



# MEL COOK

I NEED A VOICE  
NOT A BODY

VITAL  
SIGNS  
MKE

This catalog was produced in conjunction with

Mel Cook's solo exhibition

## **I NEED A VOICE NOT A BODY**

at VitalSigns MKE from April-June, 2019.

CONSTELLATIONS——

of language,

of string figures

and the pleasure

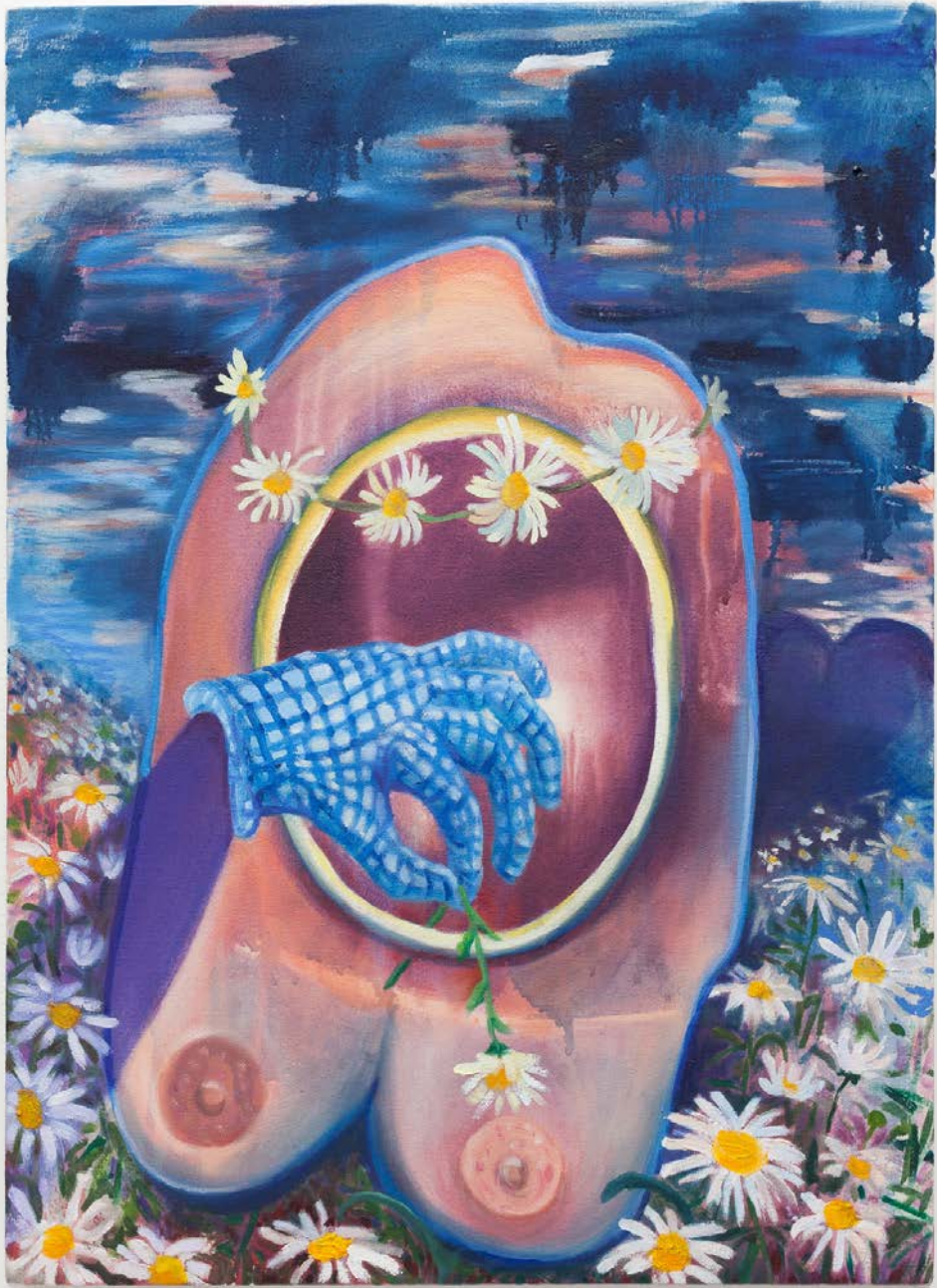
in transparency—— as a body

pushed

up against [sy]stems——

of reproduction









body gets to be a star!" (2) The Andromeda constellation is located in the northern sky, between Cassiopeia's West asterism and the Great Square of Pegasus. It is also known as the Chained Maiden. (3) On "misogynist threats and violence..in relation to sexual assault, stalking, intimate partner violence, and certain forms of homicide—these are all crimes whose victims are generally (by no means always) women rather than men, and the perpetrators are generally and sometimes almost exclusively, men rather than women," from *Down Girl*. FURTHER READING

