

Intimate
confession
is a project

Blaffer Art Museum

October 27, 2023—March 10, 2024



Gwenneth Boelens. *Liar's Cloth*, 2017. Reflective and conductive thread, aramid, folding chair. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Klemm's.

This exhibition, through the work of eleven artists spanning generations and geographies, thinks through infrastructure as an intimate holding cell, capable of affective and affirmative power.

— Jennifer Teets

Intimate confession is a project is a group exhibition that considers transmission, intergenerational life, and cultural inheritance through the prism of intimacy and infrastructure. The juxtaposition of “intimacy” and “infrastructure” as the theme for an exhibition might seem paradoxical: Infrastructure is, by definition, composed of material and immaterial relations that interchange or express movement. It’s the structures that make society operate (government, education, hospitals, power stations, cables, pipelines, etc.) and it enables, sustains, and/or enhances societal living conditions—until it ruptures. Intimacy, on the other hand, is a term of unbound meaning. It is a synonym for proximity or close relations. Intimate relations imply *affect*, or a looking inward, often embodied, private, and psychological. And yet, these two rubrics have been together animating conversations around relational life as of late, especially in the work of a number of artists.

This exhibition, through the work of eleven artists spanning generations and geographies, thinks through infrastructure as an intimate holding cell, capable of affective and affirmative power. While feminist and

queer scholarship have engaged with intimacy as an analytical tool, introducing intimacy to the field of infrastructural research is somewhat novel. It situates the affective within the pronounced infrastructural turn, creating what thinkers such as Lauren Berlant, Ara Wilson, and Kai Bosworth have deemed “affective infrastructures.” Affective infrastructures draw our attention to the emotions produced by concrete infrastructure systems and they are composed of infrastructural relations of social systems. In our age of canals, pipes, tubes, wires, locks, valves, streets, tracks, ramps, networks, and so on, thinking through affective infrastructures allows for “multiplicity and difference and to be with each other in common, moving beyond relations of sovereignty,” in the words of Berlant, a cultural theorist. Intimacy can be enabled or hindered by infrastructures; influenced by material and symbolic domains. *Intimate confession is a project* thus looks at that potentialized juncture in forms such as (glitched) artifacts and portals, vessels, buildings, fibers, found objects, and heirlooms.

The title of the exhibition is borrowed from a line of a sonnet by Juliana Spahr in her book *Well, Then, There, Now* (2011). In her poetry, the author illuminates various forms of infrastructural space, of being in common and in resistance. In Spahr's words and worlds, blood is warranted as a collective, intimate confessional space; an infrastructure that flows, borderless, and bountiful:

*Things should be said more largely than the personal way.
Things are larger than the personal way of telling.
Intimate confession is a project.
Confession's structured plan of percents and regulations.*

*When the amounts of blood are considered.
When the strength, the quantities, of blood are regarded.
When blood is thought as meaning.
An intimate confession.*

*Blood is a force, a house.
And the difference between those that took and those that remained.
As the qualities of blood are considered remains undocumentable.
As the quantities of blood are considered remains unquantifiable.*

*For we are located with some and not with others for this is intimate.
We are situated with some and not with one against confession.*

Spahr's poem is recast in this exhibition to reflect on the relational infrastructures of cultural material. Artists have long explored various forms of cultural and material transfer, and the works gathered here look at ways of subverting, dislocating, or distorting infrastructures. Some works reflect on forms of embedded experience in racialized, gendered, and environmentally determinant constitutions, of inherited forms often perpetuated by global capitalism. The show asks what happens when we acknowledge material transference as an act of symbolic and material power, with works confronting infrastructures and the resulting environments.

Intimate confession is a project is informed by Houston, a city loaded with infrastructural change and charge especially tied to the repercussions of climate-induced weather events. Three artists were commissioned to make new works and invited to spend time in the city's waterways, bayous, chemical factories, petrochemical corridors, and the facilities of the University of Houston and the Blaffer Art Museum.



Kate Newby. *Do it tired*, 2023. Cast iron, Loading dock, 14 x 24 x 2 in. (9 pieces). Courtesy of the artist and Laurel Gitlen. Photo: Jennifer Bootwala.

Drawing from Houston’s drainage network and storm systems management, **Kate Newby** (b. 1979, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in Floresville, Texas) created a project comprising a series of cast-iron grates fabricated at a foundry in the town where she lives. The works are installed in three transitional locations in and around the Blaffer: the museum entrance, the loading dock, and the courtyard. These site-specific works mark the junctures between above and below ground, serving as conduits for channeling rain and floodwaters. Over time, the cast iron will gradually brighten as the material weathers. Moreover, Newby’s distinctive, hand-cut openings and holes are an invitation to look closer, bringing a very intimately crafted form and viewing experience to the public sphere.

