

Derosia

R.H. Lossin, Art Agenda, May 13, 2022

ART  AGENDA



Em Rooney, *Lover's Year*, 2022. Steel, aluminum, gold foil, copper, 94 × 128 × 7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Derosia, New York.

## Em Rooney's "Entrance of Butterfly"

by R. H. Lossin

April 9—May 14, 2022

Derosia, New York

"Entrance of Butterfly," Em Rooney's third solo show with Derosia (formerly Bodega), consists of six large sculptures and the looping, 11-minute slide show that gives the exhibition its title. The artist has previously integrated photographs into her sculptures, but here the 80 color stills are disaggregated and projected at a notably small scale in a separate gallery: their relation to the sculptural forms is symbolic or narrative rather than material. If these representational images suggest context or content for their more abstract, three-dimensional counterparts, it is only in the most provisional way. The wall-mounted sculptures, titled with reference to films and natural processes, have a descriptive power of their own.

*trouble every day* (all works 2022) is the approximate size and shape of a headless dress mannequin. Impaled on the steel strip that secures it to the wall, the candy-wrapper quality

bestowed by Mylar and coated rice paper is at odds with the violence of a disarticulated female torso. This shape, at once a replica and an encasement of the female body—shiny, blue, aggressively corseted by sharp, rhinestone-studded petals (synthetic whale boning and all)—invites us to dwell on the often incompatible demands made on women's bodies (literally, materially on them). The Caribbean travel advert palette is enticing in a way that makes me suspicious of the politics of my own taste, but the title implies the unlikely agency of this dominated and partial body.

The other reading of *trouble every day*—made clear by the show's collective theme of insect incubation and, by symbolic extension, pubescence and womanhood—is as massive, synthetic pupa. Something obvious once named, but I suspect that I was not the only one to see breasts and a waist first. Mannequin and pupa are very different objects—mutilated, fake, aggressively empty female form on the one hand, and protective layer for a new form of life on the other—but hardly incompatible. Together they produce a theory of femininity in which limitations and catharsis, nature and nurture, violence and rebirth are co-constitutive. The perpetually emergent state of this pupa reinforces the threat of the title and reconfigures what might have been a harmless, playful everyday trouble into something unseen, sinister, always already about to happen.

Other sculptures in this sequence also conflate bodies and carnivalesque costuming. *One in a Wake* and *Ecllosion Sequence* simultaneously evoke elaborate garments and body parts—the former insistently vaginal and the latter a massive fan or bow, the color of raw meat, adipose, and flayed skin. That carnival and carnivorous share a root word seems relevant here, whether or not the connection was intentional.

*Ecllosion Sequence* is flanked by *Madame Charpillon* and *Lover's Year*, both of which lack their companions' sumptuary aesthetic, but whose titles form a couplet of serial seduction. The name of one of Casanova's lovers is assigned to looped steel strips suspended away from the wall and held together by hinges that are, in turn, immobilized and robbed of their function by chunks of colored resin filling the crevasses created by the joints. *Lover's Year* lies flat against the wall, aluminum and gold foil coils woven with copper wire into a shape that brings to mind both wings and medieval military banners. What relation these titles have to the structures they name is left open, but their placement on either side of a sculpture whose name describes the process of emergence from an egg or cocoon, invites us into a narrative structure that has the basic components of coherence: a character, an action, and a literal timeline.

The butterfly-to-woman trope risks feeling overdetermined, but Rooney seems to like the difficulty of navigating this sort of territory. A 2020 show, "Women in Fiction" at Francois Ghebaly in Los Angeles, was dominated by massive flowers. Rooney doesn't strike me as particularly interested in clever, ironic gestures. She is serious about these women, these flowers, these butterflies and veiny, alien torsos. The primary concern here is actually using these symbols anew—not commenting on their use by others. This is a bold move. Disavowal continues to be a wise approach for women who wish to be taken seriously. The scale of these works is a hedge against the baggage carried by the female—a category that still implies the minor, diminutive, and fragile. But still, to put together a show about women as biological entities and beneficiaries (willing or not) of a known symbolic inheritance risks reinscribing normative gender roles as well as casting Rooney as a limited, hyphenated artist. "Entrance of Butterfly" is a collection of shiny ruffles, sea shells, rhinestones, and materials associated with kitchens, but it is anything but limited. Whatever normative claims it is making lie far beyond the miserable, pinched imagination of heterosexuality. This was a leap; the landing was exquisite.

# ARTFORUM



View of “Em Rooney: Women in Fiction” 2020 at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Photo: Em Rooney and François Ghebaly.

## INTERVIEWS

### Em Rooney

December 15, 2020

Em Rooney on finish and embodiment in “Women in Fiction”

*For her first solo show in Los Angeles—on view at François Ghebaly from December 12 to January 9—Em Rooney unveils a new body of sculpture alongside her photographs. While Rooney is known for creating sculptural framing devices for her photos, this marks her first exhibition of stand-alone sculptures, almost all of which assume the form of flowers. An emphasis on tactility and process has always been evident in Rooney’s photographic “containers,” which deftly merge two differently valued modes of knowledge acquisition: sight and touch. Focusing on sculptural forms allows Rooney to continue drawing connections between materiality, touch, and the ethics of care. The show also includes a new series of photographs inspired by Garry Winogrand’s 1975 book of street photography, *Women Are Beautiful*. The two bodies of work are united under the show’s title—“Women in Fiction.” There’s a small conceptual leap between women in fiction and woman as fiction. The title nudges us to consider this construction, but also gives us permission to take pleasure in it. Rooney nimbly employs symbolic containers that are all too easily overdetermined—woman, flower—without allowing them to get backed into theoretical dead-ends.*

**MAKING A FLOWER SCULPTURE** felt like a huge leap from other sculptures that I'd made, which had never really been representational. The flower shape was like a doorway to beginning to work with form outside of a semantic relationship to its frame or container. Its morphology proved to be complicated enough that I could use it as a structure from which to make other sculptures. I love that they are vaginal or feminine, but that wasn't the starting place.

