An Interview with Maura Brewer, by Machine Project intern Gemma Godfrey

What are you working on right now?

I'm finishing up the third part in the Jessica Chastain trilogy, which is based on The Martian. I'm working on the third video and the second performance for a show I have in October at UC Irvine, where there will eventually be three videos, a couple sculptural works and some drawings and smaller video.

How'd you start making the Jessica Chastain work?

I was really interested in the film Zero Dark Thirty. Initially because of the movie's problematic politics, but also because of these striking shots of stealth helicopters—these shots of black helicopters against these really dark abstracts, flying super low to the ground under the radar, it's called "nape of the earth." They look almost like monochrome paintings or something like really abstract.

I also think Kathryn Bigelow is an amazing director. Point Break is one of my favorite movies. But I was interested that she had made this really problematic film that seemed almost like it had gotten away from her. People were accusing her of being pro-torture, and she made all these statements that she was a pacifist. She also went to the Whitney Independent Study Program, which I was about to attend when I started that project, so I ended up thinking about her as some alternate reality version of me, and then the black on black helicopters as a metaphor for losing yourself.

But as I set out to make this film (where I ended up not using the black on black footage at all actually) I was thinking well, there's something in the narrative structure of the film that demands this movement towards greater and greater certainty. For

example, if you get tortured in scene A, it leads to Osama Bin Laden in scene Z. I thought in some ways, that the narrative logic of the film was operating outside of Kathryn Bigelow's ability to control it, and that one way to make a critical film would be to invert that narrative logic, so instead of moving closer and closer to Osama Bin Laden and more and more towards the space of total certainty, as you moved closer to him you would become increasingly uncertain and increasingly indistinct, and be unable to tell the difference between yourself and him; and using visual manners of camouflage to track the collapse of self and other.

How do the objects work in the show?

I think of them as supplementary—play versions of the ideas in the video essay. I'm buying Victorian fainting couches and recovering them with palm print fabric. I'm also making custom pajamas with the same fabric so you can sit on the couch and be in camouflage. I'm making drawings of peppered moths, because of this Dalmatian eye test that tests how your brain receives figure-ground relationships, and I'm trying to do a similar thing by tracing and rendering in black and white forms. But mostly a lot of my work is about being depressed. The idea of being triangulated in capitalism is another way of talking about being depressed, feeling like you can't act fully on your own terms. So I think of the peppered moths as metaphors for depression. If depression is a loss of self, where you're the stealth helicopter. Figure and ground are receiving you, it's like becoming the wallpaper. I'm also making these sculptures that are knockoffs of these Lygia Clark sculptures from the 60s that are these folded metal, planar shapes with hinges. I'm making those as a way to think about the structure of metaphor, which is a folding—one thing collapsing onto another thing. Basically, I'm making stuff that looks like other stuff and stuff that folds on top of itself.

What else are you interested in?

Well another reason I'm interested in Jessica Chastain is I'm interested in psychoanalytic feminist theory. Laura Mulvey came to the ISP when I was there, she was talking about visual structure in narrative cinema and the ways that those theories hadn't been updated to account for the way that female representation operates now—in that now it's obviously much more complicated, the active/passive binary of the objectified woman and active male character doesn't operate so much anymore. So I began thinking about Jessica Chastain, as a character who was at once both a victim of power and a bearer of power. She's always perceived as this career woman—agential, smart, active; she's not objectified in the typical sense. Yet, she's always acting on behalf of an institution, and she's never operating according to her own will, her power is coming from elsewhere, whether she's acting on behalf of NASA/Matt Damon or NASA/Matthew McConaughy/her dad or Osama Bin Laden who's also kind of her dad…the CIA who's also her dad… Paternal institutional structures that are mobilizing her. I think about that as being complicit in a system which is also simultaneously victimizing you, getting power from the thing that's giving you the promise of agency but takes it away all in the same breath.

I see JUMPSUIT, my other project, as being really related to that, conceptually, because as consumers of mass media—film and television and fashion—we're complicit in systems that offer us power while simultaneously taking it away. I see fashion in a similar light, that you're given a fantasy of total and perfect self-expression, where you can go to the mall and buy a new article of clothing every single day, but the promise of expression, which promises choice, is actually foreclosing choice. It's a false choice, and you can't choose to be outside of it because there is no outside. But because JUMPSUIT is a design project and not a video essay, it imagines that there could be an outside space.

