

Text version of Art Horse 1: *Self Adjacent*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Recorded December 22, 2023

Welcome to the first episode of *Art Horse*, an occasional audio essay about art. I'm Sommer Browning.

Sometimes, not very often, but often enough to remember, while I'm driving on the freeway or tapping my credit card at the market or cooking my child dinner I think, They let me do this? I'm old enough, responsible enough, to be allowed to do this? Propel this enormous machine. Decide what to spend money on. Feed another living being. It's just a very quick flash back and forth between being a child who had to ask before she was allowed to do anything to being an adult who does things in the world without anyone even knowing, let alone having to ask for permission for.

I thought about this as I moved through *Self Adjacent* the group show up at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. 21 artists making art that approaches or converses with caretaking and parenting in some way.

I've always hated this word that has become so popular in the past decade "adulting." I really hate it. It has a kind of passive aggressiveness to it. Dismissive of the hard, boring, complicated work of living as an adult in an inequitable society, while also glossing over the hard, boring, complicated work of living as a child in an inequitable society.

*Self Adjacent* feels a little bit like an antidote to this word, to this privileged shorthand. I saw, in the works in this show, the experience of childhood taken seriously. I saw the experiences of parenthood and caretaking taken seriously. And I saw them both taken unseriously—which to me is always a true mark of understanding and respecting something. When you can crack good jokes about it.

I keep thinking about Courtney Kessel's and Chloe Clevenger's piece *In Balance With*—it's a wooden balance beam. Clevenger, Kessel's child, sits on one end of it and Kessel repeatedly tries to balance it again and again on the other end with her own weight, she does this over the course of years, -- a video of their performances appears next to the balance beam. On the child's end, Kessel periodically adds weight in the form of shoes, records, bags of rice, toys—what I think of as the possessions and objects we need or we think we need in order to raise children. So these things in addition to the child's weight makes it harder and harder for the artist to budge, let alone, balance the beam. In the video we see the child age, the pile of things shrinking as perhaps she needs less, the mother, the artist now being able to balance almost perfectly. It's really a beautiful concept. I am a sucker for work that takes place over years.

I loved *Hard to Place* by the artist Qiana Mestrich—it's two pieces one is a wall piece, a collage, with one side a photocopy of an old newspaper clipping, it's hard to read, but it's about Little Joe, a young mixed race boy, who, the articles says, is hard to place in foster care because of this heritage, it's almost an advertisement – maybe it is an advertisement -- and next to it is a crystal clear beautiful photograph of the back of a young brown child with a string of white beads, almost pearls, around their neck. The second piece is an artist book, also collaged, about the life of Joseph Cullen, the Little Joe from the newspaper, who from what I gather from the book, grew up in and out of foster care in the UK. Throughout the book are quotes from what seem like Cullen's files created by the institutions and agencies that Cullen passed through. We read these passages that are written in that language of government and bureaucracy, that cruel, razored, dangerous rhetoric of processing and efficiency that is erroneously assumed neutral or disguised as technical or legalese. These passages sit alongside images

of Cullen's parents and a young brown boy and maybe the places Cullen grew up, some are blurred out like how you might see through eyefuls of tears, and some abstracted so much that they're just pools of color more akin to how an infant sees the world than an adult.

I liked Christa Donner's piece called *Home/Body* -- a drawing and painting of a woman crouched, her insides are a building—you see it Richard Scarry style—a cross section with a swimming pool or bathhouse in the basement, the woman's lower body, a third floor, the woman's upper back, filled with organic, outer space plants. I liked Ahree Lee's *Timesheet: November 4-10, 2018*, a weaved piece, a visual representation, almost a chart in yarn, of how a week is spent as a parent, the fabric's colors correspond to categories found in a key on the side of the weaving, charcoal black for childcare, grey for housework, beige for sleep. I resisted this piece, honestly, because of how wary I am of this increasingly imprisoning notion that worth is a thing that can be, must be, measured. If you can't calculate it, does it even exist? If a tree falls in a forest and no one counts its rings, photographs it, measures its length, and determines the cause of death is it even profitable? But I realized that Lee is resisting that, deliberating choosing such a time consuming, precise, anti-automated medium—weaving—to depict a time audit chart. It's great.

I wanted Bohyun Yoon's piece to be working, but it wasn't—the docent said there must be a problem with it. Three golden vessels connected by strands of hair, maybe even one strand of hair, it was hard to see, and a motor, too, in the cabinet below the plank on which the vessels were mounted—I thought, maybe they turned slowly – and if they did maybe I would have thought of the earth and moon turning so that we can ever only see one side of the moon, and maybe I would have thought about how parents and children can sometimes only see one side of the other—that my child asks me not to remind them to practice violin because, *I'm not a baby anymore, mom. But -- I don't say -- you are always my baby.*

The show's up until January 7<sup>th</sup>. It is curated by Sarah Irvin and Tracey Stonestreet. Georgia Eli Browning composed the theme music for *Art Horse* and came up with the name of the show. *Art Horse* is written, produced, and recorded by me, Sommer Browning. Thank you for listening.

