

THE FIFTIETH ANNUAL UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
MASTER OF FINE ARTS GRADUATE EXHIBITION

Brian Bartz

Xandra Ibarra

Leena Joshi

Brontez Purnell

Ghazal Rahimi

Jessica Robbins

The Fiftieth Annual University of California, Berkeley Master of Fine Arts Graduate Exhibition

Every year since 1970, BAMPFA and UC Berkeley's Department of Art Practice have collaborated to present an exhibition of works by Berkeley master of fine arts (MFA) graduates. The class of 2020 marks the fiftieth anniversary of this historic partnership, and we are grateful to showcase the exceptional work of Brian Bartz, Xandra Ibarra, Leena Joshi, Brontez Purnell, Ghazal Rahimi, and Jessica Robbins. We celebrate this intimate cohort of six artists whose work exemplifies energy, excellence, and edge.

Special thanks to the artists, their professors and graduate advisors Gregory Niemeyer and Anne Walsh, and the faculty and staff of the Department of Art Practice.

Stephanie Cannizzo
ASSOCIATE CURATOR

**THE FIFTIETH ANNUAL UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
MASTER OF FINE ARTS GRADUATE EXHIBITION**

May 14–June 20, 2021

**THIS EXHIBITION IS ORGANIZED BY BAMPFA ASSOCIATE
CURATOR STEPHANIE CANNIZZO. THE ANNUAL MASTER
OF FINE ARTS EXHIBITION IS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE
BARBARA BERELSON WILTSEK ENDOWMENT.**



Brian Bartz

United States, born 1994

Recognizing technology as a primary tool that enables individuals to feel productive at all times, Brian Bartz investigates the ways in which computers facilitate a type of extractive logic akin to colonialism. He grapples with the popular belief that digital network technologies are immaterial or placeless—nothing more than a “cloud” in space—and reminds us that our smartphones, laptops, and digital devices are made from rock and minerals extracted from the earth. He strives to compress the space between the geological extraction required to develop smart technologies and the exploitative tendencies such technologies foster in users. Using a science fiction lens, he likens the brain to a planet, or land literally made fertile, undergoing a process of “terraforming.” Bartz’s installations and sculptures sit within larger frameworks of corporate and state surveillance, extractive industries, and inconspicuous devices implanted throughout our built environment. He is interested in moments when personal uses of technology point toward the larger neoliberal framework under which major tech corporations operate, interrogating the friction between our increasing desires for convenience and the everyday exploitation such desires can generate.

For his work in the MFA exhibition, Bartz conceptualizes the office as a site of personal productivity through a standing desk pierced by an unusual metal structure of unknown origin that appears to have crash-landed in the otherwise ordinary setting. A robot arm rakes over a monitor, suggesting automaticity in the screen’s treatment as a site of production—data as a natural resource. Together, the elements in the sculpture serve as a metaphor for farming, automation, factory labor, and the cultivation of minds for information extraction.

