



Works left to right: Morris Louis, *Floral IV* (1959–60); Jean Dubuffet, *Le Connétable* (1954); Jenny Calivas, *Beginner (As Diatom Scuzz) #8* (2021); Jenny Calivas, *Self Portrait While Buried #11* (2021); Jean Dubuffet, *Dormeuse au lit rouge* (1950); James Rosenquist, *Drawing of Leakey, Ride for Dr. Leakey* (1985); Alberto Giacometti, *Grande tête mince* (1954); Amphora (Greek, c. 6th century BCE); Genesis Báez, *Making Weather* (2023); Genesis Báez, *Feeling the Sky in the Green River* (2023); Genesis Báez, *Sound is also a wave* (2019–2023); Genesis Báez, *Condensation (San Juan Airport)* (2019).

MATERIALS THAT FLOW, blend, and morph have the power to unsettle familiar distinctions: this merges with that, here moves there, inside unfolds into outside, singular becomes plural. *something you cannot hold* presents a selection of artists who have cultivated working methods and modes of description characterized by fluidity.¹

The exhibition is organized as a sequence of dialogues between photographic work by four contemporary artists and artworks from The Soloviev Foundation spanning multiple eras and media. Each pairing is grounded in a technique entailing physical or semantic flow. To pour, to mix, to cast, or to configure: these ways of working with material offer paradigms for agencies, subjectivities, inheritances, and epistemes that operate across corporeal, temporal, geographic, and conceptual boundaries.

POUR

Morris Louis, Paul Feeley, and Larry Poons allow paint to travel across and into canvas through techniques that involve pouring or staining. Through these methods of setting matter into motion, the artists also initiate paint's travel through physical states. It begins as a liquid, solidifies as it dries, and enters the viewer's eye as light. Beholding these paintings, one can observe all these states at once. There are traces of how paint formerly flowed, pooled, or bled; yet, closer inspection finds the material hardened into a carapace or absorbed completely and transformed into, simply, color. The spatial and ontological movements that pouring and staining activate are retained as a visible history.

Developing affinities between paint's mutability and their paintings' dynamic visual fields, Louis, Feeley, and Poons channel the materiality of paint into artworks that unfold in time. Louis created *Floral IV* (1959–60) by pouring thinned acrylic paint onto an unprimed canvas, directing its path by angling the canvas, creasing it into troughs, and pressing it from below. His diluted materials soak overlapping, gauzy layers of color into the canvas, all occupying a single plane. Formally and chromatically distinct, yet materially unified, these swathes of color jostle for visual primacy. Feeley yields similar figure-ground oscillations



Works left to right: Amphora (Greek, c. 6th century BCE); Morris Louis, *Floral IV* (1959–60). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

from a more tightly controlled use of stained paint. The yellow quatrefoils of *Grafias* (1965), placed in a gridded arrangement, frame areas of blank canvas calibrated to echo the forms of the artwork's four blue jacks. These phantom shapes emerge from the background of their painted counterparts to generate irreconcilable reversals between the artwork's positive and negative spaces. Poons's *Untitled* (1973), meanwhile, presents an accumulation of thrown paint whose spatters of saturated and muted hues appear to vibrate. Its edge-to-edge striations read simultaneously as shimmering light, cascading fluid, and hardened shell. Compressing these states of matter into one visual field, the artwork is dense with time.

A similar temporal density is borne by Genesis Báez's photographs. Here, light is the medium that pours. A luminosity spills across the scenes Báez frames, remaking them into pregnant moments. Light seeps into the camera that records and preserves these instants. And light flows out of the resulting photographs, carrying the moments of their making into the instants of their viewing. Light opens portals that reach across time.