Also, I have spent two and a half years in the woods in Western Mass, growing things. That experience is not there in my flower sculptures, but I don't think it's crucial to their reception. For example, you wouldn't know that *Lady Macbeth*, 2020, looks like a ghost pipe plant unless you live in a hemlock forest or are a botanist or something.

The materials of the sculptures include plaster, linen, velvet, tulle, rice paper, and a heat blanket, and refer to a lineage of artists like Ree Morton, Elizabeth Murray, and Lee Bontecou. There's something in their work that one might call an earnestness and an awkwardness. The first sculpture was the hardest, and after that they were all made with different processes and materials. I switched from polystyrene to plaster because working with foam is disgusting and plaster is beautiful and amazing. I tried to focus on being able to enjoy and connect with the thing that I was making, to have some sort of loving relationship with it.



**Em Rooney, *Lady Macbeth*, 2020**, blackened and welded steel, glass, linen, paste wax, yarn, 85 x 24 x 12”.



## Derosia

Em Rooney and Ashton Cooper, Artforum, December 15, 2020

I've been thinking a lot about materials and their relationship to the body. Metal has this rigidity, malleability, and—especially with steel and pewter—fallibility within the chemical structure. I love how touch is also connected to darkroom photography, as the silver paper is a physical trace of a body or a thing in real space-time. Even though I don't like making frames, I can't ever hire it out because it's so conceptually important to me that I handle the photograph and create its container. Showing up for my work, standing with it or over it, touching the fronts and the backs, sanding and waxing carefully, has been an act of kindness to myself.



**Em Rooney, *Lady Macbeth*, 2020**, blackened and welded steel, glass, linen, paste wax, yarn, 85 x 24 x 12”.

This way of working—the “to touch is to know” approach, to paraphrase Amy Sillman—has to do with embodiment. And it has been feminized, queered, re-masculinized, and re-feminized over the past century and a half. Without getting too deep into a history of making, we can see how care and touch can morph into material and finish fetish. At the same time, there are so many sculptural processes that, in their emphasis on surface relationships, disrupt a binary of handmade/fabricated. I am thinking about Anne Truitt sanding her layers and layers of paint, creating pristine surfaces on hard wooded columns. Vincent Fecteau and the gorgeous insides and outsides of his sculptures. Or Martin Puryear, who maybe operates more like an architect but has the deep material knowledge of a carpenter. And Vaginal Davis’s paintings and drawings with cosmetics, where the idea of finish is conceptual in the sense that makeup is a finishing touch. And Louise Bourgeois, who dominates finish. Or Simone Leigh’s High Line sculpture up against the New York skyline.

## Derosia

Em Rooney and Ashton Cooper, Artforum, December 15, 2020

Of course, there would also be things that I hadn't even imagined, and those moments are, to me, where the magic happens. It isn't spill-, or mistake-, or accident-fetish. Rather, it is the strangeness of translation. Like in the English subtitles of Chris Marker's *La Jetee* where a park is referred to as a garden, or like the ways Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei's line "evening light slipping through trees" has been expressed as "slanting sun," "piercing rays," "a reaching reflection," "motley patterns," or simply "sunset" by his various modern translators.

I'm also interested in life-cycles with all of their baseness, abstraction, messiness. But also their clarity. And there is something in all that that is hard and maybe unfashionable to describe, which is my own subjectivity, my own life, my own mortality. I am thirty-seven, nearing the end of my reproductive years, with no children (an ending of a cycle within cycles). I have lived the experience of girlhood, and womanhood, and felt outside from it. I have loved women and been in love with women, been heart-broken by them, and I have pined for their hard-to-access parts. I am married to and in love with a man. I am white and have had the experience, many times throughout my life, of having my whiteness and my femininity grant me access, approval, and safety. I am queer and sometimes boyish and have been gay-bashed and excluded and loved wholesomely by community. So when I look at women and girls there is awe and shame. When I look at our natural world with all of its industriousness, when I think about our political structures and their nefarious roots and blossoms, there is the same.

The starting point for the body of photographs in this show—titled "Women in Fiction"—was my idea to remake Garry Winogrand's book *Women are Beautiful*. Right as I was really beginning to work on it, Covid happened and I thought I would never be able to make the book because I wouldn't be able to ride around the subway taking photographs of women. But, in the summer, I went to protests and the beach. I took photographs of my friends and strangers in Washington, DC; Albany and Kingston in New York; and Atlantic City and Asbury Park in New Jersey. I thought about how I could make these photographs in a way that's still totally complicated and problematic, but so much more nuanced than Winogrand's relationship to his images.

While I started working on this show, I moved into this huge new studio—the first real studio I've ever had. Incidentally, I also got on a Virginia Woolf reading rampage in early pandemic. The original title of *A Room of One's Own* was *Women and Fiction*. This show comes out of thinking about women and how people depict them in literature and on film. Women expansively, women in closed ways. The title "Women in Fiction" felt like exactly what the show was, but also something curious and open. In a way, my references to Winogrand or to the form of the flower are just helpful ways to materialize something that feels expansive.

— *As told to Ashton Cooper*

## **Our Sense of Self and the Chaos of our Strongest Feelings**

*An Interview with Em Rooney by Emile Rubino*

### **Emile Rubino**

I first saw your work when I was studying in NYC and I remember getting really excited by the very particular relationship it devised between photography and sculpture/object-making.

While the various approaches I had seen over the past few years seemed concerned with the dematerialization of images. Your approach felt like it either came from a different place, or just didn't really need to keep asking the same questions anymore. I was wondering what your thoughts on this would be?

