

WARDER

3908 De Longpre Ave
90027 LA

Solid Projections

Mahan Moalemi

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The following fragments accompany an occasion for the in-person experience of artworks that the writer observed only remotely via installation shots and other photographic reproductions, hence a primal focus on “projection” in the sense of dimensional translations between images and objects. But projections tend to solidify under the circumstances of epistemic flatness, a colloquial characteristic of the screen age, which lays the ground for perceptions that might be “sound but without any special qualities or flair,” to use one of the definitions of “solid” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As usual, projections are also at work in the sense of those mental images that one constructs in response to what is offered to the senses, almost always filtered through a baggage of a priori assumptions. What to do with these solid projections? Instead of either raising the liquidity of mediated experiences or swimming against its flattening tides, these artworks offer aesthetic opportunities for staying with and thinking through the solid projections that each redefines in its own image.

Beth Collar's sculptural wall pieces manifest a peculiar exercise in embodied epigraphy. The raw, bone-white plaster casts draw on the *Liver of Piacenza*, a 5,000-year-old bronze artifact and the most notable record of haruspicy, which is a technique of divination based on examining animal entrails, particularly the livers of sacrificed sheep or poultry. Spreading the illusion of depth over their lumpy supports, the line drawings in pencil are loosely inspired by Max Klinger's *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove* (1877-1878). In this series of ten sequential etchings, a visual narrative takes place in a skating rink in Berlin where the artist finds himself obsessing over a glove in hallucinogenic and real scenes as he looks for the woman that dropped it. Collar's drawings take certain elements from these etchings and combine them with references to augury, the other technique that ancient Romans used for prediction by looking for omens in avian movement. While hawks are not the descendants of the prehistoric Pterosaurs (which is borrowed from plate 9 in the *Paraphrase* series), their appearance in these drawings seem to point to how they both have left their marks on the interspecies evolution of flight, their shared knowhow, as a distinct epistemology. Collar moves the graphite across the plastered curves and draws a parallel between flying over a landscape, or mapping a territory, and tracing ciphers on a liver. References to forecasting, on the one hand, and the grafting of images onto an uneven surface, on the other, bring together tendencies for projection and pattern recognition. As the cultural techniques that inform them operate in and between the realms of vision, history, and base materiality, the lithified aesthetic of these objects keeps oscillating between symbolism and *thisness*, between sense and opacity, never settling on one or the other.

Coleman Collins's *Untitled (Niche)* (2023) simulates a media archeological aggregate. The CNC-carved depth-mapped line drawings on gray-coated MDF boards evoke both ancient stone slabs with inscriptions and the generic background of most modeling softwares. In the middle section of this triptych sits a small profile relief of the famed Nefertiti bust placed above a shallow arched niche and surrounded by a pattern of concentric squares and rectangles. Sourced from an asset library for digital objects, it can as well be a copy of not the artifact itself, which has been held in the Ethnological Museum of Berlin since 1918, but Isa Genzken's 2012 series of sculptures, as upon a closer look one can notice the

sunglasses that were digitally added to a scan of the statue. The drawing on the left panel, fixed into a slight recess, shows an interior space rendered in the style of a typically European neoclassical apartment, complete with chevron-patterned flooring and boiseries framing the walls. The wonky perspective unsettles the assumed coziness or bespoke domesticity of the space and seems to poke fun at the projection of depth as a token of accessibility or ownership. The image on the right, rotated vertically, is an iconic still from Jim Jarmusch's 2009 film *The Limits of Control*, titled after an eponymous essay by William Burroughs from 1975 where he wrote, "When there is no more opposition, control becomes a meaningless proposition." The narrative, suspenseful but without drama, takes place in Spain and proceeds through a series of repeated variations on similar acts carried out by the protagonist, a solitary assassin played by Isaach de Bankolé. He stops by various cafes to establish contact with informants and, while waiting for them, orders two single espressos, which the waiters occasionally confuse with one double espresso. The singular Nefertiti too came to signify more than one thing during the twentieth century: as significant a point of reference for German national identity as it has been for an African diasporic sense of historicity. A French-American who was born in Abidjan, Ivory Coast to Yoruba parents from Benin, de Bankolé attended aviation school, earned an advanced degree in physics and mathematics, and is fluent in several languages. He too has a layered and multifaceted persona that demands no less than a Cubist kind of attention, an aesthetic that not only resonates with how Collins deploys various viewpoints and view planes within the same frame but is also admired by the assassin himself in a 1916 painting by Juan Gris on one of his many visits to Reina Sofía, obsessing over images that somehow echo the latest clue of his mission.