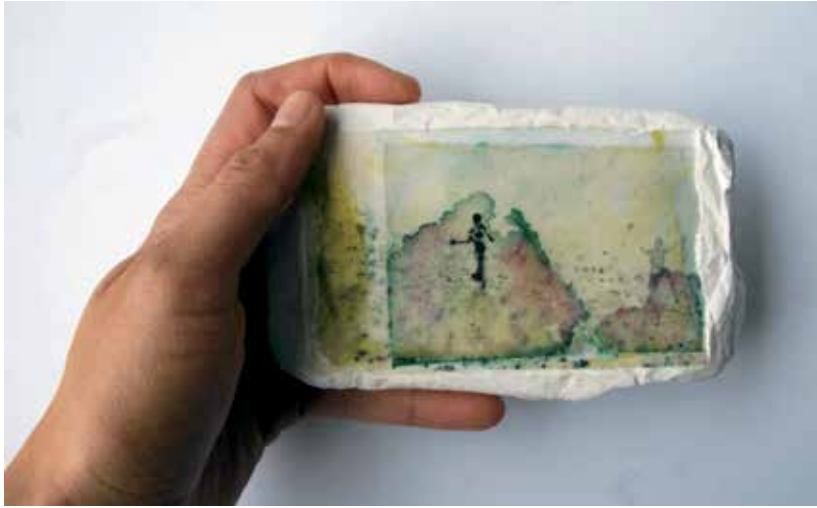


Xandra Ibarra

United States, born 1979

With aesthetic concerns informed by her activism, Xandra Ibarra uses art to advance new ways of thinking about representation and visibility, blurring and breaking through established boundaries. Born on the US-Mexico border, she centers much of her political work on immigration, prisons, and sexual violence. Ibarra incorporates humor and her body to confront her own racial and sexual experiences, investigating themes considered taboo in some activist circles. Creating the persona *La Chica Boom* (2002–12) allowed the artist to engage and destabilize racial stereotypes in a series of short performances taking place mostly in bars and nightclubs. Through the lens of an anti-rape movement, Ibarra exercised elements of burlesque and striptease to test the politics of who she could and could not be. In her video work *Turn Around Sidepiece* (2018), the artist moved from the margins to a position of power, referencing poses of canonized “sidepieces”—nudes depicted in the work of Paul Gauguin, Edouard Manet, and William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

For her MFA work, Ibarra makes a pivotal shift from performance and video with a move toward sculpture. The artist burned books of the feminist canon—books that she loves and respects—and cataloged the ashes by placing them in small boxes behind open book covers mounted on aluminum. The books’ bindings and printed call numbers replicate those found on the US Library of Congress shelves and are accompanied by bronze funerary vases with dried flowers, a red carpet, and a bench, like those found in a mausoleum. Ibarra considers the ways these feminist theoretical frames are pushed forward to promote diversity within the university. By cremating the books, she brings a new spirit to this body of work, aiming toward a feminism that moves past the performance “consciousness,” and accounts for power.



Leena Joshi

United States, born 1990

Leena Joshi's written and visual works foreground their queer, gender-variant, immigrant relationship to the world, examining the ways in which cultural and identity markers are sources of both strength and extraction. Through an intermingling of poetry, sculpture, video, and performance, Joshi's works engage with ideas of personal subterfuge as liberating, resisting the pressures of mastering identity; they lean on the notion of the constantly changing person as a form of slippage—an escape from neoliberal subjectivity and its relationship to surveillance, racial and sexual exclusion, and state control. At times ambivalent about participation in the institutionalized art world and all it represents, Joshi recognizes the importance of creating one's image for and against institutional spaces, the transformational possibilities of asserting underground/queer learning communities, and the tension of absence and presence in the mainstream for so-called "minority" figures.

Language and material are in constant interplay in Joshi's practice. The artist keeps a digital archive that transposes text, still and moving image, performance, and sculptural work into virtual space, then back into physical realms. For their MFA work, they created cement sculptures embedded with "screenshots" of digital detritus, previous performances, and systems of poetics to create objects they describe as "compression artefacts"—items analogue to the amalgamated information of a digital file. The works constitute a visual query into how our use of technology intersects with ideologies of transparency and the labor of appearance. The shapes and sizes of the objects mimic devices—tablets, phones, and screens—with the cement material acting as a container for abstracted images of the self in process. Like a compressed digital file that must lose data to move more easily through a network, the abstraction within Joshi's objects also demonstrates a loss—in this instance, one that is indeterminate and unknowable.

