

July 2019



ERIN
MORRISON

Los Angeles

The Contemporary Art Digest

Edited by Julian Lombardi
Text & Layout by Serena Caffrey

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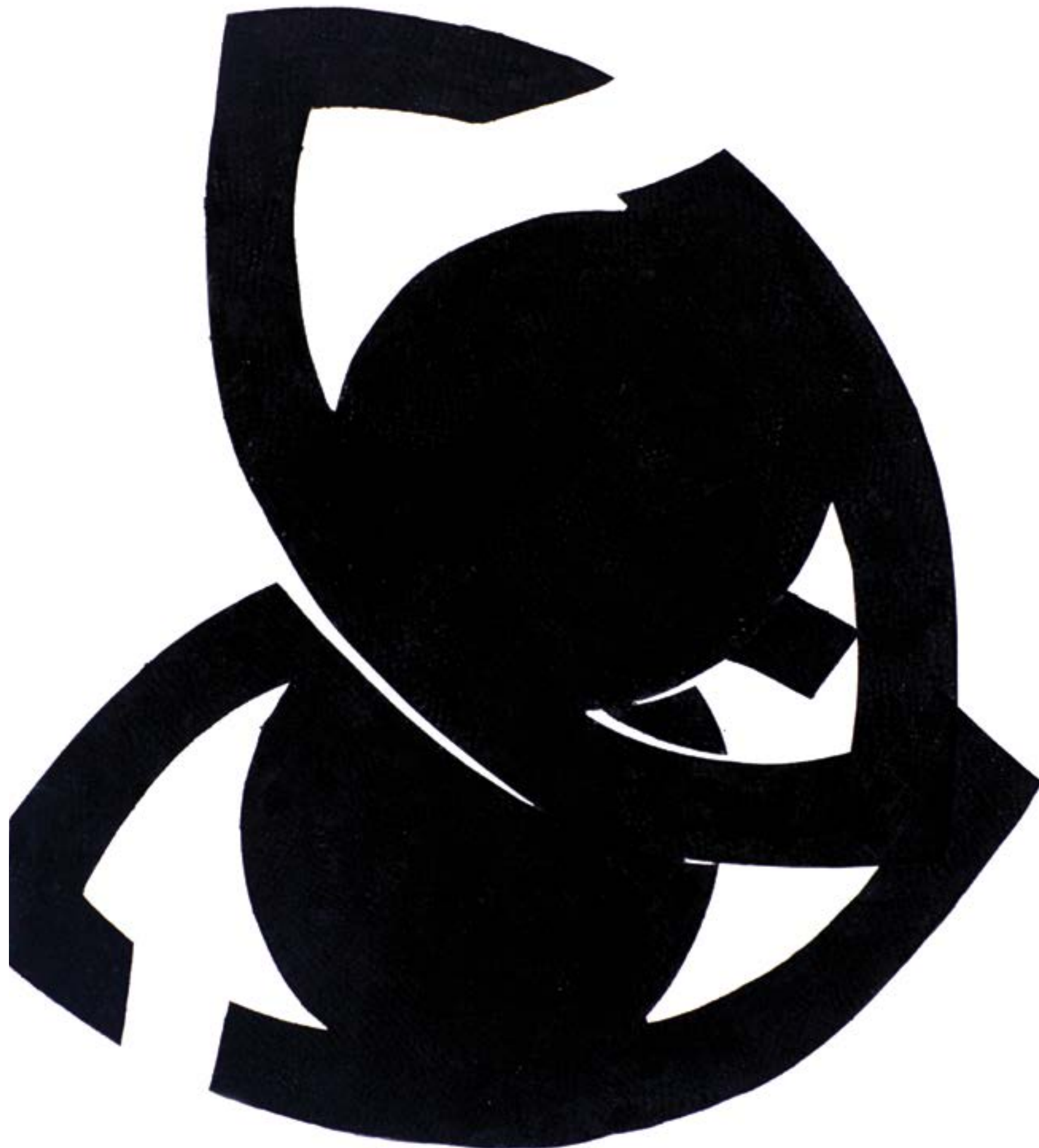
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**THE
CAD**

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MEET

ERIN MORRISON

Evicted from a shared studio following the birth of her son, Erin now deftly entertains multiple roles at her home studio in northeast LA—mother and wife, framer in the back alley, artist in the garage. With work that defies categories, so does she.

Born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, Erin came to Los Angeles in 2011 to pursue her MFA from UCLA. Grinning, she admits that after three years of graduate school she was grateful to see her program end. Her work became increasingly sculptural while a student, beginning with casts she made of quilts she'd herself sewn. A caring touch and attention to detail permeate her forms across mediums from paintings to reliefs. While the CAD photographs her recent work, she helps block light from her garage window and mentions offhand that her mom regularly sewed new curtains for their house as she was growing up. It's easy to detect this propensity to adorn among the objects that line the shelves in her living room and hang in the unused wall space of her studio. So too do we see it in her dazzlingly leafed gypsum reliefs, which create a feeling of glamor out of readily accessible materials.

