Arts Director of Programming, for coordinating all facets of this publication. Thanks also to Amanda Bradley, Programs Manager, for organizing the details of the



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The artist would like to acknowledge the lands and waters now known as the State of Florida, the ancestral homelands of the Calusa, Tequesta, and Mayaimi. Today the Greater Everglades are the unceded ancestral homeland cared for by the descendants of peoples that came to be known as the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, and the Independent Miccosukee-Simanolee.

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exhibition. And my deep appreciation to all of the Oolite staff who contributed to this effort and bring their talents to the organization every day—along with our Board, whose members generously embrace and champion the dynamic vision for Miami arts that drives our work.

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Dennis Scholl
President and CEO
Oolite Arts
January, 2021

Installation
Seashells, sand
Dimensions variable
Abrons Art Center,
New York
Photo courtesy of
Max Marshall

2019
Eroded Moon

