

Museum of
Contemporary
Art Cleve
land

Art
soft
place
to
Land

Jul 7, 2023–Jan 7, 2024

Kevin Beasley
Margarita Cabrera
Pia Camil

Cass Davis

Alexandra Kehayoglou

Tiona Nekkia McClodden

Kaveri Raina

Liang Shaoji

Marie Watt

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A soft place to
land

What does it mean to wrap yourself in a memory?

To grasp on to a before-time?
We lean on memory to build resilience,
taking the risk that it may weaken us instead.

How do memories help us heal,
even if on the way to healing, we must,
as artist Cass Davis says of their own
work, “walk towards our trauma”?

When my grandpa died in 2008, I inherited his pink and cream wool blanket. The one that I napped under every Sunday while he and my mom played endless games of gin rummy. After he died, I went a long time before I let anyone else touch it, trying to preserve the scent of his apartment, the mischief in his laughter, the blanket’s weight on my body as he quietly covered me up while I pretended to be fast asleep. Today, this blanket lives on my couch, ready to envelop a chilly friend on movie night or accompany a cozy weekend with a new book. It’s been more than a decade since my grandpa’s death, but his blanket still transports me back to his apartment, holding his presence in its scratchy wool fibers.

Cass Davis, *Laying of Hands*, 2022

A soft place to land finds roots¹ in stories like my own, bringing together nine artists—Kevin Beasley, Margarita Cabrera, Pia Camil, Cass Davis, Alexandra Kehayoglou, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Kaveri Raina, Liang Shaoji, and Marie Watt—whose material choices are guided by personal, historical, collective, and cultural memory. By placing their work in dialogue, this exhibition captures a snapshot of the expansive ways that humans form kinship with materials.

A soft place to land plays with the malleability of memory. By exploring physical material's potential to make the intangible tangible, this exhibition propels the past into the present and holds space for both to occur simultaneously, inviting us to rethink our understandings of linear time. In the book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, author adrienne maree brown unpacks the idea of the “time traveling emotion,” writing that emotion

A soft place to land plays

with the maleability of memory.

has the potential to be, “both fully of another time and fully present in the place when it appears.”² She puts forth music as a universally-relatable vehicle for activating time traveling emotions. *A soft place to land* applies the author's framework to tactile matter as a similar system for shuttling memories through time. It reveals how experiencing material through touch, sight, and smell can pull a memory forward into the present, push the keeper of the memory into the past, or reshape a moment to reveal future possibilities.

With a deeply entrenched history in the American South, cotton is a potent conjuror of time traveling memories. Its production is rooted in legacies of slavery that continue to impact us today. Within Kevin Beasley's practice, cotton weaves personal and familial stories, cultural trauma, and intergenerational

histories of commerce and labor. In his triptych, *Cottonwood (From the Grove)* (2022), cotton is a channel for time traveling the American landscape. Raw Virginia cotton fills the central panel, soaked in resin to preserve its history. Bits of t-shirts, housedresses, durags, and shoelaces pepper the surfaces and extend outwards, subtly binding the three panels together to share a single story. A Cottonwood tree, the eponym of this work, signifies home as a source of energy, its growth paralleling that of Beasley's kin—a literal family tree. Documenting the evolution of a place, *Cottonwood* gestures to the natural environment as both a site of (forced) labor and a space of rejuvenation, encapsulating past and present moments of domesticity and storing soon-to-be-passed-down memories.

Like Beasley, Cass Davis melds personal recollections with stories of the land. As a queer person raised in a religious Midwestern household, their work examines relationships between trauma and the suppression of identity. Towering straw bales in *Binding the Devil* (2023) suspend a hand-woven wool textile with archival images from Evangelical revivals reminiscent of Davis's childhood. Together, straw and wool raise questions about how embodied trauma, ritual, and histories of whiteness-as-oppressor manifest in the body.

First made by Davis during the onset of disability, their bale structures are a stand-in for the body, drawing attention to conservative Midwestern legacies of ostracizing and silencing, “the diseased body, the queer body, the bodies relegated to the margins.”³



¹ I use this phrase as a nod to the PBS show *Finding Your Roots*, which has an episode that brought me closer to fragments of my family's history that were lost in the Holocaust.

² adrienne maree brown, “Nonlinear and Iterative: The Pace and Pathways of Change,” *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (United States: AK Press, 2021), 144–45.

³ Lauren Leving & Cass Davis, Email correspondence with Cass Davis, June 12, 2023.



