Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades

SEP 13, 2019–MAY 10, 2020

Institute of Contemporary Art
University of Pennsylvania

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THE EDNA S. TUTTLEMAN GALLERY
SECOND FLOOR
In *Ballast & Barricades* Michelle Lopez employs a formal, fragmented architectural language to critique symbols of nationalism, power, and consumption. In this site-specific installation Lopez brings together a selection of recent sculptures alongside a monumental intervention in the ICA gallery that creates a suspended cityscape reduced to rubble. Blockades, borders, flags, and natural elements bleed together while remnants of construction sites and scaffolding create a delicate system of counterweights and counterbalances—all meticulously crafted by hand. For Lopez, this sculptural terrain suggests an ongoing history of bodies and violence in the absence of figuration. It is an urban landscape fabricated out of the material remains of crisis, teetering on the brink of collapse.

Lopez is recognized for her deep, investigative command of materials and for sculptural works that recast the masculinist bravado of everyday objects and pop-culture symbols through a feminist lens. Drawing on familiar works from minimalist sculpture to reorient gendered narratives of artistic practice, Lopez’s deconstruction of form also extends to the signifiers embedded within our built environment and societal structures. This doubled critique is immediately evident in *Halyard* (2014), situated at the entrance to the exhibition. A shiny, phallic metal pillar that punctuates the space and extends upward through the gallery ceiling, *Halyard* evokes references such as sculptor Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Columns*. Upon closer inspection, this totemic form reveals itself to be a recognizable object: a rope hangs down and loops around a hook, making it clear that the sculpture is a flag pole. And while the phantom flag remains out of view, the cord begins to move, slowly at first, then building until its aggressive flapping becomes audible throughout the museum. For the artist, this is the American flag asserting itself against the backdrop of a dangerous rise of populist sentiment in the guise of patriotic display. Lopez observes, “I had been considering the notion of iconography and the connotations of identity and power. I wanted to de-saturate an image by its removal, allowing the trappings and the remixing of hardware to represent its undoing.” Although our imagination is tempted to fill in the image with an enormous flag waving in the wind, “the absence of the flag creates an experience of impotence.”

Flags appear in other forms throughout the exhibition. Positioned amid a constellation of works from the last ten years is Lopez’s *Flag* (2014), in
which a spindly metal line, reminiscent of a branch, precariously supports a delicate, creased piece of lead made to resemble fabric. Is it a sign of truce, an S.O.S. signal, or the kind of pennant seen on a child’s bicycle? Regardless, the artist observes, “There is no victory in its abject folds.” ² Indeed, while the material might conjure images of artist Richard Serra flinging molten lead against a wall in the late 1960s, in Lopez’s hands these hard-edged industrial materials are often rendered limp and delicate. This is exemplified by the trio of wilted sculptures, Blue Angels (Paper Series) (2011), which Lopez describes as “partly alive and partly defeated.” ³ Over nine feet tall and leaning against the gallery wall, at first glance they recall deflated monolithic sculptures by John McCracken, but in fact they refer to the debris from airplanes, inspired in part by the artist’s experience living in New York during 9/11. Furthermore, they act as a record of the artist’s intimate performances in her studio as she wrestles with large pieces of aluminum on the ground, creating the dents and creases using the weight of her own body.

In Ballast & Barricades Lopez blows up these forms and structural concepts to architectural scale, creating an impossible scaffolding system that feels at once playful and dangerous. There is trepidation when encountering these suspended and precarious frameworks, as if they could topple at any moment. Lopez bends a language of construction to her will, reveling in the malleability of her materials: wooden police barricades are softened, warped, and distorted; rope legs prop up large metal lattices; chain-link fencing is twisted by hand; and fragments of staircases and ladders ultimately lead nowhere. And while a kind of sculptural acrobatics is on display, it should also be understood as a reflection of the crumbling infrastructure in the United States, from the devastating effects of gentrification legible throughout Philadelphia’s streets, to the blockades set up to deter protestors and the fencing used to imprison human beings at our borders. For Lopez these material conditions mirror a kind of sociopolitical unraveling. And yet, within this ruinous space, the artist sees room for action. Even as these structures and structural systems are dependent on each other for their literal support, Lopez asks the viewer to suspend disbelief and to “identify spatially with the collapse, but also imagine a redemptive, strange logic out of the impossible moment.” ⁶

— Alex Klein, Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber (CHE ’60) Curator

2  Michelle Lopez, email correspondence with Alex Klein, July 6, 2019.
3  Ibid.
4  Michelle Lopez, career narrative, 2019.
6  Michelle Lopez, career narrative, 2019.

Michelle Lopez (born 1970; lives Philadelphia) has been in solo and group exhibitions at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT; LAXART, Los Angeles; MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY; the Public Art Fund, Metrotech Center, NY; and the Orange County Museum of Art, Santa Ana, CA. Formerly a faculty member at Yale School of Art, she now heads the Sculpture Division of the Fine Arts Program at the University of Pennsylvania’s Stuart Weitzman School of Design. In 2019 she was a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades is organized by Alex Klein, Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber (CHE ’60) Curator. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated publication, designed by Mark Owens, that will be released in 2020.

RELATED PROGRAMS
FRI, SEP 13

5 PM  Members Preview

6:30 PM  Public Opening Celebration

WED, OCT 16

6:30 PM  In Conversation: Passing within Postcolonial Production with artists Michelle Lopez, Josh Kline, and Paul Pfeiffer, and curator Joselina Cruz

SAT, NOV 9

11 AM  Conversation between artist Michelle Lopez and curator Alex Klein

1 PM  Related Screening: Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

WED, DEC 4

6 PM  Curator-Led Tour with Alex Klein

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