Easton, Dossie, and Janet W. Hardy. *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*. Ten Speed Press. 2017. p. 53. Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Penguin Books, 2019. p. xi-ii. Morrow, Ashley. *Hubble Finds Universe Expanding Faster Than Expected*. NASA. 1 June 2016. Online. Nochlin, Linda. *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. Thames and Hudson, 1994. p. 19-20.

one or two and perhaps part of another constellation as well. We like the word constellation for this—in a constellation every-

## C O N S T E L L A T I O N S

In Mel Cook's solo exhibition, *I NEED A VOICE NOT A BODY*, at VitalSigns MKE, the artist uses the word constellation (1) to describe dense thickets of words, ideas, and figures that swarm through each painting. Cook's work asks us to chart flickering points on a plane as though we are reading constellations. If we slowly connect the marks we might see a milky nipple or the word MOM surface, like Andromeda (2) rising through galactic waves of paint.

Each constellation is comprised of bodily fragments that unfold in a similar fashion to the legs that Linda Nochlin describes in *The Body in Pieces*. In Cook's work, lopsided breasts and draped wrists "function metonymically, as synecdoches or part images of the body as a whole, references to the sexual attractiveness of the invisible owner or the availability of still more appetizing female bodies beyond the boundaries of painting" and "as sign-boards that advertise commodities." In Cook's painterly constellations cis-female bodies are cut up by misogyny, a pervasive but invisible systemic entity that is only pictured by ghostly implication.

Yet while misogyny severs and consumes bodies, the universe keeps growing and expanding at a rate even faster than expected. Wildly procreative daisies fill Cook's paintings, thriving and threatening to overhaul space; they feign immunity to the weedwacker. From the saturated and frenzied pleasure within Cook's work there is a call for a total reworlding of female physicalities stained by violence. (3)









## O F L A N G U A G E -

Throughout the exhibition, I NEED A VOICE NOT A BODY, words perform in multiple ways: as armatures, knives, and clouds. Opaque characters slice aggressively through soft fleshy arches, warning: YOU ARE A MIRROR MY DEAR. At other times airy letters prop up the entire structure of the painting, almost invisibly. Sunny daisies push up against gas-filled letters that tell the audience: JUST RELAX.

Cook is loquacious; her paintings are noisy and unafraid of taking up space with their flamboyant bursts of color and trilling words. The works vary significantly in scale but have a sonic resonance that vibrate beyond the bounds of each wooden stretcher. Cook is pulling at larger strings to play a fluid game of Cat's Cradle. The artist is modulating the pitch and density of language to examine how named bodies compress and expand into kaleidoscopic geometries. It is, as Donna Haraway describes, "a string figure game of caring for and with precarious worldings," teetering on the edge of proper nouns.