The material delicacy of Erin's touch in no way cramps her sense of humor, which sweeps broadly through our conversation with self-assured ease. She tells the story of losing her studio, giving birth to her son, and having a solo show at Ochi Projects shortly thereafter. The exhibition, entitled *The Letdown* (2016), was a major conceptual nexus for Erin, who was increasingly introducing her own life into the work she was making and showing. The term "letdown," the title of both the



show and a diptych it featured, references the release of oxytocin that occurs during breastfeeding, which creates an increased bond between mother and child. The show "recall[s] a memory of simultaneously experiencing the letdown [of] breastfeeding her son while feeling extreme despair watching Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign concession speech," (Ochi Projects). We see in Erin's work both from *The Letdown* and now a keenness of feeling that lays bare issues of personal and political pain with stark and fearless honesty.

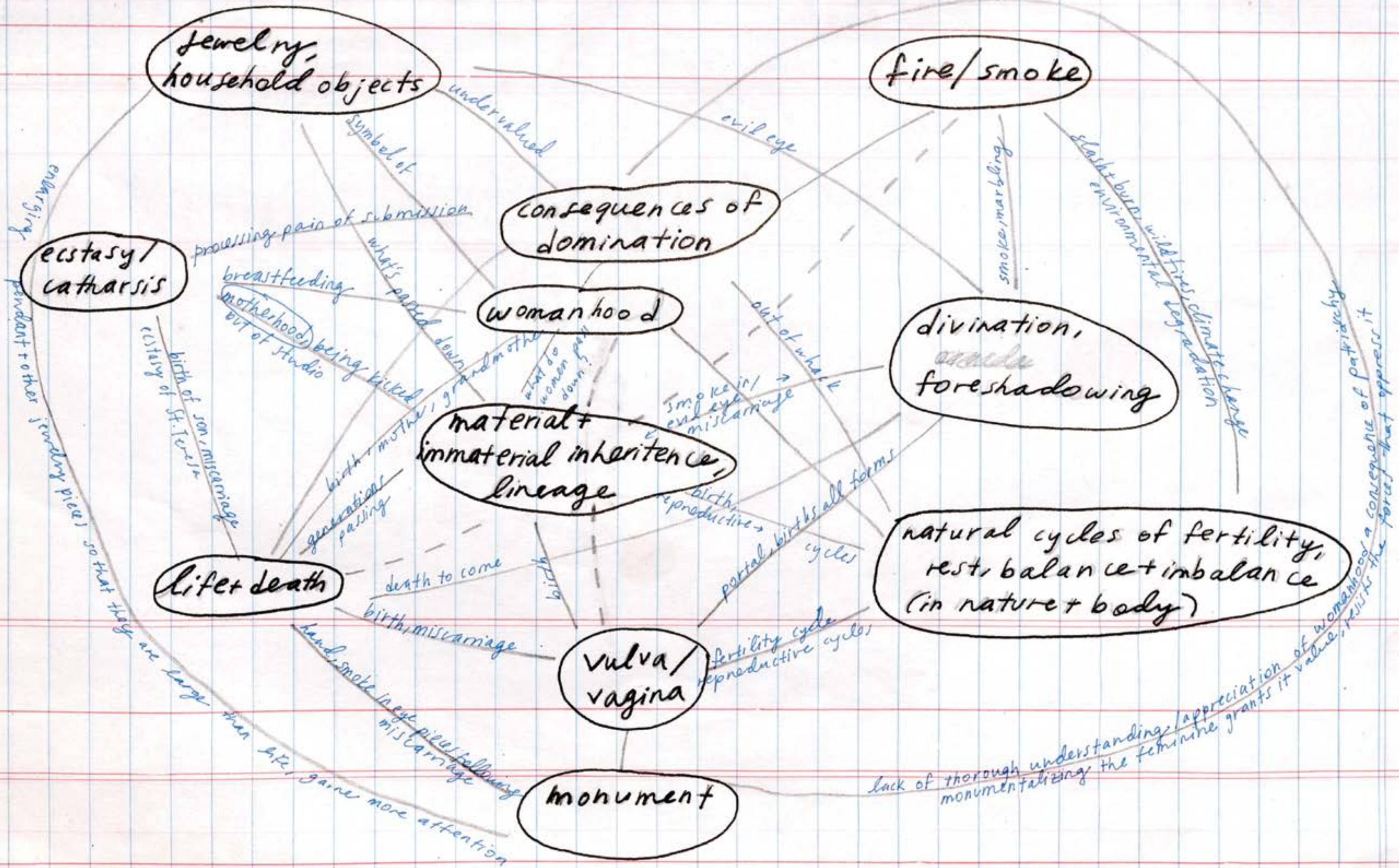
Erin is the founder of Gallery Artist Reform of Los Angeles and a contributor to the Binder of Women, an artist-run project creating a collective folio of limited edition works intended to increase the collection and exposure of women artists. She is represented by Ochi Projects in Los Angeles.

