



# Carrie Yamaoka

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forgetting  
and  
remembering  
and  
forgetting  
again

January 30– March 5, 2023 Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

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Visuality is made explicitly contingent in Carrie Yamaoka's works. The act of viewing becomes integral in the realization of the work and the space of viewing part of the production of the image. These works produce and re-produce images for each viewer, for each situation of their viewership, in each site they are installed. Yamaoka is not a picture maker—she is not interested in pure abstraction nor in representation, but rather in something process-based and in-between, in “that moment of suspension between the process of becoming visible and the legibility of form.” She strives “to capture something of that dynamic, to invite the viewer into that fleeting moment.”<sup>1</sup>

Yamaoka incorporates techniques and methods in her work from drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography. Rather than clearly reading within a specific medium, her finished artworks also evade categorization. Though self-describing as “working within the expanded field of painting,” she has found herself sometimes reluctant to call an artwork a painting, and conversely sometimes insisting on its status as such.<sup>2</sup> Yamaoka pushes the medium through her experimentation with materials and methods. Her use of polyester film<sup>3</sup> and resin lends a reflectivity to many of her works though the surface is often interrupted through abrasion, the presence of suspended pigment, or paint applied to the back of abraded mylar. The combination of the affective presence of a temporal record and their reflective surfaces, however imperfect, invoke the photographic in these works.

The works are also a material record sourced from a particular site, evidence of a set of processes that unfolded over time. They are a “tactile record.” Yamaoka explained in a recent artist talk, “I’m interested in the topography of surfaces, the tactility of the barely

visible or unnoticed, and the whole chain of incidents that determine the outcome of the finished object. The viewer is placed at the intersection between a record of chemical action/reaction and the desire to apprehend a picture emerging in fleeting and unstable states of transformation.”<sup>4</sup>

Photography was Yamaoka’s entry into artistic practice. Her older brother gave her her first camera at age ten allowing for her early experiments with film and darkroom photography.<sup>5</sup> But by the time she finished her undergraduate work in Studio Art at Wesleyan University in 1979, she was making drawings with artist Jacqueline Gourevitch as an advisor. Yamaoka’s senior thesis exhibition was about drawing and the reductive mark. She built up layers of graphite on the page and used an eraser as a mark-making tool. For Yamaoka this was about erasure as a mark, reframing reduction as a positive or additive value. Yamaoka’s erasures create, or remember, new ways of being in time. The surfaces of her works slow down the re-production of an image enough to allow an opening for memory, for forgetting and remembering.

*seeing is forgetting and remembering and forgetting again* marks the artist’s return to a gallery space in which she exhibited her senior thesis project in 1979, shortly after the gallery had opened in its present space. Rather than treating the gallery as a static container, Yamaoka approaches it as a site on its own. The Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery was purpose-built as a gallery space with three large sheetrock walls. The remaining walls are either large clear-span windows or constructed out of oversized limestone bricks and cast concrete. The porosity of the concrete and limestone, the staining residue of past moisture and current evidence of condensation, become anomalies which express to Yamaoka both the particularities of the textures of the space and also how it has aged over time. The surfaces of the gallery’s sheetrock walls are also of interest to the artist—the accumulation from many years of repainting and the bumps of patched holes from past installations.

These marks of incident, this architectural “tactile record” is a spatialized analog to the incidental processes Yamaoka uses in her own work. Over several site visits, Yamaoka made rubbings of the gallery walls onto mylar, this frottage revealing the invisible histories of the gallery. Back in her studio she painted the back of the abraded mylar and mounted pieces to panels. She then covered their surfaces with resin, some of which she left glossy and others she sanded and buffed to a matte finish. Yamaoka has been making rubbings of walls for years but this exhibition is the first time she has had the opportunity to exhibit rubbing-derived works in the same space they were produced.



Carrie Yamaoka, *16 by 12 (Zilkha wall #1)*, 2022, reflective polyester film, urethane resin and mixed media on wood panel on wood panel, 16 x 12 x 1.25 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Also included in the exhibition are reconfigurations of previous works by the artist. In recent years Yamaoka has been revisiting works, actively altering their state by separating surfaces from their substrates and recomposing the components to create new works that retain traces of their history. In her own words, “going backwards and then changing it to move forwards.”<sup>6</sup> One two-part piece, *recto/verso #2*, is installed in the middle bay of the gallery. The left part, a large tinted resin work on panel, is placed provisionally on the floor leaning against the wall. A smaller panel is installed to the right, aligned with the larger work along their top edges. The right panel is derived from a work that was originally mylar mounted on a panel with tinted resin poured over. Yamaoka pulled the mylar off, mounted it to a separate panel, and installed this sister artwork on its own elsewhere within the exhibition.



Studio image of *recto/verso #2*, 2022. Photography by the artist.