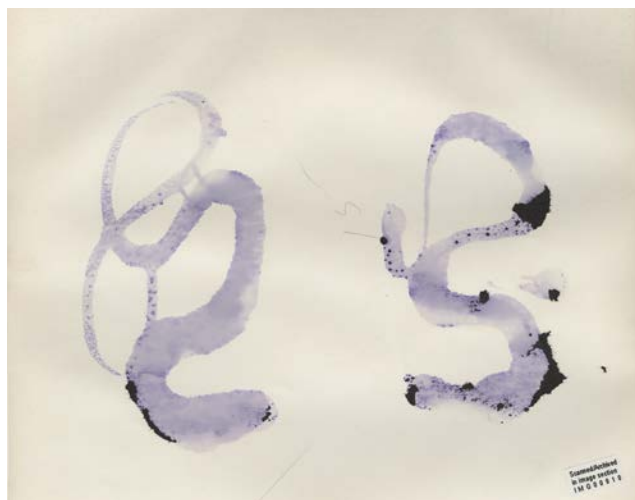
Two new works by **Clémence de La Tour du Pin** (b. 1986, Roanne, France; lives and works in Paris and Amsterdam) approach embodied experience through scent, archive, and institutional memory. One work features an arrangement of personal archival material, propaganda material, and photographs sourced from the oil and gas industries archives within the Special Collections at the University of Houston Libraries, while the other is a series of wax casts of handmade glass bottles. The use of beeswax and sealing wax, alongside a specially produced scent containing sulfuric notes embedded within the material, extends the work’s exploration of bodily infestation to ideas of containment and the distortion of various materials.



Clémence de La Tour du Pin. *Peculiar Sweet Matter*, 2023. Beeswax, pigment, oil substance, silk, thread, 5.9 x 5.9 x 3.9 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Clémence de La Tour du Pin. TPC Group [Modifications and Additions to Process Facilities], 1953. Historical photograph on loan from Special Collections UH Libraries, 8 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Clémence de La Tour du Pin. TPC Group [900-924, n. 3], 1950-1960. Backside of a historical photograph on loan from Special Collections UH Libraries, 8 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Iris Touliatou. *A Model of the Dog of Alcibiades*, temporary loan from the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Collection (MFAH) object number BF.2019.7, Benjamin Moore 1614 Delray Gray paint, Mercury Security card reader, UH Cougar card access, pedestal. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Rodeo Gallery. Photo: Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.



Chiffon Thomas, *Gresham*, 2022. Bible skins, thread, 9 x 11 x 12 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Iris Touliatou's (b. 1981, Athens, Greece; lives and works in Athens, Greece) project entailed investigating the history and ongoing functions of the Blaffer. This includes the museum's foundation, location, exhibition history, and affiliations, as well as the ordinary processes and structures—mostly hidden or invisible—that enable the institution to function. In this exhibition, Touliatou presents used staff calendars, relocating them from private offices to the public gallery, in exchange for office maintenance paid for with money from the artist's production stipend. These frozen "time pieces" gain a new status when transferred to the gallery. In tandem, Touliatou also requested the loan of *A Model of the Dog of Alcibiades*, an object gifted to the Sarah Blaffer Foundation and on view at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. The object is now viewable at the Blaffer at the request or booking of special tours by docents who have extended access to the office spaces during the exhibition. Touliatou's twofold work proposes the use of existing infrastructures to redirect, redistribute, and renegotiate temporalities.

Hovering over the Blaffer's staircase is a 25-piece installation made from salvaged leather book covers that **Chiffon Thomas** (b. 1991 in Chicago; lives and works in Los Angeles) collected and preserved over a three-year period. The covers, also known as "Bible skins," have been disassembled and sutured together in a robust display—each stitched and sewn into a miniature house or building reminiscent of the artist's childhood neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. The work is informed by the artist's fervent religious upbringing, one in which indoctrination was tethered to a lack of social mobility. Thomas also exhibits two wall sculptures with soundscapes inspired by post-human catastrophic worlds. The artist created these works while thinking through a hot and inescapable landscape: Each is made from ventilation grates sourced from colonial homes, with the grate recalling confessionals, markers of atmospheric transmission, time and apparatuses of desired relief.

