

LOVE & LONGING

A multi-media exhibition and curated video sampler

Root Division, San Francisco

November 8 – December 2, 2017

Curated by Mel Day

*“Now that my ladder’s gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.”*
—W. B. Yeats

Love & Longing shares descents into the unknown, artistic responses that perpetuate their own kind of fulfillment—“when the dark becomes another kind of lover” (John Tarrant). Through trying circumstances and a range of socio-political contexts, the works in *Love & Longing* share a sensibility fraught with loss. They offer reactions layered over time.

For this show, I include works that chip—or pound—away at the wall separating art and life. They challenge, complicate, intensify, confront, and grapple with deepening engagement and connection. Sometimes they demonstrate radical empathy. The artists expose a multiplicity of entanglements, occurring over long periods of time, projects with sustained inquiry.

The works in *Love & Longing* include series, excerpts from larger bodies of related work, or ‘nested’ pieces (works within works; multi-faceted collaborative works). The exhibition draws on a wide range of media—drawing, performance, painting, participatory projects, sound, installation, video, textiles—and conceptual strategies, from the unflinchingly serious to the deadpan, from one-on-one to larger, public encounters.

I’ve curated the works for *Love & Longing* as an extension of my research into the unknown, inner parts of ourselves. I consider the selected works to perform—rather than represent—an ever-present, enduring love and longing, a searching for real connections over time. I was initially inspired to curate this show after seeing, first, the late San Francisco painter **Mark Stocks’** (1951-2014) visual and collaborative birthday gifts to SF-based painter and framer **Gary Janis**, and, shortly afterwards, EfrenAve’s collaboration with his father. An earlier interaction with work by Linda Mary Montano resonated. Combined, these experiences led me to develop my initial proposal.

Stocks’ gifts to Janis spanned decades, moving me with their layers of love and longing. They show art and friendship intertwining through a visual conversation between their disparate artistic styles (photo-representational and abstract). It’s hard enough to remember someone’s birthday, let alone create a skillfully wrought, intensely symbolic, and emotionally-laden trompe l’oeil painting. Among these, Stocks faithfully rendered one of Janis’ signature bold, abstract paintings. In another, he intermingles his recurring theme of the unrequited love and longing of a butler for the woman who employs him. When I met Janis, he told me enchanting stories of shared birthday dinners, complete with Stocks’ famous magic tricks and surprise birthday paintings. Janis clearly missed his friend deeply.

While co-organizing an exhibition for the Cubberley Artist Studio Program, shortly after my encounter with the Stock/Janis works, I discovered **EfrenAve's** symbolic and ornate mango-sticker collaborations with his father, Pedro Alvarez Perez. This collaboration developed as a response to Perez' health challenges. The mango stickers merge the love and longing of a son for his father in difficult circumstances along with layered stories of seasonal workers, drawing connections between the hard labor in the mango groves and the intense work of creating these collaborations.

A few years ago, I had an extraordinary experience with **Linda Mary Montano's** Art/Life Counseling at Stanford's Performance Studies International Conference. So I was ecstatic when Montano agreed to share her Art/Life Counseling sessions as Skype calls on selected Saturdays. These participatory, radically empathetic services would minister to exhibition visitor-participants-in-need. Unfortunately, though for her own understandable reasons, Montano can no longer perform Art/Life Counseling for this show. A wall label notes the withdrawal of the work and marks its absence. In a way, the label "performs" the loss to *Love & Longing's* viewers, and acts as a marker to the exhibition's own entanglements of love and longing. Perhaps they are my love and longing, and I invite visitors to read my thank you note to Montano, written shortly after I engaged with her work (and later published in the *Journal of Performing Arts*).

Another work by Montano is part of *Love & Longing*. In "Nurse! Nurse!", Montano turns ritualistic, performative ministrations towards aging, mortality, self-care, and the body. We are invited to participate in our own 'remote preparation' and consider our future, aged behavior by watching the work from the wheelchair provided.

The other works in *Love & Longing* similarly layer and perform a multiplicity of entanglements. Viewers may experience in them, as I do, an extension of empathy, the possibility of heartfelt connection through art, and, perhaps, reflections of their own desires, thwarted or fulfilled.

Miriam Dym created the pieces in this installation of fragile lingerie during an intense period of cascading heartbreak and difficult personal circumstances, further exposed through a series of intimate drawings. The lingerie is made with recycled fabric she allowed to fray, with unfinished seams and unclipped threads. The household objects and clothing depicted in her drawings together also function as research for Dym's enduring longing for sustainable material systems and hand-touched products—often hovering in the liminal space between functionality and non-functionality, failed materiality and utopian grand master plans.

Twelve speakers sprout from the floor in **Chris Komater's** sound installation of his lover's breath exhaling endlessly—a piece created after his lover, Manny, passed away in 1992. His breath is entangled with the breathing and gasping sounds of eleven other men, cycling in and out of breath and longing. Their bodies are absent, out of reach.

Jillian McDonald explores her enduring romantic obsession with Billy Bob Thornton in two video works created 14 years apart, projected on opposite sides of the hallway. On one wall is "Me & Billy Bob", created in 2003, and on another wall is "Staring with Billy Bob", created in 2017. In these deadpan videos, McDonald has digitally integrated clips of herself into intimate scenes with Billy Bob. She explores our obsessive entanglements with celebrity culture, super-fandom, and our own secret crushes. (I know you have one. At least, I do.)

