

SAMANTHA WALL





Stiff as a Board, 2012
Graphite on paper
32 x 47 in

Previous page
Foreign Body 18, 2020
Ink on paper
20½ x 14¾ in



Amelia 4, 2016
Graphite on acetate
29 x 21 in



*A Prayer to Dispel Restless
Spirits (Second State)*, 2018
Ink on Dura-Lar
58 x 40 in



*A Prayer to Dispel Restless
Spirits (First State)*, 2018
Ink on Dura-Lar
58 x 40 in

THE AIR OF IDENTITY

by Mack McFarland

Art is often more about questions than answers. Viewing artworks in this light can aid in eliminating the dreaded, "I don't get it" sensation, common to those first-time exhibition visitors. Yet currently, when we're looking for new solutions to the ills of our world, and less analysis, it is an apt moment to focus on artistic practice as models or examples for how to take up the dilemmas that are all around us. While the plights shared with us via the media focus on the external, it has become clear that many impasses exist within ourselves. Muddled up inside our conscious and unconscious minds swarm questions such as: Who do I perceive I am? How are we perceived and judged by others? How do I think others perceive and judge me? How do I perceive and judge others?

For over a decade, Samantha Wall has used her drawings to examine the duality of identity, who she is or was / who others think she is or was, and the affectual impacts of those experiences. She speaks openly of contending with the stress of a divided identity, of being raised within the Korean culture, yet also feeling separated from it, of living a life in the United States as a multiracial immigrant woman. This has fueled her work and research for many years, beginning and continuing today with self-portraiture, from early works of cropped at the neck, nearly life-sized women, meticulously built from tiny repeated marks, gripping each other in wrestling poses, to her ongoing series, *Indivisible*.

The unveiling of 2013's *Indivisible* was one of Wall's breakout moments, drawing together years of research and practice into a breathtaking set of portraits. Most of this series falls in the 30" x 22" range, with a few increasing to 41" x 60," produced from graphite and charcoal on paper. The works had their beginning while Wall was in New Orleans, Louisiana at the Joan Mitchell Center on a residency. While there, she began casually meeting and then seeking out other multiracial women, whom she would make hundreds of photographs of during long conversations in her studio. This aspect of Wall's process, the engagement with her subject, in which they feel at ease and are sharing in a moment with her around difficult topics, should not be overlooked. It's Wall's ability to transmit her intellectual and emotional reflections from her life experiences during these conversations that allow her to capture "the air of the portrait" as she said to me, a line of thought Wall has taken from her reading of Roland Barthes.¹

From these hundreds of photographs, Wall selects one that best captures what she refers to as the "residue of our affective discourse," this shared sense of seeing one and other, and she sets out to accentuate the encounter upon the paper. Wall's drawings in *Indivisible* are not renderings of photographs, but empathetic translations of moments, at times gestural, as with *Gia I* pulling her hair. Yet the majority of the works bypass a physical action, rather they all focus on the facial expression of the model. We are drawn into these faces by Wall's prowess for details and contrast control with her tools, as well as her savvy for allowing the image to fade in and out of being, deeply epitomized with *Amelia III*. This process provides the precise amount of specifics for believability in the likeness and space for focus to occur, while evoking the vastness of an individual that cannot be captured within an image.

In 2016, Wall began experimenting on a new ground, dura-lar, an acid free polyester film capable of accepting ink. Her technique with these two materials have been a departure from her controlled and refined works on paper, allowing more haptic and indeterminate marks, further complicating and complementing the allegory of liminal identity and emotive cultural histories running throughout her oeuvre. This technique has been well-suited for Wall's more recent approach to the human form, the silhouette. With these works, such as *Sisters*, 2018, she probes deeper into the weight and immensity of identity, how it collectivizes within family and cultural forms. The silhouette offers a release from likeness for the artist (though many are modeled from her own form and her family), sharing with me that she feels these forms of figures pulse, radiate sensation, and speak to the empathizing, intuitive part of our minds. In her portraiture, Wall uses likeness and facial expression to delve into the affective state of individuality in herself and other women of color. These silhouettes capture a somatic response, emotional gestures and poses, filled with empathic language.

Samantha Wall's labor intense, technical brilliance links her to Vija Celmins' own obsession with representation, while her feminist perspective and interrogation of the emoting cultural body ties her passions to Wangechi Mutu's multimedia works. Through viewing Wall's artworks we, as viewers, are afforded the opportunity to empathize with an individual's social body, as told through facial expression and body language. If we dig deeper and examine her process, we can be inspired to also turn a



Foreign Body 12, 2020
Ink on paper
20½ x 14¾ in



Foreign Body 21, 2020
Ink on paper
20½ x 14¾ in

critical eye into our own internal thoughts and unprocessed emotions. Perhaps even to seek out others who might share our experiences and with whom we can reflect and learn. Samantha Wall's artworks remind us that though we perceive our subjective phenomenon individually, our societies and cultures are built from multitudes of complex personal responses to these collective experiences and lessons.

Mack McFarland is a Portland-based artist, writer, and the executive director of Converge 45.

¹ "The air of a face is unanalyzable... The air (I use this word, lacking anything better, for the expression of truth) is a kind of intractable supplement of identity, what is given as an act of grace, stripped of any importance..." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, originally published 1980, trans Richard Howard 1981 (NYC: Noonday Press, 1990).

Slip, 2014
Sumi ink, dried pigment on paper
30 x 22 in



SAMANTHA WALL

*b. 1977. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon
2015 Hallie Ford Fellow*

Originally from Seoul, South Korea, Samantha Wall immigrated to the United States as a child and comes from a multiracial background. Operating from within this framework, her drawings embody the experience of navigating transcultural identity. Wall graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and she is the recipient of awards and grants from organizations including the Oregon Arts Commission, Crow's Shadow Institute for the Arts, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Her work has been exhibited widely, including the Cue Art Foundation, New York, New York; Portland Art Museum and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, in Portland, Oregon; Clark College, Vancouver, Washington; The Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Salem, Oregon; The Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Louisiana; and the 6th International Fiber Art Fair, Hangaram Art Museum, Seoul Arts Center, Seoul, South Korea.

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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