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Pivotal Axes

Sarah Bednarek and Nichole van Beek

February 9 - March 7, 2017

Essay by Karen Schiff

Flecker Gallery
Suffolk County Community College
Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

Director's Foreword

It is a real pleasure to be a part of organizing and producing this exhibition, *Pivotal Axes: Sarah Bednarek and Nichole van Beek*. This show and catalogue are the culmination of many conversations starting with meeting Nichole, whose work I was already a fan of, on Orchard Street about a year and a half ago in Manhattan's Lower East Side at a mutual friend's opening. Not long after, I visited her studio in Gowanus and after some time considering who might make a great two-person show with her, I reached back out to Nichole, who immediately suggested we reach out to Sarah Bednarek, whom I had not yet met and whose work I was unfamiliar with. After an introduction, many emails, studio visits with both artists, studio visits with Karen Schiff, author of the following essay, a lengthy dialogue between Sarah and Nichole, and a lot more emailing, this show and catalogue were born.

There is a natural, elemental, alchemy in this show. These works exceed the sum of their parts and have a presence that extends beyond the limits of their form, beyond the material. For me, geometry and nature are inescapably transcendental, evoking our micro and macro realities, and the mysteries within and beyond. My inclination is to read Bednarek's work as a microcosmic abstraction; basic structures, elemental geometric forms. By contrast, van Beek's paintings become macrocosmic encounters with impossible and tantalizing illusions situated in a space that is once grounded in the familiar, the natural, yet is infinitely expansive. In the mind's eye, the works of these two artists could sit at the extremes of the micro and macro vision of the universe as explored in Charles and Ray Eames' *Powers of Ten*. Fortunately for us, they also sit very well together in the same room.

The dialogue and essay that follow open a number of delightful dimensions of the work and concerns of these artists, including discussion of the state of art in the current political climate, gender in the arts and sciences, mathematics as a bridge to abstract thought, and art as social speech and an elegant act of resistance. These artists affirm that visual art is a poetic language of gesture, perhaps a kind of body language, built of every element and decision in the work and can carry profound ideas in subtle expression. Consider a hand painted surface or a well-executed hand made form, these prioritize the human, the unique and personal, eschewing the mass-market and mass-culture. Mathematically complex abstract forms such as these demand intellectual activity from the audience, and therefore, stand against willful ignorance and intellectual laziness. Objects and images made with such careful consideration embody this characteristic of thought and action as a primary value and as such, stand against thoughtlessness and carelessness in both art and life.

Wassily Kandinsky opened his canonical 1912 work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* with the following sentence: "Every work of art is the child of its time" – a great, inescapable, concise truth. In my view, the highest aims of art in our time are to manifest empathy and critical thought. Works that embody such values as those mentioned above, and that are both marvelous and beautiful, have the capacity to inspire and drive these aims and more. Kandinsky also makes the case for the artist as cultural shaman, with a mission to guide society toward the pinnacle of existence, a romantic sentiment I wholeheartedly embrace. The work of Sarah Bednarek and Nichole Van Beek presented in this exhibition provide a distinct and palpably elevated experience of this world and, if I may, perhaps a lift to a higher plane, or two. Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring, Director

Care-full Geometries Karen Schiff

This exhibition opens in the winter, a season chilly not only because of its weather but also, this year, because of the after-effects of the presidential election. Sarah Bednarek and Nichole van Beek are keenly aware of this circumstance, and both have been sorting out its consequences for their art practice. Like many artists these days, they have been reassessing their aesthetic projects, especially because political realities have been urging them toward maximally direct modes of communication and action. Should they abandon their carefully cultivated abstractions, and move toward representative strategies? How do their geometries speak now?

These paintings and sculptures offer constructive counterpoints to the radical abstraction of "post-truth" discourse. A word can mean opposite things when used sincerely vs. sarcastically; a polygon can [seem to] come forward or go backward in space. But while the abstract space of language ultimately has no certain footholds — especially when words are tossed around without any consistent connection to reality — these artists' strategies for generating visual and material form show that the physical concreteness of abstract art can be specific and grounding.

