Ajay Kurian
by Shiv Kotecha

When I visited the Indian-American artist and writer Ajay Kurian at his Brooklyn studio this past December, we sat six feet apart in matching N95s, triangulated by a formidably sized, as yet unnamed entity—one in a new series of wall-hung sculptures the artist is preparing for his upcoming show at New York City's 47 Canal. The kaleidoscopic structure was coated in solar oranges and yellows, its silhouette a reference to a Rorschach inkblot.

Kurian begins making these sculptures by drawing them onto foam core, which he scores and bends at various points along the substrate's horizontal axis, creating extremities that striate out, like vegetal fronds or antennae, toward the viewer. Evading the Rorschach's premise—that we name what we see—in Kurian's sculpture, the pictorial outline and its reflective apertures become an internally expressive medium.

This new body of work expands Kurian's fluid, multimedia vocabulary, which aims to articulate the social and environmental conditions that govern our desires (for relation beyond assimilation, for a livable future) and the unflagging belligerence of white power. The humanoid figures that populate *Polyphemus*, Kurian's recent exhibition at Goucher College's Silber Art Gallery in Baltimore, nurse their beers indefinitely. They are dressed in nondescript business casual, and their heads—the tops of mechanical pedestal fans refashioned as unblinking eyeballs—crank back and forth to survey the space. A possible reference to the colonial *punkah-wallah* (Hindi for *fan-servant*) these cyclopean figures remain blind to the raced caricatures—a simian trophy, an obedient frog—who continue to serve them. Kurian's *Possessions* (2020) at Sies + Höke in Düsseldorf, Germany, imagines a world worth bracing for. As the artist writes in a poem accompanying the show: "life still seeks a greater host, / and bears new curled connections."

On my visit, I spoke to Kurian about producing objects of beauty in the age of climate catastrophe and about the psychodrama of growing up in white suburban America.

SHIV KOTECHA: What got you interested in the Rorschach as a device?

AJAY KURIAN: A lot of it was personal in the beginning. I think it was last year. I had just gotten out of a ten-year relationship, and my life was in a very different place. I also wasn't an emerging artist anymore. And that's a different territory altogether. I had been so focused on this rise where I was achieving a lot of goals that I had in mind, and then suddenly I felt very directionless. I didn't know what I wanted to do next. In some ways I felt fulfilled. Like, am I done? And then in other ways, I was like, No, I just need to hibernate for a while. I was looking for signs in everything. It was a real apophenic moment. I needed guidance of some kind, and I was surrendering to a space that I think I had held off for a while.

After making a handful of works based on the Rorschach, I finally made one that immediately suggested points of departure. I saw it growing outward, and in a few hours there was this orchid-like body-pelvis amalgamation that felt very beautiful to me, very right. It disrupted me the way I wanted it to and pushed me to think in a way that rarely happens to me: I was following the work without reading a damn thing. Usually, I'm constantly reading while making work—I tend to be a relatively discursive person. I guess I believe words have the ability to be precise enough to do the work that I expect them to do and to help me live in the world. And I started to realize that it was a bit of a defense mechanism.

SK: Reading was?

AK: Yeah, or just language; refining my words was a way of defending myself. And this whole time I've been building a sculptural vocabulary as well, which isn't to say that that isn't discursive.

SK: How would you say narrative figures into your work?

AK: In prior bodies of work, I think the narrative was clearer, but it's here still. I mean, this is emerging from a story. In my head I have two exhibitions plotted out that are loosely about failed escape: one where we're in the process of leaving the planet and mourning the loss of it. And the other where we're somewhere else and mourning our circumstances there.

SK: You find home, and then in it, you find another home missing...

AK: Yes, part of that was a way to consider these sort of neocolonial endeavors that are bound in space

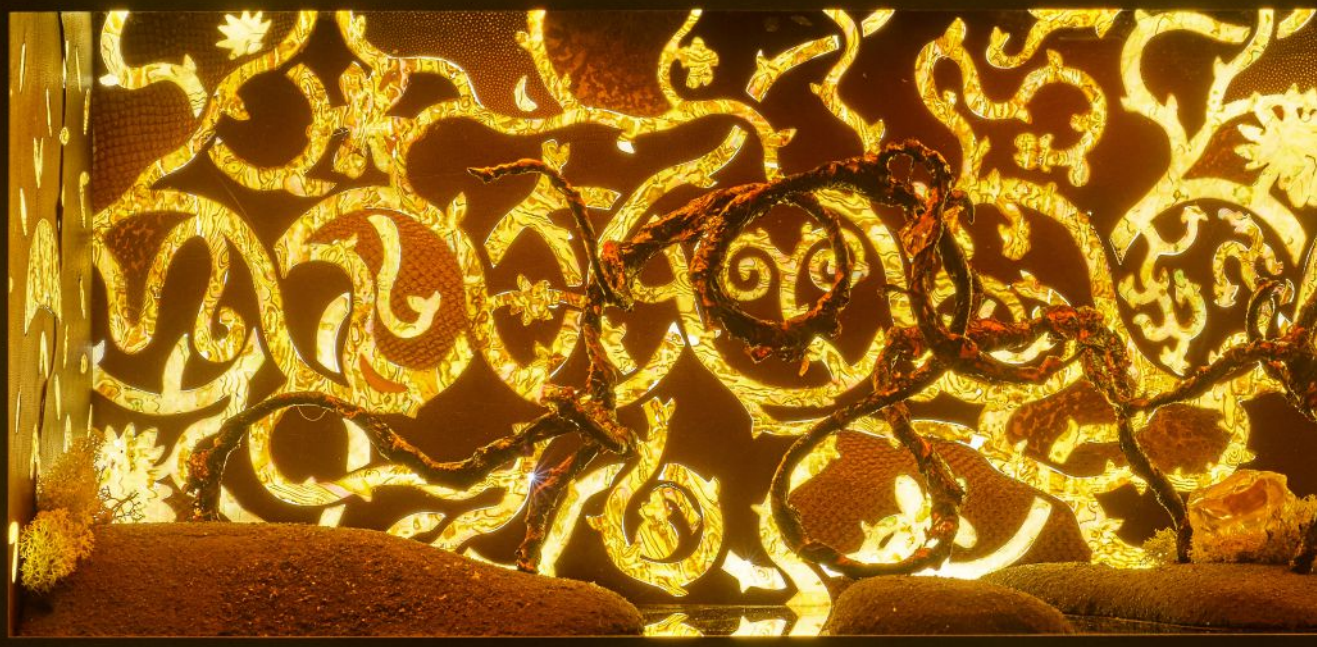
Untitled, 2021, PVC pipe, foam core, fiberglass, plaster, wire, steel, steel mesh, epoxy clay, acrylic primer, and oil paint, 60 × 40 × 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Stephen Shaheen.

