

November 11, 2021 – February 18, 2022

Soft Allergy

Judith Brotman



DEPS Artist Profile

Soft Allergy

Cameron Clayborn, Judith Brotman, and Claire Ashley
Curated by Meg Duguid

Soft Allergy is born out of the collaboration of individual practices. In a series of call-and-response installations, where edges are present yet hard to determine, the artists in this show have pushed and pulled, upending and uplifting each other's practices. Meeting every three weeks over Zoom since 2020, the artists developed the show virtually and by trading material and works in the mail along with toiling in their studios.

Not only does the exhibition consist of singular objects from the artists' individual practices that are placed in relationship to one another, but each artist has worked on, embellished, painted, sewed into, and/or incorporated spoken work, audio, or video inside of another's object. These actions spur a number of comfortable and uncomfortable relationships that are optimistically dark, bringing out issues of gender, race, and material. The works in the show exude the formal, material, and conceptual struggles of their co-creation—they are generative and intuitive, and so the show is always in a state of being created.

Excitingly, during the run of *Soft Allergy*, a satellite exhibition, *Tender Irritant*, viewable from the windows will take place at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Galleries located at 33 E. Washington St. Produced in the same manner as *Soft Allergy*, the work in *Tender Irritant* acts as a phantom appendage functioning as both companion exhibition and vigorous reaction simultaneously.

Glass Curtain Gallery – Columbia College Chicago
1104 S Wabash Ave, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605
Monday – Wednesday, Friday, 9am – 5pm
Thursday: 9am – 7pm

Tender Irritant
December 20, 2021 – January 12, 2022
SAIC Galleries
33 E Washington St, Chicago, IL 60602
www.saic.edu/exhibitions

Judith Brotman

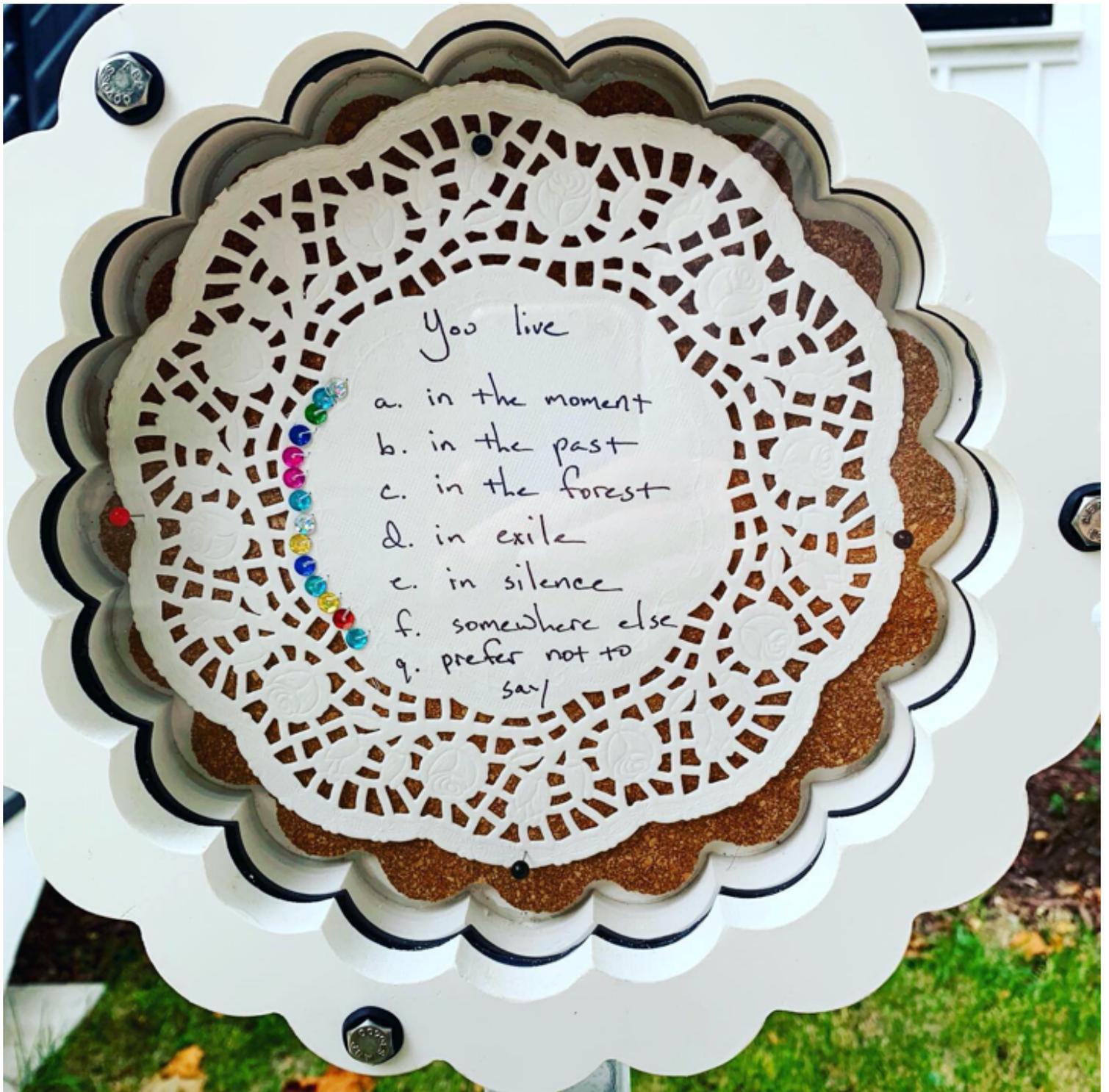
Judith Brotman's multi-disciplinary work includes large-scale immersive sculpture environments, stitched and altered book pages, and language-based conceptual projects, including prompts for "conversations" that are posed on social media. Common to her work is an interest in spaces of potential transformation, theatricality, and the impact of ambivalence and uncertainty on our commitments. Brotman draws inspiration from narratives as diverse as *The Odyssey*, *Frankenstein*, and daytime soap operas as she considers how we are impacted by time, place, power structures, and the stories we consume and carry over time. Her work hovers in spaces "between"—between abstraction and figuration, deterioration and regeneration, elegance and awkwardness, generosity and obligation. Sculptural work is typically crafted from a wide variety of humble materials (sewing thread, paper, wire- amongst many others), and is often process based. Brotman typically works serially in order to emphasize a visual language (and a written one in text-based pieces) that suggests the unfinished or incomplete, and might evoke the question, "What happens next?" Frequently posing questions without giving answers, Brotman believes that any singular response to be partial or incomplete. She considers these spaces of not knowing to be complex and generative and potentially transformative despite, or perhaps due to, the resulting cliffhanger of uncertainty.

