



SUFFERING FROM REALNESS

MASS MoCA

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Denise Markonish

“Our world is strange and often fake and corrupt. But we think it’s normal because we can’t see anything else.”

—Adam Curtis, *HyperNormalisation* (2016)

REALNESS in the 21st century is increasingly complicated. In 2016, British filmmaker Adam Curtis directed *HyperNormalisation*, which traces society’s descent into—to borrow Stephen Colbert’s term—‘truthiness’ and the systematic confusion it has created, from the Reagan through Trump administrations. The film outlines how, since the 1970s, corporations and politicians have gained power over the “real world” by creating a “fake world” that they stabilize and control. Examples range from various financial crises to the use of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi as a public relations pawn. In the last two years, as Donald Trump’s administration took office, the absurdity has amplified as xenophobic behavior has reached new extremes. Not surprisingly, artists are probing the notion of realness, using art as a tool for resistance while also trying to forge paths towards reconciliation.

This exhibition endeavors to shake us out of our frenzied state of hyperreality. The title for the show is borrowed from the Kanye West/Jay-Z song “Ni**as in Paris,” 2011, in which West raps: “Doctors say I’m the illest / ‘Cause I’m suffering from realness.” This lyric signaled the musician’s over-the-top public behavior and seeming mental health issues, which he has addressed in subsequent songs (including, most recently, his visit to the White House wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat). *Suffering From Realness* presents the works of sixteen

artists working in the United States examining the human condition from all sides, creating works that are both personal and universal, addressing racism, violence, gender equality, the politicized body of wartime, the anxious body, the complexity of responsibility, and the future. Writer Elaine Scarry says, “It will gradually become apparent that at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief...the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty.’” (*The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 1985). Working in all media, the artists in *Suffering from Realness* rouse us from the hyper-normal, helping us re-center the “aura of realness.”

Ultimately, this exhibition aims to create a space of understanding and empathy. Because, despite political tension, people are engaged—crying out for something better. *Suffering from Realness* need not dwell on suffering alone, for it also shows how tenderness and collective action can lead to a new form of realness, one tied less to uncertainty and more to liberation. No longer bound, we can “resist or move on, be mad, be rash, smoke, and explode” (Morrissey, “Hold on to Your Friends,” 1994) and find hope in something real.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue Removal: Memphis, 2017)*, 2018. Charcoal on mounted paper. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

ROBERT LONGO's monumental charcoal drawings slow down media images, allowing us to notice details and question truth. For example, *Untitled (Destroyed Head of Lamassu, Nineveh)*, 2016 depicts a stone head from the ISIS destruction of antiquities in Iraq in 2014, while *Untitled (St. Louis Rams / Hands Up)*, 2016 represents a 2014 image of the Rams entering the football field with arms raised in the "hands up, don't shoot" posture, in solidarity with protests in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting of Michael Brown. And lastly, *Untitled (Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue Removal)*, 2017 shows cranes poised to remove a statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a cotton farmer, slave owner, Confederate Army general, and the first leader of the Ku Klux Klan. The monument, erected in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1904, was finally removed in 2017.



Robert Taplin, *Punch Makes a Public Confession*, 2012/14. Milled foam, gypsum, wood. Courtesy of the artist and Winston Wächter Fine Art, New York

ROBERT TAPLIN's *History of Punch*, 2005–18, addresses the intersection of alienation and creativity. By setting Punch, or Punchinello—the 16th-century Neapolitan trickster and children's puppet show character ("*Punch and Judy*")—loose in our contemporary world, Taplin uses the character's signature slapstick and violence to make visible the absurdity of our times. The works are rendered ghostly white, with Punch wearing a commedia dell'arte clown costume. *Punch Makes a Public Confession*, 2012/14, greets visitors atop the stairs, an unlikely mascot in a pregnant pause, forever before speech. Other works balance absurdity with poignancy, such as *Punch Stopped at the Border*, 2005/19; *Punch Does a Magic Trick*, (2010/18); and *Young Punch Scratches the Burro's Ears*, (2007/18) reminding us that power is often not to be trusted.