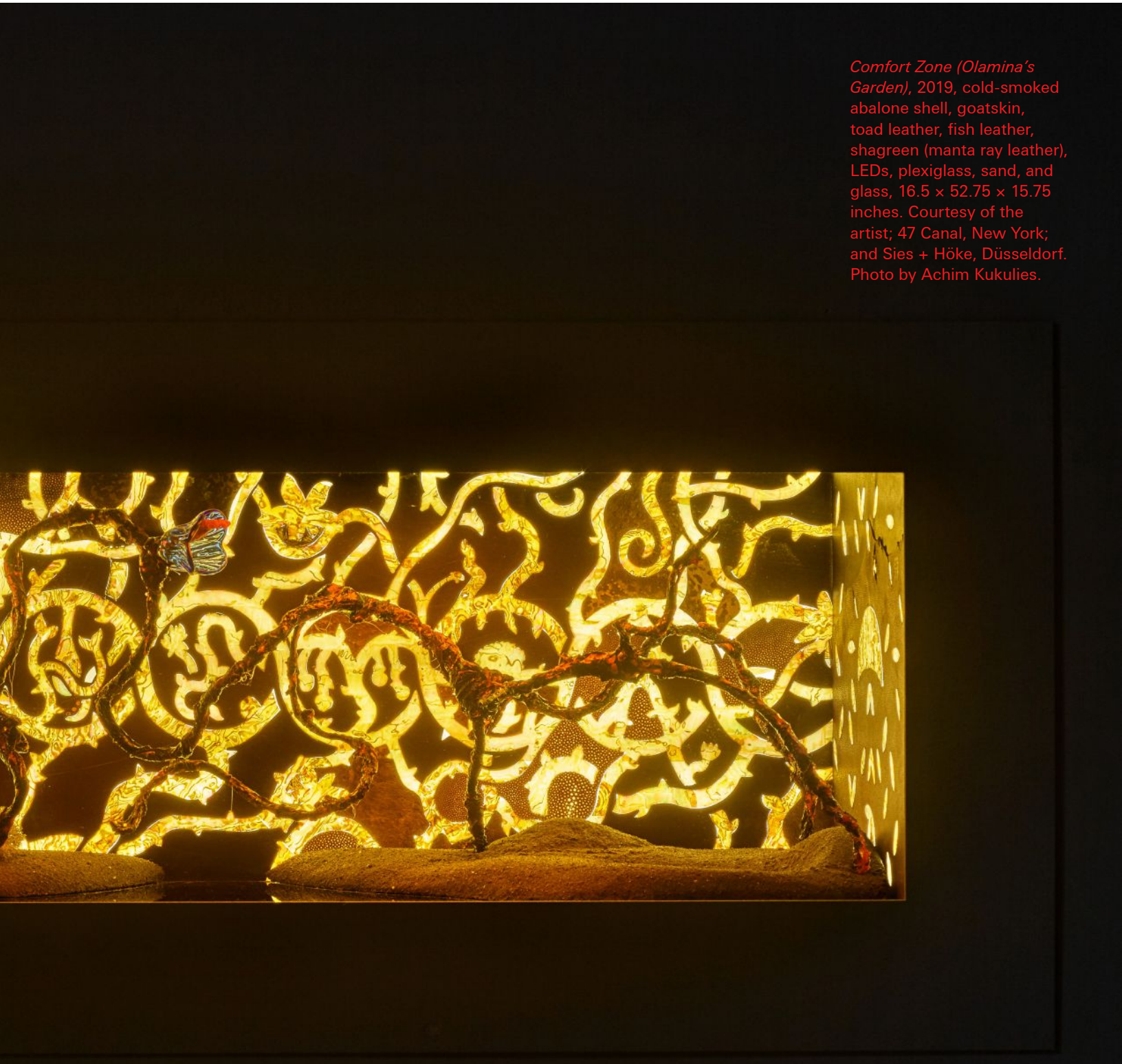
travel. I was thinking about that, and about what's left. What's the remainder? The idea for the pair of exhibitions was also governed by temperature: There are some sculptures I'm working on—one's very, very hot and the other's very, very cold. The hot sculpture uses ceramic heating elements inside a pedestal that gets to around 600 degrees Celsius, hot enough that the air near it starts to quiver, and you get what's called a "shimmer." A curtain of heat emerges from the perimeter of the pedestal, so that any object on top of it is surrounded by this shimmer, giving a sense of the sculpture as both a mirage and as a potential threat. When you see it, it looks like there is a fire, some kind of intensity.

