

Michelle Lopez and Jenn Joy in conversation

Unfolding over a series of encounters in the gallery and artist's studio, the following conversation traces some thoughts leading into Michelle Lopez's current exhibition, Ballast & Barricades. Lopez's work forces a negotiation of sculpture as an aperture for perception, asking how histories sediment in objects and how we might understand something of immateriality through surface tension.

In its physical manipulation of the materials, Lopez's process requires a fierce intimacy that becomes gestural, almost figurative. Her work appears as an ecosystem verging on collapse, repositioning tenets of minimalist sculpture as potential forms of critique, offering difference, dispersion, and a more Arte Povera play with materiality.

Against the speed and saturation of contemporary image culture, sculpture requires a particular mode of attention, metabolizing story and shape into distinctly spatial and temporal forms.

Lopez's work untethers image from representation to propose something more visceral or dissolved, a flag or throne rendered in thin, twisted line. The work relies on a serial logic of connection and encounter: twisted lead ropes conjure scaffolding; elongated glass drops act as divining rods to material poetics.

Michelle Lopez: I was on a hike with my friend Michael Queenland and he described an object that he'd found at a flea market that he didn't quite understand. Through language he was trying to delineate and create shape. It made me think about Giacometti's *Hands Holding a Void* (1934): a female figure holding up her arms and trying to create that space. In my video

Invisible Object (2016), I gave my subjects conceptual parameters—to describe an encounter or an experience of an object that they didn't quite understand, and to use as pure a language as possible to try and build the object in words and gestures. I worked with different shooting angles, from above and straight on, taking a bird's-eye view, so as they speak they begin to build this collective imaginary space through the memory evolving. In a way, it's how I construct a piece: Holding the memory of the tension of the body with the subjects, building a space. The physical objects in this installation—the ropes, the jig—are trying to activate the space in-between these phantom structures.



Michelle Lopez, making of *Invisible Object*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Even though *Invisible Object* was shot a few years ago, it opens up an idea of how to think about my sculpture now. How to take away volume and think through the signage of different cultural languages and iconographies. How to think through the body but also through memory.

Jenn Joy: *Invisible Object* also resonates with your earlier piece at the Carpenter Center [for Visual Arts at Harvard University], where sculpture is reimagined as the sensual apparatus of perception. What is sculptural is in fact breath or breathing as a volume marked as much by its absence or expiration as its presence. How might sculpture take on a different kind of labor in relation to space and temporality and attention?



Michelle Lopez, *Fictitious Pivot*, 2017, performance at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University. Courtesy of the artist.

ML: For *Fictitious Pivot* (2017), I worked with curator Dina Deitsch and composer Anna Weesner to exploit Le Corbusier's idea of lungs as an architectural apparatus of the Carpenter Center. Its shape is in relation to breathing, the ramp as the central detail for walking up and down and being aware of breath. As collaborators, we wanted to activate those nether, forgotten spaces [i.e., under the staircases and ramps] in relationship to breathing, but also to complicate the breath by suspending the flutists so that whenever they would play their breath was almost stifled. Suspending them with the cords and the ropes was in part a relationship to pulling up the body.

JJ: What was the sonic aspect when they're basically breathless?

ML: The one in the stairwell: the flute reverberates through the space like a breathing lung system. A lot of it was in relationship to Le Corbusier's ideas of ascension and descension through the space. These moments punctuate space with these bodies.

I'm thinking more about how cultural things take up space in our collective unconscious, and how memory can draw up these objects without existing, as was the case for making *Invisible Object*. Or in the case of *Fictitious Pivot*, I was thinking about how bodies can mark a space as they collectively locate the space through breath (which is also invisible). They create a volume through breathing, and that mechanism becomes a sculpture. *Invisible Object* has the subjects also collectively conjuring up an object. It is almost like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon*, where the narrative is derived from different storytellers and becomes an exquisite corpse. *Invisible Object* has the subjects within the video draw the object together. Of course, it's multiple stories and objects that get blurred.

I wanted to activate the space in front of the subject. Then, on the other side of the screen, the viewer witnesses the outline of the object, so it might change the ways in which we perceive not only our memory of time and space but, as they draw, we become aware of the activated space right in front of their own gesticulations. Of course, what they draw with their bodies isn't entirely important; it's their evocation through language that matters. But that also evaporates.