Both Bednarek and van Beek begin with math, which might suggest that they are trying to transcend worldly concerns. After all, what is the reality status of geometry, whose theories are postulated on the irreducibly theoretical figures of the point, line, and plane? Plato held that the ideal forms that we can imagine — say, a perfect sphere or cube — are more "real" than any of our incarnations of them. Try to draw a simple circle, and the result will never be totally circular, and every attempt will vary. In Plato's abstract/philosophical realm, by contrast, geometric form is singular, unambiguous. To access such clarity, it's necessary to keep your head in the clouds.

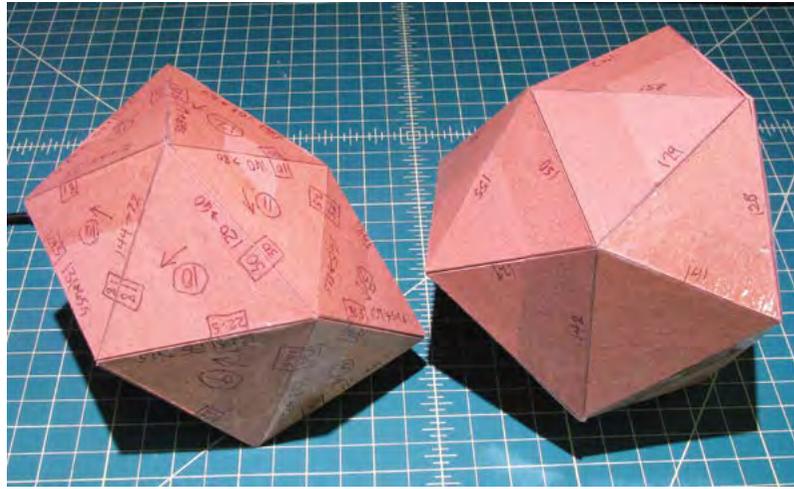
Yet a physical rendering of a geometric ideal can be itself, certainly and delightfully. And the definitive contours of given shapes, as these artists construct them in two or three dimensions, can signal multivalences that feel like Plato's abstract realm. This is because the shapes are functioning not just physically, but theoretically as well, and sometimes they are hard to parse. This complexity is the ground for the playful suggestiveness of these sculptures and paintings.

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"I want to start from primary facts," says Sarah Bednarek, paying homage to the basic elements



Nichole van Beek, "No Skins, Hides, or Bones", 2016, acrylic on dyed canvas, 20 x 20 inches



Sarah Bednarek, preliminary steps - chip-board scale models for "Sphenomegacorona", 2014

of geometry, yet also indicating the basic, physical exigencies of everyday life. Her multifaceted polyhedra, though they do begin with regular geometries, quickly diverge from them: Bednarek multiplies forms, twists them, and inverts convexities and concavities. Her woodgrain material harks back to household items from the 1970s, suggesting that some of her sculptures are like furniture you can live with. Though her forms have digital precision, they are not created by computer: these "primary facts" are familiar, homespun, and not part of online commercialism.

Bednarek's manifestations of mathematical concepts resemble microbiological structures and sexual body parts, as if the fetish objects of Louise Bourgeois were

seen through the macro lens of Wilson Bentley (an early photographer of snowflakes). Her work conveys the intimacy of both Bourgeois and Bentley, too. First impressions are of a personal quirkiness in shapes and color choices. The hues are specially mixed, with impressive boldness, and their cheeriness is more sober than slap-happy. Closer inspection reveals that the artist is deeply connected to the fabrication process: the meticulously crafted joinery has irregularities that show its handiwork, and the resplendent surfaces are carefully sanded and painted so that fine textures are visible.

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While Bednarek's sculpted geometries sometimes evoke the natural forms of the human body, Nichole van Beek literally starts each painting with the natural, formal geometries she finds in plants. A photogram of leaves, captured using different colors of photosensitive dyes painted directly onto the canvas, creates an undercurrent of pattern. These forms can be seen as three-dimensional "real" life or as two-dimensional abstract structures: this ontological ambiguity is the obverse of the geometrically abstract forms painted over the photograms. Because the latter mathematical forms are constructed with thick paint, their abstract structures can be seen as existing in a non-dimensional, theoretical space or as bursting with "real" physicality. In a small painting of a (four-dimensional) hypercube, symmetry gives way to spatial ambiguity, so that seemingly denotative brushstrokes no longer create clear illusions. In a larger painting of a polyhedron, lines are tight coils of acrylic, made by squeezing paint through a cake frosting bag, so that the relative clarity of the geometric form (which, unlike the hypercube, easily could be fabricated as a wire sculpture) is contradicted by the frenzy that constitutes its contours.