### **Em Rooney**

Huh, the dematerialization of images, I wonder whose work you're referring to? Sometimes I think this is really beautiful. The first work that comes to mind is a show of photographs by John Neff I saw at Golden Gallery, which used to be in the Lower East Side but hasn't existed for several years now. It was a group of photographs, if I remember correctly, that he had taken with a scanner hooked up to a large format camera, and the prints were fuzzy and hard to see with a lot of noise and interference, but they were also of the home, flowers, nudes... There was a pdf that you could download for free on their website, to own all of the images of the exhibition—which I guess is a type of dematerialization or a hacked rematerialization. Either way, I loved it. But I somehow think that might not be exactly what you were thinking about.

I am definitely interested in the rematerialization of images. It's almost dull how simple my thinking is about it—I make photographs, mainly in a vernacular way, because that is the way I want my photographs to exist. I'm borderline technophobic. I use inkjet printers to make color prints because they are much more accessible, but I really miss printing in the color darkroom because of the physical aspect of it. The sounds, the smells, the darkness, how when the color is wrong the print still looks so beautiful, and the way the paper holds the smell of the chemistry. It's not nostalgic. I actually feel like most technologies (especially visual ones) are poison, and photographs for me have always been personal—and not that they're always relating to my personal life, but they have personal value and meaning and significance. They are a unique unto themselves. And I don't want to think about them or any of my work in relationship to corporate technologies. I don't want their only home to be as data behind a screen. Data, even the word, to me is nefarious.

As I write this, I am looking across the room at a 9x7" photograph of my friends Lydia and Elizabeth on a perfectly sized custom shelf. It's a UV print on aluminum, and therefore it required technology to be created, and I love it nonetheless. But I guess what happens is that it still gets to be an object, and my primary interest is in objects. (Not that photography hasn't utilized technology to great ends for a very long time, it's just not where my interest in the medium lays.)

Derosia

Emile Rubino, *Le Chauffage*, Issue 1, 2020



Em Rooney, *Jesus Is Thomed (5)*, 2018  
Walnut, pewter, UV print on aluminum  
19.75 x 15 in (50.2 x 38.1 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Bodega



**Emile**

I guess what I had in mind with “the dematerialisation of images...” was roughly akin to the curatorial framework used for the *Ocean of Images* New Photography exhibition at MoMA in 2016. The inclusion of your work in the following 2018 edition *Being* just made a lot of sense to me because your take on object-making felt liberated from these sets of questions directly related to the “digital flow of images...”, hence opening up some space to think and talk about other things too.

I didn't know this work by John Neff! I just looked it up and they are really beautiful, especially the portraits, they remind me of your hand-colored photographs from 2016. As pictures, I find they have the same kind of thoughtful intimacy.

This intimacy is something I really love about your work. When I was listening to the interview you recently gave for WYBCX Yale Radio, I was really interested to hear you discuss your approach to making work as gift editions. It also reminded me that while talking to a friend of mine, we kept making parallels between Moyra Davey's practice and your work, even though yours is much more materially involved. But we thought that the literary quality of her work is something we also found in yours. This parallel, which I really liked was then furthered for me when I started thinking that your gift editions were perhaps a bit like 'more material' versions of Davey's folded photographs that she sends through the mail.

I was hoping you could tell me more about the gift aspect of your recent works. What role do you think it occupies as a mode of making, and as a way to create community through a kind of casual “gift economy” etc? Also curious to know what you think about this parallel with Moyra Davey?

**Em**

How do we ever get around thinking about the digital flow of images? Even as we try to think about other things our conversation about my photographs is still attached to that dialectic. But Moyra Davey does get around it, and I think it might have something to do with her work developing before conversations around the internet and art production dominated.

I love her work so much. It's funny because I've assigned her texts several times, and looked at her work with my students over the years, and they don't get it. I might venture to say they hate it even. Which always makes me feel like I'm failing as a teacher or that these terrible devices we carry around and depend on have shortened our attention span to such a degree that really bright people and students who otherwise would display curiosity and a desire to excavate meaning from things they don't understand, instead are bored and dismissive. They always see Davey's work as a closed feedback loop: why make art about art about art for artists? Unsurprisingly the same thing happens when I try to show them Sherrie Levine's *After August Sander* project. The takeaway, more generally, is that as a culture (and I think this is specifically an American issue) we don't value art and real creative production or the production of ideas without describable use value. And artists who commit themselves to this value—that artistic production (and the struggles therein) can itself be content—are written off as navel gazers, especially when they're women. Davey dives deep into that cycle, especially in her video and written works, she complicates it and gives it added meaning by drawing connections between her life and the lives of the other artists, poets and writers she is making work for or to.

So yes, she has been a model for me and I'm flattered that you've made a connection between my work and hers.

I hope my work has the time and space to achieve such depth.

I'm not so sure the work I'm making "creates community" or even refers to a gift economy, which is something I think is very tied to the internet.

I think there are other things that I do, and try to do that build community much more—like a project my partner Chris Domenick and I are running out of a shack in our backyard called Gertrude. Artists come and make projects, stay with us, bring their friends, and we all cook, and it is very community building. So has been working on writing projects with other artists, towards their shows, which I've done many times over the years. So too, is being with friends when they install their work, hanging around getting coffees, talking about all the possibilities and taking time with the work, putting completely out of our minds what is for sale. Doing studio visits. Going to people's openings and telling them—later—how you feel about the show. Those things build community.

I'm not so sure this gift project does. I guess I like that it could be situated within that historical context alongside Lutz Bacher, and Julie Ault, and Moyra Davey but I'm not so sure. I don't know if objects can build community the way they once did, there is a false sense of community that we all rely on through social media, and then there is showing up and being a body, and I think the possibilities in between are now, quite limited.