JJ: There is something so beautiful about how you're proposing a phenomenology of gesture in the video, where gesture is the thing that falls out of action, as Henri Bergson talks about it. Moving between the film, the imagined object, and the gestures begins to define an ecology or set of relations, yet there is also a refusal to name these relations because the source always remains outside the frame.

There is something figurative in a lot of the pieces that doesn't ever land, and that also feels important in the ways that the video touches on a refusal of content. There is overlay; there is whiteout. That moment of opening your eyes also feels like a challenge to how we look, right? There is a beautiful moment in Emmanuel Levinas's thinking that Judith Butler turns to when she's writing about precarity. Trying to create an ethics of phenomenology, Levinas describes looking into someone else's eyes. Within this encounter, he writes that returning the look, makes it impossible to commit a violent act.. Writing pre-World War II, he tragically was wrong. That impulse or the moment when Virginia opens her eyes [in the video] . . . there is something, I think, about gaze that shifts. In the beginning, they talk about looking and not looking, but the eyes, the performer's eyes, are closed. That comes back and gives us a lens

with which to look at this work or to experience this work, too. It feels so gestural, so much about containing, but the impossibility of containment.

I'm curious about the physical work *House of Cards* [Simon Preston Gallery New York, 2018], which proposes something beyond gesture perhaps held in the histories of the objects themselves, a sedimentation of material experience. While the video might describe an aperture for how we come to see things as related across concept or memory, these sculptural forms become architectures of perception—not just traces, but guides for how to move through the work, the cards.



Michelle Lopez, *House of Cards*, 2018, installation view, Simon Preston Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston New York.

ML: They're related in the sense that the content rejects a kind of contained, known language that is image-centric, but rather tries to tap into a gut experiential thing. So in that sense it really is about the viewer's body and the viewer's memory or trigger entry point into the possibilities of violence, as we look and walk through a space. I wanted to activate that experience of looking through *Invisible Object*, how we look and don't look. Challenging, encouraging the intimacy of really looking and trusting how our experience shapes the content. I also wanted to use video because "voice-overs" describe narrative in video dominantly now, and I wanted to push up against this, because it feels that we're losing something in the lack of faith that objects and the way we use 3-D space can tell far more profound stories.

If we follow the title *House of Cards* back to Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969), how are you thinking about the influence of Minimalism as another kind of sedimentation or genealogy in the work?

ML: So, in this sense, there is a real nod to Minimalism because so much of it is about the removal of image and how the forms navigate the viewer to experience a certain moment of potentiality. Serra's *House of Cards* had a real threat to it because of its sheer size and weight. So I actually wanted to move in reverse, where the weight has a different relationship to the space. I mean, in terms of making my work, it's still totally this physical thing, even if you can't detect its tension at first. If you move the hanging structures in a certain way, it'll just collapse. Everything is at body scale, and I think about it in relationship to movement and scale and how you would interact with it as a viewer. As you walk around them the narrative changes.



Michelle Lopez, *House of Cards* (detail), 2018, installation view, Simon Preston Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston New York.

JJ: In your earlier work (*Blue Angels* (2011) and *Smoke Clouds* (2014), for example), there is more often a use of leaning as a structural device—not necessarily of the work on itself, as in Serra’s piece, but as marking a reliance on the architecture of the gallery as a support mechanism. In *House of Cards*, it is contained on a platform and the flattened masses have shifted into almost outlines of forms holding other forms, so the work implies a kind of self-sustaining, self-reliant organism.



Michelle Lopez, *Blue Angels*, 2011, installation view, Simon Preston Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston New York.

ML: Right, they are free-standing pieces that could assert themselves. Specifically, just in front, it becomes a drawing. As you move through it, it has this delicacy about it. Some of it has to do with vulnerability in relationship to that suspension.