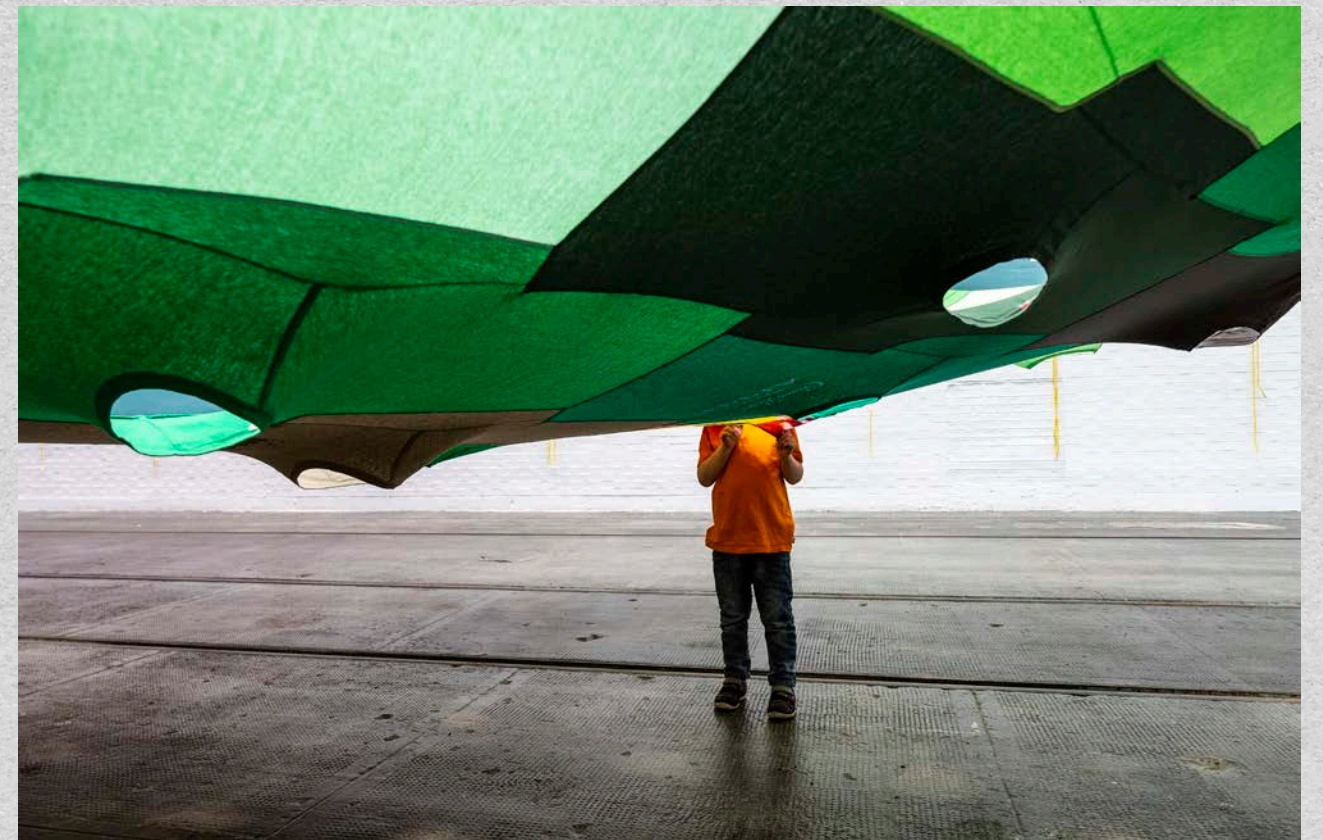
These straw bales, harvested from a landscape transformed by settler colonialism, keep the past close. Yet, they also mark a change in seasons, signaling growth and foreshadowing the future.

For Davis, wool is a direct linkage to their childhood, a signifier of absent family and an emblem of inherited trauma. For Marie Watt, wool pays homage to the animal relatives who support Indigenous creative practices and material traditions. In Watt's *Skywalker/Skyscraper* series, stacks of recycled wool blankets become pillars. They layer personal experiences, collective memories, and Indigenous histories, demonstrating the importance of human connection as a structure of support.

Presented publicly for the first time, *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Portrait)* (2021) is a commission Watt created using the collectors' blankets, recording their family history in a monument of memories. Each blanket is tagged with a story detailing its significance. These blankets are secured on steel I-beams, a tribute to the "Skywalkers," Mohawk ironworkers who deftly constructed many of New York City's early skyscrapers and for whom this series is named. Serendipitously, *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Portrait)* usually lives in the collectors' New York home, connected proximally and materially to the legacies of labor that built the city.

