

November 11, 2021 – February 18, 2022

Soft Allergy Claire Ashley



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

Claire Ashley

Claire Ashley seeks to explode the possibilities for painting. Pushing against its immense history and using its essential powers of color, surface, mark, and image, Ashley infiltrates other media to create hybrids, to procreate without reserve, and to continue to exist forcefully in the universe. Ashley works with inflatable sculpture as the surface for painting to live and breathe, becoming a tattooed skin of sorts. These sculptural paintings then become performance costumes, existing in two states as flaccid skin and taught volume.

Interested in using the physicality and imperfections in the surface as a form of embodiment rather than representation, Ashley complicates the form through mark and color. Time-based relationships are also important to her work; the aging of the form and the ephemerality of the objects are important considerations, as are mobility and portability and the fluctuation of scale that happens in these processes. Humor, empathy, and play act as a foil and connecting point in her work, as is the influence of watching her three children grow and age.

Democratic access to her work is another aspect important to Claire Ashley's work, which has led to her showing in a variety of unusual venues and using materials in her pieces that are cheaper and more accessible than the traditional fine art materials. At its core, Ashley is interested in the magical, transformative alchemy that happens when these mundane materials are brought together to make her version of a painting.

Claire Ashley received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her BFA from Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, Scotland. Originally from Edinburgh, Scotland, Ashley is now Chicago based. Currently, she teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Department of Contemporary Practices, and the Department of Painting and Drawing. Ashley's work investigates inflatables as painting, sculpture, installation and performance costume. Her works have been exhibited nationally and internationally in galleries, museums, site-specific installations, performances and collaborations at venues including Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, England, Art Basel in Kassel, Germany, Rockelmann & Partner in Berlin, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR, Illinois State University Galleries in Normal, IL, DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, MA, ICEBOX Crane Arts in Philadelphia, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Additionally, her work has been exhibited in Scotland at The House for an Art Lover in Glasgow, gallerA1, in Edinburgh, and the Highland Institute for Contemporary Art in Inverness.

Website clairehelenashley.com

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

Twitter [@ClaireHAshley](https://twitter.com/ClaireHAshley)

Facebook [Claire Ashley Studio](https://www.facebook.com/ClaireAshleyStudio)

Vimeo [Claire Ashley](https://vimeo.com/ClaireAshley)