IN A NUTSHELL

Erin's work evokes a spiritscape in which smoking palms and evil eyes warn us about what is to come should we not stray from our path of endless consumption and a propensity to hold power over one another. She suggests that at the root of this disaster lies a parallel disregard for the earth and the feminine, and that the same forces that voluntarily mine sacred land for its resources likewise reduce women to sexual objects or domestic laborers. Offering no simple solution, Morrison instead looks toward the figure as host for the pain and ecstasy of living cognizant to these extremes. Her yoni works, made in 2018—simple, monumental reliefs in black and white—depict the vulva and vaginal opening in a vast empty plane, likening them to a universe of their own, a portal through which all forms are born. Turn your eye and these works become eyes themselves, returning your gaze unashamed and unafraid. Her laborious articulation of the anatomical and material details of women's lives argues for their inherent worth. We celebrate Erin's work, which celebrates these reclaimed histories.



Fig. 1: *Black Mirror*, 2016
Ink, enamel, and wax on Hydrocal, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 28 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches







THROUGH ERIN'S EYES

Erin directs her attention to figurative elements, including hands, genitals, images appropriated from jewelry the artist owned or personally inherited, and living elements of the natural world including palms, flowers, and snakes. Each subject features independently, the star of its show, often centered and taking up most of the composition. In some pieces, other earthly symbols surface including smoke, waves, and planetary orbs. Prior work gave platform to household items, as in her graduate thesis work and her show at Ochi Gallery titled *Object Decorum*. Her use of quilting as a foundational component of her casting process similarly conjured themes of domestic material culture. The quilt did not always feature as monolithically as her recent subjects and was, rather, used more as a ground on which to explore further visual ideas.



Fig. 2: *The Study (UUCU)*, 2015
Oil, ink, and wax on Hydrocal, 87¼ x 53½ inches



Fig. 3: *Objects in an Evening Window*, 2014
Oil, ink, and silk on gypsum cement, 94 x 67 inches





Erin's paintings are made using a plaster polymer casting process. Casting is a technique by which an empty form acts as a receptacle for a liquid that hardens through chemical or physical state changes. Once this liquid becomes solid, the original material (known as the mold) is removed, leaving only the cast, or the liquid-turned-solid that hardened around the mold. Erin's casting process utilizes layers of linoleum that she builds up to articulate a rough form, stratified like a topographical map. Sometimes she uses materials with textures that transfer into the plaster, such as woven fabrics or palm fronds. The resulting cast picks up these textures so precisely that the resulting cast sometimes doesn't look like plaster at all, but whatever the original material was.

Similar to printmaking in the way that information is transferred from one surface to another, casting can likewise be used to make multiples, depending on how the process takes place. Some molds can only be used as a one-off project if the mold is fragile and loses its structural integrity in the casting process. Such is the case with Erin's quilt pieces, in which she patches together fabrics for the exclusive purpose of casting a single time. In the case of more robust materials, molds or components of molds can be reused. *The Letdown* reuses molds in the way; the diptych casts are not identical but borrow several elements from one another. Final works can also be recast using silicone, offering a mold that can be reused to much greater degree. In this case whole works can become editions.

IN PROCESS



After the casting process is complete, Erin takes the plaster forms and grinds away at their surfaces using traditional sculptural tools. This is her chance to smooth out the stratified layers of linoleum from which the form was cast. When shaping is complete, the artist uses oil paint or enamel to cover the work's surface. Plaster offers an absorbent, multidimensional surface on which to apply oil paint that is archival, unlike paper, which over time disintegrates and is flat, and unlike canvas, which is flat and upon which paint tends to sit on the surface.

Over time the artist's relationship with color has simplified. In her graduate thesis exhibition she applied color in a more painterly way; now she uses it sparingly if not altogether omitting it in her recent work. She explains that this new work doesn't demand complicated color relationships, implying that form and content supersede color's importance. Rather than abandoning it, she likens color's recent omission to putting something in her back pocket for later use when needed.

◀ Pouring cast for *The Letdown*

Fig. 4:
The Letdown (diptych), 2017
Enamel on gypsum cement
87 x 33½ inches (each panel)







Fig. 5: *O.K.O.K.*, 2016
Enamel and ink on gypsum cement, 52 x 42 inches



Fig. 6: *Sixty-Nine*, 2016
Enamel and ink on gypsum cement, 52 x 42 inches

The Contemporary Art Digest
& Erin discuss life, art, and the
the work she's making today.

IN CONVERSATION

THE CAD: You reference both the experience of breastfeeding and your more recent miscarriage as major influences in your work. What you've been making most recently seems different from *The Letdown*, the solo show you mounted the year following the birth of your son. Emotionally, conceptually, and materially, what has changed?

EM: The most recent work has been a reflection on my own body, its limitations, and examining the physical and emotional experiences of labor. The methods for producing these sculptures have been pretty consistent for about five years now, but I've lately become more interested in applying materials to the surface that enhance it rather than detract from the natural beauty of the gypsum. Applying stains, flocking, metal leafing, and polishing the surfaces have all been really satisfying. I am tremendously interested in the iconography I'm using as well. I use that word instead of "image" because I'm not as interested in the graphic as much as I am the shape, and how that can be manipulated and embedded into another material. In the past I have been resistant to producing narrative works, but with the drama of the past two years, the work is now almost entirely about reflecting on the current state of events and how I internalize them. Some of the new works are also deeply personal in that they are reflections of miscarriage and childbirth, and the disillusioned romanticism history painting has ascribed to motherhood. *The Letdown* was a much more digestible exhibition, in that the subject matter seemed more approachable and maybe easier to talk about.