Pia Camil's work with used clothing further exposes the blood, sweat, and tears of hard work as stains of memory. Short for *barato*, the Spanish word for cheap, the cry of "Bara, Bara, Bara!" echoes throughout the street markets of Iztapalapa, Mexico City as vendors peddle goods. In *A soft place to land*, Camil's quilt of green t-shirts of the same name hovers above visitors, who are invited to pop their heads into vacant neck holes. The work is monumental; its patchworking is a nod to the awnings that house the Iztapalapa markets and its overwhelming scale recalls the cacophony of bustling street vendors and buyers. Each shirt was made in Latin America, sold to customers in the U.S., and then resold in Mexico City markets as bootlegs, where the artist acquired them. Their fibers carry the stories of the hands that made them, former wearers, and clandestine journeys of international trade routes.

Left: Marie Watt, *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Portrait)* 2021; Below: Pia Camil, Installation view: Tramway Glasgow: *Bara Bara Bara (Divisor Pirata Verde)*, 2019. Photo: Keith Hunter. Courtesy of Tramway



While both Watt and Camil use pre-owned textiles to layer disparate histories, their work taps into contrasting experiences of the collective. In Watt's work, blankets travel as a part of a culture of gifting, filled with a spirit of generosity. But the shirts in *Bara, Bara, Bara (Divisor Pirata Verde)* (2017), are permeated with the sinister unknown of global commerce, drawing attention to the inequities of exchange. Presented together in this exhibition, these works encourage us to contemplate the lives of everyday objects and the invisible memories they carry.

Margarita Cabrera's *Space in Between* series (2010–ongoing) advances the idea that garments are memories of global movement. In this community-engaged project, the artist collaborates with individuals from largely Spanish-speaking immigrant communities to create sculptures

of plants indigenous to the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Employing traditional sewing and embroidery techniques from Los Tenagos, Hidalgo, Mexico, participants stitch imagery of their border-crossing stories onto the cacti sculptures, which are made from border patrol uniforms.

These uniforms are taut with a tension of perspectives. For some, uniforms represent power, protection, and assimilation. But for others, they incite fear. They are a symbol of oppression, dehumanization, and family separation. By creating *Space in Between* collectively, Cabrera cultivates inclusive spaces of trust and empowerment in which participants come together to unpack these tensions and celebrate their immigration experiences as an integral part of American



Above: Margarita Cabrera, *Space In Between-Bisnaga (Angelica Garcia)* (detail), 2022; Right: Alexandra Kehayoglou, *With Reverence* (detail), 2023



history. In transforming border patrol garments into sculptural narratives, they become tactile records of migratory memories and, Cabrera states, “serve as cultural and historical artifacts that value and document the experiences, struggles, and achievements of those who have found their way. . .”⁴

The daughter of a carpet-maker, Alexandra Kehayoglou began creating hand-tufted work with leftovers from her father's factory and the embodied knowledge that lives in her hands. While Cabrera's *Space in Between* celebrates the resilience that flourishes in hardship's wake, Kehayoglou's site-specific installation, *With Reverence* (2023) is a glimpse of the journey itself. This work is

a portal connecting Kehayoglou with her ancestors as she considers the meaning of passing down a legacy. With it, she examines her grandparents' forced emigration from Greece and how familial trauma is embedded in the lands we associate with home. The work's silhouette—patterned after the woven shoes the artist's grandmother received as a wedding gift—illustrates the heartbreak of migration. The tufted flowers—calendula and roses used in herbal medicine—reframe Kehayoglou's relationship with the Grecian landscape. Here, *With Reverence* is patient, providing the opportunity to heal, rather than perpetuate a lineage of intergenerational struggle fueled by a past of displacement.

⁴ “Multimedia: Artists Explore Cultural Paths Created through Chinese and Mexican Immigration,” Asia Society, May 6, 2015, <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/multimedia-artists-explore-cultural-paths-created-through-chinese-and-mexican-immigration>.



Soft signifies a space with *give*, a portal as porous as the fibers that surround us, a place that welcomes a seepage of memory.

Curatorial ideas for *A soft place to land* began after a fruitful studio visit with Kaveri Raina almost seven years ago. Her work has continued to evolve, the color palette reaching more somber octaves and the fluctuation in saturation capturing the fervor of her movements. Exemplified in *Unforeseen Rigor; To Cease* (2021), the evidence of the artist's hand leaves behind traces of her process; the paintings themselves become a memory of their own making.

