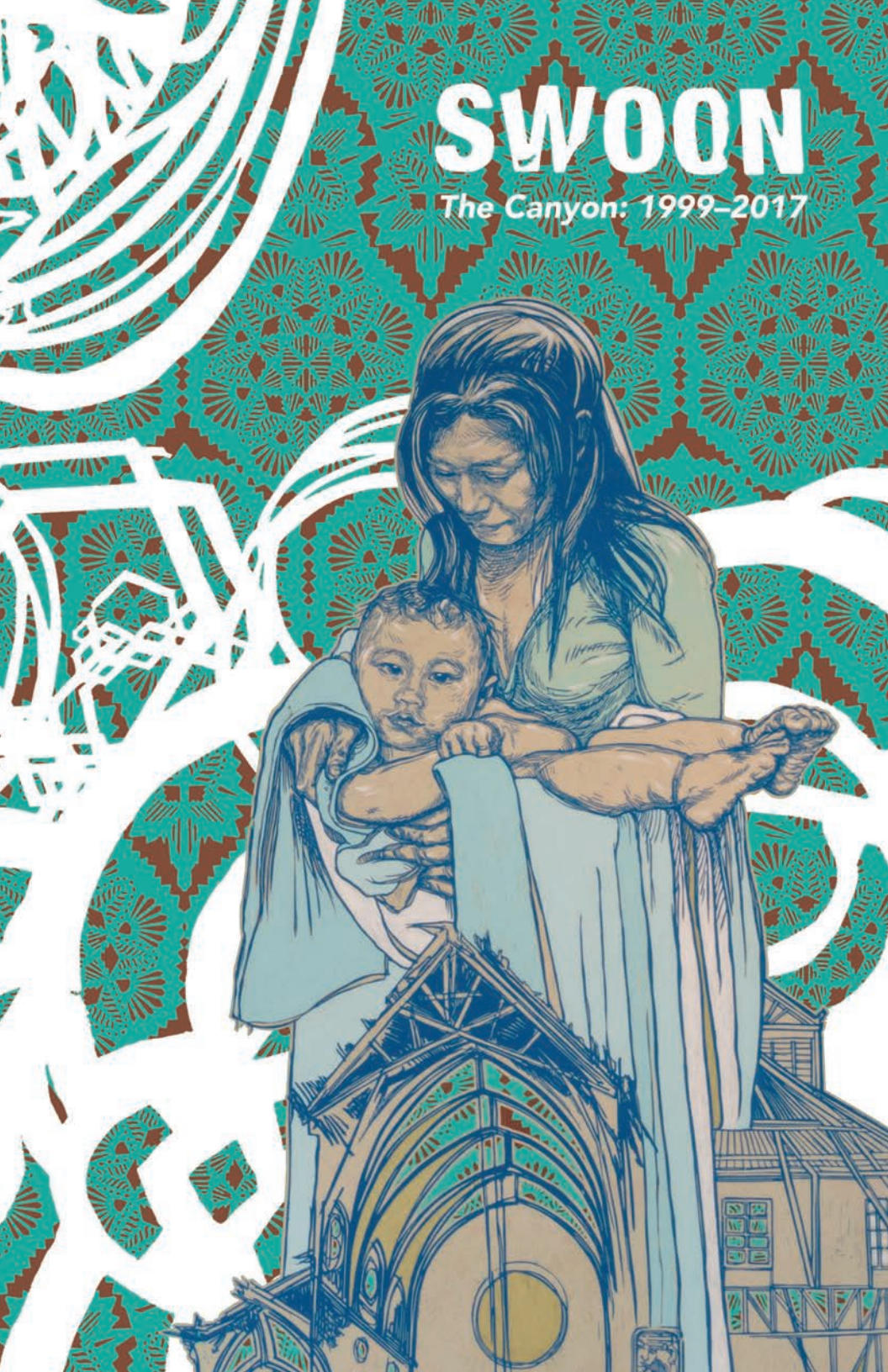


# SWOON

The Canyon: 1999-2017



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*The Canyon: 1999–2017*



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Caledonia Curry (aka Swoon) and crew at work on the *Time Capsule* section of the *The Canyon*. Inhabiting a workspace inside of the American Sign Museum in Cincinnati, the crew built entire walls of the installation before disassembling them, after which they were brought to the Contemporary Arts Center and reconstructed as part of the larger exhibition.







Swoon crew pre-install at  
the American Sign Museum  
Cincinnati, OH









**Left:** Callie mixing paint while working on the *Time Capsule*, American Sign Museum, Cincinnati, OH, August 2017

**Bottom:** Swoon crew at work, American Sign Museum, August 2017



# The Fanny Pack



"When you're in a space this big, you can't think, 'Oh, where's my knife?' You just have to have these things on you."





