

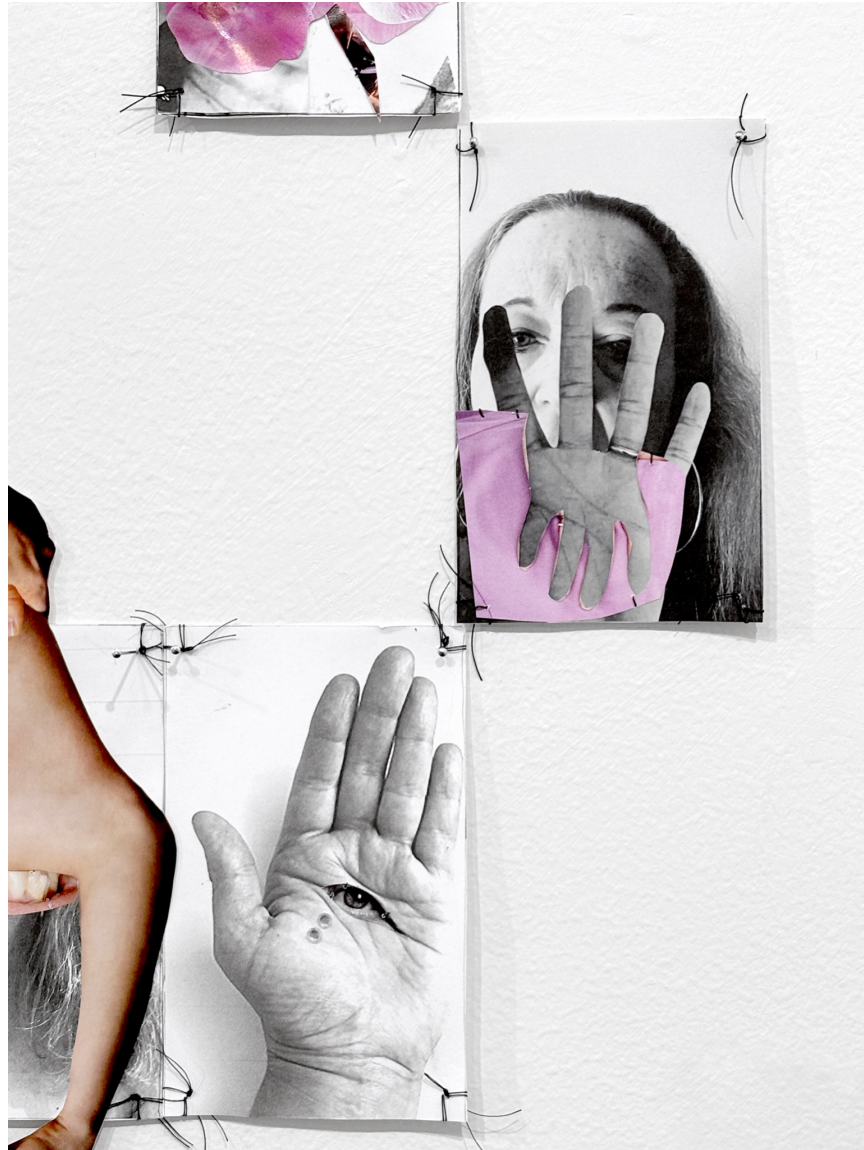
Pyewacket; rather,

*on the occasion of Judith Brotman's
Love Letters to My Strange Familiars,
Material Exhibitions, Chicago, IL,
September 10 – October 6, 2024*

What happens after the absence of any conviction that what is being done bears any correlation to what is said to be being done? What if the looking, its subsequent analysis, and resulting knowledge is so dependent upon a gaze pierced with a recognized, legible splinter (or even a foundational concept of what a gaze is and how it performs) that a description of what has been seen is inexcusably compromised by ego distortion? What recourse presents itself when causalities are undermined and outcomes prove to be out of reach by design? These are inquiries that reach beyond the fact of meaninglessness with which all living things should at some point reckon—imposing new meaning is the attractive, popular first solution, but a potent shadow work hangs further back, never recommending itself because no one should or even could set to wrestling through myriad successive orientations unless they want to.

