



Seeing Eye to Eye: Notes on Curating *Room for One* By Daniel Oliva

Why am I so excited about this exhibition? I wanted to make a show with miniatures and small works because they invite close looking. When artists produce works this small and with an abundance of precise detail, viewers can often feel the pleasure of seeing the work as closely as the artist did while making it. I have felt for a while that our environment at 319 is dominated by temporary installations and objects that appear to have been constructed casually, and it would be a refreshing alternative to offer visitors a quiet show of precise and detailed works, mostly in the representational area of the spectrum, and with a nod to the aesthetic rewards of color, scale, texture, and so many elements related to painting. This is essentially a painting show, with collage, crochet and ceramics amicably nestling in with the canvases and panels. It almost goes without saying that the cultural climate beyond this building is noisy, nasty and, for now at least, vast in its bleakness. *Room for One* offers a little space to recuperate.

I've had my eye on these artists for years because I love their work. I find it easy to dive into these works, perhaps because they are made by artists who appear to be delighted by the process of creation. I've also long been infatuated by artworks that reference their own making (modern and post-modern clichés be damned), but rarely do I find the actual experience of viewing a self-referential work to be satisfying. Cleverly revealing elements of your own hand in the process has been done, over and over again, and the coolest artist to do it was Velázquez in 1656. So why drag out a tired old trope? Because when I look at Olivia Jia's paintings, I feel that a painting of an image reproduced, a frame within a frame, actually matters. Her touch is so sensitive, and the light modulates across her canvas with such fine nuance, that I feel as if a musical tone, like a low hum, is playing in my mind as I gaze. The flatness of paper and photographic images, reproductions reproduced lovingly in oil paint, evoke memories of having seen images. The darkened environments would reveal a chiaroscuro as volumetric as a Caravaggio if not for the flatness of the objects that Olivia chooses to explore. I love the cleverness of painting slides of Ansel Adams' photos of mountains, a giant of photography reduced to an archival storage device (painted at *actual* scale!). Her paintings convince us that we can see what she has seen, and that every detail, from a torn edge of paper to the mismatched corners of an old slide, have amplified significance. We can enjoy her magic with suspended disbelief.



Olivia Jia, *Untitled (Slides)*



Olivia Jia, *Untitled (Paper)*

I met Justin Webb when we were both working on the installation team at the Galleries at Moore. I checked out his paintings and fell in love. Justin brings a minimalist sense of color and shape to paintings that are both precise and ebullient. Please excuse the oxymoron, but I see these paintings as playfully melancholy. My teachers used to say that a clear desk is a clear mind, and there is something about an empty doorway with that pre-war molding we all know, that blows away the cobwebs in my mind. Light casts a stark shadow across the wall, as if we're in the room next to the room that Edward Hopper is painting. We see a cat calmly waiting for nothing in particular, or the absence of any living being, and we feel our own space. For me, this is a beautiful nowhere to stay for a while.



