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Tears Are Not Becoming Weapons For Blondes

STARRING

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RACE GENTRY JARED JUST HILTON PEREZ CHANCE GENTRY
AND
DOLLY WILDE**

"Tolerance is something we should extend to people who are not like everyone else." - Vito Russo

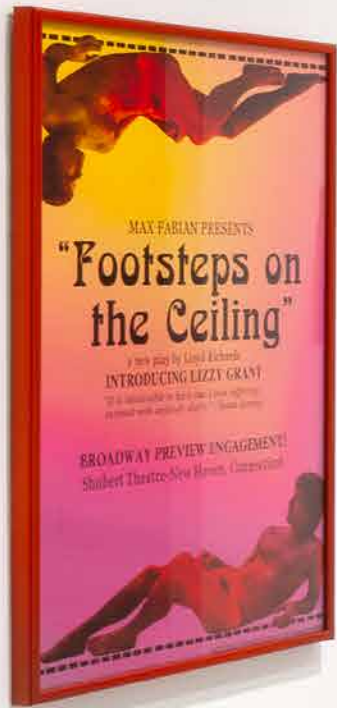


A MONOGRAM PICTURES/A24 STUDIOS RELEASE

JOE MAMA-NITZBERG

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**THE PAST IS AN
ALLIED COUNTRY**



5/3-6/15/2024

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:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

THE PAST IS AN ALLIED COUNTRY

“The Past is an Allied Country” nods to the opening line of L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel of lost innocence, memory, and forbidden sex(uality) *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” Putting the artist’s own spin on Hartley’s themes, “The Past is an Allied Country” is a riveting new turn in Mama-Nitzberg’s ongoing exploration of the (ab)uses of history, the distortions of fame and anonymity, and the vicissitudes of identity. Featuring 10 new works in a variety of formats, the exhibition is a dense web of cultural, sub-cultural, and personal references that Mama-Nitzberg weaves into speculative or even counterfactual histories.

To varying degrees, all of the works in the exhibition mimic twentieth century advertisements, with particular emphasis on styles from the decades leading up to and during the onset of the AIDS crisis. Many of these works take the form of posters for performances, films, and theatrical productions that on closer inspection reveal themselves to be fictional. For example, *Is Sincerity Enough?* resembles a movie poster from the 1960s and features images of Martin Luther King Jr. and Susan Sontag above the phrase “Sincerity is not enough!” and a promised release date of May 1965 alongside text reading “@sinceritywithoutintelligenceismeaningless.” Like many acts of queer citation, *Is Sincerity Enough?* invites a bit of decoding. King used the phrase about sincerity in a 1951 sermon; Sontag used it her 1964 essay *Notes on Camp* (a perennial reference point for Mama-Nitzberg); May 1965 is the month of the artist’s birth; the use of the “@” symbol from social media humorously flags the work as contemporary. By invoking all of these reference points in the form of an advertisement for a cultural artifact that does not actually exist, Mama-Nitzberg raises a host of important questions: How do

we interpret the inadequacy of sincerity when asserted by King versus Sontag? To what extent does our interpretation turn on the intersectional identities of the authors? What value do we ascribe to sincerity in our current moment, and is it (still) not enough?

Framing in all its varied senses and meanings—personal, conceptual, historical, formal—has always been an essential concern of Mama-Nitzberg’s work. Each of the invented “posters” in “The Past is an Allied Country” is framed in a period appropriate aluminum frame implying that each work could conceivably have been retrieved from the apartment of an imagined queer sophisticate. Mama-Nitzberg takes the framing of queer domesticity further in a number of works by placing some “posters” in sculptural tableau suggesting not only removal of the poster from its original context but also the wall on which it sat. *Tears are not Enough*, which summons the “celluloid closet” of the 1950s, the writings of Vito Russo, the early years of online gossip blogs, and even Oscar Wilde’s niece, sits on a retro floral wallpaper adjacent to a yellow light switch; *Regards*, which alludes to Sontag, Wilde, RuPaul’s Drag Race, and leather culture, sits on a black wall beneath a red light bulb. Mama-Nitzberg’s conflation of constructed and found objects toys with the way in which formal strategies are framed by history and identity—are these Broodthaers-esque decors, or acts of “decorating” (#pejorative)?