As Raina's work develops, a burlap foundation remains consistent. Like Kehayoglou, Raina leans on the familiarity of material to bring her closer to the complexities of home, jute fibers intertwining her own past with India's. While she considered her earlier burlap paintings an extension of herself, her more recent paintings have shifted away from a self-exploration, extending outwards to become a dialogue with those who have

influenced her. The work included in *A soft place to land* is embedded with the legacies of the fierce women who came before her—Rani Lakshmibai, the former Queen of Jhansi who died defending her city, and Jyoti Singh, who fought back as she was brutally raped and murdered and lives on as “Nirbhaya” or the “fearless one.” The practice of weaving history into her work was inspired by conversations with her father, and as such, her paintings also preserve their shared memories. Raina's burlap canvases are planes for untold and erased moments of resistance, alternate realities, histories in the making and histories yet to come.

Liang Shaoji (梁绍基) also uses fibers native to his home, raw silk that is made with silkworms with whom he has been collaborating for over thirty years. The silkworms's act of spinning silk is an embodied memory, encouraging

us to contemplate their interior lives. What memories do they keep? Have they forged a kinship with Liang through making? The artist's interest in this interspecies relationship is, “rooted in the Chinese psyche: Chinese legends connect the invention of silk-making with the creation of Chinese civilization. It is said that the Yellow Emperor, Huangdi, or his wife, Lady Xiling, actually discovered the method of raising silkworms and spinning silk.”⁵ The delicate silk discs in *Planar Tunnel* (2011–2012) are an entrance into this lore. Floating in space, their distance from the wall acts as a portal for time traveling, allowing a helix of memory and myth to form. With this work, Liang demonstrates the fragility of remembrance and how the conflation of fact and fiction has the potential to shape a sustained, multigenerational cultural influence.

Above: Kaveri Raina, *Unforeseen Rigor, To Cease*, 2021;
Right: Liang Shaoji, *Planar Tunnel*, 2011–12



⁵ “Liang Shaoji,” *The Allure of Matter*, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/liang-shaoji/>.



Our dependence on animals is considered throughout *A soft place to land*, again manifesting in Tiona Nekkia McClodden's leatherwork. Care is embedded in the ritual of her process. Through conditioning, protecting, and rejuvenating, she acknowledges and honors the sacrifices of cattle whose hides support her practice.

A member of the leather community, McClodden uses the language of BDSM to explore the enmeshment of desire and pain. The painterly motions of her hands, polishing, conditioning, repairing, show the movement of memory. With each gesture, she layers histories of animal labor, histories of personal inspiration, and histories she holds in her body. These movements of maintenance and care are captured in *A.B. 2-BLANK* (2019). This work, a restored lineman harness once used to suspend construction workers from buildings, is inspired by the practice of late photographer

Alvin Baltrop. In the 1970s and 1980s, a fearless Baltrop used a makeshift harness to secure himself from warehouse rafters, dangling to document the New York City piers as hubs for artists and spots for cruising. His photographs, overlooked during his lifetime, froze key moments in time and prevented pieces of queer history from being swallowed by the AIDS epidemic. *A.B. 2-BLANK* closes the distance between present day and memories of the past; it is almost as if the wax McClodden uses is potent enough to hermetically seal the stories of the harness within itself. Here, using Saphir shoe polish (the artist's brand of choice) and spit-shined steel, McClodden examines relationships between desire, brutality, and function, and the ways in which a kinship with leather cultivates spaces of material, psychosexual, and restorative care.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *A.B. 2-BLANK*, 2019

The materials used to create the work in *A soft place to land* are the kindling that awaken our memories.

Tactile matter transports us through time and space, a carrier for the time traveling emotions of which adrienne maree brown writes. Memory is fragile, but material has the potential to extract lost moments, preserve cultural histories, unravel the threads of trauma, and, as my grandpa's blanket exemplifies, connect us with loved ones lost.

It is my hope that through the artwork presented, the space that houses *A soft place to land* transforms into a site of conjured memories, fostering connectivity through lived experience. That the environment itself becomes a soft place to land. But soft doesn't necessarily mean safe. Soft signifies a space with *give*, a portal as porous as the fibers that surround us, a place that welcomes a seepage of memory.

—Lauren Leving, curator

Kevin Beasley
Cottonwood (From the Grove)
 2022
 Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton,
 dye sublimation t-shirts, altered t-shirts,
 confetti t-shirts, housedress, epoxy resin,
 carbon fiber, altered housedresses,
 durags, work gloves, shoelaces
 74 x 250.75 x 2 in (188 x 636.9 x 5.1 cm)

Margarita Cabrera
Space In Between-Agave (Manuel S. G.)
 2016
 Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper wire,
 PVC pipe, foam, thread, terra cotta pot
 64.5 x 22 x 18 in (163.83 x 55.88 x
 45.72 cm)