Benvenuto Chavajay Ixtetelá (b. 1978 in San Pedro La Laguna, Sololá, Guatemala; lives and works in San Pedro La Laguna and Guatemala City) presents a human-scale photograph printed on canvas showing a person camouflaged with greenery, blending into the lush forest surrounding them. The image was produced during the artist's performance in his Guatemalan homeland, specifically in the sacred mountains where spiritual guides come to cure their patients. The work refers to people made of plants—grandparents, grandmothers, and ancestors—through the use of the medicinal rue plant, and is the artist's gesture toward remembering his mother's healing. The image is also intended to introduce a fourth moment, or unwritten chapter, to what the artist calls "Plant Humanity" in the sacred Mayan text, the Popol Vuh.

Na Mira's (b. 1982, Lawrence, Kansas; lives and works in Los Angeles) installation finds its meaning in apparatus and animism. Using an infrared video camera that began, as the artist says, "glitching past

scenes" into the present, Mira follows a contaminated rhythm across depicted points of rupture. Projected above a Chinoiserie family heirloom charred by the Japanese preservation technique of *shou-sugi ban*, the scenes mesh (glitched) memory, language, and heritage.

Copper, noteworthy for its use in electrical grids, is a predominant material throughout the exhibition. **Gwenneth Boelens'** (b. 1980, Soest, Netherlands; lives and works in Amsterdam) site-specific installation made of copper wires and reflective yarn connects the three galleries on the Blaffer's upstairs floor. The strings pass over rollers, through spindles, and across pulleys, each technical component reclaimed from abandoned textile machinery. The wires winding throughout the space evoke notions of conductivity and transmission, hinting at their role in telecommunications as well as the somatic body and the nervous system. Boelens also presents a textile work incorporating similar materials, looking at the technical feasibilities of weaving.



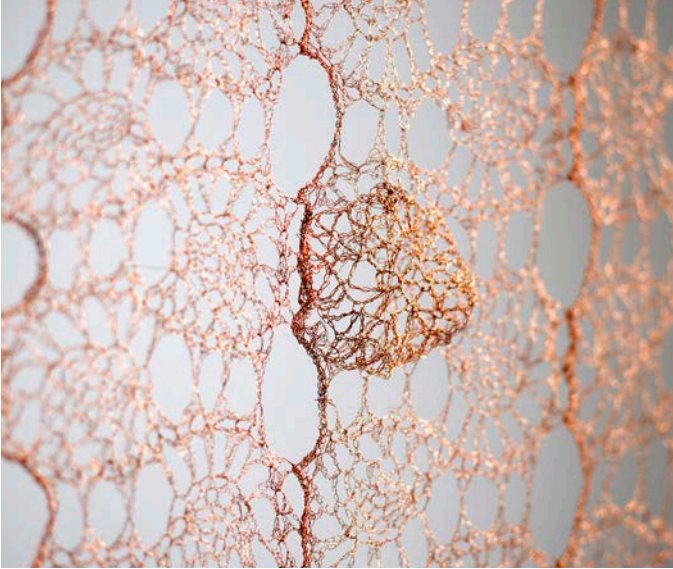
Benvenuto Chavajay Ixtetelá. *Hombre verde*, 2022/2023. Ríjtual Acción Performance, Montañas del volcán Chichuk, San Pedro Lago Atitlán Stretched canvas print, 55 x 83 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Na Mira. *Sgr A** 𐄂𐄂, 1898-2019. Inherited wood chair, fire, beeswax, 34 x 19 x 27 in. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Soto. Photo: Jeff McLane.



Gwenneth Boelens. *This Dusk Song (subtle body)*, 2023. Copper yarn, reflective yarn, reclaimed factory spools and rollers. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Klemm's.



ektor garcia. *portal III* (detail), 2019/2022. Crocheted copper wire, copper, welded steel, 73 3/4 x 52 x 17 in. Courtesy of the artist and Rebecca Camacho Presents.

In his intricately knotted textile works, **ektor garcia** (b. 1985, Red Bluff, California; lives and works nomadically) crochets with copper wires to reinterpret the doily-making technique he learned from the women in his maternal family, whose roots are in rural Zacatecas, Mexico. Often working on-site, garcia disassembles past works, then reassembles them in the spirit of his itinerant and nomadic lifestyle. At the Blaffer, crocheted doilies and granny squares made from copper wire form the supports of other varied handmade pieces. A fortified center consisting of copper crochet consumes and feeds—it is webbing as skin, webbing as portal; stained-glass screens or radials that you can peer through.