Justin R. Webb, *Hallway, Doorway Cat*

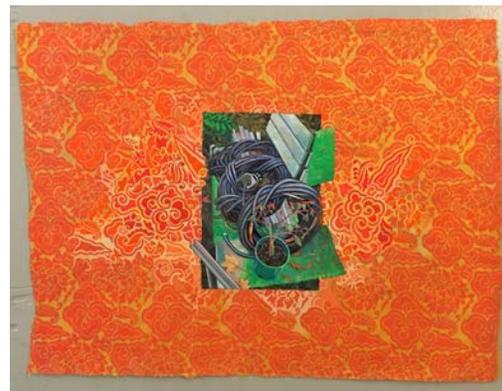


Justin R. Webb, *Hallway, Doorway #4*

Anda Dubinskis has hands that create some of the most gorgeous lines I've ever seen, wrapping rhythmically up and around one another in aesthetic pleasure. Anda makes such wonderful choices and displays such a range of techniques and styles, she can move from lyrical abstraction and into tight representation in one piece. It was difficult to choose which work to request for this show. Luckily, she agreed to include two beautiful gouache paintings on decorative paper. These works explore the way her parents collected things and how they influenced Anda's sense of perception. She sums it up well in her artist statement, "They were both hoarders, competing to cover every available surface with things that caught their fancy, the house was my mother's, and she filled both the outdoors and indoors with tropical plants, plastic pots, Beanie Babies and old newspapers that contained interesting articles. The blue stepping stool was a fixture in her kitchen. My father worked for the electric power company as a lead relay tester. Perhaps that is what led him to accumulate miles of heavy copper cables which he kept on patio benches upholstered with green Astroturf." She visually sews together the objects that filled her parents' environment with the abundant foliage of trees and plants found in her parents' backyard, and again with the ornamental pattern of paper, which, as she says "churn and bulge to suggest the surreal effect this created environment evoked."



Anda Dubinskis, *My Mother's Backyard*



Anda Dubinskis, *My Father's Backyard*

I learned about Matt Hepworth by randomly finding his work on the Internet. My mind kept wandering back to his collages, with his use of subtle double-entendres and the apparent ease with which he

creates textures, objects, and architectural space. His collages portray such a large scale that I've gotten lost in them, as if I'm wandering a parking lot looking for my car. This bird's-eye-view of the world feels similar to how we watch tiny speeding cars zip past rows of dollhouses as an airplane lifts us up into the sky. It encourages us to contemplate our physical and emotional constructions. These works remind us that we can understand our own physical region from another level, or point of view, but then again, there are nefarious forces that constantly surveil us all, happy to sit up in the sky watching our movements down below.



Matt Hepworth, *Dead Enders*



Matt Hepworth, *Lung Rust*

Alex Nguyen-Vo and I met in graduate school and I always felt that our conversations happened at just the right time in that environment which was constantly destabilizing. Alex would often nudge me back towards my center, encouraging me to focus on what I loved about art, mostly about painting. His painting style flourished during and especially after we graduated in 2013. His use of color is partially informed by a deep and accomplished history working in video, and I imagine that he is closely looking at the world as all painters are. His use of texture is wild and exuberant, with a paint surface that sits in such relief, rivaling Frank Auerbach and Jay DeFao, and color that surges towards you as if molten lava is boiling under the canvas. Alex uses rich colors and often his smaller works have such a packed mix of hues that the paintings feel larger than they really are. He is one of the few artists I know who can engage with almost any subject and find a way to address it using his idiosyncratic approach. You should see all of the paintings of his that are not in this show. His universe contains works that reference one another, so police officers that he painted during his recent residency in Hong Kong (during the protests) morph into sunflowers; a group born of aggression transforming into potential for love, but with a darkened core. Alex deals with current events as they unfold, beginning a painting of the exploded and burning remains of the car carrying Qasem Soleimani in Bagdad and finishing it on the day we all learned of Kobe Bryant's tragic helicopter crash in the California hills.



Alex Nguyen-Vo, *January 2020*



Alex Nguyen-Vo, *Three Sunflowers*

I began to study under Joan Wadleigh Curran in 2012, as her graduate assistant teaching drawing, and I never intend to stop. Nothing teaches a person more about a subject than when they have to teach it to someone else, but a close second is when you can be in the studio with an exceptional artist and discuss the choices she is making during a tough day with a painting. Do not go to an easy fix, a quick and satisfying burst of color, or a graphic outline that will look good on Instagram. Whatever the obvious choice is be wary of it, make a work that will last. Joan is endlessly experimental within her focused set of interests in organic forms, complexity of growth and how man-made environments decay. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of our regional flora (did you know there is a weed called dock that grows behind the Home Depot on Columbus Boulevard? Joan does). Recently, she has challenged herself in new ways by cutting up and combining images printed from woodblocks and etchings, while occasionally slipping in an image from a textbook or other sourced material. Within just two years Joan has created a new body of work that is radically different from her previous paintings, drawings and prints, and yet can easily be seen as a continuation of her vision. This labor-intensive process of printing on various papers, cutting away negative space (or sometimes drawing new shapes with it) and then arranging compositions, forces Joan to make difficult and exciting choices. The artist as problem solver, calculating the next move, building a composition of color, rhythm and shape. But let those of us viewing Joan's work put aside what we've heard about her process, because the work is so effortlessly enjoyable to look at.