Weirdly, I think before it became a show, and when it was just some one-off pieces here and there, it felt more spontaneous and truly about the gift. In, *You Too Know That You Live*, the gift giving component became more of an opportunity for me to make the sculptures I wanted to make, while still having them relate to the semantic (like a photograph)—as containers for gifts, and elaborate jewelry

boxes. And also, as Nancy Lupo alluded to, I think rightly in her press release, the gifts in some cases become a way of exercising or processing humiliation. That is maybe a little complicated to unpack and this answer is already getting quite long. But yes, to bring it full circle, there is this inward look at my own creative practice and how it is informed by others, in my community and right outside of it. For instance the quilt piece in that show, was made for RJ (all of the gift objects are doubles, or multiples so her quilt exists in the gallery space as a re-creation of a second quilt that was made and actually given to her). RJ Messineo is a close friend and a painter whose work I love. She made a painting last year that referenced a quilt and we talked about how amazing a show of her paintings with Zoe Leonard's quilt collection would be. So in making that piece I'm shouting out to RJ, to Zoe, and to Eva Hesse from whom I borrowed the g dome structure that both penetrates and holds the quilt.

### **Emile**

Thanks for this amazing answer, it touches upon many things I hope we get to discuss later on, but first, I'd like to talk about teaching.

It's interesting to hear about your student's complicated relationship to Moyra Davey's work because I remember also having a hard time with her work at first. She had a show at the gallery I interned at during my undergrad in Vancouver and I just couldn't get into her work at all back then. It took me some time and now I love it unconditionally. Im sure you are doing an amazing job as a teacher and some of your students will probably look back at the material you provided and find interest in it later on.

In your show in Amsterdam there is this picture called *Students with Urn Pendants* (2019), which is this pretty straightforward picture of a group of students wearing these urn-shaped pendants. I find that picture seems

to encapsulate many aspects your work at once. Can you tell me a bit more about this work and the Urn pendants? And perhaps you could elaborate on the connections between teaching and your practice in light of the aforementioned idea of the gift, community and intimacy?

**Em**

This photograph was the first photograph I ever made with an 8x10 camera, I was so excited when it came out like this, so perfect with the dull colors and the late morning fog. The kids in the photograph were in a class I taught during my first year at Simon's Rock. It was a class called Seminar, which goes on rotation among faculty, and is an introduction into humanities. So we read a classic work of fiction, non-fiction, theory, theater, looked at a film and a painting, one of each, as the primary texts of the class. I had to teach Plato's dialogues, which I had only read one of many years ago in a literature class I took at San Francisco community college in 2006—so it was hard for me, but they loved it. We had amazing debates about logic, and the existence of the soul, and then I asked them to help me design a pendant in response to *Phaedo*. Someone drew an anatomical heart which reminded me of canopic urns used by ancient Egyptians to preserve organs in the afterlife, and from there reminded me of the metaphor of the urn that reoccurs in different ways in Socratic dialogs. Its etymology is linked to foolishness because *pithos* is the greek for urn, and *pithanon* means persuadable—and so already the connection is there, but he elaborates that the leaky urn is a metaphor for an unwise and unhappy man, and that the urn of a man with a full mind and soul doesn't leak. Anyway, so I turned my student's heart drawing into an urn and they decided to inscribe it with the words "breath/breadth" because we meditated at the start of every class and because of the breadth of the material we had covered. I led their orientation so we had a special relationship. They were my first students of my first full-time teaching

job, I was their first professor, and we were all reading and discussing this material for the first time. I told them about my jewelry project, and they all seemed extremely proud and happy (especially for teenagers) that I had made them all this heavy piece of jewelry that we designed together. I love that photograph. It's not for sale, it's just for me. Teaching informs my practice less than it is a natural extension of it. I love being around people, sharing ideas with them, and collaborating. And that's basically what teaching is, and my students are really smart and special.

I also liked the idea of doing a larger edition, and the only way it would work conceptually was if I made it for my class, because at any given point in time my class is the largest community I am a part of. Although I am making rings for everyone I was with at MacDowell Colony this summer (or I will once this insane fall has chilled out a little bit). I have also been excited about photographing younger people lately. I always really loved Rineke Dijkstra's photographs of young teens, and now that I am quite far from my teenage years, I see younger people and children with a certain awkwardness and latency that is so beautiful, complex and unresolved. Last year for *Liste* I made a series of photographs and a video of RJ's daughter Helen, and I feel similarly about those.

**Emile**

I love these photographs by Rineke Dijkstra too! A few months ago I saw a small show with some of these pictures at Jan Mot in Brussels. I hadn't thought about these photos for some time and I was amazed by how 'fresh' they looked even though I have known them for a while. The way they depict teenagers' intense state of oscillation between power and vulnerability remains so striking. Talking about this actually brings to mind the great Audre Lorde quote from *Uses of the Erotics* that Nancy Lupo included in the text she wrote



Em Rooney, *Pilate Condemns (4)*, 2018  
Walnut, pewter, UV print on aluminum  
20 x 14.75 in (50.8 x 37.5 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Bodega



Derosia

Emile Rubino, *Le Chauffage*, Issue 1, 2020



Em Rooney, *Students with Urn Pendants*, 2019,  
Digital C-Print, cast pewter frame, walnut, glass  
19,7 x 25,4 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Fons Welters

for your show at Fons Welters. “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.” I feel like this quote also does a weirdly good job at describing the state of teenagehood—a moment where one is just starting to figure out the kind of internal satisfaction that Lorde talks about as being the key to using the erotic as an empowering tool in life.

Also in *Uses of the Erotics*, Lorde talks about how, “...it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory and antithetical.”