Báez's work mediates on life in diaspora, drawing upon her experience as someone raised in New England with ties to Puerto Rico. "I photograph," she states, "to trace the invisible threads that connect people and places otherwise separated by time and distance."² In addition to light, water is a privileged motif through which she materializes connection across distance. Bodies of water furnish territorial boundaries while also physically linking what they divide. Water is one of Báez's constant collaborators; she activates it by stirring silt in its shallows, decanting it into vessels, and floating her body upon it. In her photographs, this collaborator enacts multiple, sometimes surprising, forms of agency. It envelops the artist in *Feeling the Sky in the Green River* (2023). It traces a circle upon a bank of windows in *Condensation (San Juan Airport)* (2019). It reauthors family photographs into woozy abstractions in *Sound is also a wave* (2019–23). It even arranges itself into a microcosmic storm in *Making Weather* (2023), recalling oceanic and atmospheric systems.

Created between the northeastern United States and Puerto Rico, Báez's photographs frequently exclude markers specifying their exact location. This, she observes, reflects "the lack of geographic space that is diaspora."³ Yet, the images convey a strong sense of place, locating it at the nexus of the water that resides between territories and the light that traverses their boundaries. At these points of conjunction, something revelatory results. The photographs catch the world in the midst of disclosing that its "heres" are made from, and maintain intimate contact with, a myriad of "theres."

MIX

Jean Dubuffet's work prizes the vitality of physical matter. According to the artist, the unorthodox mixtures of artistic and non-art media he employed in his paintings could lead as well as follow. "Those who imagine that these kinds of pastes are something inert make a grave mistake," he wrote in 1952. "My connection with the material I use is like the bond of the dancer with his partner, the rider with his horse, the fortune teller with her cards."⁴

Dubuffet reconceived his practice as a collaboration between human and non-human agents. Series by series, he challenged the obdurate values embedded in Western culture by injecting radical, matterly notions of beauty, proportion, and dignity into its art's standardized formats. *Dormeuse au lit rouge* (1950, from the series "Corps de dames") introduces a metamorphic materiality into the genre of the female nude. *L'Entrecôte* (1950, anticipating the series "Landscape Tables") does the same to still life. *Le Connétable* (1954, from the "Petites statues de la vie précaire") refashions the portrait bust from beguiling geologies.

Le Rédacteur (1951) adds another vocation to the list of similes—dancer, horserider, fortune teller—by which Dubuffet describes his partnership with his materials. This artwork displays the crudely rendered figure of a writer or editor—the title carries both meanings. A possible stand-in for the artist, this figure works on a page beside which rests a rolling blotter, an implement used to prevent the smudging of ink. While the image suggests the possibility of legible marks becoming illegible ones, the surface into which it has been inscribed is complete illegibility. This surface is the product of the artist's homemade compounds, whose interactions generate its mass of swirls and craquelure. Just as an editor's task is to modify, redact, and clarify, Dubuffet's lines, etched into his paint, wrest a rudimentary picture from what materials authored. In the title's dual meaning, *Le Rédacteur* points to the two intertwined roles entailed in making the artwork: matter writes, the artist revises.

Jenny Calivas's recent artworks also result from collaborations with matter. She predicates her working methods upon physical exchanges with photographic and non-art materials, discovering new capacities within such



Works left to right: Jenny Calivas, *Beginner (As Diatom Scuzz) #8* (2021); Jenny Calivas, *Self Portrait While Buried #11* (2021); Jean Dubuffet, *Dormeuse au lit rouge* (1950). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

entanglements. Relinquishing the artist's traditional claim as sole shaper of the work, she decouples her practice from a form of control that parallels structures of dominance in the wider world. "If women's bodies and the Earth are thought of as for the taking," she asks, "how could I picture a new possibility through photographs?"⁵ A central tactic of her response: propose new guiding principles that contest vision's privileged role in the artmaking process.

The photograms *Beginner (As Diatom Scuzz) #8* (2021) and *Beginner (As Diatom Scuzz) #10* (2021) were both created without a camera. Calivas drew directly on the photographic paper with sand and saliva, exposed negatives on its photosensitive surface, and used her body to shape the light that landed on it. Since her photograms only revealed their images after final processing, remaining blank throughout her darkroom procedures, the artworks are not composed according

to visual dictates. They result, instead, from the pleasure of physical interaction with materials.

