

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**The Montclair State University Galleries Announces *The Backend***

**A group exhibition featuring works by Merlin Carpenter, Maia Chao and Josephine Devanbu, Johann Diedrick, Sophia Giovannitti, Liz Magic Laser, Ari Melenciano, William Powhida, Bat-Ami Rivlin, Rose Salane, Finnegan Shannon, TJ Shin, and Julia Weist**

**13 Contemporary artists probe the nature of protocols and agreements prompting questions about ownership, production, notions of truth, and agency**

**On View September 14 – December 1, 2023**



**Installation photograph of Julia Weist's *MPA Rating No. 53558* at Rachel Uffner Gallery, 2022.**

**Montclair, NJ** – Montclair State University Galleries presents *The Backend*, a group exhibition of works by thirteen contemporary artists who delve into the protocols and agreements that shape our society and the framework of our participation. These often hidden structures, such as the code behind digital platforms or legal systems that dictate the use and access to information, significantly impact our daily lives and cannot be skirted without voiding participation. Artists approach these arrangements often already in place without mutual agreement, revealing societal givens we are born into regardless of our willingness and understanding. The artists aim to reveal these hidden structures and how they manifest,

where encounters with refusals, confusion, bureaucracy, and denial function like dog whistles to investigate further.

*The Backend* title refers to a system of code that is responsible for the logic of any given software hidden from the user. Without the backend, there would be no front-end to experience. The exhibition is placed in the space between the unseeable logic of systems and the presence of their power, exploring the dynamics at play within a social context. The artists reflect systems onto themselves, holding up a mirror to their encounters for others to bear witness. This approach takes different forms, such as adopting the language of contracts to show the system at work in real-time or relying on notions of refusal and obfuscation to withhold content from the viewer as ways to illuminate the architecture of the systems we move through.

The exhibition provides discreet and focused windows into how knowledge, culture, and people are circulated or restricted. Rather than the proposed solution, *The Backend* functions as an exercise in cartography, mapping ecosystems of malpractice. Together, these artists prompt larger questions about ownership and rights to access, notions of truth, manifestations of power, and the way these overarching systems dictate the conditions of our lived experiences.

This exhibition is curated by Jesse Bandler Firestone, Curator and Exhibition Coordinator at Montclair State University Galleries.

### **Works in the exhibition:**

- In his *After John Hoyland* series, Merlin Carpenter showcases paintings imitating the 1960s works of John Hoyland, a prominent British artist. Carpenter originally requested permission from Hoyland to exhibit these replica paintings but was denied. As a result, to avoid violating copyright laws and to maintain the integrity of his artistic agency, Carpenter exhibited the paintings in their cardboard wrapping and specified that they should only be revealed in 2081, which is when Hoyland's current copyright expires.
- *Look at Art. Get Paid. (LAAGP)* is an art initiative by Maia Chao and Josephine Devanbu that pays individuals who do not typically visit museums to become guest critics and provide honest feedback. This program asks art institutions to engage in a process of public critique and institutional change. The University Galleries are introducing *Art on Your Terms*, a similar program inspired by *LAAGP* as part of their exhibitions.
- Johann Diedrick's interactive and multi-media installation *Dark Matters* simulates the workstation of a speech AI software engineer. The installation features a work desk, books, a coffee cup, a VR headset, and a television monitor for visitors to experience the role of a machine learning researcher. *Dark Matters* focuses on the absence of speech from Black people in datasets used to train voice interface systems such as Alexa, Google Home, and Siri, and the relationship between data, privacy, and racism.
- Sophia Giovannitti's *Record 1-3 (Failure as Form)*, *Record 4-6 from Incall: Study 2; Contract*, and *Record 12-14 from Study 3; Debt* examine power dynamics in different situations. Through staged scenarios and loosely structured events, she uses her own body, the movement of money, and the threat

of legal or personal vengeance as mediums, establishing contracts and choreographies that outline the terms of interaction. Ultimately these works reflect how permission, agency, and consent are negotiated, abided by, or disregarded.

