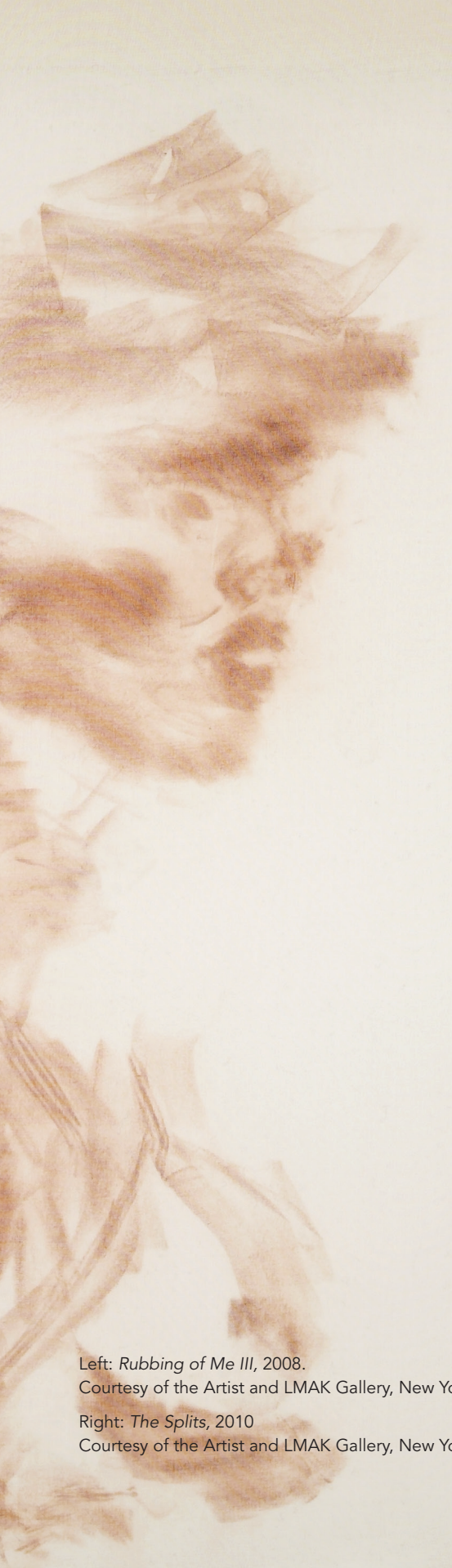




C/A/C
Contemporary
Arts Center

JANE BENSON
Half-Truths



Left: *Rubbing of Me III*, 2008.

Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

Right: *The Splits*, 2010

Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

Artist Jane Benson pushes destruction into an ever more inventive and humanistic, if still ambivalent, context, declaring: "unfortunately, I've developed a destructive side to my personality and it's apparent in every single body of my work over the past 10 years." In her hands, fracture is the most accurate reflection of our present, and the most necessary precursor of tomorrow – echoing theorist Boris Groys' identification of iconoclasm as, "a mechanism of historical innovation" and "a means of revaluing values." She is self-professedly "more comfortable with something being destabilized rather than complete," systematically deconstructing "the experience of the everyday" as what art historian and critic Nuit Banait calls "an accumulation of contexts, habits and environments that can be reshaped once they are revealed as artificial." Piercing the enduring, if no less illusory integrity of the gestalt, she confronts objects, words and environs that have ossified into absolutes – taking them apart and putting them back together to produce vexing new formations. With a delicate, but poignant approach to dismantling and rebuilding, Benson's work has been described as "industrial production meets cottage industry handiwork." She locates fertile possibility in the fragments of old, translating that which was once seen as a threat to humanity – destruction – into one of our most salient signifiers.

In the typically ego-laden realm of self-portraiture, Benson continues her measured, but no less systematic campaign of destruction on both the composition and subject of artistic autonomy. Her pseudo-classical works featuring faceless marbled busts (i.e. *Wig Head [Ann and Jane]*, 2006) and smoking jackets sliced to fall in graceful, feathery tatters (i.e. *Bitches*, 2004) eventually culminate in the pivotal series *Rubbings of Me* (2008). To purposefully thwart the conventional process of portraiture Benson draped sheets of muslin over her torso and face, then reached around and blindly rubbed her countenance with conte crayon. The ensuing, partial portraits are spontaneous actions that Benson does not refine or re-work – mapping herself as alien terrain in a portrait of/as the other. In her words, "Even though the drawing represents me, I am absent from the work as the self-portraits are not recognizable as me." Thereby celebrating her obscured visage (and authorship), she revels in the reality that "every drawing...looks like a different person" and paradoxically embraces, "the freedom that creating these works provided; they offered an instant freedom

from myself.” Much like crude 3D renderings without the glasses we require to reconcile the attendant forms, her cloudy portraits float in and out of focus – splitting the subject into a nebulous constellation.