Wangechi Mutu, *Mwotaji the Dreamer*, 2016. Polished bronze, hand-carved Carrara marble, steel base. Edition of 6. Co-published by Carolina Nitsch + Elisabeth Ross Wingate. Courtesy of the artist and Carolina Nitsch + Elisabeth Ross Wingate

WANGECHI MUTU upends the representation of Africans in Western art history. Her *Mwotaji The Dreamer*, 2016, recalls Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse*, 1910. However, instead of an aerodynamic egg-shaped head with slight features peacefully resting atop a pedestal, Mutu's version shows a head with topknots in her hair, a strained neck, and tension in her lips. *Mwotaji*, which means "dreamer" in Kiswahili, is decapitated, only finding peace in death, an escape from her violent reality. This work sits alongside *One Cut* and *Mary & Magda*, both 2018, which represent further acts of severing and taking control of women's bodies. In the first, a hand, complete with red nail polish, tightly clutches a machete, ready for one last swing, while the other represents a form of comfort in the womanly leg/pillows.

MPA's work grapples with what is real in a society in which loose facts and reinforced binaries run rampant. *1, 2, 3, For*, 2019 consists of four walls painted in the hue of green screens, setting up the gallery as a theater of numerology focusing on 0–4: 4 is the constructed walls of the installation; 3 is a sword being split in two by a wand (magic defeats power); 2 is the ultramarine, alpha, and omega circles on the wall—a pair of symbols of the beginning and end; 1 is a crack breaking an adjacent wall, allowing us to peer behind its reality; and 0 is the hole above this crack allowing us to peer behind its reality. An ammonite fossil embedded in the floor, functions as an artifact of the infinite, above which swings a pendulum pointing to the four cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west. Together, these elements produce an energy that hopes to incite curiosity or the elemental and esoteric "realities" gridded by binaries of race, gender, class, and politics.



MPA, *1, 2, 3 For*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist



Hayv Kahraman, *Three Celebrities*, 2018. Oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

HAYV KAHRAMAN fled Iraq shortly after the Kurdish refugee crisis of 1991, the same year the charity concert, called “*The Simple Truth: A Concert for Kurdish Refugees*” was staged in England. Kahraman remembers watching musicians—Whitney Houston, Sting, MC Hammer—perform in solidarity, while distraught images of Kurds fleeing their homeland filled stadium Jumbotrons. This disconnect between her lived experience and how that experience was transformed into a spectacle of suffering is the subject of Kahraman’s 2018 series *Silence is Golden*. These works mock celebrity humanitarian campaigns complete with “donation boxes” such as *Pussy Gold*, a figure painted on wood, legs spread, with a donation slot between her labia; and greedy celebrities such as *Three Celebrities*, a group of women in resplendent robes arguing about who gets to claim the pile of gold before their feet.

CHRISTOPHER MIR’s paintings come from a personal mythology tied to his own consciousness and are manifested as a free-association image stream. For example, in *Teeth*, 2018, we see a stack of pearly whites delicately balanced against a scratchy blue ground. This is the stuff of nightmares, yet Mir shifts the image from a Freudian take on anxiety, as that pyramid, a reorganizing of the teeth, turns the terrifying into the absurd in their ordinary piling up. In other paintings, we see broken model airplanes, boxers, wilting flower bouquets, impaled candles, and even a trio of figures atop a red hill, either enemies or revelers dancing in the glittery reflections of a disco ball, or perhaps both. Together these images represent our fears and anxieties but also our hopes and dreams.



Christopher Mir, *Teeth*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

TITUS KAPHAR's work amends art history, shifting representation to give African Americans center stage. This tactic exists in *Seeing Through Time 2*, 2018, in which Kaphar collages together a portrait of a contemporary African American woman with that of a wealthy European aristocrat being offered flowers by a black child who she has enslaved. The European figure is cut away, revealing the contemporary image underneath. Kaphar's glass and mixed media sculptures also investigate commemoration and representation. *Monumental Inversions: George Washington*, 2016, shows the President on horseback carved into wood, with glass impressions stuck in and falling out of the scorched surface, while *A Pillow for Fragile Fictions*, 2016, depicts a marble pillow on which rests a bust of Washington filled with rum, tamarind, lime, and molasses—materials he used to barter with traders in the West Indies, giving them a man he enslaved in exchange.



Titus Kaphar, *Seeing Through Time 2*, 2018. Oil on canvas. Collection of Reginald and Aliya Brown, Newtown, PA



Keith Sklar, *Declaration*, 2019. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

KEITH SKLAR's *Sitting Down for a Drink with My Shadow*, 2019, presents a world afloat. A wall, leaning dangerously into the gallery, has on its surface the painting *Core Value*. A hole bored through the painting and wall reveals *The Hoard*—a junk pile of nightmares. This uncontrollable mess represents Sklar's feelings about the current political climate. The materials in *The Hoard* incorporate wordplay, also found in Sklar's paintings: steal/ steel; stud (human)/stud (building material); felt (material)/felt (action); knots/notes; lead (material)/lead (action); stained glass, and window panes/pains. Amidst the pile are reproductions of historic artworks on colored acetate hidden in the junk, thus devaluing the history of the European art canon. *The Hoard* casts a long shadow through the installation across a stunted bar, sinking into the floor as if it were quicksand, with shards of light glittering throughout balancing optimism and despair.

