

## *Queer Storytelling and The Narrative Body*

"[T]he art of storytelling is coming to an end," wrote Walter Benjamin in 1936, "Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed."<sup>[1]</sup> Connecting this creative decline to the aftermath of World War I, the philosopher suggested that facing unspeakable tragedy greatly limited the human ability to tell stories. In the artworld, Benjamin's argument has played out in different ways, as experiences of adversity shaped styles and gave rise to new movements, both figurative and abstract. More so than literature, art history has provided a space for alternative modes of storytelling; and within this endeavor, queer artists in particular have challenged the dominant fixation on coherent and linear forms of narrative.

When the COVID-19 pandemic took the world in its grip over a year ago, life became muted, lacking the richness of those tiny rituals and encounters that accumulate and together form the larger narratives of our lives. And as we were told that this was the time to write that novel, create that podcast, record that album, many of us withdrew and grew quiet instead. Then, a second pandemic followed, exposing the racism and white supremacy entrenched in our culture, and urging to address our silence. The social and political reckonings of these pandemic times have motivated many of us to reassess the stories we tell and absorb, both individually and as a culture. Yet the art of storytelling has by no means vanished, and as more and more bodies are vaccinated each day, we begin to re-discover the various sources and structures through which narratives can unfold.

*In between, ours* is the tale of five queer artists, brought together by Hales Gallery, who share an investment in rethinking the art of storytelling—albeit across different media. Save one piece, the exhibition features artworks that date from the pandemic times, at once speaking to the current moment and also marking the turning of a page onto a new chapter. The body stands out as a central focus in the exhibition, used and manipulated in different ways by each artist, yet always highlighted as a meaningful vessel that holds our stories.

Gray Wielebinski's commitment to the representational strategies of collage and montage signify their desire to deconstruct existing narratives and reveal their dangerously sharp individual parts. In *Last Year's Class* (2021), Wielebinski employs found-footage to examine patterns of mythmaking in American football culture, spanning from early childhood into adulthood. Highlighting the experience of college football, Wielebinski's piece exposes that once the schoolyear is over, one rarely thinks about last year's class of players and the shapes their futures have taken; yet it's the story of last year's class that the artist wants to tell. Collapsing time and place, Wielebinski montages video footage that depicts football players' sturdy bodies in action, juxtaposed with scenes where these bodies are injured and in pain. On the accompanying audio sequence created by the artist, one player is heard saying: "The thought of playing football is more important to me now than having arthritis later." A deliberate gesture, Wielebinski's intervention forces the viewer to consider how bodies quickly become expandable when they do not perform in certain ways that meet the expectations of dominant culture.

Mythmaking also plays an important role in a series of intricate works on paper by Chitra Ganesh. Throughout her artistic career, Ganesh has explored the ways in which the supernatural has historically allowed for visions of alternative and queer futures. Drawing from traditional South Asian painting practices such as Kalighat and Madhubani, as well as Hindu and Buddhist iconography, Ganesh' works are infused with spirituality and lush symbolisms. As Ganesh depicts hybrid bodies that are both physical and mythical, the prominence of the line calls to mind William Blake's illusionistic work, mystical and familiar at the same time. Negating the flatness of the paper surface, the artist also attaches material traces such as flower petals and embroidery, thus adding a relic-like quality to the drawings. Engaged in what appear to be dedicated rituals of devotion, the godlike bodies make us contemplate the extent to which religion and spirituality have shaped human history, as well as our relationship with so-called reality.

Anthony Cudahy's paintings present more quotidian activities, such as reading or gardening, as important routines that have a vast impact on our larger self-narratives. Capturing quiet moments that often center around his chosen family, Cudahy's figures radiate a Vermeer-like serenity, while the painterly brushstrokes remind us that these are fleeting instances. In *seeking a pattern* (2021), the artist's husband, the photographer Ian Lewandowski, rests his hand against his head as he studies a patterned blanket. A domestic interior on the background features a bright yellow opening, and as a pink hand emerges from the ceiling the viewer is urged to reconsider whether the composition is real or imaginary. Borrowed from a Hieronymus Bosch painting, the hand also signifies Cudahy's dialogue with the larger art historical narrative. Existing as intimate gestures that record precious moments in time, Cudahy's works suggest that seemingly mundane activities, and not only singular decisive events, contribute to our character development.

Having maintained a continuous engagement with the act of protesting throughout her life, Andrea Geyer's interdisciplinary practice often highlights the power of collectivity in the struggle against a common oppressor. In her most recent work, *Resonant* (2021), the artist turns to protest documentation she has been making and collecting since 1996, to revisit fragmented stories of police violence against marginalized bodies. Layering iridescent paint and aluminum on felt, Geyer creates a collaged composition of large silhouettes holding up signs in an otherwise ambiguous environment; it is the bodies' presence that marks the space as one of protest. Drawing both from her own photographs, as well as newspaper clippings, the artist merges personal memory with official memory, uncovering the relationships and dichotomies between the two. Thinking about her individual body in the act of protest, as well as the accumulation of collective bodies, Geyer reveals how space itself holds narrative for stories that are threatened by erasure. Another recent work, *un/rest* (2021), presents Geyer's growing collection of walking sticks. Created to support us, these curious objects imply that the enduring body is slowly failing, recalling Wielebinski's meditation on physical vulnerability.

Sunil Gupta's *Untitled #03 Lake Pichola, Udaipur* (1983) wraps the exhibition up by looking back into the past, thus affirming that narrative time does not have to be linear. With their backs turned to the photographer, and thereby the viewer, two Indian men stand intimately close next to each other. One dressed in all black, the other in all white, they overlook a vast lake followed by a mountainous landscape that seems to go on for eternity. Approaching a quintessential idea of paradise, the location is a romantic trope for heterosexual couples to visit on their honeymoon. Taken on Gupta's first return to India as an adult, during a time when another pandemic (the AIDS crisis) was quickly spreading across the globe, the artist wanted to explore what it means to exist as a queer body in an environment where this existence is repressed. Contrary to the queer presence in Cudahy's works, Gupta explores its absence; questioning how someone can function as a subject when they have actively been made to seem invisible. The space between the two men becomes charged with potential, a queer ellipsis as a placeholder for queer love. A rather perfect summary of the show, this photograph illustrates how much of queer narrative only exists because we insisted on reading between the lines, and pushed aside recorded histories to weave in our own stories.

- Ksenia M. Soboleva

**Ksenia M. Soboleva** is a Russian-Tatar writer, art historian, and curator based in New York City. She is completing her PhD in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, where her dissertation focuses on art, lesbian identity and the AIDS crisis (1981-1996). Soboleva has curated exhibitions at the 80WSE Project Space, Assembly Room, Honey's, SPRING/BREAK Art Show, and Stellar Projects. She has taught at NYU and the Cooper Union, and presented her research at various institutions in the United States and abroad. Her writings have appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *the Brooklyn Rail*, *art-agenda*, *QED: A Journal in LGBTQ Worldmaking*, as well as various catalogues. Forthcoming projects include a book collaboration with Samantha Nye and Catalina Schliebener (published by Lyeberry Press, Summer 2021), and an exhibition titled *fetch fiddle fidget*, opening at La Mama Gallery in June 2021. She is the 2020-2021 Marica and Jan Vilcek Curatorial Fellow at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in *Orient und Okzident*, 1936 (first print); rep. in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn; ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968), pp.83-109.