



Contemporary  
Arts Center

**ALISON CROCETTA**  
CIRCUS OF ONE





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*“She is as interested in what  
we see as how we see it”*



The work of Alison Crocetta subtly, but insistently slides the concept of art between noun and verb, object and action, as she crafts lyrical performances that coalesce into environments. Her practice accumulates in a similar fashion, gathering performance, film, photographs, garments, objects, music and song into a sculptural arena where stillness and substance infuse both actors and the surroundings they organize and reflect. The garments and headdresses she builds are architectural in spirit, while the objects she employs transcend their typical assignment as props – living holistically in environments that feel as if they float underwater, gathering added weight with every repetition. The ensuing works inhabit a nascent black & white world reminiscent of silent film, in both spirit and tone, where flourishes of color and musicality gradually appear – providing moments of inflection in the ever-gathering meditation. In this dreamy, but deliberate lineage of performance-driven artists like Maya Deren, Joan Jonas, Shirley Clarke and Gabriel Lester, Crocetta initiates and repeats actions in the manner of Samuel Beckett – where episodes and punctuation are replaced by endless urgencies and open-ended meaning. In this way, she is as interested in what we see as how we see it – deconstructing popular media expressions of entertainment, carnival and politics to assemble a contradictory, and equally reflexive circus.







*Celebration/Love/Loss*, 2013, Image courtesy of the Artist

Apart from those who see her performances in person, most of us encounter Crocetta's work through film and video, which artist and critic Matt Morris singles out in their ambition to go beyond simple documentation of serial tasks. Speaking to an archaeology of amusement conducted via exploratory actions, he describes her work as "stylistic experiments in dusty white spaces, fluttering and grainy film, androgynous costuming and a yesteryear aesthetic that use images of old-fashioned carnivals and circuses." In these rings of anticipated revelry Crocetta mines her research into the lineage of clowns and early forms of carnival including their nomadic architecture, eccentric archetypes and motley cast. With a minimum of fanfare or posturing, Crocetta has subsequently played the role of acrobat, clown, tight-rope and stilt walker, balloon man, and sideshow oddity – turning these "found" caricatures into a quiet choreography that sheds excess in favor of essence. Her actions in these circus-inspired projects are vague and viscous, unfolding like a trance that exerts entropic force upon our abiding expectations of shiny, effervescent escapism.

As a case in point, *The Galanty Show* (2009) locates a procession of backlit pirates, ballerinas and clowns behind a translucent scrim that evokes shadow theatres of old. Translucent garments add a further layer of revelation and vulnerability to the Platonic performance, stripping down both the content and costuming to illuminate the human architecture behind a culture of spectacle. This in-between, x-ray model of seeing into the underpinning of fantasy conditions a more self-conscious mode of seeing, akin to that the aforementioned Lester observes, "when something is at once magic and recognizable, the spectator becomes aware of his cognitive codes and conditions." Much of this reflexive exchange between actor and audience culminates in *A Circus of One* (2011), where Crocetta dons a simplified clown costume, constructs a single-ring stage, and proceeds through a sequence of performative vignettes in front of an old metal barn. It's corrugated steel façade and Crocetta's incorporation of a ladder and seesaw in this solitary circus establishes a language of sequence and geometry that echoes the celluloid strips of analog film reels – embedding Crocetta into the site, subject and substrate she performs equally, all at once. This meta-union of artist, object, medium and ar-



chitecture is extended into durational, audio-driven performances that Crocetta describes as “celebrations,” of the “economy of simple machines.” Making the case for “relative stillness” in the sculptural treatment of performing subject/s, Crocetta has worked with fellow artist Peter Reese on multiple occasions to complicate disposable spectacle with what she calls “enduring bodies.” In projects like *Load & Effort* (2014) and *On & On* (2017) they operate in tandem, standing resolutely still in storefront windows, eyes forward, or spinning and singing together on a life-scale Lazy Susan – infusing stoic forms with human idiosyncrasy. The same could be said for the 2018 sculpture/performance *RESONATOR*, which was inspired by the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo and his unruly objects, or *Intonarumori* (“noise-makers”), designed to disrupt convention and decorum via orchestral performance. In Crocetta’s version she occupies a wooden box built to snugly accommodate her body, and with an attached metal cone, attempts to, in her words, “use my human voice as a generator of infinite sound.” In so doing, she transforms what initially appears as a stoic monolith into woman-powered jukebox – singing music and songs from the past twenty-five years of her career without fan-fare or ostensible focal point. Just as we rarely look at speakers while listening to music, sound fills the space without conspicuous origin – forging what Crocetta dubs a “sonic manifesto” that speaks to the immersive tapestry she weaves between subject, thing and space. Objects and environments grow more human here, at the same time the human grows more unmoored, atomized, and disseminated. For Crocetta, the porous exchange we have with