Swoon crew working on the *Time Capsule* at the American Sign Museum, August 2017





Installation View: The Grotto  
Photo: Tod Seelie



# SWOON: A SELF-POR- TRAIT IN PIECES

Words: Steven Matijcio, Curator, Contemporary Arts Center





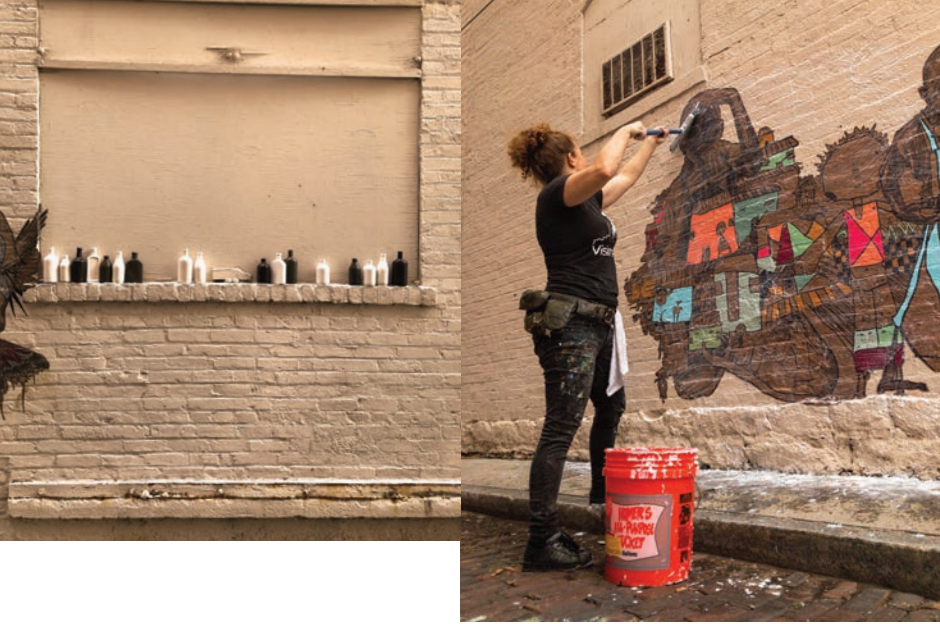


As an unavoidably public figure, Callie is neither camera shy nor one for self-aggrandizement—shining as the charismatic, if modest beacon of many projects that span art, people and the political. The absence of a self-portrait for an artist who has found a vocation in the fierce, unrelenting study and depiction of the human face is thereby puzzling to say the least. More so when considering that *The Canyon* is a monumental example of the candor that has been present throughout this artist's rise to public prominence—rarely sidestepping the painful trauma that has littered her life. Substance abuse, mental illness, suicide and emotional evacuation have traveled devastatingly through her bloodlines, shaping the course of a cathartic practice that has translated subjective experience into a shared forum. In this context the conspicuous omission of a definitive self-portrait could not be a simple oversight, prompting a deeper look that is more intimate and expansive at once.

Whether on the street, in the museum, staring at a screen or curiously turning a page, the Swoon experience has become synonymous with portraits that are as intriguing and magnetic as they are enigmatic and complex. As one walks through the pantheon of her many figures and faces in the retrospective exhibition *The Canyon* (1999–2017), each set of soulful eyes, each arresting gaze and expressive pose slows your path, weighs your step and implicitly asks for more. Staring out intently, they demand more, even as the request remains intensely equivocal. The portrait—whether full length, half-body, bust, partial or close-up—serves as the bedrock of her practice and underpins the architecture of its inescapable empathy. And it was for this reason that the question from a museum director during a tour of the show was especially perplexing for me when he asked expectantly, “Has she done a self-portrait?” I couldn’t answer... and to my knowledge, there wasn’t one present in an exhibition that made every effort to be as comprehensive and thorough as possible.



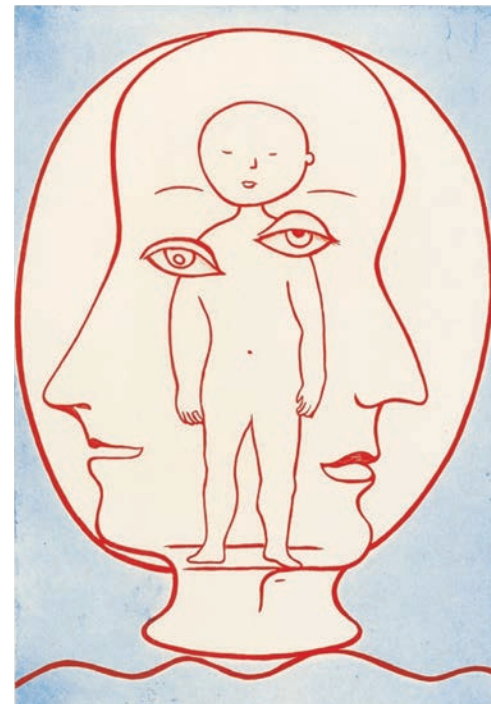




Callie installing work at Findlay Market, Cincinnati, OH, October 2017

The confrontation of personal suffering in art is by no means gendered, but the faces of female artists who have done so in especially iconic fashion have consistently interwoven the self and/as subject. When faced with injury, tragedy and abuse in the innermost rings of their respective family trees, many in this esteemed lineage have employed the self-portrait as a repository of both affect and agency. Frida Kahlo, Claude Cahun and Kiki Smith offer resonant representations of themselves in various states of adversity and defiance—wrestling with afflictions that span private and public, personal and political, at the nexus of their countenance. German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1869–1945) navigated the premature death of siblings, children and grandchildren—as well as the brutality of war, the threat of Nazi persecution and her own neurological disorders—through dark, expressive woodcuts that have been particularly influential for Callie. And yet, while these two artists share striking parallels in aesthetics, materials, composition and figuration, Kollwitz’s steadfast series of brooding self-portraits have yet to be emulated in the prolific tomes of Swoon.