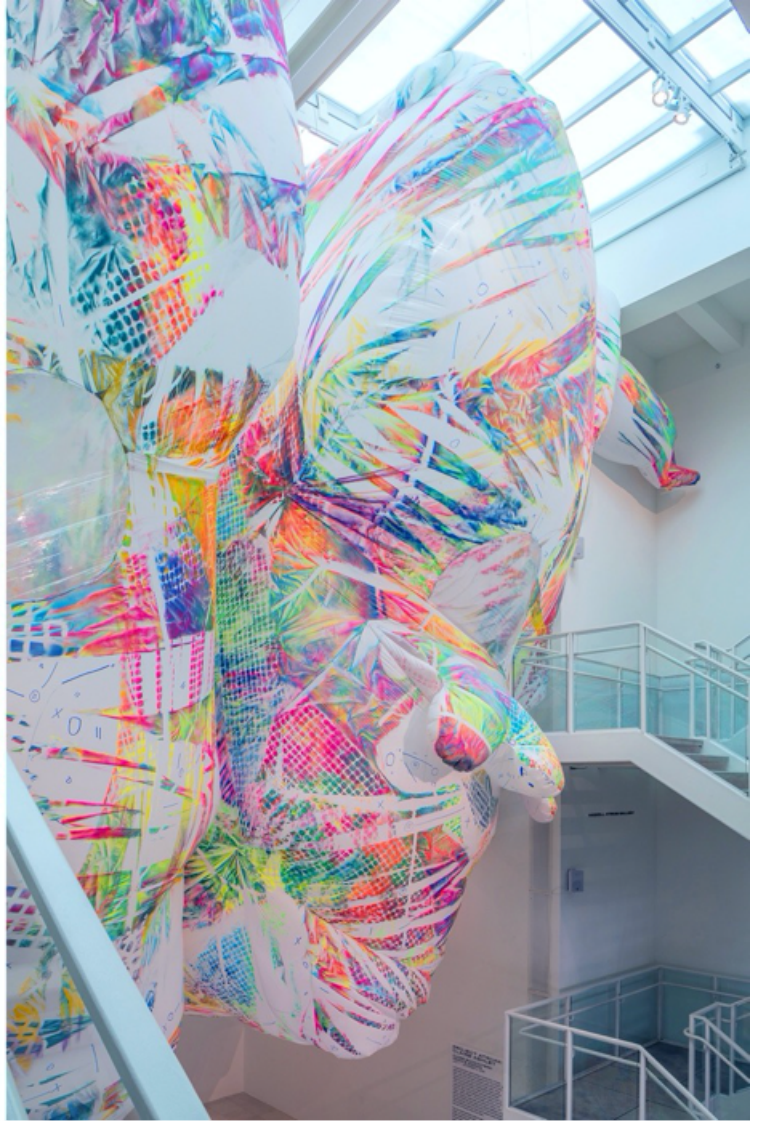


ASTROZONE: An Interactive Art Experience, 2020

spray paint, acrylic paint, sand, feathers, dirt, zippers, chain, embroidery floss, 3D prints, clear vinyl, pvc coated canvas tarpaulin, Tyvek, expandable foam, fans, and LED lights



distant landscapes: peepdyedcrevicehotpinkridge, 2013
spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin and fans



Close Encounters: Adam's Madam, 2018

spray paint on PVC coated Ripstop Nylon, Sharpie, beanbags, rugs, fans
approx. 40' x 30' x 25'



installation view of *Claire Ashley: Loathsome Beauty, Loaded Body*, 2017
spray paint on PVC coated canvas tarpaulin, and fans
approx. 8' x 8' x 5' each



Double Disco, 2013

performance at Defibrillator Performance Space

Vimeo link:

Double Disco - vimeo.com/65275102



CLOWN (Laughing Stock), 2020
spray paint on PVC coated ripstop nylon, zippers, and fan
approx. 16' x 10' x 10'



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



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



Tight Squeeze (In a Pinch), 2021
photo by Jonathan Castillo



detail of *Tight Squeeze (In a Pinch)*, 2021
photo by Jonathan Castillo



detail of *Tight Squeeze (In a Pinch)*, 2021
photo by Jonathan Castillo



Tight Squeeze (In a Pinch), 2021
photo by Jonathan Castillo



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photo by Jonathan Castillo

Interview with Claire Ashley

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: What was your relationship, if any, to the other artists in *Soft Allergy* and to curator Meg Duguid before the exhibition was conceived? What drew you to being a part of *Soft Allergy*?

Claire Ashley: I have known Meg for about 25 years or so - we were gallery administrators at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) together, when we were young-uns.

Judith and I have been friends and colleagues for about 15 years perhaps - we have taught in the same department at SAIC for many years. We previously collaborated on a show together at SLOW Gallery in Pilsen and proposed this show to Meg in 2019 or so I think.

And Cameron I met about 7 years ago at Oxbow Summer School of Art in Michigan when he was a fellow there and I was teaching a class - we karaoke'd together with friends at "The Dunes", a fantastic gay bar in Saugatuck. I also follow him on Instagram of course, and in 2019 I saw some Instagram posts where he was inserting soft materials into clear inflatable forms and realized that he was holding the perfect middle ground between the scale of my work and Judith's work, and using a lovely mixture of carefully curated materials that referenced both Judith's found objects and my membrane materials.

And in terms of why we proposed *Soft Allergy* - we wanted to create a show that subtly embedded the current politics of human connection and conversation into the dynamic formal relationships set up in the work. Kind of like a heated argument, or a picky niggling point of view, where we would use material experimentation with one another's work to interrupt, fragment,

festoon, pin, velcro, stitch, pierce, bind, and otherwise create allergic reactions to/with one another, if that makes sense.