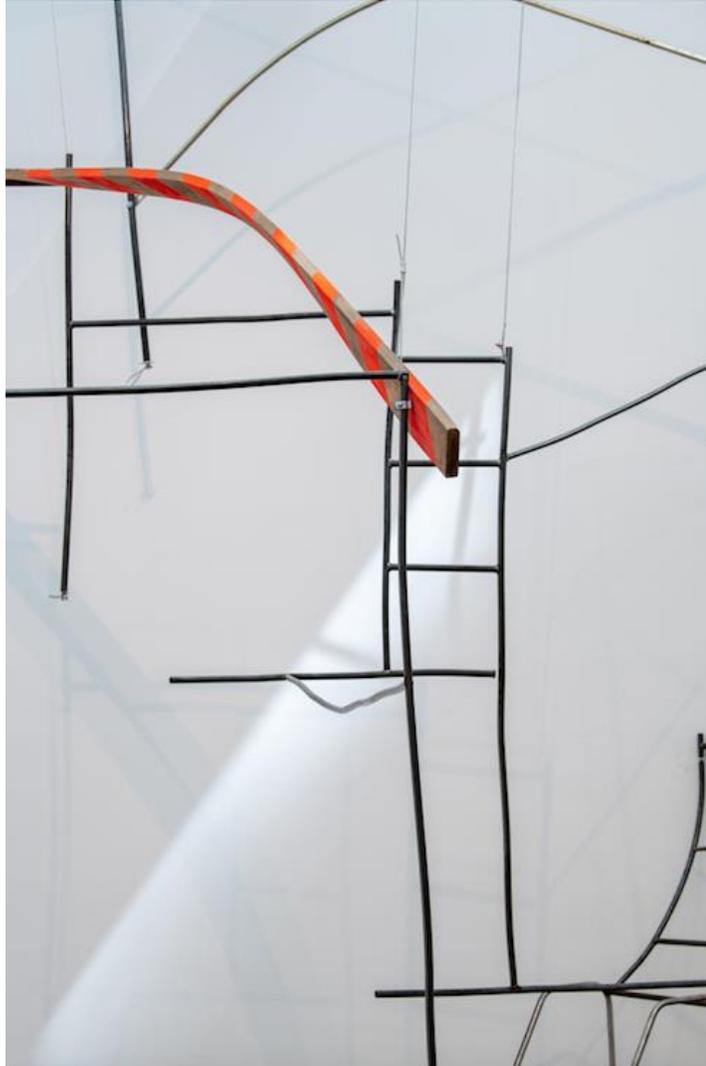


Michelle Lopez, *Smoke Cloud II* (diptych), 2014, tempered architectural glass, ultraviolet light, tin, silver nitrate, varnish, wood, 88 x 120 inches, installation view, Simon Preston Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston New York.

I'm also thinking about how sculpture has often been defined in the realm of site-specificity. We often think about an integration or intervention onto the site itself as a political gesture in relation to installation, and that intervention becomes "sculptural." Sculpture has evolved (or devolved) so much that we don't bother discussing how the work is operating as an object, even though there is always the reality of our sheer physicality as makers working with materials, and the limitation of sculpture as objects within spaces, that we tend to ignore. I'm trying to combine both: the awareness of the site, and then the weirdness of the object doing something.

For me, in the *Ballast & Barricades* installation it has been important to have the scaffolding be site-specific to this particular thirty-foot space and really take advantage of the

height. So there is some dependence on the wall and the ceiling struts. Things bounce and lean on the wall as before, but in a more architectural, all-encompassing way.



Michelle Lopez, *Ballast & Barricades* (detail), 2019–2020, installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

JJ: How does this work extend the language of political ecology that you propose in some of the earlier works like *Blue Angels*? There are traces of flags and thrones from your earlier series, signposts or gestures of resistance. In its collectivity, the work speaks of occupation, but differently.



Michelle Lopez, *Blue Angel II*, 2013, stainless steel, powder-coated aluminum, and rivets, 36 x 6 x 7 feet, installation view, Bass Museum, Miami.

ML: I was thinking about questions of image and appropriation, about taking an icon of power, a flag, and trying to strip it of its power. Thinking about scaffolding as a power structure and then combining it with these different forms of resistance, paring it down in terms of the street level, the suspended/spectator level, or the way that this transparent piece of glass is being hung by the neck of the piece and tied up by rope. I wanted the glass pieces to serve as hanging figures that would punctuate the space.

And for the *Ballast & Barricade* installation, I had the same notion with the viewer, in that you are immersed and when you look up there are these collapsing and floating moments above, an ecosystem that was on the verge of collapse. I wanted to bring in all the materials that I had used before (bent wood, lead sheets wrapping metal and acting as flags, rope). They all have their own role to play within the structure. The rope had to move backward in space to actually support the scaffolding structures. Things actually had to work in reverse.