Why video for you?

Because it's mass media. Though I am making sculpture right now since I've sort of gone back to making objects, I always identify more as a video artist. When I was making abstract sculpture and also reading feminist theory, they weren't connecting, and I couldn't get people to get what I was thinking about. There's something about video, since it's a writing medium, where you can just say what it is that you're thinking about. Sometimes you just want to say what you mean, and video has done that for me. I had a teacher, Vanalyne Greene, in undergrad who really helped me to figure it out.

It's important to me to work in a medium where the priority is dissemination and not where you're producing luxury commodities. I like the unassailable quality of video. I've always been more interested in critical, essayistic video and experimental documentary practices in which you can appropriate from mass culture and turn the thing against itself. Or write an essay about the thing, but in the space of the original media. It's a site-specific practice, like if I'm interested in Jessica Chastain, it makes sense to me logically that you work in the film, like she's a site. So you just try to rearrange whatever she's doing or look for clues inside it, and that's the space of the work.

What do you want people to see in your work? Or what do you want to happen when people see your work?

To laugh. With video art I just sort of feel like you're doing some sort of critical work and the most you can hope for is that people laugh instead of walking away, and go along for whatever ride you're taking them on. Maybe laughing deflates power.

For JUMPSUIT, presented in design departments and educational contexts, sometimes in those contexts people get angry, and that feels kind of good. It's sort of hard to make people angry in art, but in design you can step on toes—there's no history of institutional critique in design, whereas in art it's in the textbook.

If you're in design school making objects, thinking critically about their dissemination in the world or what systems you're participating in, is not something that's done as much, so it has more potential to bother people, which is kind of good.

Where do you see that your work is headed?

I just work on the same thing over and over again. One thing that's funny right now is that in some ways, JUMPSUIT is totally conceptually consistent to my other work and ideas, but in other ways it's radically different than my video. That's produced a kind of desire for me to figure out how to approach my video work more like I approach JUMPSUIT. It's been so amazing to get people to pay attention, because people don't really pay that much attention to art. You end up talking to lots of people who are already like-minded. They're delightful people, and honestly I can't really survive in other social spaces so I definitely belong in art. But because people enjoy fashion and it's truly mass cultural, we are able to get press in non-art publications, and there's just a broader interest. It's easier for people to understand and engage with.

I keep feeling like my video work, because its site is also cinema, should be able to operate in that way, or have a broader reach. I don't know if that's possible because it is critical and deconstructive and doesn't speak the language of cinema. I'm also really into videos that people make on Youtube. I think that's where a lot of interesting video art is. It's just not called video art. I've been thinking more about how to engage with a broader Internet space, but I'm not sure how.

An Interview with Lex Brown by Machine Project intern Gemma Godfrey

What are you working on right now?

I'm mid-week through a series of performances at Monkeytown, a video art pop-up in downtown LA. It's been really challenging because I'm in the midst of reevaluating how I make my work, and want to make some real changes, but I've been dealing with a difficult period of depression, and then I also got a concussion a few weeks ago. A lot of this performance ended up being about finally accepting my depression and anxiety, which I've partially been able to do thanks to the concussion, but also by connecting my personal experiences with a family history, and with a traumatic national history.

Part of the struggle of depression for me has always been blaming myself and being too hard on myself when I needed to be compassionate. I never thought about those mental patterns as part of a direct line of damage done by the white slaveowners in my family history. When I found out about that history, it really helped me to forgive myself, and understand the pain I've always felt "for no reason." That's what internalized self-hatred is though, and one of the most violent parts about the widespread denial of racism is that it completely displaces the responsibility from the perpetrators, like "You're worthless AND it's also your fault for feeling that way." It happens as a woman, too, and to many other types of people. I don't feel worthless now, and looking at my life on paper, you wouldn't believe I ever have, but it's been a long process of managing that internal struggle, and performing has been instrumental in overcoming some toxic beliefs.

