

Michelle Lopez

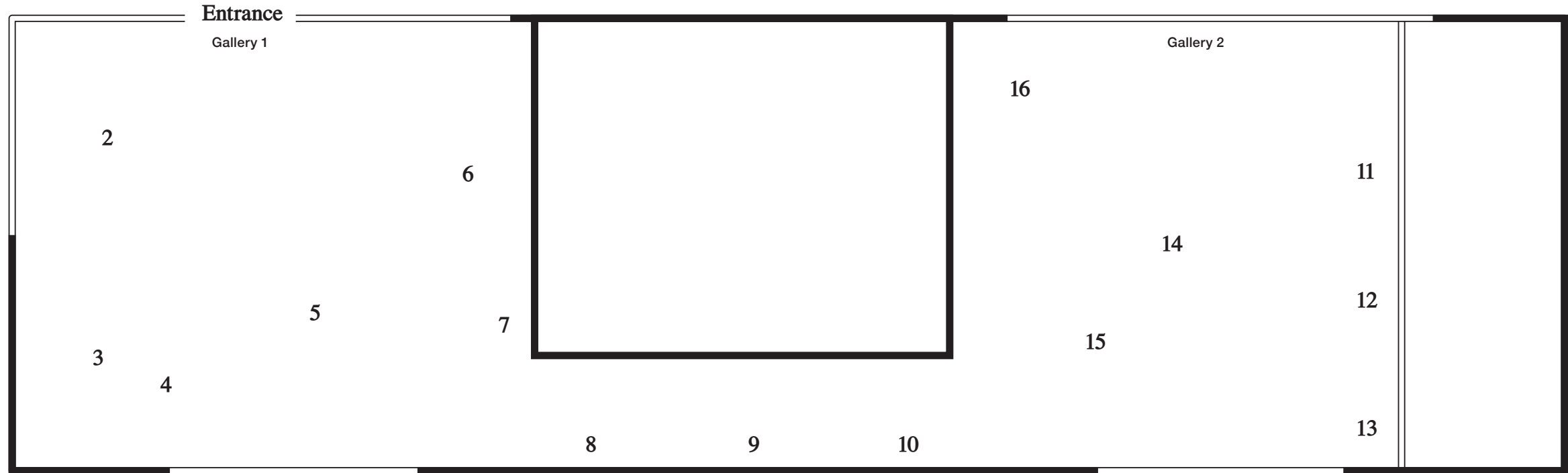
Ester Partegàs

STEADY



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Garden



Stanlee Gatti Gardens

1 Michelle Lopez, *Single Line/Ropehenge*, 2025. Nylon, steel, fiberglass, resin, enamel, 88 1/2 x 72 1/2 x 110 in. Co-commissioned by the Wattis and Tufts University Art Galleries.

Stanlee Gatti Galleries (Gallery 1)

2 Ester Partegàs, *Two Moons (laundry baskets)*, 2024. FastMaché, cardboard, fabric, wood, disco balls, 125 x 80 x 64 in.

3 Michelle Lopez, *THRONE*, 2016-17. Pure lead, enamel gilding paint, steel, 16 x 18 x 88 in.

4 Michelle Lopez, *THRONE*, 2016-17. Pure lead, enamel gilding paint, steel, 16 x 18 x 88 in.

5 Ester Partegàs, *Host*, 2024. FastMaché, cardboard, fabric, brick, tile, plywood, polyurethane resin, 72 x 20 x 32 in.

6 Michelle Lopez, *HEMP DREAM*, 2023. Steel, nylon, 42 x 46 x 50 in.

7 Michelle Lopez, *SINGLE LINE*, 2023. Steel, nylon, 42 1/4 x 49 1/2 x 20 in.

Hallway Gallery

8 Ester Partegàs, *knead, penetrate, let go (strawberry soccer ball)*, 2024. Graphite on vellum, stickers, tape, 38 1/6 x 34 1/8 x 1 3/4 in. (framed)