the environment and one another find both material form and provocative allegory in breath and water. She builds performances and interactions to high-light these ubiquitous, but still mythical elements to fashion intimate, and sometimes unsettling experiences where we confront our shared ecology. In the 2003 film trilogy *Clear / Fill / Reveal* Crocetta constructs fabric chambers where only her head and hands can operate to consider, in her words, “the relationship between the body, the built environment and sculptural form.” Inside these aptly titled “head-spaces” Crocetta conducts minimal performances that employ air, transparent vinyl vessels and plastic flowers to represent her thoughts on how relationships between people and place slide between symbiosis and violence. In this claustrophobic microcosm there is an especially enduring moment in *Reveal* when she plucks stiff little flowers from her bathing cap and scatters them as abject thoughts around her head, methodically repeating “she loves me, she loves me not” as a childhood dalliance leaves ruins on both the mental and natural landscape. Water takes on a similarly ambivalent tenor in a related series of performances where Crocetta employs the liquid that can both nurture and extinguish life to establish bonds and walls between (and amongst) subjects and spaces. In the 1993 work *Exercise* she covered the ceiling and walls of a former toothpaste factory with cornstarch and sealed the carpet in packing tape so as to amplify one’s movement in the space. Within this curtained chamber Crocetta marched back and forth in a vest laden with slowly leaking water balls, breathing labouredly through a snorkel, while an anonymous collaborator floated face down in a

nearby tub, also breathing through a snorkel, periodically coming up to blow mouthfuls of water against the walls. These actions produced a viscous paste that simultaneously blurred and galvanized the borders of a shared space that became increasingly bodily. The politics of those bodies took on added weight in the 1994 performance *Exercise in Perception, Capacity and Projection* in which Crocetta and a female collaborator are set behind glass, in a hot, foggy room draped in cheesecloth and plastic, upon a floor covered conspicuously in tin. With their every move thusly taxed and magnified, Crocetta and her partner exchange mouthfuls of water in serialized kisses that is then spit onto the wall facing the audience – establishing an ecosystem where structure and subject mutually reinforce one another, pushing against the fleeting fourth wall.

Site takes on an increasingly catalytic role in the work









that followed, exceeding the envelope of the room to shape Crocetta's actions and propel her thinking. For the 2012 performative installation *100 Touches, 100 Breaths*, she was inspired by Korean Hanji paper – which is handled multiple times in the process of its making, and is said to naturally filter impurities in the air. It is also employed to sheathe corpses before burial, and this capacity for an object/material to hold, “breathe” and reciprocate in-spired Crocetta to collect her own breath in 100 hanji boxes as effigies of the room she performed (in), collected and displayed as living sculptural vessels. Her corresponding hanji garment and headdress extend the concept as a whole, marrying material with maker in a delicate meditation on the relationship between existence and environment. Such a dialogue finds important precedence in the 2005-2008 film trilogy *Gather / Shed / Lift*, where Crocetta employed a farmer's field, an urban building rooftop, and an empty swimming pool as the inspiration for curious performances marrying comedy and catharsis. With the accelerated frame rate of early cinema, her ensuing actions evoke the physical humor of silent film as Crocetta collects, moves and releases balloon-like orbs that vary in scale and suggestion. Between dragging these objects across a snowy pasture, surgically snipping of their sagging weight from her body, or collecting those that float upon an ascendant crown, their varying buoyancy and weight took on the role of psychological surrogates. And while seemingly absurd in concept and questionable in product, Crocetta's trilogy steadily coalesces into a conflicted memento mori where abstract accumulations bear the alternating capacity to uplift and encumber. This work is therefore less about the clichéd evils of material possessions and more about the memories, emotions and experiences that collect via passage and place, and how we carry them to the next place.

As Crocetta ventured farther afield geographically, the heightened presence of song in her projects pushed this cargo into a reformulated landscape that personalizes the politics of aging institutions. For example, *A Passage* (2014) continued her kinetic meditation on questions of existence, translating a site-specific response in Dale, Norway into a universal alarum. Identifying a picturesque bridge as an allegory of life's travels, she walks back and forth across the handrail – slowly and systematically – with a shouting cone helmet, and a resonant soundscape drawn from field recordings. The resulting meditation is a vernacular invitation, turning a sacrificial gesture into a shared metaphor. A similar spirit of agency informs the 2015 project *Songs for my Sisters* where Crocetta connected three “significant centers of female presence” in Curitiba, Brazil by way of a walking meditation amalgamating musical odes, ad hoc rituals and ephemeral offerings. From cosmetics and wreaths of sunflowers applied to female statues to pan-historical duets with bronzed orators, she performed as both a foil and bridge between the cultures – translating distance and the shared desire for civil rights and social recognition into monumental prosthetics.