A smooth, unblemished whole seems a far less sincere way to represent our current state of being, particularly regarding geography and global migration, than an archipelago of fissures and forms. In 2011, Benson’s seminal series *The Splits* was inspired by her curiosity to peer inside stringed musical instruments, “[see] something we’re never permitted to see,” and turn a singular quantity into a revelatory dialectic. To do so, she bisected a number of violins, violas and cellos – converting cheap, mass produced instruments (which serious musicians consider “fake”) into vessels of/for originality. By slicing the wooden objects down the center, Benson establishes a scenario where these uncanny “halves” must be played together, by more than one person, to register a full tonal scale. In this necessarily dialogical arena that she dubs a “graceful passage for imagined evolution,” individual actions are rendered inferior as Benson institutes a collaborative model of performance. As a newly cobbled catalyst for both musicality and gathering, she explains that “in the destruction or the halving of the instrument you destroy the original aesthetic identity, but...[re-invent] the instrument and [create] new community.” When performed, the ensuing range of tonality produced by the split instruments has been aptly described by Benson’s collaborator and composer Matt Schickele as “alien folk music.”

Benson’s multi-authored pursuit of alternate instrumentation continued in 2013 when she paired two musicians in an uncanny white room to recreate titles from *Rolling Stone Magazine*’s catalog of the top 100 guitar songs of all time. The particular choices of *She’s Lost Control* and *Crossroad Blues* could not be more apropos for Benson’s purposeful delegation of authorship and conspicuous absence on camera. Instead, in an exploratory duet, these anonymous guitarists become agents of Benson’s symbiotic concert – clad in black from head to toe in a cabinet whose sleek lines slide from wall to floor, outside an identifiable place or time. In the succeeding work *Extended Play* (2013), Benson situates another pair of guitarists in New York City and Mexico City, “to,” in her words, “imagine new forms of trans-cultural communication between two disparate parts of the world.” As these two men subsequently search to find elusive, but no less desired musical harmony



across an online bridge, she disrupts and reformulates their dialogue and diaspora – mapping terrain that meanders between the real and the unreal.

The written scores for many of *The Splits* performances read much like redacted texts as Benson scribbles away notes that the respective instruments can no longer play – effectively remapping their tonal landscape, body and scope. In so doing, these fragmentary pages serve as a foreshadowing for the 2016 work *Song for Sebald* where Benson methodically revises WG Sebald's 1995 novel *The Rings of Saturn*. The self-exiled German author Winfried Georg Sebald (1944-2001) was heralded as one of the greatest living writers of his era as he wrestled with the devastation of World War II and its affect upon the German psyche. Themes of memory, loss and decay – of civilizations and traditions, as well as physical entities – are correspondingly prominent in his writing, as seen in his calmly devastating 1999 anthology *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* blends travelogue, biography, myth and memoir in an account of a nameless narrator who walks Suffolk, England and describes the places he sees and people he encounters, as well as various episodes of history and literature. Marrying walking tour and meditation, this tale's conspicuous omission of quotation marks further blurs the distinction between author, narrator and subject – creating a floating voice to map a place marrying fact and fantasy. In *Song for Sebald*, Benson adds a number of additional voices into this already populous mix, carefully excising every part of the text except for the syllables of a musical scale to uncover what she calls the "potential music" of the novel. An operatic performance of this excavated music by multiple performers follows as Benson collaboratively composes a score based on the spaces between the "found" notes and emotive tone of Sebald's prose. Taken as a whole, this work stitches together remnants, absences and imaginings into what Benson calls, "a process of collaboration that links together nationalities, disciplines, genders and fields of creative work."