9 Ester Partegàs, *knead, penetrate, let go (cat spaceship donut)*, 2024. Graphite on vellum, stickers, tape, 32 3/4 x 35 7/8 x 1 3/4 in. (framed)

10 Ester Partegàs, *knead, penetrate, let go (green sneaker)*, 2024. Graphite on vellum, stickers, tape, 41 3/8 x 30 7/8 x 1 3/4 in. (framed)

11 Ester Partegàs, *knead, penetrate, let go (French fries)*, 2024. Graphite on vellum, stickers, tape, 42 7/16 x 27 9/16 x 1 3/4 in. (framed)

12 Ester Partegàs, *knead, penetrate, let go (lightning bolt pretzel)*, 2024. Graphite on vellum, stickers, tape, 40 1/8 x 29 3/8 x 1 3/4 in. (framed)

Penny and Jim Coulter Galleries (Gallery 2)

13 Ester Partegàs, *Half*, 2024. FastMaché, cardboard, fabric, cleaning sponges and wipes, 24 x 5 x 29 in.

14 Michelle Lopez, *THREE ROPE PROP*, 2023. Steel, 69 x 71 x 81 in.

15 Ester Partegàs, *Twilight (laundry baskets)*, 2024. FastMaché, cardboard, fabric, brick, tile, plywood, polyurethane resin, 90 x 30 x 56 in.

16 Michelle Lopez, *SINGLE LINE II*, 2023. Steel, nylon, 50 x 49 x 9 in.

All Michelle Lopez's works are courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. All Ester Partegàs's works are courtesy of the artist.

Stepping onto plush red carpet, visitors first encounter Michelle Lopez's *THRONE* (2016–17) and Ester Partegàs's *Host* (2023) in the exhibition *STEADY* at the Wattis. *THRONE* is rendered in an “anemically Giacometti-style,” as the artist describes it, referring to Alberto Giacometti's *Hands Holding the Void (Invisible Object)* (1934) or *Seated Woman* (1949).<sup>1</sup> In Lopez's rendition, the female figure is absent, as is the physical seat itself. Made of lead and partially gilded, the thrones stand over seven feet tall and rest on three spindly legs, instead of the typical four. Lopez made this work after the presidential election in 2016. Across the room Partegàs's *Host* rests directly on the floor. A toppled sky blue chair with its legs up in the air is attached to a tunnel form. Holding up the structure are stacks of red bricks, one on each side of the overturned seat.

Let's take a slight detour to understand the show's origins. The initial iteration of the exhibition began in Marfa. Overwhelmingly rich in its biodiversity and history, this West Texas border town is primarily known as the place where Donald Judd lived and worked from the 1970s until his death in 1994. His legacy and that of his Minimalist works still dominate the town and landscape, and this context provided the backdrop for the first version of this two-person exhibition at Ballroom Marfa in 2024. I found a curious convergence of the return of patriarchal, hetero-masculine authoritarianism in politics and society and the thriving legacy of Minimalism.<sup>2</sup> This intertwining intersection made me wonder how power returns, replicates, and remains. But also, how do we free ourselves from old patterns? Lopez and Partegàs's works create a wedge that breaks open conversations, bypassing the shadows of these looming legacies. In *Minimalism and Rhetoric of Power* (1990), art historian Anna Chave argues that the visual language

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1 Michelle Lopez, excerpt from Guggenheim application, career narrative, 2019, <https://www.michellelopez.com/artwork/throne>

2 Of course plenty of artists have reinvented Minimalism from the 1960s to the 1990s from Eva Hesse to Scott Burton to Mel Edwards to Jackie Windsor (a mentor of Lopez's) to name a few.

of Minimalism and the “object’s look of absolute, or ‘plain power’ as Judd described it” replicates the visual language of power, military, capital, and patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> While Minimalists stated that their objects are empty and neutral, she argues that “with closer scrutiny ... the blank face of Minimalism may come into focus as the face of capital, the face of authority, the face of the father.”<sup>4</sup> The heroization of men and any figures of authority should continuously be examined. What Chave predicted has come true—Minimalism has been co-opted by consumerism, starting with the Calvin Klein photoshoot at Judd’s studio in the 1990s, and has now become a lifestyle, at times unattainable even by the most wealthy and resourced (celebrity billionaire Kim Kardashian is currently being sued for purchasing knock-off Judd furniture).