Jonn Herschend is known for highly deadpan films and written pieces exploring the unrequited yearnings of the narrator. In the works here, he grapples with another recurring theme throughout his work—the longing for the 'forest-office' and a 'getting-back-to-the-garden'. This lost paradise of contemplations, of work-space-

with-a-view, beckons, perpetually out of reach. “Pastoral, No.11 (With Pipeworks)” depends upon neutral, thick grays, and ostensibly charismatic fluid broad strokes—a wink at Philip Guston’s ostensibly easy going painterly wit—to depict a fictional narrative with ‘real’ deeply felt melancholy and longing.

Carissa Potter Carlson presents “Perhaps the One & Only *Love & Longing* Choir” at the opening reception. In this one-time piece, she invites visitors together to sing songs of desire, heartbreak, and hope. During the rest of the exhibit, Potter Carlson invites visitors to quietly attend to a moment of solitude and silence alongside her drawing installation, with their own customized boxed set of earplugs. In these and other works, Carlson grapples with the precarious alchemy of wellbeing and our yearnings to both use our voices and rest in silence and stillness.

In **Kija Lucas’** installation, “Objects to Remember You By: An Index of Sentiment,” Lucas displays an archive created by visitors past and present sharing objects of sentimental value. Lucas generously extends herself as an ongoing archivist for our most precious relics. She suggests we consider them less as inert objects and more as a living collection that embodies our particular love and longing for one another.

Moir Clements (1924-2015) was a British artist, a Warden in London during World War II, and my grandmother. She painted scenes from all parts of the British Isles, always in oil paint, and often from the front of her motor caravan. Early in her career she became discouraged after her work was repeatedly rejected from exhibitions. She never felt justified calling herself an artist, and, indeed, developed an acerbic disdain for the contemporary British art establishment. Alongside personal and artistic insecurities and longings (she lost both parents at a young age), her greatest loss was her failing sight. Moir, as she liked to be called, collaborated with her grandson, my cousin Laurence Upton, to create a series of paintings. He painted them, according to her verbal instructions and visual memory—using yellow heavily as the color she could see most clearly. At Root Division, lying by one of these collaborative paintings is a photograph of Moir’s worn-down fuchsia Staedtler pencil. She was the last person to use this pencil until I used it to sign her name posthumously. She was always an artist and is deeply loved.

Mark Clintberg’s “Not over you”, from 2014-2017, is a pair of posters exploring the spatial and emotional experience of queerness. They ask questions involving bodily position as well as where one ‘stands’ in a relationship. Clintberg prints the posters in an open edition. Visitors are welcome to have a copy of the poster and consider their own spatial and emotional position with regards to their own closely held entanglements. In his 2017 essay “Not over you”, Clintberg asks: are we ever “over” someone? And is this a posterior, submissive position or a “productive nostalgia or longing that respects and grieves the loss of relationship...?” ‘Not over you’ manifested previously as an illuminated, large-scale neon public sign. The process of making this work, Clintberg writes, is both “over” and “not over.”

Peggy Phelan’s 30-minute piece “In the Dark,” was originally performed live at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris in 2010, part of an exhibition of work that could only be experienced without any light. Phelan, a renowned performance scholar, vocalized (spoke, sung, and sometimes hummed) in a lulling, resonant voice about stumbling in the dark, comforting her daughter Laura at night, and about absence, presence, loss, longing, and sleep. For *Love & Longing*, I provide an armchair and blindfold for visitor-participants to accompany Phelan’s words heard through headphones. The visitor becomes a silent participant of this unscripted ‘dark night of the senses’, alone yet together with others in the gallery.

Joel Daniel Phillips draws life-size, meticulously rendered charcoal and pencil drawings of his neighbors as a way to build relationships and connections within his local community. This exhibition includes two works from a larger series of drawings of Billy, an itinerant man who grows and sells plants on the streets of Oakland. Over a number of years, and multiple life-size drawings, the two men got to know each other and

became friends. The drawings created by a (privileged) white artist of a (disenfranchised) black man show us two men sharing space and company over extended periods of time and the challenges of an individual's response to a systemic problem.

Dario Robleto's "Tonight I'm Gonna Party like its 2099" (1996-present) is one of a series of actions Robleto has conducted in his surrounding neighborhood. Over the past 20 years, Robleto has attempted to buy us more time by locating and whitening out all references to the end of the world (since wanting the world to last is one of our collective love and longings) in the local university library. He then writes in new dates with an additional 100 years. This intervention is ongoing.

Women refugees came together with *Thistle Farms* and *I Am You* to start **The Welcome Project**. Described as the first social enterprise in Ritsona, Greece, the women refugees interweave materials taken from their journey with the fabric of discarded life jackets (salvaged from the many strewn on the beaches in Greece) and material from the blankets provided to them upon their arrival. The up-cycled woven cloth stands in for the diverse stories of these refugees, suffering in tragic circumstances. The mats are used to raise money for the women refugees and function as a symbolic welcoming for refugees seeking safe harbor. If you wish to support this meaningful enterprise, you can pre-order mats (<https://thistlefarms.org/pages/the-welcome-project>) or upload a photograph of yourself standing on the mat to #LoveWelcomes.

As part of *Love & Longing*, I co-curated a video sampler with **Nadav Assor, Jaime Cortez, Rossalyn Day, Joel Daniel Phillips, Christopher Scott, and Michelle Wilson** drawing a diverse array of entanglements with families, friends, lovers, places, pets, and the invisible.

The art works selected visually and aurally engage with unlikely, ungraspable hope, resilience, and a call for radical empathy and deepening relationships—in our own dark time.

—Mel Day, Curator



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