This path continues in *Finding Baghdad* (2015) as Benson convenes elements of *Song for Sebald*, *The Splits* and *Extended Play* to tell the story of an Iraqi family's disperse relationship across turbulent geographical and emotional terrain. Her early works again provide insightful precedence, as the 2005-2006 *Disco Globe* and 2006 installation *Mirror*

Globe (Map of the World) transform the globe as an archetype of orientation into a shiny, but no less unsettling mosaic – fracturing the countenance of a viewer who is everywhere and nowhere on this world. The next chapter of this tale, of two Iraqi brothers forcibly divided by war and the whims of immigration policy, is not one of nostalgia or utopian longing for the nuclear family, but rather one that attempts to reformulate how the family operates in this atomized state of affairs. *Finding Baghdad* is a two-channel video installation that begins with the splitting of two mass-produced Iraqi instruments – an oud and a djoze – as both a reflection of, and an antidote to, the family's pan-global separation. Between Cologne, Germany and Sanad, Bahrain, estranged brothers Bassem Hawar and Saad Mahmood Jawad play a stirring duet via Skype – "speaking" to



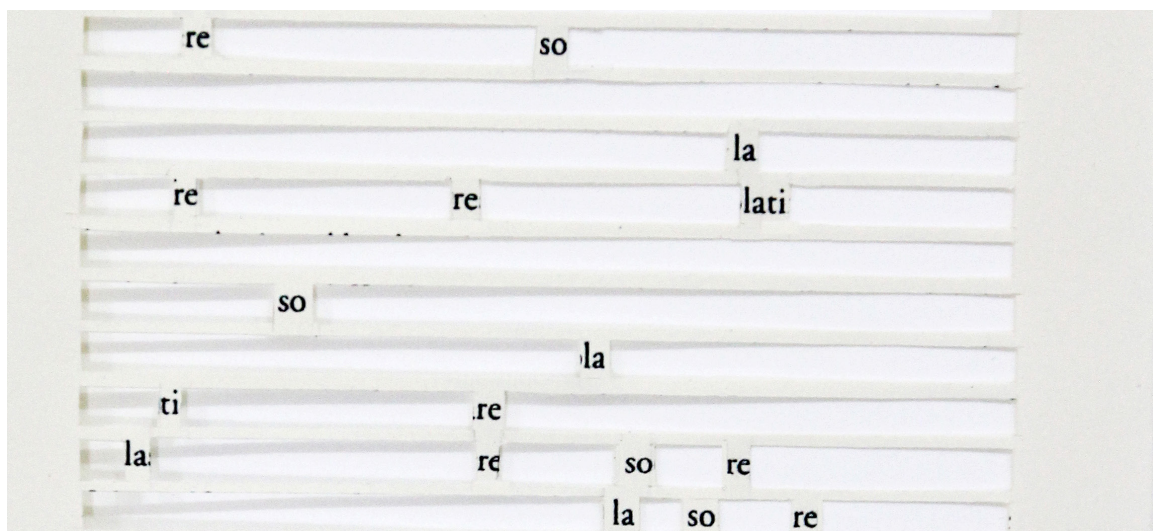
one another in a disjointed, but ultimately cathartic musical language that weaves distance into dialogue.

Absence and displacement are crucial pieces of content here, and thus, while Benson orchestrates the bridge she does not choreograph the passage – working carefully to minimize her visible presence and expand the platform for a plurality of voices. Recognizing this sensitive deferral of authorship, Matthew Hart notes that, "Although Benson's cameras linger on them, she doesn't pry; we can only tell how the brothers feel about their reunion by listening to their music and by watching their beautifully mobile and adept faces and hands."

The music they subsequently weave is therapeutic but always and ever incomplete, reflecting a schism that will never be completely forgotten, reconciled or healed. In a parallel way, we can never see the brothers simultaneously in this installation – a turn to one requires a turn away from the other – but their cobbled sound nevertheless fills the space. It is immersive and unknowable, for much like its authorship, we cannot identify where one musician ends and the other begins.

Relatives spread across various parts of the world under a variety of circumstances has become the norm rather the exception, amplifying the need to reinvent the language and iconography of family. As an artist, observer and subject, Benson employs this post-national condition as her foil and muse. As

a sister work to *Finding Baghdad*, Benson's series of *Family Portraits* (2015) assault and amalgamate the respective locations of the displaced Iraqi family by way of national flags that have been shredded and woven together. In so doing, the symbolically-loaded avatars of Iraq, Bahrain, Germany, Norway, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Turkey and China are simultaneously obscured and reconfigured to more accurately reflect the many affiliations of their evolving citizenry. A typically iconoclastic and inflammatory gesture is, however, rendered affirmative in this work as Benson replaces the illusionistic emblems of wholeness with a more authentic manifestation of those who live these places. These methodically woven flags are neither a utopian portrait of globalism nor a dystopian condemnation of trans-national being, but rather