THE CAD: When you consider the move home to Arkansas (or more generally leaving LA), there are lots of obvious reasons that make this a compelling possibility—more space for less money, being

close to family, lots of access to the outdoors. Are there other reasons? Have you anticipated how this shift might influence your work?

EM: All of those things are a big incentive for me. But it's hard to not think about them without the drawbacks of rebuilding a social network that took years to establish, and distancing yourself from an ever-circulating feast of exhibitions, performances, and lectures. Part of me thinks I'm lucky to live in such a digital era, that I can still access so much of these things through social media, but the most elemental part of art is about participating and bearing witness. I hate to think about missing out on the incredible work being made in Los Angeles right now, but even living here it seems there is just too much to do. The reality is that I need more space for less money, and for the time being it's just not possible to do that. Are there other reasons? YES. I'm starting to understand that a lot of pretty phenomenal female artists have made this adjustment of moving away to have cheaper space after having kids, or moving their studio home. Although I think it's a bit of a cultural issue of acceptance, it's also tied to a historical diminishment of female labor and self-reliance. I know of very few female artists that can confidently say they are self-employed mothers, but I see the roles reversed so often, where my male artist friends have children and the value of their work goes up, while their wives provide the more stable portion of the family income. It seems to be a bonus that women artists don't get. I know of so many female artists that take on multiple low-paying adjunct teaching positions while their male contemporaries get the tenure track. I know a few men who hustle that hard, and I have a lot of respect for them, but they are much fewer in number comparatively. It's a double standard that needs to change.