The identification of parallels in socio-political conditions and historical experiences of women also resonates across the domestic frontier, as seen in projects like *Bear in Mind (A Bill of Rights)* (2006) and *Through Gritted Teeth* (2017). In the former Crocetta presents the first 10 amendments to the U.S. constitution in both performed sign language and a reading of the amended script written for this translation (the so-called “gloss”) – simultaneously de-familiarizing and expanding the language of enshrined values that habitually fall short in application. A provocative, revelatory obfuscation also informs the latter, where Crocetta alternately vocalizes dialectal songs *Hail to the Chief* and *I wish I knew how it would feel to be free without ever fully opening her mouth*. Instead she marches to the beat of a quixotic tin drum, clad garishly in patriotic garb but exercising a conspicuous restraint within a contemporary political arena where both virulence and volume escalate in tandem. This seemingly paradoxical form of performed reticence is all the more apparent in Crocetta’s 2013 project *Surrender*, where she faces New York City from across the harbor and sings songs of freedom while clad in white, holding an equally vacant flag. In so doing she once again undermines the expectations of the circus wherever (and however) it resides – replacing ringleaders and rhetoric with sculptural meditation, hymns, and a steadfast body that endures in the willful denial of both conflict and erasure. This is an artist and a practice that sidesteps explicit

meaning, linear paths and easy comprehension to instead perform cross-disciplinary allegories that collect, rather than direct associations. We do not find entertainment or explanation under Crocetta’s marquee, but rather open-ended, exploratory proposals that live the ecology amongst objects, subjects, sites and song. These worlds are fantastical without flitting into fantasy, channeling the surreal lens of carnivals, cinema and political campaigns into a heightened cartography of the people and places that inform our being. In this fundamentally interconnected arena Crocetta is both protagonist and vessel, inviting us to inhabit her vestments, shed the passivity of populist media, and perform our lives in a heightened fashion. In this *Circus of One*, the one are many, ceaseless and manifold.

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*“In this Circus of One, the one are many, ceaseless and manifold.”*

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## CHRIS LARSON

### FUNCTION IS REDUNDANT

April 20 through September 2, 2018

Curated by Steven Matijcio

#### Generously supported by

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**Chris Larson** was born in 1966 in St Paul, Minnesota, where he currently lives and works. Since receiving his MFA from Yale University in 1991, Larson has received numerous awards including the Bush Foundation Fellowship, The McKnight Foundation Fellowship, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, a New Work Project Grant from The Harpo Foundation, and was most recently named a 2018 John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellow. His work can be found in private and museum collections including Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg, Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Walker Art Center and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. Larson has most recently had solo exhibitions at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN, Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, NY and his work was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. In 2018, Larson's work was included in the 11th Bienal do Mercosul in Porto Alegre, Brazil. He is an Associate Professor of Art and the Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Minnesota and is also the publisher of *Inreview*, a quarterly print publication presenting critical responses to art in the Twin Cities.

## Exhibition Checklist

- **Deep North**; 2008; HD Video; Courtesy of Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of funds from the Photography and New Media Affinity Group, 2013.67
- **Deep North Front**; 2008; Inkjet Print, Courtesy of Jim and Lynn Schell
- **Deep North Bed**; 2008; Inkjet Print, Courtesy of Thomson Family Collection, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- **Deep North Sink**; 2008; Inkjet Print
- **Deep North TV**; 2008; Inkjet Print
- **Deep North Toilet**; 2008; Inkjet Print
- **Deep North Kitchen Table**; 2008; Inkjet Print
- **Deep North**; 2008; Photo Collage, Ink and Paper
- **Heavy Rotation**; 2011; HD Video; Courtesy of Collection of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Justin Smith Purchas Fund, 2014
- **Heavy Rotation #14**; 2011; Graphite, galkyd and gamsol on canvas
- **Heavy Rotation #1**; 2011; Graphite, Galkyd and Gamsol on vellum
- **Heavy Rotation #3**; 2011; Graphite, Galkyd and Gamsol on vellum
- **Heavy Rotation #4**; 2011; Graphite, Galkyd and Gamsol on vellum
- **Heavy Rotation #5**; 2011; Graphite, Galkyd and Gamsol on vellum
- **Heavy Rotation Sculpture**; 2011; Wood, Paint and Plaster
- **Land Speed Record**; 2016; HD Video
- **Bar Rail**; 2016; Wood and Paint
- **Crush Collision**; 2006; Color Video, 12 minutes, 10 seconds, Courtesy of Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg
- **Crush Collision**; 2006; Inkjet print, Courtesy of Collection of Elizabeth G. Redlef
- **Crush Collision Ring**; 2006; Porcelain
- **Crush Collision Drawing**; 2006; Photo Collage, Ink, vellum
- **Threshold Drawing #5**; 2017; Black Gesso on Board, Pencil and Nail
- **Threshold Drawing #7**; 2017; Black Gesso on Board, Pencil and Nail
- **Threshold Drawing #8**; 2017; Black Gesso on Board, Pencil and Nail
- **Threshold Drawing #12**; 2017; Black Gesso on Board, Pencil and Nail
- **Threshold**; 2016; Silicone Cast of studio threshold in St. Paul, MN
- **Reservoir Drawing**; 2015; HD Video
- **Reservoir Drawing**; 2015; Medium-density Fiberboard, Paint and Submerged in Water for 1 Year
- **Untitled (Curatorial office, relocated)**; 2018; Wood, Paint and CAC Exhibition Archive

*All works by Chris Larson unless otherwise noted*

*Images Courtesy of Chris Larson Studio*

*Cover: Land Speed Record, 2016, Image Courtesy of the Artist*