

Lex Brown: Carnelian

April 4–July 16, 2023, Reference Gallery

Lex Brown: Carnelian

April 4–July 16, 2023, Reference Gallery

Spanning video, sculpture, drawing, writing, performance, and the podcast *1-800-POWERS*, Lex Brown’s incisive artworks confront pressing social conditions of our time—from gentrification and greenwashing to police violence—through an irreverent, sometimes jarring use of humor.

Steeped in satire and slapstick, Brown’s works borrow the visual tropes and intonations of pop culture, social media, and corporate branding.

Often, the artist mimics and lampoons this source material to illuminate the absurdities, contradictions, and exploitative designs of late capitalism and its social constructs. Her recent videos, *Communication* (2021) and *The Glass Eye* (2023), for instance, both center on a fictional media conglomerate named Omnesia. *Communication* features caricatures of tech executives (all played by Brown) who receive advice from an AI named Sylvie on how to expand Omnesia’s real estate holdings. In both works, the artist parodies and takes to task the “cosmic manifest destiny” bids of futurist technologists like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Richard Branson, who seek to colonize and privatize outer space while advancing automation, AI, and big data on this planet.

Through her works, the artist also savvily observes how our relationships to various kinds of technology and media—both as consumers and, increasingly, “users”

and content producers—contour our lived experience. In past installations, for example, Brown has utilized motion sensors to cue videos and illuminate drawings in response to a spectator’s path through the exhibition (*Animal Static* [2019]); viewers have accessed sound installations by telephone (*Call Waiting* [2021]); and the artist’s poetry has scrolled on the monitors of closed-circuit televisions (*A Footnote or Red Herring* [2021]).

At the List Center, Brown debuts a multichannel video installation titled *Carnelian* (2023) and a group of significant new paintings. The centerpiece of this new body of work, *Carnelian*, looks with humor and pathos at impending global disaster and the varying psychological effects that an overwhelming amount of digital content, data, and even news media can yield. Taking the form of a musical—with songs co-composed by the artist and Samuel Beebe and script authored by Brown—the work offers a complex take on contemporary conditions marked by polarizing rhetoric and reporting, endless media content, and the looming threat of human extinction.



Above and front cover:
Production photos from *Carnelian*, 2023. Photo: Bob Sweeney



Production documentation from *Carnelian*, 2023. Pictured are actor Najee DuWon (at left) and artist Lex Brown (right). Photo: Bob Sweeney

Carnelian, 2023

Carnelian, like Brown's live performance "soap operettas" *Focacciatown* (2017) and *Focacciatown Reloaded* (2019), riffs on the structure of a popular theater form. The songbook and multi-act format of the musical undergird this new multichannel video installation, which features songs co-composed by the artist and Samuel Beebe. In three acts—"Dawn," "Afternoon," and "Dusk"—three characters, Orachrysops, Necyria, and Bicyclus, await the imminent arrival of a cataclysmic event, referred to as the "Boom."

Brown's treatment for *Carnelian* sets the action on "Earth," its narrative unfolding "sometime after the Industrial Revolution and within the horizon of extinction." The work looks critically, and with humor, at the conditions of contemporary life marked by climate disaster, imminent extinction, authoritarian political rhetoric, and an oversaturated media landscape of endless digital content, including twenty-four-hour news media, often from dubious sources.

The effects of media on forming attitudes and political ideology at the individual level, particularly the psychological effects of the news, are a recurring theme in Brown's work. In *Carnelian*, for example, a character frets over the arrival of "the Script," which, at first, viewers believe to be a fourth wall-breaking reference to the script for the performance but is later revealed to be the name of a fictional news podcast to which he devoutly listens—and which informs his decisions on how to conduct his daily life. Throughout the work, all three characters contend with how they define and relate to power, whether through political, natural, or technological means.

Distinct from many of Brown's earlier performances and videos in which the artist herself appears (often as multiple characters), the roles in *Carnelian* are performed by actors. Each video channel features a performer in a painterly tableau of an interior that they inhabit for the work's duration—*mise en scènes* that constitute

aspects of the characters' psychological worlds. Brown based the characters (Necyria, Orachrysops, and Bicyclus, and the Auctioneer) on archetypes associated with the animistic qualities ascribed to fire, earth, air, and the void, respectively. These elements are personified in the cosmologies of many cultures, and Brown's reinterpretations form protagonists that, in her words, "exist somewhere between human, figurine, and muse." (Their Latin monikers also beckon associations with

classical mythology but are, in fact, the names of moth and butterfly genera found in Afrotropical and Neotropical realms—zoological regions of sub-Saharan Africa and South America.) Through Brown's savvy use of archetypal characters, *Carnelian* addresses how issues like the climate crisis and extremist ideologies exert themselves on individuals and are mediated, and asks, in the artist's words: "How does our humanity endure, in spite of itself, through these existential threats?"

Dawn, 2023 Afternoon, 2023 Dusk, 2023 Night, 2023

Four large paintings on panel are integrated into the exhibition design, hung on both the gallery walls and the opposing sides of the structures that display *Carnelian's* moving images. Made to accompany the video installation, their straightforward style and imposing scale reference painted theatrical backdrops, nineteenth-century equestrian portraits, and French scenic wallpaper designs, particularly those of Zuber & Cie. The artifice of the paintings' source materials is also mirrored in Brown's stylized treatment of the sets each character performs within in the film. The reference points and contexts of these two parallel scenographies underscore the relationship between contemporary crises—of climate, ideology, and technology—and the imperial and colonial structures they arise from.

