

THE BODY AS MEMORY



FOTO RELEVANCE HOUSTON TEXAS

JAN 15 - MAR 19, 2022

**CALEB COLE, NICK SIMKO,
AND GABRIEL GARCÍA ROMÁN**

THE BODY
AS MEMORY

Caleb Cole, Trace (living room), 2012

(Cover Image)

Archival Pigment Print

11x13" • Edition of 10 + 2 AP

24x30" • Edition of 6 + 2 AP

CURATOR'S NOTE

SUZANNE ZELLER

The Body as Memory investigates the ways in which the body interacts with the environment around it—the cultures it is born into, how it is viewed, how it views itself within that context, and how it imagines itself. It seeks to recognize the queer body as a historical site of injustice, yet, through acceptance, present the body as a site of exultation (and exaltation) instead.

Caleb Cole, Nick Simko, and Gabriel García Román each tackle concepts of identity and queerness through the lens of their own unique experiences. Having grown up with a passion for thrifting and second-hand objects, Cole's work reflects a deep desire to connect with histories lost to time, stories that are just as personal as they are collective. Simko's interest in intersections of technology and authenticity tie into this discussion of recorded histories, questioning what is missing from the narrative and how much of that which remains is artifice. Simko also seeks to test the limits of photography's ability to express his own queerness in textural, spatial, and atmospheric ways. García Román's background in the Roman Catholic church inspired him to co-opt the aesthetics of traditional religious iconography to elevate individuals who are underrepresented and often pushed to the margins of Western communities.

In the works brought together for this show, the visual form of the body serves as a vessel, telling a story, or only parts of a story, or even leaving the story entirely untold, leaving the viewer to question what is missing, what has been lost. Memory is a powerful force, and queer and minority histories are systematically erased by those who control the larger narrative. They say history is written by the victors, when, in fact, it is written by the oppressors. The works in *The Body as Memory* touch on different points in this process: the active twisting of history through omission; the passively violent erasure of an entire queer generation, along with their stories, during the AIDS crisis; the modern experience of living as a queer individual in a world not made for us; and finally, a look towards a brighter future which turns traditional visual language on its head.

When I think about queerness — my own experience, how I interact with others in my community, how queerness is discussed in mainstream culture — I almost always come to think about the body. The body, that pesky thing — it binds us to the material plane; it is the lens through which the rest of the world views you, judges you, often defines you. For many queer and gender nonconforming people, it can be a burden, sometimes a betrayal. The body is the vessel which carries the true self, the self that exists in thought and spirit.

There are many reasons why people feel disconnected from their bodies. In a world where images and information and advertisements are constantly assailing us, we are told there is a right way to look, a standard of beauty to uphold that is rooted in misogyny, heteronormativity, and Eurocentrism. Bodies existing visibly on the margins of those ideals are subject to prejudices and harmful assumptions in many aspects of their lives — at school and in the workplace, in housing situations, in grocery stores, in the doctor's office, in every imaginable place. Sometimes, a body can feel like a cage that you cannot escape. Even in the face of all this, it can still become a site of absolution.

My own journey with queerness has been unique to me, and I cannot presume to speak for the vastly and beautifully varied experiences of all others in my community. It is an understanding which has been informed by the culture I was raised in, the language I learned to translate experience through, the friends who have shared the path of self-discovery with me, and those who have been loud and unabashed about who they are and how they exist in the world. Language is very powerful in determining how we shape our thoughts. I, like many others of my generation, use the label *queer* as a means of encouraging solidarity, to avoid the pigeonholing of individual identities, and as a term that allows for fluidity of identity as we grow and learn. The beauty of queerness is truly in community, in finding a space to be true to oneself. Queer author and activist bell hooks said it best:

"queer not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live."

