

carla

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in a recent interview, Semmes detailed her initial interest in textile as a medium. It began early in life, she said, as she watched her aunts construct quilts or her grandmother tailor clothes.² Culturally embraced as a part of daily life, these activities have a long-standing history of collaboration. Much like the impetus behind *Pool*, many hands are involved in the labor of producing textiles, a process that is often done in community.

Femme and gender nonconforming bodies have learned to navigate the world by making fashion choices that, while seemingly mundane, are rooted in survival. In *Pool*, Mast and CarWash Collective addressed these choices by thinking of sexual freedom quite differently than mainstream media would suggest, as something that has less to do with the representation of nudity and more with the right to defy the patriarchal gaze. Through layers of clothing, paint, and movement, these artists used collaboration—which often took the form of collective disobedience—as a lens for playful experimentation with the exposure and concealment of the body.

1. Beverly Semmes, “Beverly Semmes, Rubens & Antiquity,” interview with Tyler Green, *The Modern Art Notes Podcast*, January 6, 2022, MP3 audio, 59:47, <https://soundcloud.com/manpodcast/ep531>.

2. Ibid.

Ei Arakawa Overduin & Co

May 8–June 25, 2022

In *Don't Give Up*, Ei Arakawa's recent exhibition at Overduin & Co., the expansive gallery was partitioned with rows

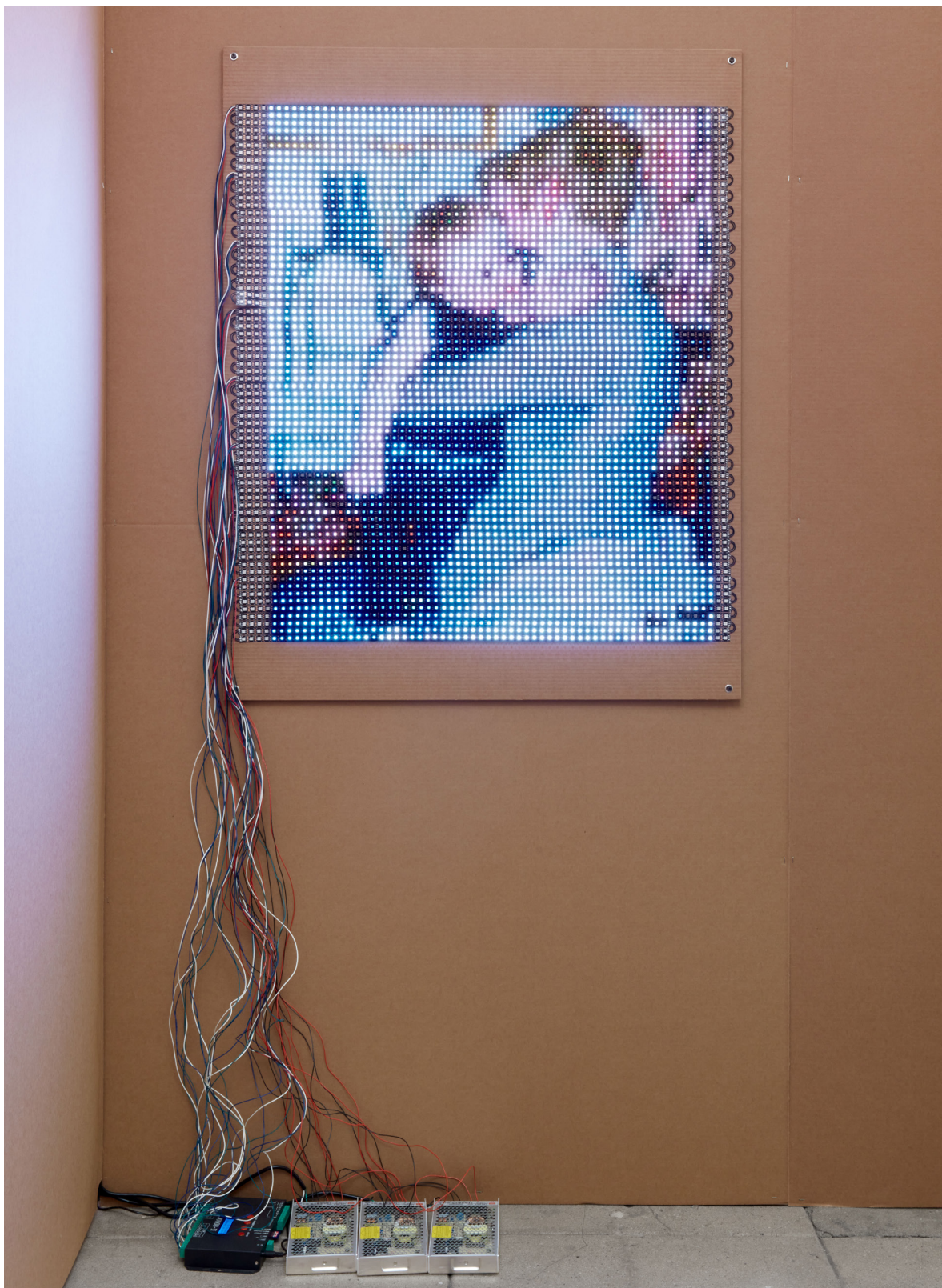
of cardboard walls affixed to unadorned two-by-four frames. Entering the space sans-context felt like walking into the world's cheapest haunted house. In contrast to the hodgepodge assembly, *Don't Give Up* was a considered show about parenthood. Stenciled along the entirety of the cardboard walls were short blocks of multicolored texts with phrases like “A SPIRAL OF WATER, A BABY STICKING HER FINGER” or “MY KIDS TAKE CARE OF MY PAINTINGS.” The phrases were taken from interviews Arakawa conducted about parenthood with three artists: Nicole Eisenman, Laura Owens, and Trevor Shimizu. These personal accounts of parenthood, and its implications for artmaking, served as the scaffolding on which Arakawa built the exhibition.