SK: Our climate is precarious, as is our memory and sense of home.

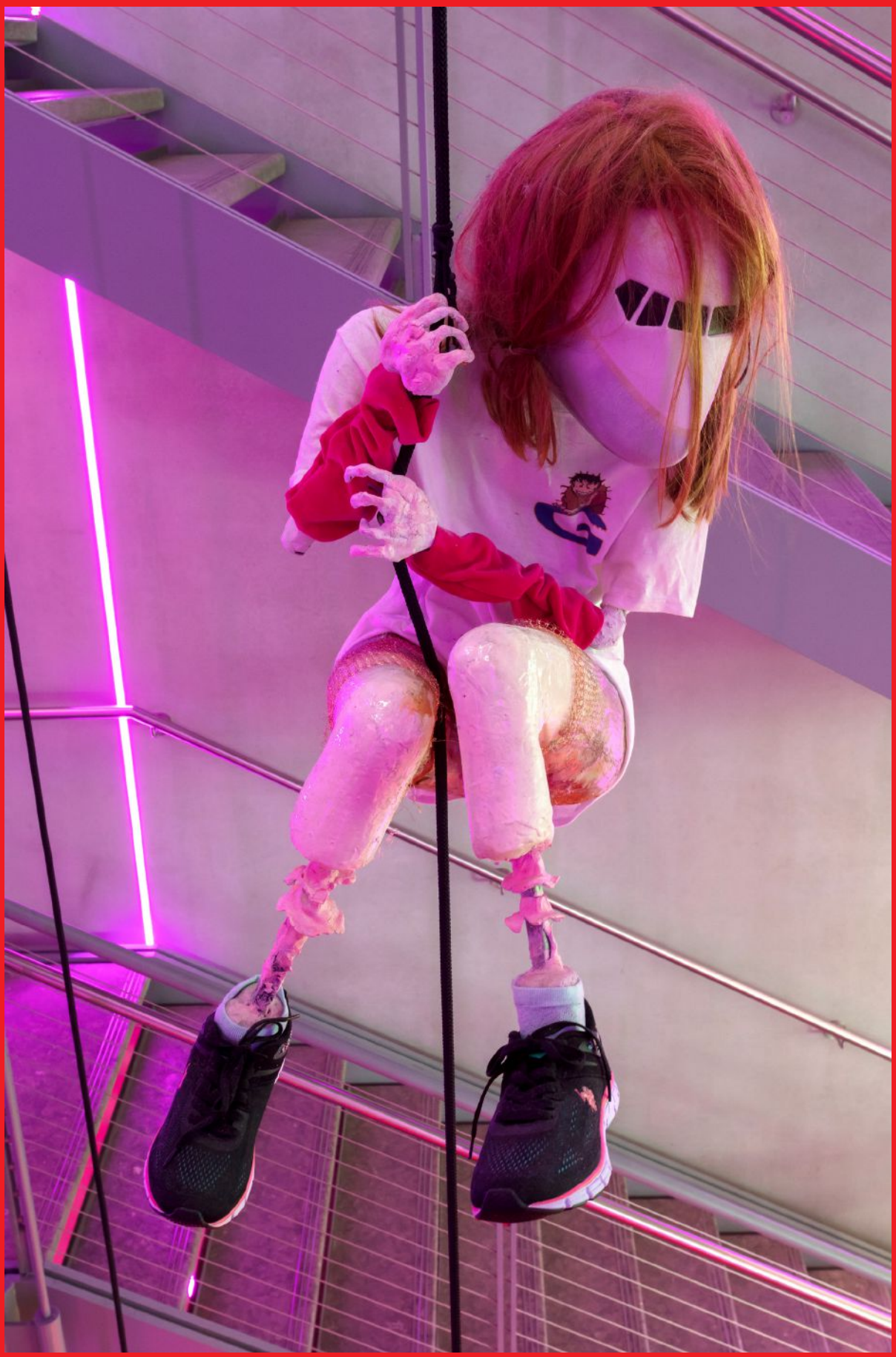
AK: There's a scene in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* where the main character, Cleo, is in the hospital and as she's looking through the window at the premature babies in the NICU, there's an earthquake, and a chunk of the hospital collapses on one of the incubators. The camera stays on that crushed incubator for quite a while, and the image is just so haunting. I'm making almost a reproduction of that sculpturally, an empty incubator with a giant piece of concrete smashed into it, and it will have this curtain of heat around it.