Even gender nonconformity is not safe from the incessant categorizing impulse of Western society. As the concept of nonbinary, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, etc. identities become more widely discussed in mainstream Western culture, they have become associated with a specific look, a body. Thin, white, and androgynous is the new expectation, regardless of the fact that gender identities outside of the binary have existed (and still exist) prominently in many cultures, especially non-white ones, throughout history. To explore only two such examples out of countless others: *Two-Spirit* is an umbrella term meant to unify the various gender identities and expressions of Indigenous Americans; it is a modern term coined in Winnipeg in 1990 from an Ojibwe translation, and it does not perfectly describe the varied forms of gender expression across different Indigenous languages and cultures. Within Hinduism, *hijra* and *kinnar* are just two words used to refer to gender nonconforming identities, among many other nuanced terms. Both Hijra and Two-Spirit individuals

hold historically important roles in the religious practice and mythologies of their respective cultures. The complexity of these nuanced identities cannot be simplified into a 1:1 translation to the Western concept of nonbinary gender. Although the Western world may consider itself to be progressive in today's context, it is important to remember that the reason many queer people face discrimination across the globe is as a direct result of European and US colonization. Colonizing nations leveraged Christian principles through enforced laws and policies intended to destroy indigenous ways of life, and the effects of those policies are still being felt today as new forms of cultural colonization persist.

Each artist in this show explores queer realities: historical, current, and speculative. Understanding where we have come from is essential to imagining the endless possibilities of where we are going. The queer struggle for liberation is not a new one, and anyone reducing it to any one generation or framing it as some newfangled concept is attempting to discredit its legitimacy and importance. When it comes to approaching queerness as an outsider, the vast diversity of our community, language, and experience can be overwhelming. I ask that you do not let it strike you as daunting — rather, let it strike you as an opportunity to listen and learn. We are all translating new information through the lens of our individual cultural biases — realizing that limitation is key to deconstructing it.

TRACES

CALEB COLE

Caleb Cole's work addresses holes in collective memory, alongside a deep desire to connect with our histories, however fragmented they may be. Community is, and has always been, an integral aspect of the queer experience. Individuals excluded from mainstream society find safety and absolution in each other, but their histories are erased even as they are written. Cole's work investigates "the opportunities and difficulties of queer belonging, aiming to be a link in the creation of that tradition, no matter how fragile or ephemeral or impossible its connections" (Cole).

Cole reaches for connections with a lost history through secondhand objects, from antique photographs to pressed flowers found in books that have long since left the hands of those that once cherished them. Images in the Traces series are sourced from 1980s and 90s era pinups from gay porn magazines, corresponding with the onset of the AIDS epidemic. The figures are physically removed from the framed, collaged over, and rephotographed, leaving behind only an outline, and echo. This visual reference to the loss of countless members of the gay community during the epidemic is a powerful visualization of the loss of both human life and all the memories they carried with them, memories that were never passed down to a new generation. Though an echo of the past exists in the Cole's works, the desire to connect with that past does not imply a desire to return to it. Rather, they "look backward as a way to imagine beyond the present to new queer futures."

Trace (checkered floor), 2018

Archival Pigment Print
11x13" • Edition of 10 + 2 AP
24x30" • Edition of 6 + 2 AP





Trace (scaffolding), 2020
 Archival Pigment Print
 11x13" • Edition of 10 + 2 AP
 24x30" • Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Trace (living room), 2012
 Archival Pigment Print
 11x13" • Edition of 10+ 2 AP
 24x30" • Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Trace (corner), 2020
 Archival Pigment Print
 11x13" • Edition of 10 + 2 AP
 24x30" • Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Trace (study), 2018
 Archival Pigment Print
 11x13" • Edition of 10 + 2 AP
 24x30" • Edition of 6 + 2 AP

PURSES
CALEB COLE



Purses, 2017

Interleaving from antique photo folios,
pressed flowers found in vintage books,
vintage photographs, second hand necklaces
Various sizes • Each unique



Purses, 2017

Interleaving from antique photo folios,
pressed flowers found in vintage books,
vintage photographs, second hand necklaces
Various sizes • Each unique



Purses, 2017

Interleaving from antique photo folios,
pressed flowers found in vintage books,
vintage photographs, second hand necklaces
Various sizes • Each unique



FRAGMENTIA

NICK SIMKO

That which is absent from Nick Simko's tapestries and prints is equally as profound as that which remains visible. To Simko, photography is a conversation between authenticity and artifice, and their work seeks to pull at the threads of the language of visual culture.