Anna Mayer's (b. 1974, Macomb, Illinois; lives and works Houston) sculptures are in dialog with pre- and post-petroculture by collapsing the distinction between the above and below of the Earth's surface, a characteristic trait of fracking seen in various landscapes throughout Texas. Each work uses what Mayer calls "funeral fringe" to penetrate photos sourced from a United States Department of Agriculture database of Texan landscapes and various moments of its induced fracturing. Mayer also presents a latch-hooked replica of a painting by Paul Klee. When the artist's mother passed away in 2016, she was knitting excerpts of paintings by Klee, her favorite painter. Mayer took her mother's patterns and latch-hooked them, the grid of this fiber process replacing the grid of the knit versions.

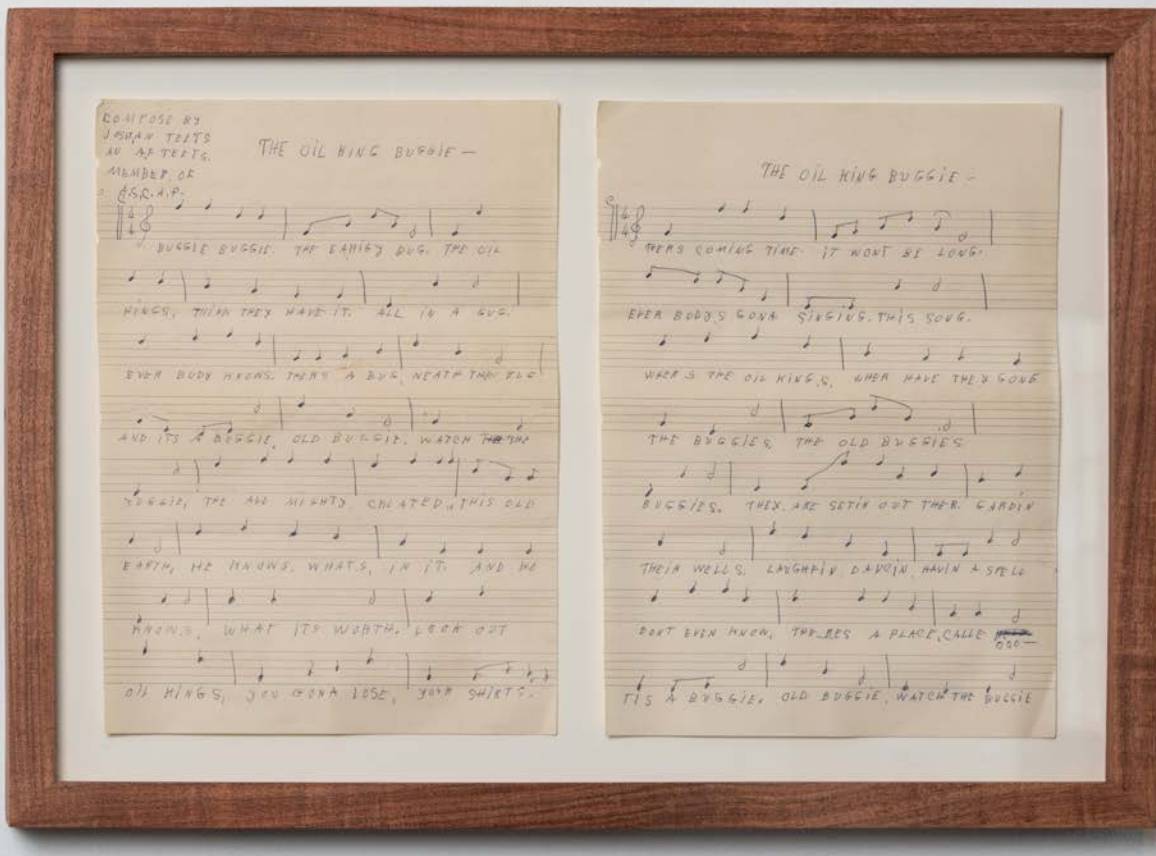


Anna Mayer. *Pale Clay (Unknown Grid 8)*, 2022. Hooked rug with dyed canvas and inked tips, mounted on wood panel, 16 x 12 x 2 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Lonnie Holley (b. 1950, Birmingham, Alabama; lives and works in Atlanta) presents two works: one a spray-painted quilt, "a second skin" for many African Americans living in the South, and the other a freestanding sculpture comprised of mops. The artist often inserts his own narrative within the objects he uses, acknowledging both their histories and his own. For the sculpture, Holley took the mops from the now-defunct North Carolina Asylum for the Negro Insane, which was associated with a number of child labor violations. As a child himself, Holley lived in Jim Crow-era Birmingham, Alabama and spent time in several foster homes. Holley sees these mops as infrastructural remains, representative of "broken-down inmates waiting to be ordered around."