In sum, “The Past is an Allied Country” calls attention to the fact that all histories are framed by, and are in fact, assertions of power. “MAGA!,” “Land back!,” or “[insert name here] threw the first brick at Stonewall!”: all are histories that imagine a past from the standpoint of the present to make claims on the future. In contrast with these restorative and reflective forms of nostalgia,

Mama-Nitzberg’s works are a fresh manifestation of the nostalgic dissidence described by the late cultural theorist Svetlana Boym: “It is up to us to take responsibility of our nostalgia and not let others ‘prefabricate’ it for us. The prepackaged ‘usable past’ may be of no use to us if we want to cocreate our future. Perhaps dreams of imagined homelands cannot and should not come to life. Sometimes it is preferable [...] to leave dreams alone[.]”

Joe Mama-Nitzberg received a B.A. from San Francisco State University in 1989 and an M.F.A. from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California, in 1995. He lives and works in Catskill, New York. He has had solo exhibitions at Grant Wahlquist Gallery; Basilica, Hudson; Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels; and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles. His work has also been featured in exhibitions at venues including: the Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg; the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; White Columns, New York; Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York; and David Zwirner Gallery, New York. His work is in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

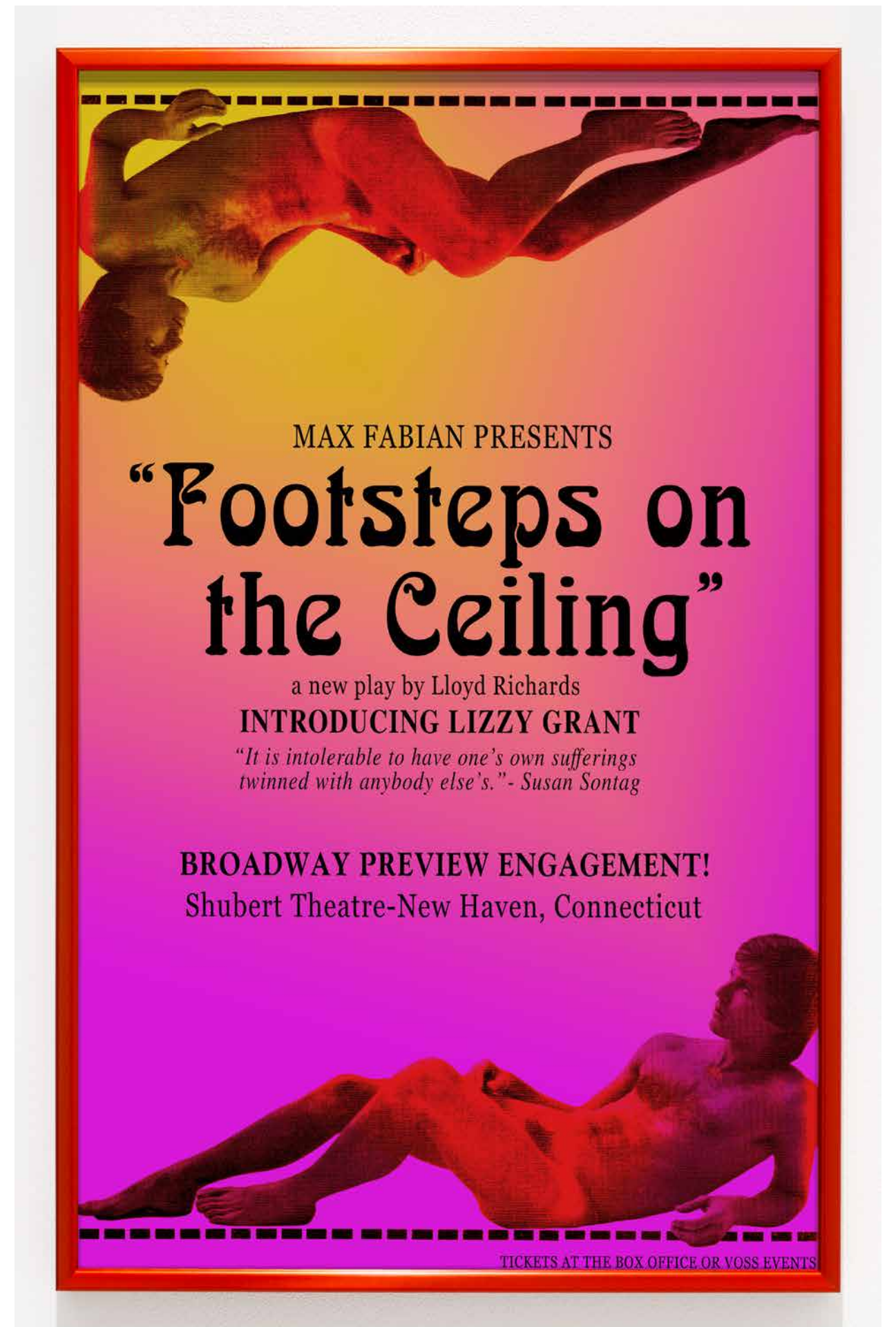
You're Beautiful and I'm Insane

2024

Framed archival inkjet print

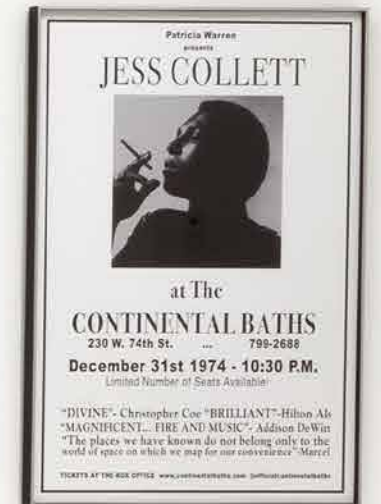
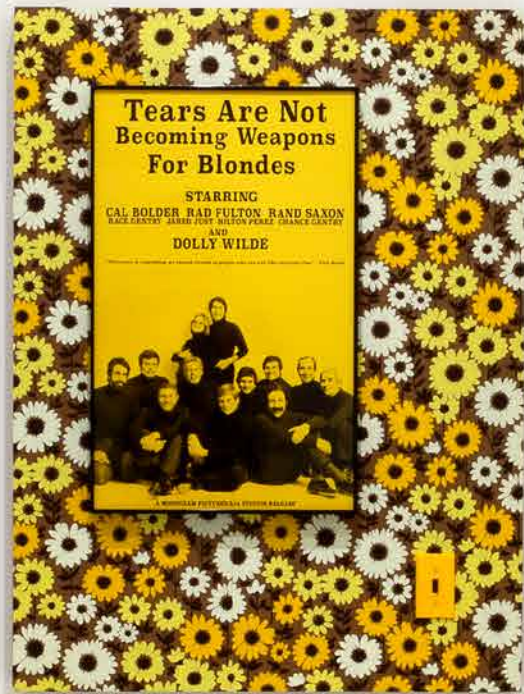
31.75 x 20.125 inches