Judith Brotman is a multidisciplinary artist and educator from Chicago. Her work frequently occupies a space between abstraction and figuration, deterioration and regeneration, elegance and awkwardness, generosity and obligation. She has exhibited at venues including Indiana University Northwest, Franconia Sculpture Park in Shafer, MN, Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, The Society of Arts & Crafts in Boston, Asphodel Gallery in Brooklyn, the DeVos Art Museum in Marquette, MI, as well as Smart Museum of Art, RUSCHWOMAN, Weinberg/Newton Gallery, Threewalls, Slow Gallery, Chicago Cultural Center, Tiger Strikes Asteroid Chicago, Chicago Artists Coalition, Hyde Park Art Center, and Gallery 400 all in Chicago. Brotman's work is in the collection of The Museum of Fine Arts in 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 School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies where she currently teaches.

Website judithbrotman.com

Instagram [@judithbrotman](https://www.instagram.com/judithbrotman)

Facebook [_Judith Brotman](https://www.facebook.com/JudithBrotman)



Life In Progress, 2017 – on-going
embellished napkins and doilies, text with multiple choice responses changed daily during the run of
Terrain Biennial, structure built by Burt Isenstein
photo by Burt Isenstein



Message in a Bottle: A Three Part Opera for the Foliage of Rumah Tangga, 2021
collaboration with Kurt Peterson and Ella Wijt
sharpie markers, leaves
photo by Patar Pribadi



The Ghosts From Your Past Will Be Late For Dinner (but may be on time for other meals and activities), 2019