Nevine Mahmoud's practice brings to mind this oft-quoted statement attributed to Michelangelo: "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block... I just have to chisel away the superfluous material..." Furthermore, natural imperfections are hidden deep within the inner layers of the stone, including color variations, inconsistent patterns, pits and pores that are expected to cause surprising but determining effects in the fabric of the artifact. To project is equal parts to carve in and to carve out; it is as much a matter of pressing a shape onto raw material as the estimation of an essence that is then to be revealed by peeling off the surface appearance. Solidity, according to these sculptures, speaks not only to permanence but also phase transition, a measure of interaction between image and matter, hard and soft, human and nonhuman. Whether a flower, a bicycle seat, or the earless head of a fawn, Mahmoud's sculptures seem like the different reincarnations of the same spirit, perhaps the spirit of artifice itself. The objects lean serenely on shelves that extend on the wall to stage them against a burnished, metallic backdrop, rendering the sculptures photogenic and, by extension, personified and biologized. The display feels like an autopsy table reimaged as a platform not for lifelessness but a perverse sense of vibrancy, of theatricality and puppetry, where the marble is not just an undying medium but also performing the impressions of mortality. These objects usher eternity into history.

Jeffrey Stuker's *To the Satisfaction of the Botanist* (2023) looks into the relationship of a caterpillar and a computer to summon myths and challenge the assumed divide between the natural and the technological. Two photo negatives are displayed on a horizontal lightbox atop a plinth, equipped with a loupe for close inspection. The image of the caterpillar is computer-generated, made with the help of 3D modeling softwares used for Hollywood special effects and other culture-industry productions. This image is fictional, it is part of a storyline, one which is nonetheless very true to life, like the hyperrealistic representational quality of the image itself. Set in the 1990s at a pharmaceutical farming facility in southern Madagascar, it shows a *Daphnis nerii* caterpillar crawling up and feeding on a flowerless *Vinca*, also known as periwinkle or "bright eyes," whose extract is harvested for making cytotoxic drugs used in chemotherapy for cancer. In the course of its evolution, the pre-pupal *Daphnis nerii* has learned to treat the extract as a pharmakon, metabolizing the

toxin and adopting its poisonous properties as a defense mechanism against potential predators. The bespoke computer too has been developed to, among other things, learn from the plant. The other image is a closeup photograph of a graphical processing unit manufactured by Nvidia Corporation based in Santa Clara, California. Not only was it used by the artist to render the caterpillar but also deployed by the Scripps Institute in La Jolla, California in the 2010s to run an AI-powered, biomolecular simulation program for the production of synthetic vincristine, the therapeutic extract of the Madagascar periwinkle. The imaging quality allowed the artist to represent the lighting, color, texture, and general atmosphere that could have been shot on transparency film with a large format camera if it was set up in the plant's native habitat, where it was farmed for extraction by Western corporations at the tail end of the twentieth century. In this juxtaposition of two different regimes of visibility and representation, Stuker foregrounds the complementary reciprocity between mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies. While the computer and the medical enterprise it supports seem to have been modeled after the caterpillar's survival strategy, they also serve as a model on the basis of which survival can be explained and extended, in ways all too suggestive of when life imitates art. Doctors have reported multiple incidents where the plant-based chemotherapy has caused hallucinations in the patients, significantly of brightly colored insects, which the artist himself experienced as he underwent treatment in the early 1990s and was administered high doses of the drug. But this story involves another link as well between the *Daphnis nerii* caterpillar and the matters of virtual vision and protection, as the insect's retinaless eyespots, placed on the back of its head, perform the task of intimidation masquerade to avert the menacing gaze of potential predators, while the caterpillar's actual eyes only function in light detection and not in image formation. Such and similar phenomena are also part of human civilization and can be traced in the image of the evil eye and instruments of apotropaic magic. In Greek mythology, for example, this natural-historical phenomenon takes the form of the fascinum, which serves as a protective intervention against *Invidia*, the personification of envious and vengeful gazing. The green that humans perceive as the dominant color of vegetation, tinting the mental image of nature itself as a fiction or solid projection, is also the default color of printed circuit boards, including that of the Nvidia GPU, that are coated by a lacquer-like layer of protective polymer. This is the persistence of myth on the basis of a deep yet contingent sense of chromatic iconicity.

Mahan Moalemi (b. 1992, Tehran, IR) is a PhD candidate in visual studies at Harvard University, Cambridge. He has written for *Art in America*, *Cabinet*, *Domus*, *e-flux*, and *Frieze*, among other journals, exhibition catalogues, and artist monographs.

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