To complicate the space, I wanted the rock/rubble to act as a form of resistance in terms of something that can be thrown as a striking mechanism, as a form of protest to suspend the whole thing. All these elements come together as if they could collapse at any moment; it was pure intuition. The suspended skeleton of signage suggests that it could be a moment for broadcasting that was bankrupt of any system.

I went from doing SOS flags to doing the flagpole (“Halyard” 2014). Yet I was actually not interested in the flagpole or in the flags, I'm interested in structures of power or monuments that suggest power. To pare it down, I thought, could actually be more subversive. The glass pieces come from an idea of ropes that I cast in crystal. Even that I felt was too articulated. It was too much of an image. How can I delineate these ideas through gesture and have it be more devastating in a way?



Michelle Lopez, *Halyard* (detail), 2014, six channel 11 minute loop stereo sound, aluminum flag pole, rope, steel cleat, 8 inches x 40 feet. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston New York.

I like the contradiction that an image can evoke when encountering work, depending on how an artist uses it. *House of Cards* proposes familiar physical structures of the most anemic sense in order to create suggestions. That activates the space around it through our own understanding of how those images or structures historically worked in space. The labor then is

left up to the viewer in the physical act of perception. I think what is frustrating to me about this work, in terms of it proliferating in the world, is that the work is image-resistant. It doesn't communicate well via the flatness of photos, Instagram being a prime example. It really is work that has to be experienced and moved around in a kind of revolution (meaning a procedure, a movement through). It's communicating in the most old-school sculptural strategies so that once you move through it, you begin to understand. It's like walking through a ruin with a whole set of circumstances that are clearly legible through the experience of the body. It sounds really esoteric, but it's grounded in the way we navigate space because of specific cultural signifiers. And yes, I am trying to empty those moments of language. We understand and we don't. The "encounter" is that arrest in an art experience that I consider a lot, where something changes in our looking or perception. It's easy for the encounter to become blasé or in quotation marks.

JJ: Might the glass pieces become divining rods? I'm curious about the continuing impulse coming out of Minimalism to think abstraction in terms of political efficacy—the seduction and possibility of that, and also where it feels really tenuous and incommensurable to its content?

How do we begin to think about these immaterial qualities as structural and as something else? Through your aesthetic practice, are you trying to ask how we can engage formally and materially with these questions? It feels like a complicated kind of conundrum, right? Danh V-ō's work in the Guggenheim exhibition, *Take My Breath Away* (2018) that we talked about is almost didactic, to a point in terms of how we're made to understand the logics of colonialism and legal language. Removed from that language, there are formal decisions that

begin to feel like tropes in some contexts. I'm interested in how attention, address, and perception begin to function differently in the space, and how your work offers it.

ML: When we were talking about the Danh Vō show at the Guggenheim, I think about it in relationship to curating image and the question of language. I had a feeling of mourning going through that show, because I feel very connected to his ideas in relationship to postcolonialism and identity. So much of the work was in relationship to Western identity and the ways that he in particular was affected by it.

There's a kind of familiarity with Danh Vō's work in its sculptural containment. I think it moves with modernist singularity. I use modernism uncomfortably, as a form of critique. I think when we're dealing with objects, there is a singularity that the viewer demands (or maybe the consumer!) and that's a problem. We (myself as an Asian-American and Danh Vō) are bowing to a certain kind of Western colonial aesthetic that gives me the biggest sense of mourning that is inescapable. I can't seem to get past it because I'm made of it. I was indoctrinated by it. I was taught to believe in it.

The challenge in making is trying to build a vocabulary that might move beyond that and have more room for it to become lots of other things. Trying to create those forms of political resistance, but through these gestures that I'm hoping resonate between the spaces in-between. It gets confusing because I'm worried, can it be through these formal gestures?

JJ: It feels important, the challenge of materiality or an anti-monumental relationship to the ways that work takes up or articulates space. This mining of Minimalism has to do with something that's maybe pedestrian, which feels a little bit questionable given that its early

practitioners were also highly trained. There is something of repetition and the ways that gesture comes undone and differentiates itself in space. In its sparseness and evisceration of form, your work points to something else, channels temperature differently, which feels connected to other modes of signification.