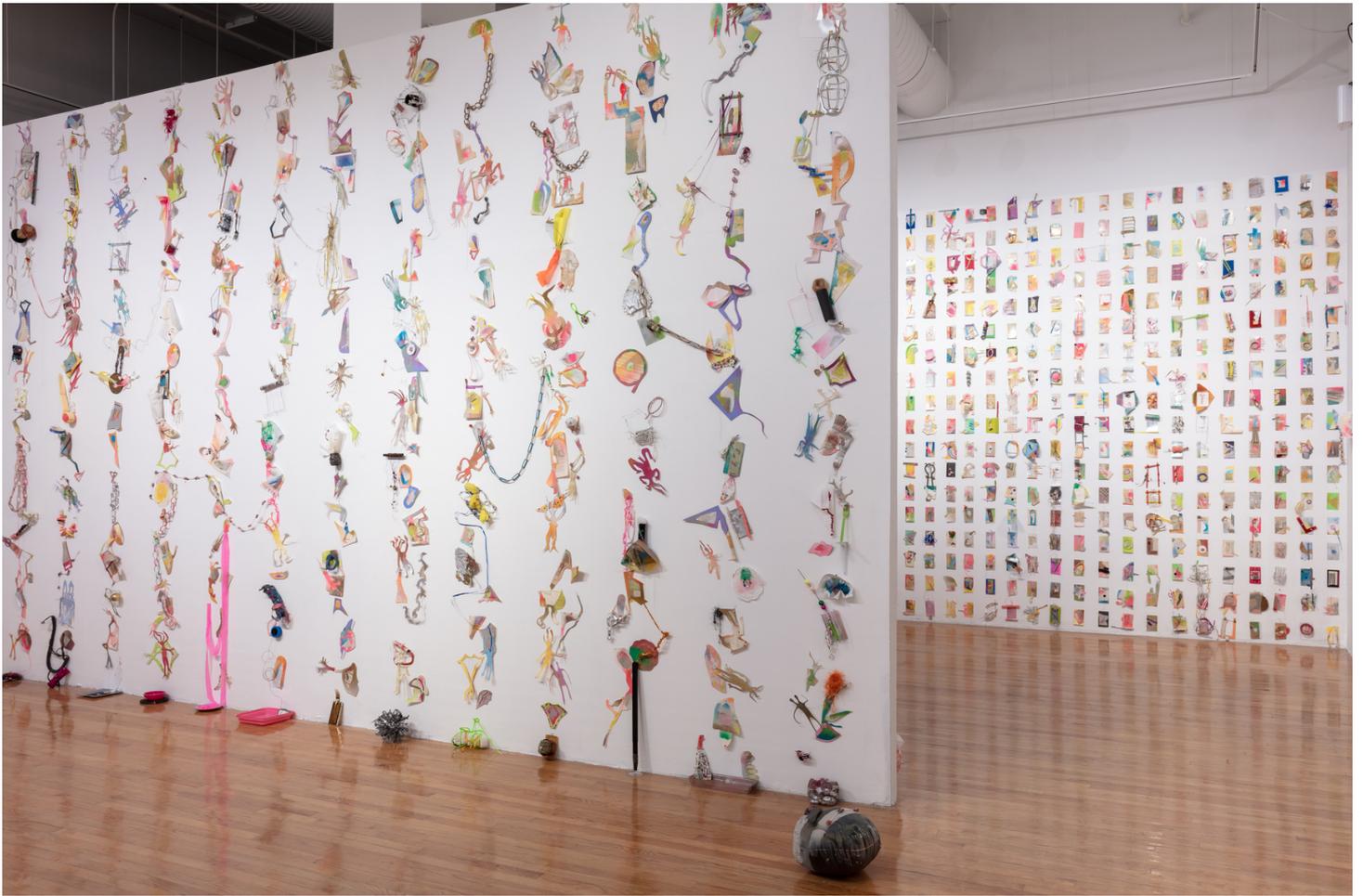
two boxes of 3-ply ultra-soft Kleenex, metal movie reel, paper doilies, beads, sequins, metal, wire, thread, telephone cord, wire, paper cording, bamboo skewer, gesso
dimensions variable



Soft Allergy installation view, Glass Curtain Gallery
photo by Jonathan Castillo



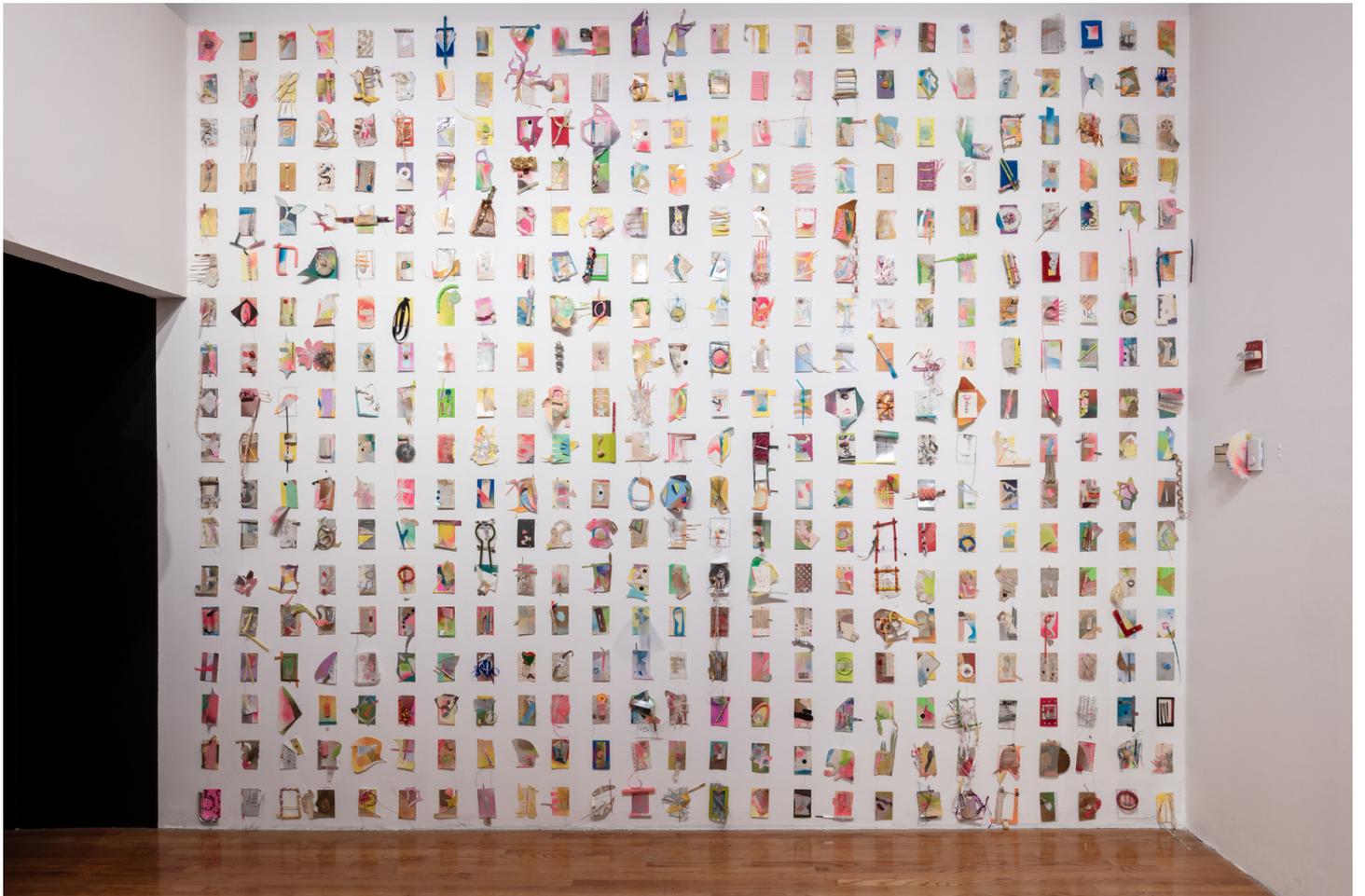
Soft Allergy installation view, Glass Curtain Gallery
photo by Jonathan Castillo