One of three unique versions



Re-election Day
2024
Found and made objects
42.5 x 22 x 4 inches





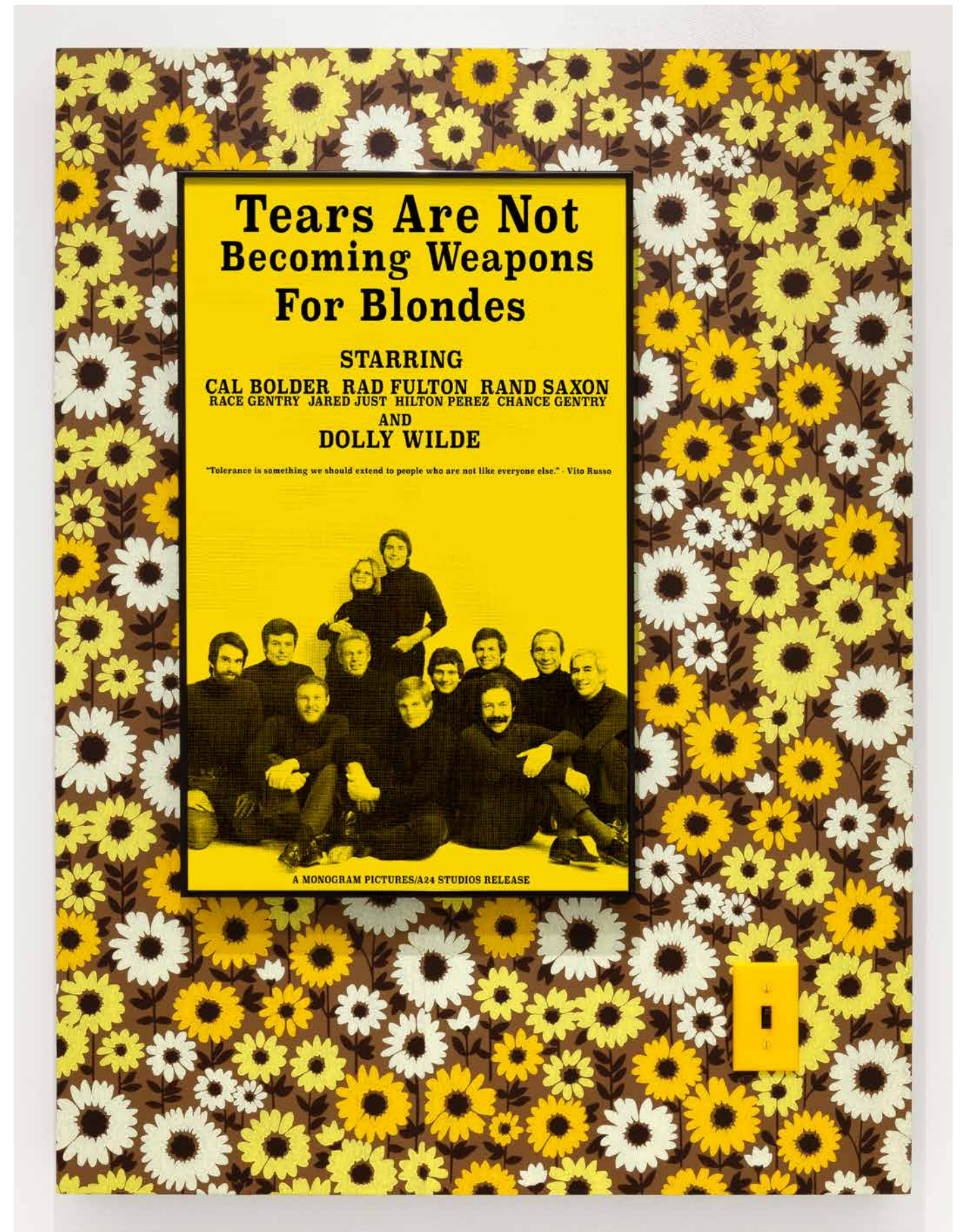
Tears Are Not Enough

2024

Found and made objects and framed archival inkjet print


48 x 36 x 4.25 inches

One of three unique versions



Patricia Warren
presents

JESS COLLETT



at The
CONTINENTAL BATHS
230 W. 74th St. ... 799-2688
December 31st 1974 - 10:30 P.M.
Limited Number of Seats Available!

"DIVINE"- Christopher Coe "BRILLIANT"-Hilton Als
"MAGNIFICENT... FIRE AND MUSIC"- Addison DeWitt
"The places we have known do not belong only to the
world of space on which we map for our convenience"-Marcel

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**REGARDING
THE PAIN
OF
OTHERS**

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BY BRIGGLAS
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AND
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"TO
MAGNIFY
THE
CONTACT
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1974 AND 2. ONLY 100 COPIES

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JESS COLLETT



at The

CONTINENTAL BATHS

230 W. 74th St. ... 799-2688

December 31st 1974 - 10:30 P.M.

Limited Number of Seats Available!

“DIVINE”- Christopher Coe “BRILLIANT”-Hilton Als
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“The places we have known do not belong only to the
world of space on which we map for our convenience”-Marcel

TICKETS AT THE BOX OFFICE www.continentalbaths.com @officialcontinentalbaths

Time and Place

2024

Framed archival inkjet print

35.875 x 24.125 inches

One of three unique versions

ESSAY

BY CAT DAWSON

In 1951, Robert Rauschenberg made *Should Love Come First?*, an assemblage or collaged work that includes a footprint, dance steps, a temporal diagram, and, in the upper left corner, the words that would title the work. The “first” is slightly offset to the “should love come,” making it a question in two parts: not just should love some before other things, but should love come at all?