Fig. 7: *Marbled Palm*, 2016
Ink and wax on Hydrocal, 29 x 29 inches



Fig. 8: *Red Palm*, 2016
Ink and wax on Hydrocal, 31¼ x 31¼ inches



Fig. 9: *Byzantine Palm*, 2016
Ink and enamel on Hydrocal, 32 x 32 inches



Fig. 10: *Palm with Cut-Out*, 2016
Ink and graphite on Hydrocal, 25 x 25 inches



Fig. 12: *Flower*, 2018
Oil, enamel, and Flashe on gypsum cement, 30 x 26 inches

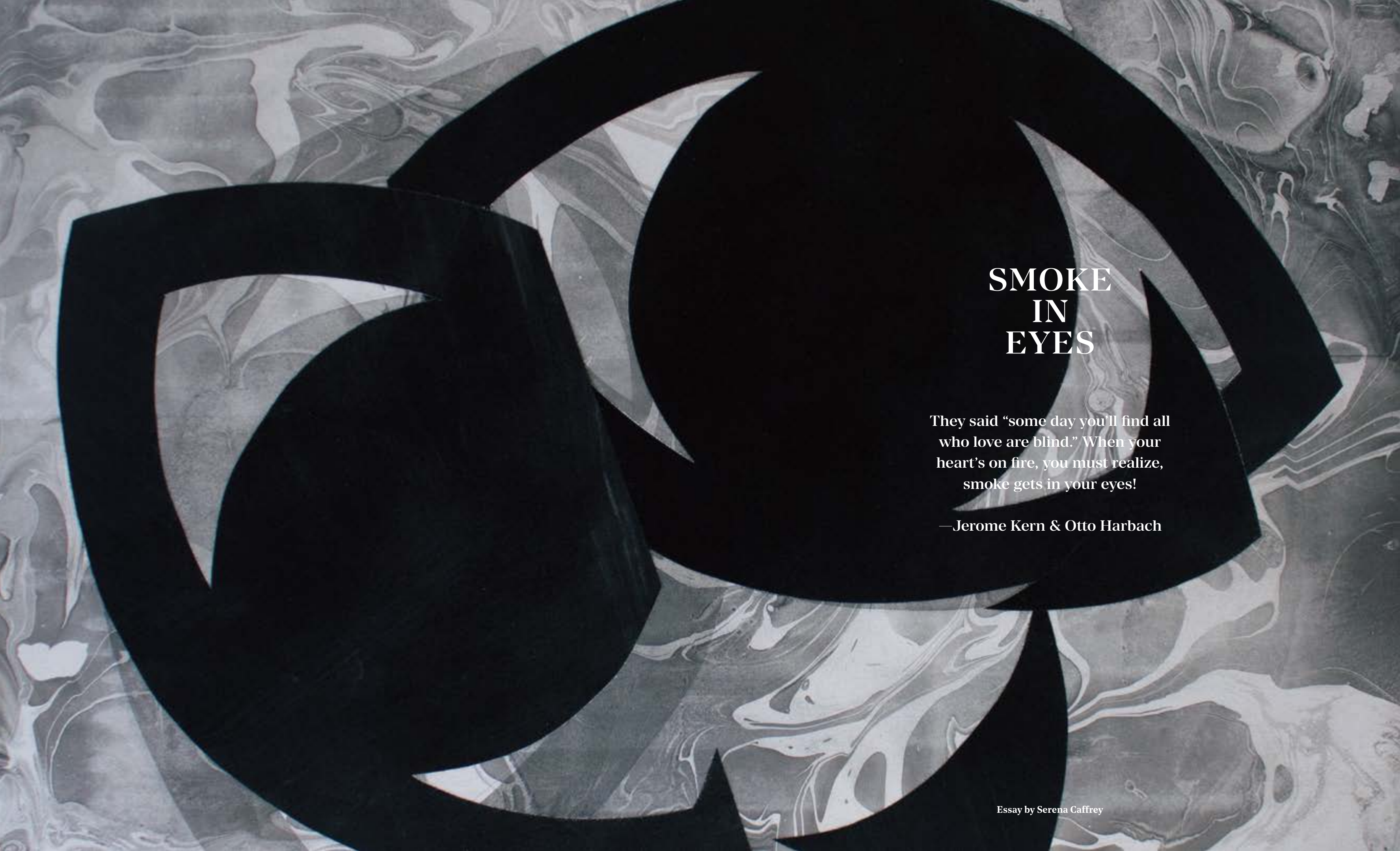


Fig. 13: *Ecstasy 2*, 2017
Enamel on gypsum cement, 53½ x 41 inches





Fig. 14: *Odalisque White* and *Odalisque Black*, 2018
Oil enamel on gypsum cement, 43½ x 42½ inches

The background is a piece of marbled paper with a complex, swirling pattern of grey, white, and black. Overlaid on this are several large, solid black circular shapes that partially overlap each other, creating a layered, abstract effect. The text is positioned within the white space of these circles.

SMOKE IN EYES

They said “some day you’ll find all
who love are blind.” When your
heart’s on fire, you must realize,
smoke gets in your eyes!

—Jerome Kern & Otto Harbach



Fig. 15 (both pages): *Smoke in Eyes 1–2*, 2018
Nylon fibers and ink on paper, 30 x 26 inches

Sitting in Erin Morrison’s studio one Saturday morning in October, I try to imagine what it might be like to be born here. Some sixteen weeks old, Erin’s son, Guston, entered her studio a newborn, nursing. At the time, Morrison was still working in a shared studio. Now, in her home garage, there’s a sign above the table proclaiming, “No Liquids on Desk!” and when she leans a painting against the door leading to the house, she quickly corrects herself. “Not a good move,” she laughs, referencing the possibility of a family member galloping in without warning. Seeing the recent work through the lens of her son’s life, currently three years old, the question of what Erin has made since he was born takes on new significance. Her recent life as a mother seems inextricably wound into the work, which she made initially with Gus in arms. Now running around in dinosaur pajamas, it is amazing to think that his whole life is contained in the time that Erin has been working in this studio, since the 2016 election campaign and the resulting presidency, in all her work from *The Letdown*, and everything she’s made since.

Looking at Morrison’s work as a whole, the centrality of her role as a mother both in our interview and in her recent pieces is not surprising. Giving attention to the details of women’s domestic lives and lineages has been thematic across Morrison’s work since graduate school, during which time she

enlarged household objects, jewelry, and quilts. Such is the case, for example, with *Eye Chain Silver* (fig. 19), featuring a necklace of hers from the 1990s—an iteration of the ancient symbol meant to ward off bad omens. Other jewelry pieces are hand-me-downs from her grandmother Rose, who raised four sons alone following the death of her husband at age forty. *Head Game* (fig. 16) references a brooch Rose wore mimicking a military pin decorated with four heads, symbolizing her sons. In this celebration of matrilineal inheritance through material culture, the artist remarks on how historically women have been limited in what they’ve been able to pass down to the generations below them. “It’s usually not land or a business. It’s jewelry.”

**“When you start to treat
[the vagina] as a symbol, it has
all of these other connotations.
It becomes a barrier, like an
astral plane or something, the
metaphor for the universe. [...]
It’s a portal; it’s a gateway.”**

Had we been born into Erin’s studio the day of our interview, we would find ourselves face-to-face with the very portals that brought us there (fig. 14). “Yoni,” from Sanskrit, has been appropriated in the West as a sacred word for vulva, or the external genitals including the clitoral shaft, the inner and outer labia, the vaginal opening, and the perineum. Here, Morrison depicts the vulva and vaginal opening as emerging in low relief from a vast square plane of plaster. The two pieces hanging next to one another, the first entirely white and the second black, are both finished until their whole surfaces are smooth. Soft ridges delineate her subject, reduced here to one version of its essential forms. Morrison wryly calls this series *Odalisque*, which references the chambermaid of a Turkish harem who frequently became the subject of Western painters’ gaze. There is something cynical about these pieces—understandably so,