Top: *Finding Baghdad (Part A)*, 2015.
Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

Bottom: *Song for Sebald (detail)*, 2016.
Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

*"I loved the freedom
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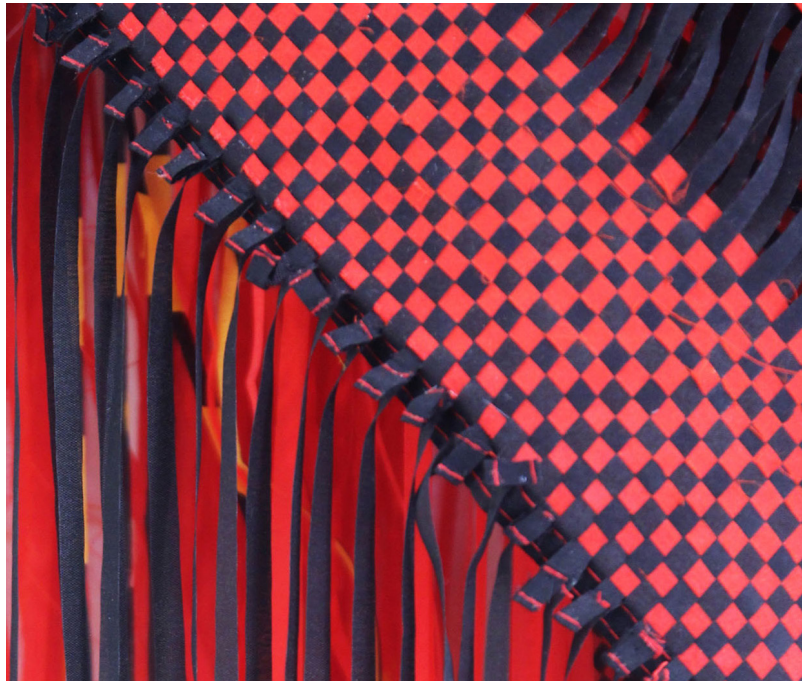


contingent cartographies that reflect (and project) a population in flux.

Benson's colorful, if circuitous use of line to speak this fledgling language is echoed in the haunting drawings she makes by attaching colored pencils to her split instruments. The ensuing path of these pencils across large sheets of paper taped together evokes Sebald's anonymous explorer as he mapped Suffolk – moving across frontier terrain with curious, but uncertain steps. They are looping and meandering in nature, forgoing a linear course to forge an exploratory collage that in turn, connects with the many performers of Benson's split instruments. The surface/s of these drawings are crudely joined, and those seams are further amplified by the spiro-graphic orbit of each colored pencil – producing a map that continuously reiterates its splits and borders. In this way they resemble Benson's rubbings of herself, and their disorienting, but emancipatory subdivision of subjectivity. Their circular trajectory also speaks to cycles of injury and obsession, as well as a meditative action that has no

intention of stopping.

While destruction and art-making appear to exclude one another by their very definitions, their uneasy, but ultimately generative exchange has re-shaped the face of both art and the world it reflects. This kind of assault is not about an apocalyptic end of days or learning new systems on a daily basis, but rather about the renewal of our perceptual compass to navigate terrain that is re-arranging itself, continuously, whether we like it or not. Yet in this current context, where "destruction is," according to curator Gianni Jetzer, "an artistic commonplace of self-expression", he argues that the artist of today must have a level of "discipline" in its exercise, "not to overdo it." In critic Richard J. Goldstein's description of her "carefully considered destructive nature," it seems apparent that Benson has heeded this call and practiced its skillful measures – quietly, but consistently pushing concepts and objects to both sides of collapse. For curator Elizabeth Barnett, Benson's work "[forces] us to look closely at the objects (and ideas) we take for granted" as she recognizes the



illusory nature of absolutes and the realities of adaptation. A year after the horrific destruction wrought on September 11th, 2001 in New York City, Benson was commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and World Financial Center to furnish the lobby of the latter with a series of fake topiaries she titled *Happy Faux Flora* (2002). Without cynicism or resignation, she presented “artificial plants in their natural habitats” – cutting the leaves and flowers of synthetic flora into unnatural geometric shapes. In making something more fake feel less fictive, Benson created an arguably more “authentic” rendering of the synthetic nature we experience on a daily basis.