Vincent Valdez, *Dream Baby Dream* 3, 2018. Oil on paper. Courtesy of the artist and David Shelton Gallery, Houston, TX. Photo: Peter Molick



VINCENT VALDEZ's *The Beginning is Near* is comprised of three sections: *Chapter I: The City* (a 2016 chilling portrait of the Ku Klux Klan); *Chapter III: The New Americans* (in progress); and *Chapter II: Dream Baby Dream*, 2018, twelve paintings focusing on the podium and mourners at Muhammad Ali's funeral. This event was a cross-denominational, interracial celebration of an athlete and activist. Surrounded by wreaths, ten figures stand silent, waiting to speak. Rendered mostly in monochrome, the touches of red around the eyes, noses, and hands of the figures remind us of all we have lost and continue to lose. The portraits are accompanied by two panels: one depicts the podium devoid of speakers, and the other shows a funeral wreath, its cascading ribbon emblazoned with lyrics from Suicide's 1979 song *Dream Baby Dream*.



Adriana Corral, *Requiem*, 2019. Site-specific installation, dates hand-carved into drywall. Courtesy of the artist

ADRIANA CORRAL's installations, performances, and sculptures embody universal themes of loss, human rights violations, memory, and erased historical narratives. Teaming up with Valdez, Corral presents *Requiem*, 2018. A requiem is a mass for the souls of the dead, and here Corral and Valdez have used it to take stock of American history, beginning by asking 243 Americans (a number marking the age of the American Republic in 2019) to each submit a date of personal and historical significance. These dates were then burned by Corral, and the ash was used by Valdez to patina a bronze sculpture of an American bald eagle in distress. Each of the collected dates was then laboriously cut directly into the sheetrock wall by Corral, literally scarring the museum with American history, creating both an urn and a time capsule.



Aziz + Cucher, *You're Welcome, and I'm Sorry*, 2019, video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Gazelli Art House, London

AZIZ + CUCHER are pioneers of digital imaging and post-photography, using diverse media to explore the issues of our time. The duo's newest work *You're Welcome, and I'm Sorry*, 2019, is a multi-channel video installation cum Dadaist romp through the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. The room is painted in circus stripes derived from the colors of various bank logos, while across a series of screens we see costumed characters—most wearing masks made from repurposed shirts, ties, and deconstructed power suits—dancing, gesticulating, and orating. The figures appear in a variety of quasi-corporate locations, and even end up in Davos, the Alpine resort where the World Economic Forum takes place. The installation is set to a dense soundtrack that amplifies the video, along with a chorus of text-to-speech computerized voices reciting mathematical formulas as well as references to globalization and financial speculation.



Jennifer Karady, *Former Specialist Brittney Gillespie, 139th Military Police Company, 16th MP Brigade, U.S. Army, veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, with Volunteers of America Los Angeles Battle Buddy Elizabeth Saucedo and friend Corey*; Los Angeles, CA, February 2014. Chromogenic color prints on Fujiflex mounted on Plexiglas. Courtesy of the artist

JENNIFER KARADY collaborates with veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan for *Soldier Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan*, a series of photographs focusing on the difficulties of adjusting to civilian life after war. She listens over the course of two months or more, a process allowing veterans to feel comfortable sharing not just their wartime experiences but their home life afterwards. Karady works with each veteran to recreate one story as a theatrical photographs, merging wartime memories with everyday reality. She records the soldiers' stories so that their words are exhibited with their photographs, giving voice to their experiences. This act of regaining power over one's story ideally serves as a therapeutic device, opening up pathways for veterans to talk to their loved ones about their experiences, and begin to heal.