I've made a lot of work about that, but now I want to make more work that comes from different parts of me. Part of that is finding ways that I can be more efficient, in a sense, by easing up on myself and by evolving my ideas throughout different performances, rather than dropping something cold and feeling like I have to start new all over again. I'm looking forward to a project I'm doing at the International Center for Photography for their show on surveillance, as well as the Sommerakademie at the Paul Klee Center in Bern.

How'd you start this making this kind of work?

Sometimes it feels like it happened accidentally, but I guess I could say it happened naturally. I've always been a performer and public speaking type, making up different voices, and always talking a lot in class. I used to want to be an actor, but I gave up that dream in high school. When I went to Princeton for undergrad, I knew I wanted to study art and continue making art. At first I was painting, but I always felt like my paintings were strange in some way, none of them were ever the same and that really bothered me. I hadn't been exposed to painters who worked that way. I couldn't deal with painting on canvas. It was just too much of a head trip. I went to a residency in upstate New York after my second year of school and that was the first time I met painters from art school. The way that some of them talked about painting both intimidated and deeply irritated me – it was the first time I really experienced artspeak. I stopped painting there and I worked on an installation, which in hindsight I can identify as the first "set" I ever built, but mostly I was just trying to find a more intuitive way for me to put things together.

Some people I met there told me about the Yale-Norfolk program and I decided I would apply to go there. During that year I started making sculptures that involved a lot of language and clothing – things that I can now identify as having a really direct relationship to performing or performativity. I got into Norfolk and it completely changed my life. It was the first time I really felt, one hundred percent, accepted by a group of people. I never felt that way growing up. I often felt like the odd one out, whether it was being the only black kid in school, or being the smart one in class, or being in a science and tech high school where that wasn't my thing, or being an artist at Princeton. When I was at Norfolk, we had an assignment to make a video. It felt like I found what had been missing for me. I made my first real video, Red Yellow Blue Untitled and I painted the room—I love painting walls, I love interiors—it was the first time I felt like I was painting in the way that felt right to me, to make a whole environment out of it. But I was also able to express something about a particular mental space, visual rhythm, music, and time in the video. Then over the next few years I had some experiences around groups of artists where I was singing, and people encouraged me to do that in my work. I performed my first songs in my friend Tyler's backyard in 2014. From there things just kept happening.

Another thing that's been super important to my work was taking clowning classes. I learned a way to work that was about vulnerability and honesty. Those classes were so hard. There would be truly embarrassing moments of true terror when you were behind the curtain about to come into the space and try to do something funny. And you know it's not gonna be funny, but you still have to do it and confront people's completely un-entertained faces, and confront how bad your "good idea" was. The moments where you are funny are the moments where you're able to tap into

your most goofy, idiot, silly self, like when you crack your own self up, and let go of this concept of your "good ideas". It was such an amazing experience, so difficult, and it gave me a lot more courage and comfort on stage.

What are your performances about?

My performances are about the quest for personal freedom, personal permission, connection to other people in the moment—through the act of giving something of myself. They're about happiness, sadness, joy, sorrow, pain, depression, duality, humor of everyday life, politics—I talk about race, economy, gender. They're a way for me to connect things that I see as connected in existence, but aren't often presented to us as being connected by culture, history, economy, etc.

What else are you interested in?

I'm interested in being in nature. I'm interested in pop culture, and astrology for real. I'm very interested in reality TV, Sci-Fi, although I have not read much of it. Anything that has to do with re-contextualizing the present or speculating on things – I just learned the name for this is "speculative fiction," science fiction that happens tomorrow. I'm really interested in hypotheticals, like "what if this thing happened..." "what if that thing happened...." I like being around people who can kind of entertain that kind of conversation without coming to a conclusion. I'm interested in really big things, and the bigness of the things, and how small they can become, like dinosaurs. I probably wouldn't make work about dinosaurs, but they'll appear in my work like, "Dinosaurs, remember those?". I like being in the state of awe. There is a lot of information and simultaneous truth to process in this world.