The motifs in *Dawn*, *Afternoon*, *Dusk*, and *Night* are also inspired by the idealized, neoclassical, American pastoral landscapes of the Philadelphia-born artist Maxfield Parrish (1870–1922). Brown's paintings, which integrate architectural features into the landscape, allude to Parrish's *Atlas Landscape* (1907–10), *The Tempest* (1909),

and *The Dream Garden* (1916)—the latter of which is a site-specific glass mosaic in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Features of Philadelphia's first public drinking fountain (1854) in Wissahickon Valley Park and a masonry wall motif that appear in many of Brown's works are among the varied architectural components that meet with elements of landscapes and prominent painted text.

Embedding language into the surfaces of drawings and paintings is also characteristic of Brown's work. In past pieces, the artist's poetry has offered alternate perspectives on themes addressed in her related videos and sculptures. Executed in a *trompe l'oeil* style, as if the words are engraved in stone, one painting reads: "it is not a failure for the flower of life to pass for the bearing of fruit / it is not a failure for the fruit to fall in life of a seed / it is not a failure taking root burying itself in the earth / it is not a failure of life to never bloom." In contrast to *Carnelian's* apocalyptic undertones, here, Brown's poem offers a hopeful reminder that cycles of growth and decay define life.



Carnelian, 2023 (stills)



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Carnelian, 2023

Three-channel 4K video, 16mm film, color, stereo sound, closed captions
60 min. (approx.)

Written and directed by Lex Brown

Music co-composed with Samuel Beebe

Filmed by Bob Sweeney

Edited by Lex Brown and Bob Sweeney

Starring Ciani Barclay, Mya Drew Flood, Najee DuWon, and Venkatesh Sundarapalli

Dawn, 2023

Acrylic on panel
50 × 80 × 2¼ in. (127 × 203.2 × 5.7 cm)

Afternoon, 2023

Acrylic on panel
50 × 80 × 2¼ in. (127 × 203.2 × 5.7 cm)

Dusk, 2023

Acrylic on panel
72 × 58 × 2¼ in. (182.9 × 147.3 × 5.7 cm)

Night, 2023

Acrylic on panel
72 × 58 × 2¼ in. (182.9 × 147.3 × 5.7 cm)

All works courtesy the artist and Deli Gallery, New York and Mexico City

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lex Brown (b. 1989, Oakland, CA) has performed and exhibited work at the New Museum, the High Line, the International Center of Photography, Recess, and The Kitchen (all New York); REDCAT Theater and the Hammer Museum (both Los Angeles); Baltimore Museum of Art; Western Front, Vancouver; and the Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway. Her films have been presented at e-flux Screening Room, New York; Transmediale, Berlin; and the East End Film Festival, London. Brown received her undergraduate degree from Princeton University and an MFA from Yale. She is the author of *My Wet Hot Drone Summer* (Badlands Unlimited, 2015) and *Consciousness* (Genderfail, 2019). Brown hosts the podcast 1-800-POWERS and currently teaches at Princeton University. She was a 2021 United States Artist Fellow and a 2020–22 Harvard University Media Fellow in Theater, Dance, and Media and Art, Film, and Visual Studies. She lives and works in Philadelphia.

Lex Brown: Carnelian is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator.

MEMBERSHIP

The List Center is pleased to offer special programming for museum members, including behind-the-scenes experiences, exclusive events, and travel opportunities. We are deeply grateful to members of the List Center's Director's Circle, whose philanthropic support ensures our ability to present outstanding art and artists of our time. To join, or for more information, visit: listart.mit.edu/support

ACCESSIBILITY

This exhibition is accompanied by a visual description tour.

The List Visual Arts Center strives to provide an accessible experience for all our visitors. For questions about program access, please email listinfo@mit.edu

SPONSORS

Exhibitions at the List Center are made possible with the support of Fotene & Tom Coté, Audrey & James Foster, Idee German Schoenheimer, Joyce Linde, Cynthia & John Reed, and Sara-Ann & Robert Sanders. This exhibition is also supported by generous donors to the 2020 McDermott Award Gala, hosted by the Council for the Arts at MIT. Additional support for *Lex Brown: Carnelian* is generously provided by Deli Gallery, New York, and the Harpo Foundation.

General operating support is provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Council for the Arts at MIT; Philip S. Khoury, Associate Provost at MIT; the MIT School of Architecture + Planning; the Mass Cultural Council; and many generous individual donors. In-kind media sponsorship provided by 90.9 WBUR. The Advisory Committee Members of the List Visual Arts Center are gratefully acknowledged.



PUBLIC PROGRAMS



Graduate Student Talk: Ardalan SadeghiKivi

Thursday, April 13, 2023, 5:30–6 PM EST
Hybrid program (in-person with virtual available)

Artist Discussion: Sound Collaboration with Lex Brown and Samuel Beebe

Friday, April 28, 2023, 5–6 PM EST
In-person program

All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public. Registration is required. For a full list of programs and more information about these events, visit: listart.mit.edu/events-programs

LEARN MORE

Brown, Lex. *Consciousness*. New York: Genderfail, 2019.

Brown, Lex. *My Wet Hot Drone Summer*. New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2015.

FREE DIGITAL GUIDE



Learn more about the work on view and access a visual descriptor audio guide through the Bloomberg Connects mobile application.

This audio guide is narrated by Lex Brown.

Learn more about
our exhibitions at
listart.mit.edu

Follow us on Instagram,
Facebook, & Twitter
[@mitlistarts](https://www.instagram.com/mitlistarts)

MIT List Visual Arts Center
20 Ames Street, Bldg. E15
Cambridge, MA 02139
listart.mit.edu