When construction began in the 1960s on Wesleyan's Center for the Arts complex, including the gallery's building, the architecture firm Roche-Dinkeloo attempted to leave as many trees on the land as they could, laying out buildings and designing courtyards around existing trees. Over the intervening ~50 years some of the original trees have died or become damaged, and were removed. Over the course of Yamaoka's visits to the gallery in summer 2022 she witnessed the gradual removal of an old tree just to the north of the large gallery windows. On her second visit she noticed the tree stump, the remains of the tree, marked with a spray-painted "X." By her third visit even the stump had been removed creating a large dirt area.<sup>7</sup> She printed one photograph of the stump on chiffon and includes it as an element in the installation "Carousel."

It's an ironic act to print the image of something so solid, material, and overlooked as a stump on a precious and diaphanous textile, although it's a departure for Yamaoka to include anything so pictorial

in her work. Like non-pictorial works included in the exhibition, Yamaoka's reinstatement of the stump in the gallery is a gesture to time and its passage, granting visible presence to the previously invisible. Yamaoka also recognizes a double negative in the stump's "X"—it's crossing out what is already not there. The artist is insisting on a memory of the *stump*, not the full tree but what was left of it in the suspension of its erasure.



Photograph by Carrie Yamaoka, 2022.

The title of the exhibition brings together seeing and forgetting in a way reminiscent of the quote attributed to the French poet Paul Valéry, "to see is to forget the name of the thing one sees." Valéry is referring to a seeing which transcends our ordinary seeing, a type of seeing that is immersed in our everyday world.<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Weschler referenced Valéry when titling his compilation of writings on the artist Robert Irwin. For Irwin, as for Yamaoka, the phenomenon of viewership is another medium of the work and contains within it the power to radically change the world by altering how we see it. As Irwin put it, "What we're talking about is changing the whole visual structure of how you look at the world...The implications of that structure are very rash...in time they have the ability to change every single thing in the culture itself."<sup>9</sup>

Yamaoka is one of the founding and current members of fierce pussy, a queer art collective. Originally formed in New York City in 1991 through their immersion in AIDS activism during a decade of increasing political mobilization around LGBTQ+ rights, fierce pussy brought lesbian identity and visibility directly into the streets. Yamaoka, alongside three other original members

Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, and Zoe Leonard, continue to work as a collective today.<sup>10</sup> fierce pussy's collective work often has clear political content but the politic within Yamaoka's solo practice operates at a different valence. Yamaoka believes in the existence of a politic within the formal. The history of the materials in her work and the decisions, attention, and processes that the artist has brought to bear on the materials express a political ontology.

Her emphasis on the importance of the material relates to a feminist tradition of situated knowledge, a reframing of knowledge as related to the specificities of certain sites and conditions. This inverts the teleology of knowledge so that knowing arises out of relation/ experience/material rather than being received through a normative social or political hierarchy. Yamaoka refers to this second type as "received knowledge."<sup>11</sup> Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz builds on this idea of relation to material in her essay "Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom," looking back to French philosopher Henri Bergson's writings for his conception of a perceptual process that took place entirely outside of one's subjectivity. Perceiving, for Bergson, was something that happens outside of one's body/mind. The images we form of the world arise from the material and are but one of an aggregate of potential images. Bergson, according to Grosz, also separates freedom from subjecthood and locates it instead in the act or the approach of the subject towards the material, positively defined "as the condition of or capacity for action."<sup>12</sup> "Freedom is not a transcendent quality inherent in subjects but is immanent in the relations that the living has with the material world, including other forms of life."<sup>13</sup>

The Steinian recursivity of *seeing is forgetting and remembering and forgetting again* suggests that any transcendence is interrupted by remembering and only made possible by further forgetting. It encourages an immanence from the act of seeing itself, encouraging our own seeing, knowing, and freedom to act in relation to material. Yamaoka's works are radically contingent, conditioned by their viewership and the context of their display. The works are not something, as in being in a state, but as being something that could have been, or could be, different. The lack of a fixed vantage point leaves her work open to a multiplicity of states of relation and to the attention viewers could have with the works, encouraging viewers to recognize their own agency in looking, their capacity for action. This indeterminacy, to return to Grosz's elaboration of freedom, "spreads through matter by means of the activities that life performs on matter. As a result, the world itself comes to vibrate with its possibilities for being otherwise."<sup>14</sup>