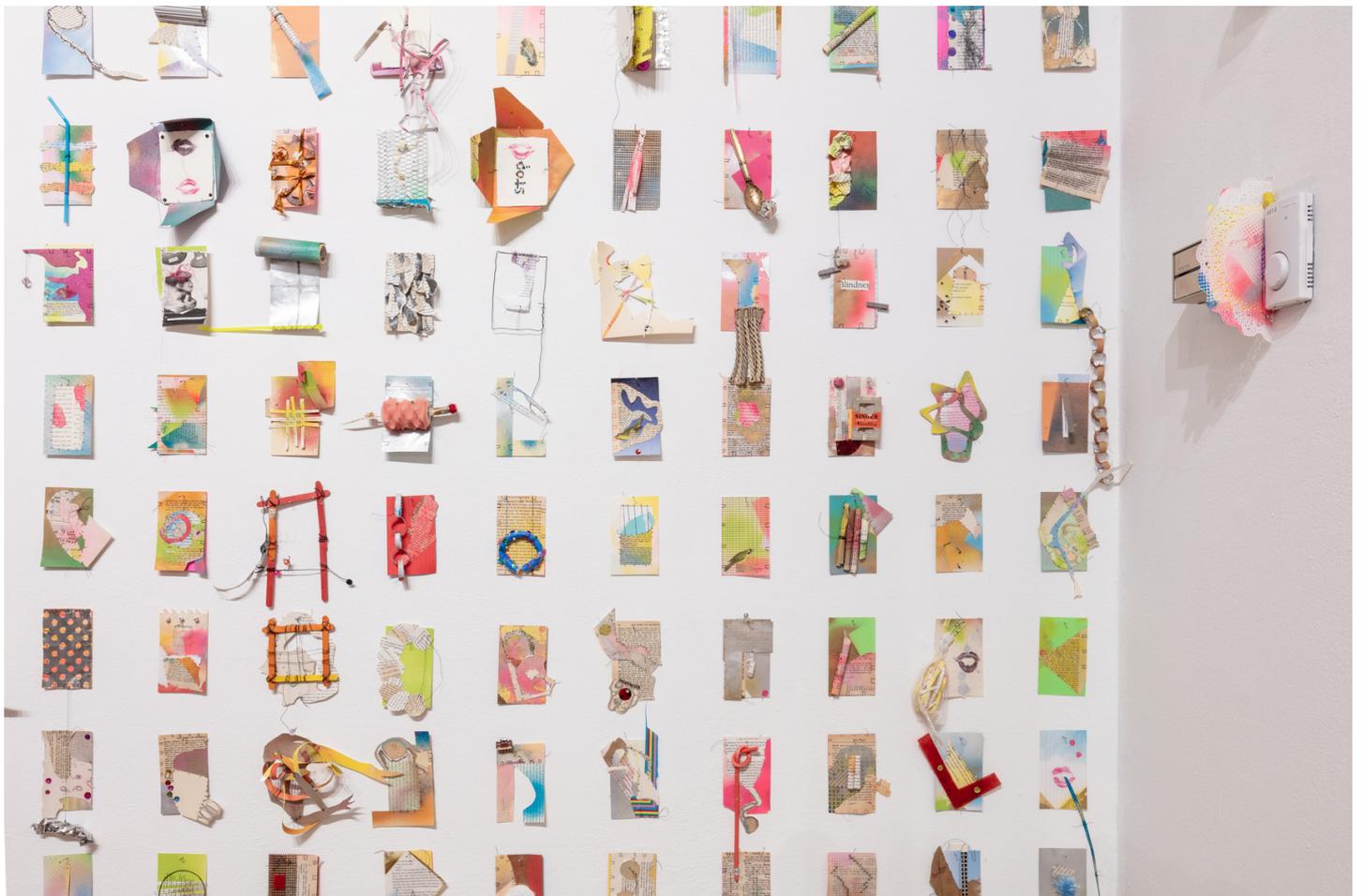
Soft Allergy installation view, Glass Curtain Gallery
photo by Jonathan Castillo