The cumulative result of these techniques is an unsettling of dimensional space, and a mixing of physical and non-physical frameworks. Van Beek says, for instance, that her dyed photograms "allow the figures to get constructed with reference to a landscape," but what is this landscape? On a formal level, she is placing the

geometric forms against a "landscape" of pattern, in a classic relation between foreground and background. On a literal level, she has created that patterned ground by gathering growths from the organic "landscape" that surrounds her studio, wherever she happens to be working, so her geometries attach to these larger, natural contexts. And on an even more expansive level, both of these — the 2D pattern on the canvas as well as the gesture toward the 3D plants near the studio — are in conversation with a non-dimensional, intellectual "landscape" which is the field of geometry and the history of depicting space.

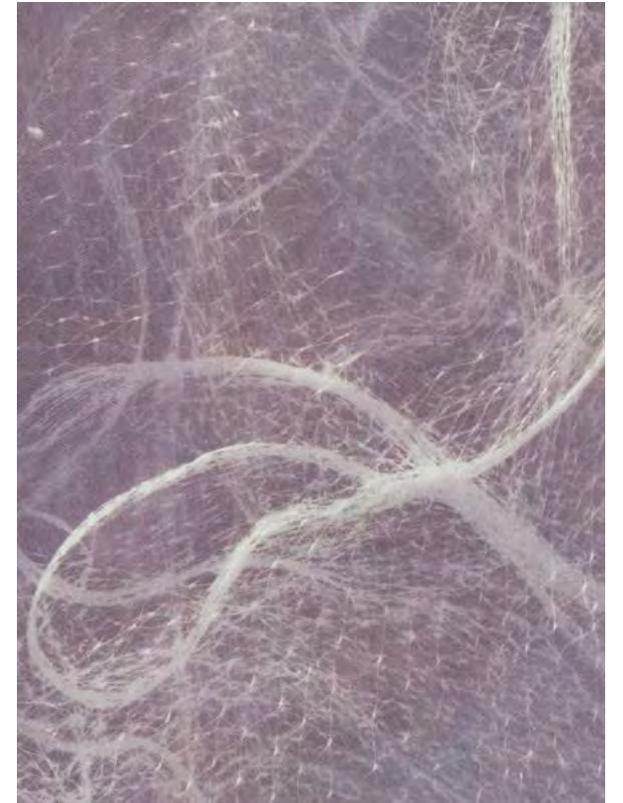
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Altogether, these works spark back and forth between "figuration" and "abstraction," physical facts and mathematical ideas. In van Beek's canvases, literal glitter underscores the electricity between these potential poles, while Bednarek's sculptures occupy space with an understated glow that seems to emanate from the integration of theoretical geometry and studio processes.

Now, how does all of this relate back to our political context? There are several possibilities. First, these works' complexities invite us to consider abstraction as a useful metaphor for the ambiguities of political "reality." Second, though geometry can be bracketed as existing in a theoretical realm, far from politics, it can serve as a reminder that political conditions coexist with apolitical realms — such as math, materiality, and love — to which we all have constant and consistent access. A subset of this idea is that geometric abstraction has long been sought after as a source of aesthetic replenishment, which is a kind of love-offering, amidst daily life.

How do the aesthetics of geometry link up with love? Actually, this is where we started: with the observation that these artists create "carefully cultivated abstractions." Their work is "careful" not only in the sense that it is deliberately attentive; but also because it is full of caring. Taking care, as an act in itself — especially as these artists mix it with their conceptual scaffolding and their material processes — constitutes a loving response to any concerns, political or otherwise.

Karen Schiff is an artist and writer based in New York. She has shown her work in solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally including at Danese Corey (New York, NY) Fred Giampetro Gallery (New Haven CT), as well as Schema Projects, Odetta Gallery, Centotto (all in Brooklyn, NY). She is also an active writer and has published numerous reviews and essays in Art in America, Tate Etc., Hyperallergic Weekend, Art Journal, and the Brooklyn Rail.