Thinking about the history of photography, this seems especially true. It seems to me for instance, that documentary and ‘aura photography’ never really get to cohabitate much! In your work, and especially in your series *Ordinary Time*, composed of sixteen frames presented like an out of order Stations of the Cross, you develop a specific relationship to spirituality and I think you successfully make the spiritual and the political work together. I hope it’s not too broad if I ask you to how you perceive the role of spirituality in this body of work and in the rest of your practice?

### **Em**

This is a great question, and I have some answers to it formulating in my head right now.

I live in the country—I can’t remember if that’s come up already or not—but the power is out right now because there was a big storm where I live, and branches and debris made a big mess on the property. I don’t have cell service, a landline, any power, lights, etc. I’m at the studio right now, where I have all of those things, but I need to be at home tending to the mess. I’m going to try to answer this question tonight in front of the fire, and send it to you tomorrow a.m. hopefully when the power is back on.

...

Firstly, the role of spirituality, in *Ordinary Time*, is complicated or it’s sublimated into the larger premise of that work, which is about how Biblical, Western narrative tropes are. Our ideas about revenge, sacrifice, damnation, glory and redemption are all tied up in the stories of the Old and New Testament. There were also some direct references to Renaissance paintings, like *Jesus Is Thorned (5)*, which I made with Fra Angelico’s *Christ Crowned with Thorns* in mind. But mainly I selected the images and arranged them the same way I might on a timeline if I was making a video. In some ways, the series is like a montage. I was thinking about ambient narrative, stories around stories and B-roll. Pontius Pilate, in some interpretations, was a burdened judge, guilty with indecision when he condemned Jesus to death, so in *Pilate Condemns (4)* I see Pilate with his head tipped down, leaving the courthouse, I imagine his face filled with onus. When Jesus dies on the cross, the bible mentions a solar eclipse, so the 13th station, is a photograph of a dark sky with the sun barely perceptible behind the clouds, instead of an image of a corpse nailed to a cross. What is happening in the crowd while a primary (and violent) action is occurring? Or how can we envision contemporary moments of betrayal with nuance? Or care without sacrifice?

I don’t think *Ordinary Time* answered all of those questions but I thought about them. More than spirituality, I was thinking about narrative structures.

But yes, it’s in there. I was raised Catholic, and it’s apparently been hugely impactful. The symbolism, and images of and from the church inform the way I approach materials and photographs. But it is more complicated than that. I don’t know if I know how to put it into words.

I was recently reading Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, and there is something in evil which resonated—even though I'm not sure if I've interpreted it correctly. Something about the proximity of goodness and evil. She writes "Good as the opposite of evil is, in a sense, equivalent to it, as is the way with all opposites." and then a little later "Good is essentially other than evil. Evil is multifarious and fragmentary, good is one, evil is apparent, good is mysterious; evil consists in action, good in non-action." When I read this I was thinking about the proximity of good and evil, and about evil in relationship to our political structure and to capitalism.

And this is where my thinking about Audre Lorde comes back in, and I hope this isn't totally convoluted. When she talks about the psychic and the emotional as separate from the political, I think about the psychic and emotional (or the erotic) as good, and the political as a constructed opposite, therefore necessarily close.

Our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings (why teenagers provide such a salient metaphor).

When we react (even though Weil says good is inactive) to things that illicit strong feelings—people, structures, spaces—we're exercising our spirituality, and our politics. And as art is innately reactive so too is it spiritual. And furthermore, I see a connection between the erotic and evil. This is what I think I was trying to say, very ham-fistedly, when lecturing on my work at Cranbrook in early 2018 I told the auditorium that watching right-wing politics and policy makers in action "makes me want to fuck." (facepalm) The linkage between politics and spirituality, even when both are challenged, requires an eroticism that isn't always about sex but definitely can be.

The thing of honoring people, and making altars, is something that comes in and out of

my practice when I need to touch down and find purpose. It's like a palate cleanser, there is always content in love and appreciation.

This thing about documentary and aura photography is interesting. I have never thought about it that way, but I guess you're right. I think I know what you mean. Although there is that thing of artists getting labeled and grouped without interest or consent. Even Cartier-Bresson never considered himself a documentary photographer or a photojournalist, he was a surrealist. And maybe here we come full circle back to Moyra Davey, and an interest in looking that can shift drastically based not only on what is expected of you, but also on what is happening in your life, what you're reading, looking at and thinking about. I think about Carrie Mae Weem's *Kitchen Table Series*, compared to her *Shape of Things* or Catherine Opie's *Icehouses* relative to *Portraits*. Aura photography, if it is what I think it is, seems like it would be meaningless if it wasn't connected to a body in politic. If that connection can't be made then who cares?

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This interview was conducted by email between September and November 2019.

Derosia

Rosalind Duguid, Elephant Magazine, August 18, 2020

# ELEPHANT

PROFILE

## Em Rooney Explores the Photograph as Something to Be Held

“I think photographic literacy is key to survival.” Grounded in sculpture, Em Rooney’s practice gives weight to photographs in a time when we are swimming in images. Words by Rosalind Duguid



Xylor, 2019

Back in 2018, when I saw Em Rooney’s work in MoMA’s show *Being: New Photography*, I was struck by its tenderness. In the two years since the glimpses I’ve caught of her work have been online, as I’ve sought out her sculptures in their photo form, processing all their heavy materiality as pixels.

In Rooney’s practice, photographs are given a stillness that the images we scroll through online are not afforded. They are treated with care, enshrined in resin or dressed up with pewter; they are also weighed down, embedded in books or strapped to the walls with steel brackets. Rooney’s role as an educator (she



## Derosia

Rosalind Duguid, Elephant Magazine, August 18, 2020

has taught a range of subjects, including humanities and photography, for the last ten years) emerges in the material generosity of her sculptures.

