The song Maggie by Matt Hilvers (mixed and mastered by Caleb Laven) finishes playing

Fiona: Fiona Duncan, also known as Fiona Alison Duncan, also known in certain circles as Fi Fi Dunks, is an author, curator, artist, activist, archivist, film costume stylist, and the founding host of Hard to Read, a long running literary social practice that's basically a book club crossed with a talk show crossed with group therapy for femmes and queers who read.

Her debut novel, *Exquisite Mariposa*, set in Los Angeles at the end of your twenties when everyone is broke, psychic, and online, won the 2020 Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Fiction and was long-listed for the Golden Poppy Award.

She is also the author of the cult chapbook *Ex-Best Friends* for F Magazine, for anyone still spiritually living inside a dissolved friendship group chat.

As a curator and organizer, Fiona is one of the brains behind the recent rediscovery of legendary artist and trans icon Pippa Garner; she co-edited Garner's first major survey monograph *Act Like You Know Me*, published with Kunstverein München, Kunsthalle Zürich, Frac Lorraine, and White Columns, while also helping steward Garner's late style, archive, and general chaos.

Through Hard to Read and its softer spin-off Pillow Talk, she has organized nearly a decade of events, exhibitions, and book collections that center women, queer, and trans writers, with proceeds regularly funneled to allied causes and mutual aid projects, including One Love Community Fridge and the COIN program at Callen-Lorde in honor of the late Cecilia Gentili.

Her journalism and essays move between art, fashion, and literature; she has written for *Vogue*, *Artforum*, *New York Magazine*, *Spike*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *The White Review*, and *Gagosian Quarterly* among others, and is notorious for her 2014 New York Magazine piece that accidentally named an entire generation's dress code, the "normcore" article that will follow her into the afterlife.

For this work she has been awarded an Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grant and NYFA's Canadian Women Artists' Award in Literary Arts, which means at least two separate institutions have put in writing that giving her money to think and talk is a good idea.

Conceived in Venice Beach and born in London, Ontario, Canada she grew up between London, Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa, eventually extending that migratory pattern to Berlin, New York, and Los Angeles in her adult life.

Of Scottish and Norwegian ancestry, her full name – Fiona Alison Duncan – loosely translates to something like Fair-Headed, Truth, Dark Warrior.

Matt Hilvers, Dozie Kanu, and chukwumaa are artists.

__long pause__

Fiona: The art of refusal. We see the results of yeses in the culture, but the no's are just as important.

Could you tell us about some opportunities you said no to as an artists?

chukwumaa: Yeah. OK, I'll start.

I was brought into this kind of think-tank of people who wanted to "make Julius Eastman relevant again"—or maybe relevant for the first time, depending on your orientation to his work. It was several days of people mostly trying to prove how smart they were to each other.

There was one person in the room going, "This is actually a really painful story. How do people who knew him feel? What happened? What did they do?" I just wanted to know more about *him*, not what everybody else thought about him.

The whole thing eventually led to a series of traveling exhibitions, and I was invited to be in all of them. On paper, it would have been really good for my profile as a sound artist and sculptor. But I felt very weird about the people who were bringing him back into public view—how they were representing him and the harm some of them had done to people close to me.

So I said no.

Fiona: If any of those people were here right now, would you feel uncomfortable saying that?

chukwumaa: Oh, hell no. The real question is whether *they* would be comfortable confronting me.

I try to be upright about this stuff. I'm not the best person in the world– if I fuck up, I fuck up—I don't have to hide from it.

I just didn't want to help them look a certain way that they really weren't, just because they were suddenly "stewarding" Julius Eastman's legacy.

Fiona: And when you said no, did you tell them why?

chukwumaa: I did, but I didn't say *everything*. I didn't yet know how to directly address people who had harmed people I love.

__Fiona holds up a card that displays "FAWN" in sharpie__

Fawn? Yeah, I was like, oh, we're fawners? Yeah, that's like my favorite way to respond to, conflict. Life or death situation. Life or death.

Not that I'm actually in a life or death situation. Um... I don't even know if I'm actually a nice person. I just know that I'm, like, trying to survive and need to interact with a smile.