Crones are often the shadow workers because they are systemically relegated to the abject and because it can be very upsetting to witness or be witnessed while building a new world. The story has been completed, and its aftermath is unremarkable; stripping the story for parts seems pernicious. This is a matter of finding oneself amidst an epistemological endgame wherein any of us are relegated to the position of the dying. The sorceress appears not to fend off permanent loss or restore an earlier condition; rather, she catalyzes a process that falls away from status, value, or meaning, yet is, with a burgeoning knowledge of what that is.

Crones are often underestimated, but they do not fear death. The dead make better lovers. Lovers share seven cups but never a toothbrush. Beauticians are the only ones to brush each other's hair. Mermaids also brush each other's hair but rely on water for prophetic clarity. The prophet climbs until she becomes an oracle with the scarlet fingernails and long lashes to prove it. Whipping, lashing, spanking, and slapping are a number of common ways to inspire pleasure and pain.



This is a terribly painful, two part process. The first is resistance, the dark glamour of rebellion, sharp contrasts, dissent. A demonic, transgressive impulse that peels off from the pack, embracing other, becoming other, passing through hands to be positioned as other even to

status quo otherness. Speaking the words no father is prepared to be told. Rejecting the directions that would steer one away from their intuited life path. The subversion is transgressive, acting outside of the given set of responses, lubricated in the slippery pleasure of insisting on NO.

But the underground resistance only gets anyone so far—in fact, in most narratives I can think of, the character who pushes away most defiantly invariably visits the very seat of power in an intimate confrontation with centralism embodied. And depending on the form of refusal, the ideologues being opposed may be reinscribed through their naming within arguments of dissent. They are still secured place, purpose, significance. Oppression feeds off the suffering of the oppressed; it's stoked by the fires lit against it—its reality is confirmed through the perceived facticity of the suffering it produces.

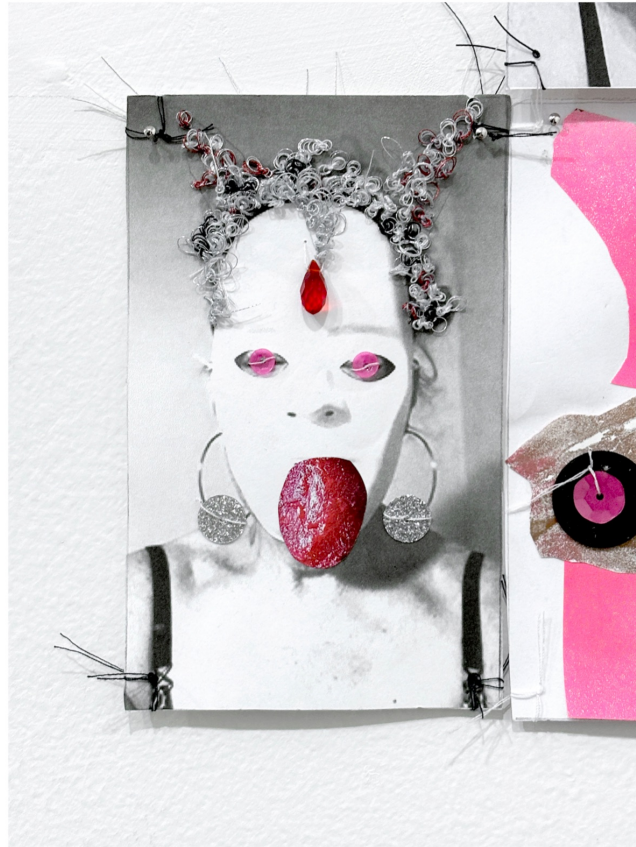
Step two is amorphous, is nearly unarticulable, is heretical up until the very fragile moment when it isn't. This step doesn't resist the impact of blows struck from one counterposition or another. The strikes never land, because they were never issued, because there was no orientation toward antagonism, hierarchy, or even power per se. Foucault outright refused the possibility of this space beyond alterity. There's no outside of power, after all. And functional that idiom may be, queerness is disorienting, the feminine is disorienting, *jouissance* is disorienting, and as such there are necessarily more orientations available than compliance or resistance.