While the origin story of *STEADY* began in Texas, it’s not where it ends. The exhibition comes further west to the Wattis, opening on January 21, 2025, the day after Inauguration Day. As this text is being written, Donald Trump has been elected for a second term. The first two works in *STEADY* elicit questions such as: Who holds the seat of power? How did they come into power? How is power used? The act of steadying is an act of power. It requires ongoing physical and structural interdependence with the collaboration of parts and partners. Instead of separation, dominance, and control, there is counterbalance. Perhaps we can look under the seat, as *Host* suggests. What will we find under the surface, or within ourselves? Through curiosity and play the artists invite and challenge us to have our own interpretation, meaning, and experience with the works. Lopez and Partegas’s experimentation with materials, form, and color resists closed systems and ways of thinking, bringing forth open forms of possibility and life.

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3 Anna Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 64, no. 5, (January 1990), 44. Another stand-out quote from the essay that illustrates the macho mindset is from Carl Andre, a friend of Judd’s who also has work on view at Chinati, Judd’s museum: “I wanted very much to seize and hold the space of that gallery—not simply fill it, but seize and hold that space.” Chave, 51.

4 Chave, 51.

Historian Mary Beard reflects on today’s society as “very narrowly” understanding power “as an object of possession that only the few—mostly men—can own or wield.” To effectively change power is to “decoupl[e] it from public prestige. It means thinking collaboratively, about the power of followers not just of leaders. It means, above all, thinking about power as an attribute or even a verb (to power), not as a possession.”<sup>5</sup> To steady ourselves we need “to power” among and between many parts and partners, instead of the singular authority of “the father,” to use Chave’s phrase again. Patriarchal power leaves us in a state of torpor, depriving us from being active participants in the world. Coupled with technology and propaganda (absolute representation and images), it leads to even larger and more devastating effects, as we see with the multiple active wars today.<sup>6</sup> The current systems of power have failed many of us, including the artists. Lopez reflects: “the system has failed me, the art market [has failed me], the patriarchy has failed me—and where do I position myself in that?”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps their artworks help us to make sense of it all. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed writes that “to be orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us find our way,” and it is also a matter of “how we inhabit spaces as well as “who” or “what” we inhabit spaces with.”<sup>8</sup> Ahmed uses concepts of phenomenology (consciousness directed toward an object) and orientation to offer new ways of thinking about

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5 Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company: 2017), 86.

6 More on this in Sarah Schulman’s book *Conflict is not Abuse*, where she illustrates how supremacy behavior and way of thinking do not tolerate difference (and how traumatized behavior can also resemble this), leading to escalation in group relationships and nation-states.

7 Alex Klein, “Through the Barricades,” *Michelle Lopez: Ballast and Barricades* (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania: 2020), 20.

8 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press: 2006), 3.



Ester Partegàs, *knead, penetrate, let go (cat spaceship donut)*, 2024 (on left) and *Two Moons (laundry baskets)*, 2024 (on right). Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Heather Rasmussen.