Rooney had a solo show titled *You, Too, Know That You Live* at Galerie Fons Welters last year, and most recently exhibited in Bodega's online viewing room for Art Basel. I spoke with the artist about the erotics of metalworking, taking personal photographs, and why photographic literacy is "key to survival".

### **In *You, Too, Know That You Live* you made multiples of works and gave them as gifts. What brought you to that as an idea?**

My professor in college was the collage artist Robert Seydel. He was working in a moment where DIY and mail art was becoming an ethos of making. He was so charismatic and influential that this idea worked itself into my thinking from a young age: you could send something to somebody and the act of sending could be art; intentions and actions and things that are imperceptible, a feeling or a description of a feeling, could be art. That was really revelatory to me.

I saw this Julie Ault show in 2013. She had collected things that members of Group Material had sent to each other as gifts. It was amazing. It has something to do with the archiving of artists' relationships, and people building their own universe between each other, through this kind of sharing that's outside of the canon, outside a certain type of approval that you would get from capitalism or the art market. It's anti-capitalistic, that's what was so moving for me.

I've been making things for friends that I think of also as art for a while, but for that show, Tim Rollins' project with Kids Of Survival was influential. Rollins had this ongoing collaboration with kids in the Bronx. It's not always my instinct to work collectively with my students but I loved that idea: doing an edition of gifts was more a framework, a way to think about how to make a series of sculptures.

As an artist you're always finding ways to situate your impulses relative to your work. So, even though there's a lot of care and community-building in my practice (things outside of what I do alone in my studio), weirdly, that show is almost not that at all. It's there and it helped me make that show, but the show is less about the intimacy of those objects and more of a way of thinking about how to make sculpture.



Inverse of Sarah with a Portrait of Her Own Eyes, 2016 (as displayed at MoMA)

**In the MoMA show you had a frame with text (Sarah with a Portrait of Her Own Eyes). What can a frame do without a photo in it?**

That frame actually did have a photo in it, it was just turned to the wall. I think that's an important distinction, because for my practice a frame without a photo doesn't mean anything. What made that piece meaningful was that the content is latent; in there but invisible, like a piece of undeveloped film. It has a photograph, but it hasn't come into existence yet, so the meaning is the way you know something is there but it's not accessible to you, like an urn filled with ashes or a locket that doesn't open.

**That sounds really linked to desire. I've been reading Anne Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet*. Does that resonate with you, desire being a part of your work?**

So much. In so many ways that I don't even know where to begin. The first thing that comes to mind is a piece that I saw at Matthew Brannon's studio, probably in 2016: big abstract silk screens. The stretchers had slots inside them, and in each slot was a novel he had written, they were all pornographic novels. It connects to this idea of the envelope, which is a thing very connected to desire. You need to see what is inside it, you need to rip it open. I brought my students to look at our college's artist's book collection and Anne Carson's *Nox* was there. It ended up being very influential on one of my students who wrote her final paper on Carson, the envelope and desire. A beautiful paper.

Anyway, definitely those Matthew Brannon pieces lodged in my brain and influenced some of these pieces I made that had text on the back. The text would be more honest and open than the piece itself, and it would be something very few people would ever have access to because the piece would never be shown from behind... except that it was at MoMA!

**When I was in a university class, the artist Kathryn Elkin showed us a film by Chick Strand called *Soft Fiction*. There's a bit where a woman speaks about seeing a metal railing and having an erotic reaction to it, a desire to become the railing and to let her bones go soft. I was wondering what working with metal is like for you, if it's connected to that?**

That's a really great comparison. I totally think about that, I've always thought about that. A while ago I made a zine with Good Press called *Love Is In The Flowers*, a bunch of photographs and a text I'd written about when I worked as a fabricator for a year. I worked in the metal shop, which was almost all women, and for a while it was just women. All three of us are queer, so it was about the phenomenology of working with metal and all the various incantations, what happens when you apply things to the surface and see chemical reactions, how it gets hot and how it bends, the erotics of using the drill press.

And there was this really charged, kinetic feeling because of the crassness or rawness that can happen when you're working with your community members and it feels really safe—this queer female-bodied version of shop-talk, relative to these really strenuous material things we were doing. That's why I love working with metal, because it's so much more like the body than wood or any other material.