Through his carefully tattered and torn contemporary weavings, Simko's *Fragmentia* series examines the fragmented, often fabricated narrative of Eurocentric imperialist history that is offered to us as truth. Each tapestry in this series is composed in full by the artist, using photographic imagery of people, statues, flowers, etc. shot in the artist's studio and in the field to create allegorical narratives—some rooted in art historical precedent, some imagined. These compositions are woven into a life-sized finished piece on a computerized jacquard loom using threads of varying colors, visible up close, which visually combine at a distance in an almost pointillist effect. The tapestry is then torn and reassembled, leaving gaps which may be integral to fully comprehending the narrative. This process mimics the passing down of history—vital information is lost to memory, or intentionally removed by those who wish to alter the narrative, resulting in a fragmented understanding of our past. Understanding that there are missing pieces is vital to avoiding making assumptions in a world where truth is subjective.

Allegory of Art History, 2012

Tapestry fragments woven on a computerized jacquard loom
70x108" overall • Unique





High Drama, 2015

Tapestry fragments woven on a computerized jacquard loom
99x120" overall • Unique



The Power to Choose, 2015

Tapestry fragments woven on a computerized jacquard loom
99x120" overall • Unique

QUEER DIMENSIONALITIES

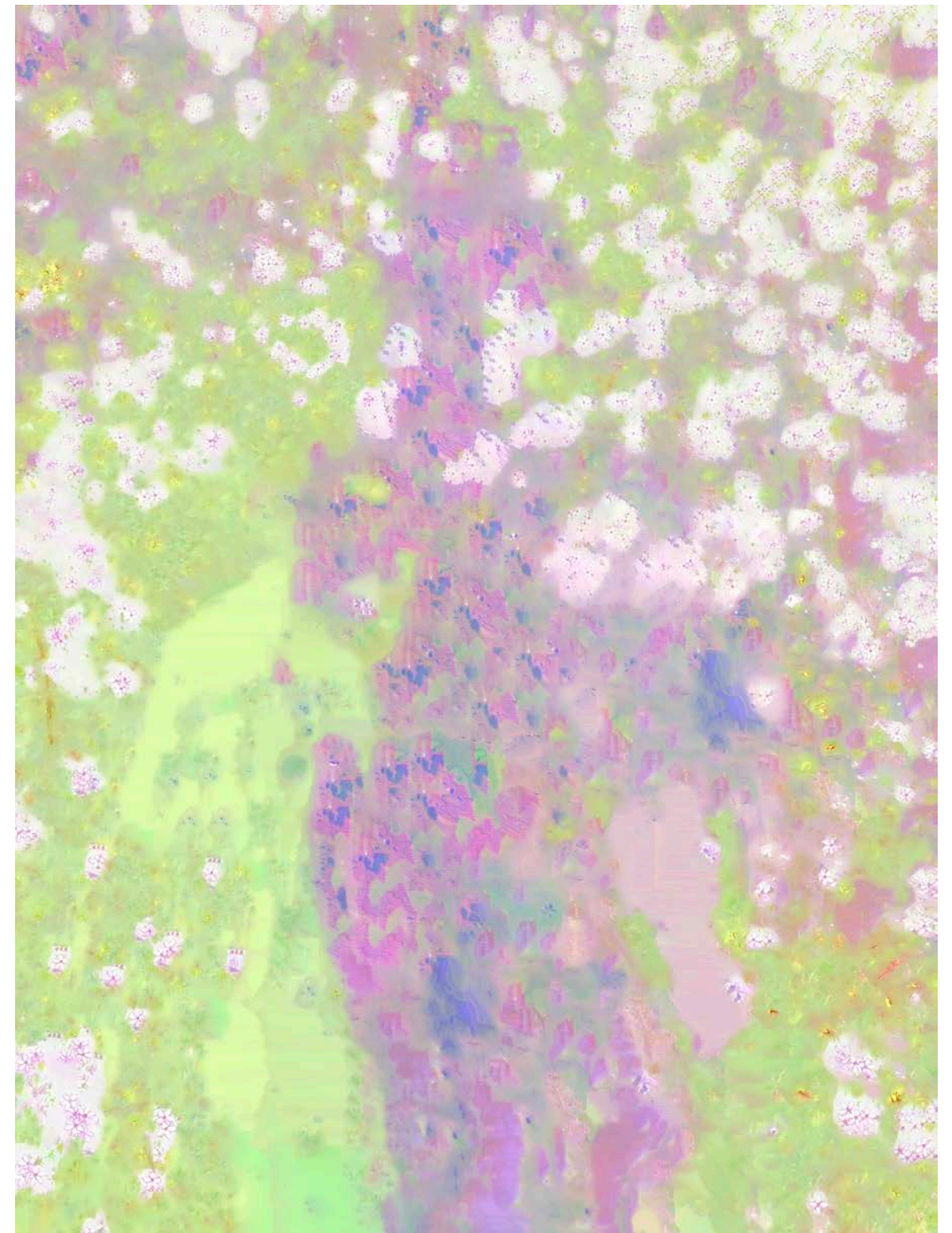
NICK SIMKO

Looking to the present, Simko's *Queer Dimensionalities* series explores the visibility of queerness within popular culture — "what it means to be seen in culturally mainstream ways, while being largely imperceptible at the same time" (Simko). Created during the initial lockdown in 2020, these images are a deeply personal exercise in exploring one's own identity in isolation, taking a step outside of society in order to understand it, and the self, better. These images are a collaboration between the artist and technology, using digital tools and chance to remove the form of the shadow of the body, leaving behind textures, space, and emptiness even where gaps do not visually exist. Through these layers, Simko creates portraiture that extends beyond physical representation and possibly closer to the self that exists only in the mind.