Soft Allergy installation view, Glass Curtain Gallery
photo by Jonathan Castillo



Less Than You Know/More Than You Imagine, 2020-21
mixed media with altered texts
dimensions variable
photo by Jonathan Castillo

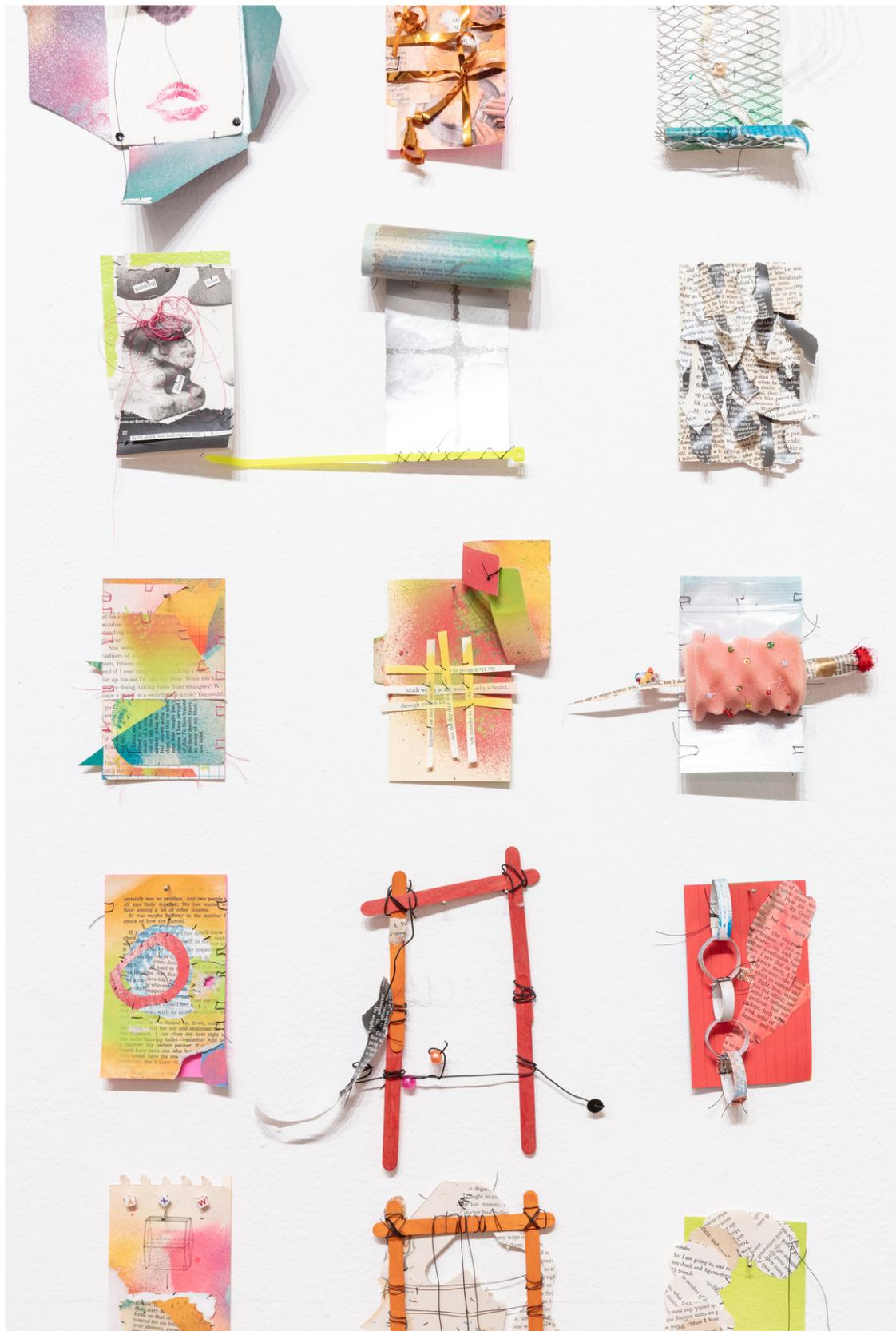


Less Than You Know/More Than You Imagine, 2020-21

mixed media with altered texts

dimensions variable

photo by Jonathan Castillo



detail from *Less Than You Know/More Than You Imagine*, 2020-21
mixed media with altered texts
dimensions variable
photo by Jonathan Castillo



detail from *Less Than You Know/More Than You Imagine*, 2020-21
mixed media with altered texts
dimensions variable
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detail from *Less Than You Know/More Than You Imagine*, 2020-21
mixed media with altered texts
dimensions variable
photo by Jonathan Castillo



detail from *Less Than You Know/More Than You Imagine*, 2020-21
mixed media with altered texts
dimensions variable
photo by Jonathan Castillo



Soft Allergy installation view, Glass Curtain Gallery
photo by Jonathan Castillo



The Tales 1: (yes, they could happen to you), 2021
audio transcription
photo by Jonathan Castillo



from series *Union of Opposites*, 2021
sequins, thread, cloth taken from dermatologist's office, bamboo skewer
photo by Jonathan Castillo

Interview with Judith Brotman

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: How did you get involved with *Soft Allergy*? Have you collaborated with the other artists involved before?