I'm so fucking over me
I can't even make myself hard for me anymore
Every time I get my dick hard to masturbate
The voice in my head is like
"Ew, this guy again?"
It's a process.
Instead I go out walking after midnight, under street lights
On avenues where any old body will do
I laugh at the contradictions of myself
Though a reasonable person might call them "boundaries"
I refuse to buy a butane-less lighter from this homeless man cause I'm
afraid I might catch a cold from his handshake
Yet I would probably suck his dick if he asked nicely
XIEK I'm Amanda by night
But in the daytime
On the street
I'm all fist bumps and no shock hands
And I largely avoid eye contact
Even in the straight Black boy barber shop
I use the only "straight man voice" I can muster: silence
I know that my barber doesn't give a shit that I take dicks in my butt
He's an older man, he's a Democrat, he's seen faggots before
and as said specimen I'm not particularly that remarkable
B U T
There is that old voice in my head that I can't ever shake-
That if I make too much of a fuss
My fade will be less than tight
and I simply can't take that chance
Is there such a thing as pre-traumatic stress syndrome?
Despite myself, XIEK I'm neat
"The creases in my pants are so muthafuckin' sharp you could cut your
goddamn hand on 'em" as my father used to say
I'm wearing a custom made dashiki cut from Japanese silk.
There are roses drawn in abstract on the print.
My little perfect chocolate nipples are rubbing against the fabric.
I'm wearing tight jeans.
I walk like I want to get fucked.
I wear Vans when I wanna fuck a white boy
and Jordan's when I wanna fuck a Black boy
and vintage white Jordan's when I wanna stunt and fuck every boy
in the neighbourhood
I'm wearing a Raiders cap and ghetto diamond earrings
And I am serving "fuck boy" like it's going out of style
And I am serving "FUCK NERBOY" like it's going out of style
To the untrained eye I look like I graduated from Hillman College.
Nobody knows I'm a ho.
I look like the boy you would least suspect.
When I walk down the street rest assured that I will not remember your name
but more importantly
rest assured that you ~~shit~~ do not know me.

Brontez Purnell

United States, born 1982

Moved by dance, African American literature, California, the first major underground performance artists, and relationality to destruction, Brontez Purnell incorporates his varied interests in work as a writer, musician, dancer, choreographer, filmmaker, and performance artist. Born in Triana, Alabama, he made his debut as a performer in church. There he learned the importance of projecting his voice—a concept that resonates throughout his oeuvre. As the front man of the punk band the Younger Lovers, the artist understands punk rock as a different kind of church, with its own meanings, rules, and hierarchies. Boldness translates to Purnell's writing, too. He composes with urgency, scripting words that leap off the page. He credits his mother's collection of books and appreciation of strong Black literature as an early inspiration. As a teenager growing up queer, he found that producing zines was a way to get his message across. DIY culture taught Purnell to take control of things that need to be addressed, to not be erased. Combining writing with dance and performance, he is interested in new ways of making. In the large warehouse space where he lives in Oakland, the artist initiated open dance classes for people interested in movement as art; the Brontez Purnell Dance Company was founded in 2010, building on free-jazz improvisation, punk-rock subversion, and community engagement. BAMPFA was the site of the company's first public performance.

For his MFA work, Purnell created an installation of large Xerox prints that incorporate images and text cut by the editor of his upcoming novel *100 Boyfriends*. The book follows his film *100 Boyfriends Mixtape*, made for the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Exploring coping mechanisms around abandonment and rejection, Purnell is inspired by what he calls "reject material"—important work with a life of its own.

Ghazal Rahimi

Iran, born 1994

Integrating concepts of duality, cultural assimilation, and internal identity conflicts, Ghazal Rahimi's work encompasses media as varied as painting, drawing, ceramic sculpture, and installation. The role of women in culture and society is important to Rahimi, personally and politically. She explores damage caused by restriction and erasure—a historical condition for women, particularly women of color. Rahimi utilizes Persian and Islamic geometric patterns to represent systems of oppression. Historically, such patterns would not include figural or representational forms; by showcasing these patterns outside their traditional contexts, Rahimi aims to disrupt order and communicate shifts in cultural traditions, while considering the spaces in between and what gets lost in the transition. In an untitled portrait from her *Ornamental Oppression* series (2018), the artist painted a woman wearing a modern fashioning of the customary hejab, framing her face with a border of patterned foliage, set on a turquoise-blue background. Turquoise and lapis lazuli are mined in Iran and Afghanistan. Rahimi is interested in the routes the stones traveled, and how their meanings changed as they found their way into Renaissance painting. Her abstract wall sculptures from the series *Endless Becoming* (2020) employ broad strokes of turquoise, as well as—more recently—red paint, affixed with materials including ceramic shards of her own design. Choosing patterns to represent societal rules and customs, Rahimi draws and paints on unfired clay tiles, then breaks them apart to represent a state of post-oppression—ruins become a catalyst for new perspectives and growth. She reassembles the broken pieces and then fires, glazes, and attaches the reordered tiles to her painted surface, imagining liberation from cultural oppression, with a mending and transformation taking shape in the process.