Queer Dimensionalities, Sequence 2(d), 2020

Archival Inkjet Print
17x22" • Edition of 5 + 3 AP



Queer Dimensionalities, Sequence 3(e), 2020

Archival Inkjet Print
17x22" • Edition of 5 + 3 AP



Queer Dimensionalities, Sequence 1(b), 2020

Archival Inkjet Print
17x22" • Edition of 5 + 3 AP



Queer Dimensionalities, Sequence 3(c), 2020

Archival Inkjet Print
17x22" • Edition of 5 + 3 AP

QUEER ICONS

GABRIEL GARCÍA ROMÁN

Gabriel García Román's *Queer Icons* series seeks to honor under-represented queer beings, who are so often relegated to the outskirts of society, and elevate them through the visual language of saintly icons, looking toward a divine future. Taking inspiration from the historical iconography of Renaissance, Flemish, and Christian Orthodox paintings, the series elevates individuals in the queer community—friends, organizers, activists, and creators—to a saintly status. Using materials such as metal leaf and collage to play with depth and light, García "repositions the portrayed "outsiders" as central to the narrative, just like saints—figures that are inherently worthy of attention, emulation, and storytelling" (García). Through this, he posits the queer body as divine, despite its noncompliance to traditional ideals of beauty and praise.

Going a step beyond visual language, the inclusion of text written by the subject of each portrait is integral to the work. García introduced this aspect in an effort to amplify their voices in the face of a history that systematically silences them, whether for their gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity. García's handmade dimensional frames, influenced by the beautifully framed icons he sees when returning home to family in Mexico, add a sense of care and reverence to each portrait. Each piece is a precious object, a testament to the strength and perseverance of the queer community, and a window into a brighter future.