Judith Brotman: Claire Ashley, one of the two other artists in the exhibition, and I had a show together at Slow Gallery in 2018. It wasn't specifically a collaboration, but we were very interested in how our work played off of each other's. My work in that show was quite small—delicate with a dark underbelly. Claire's was much larger—aggressive in one sense but with a humorous side.

After the show was over, we felt we and our work had more to say together and also thought something different might happen in a much larger space. We continued talking and writing down our thoughts about a future show. We were very excited when that show turned out to be at Glass Curtain Gallery, working with Meg Duguid.

At some point after Claire, Meg, and I had a few conversations, the thought occurred to us that a third artist/perspective might be a great addition to the show. Claire had known Cameron Clayborn from OxBow. Our first Zoom meeting with Cameron made it absolutely clear that we now had THE right combination of artists.

There's something different about collaborating than simply showing together. It's a different kind of risk. That risk can be incredibly energizing if it's positive. I have been awed by the ongoing energy that emerged from our collaboration.

KF: For this exhibition, you and the other artists involved have met on Zoom every three weeks since 2020 to develop the show virtually. How has collaborating over Zoom been different from collaborations

in the past? Do you think the work has changed in response to these circumstances in ways you haven't experienced in the past?

JB: *Soft Allergy* is the first true collaboration I've done. I've worked closely with other artists in the past in the context of 2-person shows. But I would say that previous exhibitions have emphasized works "in conversation with each other" rather than actual collaborative moves. *Soft Allergy* includes both conversations and collaborations.

For me, the Zoom meetings were amazing---inspiring and generative. I looked forward to each and every meeting and was never once disappointed. I left each meeting excited to start working again.

I believe so much of this had to do with the synergy between me, Claire, Cameron and Meg. It's hard to factor Zoom into the equation. There were times I was so inspired by the conversations that I almost forgot about Zoom and the screen. Certainly, that would not have been the case on Zoom with any random three other people. In terms of how my work has changed, I think anytime I'm very excited and inspired, I feel an additional sense of permission to take more risks.

One of the other major impacts of this collaboration on Zoom is that it made me more interested in future collaborations... something I've already begun doing with other artists.

KF: With the works in *Soft Allergy* being so site-specific, what parts of the exhibition were planned, and what ideas and works developed during installation in the space itself?

Interview continued

JB: My two large wall installations were planned well ahead of installation. The wall of gridded index-card-sized pieces (*1001 Nights (more or less)*) was actually begun before *Soft Allergy* was planned, although aspects of it changed because of our collaboration. The largest unknowns had to do with the integration of my, Cameron's and Claire's works on site. I was making many embellished pieces: Kleenex, napkins, straws, cloths, and other materials that were embellished with sequins and beads. Some were requested by Claire or Cameron, and some were mailed to them well in advance of the exhibition. But the vast majority of my materials were brought to the exhibition space and attached to my collaborators' pieces on site. By the time installation occurred, (and long before) there was quite a level of trust between us. I firmly believe that made an enormous amount of difference in how well we worked together.

We were only all together at the gallery once during installation. But there were a number of Zoom meetings during which we could check out how the work was functioning together and if any of us wanted any shifts. We made minor adjustments throughout installation, but for the most part, we were very comfortable (and excited) with the ways in which our work functioned together. I have not yet had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time in the gallery since all the work was installed. I am looking forward to more time alone in the space during the run of the show.

I was there once for a couple hours, which gave me my first glimpse of what we had done versus what we had planned. My initial impression was that we actually had created a true immersive landscape or "universe" that was even more complex than what we had initially anticipated.

KF: In your individual practice, you create a lot of large-scale and immersive environments; how has your concept and creation of your work changed, if at all, over the past two years with such limited access to art in real spaces?

JB: I have certainly missed being able to see art in real spaces. I've been relatively self-isolated throughout the pandemic and have seen very few shows in person this entire time. There have been quite a few shows that I've been heartbroken to have missed, both here in Chicago and in New York. Your question is an excellent one and beyond missing seeing art in person, and I have not actually thought about whether it's changed my own work. As far as I can tell, I don't think it has. (But I'll be pondering this long after I submit these answers!) I think it's made me become differently involved in ways that I (or any of us) had done in the past. I've attended many virtual artist talks and have found them very inspiring. And I've had virtual studio visits...my own work and with others...throughout the pandemic. These have been for the most part more impactful than I would have imagined. I've also spent much more time on gallery websites than I ever have in the past. Of course, this isn't the same as being there in person. But I do believe many galleries have devoted much more time to their online images, so it's been more satisfying than it might have been in the past.