ML: Maybe the early work was critiquing Minimalism, specifically the masculine, monolithic quality to it. I think this work is drawing upon other things like Arte Povera. My hand is in everything. If I don't feel right, or right in the gesture, then somehow it doesn't do it, it's dry. The relationship to my body when I'm making it is really important for me. There still is an image. I think it's very figurative work in a lot of ways.

JJ: I was struck, listening to you talk about the process, by the physical way that you work with all of the materials to get them into that shape—the strength and fierce intimacy that requires. There is something of the choreographic, not simply as performance or dance, but as latent qualities of movement that have to do with how things hold temporality and spatiality to put pressure on representation in an important way.

The ways that your work, if it's a stage or if it's a pedestal, acts as a topography that we move through refracts back on how we stand. I notice that I keep switching positions as we speak, as if there is something about the work that unsettles, untethers balance, or plays with suspension to think about different physicalities and positions.

The resistance of image, or the resistance of textual language, pushes us to other sensual apparatuses. I love that it also requires movement or an openness of encounter that diverges from other contemporary sculpture practices. Is it a refusal of autonomy? You use the

word “encounter” often to speak of the meeting of image and language, language and gesture. I’m curious how the encounter enables perception.

ML: I really wanted to amplify that space in-between this moment of possibility and poetry. A lot of it was improvisational, and some was giving everything a structure in which to function and exploit the relationship between the objects and the shadows they cast. I see these as phantom structures.

My thinking about violence used to be more obvious in the way I worked. I would beat things up quite physically (*Blue Angels*) to leave that broken residue. Now I look for violence in the space where things have happened, and I’m trying to activate the ghosts.

JJ: Will this play of shadows continue in the new installation, *Ballast & Barricades*, for ICA? Looking at your drawings, it feels as if the objects themselves have been translated into gradients where densities of stain indicate weight or gravity. The looseness of the lines conjures indexes of objects, yet they are not always legible.

ML: I’m developing a shorthand in the drawings for the sculptures. So a particular quality of line in the drawings indicates rope or scaffolding, or flag, so I can sort out a larger phantom installation. I’m trying to signify enough that it engages, and then responding to each line as it gets set down. I have to do the drawings in the morning—otherwise, they become bogged down—so the drawings can imagine structures that are more expansive. But it’s true with the gradients, I felt I wanted to expand to different kinds of signifiers besides just lines of scaffolding and rubble. Now there are bent-wood barricades that are painted safety and police colors. There are wilted tarps and more signifiers for flags, a lot of chains and construction

colors. So yes, I wanted to give it more depth yet still have a fluidity and ambiguity where it is growing and also collapsing.

JJ: How are you thinking about genealogies of sculpture in this work? Particularly in the building fragment, is this a nod to Gordon Matta-Clark?

ML: Definitely. The fragment is from an abandoned restaurant that was being demolished in Northeast Philadelphia. I wanted to get a cross-section of signage, roof, and brick in order to allow its history to emerge and also allow its decrepit-ness serve as a counterweight to the whole scaffolding structure. Hopefully it feels more swiped from a building, so the gesture feels more violent, rather than a cut-out like Matta-Clark. I have really been thinking about tornadoes with another project (*Joplin*), so that's probably in the air too, quite literally. So there are things rising up high above as they are also collapsing.

There are elements that I've appropriated from the environment of disrepair. In addition, we are also handmaking elements of it. The chain-link fence is all handwoven and spot-welded to achieve the crumpled, blown-out shape that I wanted. The scaffolding was placed in vinegar baths to remove the rust and age from one side, so that the other side has a painted, glossy fetish finish. So there are these contrasting surfaces in a single piece (both decay and opulence), much like *Throne* (2016).



Michelle Lopez, *Throne II*, steel, pure lead, enamel paint, 83.50 x 15 x 14 inches, installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston New York.

There is a lot of labor involved in making, twisting, and bending the scaffold; making the rope structural with insertion of rods, powder-coating the steel in a drone military black palate.

Ballast & Barricades is a response to the delicacy of *House of Cards*, which was extremely subtle and formal, and I think those gestures are still there. But here, I'm trying for more cultural legibility, taking on construction and use of scaffolding, and then a thousand-pound building fragment suspended, even more explicitly. Thinking about an installation on the verge of collapse, using remnants of cultural signifiers: scaffolding for falling, climbing ladders, floating building fragment as counterweight. I wanted to create impossible moments; so everything feels a lot more politically and architecturally tenuous.