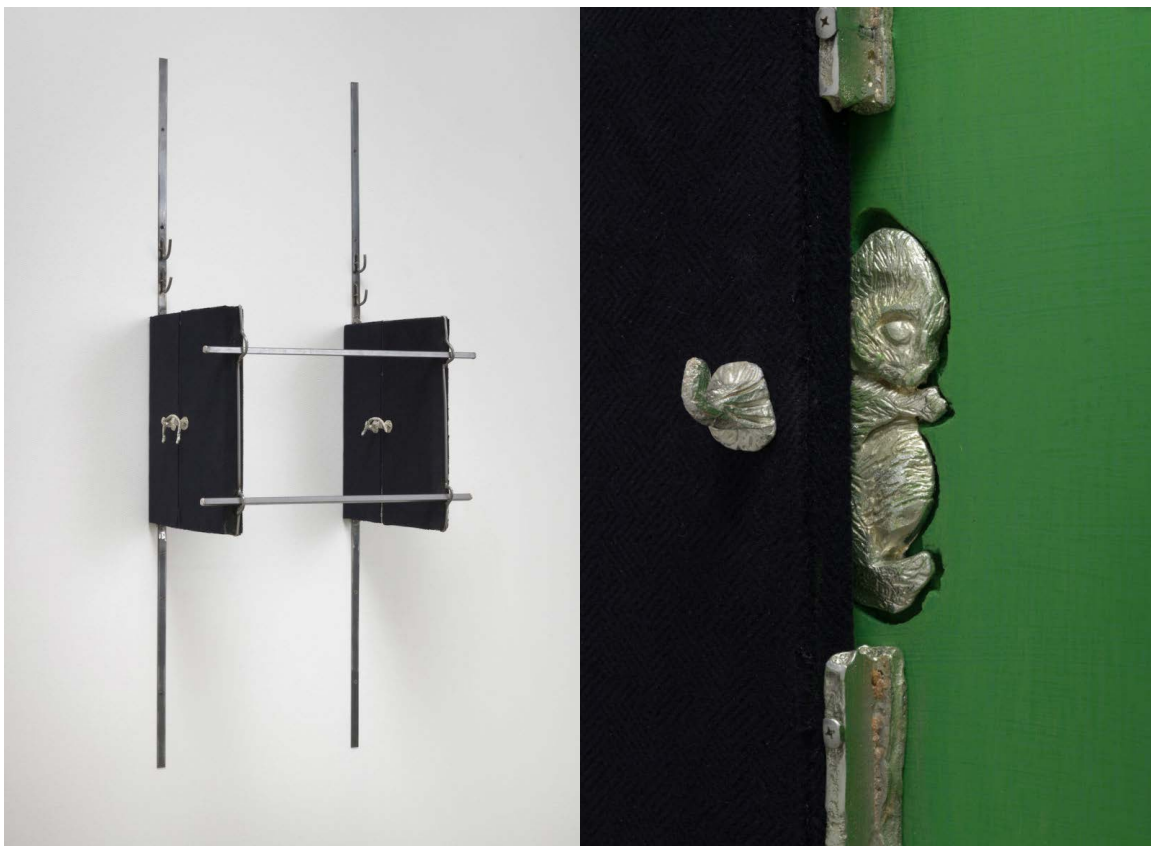


The Risk of Being Left Behind, 2017

**I read that your practice works “against the ubiquity of the photograph”. What does that mean to you?**

So much of our engagement with the world is through photographic, pixel-based images. All day we're interfacing with pictures, so I'm talking about that. Traditional processes can get discussed in relation to nostalgia, but I don't relate to them in that way. I really think about the material world: things that are yours and things that you can hold, things that aren't held hostage by corporations, which so much of our image content is now, even when we make it for ourselves. And because of photography's historical and contemporary ties to imperialism, colonialism, oppression and racism, there are so many nefarious uses for photography, and many are related to its current ubiquity.

Fighting against this ubiquity is learning to take photographs that are nuanced and self-reflective and actually personal. I don't mean personal like taking photographs of your loved ones necessarily. The past five years I've been photographing people on the street with my camera, which I used to feel uncomfortable doing. It's about how to do that while holding the history of photography in your mind, making it personal in that you're accountable to your own politic in the images you make. And it slows the process of production.



Getting There (All Quill's are Reincarnated) For Sheilah and Dani ReStack: Part 1, 2019

**In The Social Photo, Nathan Jurgenson writes about photography now being seen more as a language than an art form: on social media you're taking pictures just to send a message. Is that a problem?**

Hito Steyerl wrote about the democratising of photography in her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*. To oversimplify one of her points: when we're not obsessed with high-quality images, and when everybody has their hands on this technology, a person can really see things through photographs in a new way.

We're seeing now bystanders, and organisers using it to record police brutality, documenting the murder of unarmed Black civilians, bringing together masses of people in protest. If you trace that back to what the photograph of Emmett Till did, adding fuel to the fire inside of the civil rights movement, I think that positive uses of technology are many, and they have just grown from media-controlled newspaper images to civilian sharing via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook.

But ultimately, outside of those instances... so much of photographic technology gets utilised by the military, gets weaponised. I have very little optimism around technology and its uses of pixel-based images.

**And the apps we use are owned by corporations who are so ready to sell your data...**

At this time it's complicated to talk about, because I'm somebody who doesn't immediately need to access data that is going to be life-saving. Situate what I'm saying inside the knowledge of my own privilege around that, and the necessity and positive impact of that technology in the ways we already discussed.

But I have a friend at the ACLU who posted some bullshit statement that Amazon put out about their support of Black lives. The ACLU reposted it, saying, "Thanks a lot Amazon, why don't you stop selling facial recognition software to the military?" I talk a lot about facial-recognition software as a sort of continuum of terrorism.

After I was in college, when laptops became more common, everybody taped over their webcam. This was before we knew about data mining, there was just this mistrust—anything you're engaging in on your computer, someone's watching and you don't want them to be. Fast-forward fifteen years and everyone's doing face app shit and all of that data is being mined and sold.

**I also think about how images can disguise material inequality.**

That's why I take the teaching of photography really seriously. I think photographic literacy is key to survival. To be able to decode those messages is hard to do.

I think about that relative to how I take and share photos; who I share them with and what the context of sharing is. For a long time I've been really fearful of co-optation. There's this idea that, because of modernism and its entrails, we still expect the artist's subjectivity to be irrelevant: you can just look at the work and get everything that you need from it. That still propels a lot of artists to withhold intention, meaning, or their personal life. I think that that's not a great leftover from modernism—it doesn't serve a very holy purpose.

But there's another type of withholding that's self-protective. There's an Édouard Glissant text I read with my students called *For Opacity*. It's not specifically about images, but how understanding is a type of imperialism, that there's a right that people have to opacity. A lot of my work is tied very personally to who I am, my life and my deepest thoughts, and any moments of withholding are more to do with self-protection and not wanting to be fully understood, because I don't know that everybody has the right to think that they could fully understand anybody.