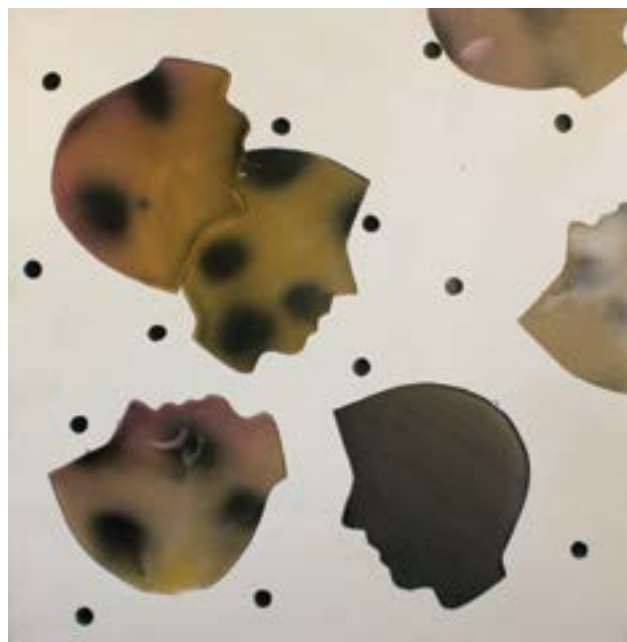


Fig. 16: *Head Game*, 2018
Ink and enamel on gypsum cement, 28.5 x 28.5 inches

given their context (consider, for starters, the #MeToo movement). “These vaginal, yonic kind of pieces, I call them ‘Odalisque’ because there’s been such a history to the muse and painting women in this kind of reclining defenseless position as the object. I liked the idea of taking a kind of pornographic view of the most coveted part of the female, [...] this very sensitive part of the body, taking it in sculpture and elevating it through the female gaze to the point where it has this kind of power and it becomes monumentalized.”

Presented hairless, colorless, and divorced from the body to which they belong, these yoni works toy dangerously with being an object in the same way that pornographic images make bodies objects upon which the viewer imagines how they would act. “But you know at the same time when you start to treat it as a symbol it has all of these other connotations.” Elliptical, with concentric circles within it, the vulva becomes galactic, a universe out of which all forms are born. Next to the pieces featuring an evil eye in Erin’s studio, the vulva takes on resemblance to this seeing organ, especially the two pieces side by side. Interpreted as such, either a vast spatial body that conjures all life or an omnipotent eye that challenges the viewer’s objectifying gaze, these genitals take on a defiant resilience, as if boasting their alchemical powers.

Made in the wake of a miscarriage, the *Odalisque* works might be seen as a reprise of *The Letdown*, which responded in part to Erin’s experience of being evicted from her studio following the birth of her son. Both the title of a diptych (fig. 4) and an exhibition, the term “letdown” refers to the chemical experience between mother and child following the release of oxytocin during breastfeeding. In language, a letdown is something that disappoints us, or a place where our expectations are unmet. When Morrison watched Hillary Clinton’s concession speech while breastfeeding her son, she found herself within both meanings of the word, enacting its double entendre, chemically elated and deeply defeated at the same time. In the same way that *Odalisque* presents seemingly contradictory reads of the same subject, *The Letdown* likewise holds these opposing extremes simultaneously. Her sensitivity of

feeling knows both edges of the blade: rather than reject what is painful about her experience, Morrison understands that sorrow, rage, and remorse all give form to its fullness, alongside feelings of belonging, joy, or beauty.

**“And because it’s so frontal,
because it’s centralized, because
it’s in your face [...] — you just
have to contend with it.”**

Ecstasy 1 (fig. 18) and *Ecstasy 2* (fig. 13), which reference Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, reiterate this notion. Saint Teresa’s outstretched hand receives God’s presence with a pain “so great [...] it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.” This accepting of life’s conditions—in Saint Teresa’s case the intense glory and pain of communing with God and in Erin’s coming to terms with the real and repeated obstacles women face professionally and physically—is not a defeat. Acceptance, rather, is a tool that gives us the strength and clarity of mind to respond wisely to our circumstances. Formally, *Ecstasy*, *The Letdown*, and *Odalisque* (*Pink Wave*) all employ wave-like forms that visually recall oceanic waves and



Fig. 17: *Odalisque* (*Pink Wave*) (detail), 2018
Enamel and Flashe on gypsum cement, 39 x 43 inches

Looking back at the piece itself, we wonder which version of the phrase applies. In it a hand reaches, outstretched, toward a circular body. Both figures are embossed with linear patterns. On the hand, there are squares with crosses in them that look like pyramids viewed from above, and the reappearance of the heads from Erin's grandmother's pin, repeated and overlapped to form meandering lines on the hand's surface. The circle has wavelike peaks, as if oceans on a tiny planet the hand is reaching toward. The visual relationship between the subjects suggests the idea of an omnipotent God-man acting upon an object—reaching for its resources and affecting its future. Whether a product of war, climate change, or overpopulation, the smoking catastrophe lurking in Erin's imagery is not a chance disaster, but one with a clear and culpable cause: fortune's fool.

It seems less likely Erin is pointing blame at all of humanity than at the political powers, lobbying forces, and corporations that are reaching toward earth's resources unconcerned for the consequences of their actions. Made shortly after the Standing Rock protests in North Dakota to protect communal water and Sioux sacred sites, we recall the water they protected, already subject to an oil spill shortly following Trump's executive order to resume building. Given this interpretation, of a greedy hand outstretched, we return to the etymology of "fortune's fool," which Shakespeare inverted—fate only grants fortune to fools, suggesting the damage they cause is inevitable.