Fiona: That's good. You have a nice smile.

chukwumaa: Thank you.

Fiona: Dozie, what about you—what are some of your big no's? Historic no's? Secret no's?

Dozie: I can talk about something I *almost* said no to, that I ended up saying yes to and I'm happy about that choice now.

From the beginning, I was thrown into this context of "collectible design." That's how people talked about my work and how they tried to place it. But in my heart, I wanted to explore exhibition-making as a practice, not just make collectible pieces.

I started to feel like the way my work was being discussed was blocking me from really entering that space of exhibition-making. So in an act of rebellion, or discomfort, I made this kind of bold decision to start over.

In 2018 I moved to the countryside of Portugal. I found an abandoned warehouse, renovated it, and turned it into a live–work space where I've been for the last five or six years. I spent that time being very selective about projects, trying to develop this intentional practice of exhibition making and understanding what that looks like and what it means for myself.

Then suddenly I was brought this opportunity to do a collection with Knoll —one of *the* staple furniture design companies in America. A huge part of me felt like if I said yes, I'd be betraying all those years of fighting against being boxed into the design industry.

My first instinct was to say no. But my friends were like, “You absolutely cannot say no to this. Do it all.” So I caved in the best way, and now the collection’s supposed to launch next year.
So that’s a no that became a yes.

Fiona: What's the closest you’ve come to death? Matt?

Matt: There’s several but the only near death thing I will share is this.

Narcan, Chicago, y’all know the deal.

So, if you are a junkie living in a city, there is this little finesse people use when they buy drugs. A gram of heroin at the time was about one hundred and fifty dollars. The move was to take a twenty dollar bill, then get a bunch of ones, and wrap the ones around the twenty so it looked like a fat stack of cash. The dealer would think he was getting the full amount.

Once you have some rapport with your dealer, the best move is then, when you do the handoff at a gas station off the highway or wherever, you just quickly give him the bundle that is really like twenty seven dollars and say, “Trust me, bro.”

The obvious question is, okay, but you are going to have to see this guy again, right?
Yes, of course. What do you do then?
You figure all that out when you get there.
So he calls you and says, “Hey, you owe me one fifty.”
You say, “Yeah, I will pay you next time I see you.”

Then the next time you see him, you do it again.

Now you owe him three hundred. You say, “Yeah, I got you.” You try to do as many illegal things as you can to come up with the three hundred, but it never really works, because you keep using whatever money you get to buy more drugs elsewhere. So it becomes this never ending loop.

Then, the next time you go to buy from him, because he is now the only person you can turn to, he says, “Get in the car.” And you are like, “Okay.”

You get in, he drives you to some random parking lot, parks, and I remember there was this Shakira song playing really loud on the radio. He pulls out a Glock nine millimeter and says, “Nobody knows you are here. You have to go get my money.”

And I’m just like, “Yeah. I’ll go get your money.”

Dozie: I got one.

I'm not the greatest swimmer which sucks cause Portugal has really beautiful beaches.

There was this collector who was also a real-estate guy, he had all these empty apartments around the city— Lisbon. He told me, "If you give me an artwork every January, you can live in any one of these apartments for the year, rent-free."

I chose an apartment located on the water. My goal at that time was to become comfortable with the ocean— going in every day. I'd go around 6:30 a.m., when very few people were there. After two or three months I started to really feel more confident about moving with the water.

One morning I was too confident and went out too far. I got caught in a current. I got pulled way way out and then I got really tired, and at a certain point I just gave up trying to swim back to shore.

I started to go under and thought, "Oh shit, this is it." I started thinking about my mom finding out that I'd drowned, all of that.

And then somehow I just ended up back on the shore, throwing up salt water for an hour.

And I'm still alive.

chukwumaa: Okay, so, when you started that story, I was like, Portugal is cursed. Just like, that's life.

Dozie: You think Portugal's cursed?

Lagos, Portugal, and Lagos, Nigeria. Lagos, Nigeria getting its name supposedly because that was the port they first sailed to from Portugal to West Africa—one of the starting points of the slave trade. But I'm not superstitious.
Fiona: chuks?

chukwumaa: The Navy Yard Shooting. Everyone know about that?