A more provocative, if less immediate comparison can be made with the famously audacious French artist Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), who navigated the untimely death of her mother, a tyrannical philandering father and childhood trauma with an array of eerily abstracted portraits. Ambivalence is palpable in the towering, spindly-legged spider she called *Maman* as an uncanny ode to a mother who protected as fiercely as she suffered. Bourgeois’ 1990 *Self-Portrait*<sup>1</sup> is even more relevant in its subversion of expectations and circular logic—eschewing a singular representation in favor of a codependent constellation. Marrying the profiled faces of parents across the body of a bare, doll-like child, all cradled within a cranium-like orb, Bourgeois elaborated: “The strong figure on the right is the father, and the softer figure on the left is the mother. And there, in between, this creature appears. It is simply a self-portrait. A self-portrait with a certain attitude, of course, the attitude being... well, I don’t know if I am ugly, repulsive or if I am unwelcome. But, to tell you the truth, it’s not my fault.” And in this self-effacing strength, in this ring that atomizes the self across a multitude of faces and emotions in various states of definition, we find a cartography of being that resonates through *The Canyon*.



<sup>1</sup> Louise Bourgeois  
*Self-Portrait*  
Courtesy, estate of Louise Bourgeois





Installation View: Medea  
Photo: Tod Seelie



When meeting the many avatars of Callie's exhibition and the phases of her life and career they reflect, one's awareness of the identity they collectively constitute (and complicate) grows ever more tangible. Along the way there are multiple representations of her mother, father, sister, grandparents and other familial relatives alongside friends, partners, muses, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers whose relationship spanned the short, if enduring terrain of a shared glance. Within this holistic archive, many of these portraits are intersections unto themselves—sharing their bodies with cityscapes, buildings, animals, deities, fellow figures and iconographies from a variety of world cultures. Each is thus a kaleidoscope of associations for the artist, spanning the conscious and subconscious, multiplied by the interpretation of every additional viewer who enters this arena.

"Each [portrait] is thus a kaleidoscope of associations... spanning the conscious and subconscious..."

And while it can be argued that every artist's body of work constitutes an overarching biography—no matter how abstract or seemingly removed—there is something greater, more unwieldy here, where the entity known as "Swoon" transcends individual assignment to circulate in the plural. That is to say, Callie is simultaneously all of these portraits and none of them at all, congregating an evolving tapestry where the many people that cumulatively shape her identity gather and seek to recruit more. She does not defer in the construction and crafting of her artwork—her hand is always present and Callie's vision is relentlessly singular—but the social infrastructure behind every portrait produces a very human reciprocity that blurs the distinction between subject and author.

In the many ambitious collaborations she alternately initiates and participates in, synergies are cultivated that exceed the sum of their parts and the singularities of conventional artistic relationships. As I watched and participated in the installation of this exhibition at the CAC, a distinct community coalesced in the process—bringing together installation assistants, friends, volunteers, supporters and a variety of craftspeople to collectively realize a project that required the proverbial village. Each person became an extension and surrogate of Swoon here for a brief amount of time, inhabiting the mind and hand of the artist that first created the work while still retaining their individuality. These are not the cults of Caledonia, but spending time in such an environment makes clear how Callie inspires people to participate in causes that regularly exceed caution and convention. Each one is an opportunity to do something beyond the capacity of an individual; to live beyond your skin, and overcome doubt, skepticism, baggage, trauma and what norms necessitate. This is swelling agency that surpasses the capacity of the self-portrait as we know it, shed like an ill-fitting sweater a hundred sizes too small. The self that Callie practices here is a porous venture—distributed and disseminated— orbiting as pieces that have risen from fracture into the collective might of swarms.

Installation crews need to eat, too







## THANK YOU:

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Emma Anderson  
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### CAC Communications Team

Adriana Alvarez  
Asa Featherstone, IV  
Kyle Mace  
Joshua Mattie

### Photographs By

Asa Featherstone, IV  
Kyle Mace  
Tod Seelie

### Layout & Design

Kyle Mace

### Friends

Deanne Beam  
John Beam  
Harmony Denlinger  
Cal Jia Eng  
Shayna McConville  
David Shanks

### Volunteers

Jenna Rueger  
Jennifer Stuhlfreyer  
Chelsea Borgman  
Paula Cole  
Sarah Cole  
Christina Marie Collins  
Michelle Cone  
Sarah Ditlinger  
Maria Kalomenidou  
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Michelle Cone  
Sarah Ditlinger  
Maria Kalomenidou  
Lynne Gibb  
Sabrina Pachla  
Sarah Rodriguez