I've always thought about how I can use space in a different way — like this space I'm in at Monkey Town, it's a warehouse space. I think the previous performers had performed within the four-screen projection cube where people are eating dinner during the program, but I wanted people get up and out of the cube, so I decided to drive a truck into the space and perform in the headlights. It's amazing how rigid the expectations are for how to be in a space, any space. You can really surprise people, and that's what I really love about performing— in the right moment, with the right amount of emotional tension and anticipation, you can blow people's minds, by I don't know.. coming in upside down from the roof or something. I love that. What's fun about architecture is actually using it.

What do you want people to see in your work?

In this work, I talk about my great-great-grandfather, who was white, and was a slave owner, who owned my great-grandmother, who was a slave. I talk about that as a way to make the political very personal, and to talk about the trauma of racism. It stays in a family, but it also stays in a country. That story is not unique. I think it's really important, especially right now when there is a lot of tension and outright vitriol, particularly around race, but also around many identity politics. These things become so abstract in the news, and people's Facebook posts, and you know where people are coming from, but the delivery of the message is impersonal and often just reactionary. I wanted to deliver this by using my own ancestry. Talking about myself is sometimes the most effective way for me to talk about other things in the world, because I can't speak for anybody else's experience, I can't really judge, but I can analyze my experience and be critical of my own

self-conception, and how things from the world enter me.

I want people to have a moment where grief or sadness is an okay thing to feel, with other people around you who are strangers. Especially in our culture, we don't have ceremonies of grief and mourning, it's very taboo, we don't talk about death in the everyday, we don't know how to deal with pain. I want people to be able to laugh at how out of control this world is, but instead of a nervous laughter that's uncomfortable with the truth, a wise laughter that comes from knowing what's up. What I hope people take away from my work is an actual experience, an actual feeling. I take performing so seriously because it's a very serious thing for a person to take on the role of audience member, and give you their time and attention. There's so much potential for a real moment of connection to happen, and when it does happen, I don't always know what happens afterwards, but I know in that moment that it is a significant and important experience to have as a human.

In so much art, you don't feel anything. Maybe you think about a feeling, but you don't really feel it. It's rare and wonderful to really feel.

Where do you think your work is headed?

I think the same places — I find I just keep doing the same things I've been doing, even when I'm sure I have no idea how to do it. Every time I set out to do something differently, I repeat a cycle, but each time it gets more nuanced, like a fractal. I want to be able to pull in more and more details while still making things more cohesive as a whole. I would like to write another book, and to write some plays or musicals. I want to make clothes for other people, continue making music, and figure out what sculpture is to

me. It's weird because the more I go out reaching for something, the more I end up doing whatever thing was right there, and even though I know it's a mystery, it somehow gets more mysterious. I think I'm learning that the things that really work are the things that are familiar and natural, but it's not necessarily familiar or natural to know what they are.

I'm 26 and the ride of the 20s is a hard one, especially making art. At my age, it's hard to know where my work is headed, much less if there will even be a place for it to land. There's so many moving pieces. A part of me thinks there won't even be an art world in 30 years, I'll just be running around with a backpack and a spear making operas in a bunker. I'm low-key preparing for that future. But wherever my work heads, I want for it to head in a sustainable direction: something that I can sustain, and that sustains me and, I hope, other people. I want for it to be built around things that will always be problems, and things that will always be solutions, things that can't be taken away.

An Interview with Paul Pescador, by Machine Project intern Gemma Godfrey

What are you working on right now?

I'm currently working on a bunch of things. I have a show of photography at this artist run gallery called Vacancy which is in LA. The name of this show is called Crushes and I'll be showing these super brightly colored, cartoon like photographs. The project began when I started by writing a novel, which I'm currently working with a couple people to get published. There were also a set of ten separate performances as well as a film, which have all become part of this larger body of work. In the Vacancy show, I'm interested in the playfulness and thoughtfulness of the crush. The photos are brightly colored, very plastic-y, and I'm literally using candy, cookies and glitter in them. But the images are all of my own body, and I think that's another function of the crush that this show will explore, the relationship of the individual being and the potential for another body who isn't present.

How did you start on the Crushes project?