Abdool, 2014

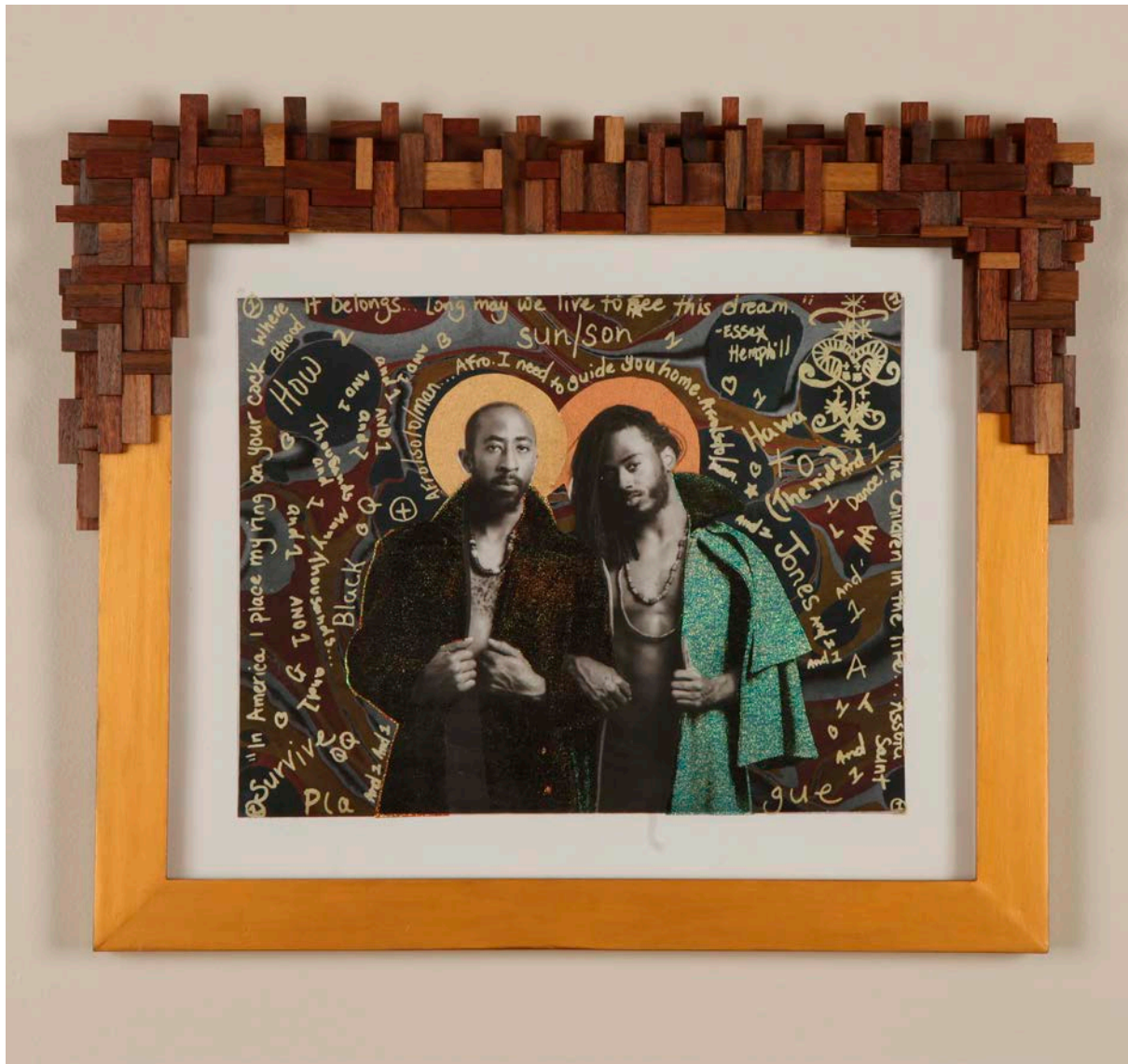
Photogravure with chine-collé in poplar frame
8x10" Image in 14x17 Frame • Unique