Should Love Come First? is an example of queer coding. As the art historian Jonathan D. Katz explains, the pictorial surface can be read as a roadmap of Rauschenberg’s struggle to figure out how to relate to his own queerness at a moment of intense homophobia beyond Rauschenberg’s world, and significant turmoil within it.ⁱ But this only becomes visible if one knows how and where to look.

Codes work through familiarity. They are born of necessity, shared furtively, and often learned accidentally, sometimes when looking for something one may not even be aware one is looking for. If not read into the fact or details of queer codes, one might recognize their existence in the *sotto voce* with which queerness has been and still sometimes is spoken about; if one is read in—to certain species of furtive glances, or certain questions asked or not asked—a whole world opens up, at least for those of that code’s place or time. IYKYK, as the children say.

Joe Mama-Nitzberg trades in codes, but not perhaps in the way his queer artist forebearers did. Where in Rauschenberg’s work the code is a set of steps—in *Should Love Come First?*, literal ones—that can be followed to a queer subtext, in Mama-Nitzberg’s practice queer is the code one follows, and it leads to something entirely different.

By contrast to the coded ways in which queerness has historically become visible, the works that comprise “The Past is an Allied Country” foreground queerness in a way that is utterly uncloseted and broadly legible. In a show into which language figures heavily, queerness may announce itself first and foremost in an aggregate

of colors and materials. *Turning* thematizes a continuum of purples that nod to historical queer references to lavender, scares and otherwise; the black and red of *Regards* evokes so many different indoor cruising grounds made even more explicit by a vintage image of two figures cruising on the street; and the leather masks, opera gloves, and spilled nail polish of *Pretending* gesture toward a range of performances that may manifest as BDSM or kink or drag, but when brought together point up the degree to which each of those practices are, at their core, highly domestic. Even without getting into the particulars of why, these signifiers both individually and together seem seductively, even obviously queer—at least at first.