# BeauxArts



## 4. Em Rooney : empreintes du réel

À tous ces fichiers JPEG que nous accumulons dans des dossiers, sur le *cloud*, dans des boîtes mail ou sur des disques durs, à ces images perdues, que l'on ne peut plus lire ou que l'on oublie, Em Rooney oppose des objets photographiques et sculpturaux qui ont un poids et une texture bien tangibles. Née en 1983, cette artiste veut ancrer les photos dans notre présent, même si elles ont été prises par erreur ou qu'elles apparaissent « sales », pixelisées ou insignifiantes. Em Rooney recontextualise des images issues de son stock personnel. Elle les imprime sur papier glacé pour les insérer dans des objets dignes de précieux reliquaires gothiques. Artiste de l'archive, elle sort la photographie de ses gonds et l'enferme pour mieux la conserver.



Em Rooney, *Rearview Mirror (8)*, 2018

## 4. Em Rooney: footprints of the real

To all these JPEG files that we accumulate in folders, on the *cloud*, in mailboxes or on hard disks, with these lost images, which one can not read any more or that one forgets, Em Rooney opposes objects photographic and sculptural, which have a very tangible weight and texture. Born in 1983, this artist wants to anchor photos in our present, even if they were taken by mistake or they appear « dirty », pixelated or insignificant. Em Rooney recontextualizes images from her personal archive. She prints them on glossy paper to insert them into objects worthy of valuable gothic reliquaries. Artist of the archive, she takes the photograph of its hinges and encloses it to better preserve it.

Derosia

Holland Cotter, The New York Times, April 26, 2018

# The New York Times

By Holland Cotter  
April 26, 2018

**BODEGA** through May 13; 167 Rivington Street, [bodega-us.org](http://bodega-us.org). Em Rooney's "Ordinary Time" is one of my favorite shows — another small one, in a basement space on Rivington Street. Its title refers to weeks and months between Christian holy days marking events in the life of Jesus. And the show's 16 images, called "Stations of the Cross," refer to the final cluster of events called the Passion. The sequence begins with the Last Supper, continues through Jesus's death, and ends at his tomb. But each scene, embodied in blurry photographs, is set in the present: "Three Marys Meet Jesus" is an all-women civil rights march; "Joseph Takes Jesus Down From the Cross" is an EMS rescue; Jesus's death, a solar eclipse. The work gives us everyday life as a sacred tale.

Ms. Rooney is currently included in the exhibition "Being: New Photography 2018" at the Museum of Modern Art. Maybe someday "Ordinary Time" will be shown in that museum too. But I guarantee you, it will never again look as unordinary as it does in a Lower East Side gallery this spring.



Em Rooney's "Simon Shares the Burden (7)," at Bodega.

# ARTFORUM

## Em Rooney

### BODEGA

167 Rivington Street, Lower Level East  
January 10–February 14

The press release for Em Rooney's exhibition at this gallery is written in first person and ends with a list: "Future words for forest: apple, brazil, empire, expro, Exxon, gate, gates, grass, fire, loneliness, love, sand, seed, sunrise, rattlesnake, rock." Almost alphabetical, the list is imperfect, personal—much like the artist's photographs. Rooney, no Luddite, nonetheless worries about the ephemeral textures and qualities of material—and memories—that are imperiled by transitions to digital storage and circulation.

Rooney's hand-colored silver gelatin prints depict views of loft apartments and squats, some woods in Maine, and a melancholy zoo. They are images from a personal archive that dates back to her high-school years. Their pastel-tinged, black-and-white aesthetic imparts a de facto nostalgia, but these are not exactly resurrected snapshots. Subtle traces of manipulation abound. One can detect double-exposures, bits of collage, and a wry intermingling of digital and analog processes, especially in *The End of Oil* (all works 2015), an image that is crowned with a Preview edit toolbar, marking its trajectory from film to digital archive to print. The "hand colored silver gelatin print in artist's frame" description for this piece is deceptively twee and simple.

"Artist's frame"—what a nebulous triangulation of medium, material, and display device that term is. Rooney says her frames contain "thatch, ash, fruit and stone," but we can't see them. However, three larger wall-mounted panels, shaped like frames or mats with empty centers, make good on the insinuation, as their exterior portions are studded with three-dimensional objects. In *Outer frame for Elliot (The Sawdust Ring)*, a fake orange and three spooning ceramic figures are suspended in the hand-dyed canvas and leather surface. As its title suggests, this work is "for" a framed photograph called *Elliot*. What of the redundancy? For one thing, the "extra" frame proffers a strange opportunity to stash things away—a playful paean to imperiled marginalia.



Em Rooney, *Elliot*, 2015, hand-colored silver gelatin print in artist's frame, 11 x 13".

— Andrew Kachel

# Frieze

## Critic's Guide: Los Angeles



BY OLIVIAN CHA  
30 SEP 2016



Chris Domenick and Em Rooney, *After the Sun*, 2016, exhibition view, The Vanity East, Los Angeles. Courtesy: the artists and The Vanity East, Los Angeles

### **Chris Domenick and Em Rooney**

The Vanity East

*17 September – 23 October*

*After the Sun*, Chris Domenick and Em Rooney's meta-contribution to The Vanity East, wryly addresses the architectural specificities of exhibiting within a gallery that is located inside a veritable closet flanked by bookstore Ooga Booga and 356 Mission's massive exhibition space. Extending the Russian doll theme even further, the artists have created a collection of seven hats with accompanying hatboxes. Each is inspired by a notable 'ancestor' and is unique in its material composition – the 'Margaret Thatcher Hardhat' is made of glass and collaged images, while its complementary box is made of steel, foam, packing pillows and shrink-wrap. Everyone loves a good list, and the inventory of materials comprising all works, subtly and smartly address the more economic and ecological implications of our globalized present: 'goods, their containers', disposable packaging, branded plastics, landfills and trash. The six millinery-inspired works will be shown one-by-one, on a rotation, marking this ritual progression of time as a form of protest against the mindless cycle of consumption and waste.