For this reason, *A Place for Infinite Tuning* (2015) may be the most representative of all Benson’s series – congregating split instruments, spliced flora and precarious mirrored plinths into three dimensional cubist arrangements that teeter with graceful tension. In a place of perpetual becoming, or perhaps imminent undoing, their contingency speaks to a heightened, but unstable state that is as true of the object, as us, the observer. Every ostensible “still

life” in *this place for infinite tuning* is anything but static, and our perspective grows kaleidoscopic as the view is multiplied across fractal mirrored planes. We see ourselves in this palimpsest, but the hand of the artist is inconspicuous once again – manifest in little more than Velcro straps that hold the bifurcated instruments together. It is to her credit and contingency that everything here feels like it has always been this way. We cannot look more closely or study more intensely to know this constellation any better; they are, like all her works, evocative, elusive and enigmatic at once. This is the truth of Benson’s half-truths.

- SM 2017

[Excerpt of an essay that will appear in a forthcoming CAC publication]

Top: *Pencil (Cello)*, 2013.

Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

Right: *Family Portrait V (detail)*, 2015.

Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

JANE BENSON

Half-Truths

July 14 – October 1, 2017

Curated by Steven Matijcio

Generously supported by

Gale and David Beckett, Lynne Meyers Gordon, MFA, Margaret and Albert Vontz III Family Fund, and Artswave Corporate Partner: Duke Energy.

Jane Benson was born in Thornbury, England. She received her BFA from the Edinburgh College of Art and her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She currently lives in New York and teaches at Cornell University. Benson has exhibited in national and international venues including MoMA PS1, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh; and the San Jose Museum of Art. Other Solo exhibitions and performances have been held at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, Florida; LMAK projects, New York; Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York; and Henry Street Settlement: Abrons Arts Center, New York. Benson has been the recipient of numerous awards and residencies including the Pollock-Krasner Grant, two Lower Manhattan Cultural Council residencies, and the Atlantic Center for the Arts Residency, Florida.

List of Works

1. **Finding Bagdad (Part A)**; 2016; Dual channel video and audio track (16:31)
2. **Extended Play: TeWhenuaCentro-ChapineroCorona**; 2013; Dual channel HD video and audio track (24:00)
3. **Crossroad Blues**; 2013; Single channel HD video and audio track (4:10)
4. **She's Lost Control**; 2013; Single channel HD video and audio track (3:33)
5. **Family Portrait II**; 2015; Hand shredded and woven flags
6. **Family Portrait III**; 2015; Hand shredded and woven flags
7. **Family Portrait IV**; 2015; Hand shredded and woven flags
8. **Family Portrait V**; 2015; Hand shredded and woven flags
9. **A Place for Infinite Tuning III**; 2015; Hand-cut cello and sarod, plywood, mirrored Plexiglass, Velcro, and latex paint
10. **A Place for Infinite Tuning IV**; 2015; Hand-cut djoze and oud, plywood, mirrored plexiglass, Velcro, and latex paint
11. **A Place for Infinite Tuning V**; 2015; Hand-cut violin, guitar, oud, sarod, pipa, baglamas and djoze, plywood, mirrored Plexiglass, Velcro, and latex paint
12. **Pencil (Harpsichord Bottom)**; 2013; Digital c-print
13. **Pencil (Harpsichord Top)**; 2013; Digital c-print
14. **Pencil (Oud)**; 2013; Digital c-print
15. **Pencil (Cello)**; 2013; Digital c-print
16. **Pie II (Split Harpsichord)**; 2013; Graphite on handmade paper
17. **Pie III (Oud)**; 2013; Colored pencils on handmade paper
18. **Rubbing of Me III**; 2008; Conte crayon on muslin
19. **Rubbing of Me IV**; 2008; Conte crayon on muslin
20. **Rubbing of Me V**; 2009; Conte crayon on muslin
21. **Rubbing of Me**; 2009; Conte crayon on muslin
22. **Song for Sebald**; 2016; Hand-cut archival inkjet prints
23. **Faux Faux (Flourescent)**; 2017; Hand-cut artificial eucalyptus branches, Plexiglass vase
24. **Faux Faux (Lobby Life)**; 2017; 6 hand-cut artificial ficus trees

All works by Jane Benson

Images Courtesy of the Artist and LMAK Gallery, New York

Cover: A Place for Tuning II (detail); 2015

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