—Benjamin Chaffee

## NOTES

- 1 Carrie Yamaoka, "Carrie Yamaoka—Artist". School of Visual Arts New York, YouTube, December 13, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG50SVifR\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG50SVifR_4).
- 2 Conversation with the author, January 4, 2023.
- 3 Commonly referred to as mylar. Mylar® brand is actually a registered trademark owned by Dupont Teijin Films.
- 4 Carrie Yamaoka, "Carrie Yamaoka—Artist". School of Visual Arts New York, YouTube, December 13, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG50SVifR\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG50SVifR_4).
- 5 Carrie Yamaoka and Alex Fialho, "Oral history interview with Carrie Yamaoka, 2016 July 26-27"; Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-carrie-yamaoka-17368>
- 6 Conversation with the author, December 1, 2022.
- 7 At the time of the printing of this essay, the dirt area is still visible on the gallery's north lawn.
- 8 For more discussion: <https://geopolicraticus.wordpress.com/2010/03/26/of-seeing-and-forgetting/>
- 9 Lawrence Weschler. *seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008, p.203.
- 10 <https://fiercepussy.org/>
- 11 Conversation with the author, January 12, 2023.
- 12 Elizabeth Grosz. *becoming undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 60.
- 13 Grosz, p.68.
- 14 Elizabeth Grosz, "Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom," in Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey, and Suhail Malik, *Realism Materialism Art*. Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2015, p.59.



## Carrie Yamaoka

Carrie Yamaoka '79 is a New York-based visual artist whose work traverses the disciplines of painting, photography, and sculpture. She is interested in the topography of surfaces, materiality, and process, the tactility of the barely visible, and the chain of planned and chance incidents that determine the outcome of the object.

Her work engages the viewer at the intersection between records of chemical action/reaction and the desire to apprehend a picture emerging in fleeting and unstable states of transformation.

Exhibitions include the Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphia), MoMA/PS1 (New York), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Fondation Ricard (Paris), the Henry Art Gallery (Seattle), Artists Space (New York), the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus), Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (New York), Victoria and Albert Museum (London), and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Writing about her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The New Yorker*, *Time Out New York*, *Hyperallergic*, *Interview*, and *Bomb*. Her work is included in the collections of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Art Institute of Chicago, Dallas Museum of Art, Henry Art Gallery, and Centre Pompidou. She is the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and an Anonymous Was A Woman award. Yamaoka is represented by Commonwealth and Council (Los Angeles). She is a founding member of the queer art collective fierce pussy.

## CHECKLIST

### FIRST BAY

*64 by 20 (noise) revisited*  
2000/2022

Reflective polyester film,  
wood panel, epoxy residue,  
epoxy resin, tape  
Dimensions variable

### SECOND BAY

*20 by 20 (green verso)*  
2008/2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic  
paint, urethane resin and mixed  
media on wood panel  
20 x 20 x 1  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

*recto/verso #2*  
2008/2022

Reflective polyester film, urethane  
resin and mixed media on wood  
panel  
Left panel 72 x 45 x 2 inches  
Right panel 20 x 20 x 1  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

### THIRD BAY

*Carousel*  
2022

Flexible urethane resin on black  
vinyl on wood panel; digital print  
on chiffon; urethane resin; reflec-  
tive polyester film; glue residue  
on aluminum panel; 80 slides in  
Kodak carousel projector  
82 x 146 x 103 inches

First Window Buttress  
*8 July 2022 #3*  
2022

Unique chemically manipulated  
gelatin silver print  
20 x 24 inches

### BACK (EAST) WALL

*14 by 11 (Zilkha wall #1)*  
2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel  
14 x 11 x 1 inches

*16 by 12 (Zilkha wall #1)*  
2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel  
16 x 12 x 1 inches

*14 by 11 (Zilkha wall #2)*  
2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel  
14 x 11 x 1 inches

*14 by 11 (Zilkha wall #3)*  
2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel  
14 x 11 x 1  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

*16 by 12 (Zilkha wall #2)*  
2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel  
16 x 12 x 1 inches

*14 by 11 (Zilkha wall #4)*  
2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel  
14 x 11 x 1 inches

## **BACK (EAST) WALL**

*14 by 11 (Zilkha wall #5)*

2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel

14 x 11 x 1.5 inches

## **BACK (NORTH) WALL**

*40 by 40 (Zilkha wall)*

2022

Reflective polyester film, acrylic,  
urethane resin and mixed media  
on wood panel

40 x 40 x 2 inches

## **FLOOR**

*2176 square inches (fugitive)*

*redux*

1999/2022

Reflective polyester film and ep-  
oxy resin

Dimensions variable

## **ENTRANCE (WEST) WALL**

*52 by 30 (koolpop redux)*

2000/2022

Reflective polyester film,  
urethane resin and mixed  
media on wood panel

52 x 30 x 2.25 inches

## RELATED EVENTS

### **Opening Reception**

Monday, January 30, 2023 at 4:30pm

Curator and artist remarks at 5:00pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

### **Artist Conversation: Carrie Yamaoka and Claire Grace**

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 at 4:30pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

#### Cover image:

Studio image. Photograph by Carrie Yamaoka.

Curated by Benjamin Chaffee. Art installation by Paul Theriault and exhibition management by Rosemary Lennox. Special thanks to Carrie Yamaoka, Joy Episalla, Rani Arbo, Andrew Chatfield, John Elmore, Tony Hernandez, and Joshua Lubin-Levy. This exhibition and related programming are co-sponsored by the Feminism, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program.