Joan Wadleigh Curran, *Small Construction #1*

How delicate are bird bones? Can this be measured? I don't think so, at least not in any way that would matter to most of us. This question of materiality is central to Caitlin McCormack's crocheted creatures, because we are immediately aware that every single fiber of this animal has been surgically formed by the most demanding of techniques. Biological life is miraculous in itself but bringing dead material to life is a revelation. I have admired Caitlin's work for years and continue to enjoy it as it evolves. New explorations of color and thread that appears to fly around the composition add to the pleasure of viewing her works. She describes her animals as "tenacious" and considers one of her themes to be the disintegration and reforming of nature itself, expressed through "intricately looped and knotted cotton string with glue (that) produces material that is structurally similar to delicate bone tissue". We feel all of this as we view her work and perhaps, I wonder, do Caitlin's creatures inform us about our own tissue, bone, and origins?



Caitlin McCormack, *Course and Wet*

Lucia Thomé created her little lion as part of the generous effort by a group of six artists to produce a CSA (Community Supported Art) subscription program. Through the CSA people who contributed and joined would receive an artwork from each of these artists. The lion in this exhibition is Lucia's own personal one, and it is modeled after Edward Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom*. In our own space, the lion's stare is jarring and vulnerable, I feel simultaneously compelled to offer it food and stand next to it, shoulder to shoulder against intruders. Though perhaps like all animals and artworks, we cannot really know for certain what it is feeling, we can only project our own emotions upon it.



Lucia Thomé, *Right through me with those eyes*

When encountering a drawing or painting by Anne Canfield I often find myself pulled in like a whirlpool, calmly at first and then before I realize it, I am lost in a million details swirling around me. There are so many techniques that Anne uses to create space that it would be silly to list them all, but she knows how to use them and you can enjoy every one. Whether in pencil or oil paint, Anne's compositions allow us to explore her worlds, made up of combinations of places she's been to and imagined places that none of us can actually visit but would like to. Anne says, "I am inspired by the detail, whimsy and geometric naturalism of both early Netherlandish and Indian Miniature painting." I would add Henri Rousseau to that group and suggest that in miniature painting we sometimes feel that we can understand vast distances. With an artist such as Anne, energetically filling our view with abundant foliage, architecture, and details derived from close observation, we allow our minds to peer into a porthole and then expand with a great push of imagination. The path towards seeing the world in a large scale may just be through making ourselves small.



Anne Canfield, *All Sleep the Night*



Anne Canfield, *Saku City*

I am grateful to have these artists participating in an exhibition at NAPOLEON that explores issues I consider foundational in terms how we look at art, what it can provide for us, and how art can affect us. Our minds are flexible and active image producing machines. As we step through the show, gazing from one work to another, we can enjoy the shifting sense of scale and point-of-view. The representation of places and creatures that exist more in imagination than reality allows us to travel into and between these artists' worlds. And finally, the formal issues that each of these artists deeply consider are integral to how we approach the work. How do we as viewers in the 21st century still respond to flatness? To seeing an image within an image? To self-referential work? These are all clichés that, in most cases, can and should compel us to yawn loudly on our way out the door. But here in this show, at least for me and maybe for you, I propose that these artists can compel us all to instead take a deep dive and spend some time immersed in the joy, and solitude, of looking.

About the Author: Daniel Oliva is a Philadelphia-based artist and member of NAPOLEON. He holds an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, Philadelphia and a BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore. He has exhibited at The Galleries at Moore, Goggleworks Art Center, Pentimenti Gallery, NAPOLEON, Marginal Utility, and Bridgette Mayer Gallery. Exhibitions that he has co-curated include *Immigration Now* at Penn State, Abington and *Exquisite Form: A Fiber Invitational*, at Allens Lane Art Center in Philadelphia. He is an adjunct Professor at Penn State University, Abington, West Chester University and Drexel University and was an undergraduate instructor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design.

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NAPOLEON is a collectively-run project space that strives to provide a platform for new work and new ideas.