

The Maryland Institute College of Art's low-residency MFA (MFAST) program has always transcended significant distances, bringing together geographically-dispersed artists already established in their practices for intensive sessions of learning and critique. Rather than mediums, approaches, or themes, these artists hold in common the desire to develop their art within a tight community while they maintain their connection to their home locations and careers. The class of 2020, comprised of eight students living from Baltimore to Berlin, also share the unique experience of a pandemic disrupting their plans for a final in-person, on-site gathering and exhibition last summer. Consequently, the period for producing their culminating works has extended into unprecedented months of protests against social injustice, a presidential campaign reflecting extreme divisions in American society, and widespread uncertainty about personal and economic health.

Within this context, it is nearly impossible not to ask questions about what art has to offer a troubled and unstable society. During the virtual visits I made with the individuals in the MFAST cohort, I encountered dedicated, sincere artists seeking to answer those questions. These artists strive to make art that matters because it foregrounds overlooked elements of beauty and suppressed aspects of history; because it offers an intimate platform for resolving otherwise overwhelming social contradictions; and because it tunes perception to the subtleties of the world, as well as to paths for changing that world.

The creative investigation of space is a broad rubric for much of this art. Starting from her critical reflections on the essential relationship of mapping land and property ownership, Mary Stuart Hall (Atlanta, GA) uses sound and radio waves in her highly conceptual practice to demarcate space in a manner that allows for greater physical and conceptual fluidity. In Lauri Hafvenstein's (Washington, DC) site-interventions, lush colored light cast on architectural features generates a meditative environment in which viewers might reflect on the past inhabitants and functions of buildings. In her film work, Liz Miller (Baltimore, MD) documents performers, whom she has costumed in sculptural head pieces that invoke the beautiful intricacies of braided hair, as they use movement to cleanse and sanctify sites associated with both historical enslavement and contemporary racism throughout Baltimore.

Immediacy, intimacy, and tactility also characterize several of these bodies of work. Anchored in mundane details of the suburban American landscape, Nugent Koscielny's (Lynchburg, Virginia) softly-focused, impressionistic videos lead us into a dreamy place where personal memories and psychological associations amplify such things as gas pumps, wet pavement, and windshields to poetic levels. Azul Nogueron (Chicago, IL) transforms humble but intimate objects, turning sheets into the walls of a sanctuary-like enclosure. By painting and embroidering portraits onto the bed linens, Nogueron achieves a union between traditional Catholic iconography and celebrations of trans identity which does not typically exist in the space of everyday life. Through immersive and richly textured hand-woven nets that span the categories of sculpture and textiles as they expand across space or collapse into dense forms, Shannon Brinkley (Berlin, Germany) evokes layer upon layer of meaning within the context of our highly networked contemporary existence.

Indeed, the 2020 MFAST work foregrounds explorations of the ways in which individuals engage with the complexities of today's reality. In Michelle Lisa Herman's (Washington DC) installation comprised of sculpture, video, and sound, technology and humor draw attention to and then destabilize the limited ways in which we perceive reality, prompting us to wonder what lies beyond the cultural frameworks and bodily capacities that shape individual experience. In contrast, Anderson Funk (New Orleans, LA) brings an intentionally low-tech quality to engineering sculptures out of consumer detritus, tinkering together disparate objects to produce forms that suggest the precariousness of aspirational conditions like balance and resolution during a time when many individuals find it difficult to position themselves amidst the divisiveness and discord of society as a whole.

-Kristen Hileman, Independent Curator, Baltimore, MD