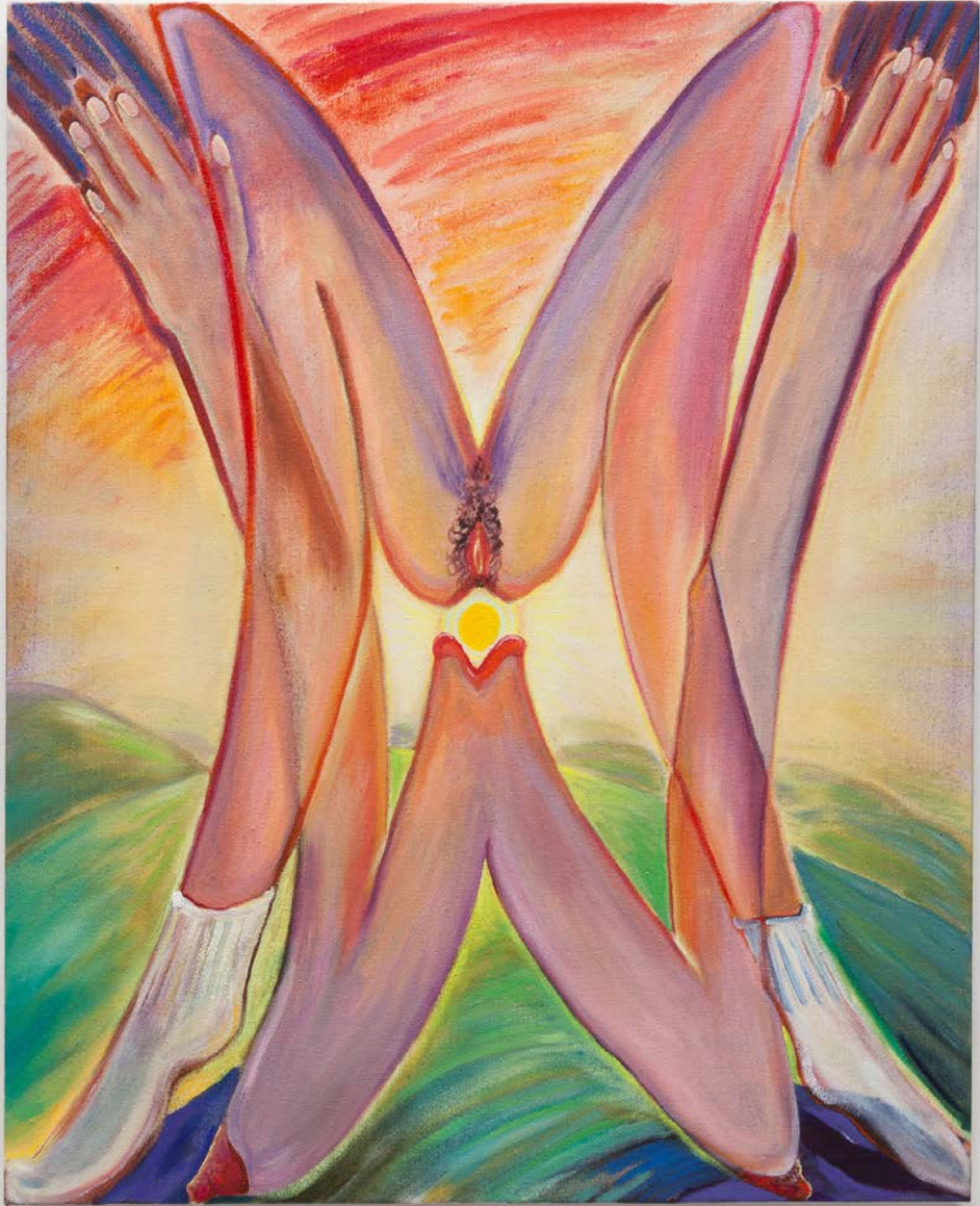
Cook is boldly building her own painterly voice with a decidedly cis-female syntax. Hers is a language of multiplicity hummed into pictures. Cook's paintings embrace sonic verbosity. Charges of taking up too much auditory space may remind one of the poignant work by artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed that states: "LOWER THE PITCH OF YOUR SUFFERING." And then one might proceed to play a string figure game of diving back to the cosmos with Morgan Parker's poem of the same title, where she writes, "you galactic." Galaxies of noise are growing from the margins. Cook is striving to work in concert with many voices to build a language brimming with the high pitch of multiplicity.

## – OF STRING FIGURES

Cook recognizes that the stakes of language games are as high as her voice but much larger than any singular voice. Multiplicity serves as an affront to hegemonic linguistic structures because as Luce Irigaray writes in *When Our Lips Speak Together*, "...to express multiplicity. To do that is to speak improperly...[but] if we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as [cis white] men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads... If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story...let our only imperatives be appeals to move, to be moved, together." By building her own language within painting, Cook is poking holes in the modernist logic of singularity. Many clamorous voices eek out over the edges. These galaxies are saturated by an airbrushed palette that boldly risks being too loud, too many, and too much.











## FINDING PLEASURE –

Despite the seriousness of Cook's critiques of misogyny, an almost maniacal insistence on pleasure pervades throughout her work. After all, who cannot find ungirded humor in a disembodied boob or a floating butt? A floppy breast suspended in mid-air with a hole cut through the center can be simultaneously funny, sexually titillating, and provoke feelings of sad empathic deflation.