In addition to interviewing these painters/parents, Arakawa recreated works by each of them as LED “paintings”—LED screens that project pixelated representations of the artists' work. Arakawa did not conceal the electrical components used to create these works, and chaotic jumbles of multicolored wires snaked their way from the bottom of the paintings into surge protectors and power supply boxes on the ground beneath them. The technological mishmash stood in contrast to the tender scenes of children, domestic life, and motherhood that each of the LED paintings depicts. Two art historical figures were also called forth in the exhibition: Mary Cassatt and Alice Neel, with select works by each likewise reconfigured in LED. Preparing to have a child of his own, Arakawa used the exhibition

space to imagine his future, considering the uncertainty, hardship, and ecstasy that comes with raising a child as someone whose identity as both a working artist and a queer person has historically and continually been viewed as antithetical to parenthood.

The phrases that appeared on the walls were also used in an accompanying soundtrack. Created by Arakawa and L.A.-based composer Celia Hollander, the words were sung out in robotic modulations and accompanied by ambient synthesizer music. The soundtrack bounced around the gallery from speakers placed behind the LED works. In this way, the artworks seemed to talk to one another—a sort of Greek chorus that narrated the viewer's experience in the same way that Arakawa's conversations with these artists have accompanied his journey toward becoming a parent.

Notably, Mary Cassatt never married or had children. As both an American painter and a single woman, Cassatt was an anomaly in the Eurocentric, male-dominated world of 19th-century impressionism. To have been a mother in addition to a prominent impressionist would have been even more unheard of, and likely would have limited her success in the arts. Ironically, because the racetracks and cafés that were frequented (and painted) by her male contemporaries were mostly inaccessible to her as a single woman, Cassatt painted scenes of family life—subjects that were socially acceptable for her to paint even as her career limited the potential for her to have a family of her own.¹ The LED versions



Ei Arakawa, *Untitled (Mary Cassatt, "Mother and Child," cir 1889) (2022)*. LEDs on cardboard, transducer, stereo amplifiers, and MP3 media player, 45.5 × 36 inches. Vocaloids by Celia Hollander with Ei Arakawa and lyrics by Ei Arakawa. Image courtesy of the artist and Overduin & Co.

of Cassatt's paintings are as concerned with parenthood as the works in the show that depict babies and small children in cribs and on rocking horses, mostly portraying children in the embrace of a mother or father.