Whether intuitively or in a calculated way, Erin's subjects respond to current events. If asked, though, Morrison makes it clear she has been trying to return to the personal following grad school, to chase the "big ideas" less. To me, it is clear that these divisions of personal and political are not so distinct, and that the questions she is asking of gender, appropriation, environmental degradation, and the embodied experience of sorrow associated with all these topics fit both categories. Still, despite its cynicism, there is a resilience that unifies the work across its subjects, a fierceness and tenacity that comes from being the underdog but a proud one. Some of the few material tokens of matriarchal inheritance, Erin exalts jewelry and other household objects passed down through her family by virtue of enlargement, replication, and public display. Instead of killing an ecosystem, a fire catapults it into a new period of growth and diversification. Instead of feeling entitled to gaze sleazily upon disembodied genitals, viewers are swallowed into the vulva's gaze, a portal into another world where time moves more slowly and is more spacious. Instead of rushing one way or another, as in birth or dying, Erin holds us—preciously—in the space between, until we are uncertain whether we are coming or going, anyway. ■



Fig. 22: *Six Heads*, 2018
Enamel and ink on gypsum cement, 38¼ x 30¼ inches



THE CAD

Julian Lombardi founded the Contemporary Art Digest (the CAD) in 2016 to express a commitment to his unending self-education about artists’ lives and work. Today, the CAD reaches over one hundred thousand viewers, catapulted by Lombardi’s probing eye into the world of contemporary art with an emphasis on painting and the role of abstraction today. By exposing new audiences to work by living artists and initiating community-based art inquiry through social media, the CAD connects contemporary artists, the galleries and organizations that represent them, and art audiences around the globe. This volume represents the CAD’s first expansion into print.

Serena Caffrey is a visual and performance artist, writer, and fertility awareness educator living in Los Angeles. Working durationally with the land as an intimate collaborator, she investigates the mundane and sublime energies that coexist in simple activities and natural cycles.

ERIN MORRISON

EXHIBITIONS, SOLO & TWO-PERSON

2019 *Colony*, Ochi Project, Los Angeles

2018 Zona Maco Art Fair, Ochi Projects, Mexico City

2017 *The Letdown*, Ochi Projects, Los Angeles
When the Fire Burns Out, Chimento Contemporary, Los Angeles

2016 *Object Decorum*, Ochi Gallery, Ketchum, Idaho

2015 *Relief*, Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles

EXHIBITIONS, GROUP

2019 Untitled, Art Fair, Ochi Projects, San Francisco

2018 *Sexy X-Mas*, The Lodge, Los Angeles
Death Show, Elevator Mondays, Los Angeles
Sexy Beast Gala and Silent Auction, Marciano Foundation, Los Angeles
Soft Pretzel, Vacation Gallery, New York City
Heat Wave, Guererro Gallery, San Francisco
An Homage to Hollis Benton, Over the Influence Gallery, Los Angeles
Good Smoke / Good Poke, o-o Gallery, Los Angeles

2016 *End of Summer Summer Show*, 24-Hour Charlie’s, Malibu
A Plot of Land, Dutton Gallery, New York
Memory Theater by Srijon Chowdhury, Upfor Gallery, Portland
Deep Superficial Perceptions, CES Gallery, Los Angeles

2015 *XX*, Subliminal Projects, Los Angeles
When the Sun Hits, THE PIT, Los Angeles
One Foot on the Ground, James Harris Gallery, Seattle
LadyGirlyFemale, Hammock Gallery, Los Angeles

2014 *Mirrored Collection*, 2126 W Jefferson Blvd, Los Angeles
Summer Show, L’Art Projects, Los Angeles
Vessels, Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles
MAS ATTACK 3, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance
MFA Thesis Show #3, UCLA New Wight Gallery, Los Angeles
Inaugural Group Exhibition, Sonce Alexander Gallery, Los Angeles

2013 MFA 2014 Exhibition, UCLA New Wight Gallery, Los Angeles
GLAMFA, California State University, Long Beach

b. Little Rock, Arkansas

EDUCATION

2014 MFA in painting, UCLA
2006 BFA, Memphis College of Art

HONORS

Stewart and Lynda Resnick Scholarship, 2013, UCLA
Edward J. and Alice Mae Smith Scholarship, 2013, UCLA
D’Arcy Hayman Scholarship, 2011, UCLA
Ox-Bow Artist in Residence Centennial Grant, 2010, SAIC
New York Studio Program selection ‘05/06, Memphis College of Art

TEACHING

Visiting Artist Lecture Series, Pepperdine University, Undergraduate Program, Spring 2019
Visiting Artist Lecture Series, Claremont University Graduate MFA Program, Fall 2015
Drawing Instructor, Santa Monica College, Fall 2014
Drawing Instructor, Summer Art Institute, UCLA, 2014
Visiting Artist, UCLA, James Welling’s Issues in Contemporary Art, Winter 2014
Teaching Assistant, UCLA, 2011–2014
Lecturer, SAIC Ox-Bow Artist in Residence, Summer 2012