In the *Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam writes about the way pleasure emerges from cut and paste methodologies like collage. The author explains that collage "bind[s] the threat of castration to the means of feminist violence and both to the promise of transformation, not through a positive production of the image but through a negative destruction of it that nonetheless refuses to relinquish pleasure." In Cook's work, disembodied parts are collaged over soft flowing landscapes; the works carve out spaces for pleasure with their "refusal to become woman as she has been defined." Continuing to think with Halberstam, these figures "express a kind of negative freedom... [through] a mode of femininity that self-destructs." By cutting up and refiguring cis-female bodies, Cook finds pleasure in nebulous piles of parts that refuse to concertize into a consumable whole.



## – I N T R A N S P A R E N C Y

Cook's relishing in the cut-up is a political gesture of solidarity, not an expression of masochism or self-flagellation. The artist is attempting to embrace bodily awkwardness and sexual pleasure in solidarity with cis-females and femme-identifying people. Or as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes, "to make sure she doesn't inherit shame from you, you have to free yourself of your own inherited shame...in every culture in the world female sexuality is about shame..the shame we attach to female sexuality is about control." Cook pokes fun at floppy tits to remove the shame, celebrate sexual pleasure, and point to the weirdness of having parts that can be individually fetishized, commodified, and cut up for consumption. Audre Lorde discusses the political vitality of the erotic in Adrienne Marie Brown's work *Pleasure Activism*, she writes "recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than settling for a shift in characters in the same weary drama."

Looking at Cook's paintings often feels like laughing with a partner mid-coitus. Laughing is an expression of pleasure and of solidarity. Jo Anna Isaak elaborates: "In providing libidinal gratification, laughter can also provide an analytic for understanding the relationships between the social and the symbolic while allowing us to imagine these relationships differently...What is requested is not a private depoliticized jouissance but sensuous solidarity. Laughter is first and foremost a communal response." Laughing can break down walls of control by embracing the goofy pleasure of having a leaky, boundless, human-animal body.