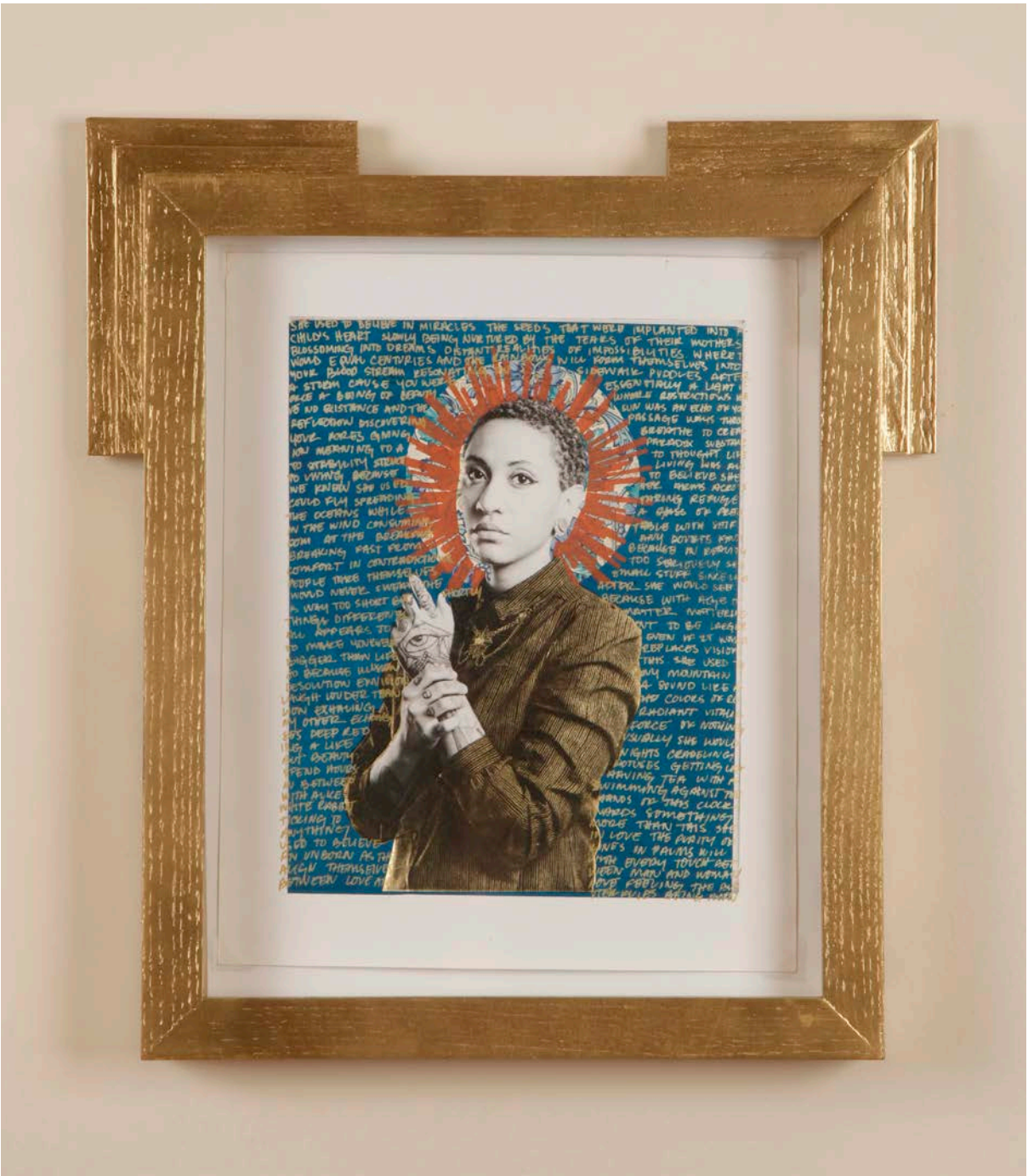
Erica, 2014
 Photogravure with chine-collé and silkscreen in poplar frame
 8x10" Image in 14x16.5" Frame • Unique



Freda, 2016
 Photogravure with chine-collé and silkscreen in oak frame
 8x10" Image in 14x17" Frame • Unique



Brother(hood) Dance II, 2017
 Photogravure with chine-collé and silkscreen in mahogany frame
 11x14" Image in 22x18" Frame • Unique



Julissa, 2015
 Photogravure with chine-collé and silkscreen in oak frame
 8x10" Image in 15x16" Frame • Unique



Vivian, 2014
Photogravure with chine-collé and silkscreen in walnut and oak frame
8x10" Image in 15x18" Frame • Unique

