



Sara Greenberger Rafferty

An Audience

February 23–April 6, 2024

Opening reception: Friday, February 23, 5–8pm

DOCUMENT is pleased to present the fourth solo exhibition of Brooklyn-based artist Sara Greenberger Rafferty (b. 1978), *An Audience*, opening February 23, 2024. The installation presents a series of large-scale reliefs, female silhouettes composed from panels of kiln-fired glass fused with photographic images, alongside unframed contact prints, a method of cameraless photography that stages various permutations of the wall-based sculptures through form and color. Spanning the gallery walls to compose a frontal line, the works on view invoke a crowd of inanimate bodies—reminiscent of discarded mannequins, life-sized diagrams transposed from anatomy textbooks, forensic crime scene outlines or autopsy reports—a collection of anonymous and enigmatic figures of display. While the figure remains consistent throughout each work, different objects occupy the body or its surrounding field: magnifying glasses, yardsticks, sardines, an eyeshadow palette reminiscent of color checkers used in studio photography, among other items. Across these disparate markers, each exists as a unit of measurement, of how closely things can be observed or arranged in proximity to our eyes or one another.

The exhibition features Rafferty's ongoing investigations into understanding how contemporary life is assembled through images—not in linear fashion or sequentially, but all at once. Her subjects are conveyed through iconography, an approach to representation that denies a spatial environment in favor of the flatness embraced by glyphic signs and symbols. Across Rafferty's installation, three-dimensional space is not being collapsed into two dimensions, but created from it.

Vacant of details that describe the body, the artist's expressionless selves creates a procession of uncanny portraits. In *Glass Figure One – I Don't Give a Fuck* (2023), the translucent figure stands against a milky backdrop of powder pink, lavender, and pale blue. A pliant measuring tape, such as one a seamstress would use, encircles her shoulders and hips, while a rigid ruler is situated firmly on her shin. From this relief arises a series of codified incarnations—at times the tiles that compose the figure are assembled in the same order to create contact prints, in others rearranged into configurations that deconstruct the body across the gridded framework. Amid the unframed, glossy sheets that hold these pictorial echoes, we see the imposing presence of an afterimage in primary hues of red, yellow, and blue. The spectral presence of Rafferty's bodies are collapsed into shallow fields of black where the original material used to cast the negative image is made more visible. While subtly perceptible in the reliefs, the inverse photographs accentuate the proliferation of tiny air bubbles embedded within the glass panes—the x-ray like reproductions create a field that appears like stars in the night sky.

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Across her practice, Rafferty has been persistently engaged with the grid, a ubiquitous standard of organization in our physical and digital worlds, as a means for categorizing collections of material culture and data as well as a method of control, surveillance, and limitation. The recurrent life-size scale of the artist's lifeless subjects has manifested in past work through stand-ins of gendered garments: images of dresses, bodysuits, shapewear, and pantyhose. This is a feminist project—in place of the corporeal, Rafferty depicts the female body as a socially constructed vessel built to contain ideals through the transposition of projections and inanimate things.

Read as references rather than realities, *An Audience* underscores the history of how figurative language operates in relation to text and image. In addition to a form, the 'figure' also expresses the anatomy of images—a word that borrows the terminology of the human body to describe where reproductions appear in manuscripts. In the expanded footnote of an essay by poet Lisa Robertson published in the artist's 2022 experimental monograph *Sara Greenberger Rafferty: Studio Visit*, the author chronicles the etymology and history of the use of the term: "an object or image *figures* when it receives more of our imaginative projection that its social or mythic function would require,"¹ (my emphasis). For Robertson, 'figure' is both a noun and a verb whose meaning stands in opposition to the symbolic. The figural relates to an interpretation of history, while the symbol interprets life. Yet, the function of these two forms are evenly quoted in Rafferty's work, in *An Audience* more so than previous exhibitions—punctuated by isolated scanned images, the quotation of objects and bodies are collapsed into a single icon.

As much as the photographic origins of Rafferty's work provide a context of how her images are read, the artist's medium can be seen as exhibition-making itself. Following the artist's past presentations at the gallery, *Dead Jokes* (2016), *The Laughter* (2018), and *Views from Somewhere* (2021), what can be seen as the subsequent chapter here serves as a continuation of the themes at the core of each project—tracing the ongoing impositions societal systems reign upon women's bodies. The artist's viewpoints are inextricably tied to material culture and unfold parallel to our current political landscape, each marked by pivotal moments of mass attention: Rafferty's first show opening just two days after the Presidential election of Donald Trump, the second surrounding the U.S. Supreme Court Hearing of Brett Kavanaugh, and the third in the wake of the pandemic. Yet, in *An Audience*, we find ourselves reeling in the uncertainty of a world defined by unlearned lessons. This transitory, ambiguous character finds itself reflected in Rafferty's audience, a vague and indeterminate assembly of spectators that we look at (as photographs) or through (as material). Of course, it is implied that they are the ones watching us. For precisely what and why is up for debate—nonetheless, the artist's figures invite us to consider the desire to interpret any signification that relates to ourselves, no matter the purpose.

– *Stephanie Cristello*

1 From the footnote of the first appearance of "figure" in "Time in the Codex" by Lisa Robertson, *Sara Greenberger Rafferty: Studio Visit* (Los Angeles: Inventory Press) 2022. 215.

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Sara Greenberger Rafferty (b. 1978) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Recent exhibitions include *A Trillion Sunsets: A Century of Image Overload*, curated by David Company at the International Center of Photography in New York City (2022), and solo exhibitions at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh (2021); *Gloves Off*, accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz in New York (2017), which traveled to the University at Albany Art Museum in New York (2017).

Other solo and two-person exhibitions include DOCUMENT, Chicago, IL; JOAN, Los Angeles, CA; the John Young Museum of Art at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, HI; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York, NY; kim?, Riga, Latvia; The Kitchen, New York, NY; MoMA PS1, New York, NY; Eli Marsh Gallery at Amherst College, MA; The Suburban, Oak Park, IL; Fine Arts Center Gallery at University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR; and a commissioned sculpture for the Public Art Fund. Rafferty has participated in group exhibitions including Foreland, Catskill, NY; The Fulcrum Press, Los Angeles, CA; Marinaro, New York, NY; Sculpture Milwaukee 2021, Milwaukee, WI; the 2020 Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, Mannheim, Germany; the 2014 Whitney Biennial, New York, NY; the Hammer Biennial, Los Angeles, CA; the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR; the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA; Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna, Austria; the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO; Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY; Gagolian Gallery, New York, NY; and The Jewish Museum, New York, NY, among many others.

She is included in the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the Yale University Art Museum, New Haven, CT; the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, Chicago, IL; and the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, Hanover, NH. Rafferty is an Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Photography at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. *Studio Visit*, Rafferty's recent experimental monograph, was published by Inventory Press in fall 2022.

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