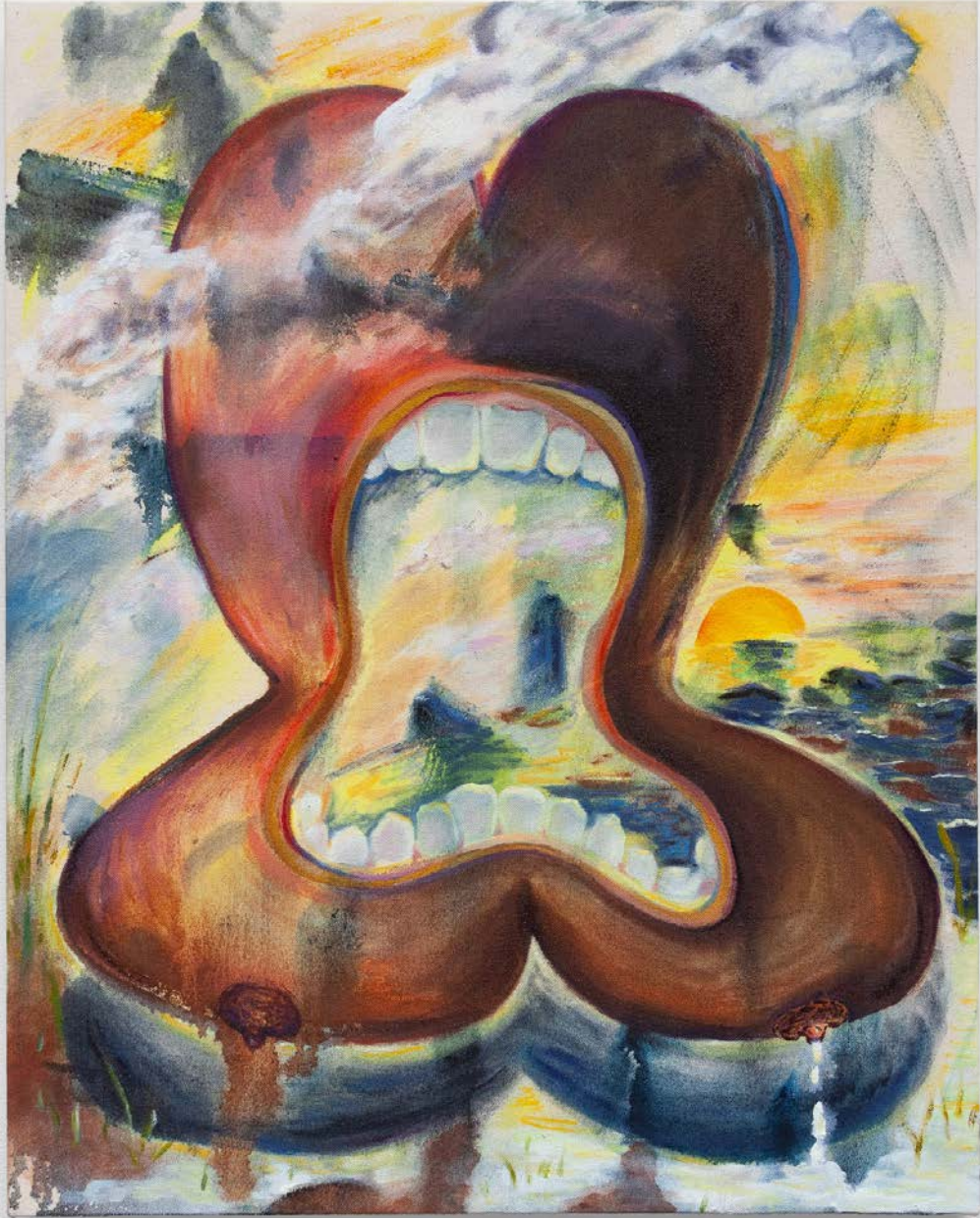
## AS A BODY PUSHED UP AGAINST—

Cook is an active mothering agent. She is a childless Mothernist painter. As Lise Haller Baggesen writes, a Mothernist: “work[s] along the porous thresholds of maternal intersubjectivity. Mothernists: lack lack. Mothernists: reimagine the domains of the social and the political in terms of fundamental relationality.” And this form of painterly Motherism challenges the canon through feminized subjectivity and caregiving. Each painting in *I NEED A VOICE NOT A BODY*, aims to subvert reproducing the canon by fostering radical intersubjectivity through messy attachments and drippy string figures.

Cook is performing linguistic and painterly disidentification to birth new forms. José Esteban Muñoz explains, “Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology...this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.” Cook’s performance of “disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation...Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence.. to perpetuate disidentification and offer it not only as a hermeneutic but also as a possibility for freedom.” Cook is an inside agent. She is painting to push back at the structures that press harshly against bodies while tacitly refusing to reproduce more of the same. Cook is working to disidentify with the mother-tongue of paintings’ forefathers.

## [SY]STEMS OF REPRODUCTION.

Cook disidentifies using her lived experience as one seed of content while deploying tools like the cut up, sonic resonance, multiplicity, erotic pleasure, and in-subordinate syntax. She draws links between female physicalities and the politics of reproduction, the psychic synchronization of moon phases and menstrual cycles, and the feminized labor of caregiving, mothering, milking, and teaching. Yet in Cook's work "the play process [entails] foreplay, coreplay, and moreplay." (4) There is more radical inclusive play to come. Cook is beginning "to think in fractal terms about gender geometries." (5) And is considering how to critique misogynistic structures as a white cis-woman while also acknowledging the intersectional (6) experiences of people along vast spectrums of identification and experience, including those who do not conform to a "two-party gender system." (7) There are more constellations of pleasure yet to emerge from slowly crumbling epistemologies. Cook is painting, planting, and mothering manic daisies in the cracking ruins, just waiting for them to bloom.