Consider that every piece of language, all names, the ascribed meanings, historical uses have almost entirely been organized in relation to some enforced use of reason, some performative masculine that claims its own superiority—where relationalities like 'about' and 'for' and 'to' constantly reveal the basis on which knowledge and with it an ontological awareness are scripted. Within this apparatus, the rebel is almost equivalent in function to the adherent, to the degree that both positions are used to further describe the outer limits of power.

The sorceress is deviant because she disrupts symbolic systems that reinforce existing power hierarchies. Her presence as an aberration, her coding as villain, her dangerous enchantment are all dependent upon a mode of definition contextual to this heterosexist, misogynist, capitalistic empire. Her capabilities are heretofore understood as being done to or in response to the declared locus, but might what we even call her *magic* exist as integrated and ordinary but for the imposed taxonomies it disrupts? What might the sorceress be understood to be, what potentials would she express if freed from not only the essentially not-male, not-rational, but dispossessed of even the 'she' and other nomenclature that produces—if not her, at least the knowledge of her, her as HER?

In this widened scope, resistance is still adherence made enjoyable by virtue of its disruption and irregularity—the novelty of the anti. It's still an orientation toward as much as away from dominant power. Anything else is labeled as escapism, passive participation, complicity; failure to revolt is admonished as agreement. Which is all hubris, because to my mind sorcery's

impacts upon a given reality is an incidental side effect, only interrupting this world insofar as another world is coming, has come into being and knowledge. Nothing about *this* is really alternative or arcane, except when forcibly positioned relationally to a dominant order.



This is not about you.

A volatile you that will reveal who feels its implication. To the extent that it's possible, *this* signals a total divestment of the rules as they've been received or enforced. Further than refusal, *this* is something else. *This* is where we live now.

Thus far in this writing I've set some high stakes in saying what *this* is. Obtusely, I mean a coextensive paradigm of (a capacity for) knowledge and of being. Discretely I am referring to what Judith Brotman has been up to in recent years.

As a precondition, fathers have fallen silent. The energy produced by work is here, but the indentured demand to be working has subsided. A temporary reprieve has brought a halt to discerning between, let alone weighting the values of, the spaces of dreams and waking life. Sisters call back, but they also recall—sometimes with shrunk houses, sometimes with burned books, sometimes with ancestral tribute. Shirts are opened so that throats and hearts and breasts are brought forth. One such portal presaging the sorceress' processing might be Florine Stettheimer's 1915 canvas *A Model (Nude Self Portrait)*, widely considered to be the first canonical nude self portrait by a woman artist (my god that's a mouthful of superlative that may in fact do more constraining than liberating). Beyond the self portrait's evocation of sexual libertinism and audacity, it advances a sly ontological split through the break between the artist rendering the picture and her image in leisurely repose that provokes a doubt and uncertainty around how we hold together as selves under the identificatory compulsions by which we are socially regulated. Instead, she shows herself not at work but reclined, holding a bouquet aloft in "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" defiance. Stettheimer made it a personal ritual to review her flowers, forming snap judgements to either kiss a petal leaving the stain of her lipstick upon it, or else to eat it. This could be done in front of a mirror or a camera, which for a woman of her situation in that time period was literally the same thing. Yet somehow, even sitting upright, with a belly pillowy with flower petal nibbling, she pictured herself lying back, spread wide, her ringlets ablaze in fiery orange. This was the image she put forth in place of her self and her own body.