I also am someone whose inspiration often comes from literature and from conversations. Both of these remained equally accessible pre-pandemic and throughout. And so my biggest source of ideas/inspiration has not shifted.

Interview continued

KF: You are interested in exploring language-based projects, including prompts for conversation on social media and odd love stories in your work. How do you balance a variety of voices and stories in your work while keeping a consistent narrative in a work? How often do the inclusions of these conversations shift what you originally thought about a work?

JB: Much of my work explores uncertainty. I think of uncertainty—for the most part—as an active and generative space. Not always, of course. It's hard to make that case for situations like the pandemic which has been uncertainty on steroids. I would still argue that the pandemic is a reminder that life is always filled with uncertainty to some extent, and we only pretend otherwise. It's also the case that the pandemic, as ghastly and disruptive as it's been, has resulted in many people re-evaluating major life choices. I bring all of this up in order to return to your question about balancing a variety of voices and stories. The inclusion of other voices—and I refer especially to social media posts—emphasizes the uncertainty factor: these are voices I neither control nor anticipate. In that sense, it supports the content (of uncertainty) rather than shifts it. I also find that input from others—their stories, their ambivalence, their willingness to share any/all—is deeply inspiring to me. Initially, I was not expecting anyone to respond to questions posed on napkins posted on Instagram! In fact, I probably would not respond if the situation were reversed. I loved being surprised by responses that were shared and private messages that were sent. And I was quite moved that people would take the time to share so honestly. The unexpected responses probably informed more work as I moved forward. For me, the “not knowing” is an inspiring if not always comfortable space to work from.

KF: What were some of the unique challenges you faced in this exhibition, and is there anything you learned from it that you will take into the rest of your practice?

JB: This show posed many challenges. I don't want to overstate their depth or significance except to say there were a lot of unknowns. I've not been able to work in my outside studio space since the pandemic. My studio isn't all that big but it is definitely larger than the tiny room in my home where I've been installing work. This meant I was never able to install an entire installation at one time on a wall...let alone view both of them together. I had a sense of what each installation would look like at Glass Curtain Gallery, but there was a lot left to the imagination! Our exhibition was postponed due to Covid at one point, something that has been relatively common throughout the pandemic. This was never a problem for any of us. I think we were all very happy to have additional time working/collaborating together.

Up until install week, I wasn't certain if I would be able to go to Glass Curtain during install. I ultimately did go several times—only for a few hours each time. The time in the gallery was very precious and felt terribly important. That said, we did have quite a few Zoom meetings during install in order to talk together and make changes/adjustments. I was apprehensive about making decisions in this way, both individual and collaborative ones. But in all honesty, it went quite seamlessly and wasn't any more stressful than what might occur during a “normal” install in the gallery space.

For me the biggest challenge was that I couldn't install my own work. I am particularly grateful to Meg Duguid and Mark Porter, who could not have been more

Interview continued

generous about facilitating the installation of my work. This was the first time I've had a large installation that I wasn't actively involved in hanging, and it was stressful for me before the fact. It's very important to share that I could NOT be happier with how the work was hung! And, in the end, what I take from this is that one of my large/complicated installations can be hung without my being in the gallery. I see this as a huge gain despite the anxiety I felt beforehand.

As a teacher, I'm often telling my students that challenges/limitations in art can ultimately be very fruitful. This is a bit harder of a lesson to take on personally, but it is most certainly true!

KF: What do you hope viewers of *Soft Allergy* will take away from this exhibition, whether about collaboration or your individual practice?

JB: I don't want to say too much on this subject, as what is most important is that viewers will bring their own stories and experiences to *Soft Allergy* and interpret the exhibition through their own lens or frame. Regardless of what I or my collaborators share, I'm guessing we jointly have the wish that it's what YOU bring to the exhibition that will activate the space.

In terms of my individual practice, the two wall installations are essentially my work (with the inclusion of my collaborators' materials). I'm very interested in how we are shaped by stories—the ones we read and hear, and the life story we experience. The gridded piece, *1001 Nights (more or less)*, is composed of altered book pages from texts I've read over the past 55 years. Included are ones that have inspired me, ones that had a negative impact, and ones that I'm ambivalent about. I believe each of us always

has the capacity to change our life in some ways and to re-think our actions, but the process is slippery and requires careful attention.

The linear installation *More Than You know/Less Than You Imagine*, also contains altered book pages but is filled with a wide variety of materials and objects as well. (Recommend viewers check out my materials list, the selection of which is quite important to me.) This installation is brightly colored and from a distance appears decorative and festive. Only close and careful looking reveals figures that are of a different tone than what you thought you saw from a distance. Many are upside down/straining/writhing. Noticing this has the capacity to really shift your first impression. My individual work, like the entire exhibition, is what I call darkly optimistic.

In terms of the collaborative works in the show, I truly hope viewers will think about what drove our impulse to collaborate and how we collaborated. We are three artists whose work is frequently material-based and whose impetus for working comes from a personal and idiosyncratic space. We very much believe in the power of shared stories and openhearted conversations. We embrace the messiness or even chaos that sometimes occurs, believing that ultimately, real transformation and understanding can result.