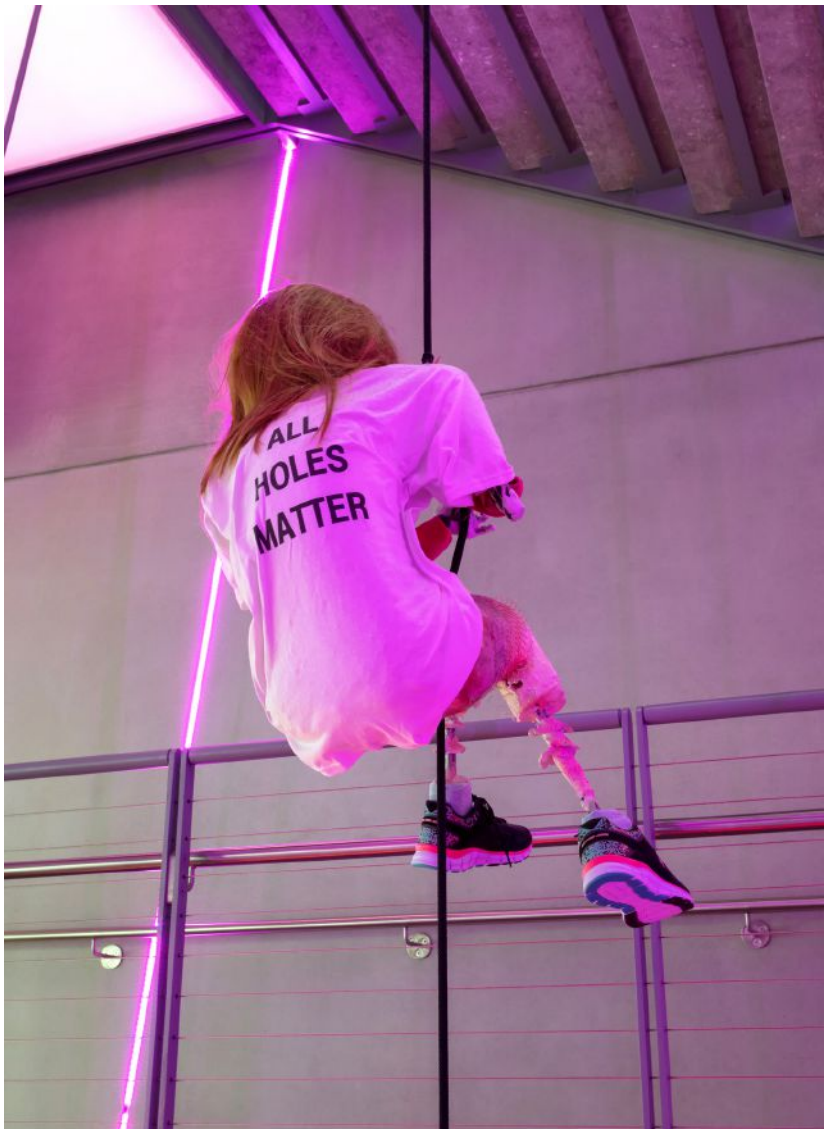
My recent exhibition *Possessions* at Sies + Höke was also bound by stories. It was in some ways a breakup show and in other ways loosely about climate change. I didn't say that at the time because it sounds absolutely ridiculous. There were three vitrines inlaid into the wall, and I thought of them in terms of *The Divine Comedy*—hell, purgatory, and paradise. The hell portion was incredibly disorienting. It's the only piece I've made in the studio that





Comfort Zone (Olamina's Garden), 2019, cold-smoked abalone shell, goatskin, toad leather, fish leather, shagreen (manta ray leather), LEDs, plexiglass, sand, and glass, 16.5 × 52.75 × 15.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf. Photo by Achim Kukulies.





#empathy, 2017, steel, 3-D print, foam, magic sculpt, magic smooth, styroplast, shellac, custom clothes, sneakers, spray paint, paint, and duct tape, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo by Joerg Lohse.

I was actually scared of. It was these hovering figures, just floating in space, turning on a carousel. And I created a strobe light that would flash on them. It was like a really dysfunctional zoetrope. You couldn't tell if it was an animation—you really couldn't tell what the hell was going on—but you could clearly see these monstrous beings, with body parts growing out of other body parts and a circle of moss below. Maybe it was because I had just seen that horror movie that's all in daylight, *Midsommar*.

SK: I had to hold myself back from that one.

AK: A lot of weird numerology has started to have an effect in my work. Astrology. Not horoscopes, but astrological significance has begun to play a role.

SK: Maybe what you mean is a different system, or narrative framework?

AK: Yeah, taking a systemic approach to a personal poetics. I think that's always been the case with how I think about sculpture—stories give the sculpture necessity, and necessity is something I'm always thinking about. When I'm teaching, I'm constantly asking my students "What is the necessity in this work?" or in what they're doing. How they come to terms with their own definition of necessity is precisely what makes their practice. Stories have been an important conduit for my work. I couldn't bear it as autobiography, so it has to find its way through something else.

SK: Your sculptures are not asking for us to identify with them. They are upright—in that they adhere to something of a different order, our sense that we're in the presence of something eerie and unfamiliar.

AK: Even when I'm not making figural work, the notion of bodily posture is still really important to how I think about the work. Rather than making figures that I immediately identify with, it's more that there's a posture that makes psychological sense to me, that I'll embody momentarily—like the cowering girl with the 3-D-printed 737 for a face (*#empathy*, 2017). She's afraid, but has all this mobility. And it's like, You're fine. What are you afraid of? (*laughter*) Or the first figural sculpture I made (*Prep*, 2015) was this kid pissing into the mouth of another and a third kid watching. I remember not being able to shake that image of two white boys in this tautological ouroboros, where one's peeing and the other kid's just loving it and they're both thrilled. They have this feedback loop, and then there's a third boy that's so confused and trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. I couldn't shake the image, so then I finally started to make it because I was like, This is definitely how it felt. The bold stance that you take at the urinal. Like when kids decide they want to see how far back they can step from the urinal—

SK: Like target practice, baby's first sport.