The sensuality and revolt of this disoriented image can be tracked across others that follow: Frida Kahlo's costumed and stripped bare self portraits of the 1930s and 40s, Tamara de Lempicka in her green Bugatti, Leonora Carrington's enigmatic dream reveries including the 1973 *Self Portrait with Orthopedic Brace*, Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* nude self portraits decorated with chewing gum clits and twists, Alice Neel's nude self portrait at 80 and the portrait of Annie Sprinkle's burlesque performativity made two years later in 1982, Warhol's polaroids of his own visage done up in drag, and Laura Aguilar's nude photographs (of herself and others) over the past several decades. Sampled from a wider field of intersections between feminist politics, self imaging, collage, as well as an inclination toward the mystical, these are some helpful touchstones that gather around the meaning potential of the photographic portrait (self, other, and appropriated) in Brotman's most recent bodies of work.

A compendium of portrait mode compositions, most of them silvery black-and-white against the flash and fervor typical to Brotman's preferred palettes, have spread through a mixed media approach that for years has privileged abstraction and text as primary forms. Not I.D. photos, as

we are mostly unidentifiable (my image appears as material along with numerous others), not responsive to technical ideals of photography, the presence of this layer of collage stages philosophical paradox prominently within Brotman's recent goings on.



And in some of these formal reconfigurations, the fight (so to speak) has gone out of the work to an extent. While this, I believe, refines the project more closely to what it wants to be, it is nonetheless tinged with a refrain of bittersweet melancholy: it hurts to give up the hurt. One's system is shocked by the abandonment of the kind of specialness that accompanies the suffering. Without suture, mending, or return to prior state, the brokenness disappears as if never having existed in precisely the moment that positivistic doubt undermines the knowledge

concerning the break. This is healing only momentarily, in the final fleeting stretch before healing becomes irrelevant because there is no longer (and was not previously) a wound. Oh it's so hard; all our internal alarms are set to protect us from exploitation and injustice. If there's not proof in the form of a wound, then how will the harmful be held accountable? How will my pain be valued? And to be sure, this is one of the mighty cruxes: under the abuses of a capitalist system, for lack of any other collateral, our pain is commodified and leveraged into proof of personhood, of mattering.

But without the wound, there is neither a prior uncompromised body—the notion (expectation, entitlement) of that coherence is unnecessary unless it anticipates breach, external aggression, a singular ideal arrangement of parts. For years (forever?) Brotman's use of collage and assemblage and deconstruction both intellectually and materially have alluded to surgeries, splices, scars. Both the taking apart and the putting together have been heightened, serious, extravagantly emotional activities, and for most of the time I've been familiar with her practice, the previous lives of her dissected materials have been more or less clearly cited even in their apparent partialness or reconfiguration.



Apart. Together. *This* is where we live now. Or at least the destination of our journeying. And any quest as a literary device is populated with a combination of solitary responsibility and the preference if not necessity of a company. It's better to go together, to go so far that *together* like *wound* becomes an irrelevant concept—so continuous are the physics of this emergent orientation that is neither for nor against but something else that is not about [a] you.

A golem and a dybbuk preside over this narrative phase and warrant some examination. The two are not either/or, for/against—witness my failure to tread back across a negative dialectic in pursuit of synthesis. This is an axis in some kind of perverse Klein group, one among several. Per the Key of Solomon, we might also account for knowledge as well as a 'prior divine love.' Also, ritual which figures greatly within these emergent strategies, but equally crucial trials for rituals.

In the story of the golem, a woman undresses down to only her slip. She takes off her makeup with a plush little pad, leaving stains and remnants of vampy rouges, currants, mauves, and plums. She draws a bath. She repeats the lyrics of a siren's song. There is a bathtub; there is a doll dressed as a bride; there are red shoes, leopard print, the dregs of tea in a porcelain cup; there is a nearly empty box of tissues; there is a vanity in the bedroom just a few steps from the tub. On a television set, a soap opera is playing a scene where a bandage is being unwrapped from a head. She sits at the vanity; she begins to apply a clay mask onto her freshly washed face. She offers the cat a treat; she is the cat she accepts the treat. She offers her her; she is her she accepts her. She offers she she she is she accepts she. It's better to go together.