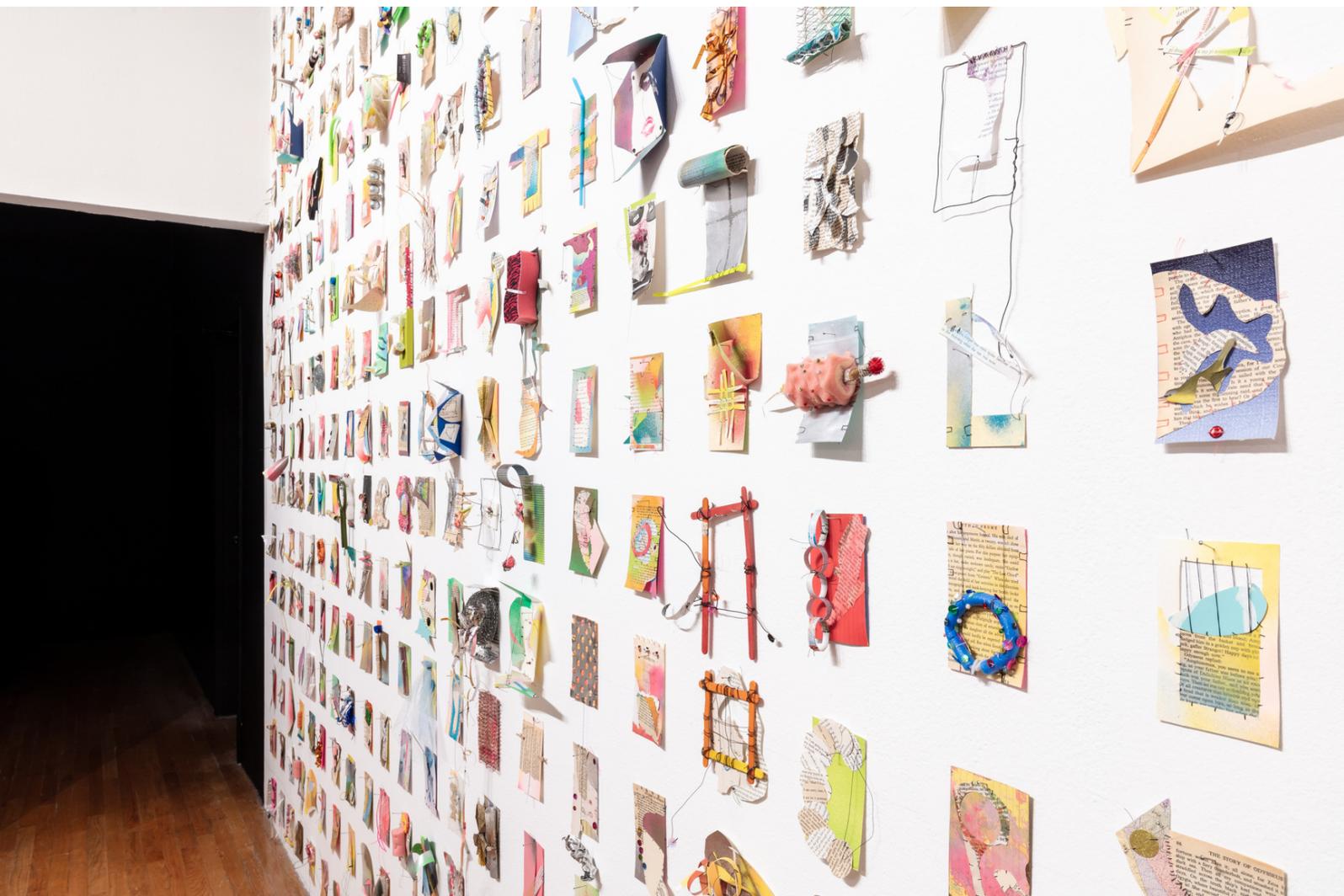
There are moments in the show when it is quite obvious whose work is whose, and "who made what" reveals itself fairly quickly. There are other moments when it is not remotely clear which artist is the maker. There were times even I wasn't certain! And then there are some of my favorite moments in the show, when something is created that is neither mine, Claire's nor Cameron's—

Interview continued

the work is entirely something else, born out of collaboration and a willingness to resist the limitations of ego.

Our title *Soft Allergy* refers to a tolerance one might develop when exposed in small doses to substances that previously brought on an intense reaction. We feel that way about our shared stories and think of it as a paradigm for moving forward in a deeply divided culture.

I hope viewers will enjoy the universe we've brought to Glass Curtain Gallery. And I especially hope they will think about their own stories as they travel through it.





The DEPS Artist Profile Series

The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at <https://students.colum.edu/deps/glass-curtain-gallery/exhibitions/2021-22/soft-allergy>.

Contact information: Mark Porter, mporter@colum.edu / 312.369.6643

Glass Curtain Gallery: 1104 S. Wabash Ave, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

Hours: Monday- Wednesday, Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Thursday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

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