- The Armory Show, an annual event in New York that features the world's top modern and contemporary art galleries, chose Liz Magic Laser as their commissioned artist to create the fair's visual identity in 2012. Laser organized a project called *Armory Show Focus Group*, which invited a variety of art professionals such as collectors, curators, and critics to participate in group discussions. Through these focus groups, Laser revealed aspects of the Armory Show's identity, visitor demographics, and other aspects of the art world.
- Ari Melenciano's *CA001: Synthesized Identity* and *CA002: Synthesized Archive* delve into contemporary Western world AI imaging technologies to better understand their capabilities and limitations. Their image outputs are a mirror to society's understanding of themselves and the societies around them, revealing image outputs that range in accuracy. Melenciano uses both self-portraiture and archival materials as the foundation for her works and inputs a series of text-based prompts into an AI imaging machine to influence how her appearance and historical images are rendered and transformed, revealing the tool's understanding of social, cultural, and political nuance or lack thereof.
- William Powhida's *Koch Industries (Private Company)* is a watercolor and ink drawing visually representing the Koch Industry's vast web of political, cultural, and business connections. The piece highlights their involvement in supporting right-wing groups like the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, their foundations as an oil-refinery company that supplied Hitler's Luftwaffe during World War II, and their influential positions on the boards of The MET Museum and The American Museum of Natural History.
- Bat-Ami Rivlin *Untitled (foam, shop rags)* explores waste streams, material production, and the illogic systems behind them. The foam used in the sculpture was obtained from a friend who purchased a mattress but was left with the foam after returning it. Despite the foam being in good condition, the mattress company refused to take it back as they had no use for it. Rivlin's sculpture showcases the foam as it is, highlighting its lack of purpose and the wastefulness of production processes that create inert materials that serve no functional, biodegradable, or desirable purpose.
- In *Panorama 94* (2019) and *60 Detected Rings* (2021), Rose Salane conducted a multi-pronged analysis of lost rings acquired through a Metropolitan Transportation Authority auction and by metal-detector enthusiast Jill Benedict on the shores of Atlantic City, New Jersey. In assembling this archive of speculative information about each of the rings, Salane offers a way to quantify a city through a set of routines, rituals, and truths that are both site and object-specific.
- The ongoing series of seats by Finnegan Shannon, *Do You Want Us Here or Not*, aims to provide comfort and promote rest while also drawing attention to the ableist tendencies that prioritize standing. Shannon's bench has been commissioned for the exhibition and will be on long-term display at the entrance of the George Segal Gallery.

- TJ Shin shares their experiences as a fellow at the University of Indiana in *Altarlife 1, 2, 3*. Through architectural details from the archives that house the university's Native American artifacts, Shin sheds light on the protocols that permit displacement and violence, allowing museums to simultaneously allow and restrict access to cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems. Each image of the archive is paired with photographs of nearby indigenous sites where objects and materials are extracted, juxtaposing concepts of ownership, cultural stewardship, and extraction. Shin reflects on the position artists find themselves in when invited to produce work for institutions that participate in forms of colonial violence.
- Julia Weist's *Motion Picture Division Association of America* consists of wallpaper, posters, and a short film called *Governing Body*. The film includes scenes censored by the New York State government's Motion Picture Division from 1921-1965. Weist submitted the film to the Motion Picture Association (MPA) and it was given an R rating. Through her research on the state-run Motion Picture Division and the MPA's responses, Weist reveals how and what forms of representation in cinema are allowed within a widespread distribution.

### **Digital Engagement**

The University Galleries is a proud partner of [Bloomberg Connects](#), the free arts and culture app created by Bloomberg Philanthropies. The Bloomberg Connects app, available for download from Google Play or the App Store, makes the University Galleries accessible for both onsite or offsite visits through photo, audio, and video features that offer insights into past and current exhibitions from artists, curators, professors, students, and more. The Galleries joins over 200 cultural organizations around the world with exclusive digital guides on Bloomberg Connects.

### **Publication**

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated digital catalog featuring interviews with the artists, faculty, and staff.

### **Gallery Hours**

Tuesday – Friday, 12 – 4 p.m.

Open on select Saturdays of the month and by appointment.

### **Opening Reception**

Thursday, September 14

5 – 7 p.m.

Segal Gallery

Celebrate the opening of Montclair State University Galleries Fall 2023 exhibitions *The Backend*, *Case Studies: Joseph Parra – the edge of flesh and blood*, and *Sound Booth – Brian Oakes*

6 p.m.

Remarks by Director Megan C. Austin, Dean Daniel Gurskis, and Curator Jesse Bandler Firestone

[Register on Eventbrite](#)

### **About The Montclair State University Galleries**

The Montclair State University Galleries brings together ideas, perspectives, and dialogues to foster curiosity and shared understandings through art. The University Galleries presents diverse and inclusive exhibitions and programs creating connections that unite the campus experience with local and global

communities. [www.montclair.edu/galleries](http://www.montclair.edu/galleries)

All exhibitions and programs are free and open to the public.

### **Social Media**

Join the conversation on social media by tagging @montclairstategalleries and using the hashtag #MontclairStateGalleries when posting.

### **Support**

This exhibition is made possible, in part, by funds from the McMullen Family Foundation, the College of the Arts, and private contributions.

### **Media Contact**

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