Judith Brotman has made many, many collages that repeat the format of a sheet the size of an index card oriented vertically. In several installations they have been displayed in a grid filling a wall or walls from edge to edge, floor to ceiling. Recently, she has begun to call groups of them *We'll Meet Again*. This is something else from the politics of derangement that have proceeded through years of her studio production. A practiced process under the auspices of a new orientation, her apart/together spellcasting knows no bounds: not differentiation or even death. A woman applies a clay mask and then bleats as a goat. A woman applies a clay mask and croaks as a raven. She belts as a synth-pop new wave rocker androgyne.

In medieval Europe, the golem is a slur leveraged at unattached childless women—meaner than spinster and with the added connotation that such women were dirty by definition. In that period especially although persistent in some of its present day usages, golem means filthy and inert. The ways queer bodies love is called golem. The ways social outcasts band together in self selected family networks is golem. Speechlessness when called to simplistic notions of patriotism is golem. Grey is so golem; greying is golem. Conversations with animals is golem. Submergence in water is golem which is mud. As with other derogatory terminology, golem has undergone some reclamation, and can now be found as an expression of friendship—indicating intimacy and intense shared understandings among a close knit group.

Whatever its usage, golem is always suggestive of a pervasive loneliness, a threshold beyond which someone has lived far more of an inner life than any spectator might suppose. Naysayers

call it disassociation, and cynics say it's boredom, but golem marks out a path of curiosity that leads one deeper still, requiring the courage to be misunderstood at least, but more, alone. Golem is a phantasmatic *being-with* that stays powerfully sensitive to where feet meet the ground, to where a body cuts through water, and to the wandering along a wide path that runs between images and what they are meant to describe.

I remember when I realized how golem Judith Brotman's art making is, mostly for how it skirts past the assumptions attached to intercutting, undercutting, and cutting remarks in pursuit of multiple, simultaneous, continuous, blended polymorphisms that shapeshift into loved ones the way a figure in a dream may change form several times, all the while in fact representing another person or concept altogether.

Together. Apart. Make them so that they orient into the same direction. While navigations of near/far, known/unknown, tangible/intangible in earlier times may have defaulted to ghost hauntings and spiritualism to articulate the pangs of object loss, contemporary life is more and more defined by a parasociality that stems from the past half decade's perfect storm of isolation during COVID-19 lockdowns, the rise of the tell-all reality star and social media personality, and a simulated familiarity that accompanies the sense that all that has been private is now public in a global culture of total surveillance. The modern denizen professes with ease their feelings of greater closeness and intimacy with acquaintances they've met on the Internet, people they 'follow' without ever having made introductions, or even AI generated dialogue that complicates the notion of talking to oneself.

Neither in tandem with nor opposed to, the array of collages Brotman proliferates uses added appendages and embellishments to prove how the image was never solely a representation of the person depicted. Images are the always already floating signifier, yet hide in plain sight as such, camouflaged as they are to resemble the things they resemble. Yet the referent is not intact, and anything that can be done to reveal the elusive, ulterior behavior of the image goes some way to terraform the realm of the sorceress who is, frankly, no longer willing to tolerate sly tricks posing as deep magic.

So Brotman caresses, carves, cuts, and kindles along the contours of her grayscale faerie folk, arranging and rearranging their constituent parts so that they resemble less the objects to which they do not refer. With the form of image thus hollowed out, she invokes the veracity of fabulation, an operation to which images are far better suited than they are a claim to representation.

It's not that these successive art studio moves mean that there is nothing of the people who were photographed in the artwork subsequently presented; rather, what they leave behind are the specifications, dictates, assumptions, and prescriptions that foist dictated definitions onto the raw material of a self. What might I be if I hadn't been born into male, son, progeny; hadn't had my orientations organized as alternative and aberrant; wasn't squarely in the middle of an ongoing struggle around the conventional, historic aesthetics relegated to the feminine and the bodies and organs with which they may or may not have any relationship? Peering into one or

another of Judith's collages that incorporate images that were taken 'of me' I see instead goddess scaled largesse, shades traipsing through shady gardens, a telepathic talisman.