I started from the exact opposite of where these photos are at now. Usually when I start a body of work the images are really stripped down, with images of my body, and I begin by taking the photos and cutting them up and layering them so by the end of that process, the photograph is quite visual layered. This time I started with a set of photos that were just of my own skin and flesh, lit very dark. I really wanted to make photographs that did not have the level of color and collage that I usually work with. I wanted to have a more melancholic starting point, which is also an important part having a crush, its ultimate disappointment, either because it doesn't live up

to the individual's expectation or nothing comes out of it. I've been told that these first images were much more sexual and darker than the rest of my work.

How did you develop all of these separate dimensions of the project (images, film, performance, the novel…)?

They all sort of build on top of each other. For Crushes, I first started by making photographs, working privately with the images, and then I was given a performance opportunity and I started writing text for the performance and the book developed alongside. Every time I would do a new performance I'd return to this text and have that as a starting point.

For the performances, I would usually spend sometime in the venue to get a feel for the space and then I would decide on the costumes or materials I would need to use. For one performance I did about a year back at UC Berkeley, I was invited to screen a film as well as perform live and I decided to do a ballet. I'd never done ballet before, so for me I was really interested in this thing that the viewer might know much more about than I was capable of, and there was this element of failure that I'm interested, which is an important part of my own work. I started by watching Youtube videos and tried to teach myself some basic dance moves, but then without even thinking the costume I created completed constricted my body, which I didn't realize until I was on stage. No matter how much I rehearsed and practiced, I couldn't really move around and flopped around instead. It was just one failure after another, but I think the element of dance became interesting because the audience's background was dance and rather than holding back my own insecurities, I used them to start a project. I think a lot of my practice is just trying things out live, or just trying them out. Like I

don't have any drawing background, but drawing has become an important part of my most recent photographs. It has become almost like a tracing of a performance, a record of a gesture.

So anyway, a lot of the performances I have developed are based on the space that I perform in. I did a performance at this gay bar in Silver Lake and I had never done a performance in a space that wasn't a gallery or museum setting, and by taking it to a bar or a club, the attitude and the way it was presented is very different. I had this costume made out of inflatable pool toys and they were all attached to my body, but the piece was very slow and sort of awkward. I wanted that to be the point, because the energy of a club is pretty flashy and fun, and I wanted the costume to also be colorful and playful, but juxtaposed by reading a text about a break ups. During the performance I would continue to fall on my face, which displayed physical pain along the emotional text I read. It also coincidentally worked out that the performance happened during the legalizing of gay marriage. People were there to celebrate and I was doing the opposite. I feel like I wasn't questioning the environment, but working against it.

Is your writing supplemental to the other works you do?

When I first started writing I would include start texts into my photo books, supplemental personal stories and anecdotes dispersed throughout the books, but the text became more of its own thing from project to project. I think there's this hope that by reading the text with the images it will function like a key and help the viewer understand the image better. Instead it just becomes another layer, they don't have anything to do with one another, they're just being made around the same time as I think about building a body of work. I used to write bits and pieces of text as a starting point for a performance as well, but the texts has now grown too big and has

branched out to become its own set of projects.

How has your work evolved over time?

I always knew I wanted to be a filmmaker, which is an issue I've always worked against. Thinking about how I can make it work in LA, and I still don't have an answer. I think for me photography became a way to make something on my own terms and trying and testing without the pressure of working Hollywood film model as I would feel as an undergrad making films for in film school. Between undergrad and grad I would go out and do these little interventions in the world—move things around in grocery stores or restaurants. I wanted the intervention to be the important thing, but the only way you can actually tell what's happening is through the photograph. I got really frustrated because there's that uncomfortableness in the moment when someone unrolls their toilet paper in a public restroom to sees the text written on it, but there was no way to capture that awkwardness in a photograph. So I started doing live performances in grad school as a way to bring that feeling of something occurring—the event, that moment I tried to convey in my photos; to a live audience. By the end of grad school I was making films again through using elements of my performances in a much more stage manner. The experience of watching my films is similar to watching a live performance as I don't show my films on loop, you have to watch it in a theater as an event. Everyone sits there together in the room and if someone stands up and leaves and you notice that, or you'll hear someone talk or laugh and that becomes part of the event.

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