RESIDENCIES

Ox-Bow, Saugatuck, MI, SAIC, 2010

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Desmarais, Charles, “A Final Goodbye to Summer Art Exhibitions,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 24, 2018.
Drohojowska-Philp, Hunter, “Women at Work” KCRW Los Angeles “Art Talk,” March 26, 2015.
Ellegood, Anne (juror), Pacific Coast #97, *New American Paintings*, December 2011.
Fützmania, Angel, *Flaunt* magazine, no.145, (Spring 2016).
Haas, Maggie, exclusive interview, Little Paper Planes, San Francisco, January 7, 2014.
Hammer Museum, *Graphite Interdisciplinary Journal of the Arts*, no. 4 (Spring 2013).
Kedmey, Karen, “Srijon Chowdhury Mines the Universe’s Memories for his ‘Memory Theatre,’” Artsy, April 27, 2016.
Lagner, Erin, “Grounding the City of Angels: Erin Morrison and Tommy Doge at James Harris Gallert,” *New American Paintings*, July 13, 2015.
Pagel, David, exhibition review, *LA Times*, September 3, 2015.

Her work is held in private and public collections, including the Collection of Cedars Sinai Hospital, Memorial Sloan Kettering Collection, Fidelity Investments Corporate Contemporary Art Collection, and the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection.

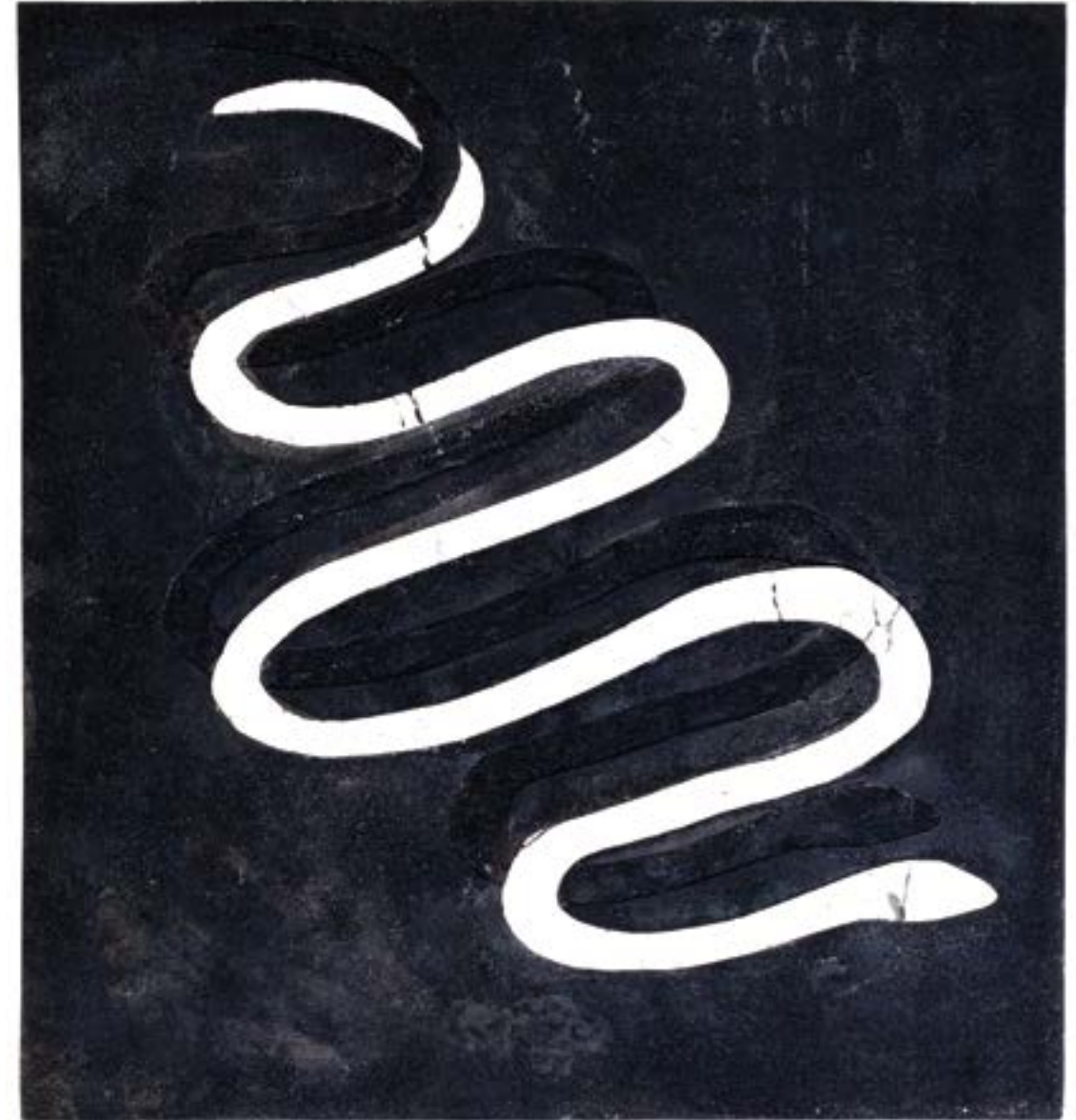


Fig. 23 (facing page): *Levitaton*, 2017
Ink and enamel on fractured Hydrocal, 36 x 34 inches