AK: Exactly, and it felt like you can lace those things in with posture, and it becomes all the more bewildering. I remember when a friend of mine from high school who was also a person

of color saw that piece, he was like, "Dude, you took me back to the sixth grade." Not because it happened, but there's something in a figural understanding; you can feel the truth of a story that didn't actually take place. I recently learned about psychodrama therapy, where you reenact events with a therapist in order to work through issues. In a way, I see my figurative work similarly.

SK: Stories are a necessary *conduit*, as you put it. I notice that you used that word in the essay you shared with me, "My Best," from the forthcoming book *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the art*s. You say that the garden is a conduit, and then that *you* are the garden, which I thought was a surprising way of thinking about one's own ecology.

AK: Yes, we are both garden and gardeners. We are tended to as we tend to others. The garden is the oldest metaphor in my toolbox. The very first show I did in New York was about making an unnatural garden as a home for Shakespeare's Caliban and Ariel. I felt like they didn't have a home in the world of the play (*The Tempest*), so I wanted to make one. What's funny is, I really shied away from any kind of racial or postcolonial analysis. I was interested in thinking through the lens of the unnatural, the monstrous, what we qualify as natural; that history was easier for me to deal with at the time. As a young artist I was obsessed with "big ideas" in the history of philosophy that felt like they held the possibility of mastery, where I could be a systems thinker and be right. That eventually got sloughed off. (*laughter*) I don't want to be right anymore. It's a stupid endeavor.

SK: (*laughter*) Yeah, it's really not worked out for anybody.

AK: It felt like there was a brighter, sharper kind of rightness I could get to if I stopped thinking about rightness. I'm now coming back to the garden with new eyes, wherein everything I've seen and experienced and rethought and unlearned about myself gives me the sense that the metaphor still rings true, but let's go back and see how this story can be told again.

These new works are as sci-fi as I've ever been. And those internal histories are also there. The sculptures are as indebted to Ron Gorchov as they are to V.S. Gaitonde and Mrinalini Mukherjee. I remember reading that Mukherjee's pieces are installed frontally. I thought that was fascinating; and it felt like there was an interesting association with the friezelike structure of ancient Indian sculpture, and that her work reads as both painting and sculpture because of that. And I was like, That's how I've thought of my vitrines this whole time. They give you a way in and govern your movements—you cannot go behind them. They're sculptural but also sort of flat. And there's depth in the sense that there are sculptural objects participating, but because of the length and the way that I've made them, you read it left to right.

There's a legibility that has everything to do with writing and painting. The way I use detail is very much about painting, which I'm never really asked about. I always have to bring up that I use color like a painter would. And now I'm like, Okay, I'll just make sculptural paintings. This is a new way to continue to do the same things that I've been doing. But they feel much more assured. Like they don't care about you.

SK: No, they definitely don't. They're doing a lot of thinking for a lot of people. It's a relief to see that they're actually doing some of the psychic work for me. (*laughter*)

AK: That's nice.

SK: In this way, they induce the experience of, say, unexpectedly seeing an actual animal—immediate shock, followed by awe and pleasure.

AK: Animals have been a really important part of the work. I started looking more into the histories of animals in early cartoons from assorted backgrounds. There's this through line from minstrelsy into early cartoons, and what I already sensed was confirmed by these histories: that we use animals to remove politics because they're natural, so to speak. People will say that nature is apolitical, but I think I've always been interested in the unnaturalness of nature. One can naturalize everything and in a sense depoliticize everything, or you can alternately say that everything is unnatural and that the world is full of active political agents, human and nonhuman alike, each with our own proclivities of cultivation. What we cultivate and what we call that process has become an ongoing question for me. It's like Foucault's biopolitics, a shift in sovereignty where we let things die instead of killing. What are we letting die? What are we actually cultivating? What are we putting our work into? That goes for images. That goes for history. All of these things become ways to scrutinize what we are really giving life to.