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

CALEB COLE

Caleb Cole (they/them) is a Midwest-born, Boston-based artist whose work addresses the opportunities and difficulties of queer belonging, as well as aims to be a link in the creation of that tradition, no matter how fragile or ephemeral or impossible its connections. They were recently an inaugural resident at Surf Point Residency and have received a Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship in Photography, Artadia Boston Finalist Award, Hearst 8x10 Biennial Award, and 3 Magenta Flash Forward Foundation Fellowships, among other distinctions. Caleb exhibits regularly at a variety of national venues and has held solo shows in Boston, New York, Chicago, and St. Louis, among others. Their work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Newport Art Museum, the Davis Art Museum, Brown University Art Museum, and Leslie Lohman Museum of Art. Cole teaches at Boston College and Clark University.

NICK SIMKO

Nick Simko's (he/him) studio work addresses and employs photography as a technology that informs how we see and how we are seen. His photographs, videos, collage, tapestries, and sculptures have been exhibited at museums and galleries throughout the United States including Diversity Richmond, The Walters Art Museum, The Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, Hillyer Arts Space, The Tyler School of Art at Temple University, and Sanitary Tortilla Factory. His studio work has been published in the University of Pittsburgh culture journal Contemporaneity, and on Strange Fire Collective. As a 2019 ONE Archives Foundation LGBTQ research fellow, Nick studied the photography collection at ONE. He is also a leadership team member for the Society for Photographic Education LGBTQ Caucus, which serves LGBTQ students and faculty in college art departments across the U.S. Nick holds an MFA in Photography from the University of New Mexico, and a BFA in Art History, Theory & Criticism from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Nick is Assistant Professor of Photography at Fort Hays State University.

GABRIEL GARCÍA ROMÁN

Gabriel García Román (he/him) was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and raised in Chicago's northwest side. He received his B.A. from The City College of New York where he studied Studio Art and currently resides in New York City. García Román is a multi-disciplinary artist and craftsman who examines and decodes the politics of identity through intricate and process-based work. His art has been acquired by the International Center of Photography and has been shown at the Museum of Latin American Art (Long Beach, CA), Galería de la Raza (San Francisco, CA), Cathedral of St. John the Divine (New York, NY), the Center for Photography at Woodstock (Woodstock, NY), BRIC (Brooklyn, NY), and numerous other institutions and galleries.

He was a 2018 recipient of the National Association of Latino Arts & Culture's artist grant and in 2019 was commissioned by the Leslie-Lohman Museum to bring his Queer Icons series into the streets for the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots where 100 Queer Icons flags were marched down the World Pride route. In 2020, Garcia Roman was one of 10 artists in residence at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council for Workspace, their flagship residency program.

CURATOR BIOGRAPHY

SUZANNE ZELLER

Suzanne Zeller (they/them) is the Assistant Director at Foto Relevance and is responsible for exhibition administration, inventory and sales management, and media outreach. They received a BA in Art History and Visual & Dramatic Arts with a concentration in Film/Photography from Rice University. While at Rice, Suzanne served as the Director of Matchbox Gallery, Rice's student-run art gallery, exhibiting work from local Houston and Texas-based artists as well as from students.

Suzanne is a photo-based artist and is interested in experimental printing media, the art historical usage of gold as a means to demonstrate power and bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual realms, and queer identity as divine expression. They were an inaugural recipient of the Joan Hohlt and Roger Wich Emerging Photographer Scholarship at the Houston Center for Photography from 2019-2020.

FOTO RELEVANCE

Since 2016, Foto Relevance cofounders Geoffrey C. Koslov and Bryn Larsen have focused on the exhibition and acquisition of museum quality contemporary fine art photography and photography-based work. Foto Relevance is dedicated to providing a platform for an innovative selection of American and international photographic artists pushing the boundaries of photography. The gallery has mounted monographic exhibitions as well as group shows to investigate current trends and themes in contemporary art, showcasing a broad range of both darkroom and digital photographic techniques. In addition to promoting the work of artists, Foto Relevance provides guidance, educating individual collectors and corporations in the acquisition and sale of art. Foto Relevance is a member of the Houston Art Gallery Association (HAGA). The gallery is located in the historic Museum District of Houston, Texas.



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