Contact with materials is pushed to an extreme in *Self Portrait While Buried #2* (2019) and *Self Portrait While Buried #11* (2021), artworks that arose from “an intense desire to feel the ground in a total way, from ... inside the earth’s surface.”⁶ As their titles indicate, Calivas created these photographs after being buried beneath layers of sand and mud. Her whole being becomes an ingredient in a mixture that includes sediments, seawater, sunlight, and more. Her sensorium is reordered by this act—vision obstructed, hearing attuned to subterranean vibrations, smell overwhelmed by intertidal odors. In order to judge the lighting within her camera’s frame from belowground, Calivas sensitizes her skin to changes in the temperature of the earth that encompasses her. These photographs are endpoints of complex sequences of exchange: sun warms earth; earth warms artist; hand squeezes shutter release’s bulb, which activates the camera: image recorded. The self-portraits picture bodies as an endless process of entanglements.

CAST

Casting begins by encasing an object in material to create a mold, which replicates that object’s contours while inverting its volume into a void. This container is subsequently filled with a fluid, such as liquid plaster or molten bronze, that hardens into a cast, a duplicate of the original. This sculpture-making procedure presents parallels to how individuals perceive one another. Like a cast, these perceptions arise at the point of contact between distinct entities; they entail a mutual exchange of impressions; and they transform dynamic beings into fixed representations.

Alberto Giacometti’s cast figurative sculptures, often portraits, give material form to the dynamic process of exchange necessary to perceive and to depict. “He has chosen to sculpt the situated appearance,” the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre remarked upon these objects. “Each one of them reveals man as one sees him to be, as he is for other men, as he appears in an intersubjective world.”⁷ The sculptures render this world’s inhabitants as amalgamations of distinct

perceptions received in varying spatial and temporal contexts. *Grande tête mince* (1954), a bust of the artist's brother, Diego, presents a defined silhouette from the side, a view of him from an intermediate distance. From the front, however, Diego dissolves into disconnected features, approximating the visual experience of an intimate face-to-face encounter. From one vantage to the next, Giacometti's sitter shifts dramatically from irremediably out of reach to too close to behold in his entirety.

These sculptures begrudgingly accept the incompleteness of visual experience, while taking for granted the impossibility of accessing other people's interiors. "I have enough trouble with the outside," Giacometti shared, "without bothering about the inside."⁸ In his portraits, this drove Giacometti to revisit the same small cohort of sitters repeatedly, discovering new exterior terrains each time. The four busts of Diego featured in *something you cannot hold*—*Grande tête mince*, *Buste d'homme (Diego au blouson)* (c. 1953), *Buste mince sur socle (dit Aménophis)* (1954), and *Buste d'homme (dit New York I)* (1965)—showcase the artist's investment in closing the gaps in his visual knowledge of one of his oldest, and ever-changing, companions. Diego's resistance to exhaustive and enduring depiction is expressed in these artworks, as it is across Giacometti's figurative work, through their roiled surfaces. These topographies prompted the poet Jean Genet to venture that "all the angles ... or curves, or dents, or ridges, or torn tips of metal are not themselves at rest."⁹ In their restlessness, the surfaces invest the sculptures' static material with echoes of its prior, molten state. They dramatize matter's movement, together with that of the artist's sitter, into and out of representation.

The artworks of Mame-Diarra Niang push photography beyond the brink of representation. Like Giacometti, she contends with portraiture's limitations. For Niang, however, the portrait's shortcomings stem from its commitment to exteriors. Her works respond to portraiture's failure to access the memories and histories that individuals embody. The photographs answer what the artist describes as "the need of the non-portrait, the need of abstraction as a new point of departure, a new point of view on representation." These needs are especially

acute as they pertain to the representation “of the Black body, that carries all the ghosts and the myths and the clichés coming from the outside.”¹⁰

Might the relationship of the self to the past—insofar as pasts and selves give form to each other from opposite sides of a boundary—share a structure with that of the mold to the cast? Characterizing memory as a fragile threshold between self and past, Niang reflects, “My ancestral history felt akin to the iridescent surface of a bubble.”¹¹ In the blurred figures who populate her artworks, portraiture has been softened into something as luminous and delicate as this bubble. These are representations that, released from identity, are able to inhabit the surface between knowledge and oblivion.