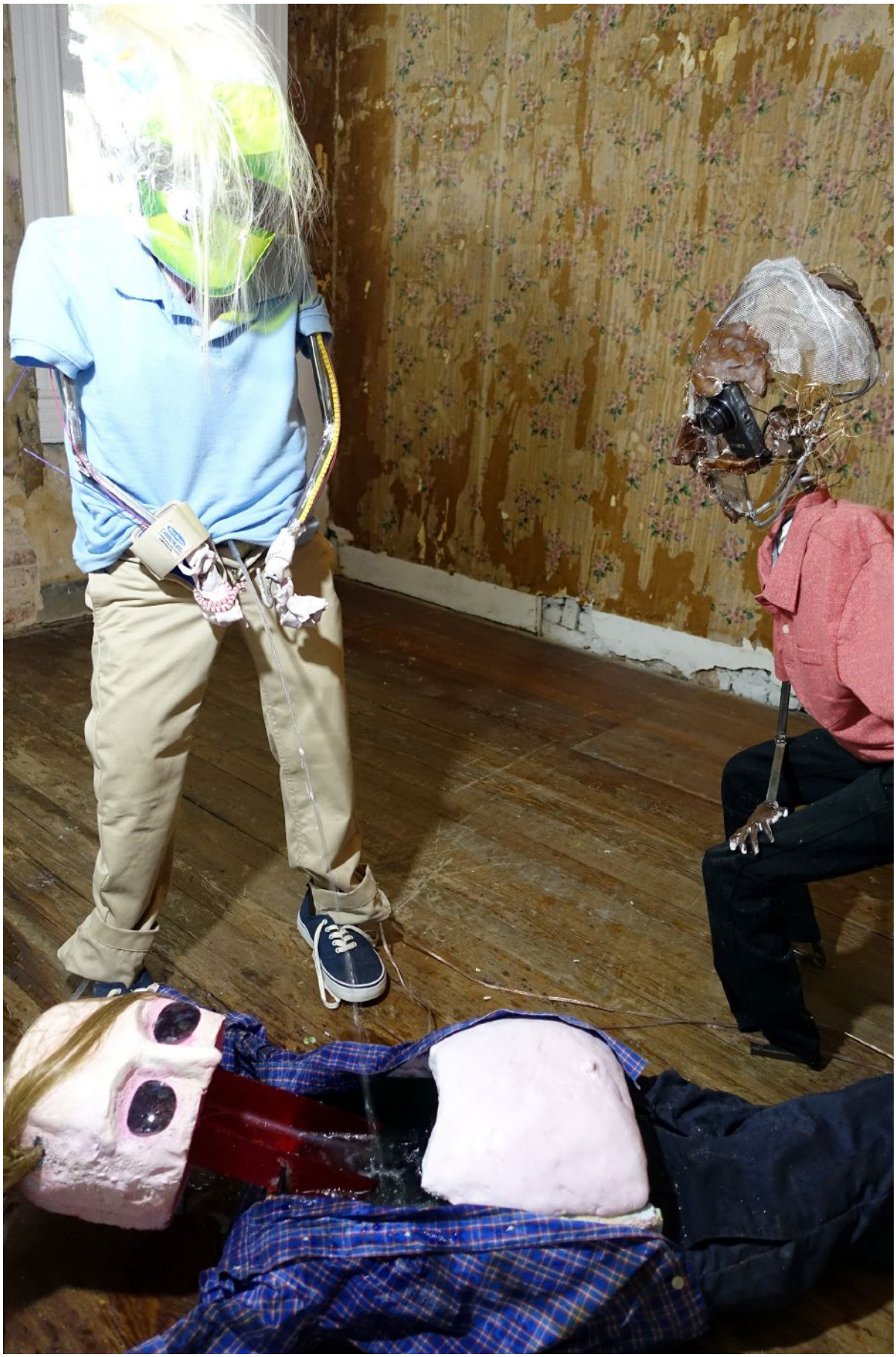
I feel like this new body of work is about giving life as opposed to critique. I want the work to have joy or positive energy, even if there is negativity there. I really want to make a beautiful show. I wanted to make something beautiful.

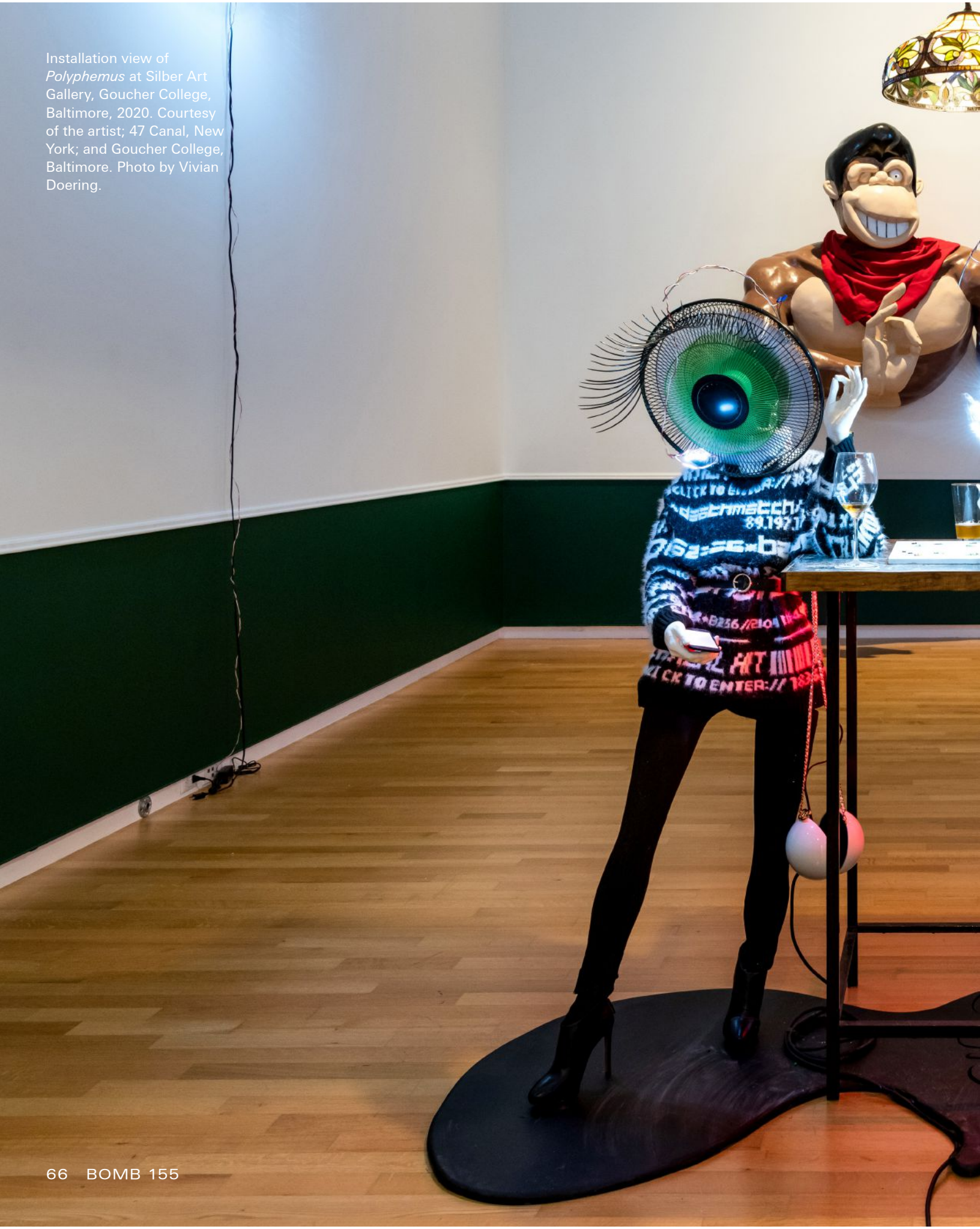
SK: As a person who enjoys art, I am in serious need of beautiful things right now. So, thank you. We're all adjusting to a very distended experience of time, which is to say it's hard to keep what feels like work separate from what gives us pleasure. And maybe it's a chance to rethink the reasons we make things. Necessity, as you put it.