Right, so the day that was happening, I was assisting this artist friend with a public performance piece. The piece was basically: he would travel the entire length of D.C. on foot with a ladder. At different points he'd stop, open the ladder, climb to the top, and just scratch on his head. That was the whole performance.

My job was to follow him in my car. We had to get up really early to make sure we could traverse all of D.C., so I wasn't checking my phone, social media, the news, nothing. I was just focused on keeping up with this man and his ladder.

By the time we got to the very last stop, we were deep in Georgetown, right on the water. D.C. has all these long, runway-like streets by the river, so we're there, he does the final "climb the ladder and scratch his head" moment, and we're like, cool, we survived. We shook hands, said congrats, because honestly we'd been worried about him the whole time.

So we wrap. I'm tired. We start driving away.

Out of nowhere, there are suddenly several government police cars coming down this runway toward me—behind me, from the left, from the right, physically on the sidewalk, everywhere. They swarm the car. One of them pulls up and gets on the loudspeaker: "Take your keys out of the ignition, throw them on the dashboard, and put your hands out the window."

And I'm like, okay. I've been stopped a lot of times; this is not that. I was like, shit, okay. I do the whole deal. Cooperate.

Of course they send the Black cop to walk up. He stops like ten feet away. He's doing the official cop walk, and then halfway there he switches—he starts kind of bouncing, like, "my man..." You know that shift.

He can't even get the story out at first, and I still have no idea what's happening. I don't know anything about the Navy Yard shooting yet. I don't know what's going on.

Eventually he tells me: some lady—actually, I'm assuming it's a lady, I don't know—called the police and said, "I saw the Navy Yard shooter."

Now, quick refresher in case you don't remember: the Navy Yard shooting was like a less-publicized Aaron Alexis situation. A guy—an active member of the Navy, if I remember correctly—went on a shooting spree at the Navy Yard in D.C. A lot of those kinds of incidents don't get as much coverage because they don't want to give people ideas.

Later on, when I finally saw a picture of him, I was like, oh... he actually did kind of look like me—fast-forwarded like fifteen years. And that was the scary part. Normally I'm like, "That's just racism, anyway." But this time I was like, oh shit. She was wrong... but she was also kinda right. She was still wrong, though. She was still wrong.
Anyway, the Navy Yard shooter had already been on lockdown inside the building since that morning, so it literally could not have been me. But that didn't stop all those government cops from trying to make sure, you know, that I wasn't him.

Fiona: In getting ready for this event, we were talking shit, as we do, about some of the chaotic or disappointing questions we get in professional art contexts: studio visits, talks, art-world dinners.

One that's been put to you, in institutional settings, is:

"How does your work contribute to the cause of Black liberation?"

Matt?

both chukwumaa and Dozie extend arms holding their microphones under Matt's face

Matt: The first thing that pops into my head is that clip of Post Malone on The Breakfast Club right after he first got famous. Charlamagne asks, "What are you doing for Black Lives Matter?" and Post just says, "Nothing." It's such a wild answer.

Inside me I have two opposite impulses. On one hand, I don't want to answer, because my friends, my family, my community—they're the ones who could really say whether my work contributes to liberation. On the other hand, I want to answer in this very specific, convincing way so all of you will believe me and absolve me of the systems I benefit from.

The best way I've found to think about it is: liberation is multi-planed. It has many intersections, many forms, many places. Who or what is being liberated, and how someone can access that, depends a lot on their particular skills and what they have access to.

For me, liberation is as spiritual as it is structural. The *spirit* of being liberated is a big part of what liberation can look like.

So for me that's been: work I've done in prisons; work around job security after incarceration; work around houselessness; around job security and stability after addiction treatment. Those are the ways I've tried to move towards liberation.

A small anecdote: there's a photo of Lana Del Rey and her ex-boyfriend standing in front of Cook County Jail. I don't know if they thought it looked cool, or what the intention was. But as someone who's been in that building, there's no way I'm taking a jokey, viral photo in front of it.

If you've been inside, you're not doing that. It's not a backdrop— it's a wound.

Fiona: Dozie?