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

CA: Well this collaboration has been a lot more intense than other collaborations I've been lucky enough to be a part of, as for those I was only responsible for a certain component of the full project. But for this show we had to give up ownership of the things we mailed to one another, and upon receiving a box of magical goodies from the other two artists, we each had to allow these external elements to infect our work. Zoom allowed for a lot of conversation between us to develop and complicate itself over an extended period of time and I think where we ended up is very different from where we began ... in a really good way.

KF: At what point were you able to work in a room with the other artists? Did the material component of this exhibition change or take shape in unexpected ways once you were able to start working in person?

CA: Not really - we had such an extended period of time to prepare and to build the work, that I feel like when we got in the gallery space together (Cameron and I spent a few days installing together, but Judith's health did not allow her to be in the gallery with other folks) we knew what we had to do.

KF: Your work takes careful consideration of the "essential power" of painting, the color, surface, mark, and image of a piece. How did

Interview continued

your unique sense of color, surface, and mark evolve throughout your practice? What thought processes are involved in deciding the visual component of a work?

CA: Yes, figuring out color is an ever-evolving journey in my work. I think of it as embedded in our genetic human make up, we know we have to pause and pay attention to it, in order to assess it for danger or pleasure. So I try to use it in a wide variety of ways that reference different bodies and body adornments operating as forms of communication. This includes: loud aggressive collections of painted marks that evoke tattoos or camouflage marks on the skins of the inflatables (not shown in this show, but a big part of my vocabulary); more built-up, monochromatic, textural, leathery, painted surfaces that evoke a tougher elephant or rhinoceros skin, or even a peat bog body that is totally preserved; and painted skins where the color palette is more a subtle aerated palette that reference internal body organs as they are a similar color in both human and animal bodies. These color experiments have evolved over many years and have been prompted often by collaborations where I am pushed to use a very different palette than I have tried previously in order to solve the particular problem at hand. However, each challenge usually comes back into my studio practice in some shape or form later on once I have processed its possibilities and conceptual content. It keeps things exciting!

KF: You work with inflatable sculptures that can fill a room with their amoebic forms. Why did you decide to start working with inflatable sculptures, and how does it challenge the traditional notion of painting?

CA: Well I began working with inflatables in 2007 after teaching a short inflatable workshop with a colleague. At that time, I

I was still a pretty new parent (I had three kids between 2000 and 2004) and was trying to grapple with the intense responsibility of it all. So I was interested in the inflatable forms' relationship to airbags, bounce houses, plush toys, pillows, etc. as a way to draw upon my lived experience in my work. Initially I was only thinking of the inflatable as a sculptural form and using duct tape as a linear color insert on the surface, but in 2010 I had an epiphany of sorts after talking with a friend. I asked if he thought I should paint directly on the surface or if that would be too much, and he said that the forms seemed like they could take a lot! So that kind of gave me permission to throw as much as I could at them, bringing my maximalist tendencies to the fore as it were.

I was excited to pull my painting vocabulary directly into the work, as I love the process of painting and color obviously, but I had never been happy with paintings sitting on a wall and behaving politely as it were. So this was an exciting way to incorporate a reference to the living breathing chaotic kid bodies occupying my every waking hour and also use color and painting as an energetic association to their loudness, playfulness, joyousness, etc.

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?

CA: Yes, perhaps the unique challenges were that we were not able to be physically together in the gallery for extended periods of time, and that the installation time itself was a little short for what we needed to do, but nothing insurmountable. And in terms of things that I will take with, I think the idea of embellishments, bling, appendages, barnacles, or zits on the inflatable membrane will continue to be of interest to

Interview continued

me for sure. And the idea of found materials collaged onto/into the skins might be an ongoing query too. Also I really loved Cam's video projected inside my inflatable and Judith's audio speaking from the belly of the form, so I think I might try more of that too :)

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

CA: Well I hope that people come away with a sense of excitement about the show, where they aren't sure whose work is which, but that they see artists trying to allow others to interrupt, infect, attach, leech, caress, hold, contain, seep into their lives, thoughts, and bodies in some way; to allow the idea of a grey area of complexity to be the soup in which we swim perhaps?





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>.

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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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