AK: It's also about starting to trust what I have access to and not having any misgivings about it. David Altmejd just had a show at Xavier Hufkens [in Brussels]. There were these rabbit sculptures. One of them in particular is truly terrifying. There's musical notation on the rabbit's chest, which I think is like a God chord, and the rabbit itself has this open mouth that looks like it's droning or in a trancelike state. Altmejd talks about how the rabbits are able to tunnel through reality and get somewhere else.

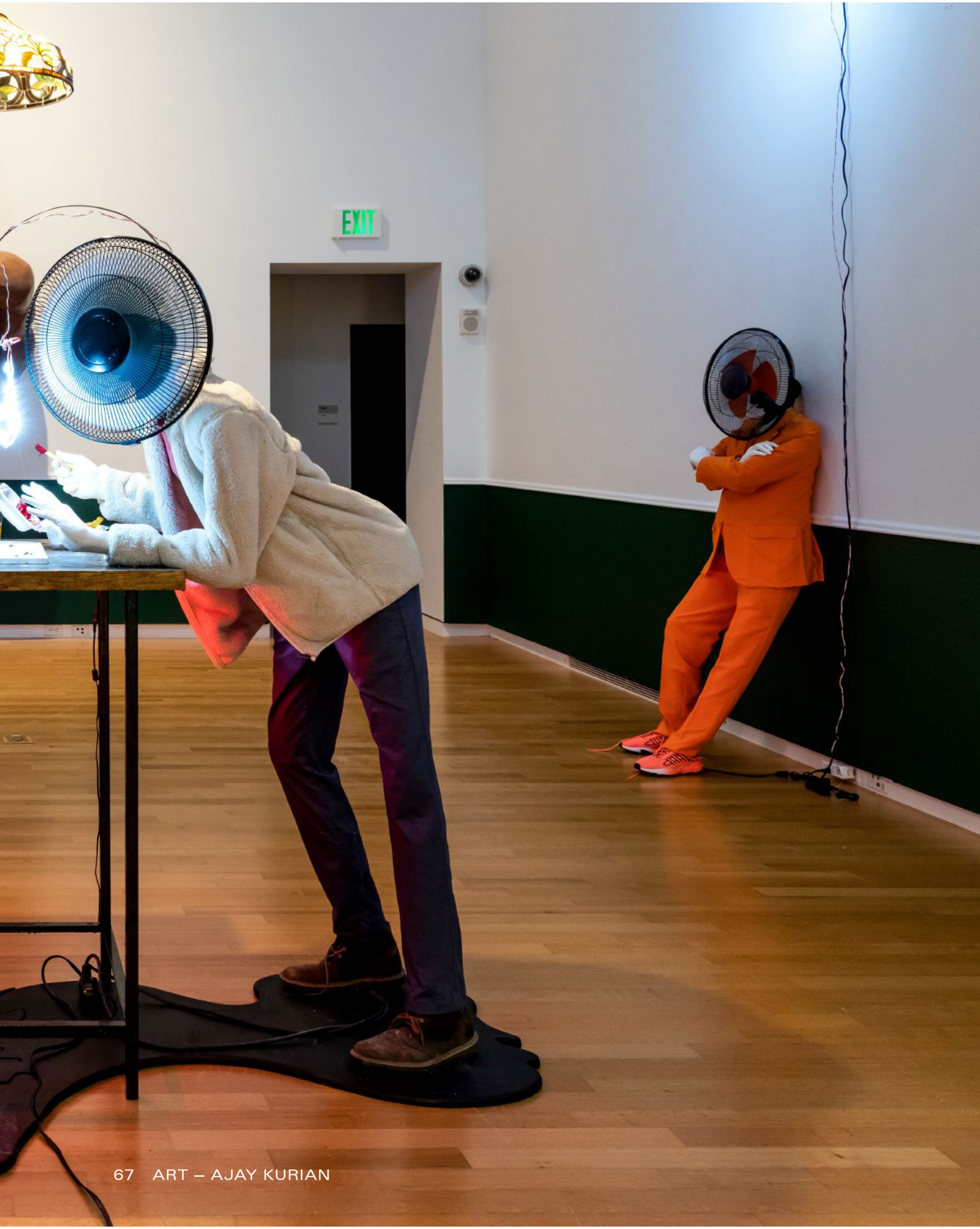
There were certain things I knew about myself that I just... I had a hard time talking about them. I've tried hallucinogenics and things like that, and in those experiences, I realized,