Yet these works do not reveal themselves in the way one may be trained through histories of queer coding to expect. One learns to read queerly through experience, to follow a set of discrete signals to something concrete, but that works in “The Past is an Allied Country” in the obverse direction. What might begin as apparently queer signifiers become ever more obtuse as one delves further into the details. One begins with the saturated and high contrast colors, nineties aesthetics of chrome, leather, and crisp white cotton only to get taken in by the text within drawn from or gesturing toward a myriad of signifiers from queer cultures that span media and decades: Radclyffe Hall, Lily Law, 41 Rare, Jess Collett. Some of these may be known or can be easily looked up; others are more niche, and still others are intimate details—phone numbers, addresses—drawn from the artist’s own past. Mama-Nitzberg gives us a thread on the surface of the work and invites us to pull it. But rather than the work becoming more visible the signifying system itself comes undone in the pulling.

To snap back from the detail of a number or name to the overarching composition is to realize that maybe one has been tricked. The viewer today is, after all, accustomed to being able to look up information on a smartphone, something easily accomplished when an object is heavily textual; so, too, are many viewers read in on pop-cultural narratives of queer historical life alive to the

presence of coded meaning in queer culture. Many of the “we’s” who comprise the viewer are, in other words, conditioned to look in a way that sends us searching for meanings that we already expect to find. Mama-Nitzberg meets just enough of those expectations to pull us in, only to push back against that approach to history, and remind us that we do not yet know all there is to know, and that a bit of light Googling cannot easily or quickly fix that. This comes through in the campaign sticker highlighting Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson—inviting an inquiry into whether and to what degree we can know these historical figures, and how many other lives, voices, and contributions we will never know about because of structural inequities in how history is recovered and uncovered—but also in small moments on the borders of certain objects that collapse the space between the past and present through phrases like “Available now on iTunes.”

Rather than making work that becomes accessible through coding, Mama-Nitzberg uses the elements of coding to describe the limits of that strategy at a moment in which coding, like so much else within queer culture, has been commodified, its origins and stakes obscured, practices used as shorthand to suggest knowledge that one might not truly have a grasp on. No amount of internet research or participation in this or any other period’s queer culture will help the viewer unlock the entirety of any of these objects; each remains provisionally opaque to every viewer, and to different viewers in different ways. In doing this, Mama-Nitzberg invites the viewer to return a fundamental opacity to queerness; to re-center the facets of queer lives, aesthetics, and practices that are unrecoverable to a norm and undiscoverable through a code.

While being interviewed by a gaggle of reporters, in the 1972 cult classic film *Pink Flamingos*, the drag queen Divine is asked about her political beliefs, to which she famously responds, “Kill everyone now! Condone first degree murder! Advocate cannibalism! Eat shit! Filth are my politics! Filth is my life! Take whatever you like!” She then turns around coyly to offer the press a glimpse of

her back side, then turns to pose again. “The Past is an Allied Country” offers a similarly camp politics that is raw and coy and seemingly coded, but which ultimately resolves to a refusal to bend the viewer’s expectations. Viewers are invited to take whatever they like, but are also reminded as they do that there will always be more to it than simply what they already can see.

Cat Dawson works at the intersection of feminist, queer and trans studies, and the history of art, and their research explores the cultural production of minoritized subjects in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the U.S. Their first book, *Monumental: Race, Representation, Culture* is forthcoming from MIT Press in 2025. Their second, *Trans Form*, has also been solicited by MIT Press. They are currently Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Art and Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College.

ⁱJonathan D. Katz “Committing the Perfect Crime: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Journal* 67:1 (Spring 2008), pp. 38-53.