Michelle Lopez, *THREE ROPE PROP*, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo by Heather Rasmussen

the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race, as it emphasizes the lived experience, where “gut-level” awareness and intelligence allow one to sense and feel things.<sup>9</sup>

Meaning can be formed and felt. It is contingent rather than absolute, shifting based on one’s experience, identity, and context. Ahmed encourages the use of sensation as a daily tool and feminist approach: “sensible because of the world we are in; feminism is a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world, which we might register at first through our own experiences.”<sup>10</sup> Partegàs has said that her work is tied to “embodied experiences as [a] women artist, mother, and immigrant.”<sup>11</sup> Lopez, as a Filipina-American, encapsulates “a dizzying array of colonial hybridity...” and she adds, “I can’t emphasize enough how important this was to my formation as an artist.”<sup>12</sup> While their experiences and identity are central to both artists’ work and practice, they do not serve as a sole subject or image. Bodies or any representational figures are purposefully absent in *STEADY*, and for the most part, shapes and forms are abstracted. These alternative forms of figuration can also act as “ghost forms”<sup>13</sup> or “future ruins,”<sup>14</sup> hints of

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9 Ahmed, 3.

10 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press: 2007), 21.

11 Ester Partegàs interview with Devon Dikeou, zing magazine: [https://zingmagazine.com/blog\\_posts/ester-partegas-steady/](https://zingmagazine.com/blog_posts/ester-partegas-steady/)

12 Alex Klein, Excerpt from Curatorial Notes from *Ballast and Barricades*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, University of Pennsylvania: <https://www.michellelopez.com/artwork/continuous-line>. As an additional note, the Philippines has been colonized by Spain (1521–1898), the United States of America (1898–1946), Japan (1941–46).

13 Lopez has said, “It’s like a ghost form—it has a physical history, but it becomes a collection of material associations that lead circuitously back to bodies.” “Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia”. Interview with Michelle Lopez and Michael Queenland, Mousse Magazine: <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/michelle-lopez-michael-queenland-at-the-institute-of-contemporary-art-philadelphia-2020/>

14 Partegàs has said, “These works combine tenderness and aggressiveness, destruction and care, vitality and impermanence. ... they embody future ruins.” Ester Partegàs interview with Devon Dikeou.

familiar associations that allude to the body or social structures. The absence of representing bodies leaves room for the body of the viewer.

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Understanding the small and familiar is a way to sense the world. Partegàs has referenced Georges Perec’s idea of the “infra-ordinary” or the unnoticed in her work: “‘infra’ points to yet another level of depth of something we assumed had touched ground, or had nothing else to offer.”<sup>15</sup> The subject of Partegàs’s new drawing series, *knead, penetrate, let go* (2024), is bread, an “infra-ordinary” object. Bread is the building block of nourishment; it is ephemeral but offers strength once digested. From afar the bread drawings look like rocks, mountain formations, cairns, or even entryways to tombs. Partegàs draws these bread structures on vellum and then affixes the sheets together with stickers initially borrowed from her young daughter Djuna’s sticker collection. The stickers, too, are infra-ordinary objects, “mundane and seemingly unimportant, domestic little things that speak of care and the small things of everyday life.”<sup>16</sup>

Lopez and Partegàs shift their value systems, and give time and attention to the unseen. Their materials and infra-structure exhibit power and strength. Partegàs’s sculptures on view are made with cardboard and FastMâché. She eagerly seeks out cardboard, a recycled material that is usually tossed aside, but is nevertheless strong and durable. The “flutes,” or the wavy inner layer in-between two flat layers of paper, act like tiny arches, effectively distributing pressure and withstanding significant weight. Cardboard allows Partegàs to easily build up the structure and work on a large scale. She can cut away, lift, and rearrange parts—all by her hand. Rope is another unassuming everyday material with great strength. Lopez uses steel rope in her “hyper-rope”

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15 Ester Partegàs interview with Devon Dikeou.

16 Ester Partegàs interview with Devon Dikeou.

sculptures, as seen with *Single Line* (2023), *Hemp Dream* (2023), *THREE ROPE PROP* (2023) on view. Rope can be listless and limp, but at its core, its infra-structure is incredibly strong. When twisted or braided together, force is distributed across many strands, increasing the rope's tensile strength and allowing it to withstand heavy loads. Rope lifts, anchors, tows, and connects objects together.