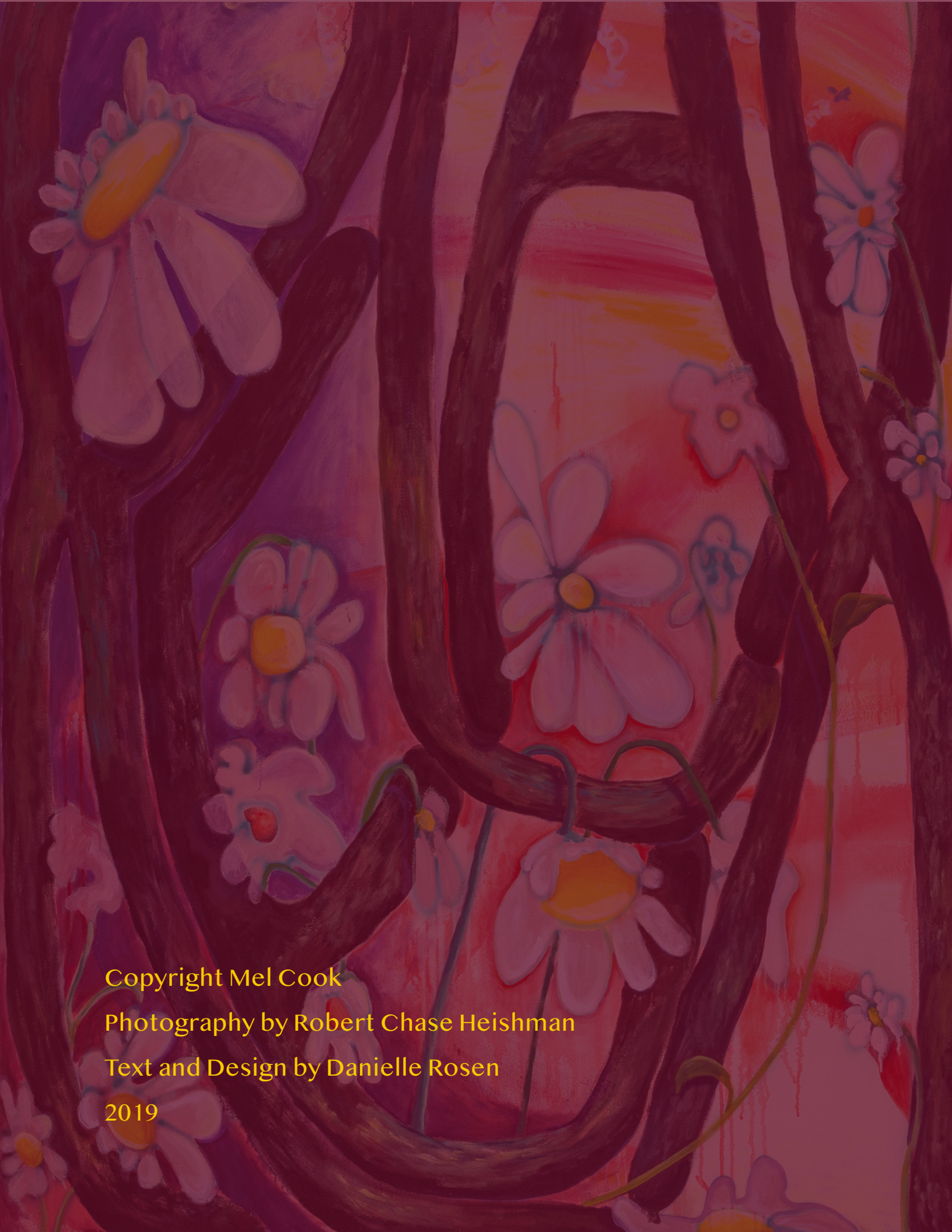




# F I G U R E S

- P1** *The Good Breast (Or The Bad?), 2018*  
Acrylic and Oil on Canvas  
24 x 18 in.
- P2** *You Would Have Burned Me at The Stake, 2019*  
Oil on Canvas  
24 x 20 in.
- P4** *You Are a Mirror My Dear,  
With a Hole in The Middle, 2019*  
Oil on Canvas  
24 x 20 in.
- P5** *JUST RELAX, 2019*  
Acrylic, Oil, and Graphite on Canvas  
72 x 48 in.
- P8** *Cat's Cradle, 2019*  
Acrylic, Oil, and Graphite on Canvas  
24 x 18 in.
- P9** *Pussy Power, 2019*  
Oil on Canvas  
24 x 20 in.
- P10** *Say Her Name (But You Can't), 2019*  
Acrylic and Oil on Canvas  
24 x 20 in.
- P13** *Homing Device, 2019*  
Oil on Canvas with Cloth  
17 x 8 in.
- P14** *Waiting For The Storm To Pass, 2019*  
Oil on Canvas  
24 x 20 in.
- P17** *We've Bled and We've Bred for You!  
Isn't That Enough?!, 2019*  
Oil on Canvas  
24 x 20 in.
- P18** *It Starts on The Playground, 2019*  
Acrylic and Oil on Canvas  
72 x 48 in.





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