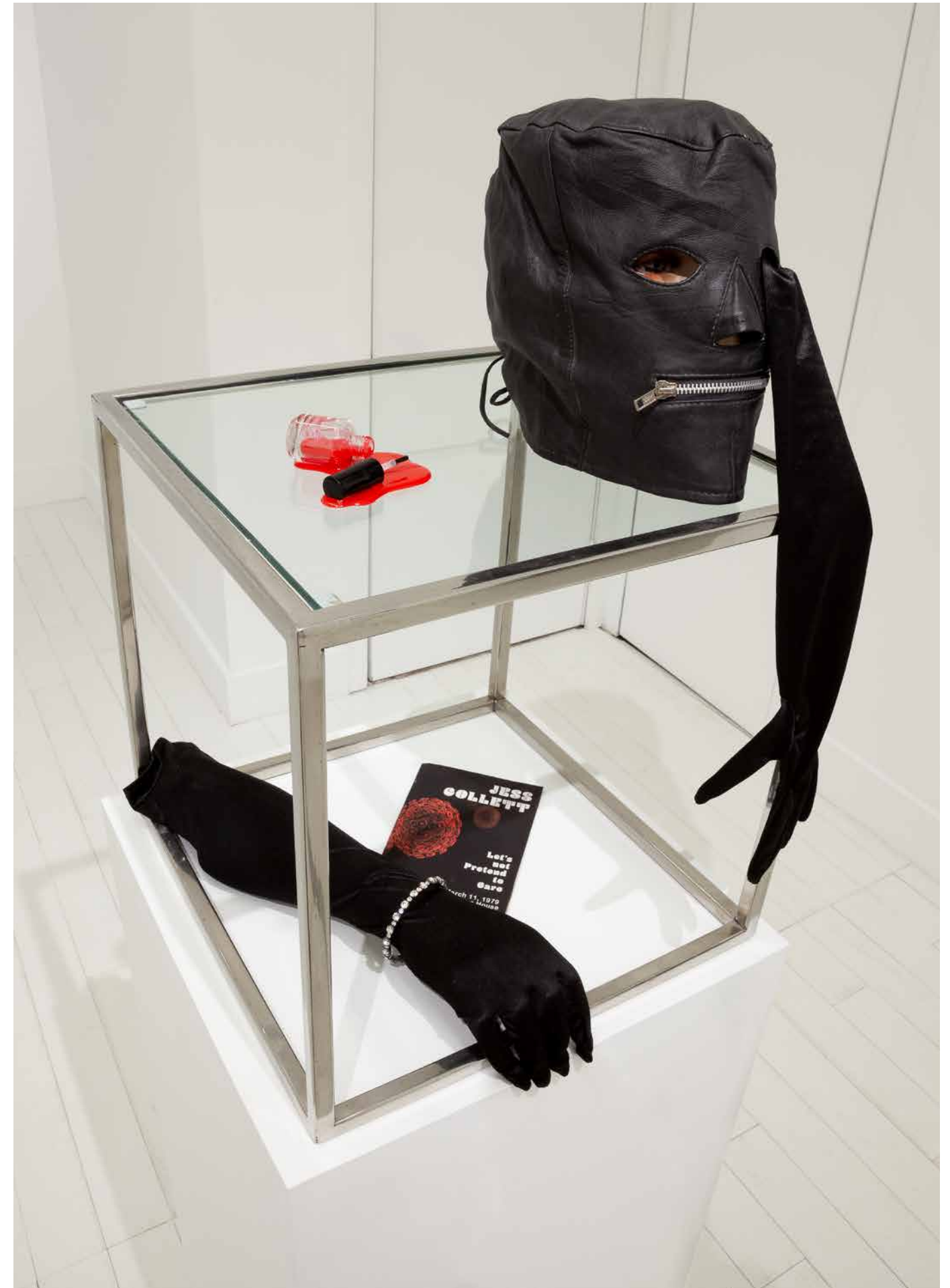