Works left to right: Alberto Giacometti, *Buste d'homme (dit New York I)* (1965); Mame-Diarra Niang, *Fait de mémoire* (2021); Alberto Giacometti, *Grande tête mince* (1954); Mame-Diarra Niang, *Morphologie du songe #2* (2021); Alberto Giacometti, *Buste mince sur socle (dit Aménophis)* (1954); Alberto Giacometti, *Buste d'homme (Diego au blouson)* (c. 1953). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

For Niang, forgetting is as necessary as remembering, because the experience of forgetting confirms the existence of pasts that elude representation. The title of the series “Sama Guent Guii”—which includes the artworks *Morphologie du rêve #1* (2021), *Morphologie du rêve #3* (2021), and *Morphologie du songe #2* (2021)—translates from Wolof to “this dream that I had;” it compares this necessity of forgetting to the commonplace experience, upon waking, of feeling that a memory lies just out of grasp. The series “Léthé”—to which *Fait de mémoire* (2021) belongs—takes its name from Greek mythology’s river of oblivion. According to myth, the spirits of the dead must drink from this river to be reborn with a new body, name, and fate—making forgetfulness the vehicle by which history enters the future. “I have come to think of the self as a territory made of well-curated memories and erasures,” Niang asserts, signaling how central the unrepresentable is to her notion of personhood.¹² Her photographic practice, which she characterizes as an extended self-portrait, maps and unmaps this territory of the self through fragments and abstractions.

CONFIGURE

The recombination of found imagery is a technique for unfixing how images signify. Works of configuration rupture the semantic boundaries of their source material, releasing associative meanings from the joints between them. This semantic excess finds its emblem in the drip of fluid, oozing from between the head of a bolt and a hexagonal nut, in James Rosenquist’s *Drawing of Leakey, Ride for Dr. Leakey* (1985). Arraying mass-media images from publications like *LIFE* magazine into a linear, sentence-like arrangement, Rosenquist’s drawing illustrates the unruly interpretations that leak from even the most streamlined syntactic structures.

Rosenquist’s title references Dr. Louis Leakey, a prominent scholar of human evolution. The segmented composition of *Drawing of Leakey, Ride for Dr. Leakey* might be read as a progression through epochs: from the discursive enterprise of the Enlightenment through the Machine Age into the era of space exploration. This linear picture of time, however, is troubled through its pairing



Works left to right: James Rosenquist, *Drawing of Leakey, Ride for Dr. Leakey* (1985); Elle Pérez, *Elle Pérez, dining shed at night II* (2023); Elle Pérez, *guabancex III* (2023). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

with a cyclical counterpart. The artwork's concentric rings are circumpolar star trails, patterns recorded through long-exposure photography of the night sky as the Earth rotates on its axis. Through the drawing's imperfect conjoining of progressive and cyclical histories, its interpretive possibilities expand. The artwork nods to aspects of reality that elude the descriptive powers of science, history, and even language itself.

Artworks are open to multidirectional reading. Robert Rauschenberg's *Rush 16 (Cloister)* (1980) invites a circumambulatory approach. Formally, the artwork interprets cloister architecture in its print- and collage-laden wood mat that surrounds a central field of imagery. Its border furnishes a space for the eye to circulate, much like a cloister's arcade provides a space for walking reflection.

The artwork's association with this ecclesiastical structure suggests potential metaphysical valences to certain of its iconography—from its kneeling runners to its radiant sea turtles to its sepulchral view from inside a hole. Yet, Rauschenberg's decentered spatial logic invites multiple, provisional meanings to hang from his repurposed images of contemporary life. Permitting readings around, across, and in every which way, *Rush 16 (Cloister)* flits playfully between the poetic and the profane.