By prominently featuring Cassatt, Arakawa framed his LED works within a historical lens. While our notions around careers and motherhood have evolved, the inclusion points out that the dominant ideology during the height of the impressionist movement, which viewed artmaking as incongruous with parenthood, persists. With these sentiments in mind, Arakawa revealed doubts about becoming a parent—whether others' or his own: one of the phrases on the wall reads, "ARTISTS SHOULD NOT HAVE A CHILD." Elsewhere, a ring of baby dolls seated in dueling strollers felt more threatening than hopeful; more like they were summoned into the center of the gallery for some cult ritual than they were participants in a play date.

Still, by appropriating the work of other artists in service of a show centered around the decision to become a parent, Arakawa proved that art is not an impediment to such decisions but rather a mechanism to inform them. Arakawa invited his audience to navigate the mental journey of impending parenthood with him, turning his uncertainty into a form of communal contemplation crafted around the practice of artmaking. Arakawa is primarily known as a performance artist, and while *Don't Give Up* is comprised of fixed objects, it felt like an active collaboration with the audience. The

cardboard walls suggested a kind of transience, as if the exhibition could be quickly put up and taken down like a puppet show—the works packed up, the babies wheeled away, the conversation continued with new participants in the next town over.

Like many things in the personal life of an artist, it's easy to see parenthood as an obstacle to creative output, the studio practice at odds with the financial resources and time required of a child. If artmaking is still seen as fundamentally incompatible with parenthood, the reality that queer parenting is still met with so much apprehension and vitriol is far more troubling. But these regressive attitudes persist, and queer parents are constantly under threat from those who view them and their families as less-than: while Arakawa explored his decision to have children, the Supreme Court took that very choice from millions of Americans. (And almost ironically, because the same political actors empowering the Court's decision have likewise stood complacent in the face of environmental collapse, gun violence, and the degradation of a social safety net, having children today can seem more-than-ever like an impossible reckoning; making art under these same conditions can seem equally illogical.) But as the exhibition's title suggests, neither pursuit should be given up. By using the words and artworks of artists with children as his material, Arakawa proved not only that parenting and artmaking are possible, but that the two can exist in support of one other.

Ultimately, *Don't Give Up* reminded the viewer that life is not supposed to excuse itself in favor of artmaking—it does not politely step aside and allow for an uninterrupted creative process. Rather, the reverse is true; art is intended to be a foundation for life, a tool that can be used to navigate us through all of life's experiences, whether troublesome, inexplicable, or sublime.

1. Katie White, "This Tender Mary Cassatt Painting of a Mother and Child Is Surprisingly Fraught. Here Are 3 Things You Might Not Know About 'The Child's Bath,'" *Artnet News*, May 7, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mary-cassatt-mothers-day-3-facts-to-know-1962076>.

EXTRACTION: Earth, Ashes, Dust at the Torrance Art Museum

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April 2–May 14, 2022

The table was set for two in a cozy, dimly lit mock dining room installed toward the back of the Torrance Art Museum's (TAM) main gallery. On the menu was a meal prepared from atmospheric particulate matter—vegetables and leafy greens were subbed for fluffy clouds of smog; a mug of dust and other organic compounds served to wash it all down. Titled *Forty Days and Forty Nights (40 Days of Smog)* (1991), the installation by Kim Abeles calls attention to our contradictory belief that while within the familiar walls of our homes, we are safe from the effects of climate change. In *EXTRACTION: Earth, Ashes, Dust*, an exhibition presented by curatorial collective SUPERCOLLIDER, Abeles and 11 other artists

Alitzah Oros