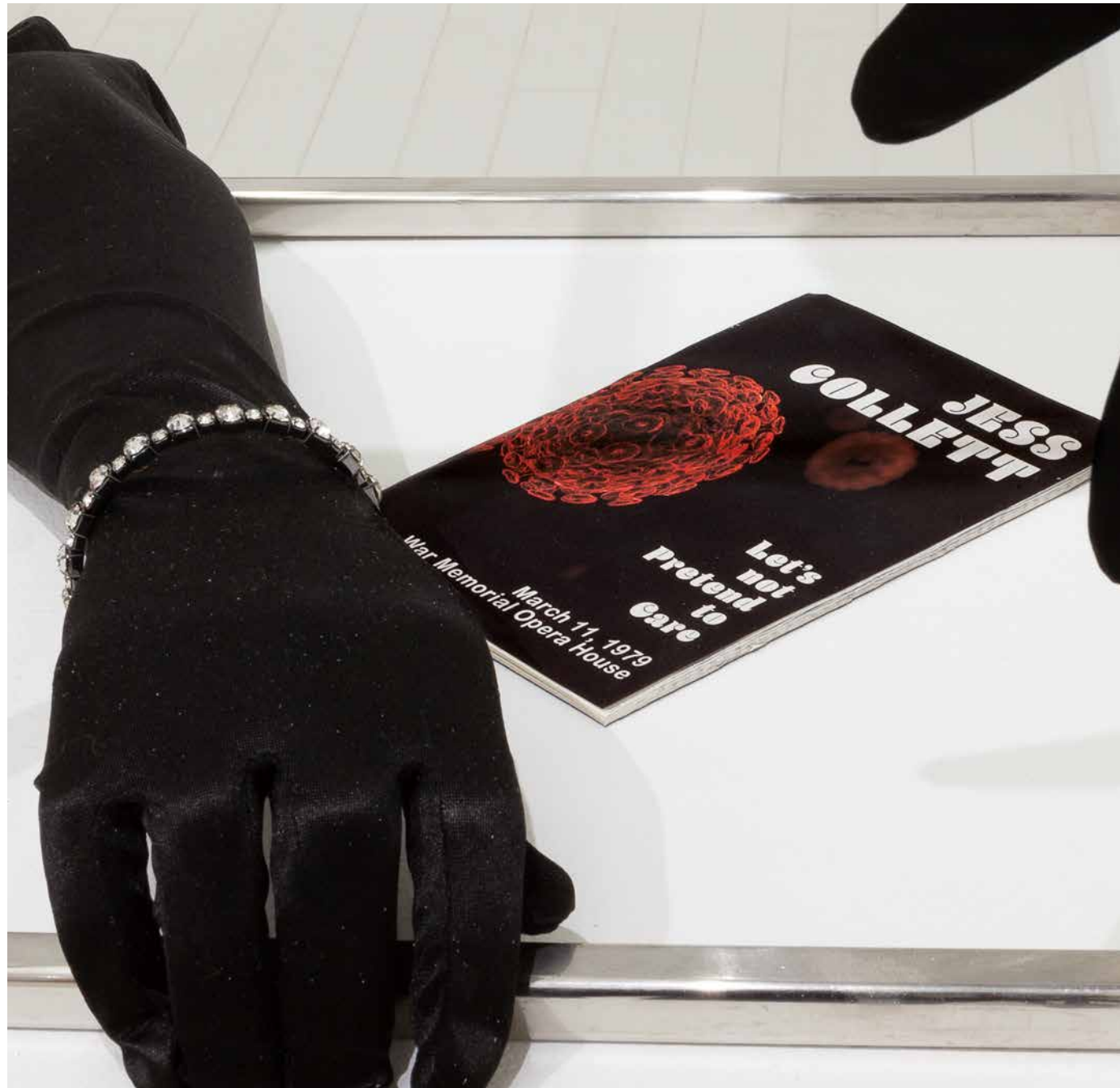
Regards