Likewise, Elle Pérez's body of work "guabancex" cultivates contingency both within and across its images. These photographs are created peripatetically, in keeping with the artist's commitment to "making work where you are."¹³ In quotidian settings and sites of collective significance, the artist studies how surfaces shape and are shaped by light. Their exacting compositions of light and shadow are visual fields where flatness and depth coexist. In *dining shed at night II* (2023), a slice of the titular streetside structure melts into a shallow pool of liquid from the aqueous glow it holds. The mottled picture plane of *cueva* (2023) recedes into a voluminous chamber that gleams with a similar vital energy. The silhouetted forms of *flood ground* (2023) double this image's perspective, overlaying its abbreviated downward view with an upward view through leaves and chainlink fence. Depth in flatness: these surfaces harbor spaces, Pérez's work implies, that grow inhabitable through a certain orientation of looking.

Communicating with one another through their visual affinities, Pérez's photographs coalesce into worlds. A central element of the artist's practice is to unspool such correspondences by sequencing their images into "configurations"—the artist's term for the intentional formations they create. Configurations begin on the studio wall, where Pérez constellates their photographs with other photographers' work, annotated texts, and their own writing. Through ongoing revision of these materials' relationships, the artist sharpens the authorial voice that speaks from a body of work. A configuration may exit the studio in the form of an artwork, such as *guabancex III* (2023), where it persists as a testimony to the guiding preoccupations, intentions, and desires of a moment in an evolving practice.

Pérez’s body of work borrows its name from Guabancex, the Taino deity of disorder. The artist wields a related power, whether by sowing spatial enigmas in their photographs or through their configurations’ uprooting of photographers and writers from their conventional contexts. These disruptions of established orderings offer starting points for other ways of provisionally holding things together.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The exhibition borrows its title from the opening line of Anne Carson’s lyric essay “The Anthropology of Water,” which reads, “Water is something you cannot hold.” In Carson’s text, water moves fluidly between figurations. It symbolizes time, coursing forward and eddying back on itself. It appears as an emblem of inseparable kinship ties. It fills the gulf between people, where, in their encounters, fantasies of self-enclosure rupture. It connotes realities and imaginaries that swirl outside or overflow the containers of language and concept. And more. Anne Carson, “Diving: Introduction to the Anthropology of Water,” *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2000), 117.
- 2 Quoted in the promotional copy for Báez’s zine *La Luz También Viaja* (Mexico City and Brooklyn: Matarile Ediciones, 2022): www.matarileediciones.com/05-la-luz-también-viaja-by-genesis-báez (accessed 26 June 2024).
- 3 Hannah Geddes, “Beyond Portraiture: Using the camera to construct a sense of self,” *The British Journal of Photography* 169, no. 7911 (Dec. 2022), 125.
- 4 Jean Dubuffet, untitled introduction to *Jean Dubuffet: Landscaped Tables, Landscape of the Mind, Stones of Philosophy* (New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1952), n.p.
- 5 Jenny Calivas, “Jenny Calivas: Surface Thing,” *Light Work Podcast* (29 Jan. 2023): shows.acast.com/lightworkorg/episodes/jenny-calivas-surface-thing (accessed 21 June 2024).
- 6 “Jenny Calivas: Surface Thing.”
- 7 Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Search for the Absolute,” *Alberto Giacometti: Exhibition of Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings* (New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948), 14.
- 8 Quoted in Paul Moorhouse, “Portraiture,” *Giacometti*, eds. Lena Fritsch and Frances Morris (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 79.
- 9 Jean Genet, *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti* (Décines: Marc Barbezat, 1963), n.p. Quoted in Alex Potts, “Sculpture—The Figure in Space and Time,” in *Giacometti*, 94.
- 10 Mame-Diarra Niang, “Léthé:” www.mamediarraniang.com/léthé (accessed 12 June 2024).
- 11 Mame-Diarra Niang, “Report from this dream:” www.mamediarraniang.com/sama-guent-guii (accessed 12 June 2024).
- 12 Mame-Diarra Niang, “Léthé.”
- 13 Quoted in Thora Siemsen, “Elle Pérez’s Poetic, Visceral Bodies,” Photo Booth (blog), *The New Yorker* (5 Apr. 2018): www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/elle-perezs-poetic-visceral-bodies (accessed 27 June 2024).