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The works in *STEADY* activate one's senses and perception. They do not dictate what they are, rather they leave room for one's own experiences, the messiness of life, of relations, of bodies, of who we are. Lopez's *Single Line* and *Hemp Dream*, for example, have a lilt and ease to them. The artist contradicts the steel rope's materiality and weight through labor intensive processes of restructuring its core and torching the steel to make bends by hand in her studio. They float up and curve, as if they are drawn in space. These works are also flocked, a process of electro-statically fusing nylon fibers onto the surface, giving a velvet-like texture. The slight shift in perception destabilizes the image: is it rope? Is it rebar? Is it soft? Is it hard? Is it floating?

Also on view is *THREE ROPE PROP*, Lopez's take on Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969). In Serra's work, four enormous plates made of steel and lead lean on each other supported by their own weight. He said of this work, "Even though it seemed it might collapse, it was in fact freestanding. You could see through it, look into it, walk around it, and I thought, 'There's no getting around it. This is sculpture.'"<sup>17</sup> The dominating nature of Serra's sculpture is not only in material, but also in assembly. In 1971, an installer was pinned down by a slab and later died from the injuries. Lopez offers another version that removes violence and danger by "purg[ing] density and mass" from the slabs. Instead she torched and reshaped three pieces of steel

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Serra, MoMA website: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81294>

rope that form the relative shape of a cube. Lopez says of her practice, "as a woman artist, I'm interested in taking masculine and monolithic Minimalist material and form and rendering [them] vulnerable."<sup>18</sup> In *THREE ROPE PROP*, there is movement and flow. Three rope pieces bend and slope and vigorously rise up to form the sculpture. At a glance they rest on one another but in reality, the ropes just barely graze each other. The work does not make one fearful, nor does it dictate what sculpture and the surrounding space is, as Serra's work does. There is dynamic participation and agency. There is not a singular view but many, depending on where you stand. It invites the viewer in as a participant to orient and steady oneself alongside the work.

In *Two Moons (laundry baskets)* (2024), a disco ball hangs on a stick that sits atop the two parts of a laundry basket. The shapes can also resemble shelters, tunnels, arches, or traps. One side is painted creamy orange while the other is painted a baby pink and layered with bedsheets. If the sides of the basket are pushed too far apart, the disco ball could come tumbling down, and if they are pushed too close together, they form a cage entrapping the disco ball. Depending on one's orientation, the disco ball is already trapped, perhaps a warning that we are all part of societal trappings. Partegàs's sculptures can betray a "promise of organization and order ... [and] our intimate notions of safety and security."<sup>19</sup> The images and objects of domesticity and social structure are sold to us, and we consume them with ease. When do the soft and comfortable things like bed sheets or shiny and fun things like the disco ball become treacherous? At what point do we need to find ourselves trapped? We can dig deeper into our subconscious into our true vulnerabilities, desires, and emotions.

Partegàs also plays with colors and the senses they evoke. The sculptures are painted the soft pastel colors of cheap plastic laundry

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<sup>18</sup> Michelle Lopez, excerpt from Guggenheim application, career narrative, 2019, <https://www.michellelopez.com/artwork/throne>

<sup>19</sup> Ester Partegàs interview with Devon Dikeou.