2024

Found and made objects and framed archival inkjet print

40 x 30 x 7 inches

One of three unique versions



Pretending
2024
Found and made objects and archival inkjet print
25 x 17 x 18 inches



PLAYBILL

BENNETT LARSON KRAMER THEATRE

1,112 AND COUNTING
...TO 525,600
OR
41 RARE, SINGULAR
ONE-NIGHT-ONLY
SENSATIONS!!!

Pass Them On and Pass Them By

2024

Framed archival inkjet print

21.375 x 14.125 inches

One of three unique versions



Is Sincerity Enough?

2024

Framed archival inkjet print

42.875 x 28.75 inches

One of three unique versions



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THE SOCIALITE NUN!**

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**Barbara Gittings
Ray Tobin
Bev Hallam
and
M-L Smart**

“Oh Mary!...Don't Ask!”

Tickets at the Theatre Four Box Office or www.herecomesthesocialitenun/ohmary/tickets.com

Turning

2024

Framed archival inkjet print

32.875 x 24.125 inches

One of three unique versions

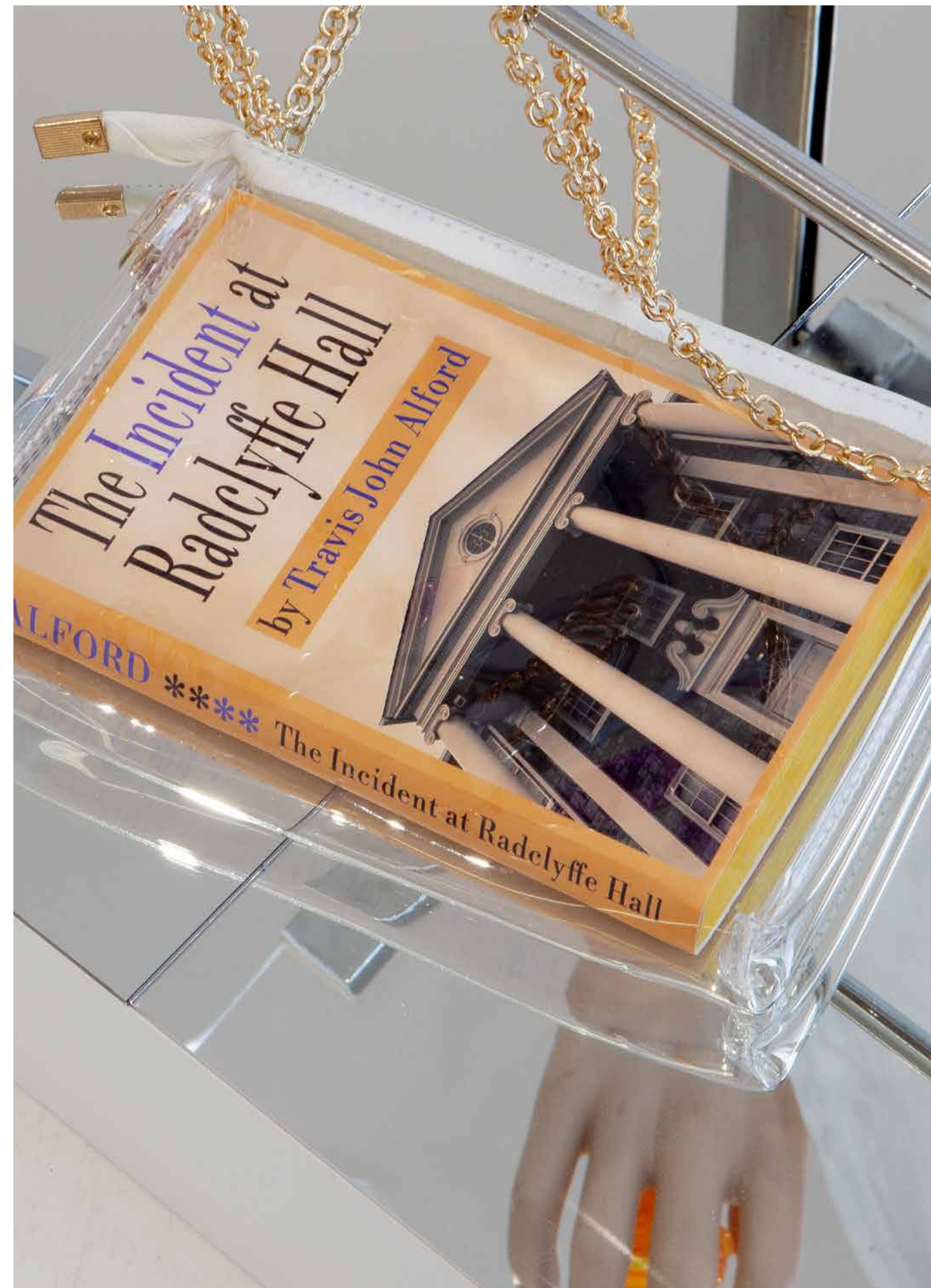
Loneliness is a Crowded Room

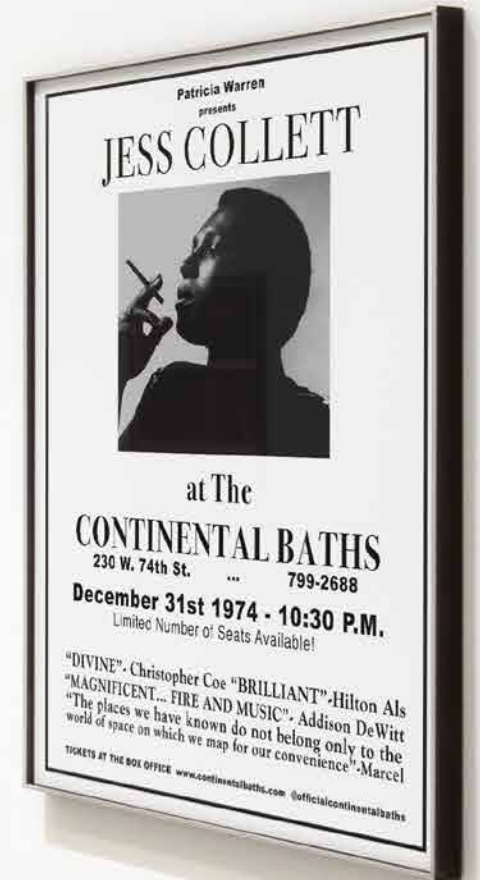
2024

Found and made objects and archival inkjet print

37 x 24 x 24 inches







:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