Song lyrics written by my late great-grandmother **Josie Ann Teets** (b. 1887, Strickler, Arkansas; d. 1982, Houston), an amateur singer who lived in the Houston/Galveston area most of her life, are also included in the exhibition as an intimate confession to the viewers. The lyrics in the framed musical partition on display hints at, rather humorously if not cynically, the loss of life on earth connected to oil extraction.

Together, the works by these eleven artists contrast what Michelle Murphy, a Professor of History and Women and Gender Studies, calls "humans, things, words, and non-humans into patterned conjunctures," outlining how infrastructures can be affective in their varied expressions of movements and imprints on cultural life.



Josie Ann Teets, *The Oil King Buggie*, 1975. Pen on paper, 8 x 10 in., 2 pages framed. Image courtesy of Artpace, San Antonio. Photo: Beth Devillier.



Lonnie Holley, *The Skin That We Are Deeply Wrapped Within*, 2022. Enamel, oil stick, spray paint, and nails on quilted fabric over wood panel, 48 1/4 x 48 1/4 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe. Photo: Sai Tripathi.

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Jennifer Teets (b. 1978, Houston, Texas) is a curator, writer, and occasional performer who has been based in Paris, France since 2009. Within her work, she addresses the roles of consumption and contamination as an embodiment of thought which then performs, spores, proliferates. She has been the director and convenor of the *Matter in Flux* (MiF) mentorship circle since 2018. Teets has curated numerous exhibitions and talks, including *Intimate confession is a project*, Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston (2023–2024); *Conduit House*, April in Paris Fine Arts, Aerdenhout, NL (2023); *Carbonate of Copper*, Artpace, San Antonio (2022); *Wager of Word*, Beeler Gallery, Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, Ohio (2018); *The Pump*, Royal College of Art, in collaboration with Flat Time House, London (2015); *Elusive Earths*, Etablissement d'en Face, Brussels (2014); among many others. She is editor of *Electric Brine*, published by Archive Books in 2021. She is a correspondent for *Artforum* and has written for *Topical Cream*, *Mousse*, *Terremoto*, *e-flux*, and multiple other publications. Teets was a Senior Scholar in Residence at the University of Texas at Austin at Casa Herrera, Antigua, Guatemala in the spring of 2022. Teets studied under French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour at the Sciences Po Experimentation in Arts and Politics program in Paris, 2013–14.

Intimate confession is a project is accompanied for its six-month duration by a rich public program featuring talks, readings, concerts, and performances in connection with a range of citywide and institutional partners, including Basket Books & Art, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Collection, the Institute for Global Engagement, Project Row Houses, the UH School of Art, and the Institute for Research on Women, Gender & Sexuality.

The *Intimate confession is a project* exhibition and programs are organized by guest curator Jennifer Teets with assistance from Steven Matijcio, Jane Dale Owen Director & Chief Curator at the Blaffer Art Museum; Melissa Noble, Managing Director of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts; and Sarah Jentsch, Program Coordinator for the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. The exhibition texts were translated into Spanish by Blanca Wilson, Executive Administrator at the Blaffer Art Museum and Natalia Valencia. Additional assistance was received from Youngmin Chung, Assistant Director of Exhibitions & Operations; Erika Mei Chua Holum, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Assistant Curator; Tony Evans, Design and Digital Resources Manager; Jen Bootwala, Design & Digital Coordinator for the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts; Robert Kimberly, Installations Manager; and Katherine Veneman, Curator of Education at the Blaffer Art Museum. The title and vinyl design are by Espace Ness, Paris. The exhibition design is by Vassiliki Holeva.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalog, designed by Espace Ness and co-published by Inventory Press in 2024, featuring essays and writings by exhibition curator Jennifer Teets; poets Juliana Spahr, Roberto Tejada, and Lara Mimosas Montes; theorists Ara Wilson and Kai Bosworth; and cultural critic Orit Gat, among others. The exhibition, catalog, and public programs are made possible with funding from the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. The exhibition is also made possible with funding from The Mondriaan Fund, Dutch Culture Fund USA, and Villa Albertine.

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Dale Owen Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Jo & Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Sarah C. Morian Endowment, and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Blaffer Gallery Endowment.

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**Blaffer Art Museum
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Admission is always free

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Front Cover: Lonnie Holley, *Uncovering the Whitewash*, 2019. Wooden stand and mops, 72 x 46 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe.
Photo: Truett Dietz.

Back Cover: Artist Kate Newby installing *Do it tired*, 2023. Cast iron, Loading dock, 14 x 24 x 2 in. (9 pieces). Courtesy of the artist and Laurel Gitlen.
Photo: Jennifer Bootwala.