Dozie: This is one of the biggest questions I wrestle with in the studio, like, genuine questioning if I am actually contributing to the liberation of Black people? ...oppressed people.

The practices I'm most drawn to are usually capital-intensive. They require a lot of investment and funding. I'm drawn to them in part because to be honest and free in those kinds of practices requires a lot of belief and genuine support.

Black consciousness in those spaces is still underdeveloped in comparison. There's so much ground that can be covered. I honestly believe we live in a world where what we see shapes what we expect to see.

So by doing work at that scale, in those spaces, I hope to help make that kind of presence.... Black presence... Black authorship, feel normal. That's the clearest way I can frame it.

chuk: I think about Édouard Glissant a lot—mostly because he hated broccoli. That was his main example for opacity: "What if I just don't like broccoli? I don't have to explain it."

He wouldn't fly; he only took boats. But he also literally held and fired a gun in an actual civil conflict alongside Black people fighting for their material liberation.

I don't know if, in that moment of shooting a gun, he was thinking about opacity, or about the theoretical language we now associate with him. And I think about that a lot.

I haven't fired a gun. Maybe that will stay true, maybe not. But I work less capital-intensively than Dozie partly because I feel like as soon as someone can pay for something, they can also say "no" to the artwork and to me.

It just isn't how I work. I don't go into the studio thinking, "This object will materially change conditions for Black people who are suffering." I try not to lie to myself in my studio. I'm worried about those things, to the point of freezing sometimes, so I've stepped back from that kind of awareness now and then.

I know artists who are very active politically and also very celebrated in the art world. But often that work—the activist work—doesn't really live inside the white-cube walls. It's connected, but it's not the same practice.

Fiona: You're talking about material and dematerialized practices?

chuk: Yeah. I'm not saying paintings should be burned or that objects don't matter. I just think change doesn't come from one way, or one person, or one group. Different approaches have to come together to move something.

I just don't think my sculpture practice, specifically, is the thing that's going to topple the system—and I'm okay with that.

Dozie: By the way, I understand that racism and capitalism are intertwined.

To really eradicate one, the other has to wither away in some form. So I think showing what Black consciousness can do in capital-intensive forms of expression might be what really matters right now because I don't see capitalism going anywhere anytime soon.

chukwumaa suddenly get's up and starts sweeping performance

Fiona: One word answers only, do you believe in God?

Matt: God.

Dozie: Maybe.

Fiona: What's the last artwork you experienced that really validated your choice to pursue art? That feeling when you leave a show or a film or finish a book and think, "This is what it's about. I can keep going."

Dozie: A few weeks ago I saw a show at Fondazione Prada in Milan by Alejandro Iñárritu. It was an installation built around some film reels he thought he'd lost.

It didn't really tell a conventional story, but the way he staged those fragments, how he turned this personal archive into an environment, it really confirmed something I've been thinking about with exhibitions. It reminded me that a show can be a way of choreographing memory and fragments of time, not just presenting finished objects in hopes of the sum of them resonating as one.

Matt: I haven't been thinking about "content" recently in that way, but I keep coming back to something that happened in 2017.

I was in Los Angeles with my friend SoiL and we went into the Eckhaus Latta store. There was this little curated book section. In that section I found a letter—handwritten, I think—addressed to God.

It was about a crisis of faith: what it feels like, how you keep going, what it means to continue believing or not believing. I was so moved that I pulled out my phone and wrote

a response on the spot, without even knowing who wrote it... about what a crisis of faith looks like to me, what faith is, what anything means at all.

Afterwards I asked one of the people working there, “Who wrote this letter?” And they said, “Oh, that’s Fiona Duncan. She works with us. She curated this book section.”

So... full circle.

Fiona: She's as sweet as Tupelo honey. She's an angel of the first degree. She's as sweet as Tupelo honey. Just like honey, baby, from the bee.

You can't stop us on our road to freedom. You can't stop us cause our eyes can see.

Men of insight. Men in granite. Knights in shining armor. Intent on chivalry.

Three-word answers only: what do you do when you don’t get what you want?

Dozie:
Sit and plot.

Matt:
I get re-connected.

chukwumaa continues sweeping