Ghazal Rahimi: *Untitled*, from the series *Ornamental Oppression*, 2018; oil on linen; 48 × 36 in.; courtesy of the artist.



Jessica Robbins

United States, born 1988

Jessica Robbins's art is rooted in the erotics of decay and transformation of the body. Memory and storytelling become tools for object-making, mixing play and survival, desire and abjection. Grappling with motherhood as a biological fiction and an entry point for queer critique, Robbins's work looks at sculpture as performance, the body as narrative, and shoemaking as an opportunity for grounding. She sources surplus materials—leftovers and throwaways—utilizes prop-making and imitation, and stretches the malleable to the verge of collapse. In the video *Reel*, a simple, yellow balloon inscribed with the word *belief* gets bigger and smaller, suggesting inhalation and exhalation. The *b* in *belief* is blurred, occasionally reading as *relief* and calling into question the ways in which belief produces relief. Her sculpture *Stand-ins*—a pair of sandals made of memory foam and bubble wrap—appears functional, but when worn in the video, the sandals fail humorously. In a world built by a body that dies, surrogates or stand-ins can negotiate absence; these recuperative objects facilitate the crossing of a liminal threshold—a becoming, a rebecoming.

For her MFA work, Robbins explores playwriting as an act of performance. Recalling memories of falling in love with her mother(s), lover(s), and self/selves, *'Play, a Play'* considers the way in which objects help to tell us who we are. In the space between being and believing, performing is a route to becoming. Robbins's installation makes visible a violence often concealed in language: she tells a fragmented story through a set of sculptures that vacillate between relapse and recuperation.

BRIAN BARTZ received his bachelor of arts degree in studio art from Reed College in 2017. He has exhibited at the SOMarts Cultural Center, San Francisco; Artists Television Access, San Francisco; Worth-Ryder Gallery, Berkeley; and the Feldenheimer Gallery, Portland (Oregon). He is the recipient of the 2019 Eisner Prize for Excellence in Creative Practice and the San Francisco Foundation Cadogan Scholarship.

XANDRA IBARRA received her bachelor of arts degree in psychology from Baylor University in 2001, and a master's in ethnic studies from San Francisco State University in 2010. She has exhibited at El Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Bogota; the Broad, Los Angeles; ExTeresa Arte Actual, Mexico City; and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. She has received numerous awards, including the Eisner Prize for Film and Video, the Lucas Visual Arts Fellowship, and the Queer Art Prize for Recent Work.

LEENA JOSHI received their bachelor of arts degree in creative writing from the University of Washington, Seattle, in 2011. They have published poetry in various online and print publications, and exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Detroit Art Week; the American Institute for Thoughts and Feelings, Tucson; SOIL Gallery, Seattle; and the Oros Gallery, San Francisco. They were a 2019 Townsend Center for the Humanities Arts Research Center Fellow at UC Berkeley.

BRONTEZ PURNELL received his bachelor of fine arts degree in theater and contemporary dance from California State University, East Bay. He has exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; the Broad, Los Angeles; and the Lab, San Francisco. His writing has appeared in many publications, including the *Paris Review* and *Harper's Magazine*. He received the Whiting Award for Fiction in 2018 for his novel *Now I Lay My Burden Down* and was named as one of thirty-two essential Black Male Writers of Our Time by the *New York Times*.

GHAZAL RAHIMI received her bachelor of fine arts degree from Otis College of Art and Design in 2018. She has exhibited at Root Division Gallery, San Francisco; Worth-Ryder Gallery, Berkeley; and the Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles. She received the Edwin Anthony and Adalaine Bourdreux Cadogan Scholarship in 2019; and Women Painters West's Brenda S. Bagg Memorial Award for Watercolor in 2018.

JESSICA ROBBINS received her bachelor of fine arts degree at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York. She has exhibited at the Oros Gallery, San Francisco; the Worth Ryder Art Gallery, Berkeley; Ginerva Gambino, Cologne; Kuir Bogotá, Festival Internacional de Arte y Cine Queer; and the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin. She received the 2019 Eisner Prize at UC Berkeley and the Pietro and Alfrieda Montana Prize at the Cooper Union.



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