When the wounds of being told what you are and how you are to be represented are closed—not healed as much as never having been inflicted—what opens is the possible, a possibility of liberation at the levels of knowledge and being.



Where this complex, mystical gesture is perhaps most provocative are the elements of this body of work that follow upon the legacies of Stettheimer et al aforementioned: when Judith confronts the image of her self in these works, she activates the other guardian of this tale. She confronts the dybbuk.

The dybbuk is a scheme, an exit strategy. It is first and foremost a severance from paternalistic chauvinism. The dybbuk is a series of impossible mazes that no heterosexual man has solved; as such the dybbuk serves as a sequence of blockades, a secure parameter, and transposes a smuggling away in the style of the witness protection program onto another plane of being that is more psychic, more intuitive, and more oriental if the concept could itself be detached from its instrumentalization within colonial throes. The dybbuk is not dissimilar from 'nüshu,' the Chinese syllabic script written exclusively among women. Although the concept of the dybbuk can be traced much further backwards, following on World War II, the production of melodramas within cinema gave way to a kind of inscrutability of affect that was, in a sense, the dybbuk: the post-industrial Western nuclear family was fractured by the incompatibility of the growing influence of the felt and the femme with a slew of social presets like boys' clubs, glass ceilings, gender-based pathologies of hysteria and madness, duty, obedience, respectability, or even the set course of checkpoints for adulthood in post-war America. Instead of being housewives, some women chose to be the dybbuk; further, instead of being workers, laborers, professionals, citizens, patriots, some the dybbuk chose to be the dybbuk. Lesbian eroticism, female orgasms, and matters of the heart are among the intricacies of the dybbuk that operate to the exclusion of master narrative arrogance. The dybbuk is an urgent evacuation of the self from the conglomerated commands that constrained the form it has taken up until now. And the deranged self portrait is to the image what the dybbuk is to hegemonic culture.

It's not too late / time no longer. Love never ends / it is eternal and infinite. No shade of lipstick is ever discontinued / they wouldn't do that to you. This is your party and tearfulness is not only possible but preferable. So cry. In time it will fill a pool, flow as a river, flood the riverbanks, soak into every structure. The totalization of tears, and since this is written text, the dybbuk collapses the disambiguation between the tear that rends and the tear that runs down your cheek. An incantation for anarchy in fluid form. Wave your tissue as we cast off to another world / this one's nearly gone.

The sorceress is the dybbuk when the mask is not clay but is a costume ball reduced down to its smallest possible free radical's valence electron. The sorceress is the dybbuk when her anger—her rage, her resentment, her impatience, her cynicism, her dread—transmutates into a vehicle for reaching another world. There are no rules that say that transport can't arrive at your destination with you, but it can't. Critical to describing an experience with Judith's recent endeavors—deeply attached as it is to a burgeoning study and practice of magick—is that the sorceress is the dybbuk when she is an artist who has departed from rote Modernist categories

of medium specificity, craft, virtuosic displays of technical proficiency, or even a public performance of one's intellectual capabilities—an artist who makes something its audience may not understand as art, but rather a humble and earnest direct engagement with the energies that run through all of matter and dark matter, anti-matter, and a capacity for mattering that relates to the construction of meaning. Those energies run like a river of tears, like a swimming pool with a current, like mascara. The sorceress is the dybbuk when the sorceress liquifies.

To get there, one cannot fear madness or being believed to be possessed of madness; cannot be debilitated by the consistency with which misunderstanding pervades, the probability of being overlooked, the risk of exclusion; will not be dissuaded when becoming further illegible in some contexts in a manner proportionate with growing more literate to one's own terms; does not reject inherent meaninglessness nor harbor resentment for the absolute disinterested freedom it implies. If I could impose a directive of my own, it would be that one mustn't eschew nuance, criticality, or feminism as a project; will not cast off excess weight even if sinking. There's an understructure one may lower to. To no longer willingly inhabit the self that one has been relegated to can feel like dying. Not fearing death is crucial paving for this path.