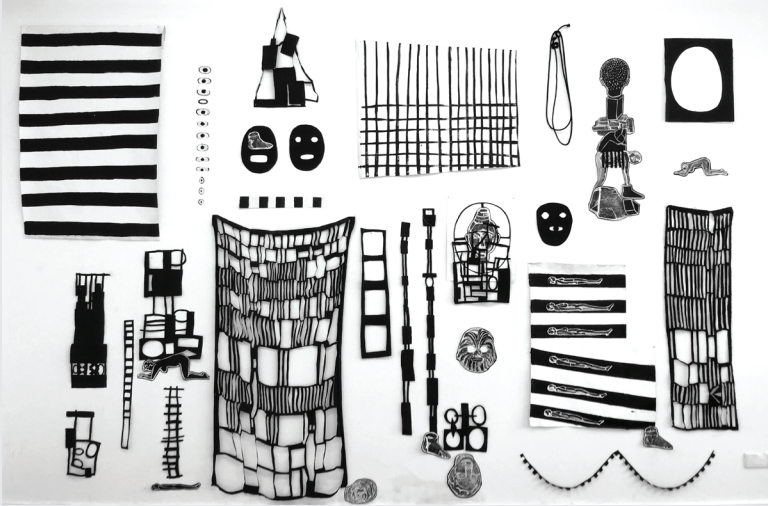
Allison Schulnik, *Moth*, 2019, gouache-on-paper animated video. Courtesy of the artist

ALLISON SCHULNIK's painting, ceramics, and animations embody a spirit of the macabre, a Shakespearean comedy/tragedy of love, death, and farce. Her new gouache-on-paper stop-motion animation *Moth*, 2019, began after a moth hit her studio window and continued while she was pregnant and gave birth to her first child. The film is about this cycle, about how emotion, motherhood, and nature come together, but also about the need to take care of the things around us in order to leave space for the dance of nature to exist. *Moth* represents a vulnerable creature not just hitting a window but soaring across the screen. Perhaps, hope, as Emily Dickinson wrote, is not just a thing with feathers but a thing with wings that can fly.



Jeffrey Gibson, installation view, 2019.

JEFFREY GIBSON's work over the last ten years has incorporated traditional Native American materials such as tipi poles, beads, and metal jingles used in powwow regalia. His recent sculptures are based on traditional Lakota ceremonial garments worn by members of the *Ghost Dance*, along with other garments historically used in faith-based ceremonies. Gibson's garments combine vintage Iroquois patchwork, powwow jingles, beads, textiles comprised of images from his sculptures and paintings, tweets from Trump about transgender politics, news headlines about the Bears Ears National Monument, and phrases such as "people like us" and "talk to me so I can understand you." Like its predecessors, Gibson's works are about protection, but they also reference queer disco culture, inviting us to dance in the face of hatred and forge a future that is exuberant.



Joey Fauerso, *You Destroy Every Special Thing I Make*, 2017. Wood and canvas. Courtesy of the artist and David Shelton Gallery, Houston

JOEY FAUERSO's reaction when the political landscape went topsy-turvy was to think about the future in which her two young sons would grow up. Often incorporating her family into her studio, *You Destroy Every Special Thing I Make*, 2017–19, is titled after a phrase that one of her sons said to the other. Fitting in our current world climate, this phrase led to an installation comprised of Fauerso's quick and gestural paintings—a funeral ceremony on the Ganges, Joan of Arc at a pyre, and a vertical pile of women's bodies. Wooden blocks and other objects flank the paintings, and all appear in adjacent videos of Fauerso's sons and other performers building and knocking down the arrangements in a continual loop of destruction and resurrection.



Cassils, *Inextinguishable Fire: Burn for Portrait*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. Photo: Cassils with Robin Black

CASSILS *Inextinguishable Fire*, 2007–15 borrows its title from German filmmaker Harun Farocki's 1969 film about napalm attacks in Vietnam. It begins with him stating: "If we show you a picture of napalm burns, you'll close your eyes. First, you'll close your eyes to the pictures, then you'll close your eyes to the memory. Then, you'll close your eyes to the facts." This inability to understand suffering is imperative for Cassils, who uses their body to address pain and transformation. Borrowing from Hollywood stunt techniques, *Inextinguishable Fire* features Cassils in a full body burn, a fourteen-second self-immolation. The footage is slowed down to fourteen minutes, assuring that audiences confront the violence of the flames engulfing Cassils's body before they are extinguished. Amidst the video are fourteen glass sculptures, each capturing a single breath of the artist.

“Your opponents would love you to believe that it’s hopeless, that you have no power, that there’s no reason to act, that you can’t win. Hope is a gift you don’t have to surrender, a power you don’t have to throw away. And though hope can be an act of defiance, defiance isn’t enough reason to hope. But there are good reasons.”

–Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 2016

“American history is longer, larger, more various, beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.”

–James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985*

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Cover: Vincent Valdez and Adriana Corral, *Requiem*, 2016–19, bronze and ash
Courtesy of the artists and David Shelton Gallery

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1040 MASS MoCA Way
North Adams, MA 01247
413.MoCA.111
massmoca.org