Prep, 2015, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Rowhouse Projects, Baltimore.





Installation view of *Polyphemus* at Silber Art Gallery, Goucher College, Baltimore, 2020. Courtesy of the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Goucher College, Baltimore. Photo by Vivian Doering.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Oh, I do this fairly frequently just on my own, where I can sit with myself long enough and start to hallucinate. And I would never say that out loud because it almost feels like an attention grab, but now with this whole year and everything that's happened both in my life and everybody else's, I almost feel like I'm running out of time to afford myself the space. If not now, when? I want to just give myself license to be myself as fully as I can.

Recently, I had a conversation with an artist who always imagined his work in blue-chip galleries, and he was like, "Didn't you?" And I said, "No, I didn't." We were talking for a while, and then he said, "You're like my father's generation." Which was funny to hear because my friend and I are the same age. And he explained that his father's parents came to America and then his father grew up here as the first generation and had to deal with all the things that I'm dealing with. My friend doesn't have to deal with any of that. He's the generation after me, so to speak. I was astonished at the acuity of his comment. But I was also like, I don't want to wait for a whole generation. I don't want it to be on my kids. And he just looked at me and said, "Then don't." That was really liberating. I can't tell if this is a South Asian thing or a first-generation thing, but that temperament of questioning everything and that doubt and shame and guilt are just in my head because I haven't felt tethered to something. I haven't felt super grounded. It's complicated. In some ways, I'm not sure what's mine, I guess. Especially in a political atmosphere where it can often simplistically feel like, there's black and white, and then there's this other stuff. As a kid I didn't understand or realize that I chose whiteness growing up. And eventually I hit a crisis: Well, now what? My mind is thoroughly colonized, and I didn't feel like I was allowed to be otherwise.

SK: I hear you. Frantz Fanon struggles with the same thing in his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*; often I permit myself to return to the line: "There is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me…" How do we break the chain?

AK: I'm of two camps. One part of me thinks about making a life, and what that means. It's like the trope in anime, where the protagonist is a fool. There are enough moments for you to realize that they are not stupid, even if they act foolishly. This part of me admires their brazenness and their certainty—they move with the most steeled intention. It's a puzzle to everyone around them: "You have no reason to be this sure of yourself." But it's not even a question of asking why they would be so sure. Even when failure confronts the protagonist, they accept the failure and continue with their surety, even if it's altered their course. That's the kind of stupidness you need to make new things—and really, it's not stupid.

You can overthink yourself into the corner you're already in. Or you can just leave the corner.

SK: That's real. What about the other camp?

AK: The other side of me thinks this shit repeats itself over and over again. I think you can keep these two things in mind simultaneously. For instance, there's an event that happened in my family, a mistake I thought we were never going to repeat, and yet it's repeating right now. It's unnerving because it really does feel like a tragic loop of like, Oh my God. Why does this *keep* happening?

SK: I think you're right. You do have to be vulnerable and courageous at the same time—by any means. It might be the only way to move a little bit forward.

AK: We can take it back to the Western literature and say that it's like Beckett: you just fail better.

SK: It's funny, when you said "giving life," you didn't mention reproduction at all. You were talking about the art you make, and about what it means to give something to the world. There's something poignant in that.

AK: I'm reading this book on the history of precolonial desire in India. Even in the *Kama Sutra*, sex is not immediately thought of as reproductive. There are so many ways of being generative that were never narrowly understood as biological reproduction. Embracing that kind of erotics is something I feel like I'm good at doing as a person, but not fully embracing in my work. It doesn't feel holistic yet. It feels fragmented. So, I'm still trying to piece these things together. But also, just seeing that history and realizing that it is, on some level, part of me, is grounding—these unnamed ways of understanding desire; importantly unnamed, importantly fluid, just like different colors bleeding together.

In this work, I can embrace a multiplicity that relates to those deeper South Asian histories of representations of desire I'm just fine claiming. I could think myself out of it and say I'm not being responsible enough because that's always plagued me, like, I need to read more about this so I understand it and I cross my *t*s and dot my *i*s. But fuck it, I'm just going to do it.

SK: Do you have a title for the exhibitions?

AK: The first show is called *Garden*. Following that is a related exhibition called *Poveri Fiori* [Italian for *Poor flowers*]. The second chapter is as yet unnamed.

Shell (lavender), 2020, epoxy clay, spray paint, wood, and Plasti Dip spray, 19 × 14 × .25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo by Joerg Lohse.