To where? If *this* is a point of intersection where the capacity to know and the capability of being are synonymous, what is the *there* that is being made from all of this? It is first of all familiar, but that doesn't mean and usually is unrelated to family; rather, you find yourself in re-encounters under strikingly less certain and probably more challenging contexts. Opposites not only attract, they cease to uphold the oppositional structure in which they've been maintained elsewhere. Agony pleasure. Sex death. Interior exterior. Covered exposed. Surface depth. Subject object. Self other. More less. These are the chimerical polymorphologies to which Brotman's rituals and assemblages and kisses not spared allude. A stage of matter wherein the edge around what has been cut away becomes the closest companion, indistinguishable from self. Familiars are familiarity decontextualized. Those who have known you most deeply have done so through bearing witness to your suffering and trauma, neither of which hold any power here, so what now is the basis of being known? And relatedly, what conditions for living will be shaped by/as this knowledge that no longer carries trauma? *This is there* is where.

Rustling within the aggregate of Judith Brotman's works on view at Material Exhibitions are attenuated visitations from strange familiars:

there is a child who you were never permitted to live as un-self-consciously
there is a matron who loosens the policies of the classrooms orphanages prisons
there is a mermaid who sings who sings
there is a gryphon whose body is half woman and half woman
there is a Florine reincarnated who is out and about and out
there is a golem who is animated by the imaginations of the outcasts
there is a crone who can do the worst things that need doing
there is a sorceress who knows and trusts her own beauty
there is a slut who never got to get around or at least no one knew

there is a witch who glitters in pink red grey white black
there is the dybbuk who leaves when she has to
there is an unrequited desire
there is a scribe
there is a swimmer
there is a spider
there is a mask
there is a mirror.

Matt Morris
September 2024

Judith Brotman is a multidisciplinary artist and educator from Chicago. Her work includes mixed media installations, theatrical immersive environments, and language/text-based projects. Brotman's work frequently occupies a space between abstraction and figuration, deterioration and regeneration, elegance and awkwardness, generosity and obligation. In a world of uncertain outcomes, Brotman emphasizes the possibility of healing and transformation. Additionally, she explores the potential of social media as a site of real interaction or conversation. In all her works, Brotman considers spaces of not knowing to be both complex and generative despite, or perhaps due to, the resulting cliffhanger of uncertainty.

Exhibitions venues include: Smart Museum of Art, SOFA Chicago, Columbia College/Chicago, Indiana University Northwest, Franconia Sculpture Park, Hampshire College, The Society of Arts & Crafts/Boston, Boundary, Mobilia Gallery, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Asphodel Gallery, INOVA, the DeVos Art Museum, Weinberg/Newton Gallery, Threewalls, Circa Modern, Slow Gallery, Chicago Cultural Center, Tiger Strikes Asteroid/Chicago, Chicago Artists Coalition, Hyde Park Art Center, Gallery 400, and The Illinois State Museum. Brotman's work is in the collection of The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, The Illinois State Museum, and the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection as well as in many private collections. Brotman received her BFA and MFA from the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she has taught for over twenty years. www.judithbrotman.com

Matt Morris is an artist, perfumer, and writer based in Chicago. Morris has presented artwork internationally including Andrew Kreps, Margot Samel, and Tiger Strikes Asteroid, New York; Musée de la Fraise and Ruschman, Berlin, Germany; Netwerk Aalst, Aalst, Belgium; Krabbesholm Højskole, Skive, Denmark; / Slash, San Francisco, CA; DePaul Art Museum and Queer Thoughts, Chicago, IL; Mary + Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston, IL; Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, IL; and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH. Morris writes prolifically about art, perfume, and culture for numerous journals, exhibition monographs, and websites. Morris is a transplant from southern Louisiana who holds a BFA from the Art Academy of Cincinnati and earned an MFA in Art Theory + Practice from Northwestern University, as well as a Certificate in Gender + Sexuality Studies. In 2017 Morris earned a Certification in Fairyology from Doreen Virtue, PhD. Morris is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. www.mattmorrisworks.com