Margarita Cabrera
Space In Between-Bisnaga
(Angelica Garcia)
 2016
 Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper wire,
 PVC pipe, foam, thread, terra cotta pot
 31.25 x 28 x 18 in (79.38 x 71.12 x
 45.74 cm)

Margarita Cabrera
Space In Between-Nopal
(Magdalena R.S.)
 2016
 Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper wire,
 PVC pipe, foam, thread, terra cotta pot
 42 x 40 x 11 in (106.68 x 101.6 x
 27.94 cm)

Margarita Cabrera
Space In Between-Nopal
(Thelma M. P.)
 2016
 Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper wire,
 PVC pipe, foam, thread, terra cotta pot
 46 x 43 x 10 in (116.84 x 109.22 x
 25.4 cm)

Margarita Cabrera
Space In Between-Pitaya
(Esther Garcia Martinez)
 2022
 Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper
 wire, PVC pipe, foam, thread, terra
 cotta pot
 42 x 40 x 15 in (106.68 x 101.6 x
 38.1 cm)

Margarita Cabrera
Space In Between-Saguaro
(Erick S. H.)
 2016
 Border Patrol uniform fabric, copper
 wire, PVC pipe, foam, thread, terra
 cotta pot
 60 x 34 x 18 in (152.4 x 86.36 x
 45.74 cm)

Pia Camil
Bara Bara Bara (Divisor Pirata Verde)
 2017
 Second-hand T-shirts from Las
 Torres Market, Iztapalapa
 281 x 145 in (713.7 x 368.3 cm)

Cass Davis
Binding the Devil
 2023
 Hay, hand-woven jacquard textile,
 orange strapping
 Approx 120 x 96 x 60 in
 (304.8 x 243.84 x 152.4 cm)

Cass Davis
Laying of Hands
 2022
 Hand-woven jacquard wool textile,
 emergency rope line
 185 x 32 in (469.9 x 81.28 cm)

Alexandra Kehayoglou
With Reverence
 2023
 Hand-tufted wool
 381.89 x 170 in (970 x 430 cm)

Tiona Nekkia McClodden
A.B. 2-BLANK
 2019
 Leather lineman harness, steel,
 leather dye, Saphir shoe polish, spit
 6 x 45 x 7 in (15.24 x 114.3 x
 17.78 cm)

Tiona Nekkia McClodden
NOTIONS OF AN EQUATION
IMPLIES A SOLUTION
 2019
 Leather hide, leather dye, Kiwi shoe
 polish, Diamond shoe polish
 44 x 22 x 6 in (111.76 x 55.88 x
 15.24 cm)

Tiona Nekkia McClodden
SOUL BENDER
 2019
 Leather sole hide, leather dye, Angelus
 shoe polish, Saphir shoe polish
 31 x 46 x 1 in (78.74 x 116.84 x
 2.54 cm)

Tiona Nekkia McClodden
TNM- [CLUB - 2018]
 2021
 Polished leather boots on metal stand
 21.25 x 16 x 16 in (53.98 x 40.64 x
 40.64 cm)

Kaveri Raina
Lack Of; Lack Thereof; Continuous
Search of Doom
 2021
 Acrylic, graphite, oil pastel, burlap
 60 x 48 in (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

Kaveri Raina
Magnetic Fields
 2023
 Acrylic, graphite, oil pastel, burlap
 60 x 48 in (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

Kaveri Raina
Unforeseen Rigor; To Cease
 2021
 Acrylic, graphite, oil pastel, burlap
 60 x 48 in (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

Liang Shaoji
Nature Series No. 103
 2008
 Newspapers, silk
 34 x 29.5 x 43.3 in (86.36 x 74.93 x
 109.98 cm)

Liang Shaoji
Planar Tunnel
 2011-2012
 Silk
 5 pieces, 57 x 57 in each (145 x
 145 cm each)

Marie Watt
Companion Species (At What Cost?)
 2020
 Reclaimed wool blankets, embroidery
 floss, thread
 107.25 x 209.5 in (272.42 x 532.13 cm)

Marie Watt
Skywalker/Skyscraper (Portrait)
 2021
 Livia Straus' family blankets,
 I-beam, cedar
 89 x 30 x 30 in (226.06 x 76.2 x
 76.2 cm)

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A soft place to land is organized by Curator Lauren Leving with Exhibitions Director Ray Juare, Registrar Jamie Sepich, Creative Director Tom Poole, Exhibitions Technicians Ewuresi Archer, Susan Danko, Jesse Huettner, Nolan Juare, Natalie Lanese, Josh Richey, Colton Rossiter, and Paul Sydorenko, and the entire moCa Cleveland staff. General support also provided by Steffani Bangel, Nathan Florsheim, and Melissa Kansky.

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**In memory*

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