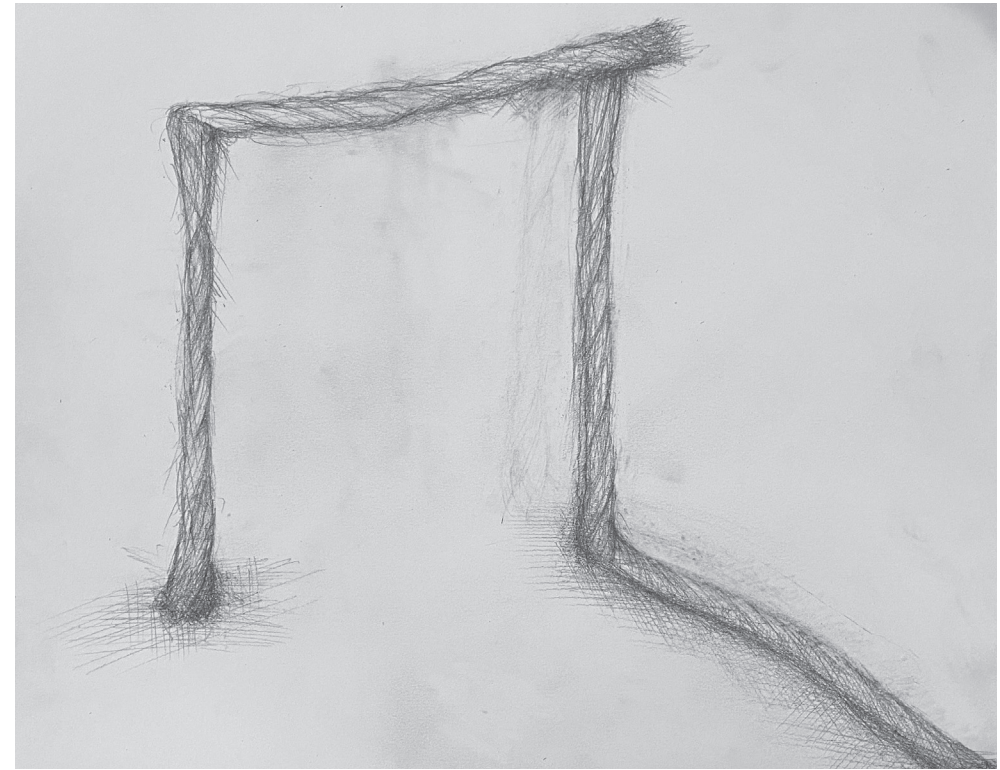
baskets. In Partegàs's color scheme, the cheerful ones are also juxtaposed with heightened colors accentuated with pigment. In *Twilight (laundry baskets)* (2024), for example, one side is painted with a soft lavender purple-gray, while the other side is yellow, almost as bright as an Easter baby chick. To top it off, bubblegum pink bows adorn the yellow surface. She says of her use of color, "I want to make them seductive and also repellent at the same time, I want to make them scream or act bitter."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps to scream is the first act of liberation. Another freeing gesture can be seen in Lopez's outdoor sculpture, *Single Line/Ropehenge* (2025). The work resembles a portal or a frame, but one that continually re-frames its surroundings. Painted a vibrant magenta, the rope sculpture stands tall in the gardens that surround the new Wattis gallery. This is the first time that the artist has used this color, which is typically read as ultra-feminine. The maximal color and gesture are what these times call for.

Michelle Lopez and Ester Partegàs's works are testaments that we are not beholden to ghosts of the past, or to any heroes. The structures that have been passed down, much like the Minimalist sculptures, replicate. Using nuanced ways of looking and feeling with curiosity, softness, criticality, imagination, and humor, we find ways to steady ourselves for what is to come ahead.

—Daisy Nam

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<sup>20</sup> Ester Partegàs interview with Devon Dikeou.



Michelle Lopez, Preliminary drawing for *Single Line/Ropehenge*, 2024.

#### Wattis Institute Staff

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**STEADY: Michelle Lopez and Ester Partegàs**  
**CCA Wattis Institute**  
**January 21–April 12, 2025**

**Public Programs:**  
**Guided Tour with Ester Partegàs and Daisy Nam**  
**as part of SF Art Week**  
**January 24, 10 am**

**A Conversation between**  
**Ester Partegàs and Stephen Lichty**  
**February 8, 11am**

**A Conversation between**  
**Michelle Lopez and Vincent Fecteau**  
**March 11, 6pm**

This exhibition comes to the Wattis from Ballroom Marfa. *STEADY* is curated by Daisy Nam and organized by Diego Villalobos.

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