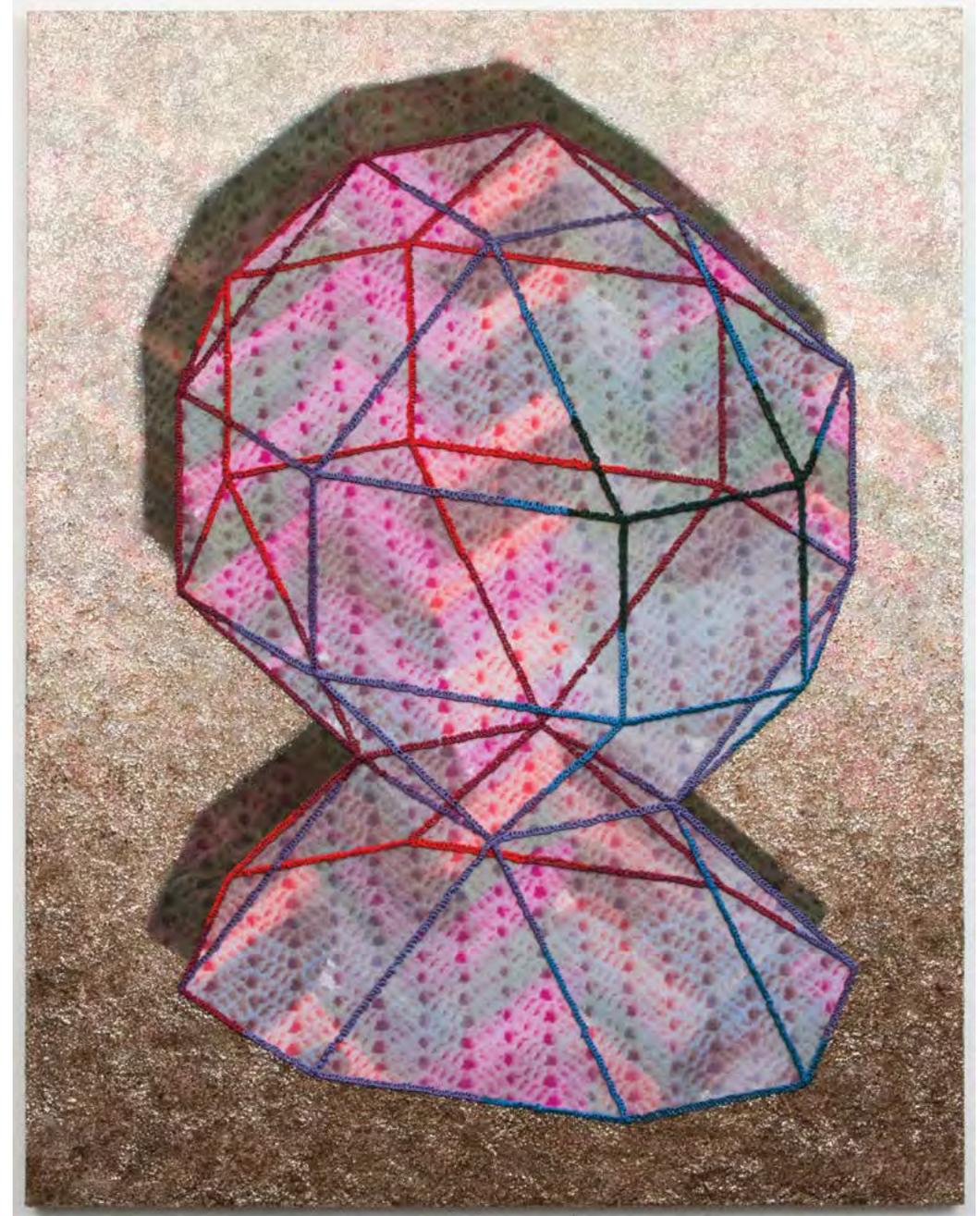


Nichole van Beek, preliminary steps - photo sensitive dye on canvas, detail, 2017

Sarah Bednarek, "Concave Sibling", 2016, mdf, walnut veneer, paint, 30 x 30 x 30 inches



Nichole van Beek, "Omahedron", 2016, mica and acrylic on dyed canvas, 48 x 38 inches





Sarah Bednarek, "Pink Experiment", 2016, mdf, walnut veneer, paint, 36 x 19 x 20 inches

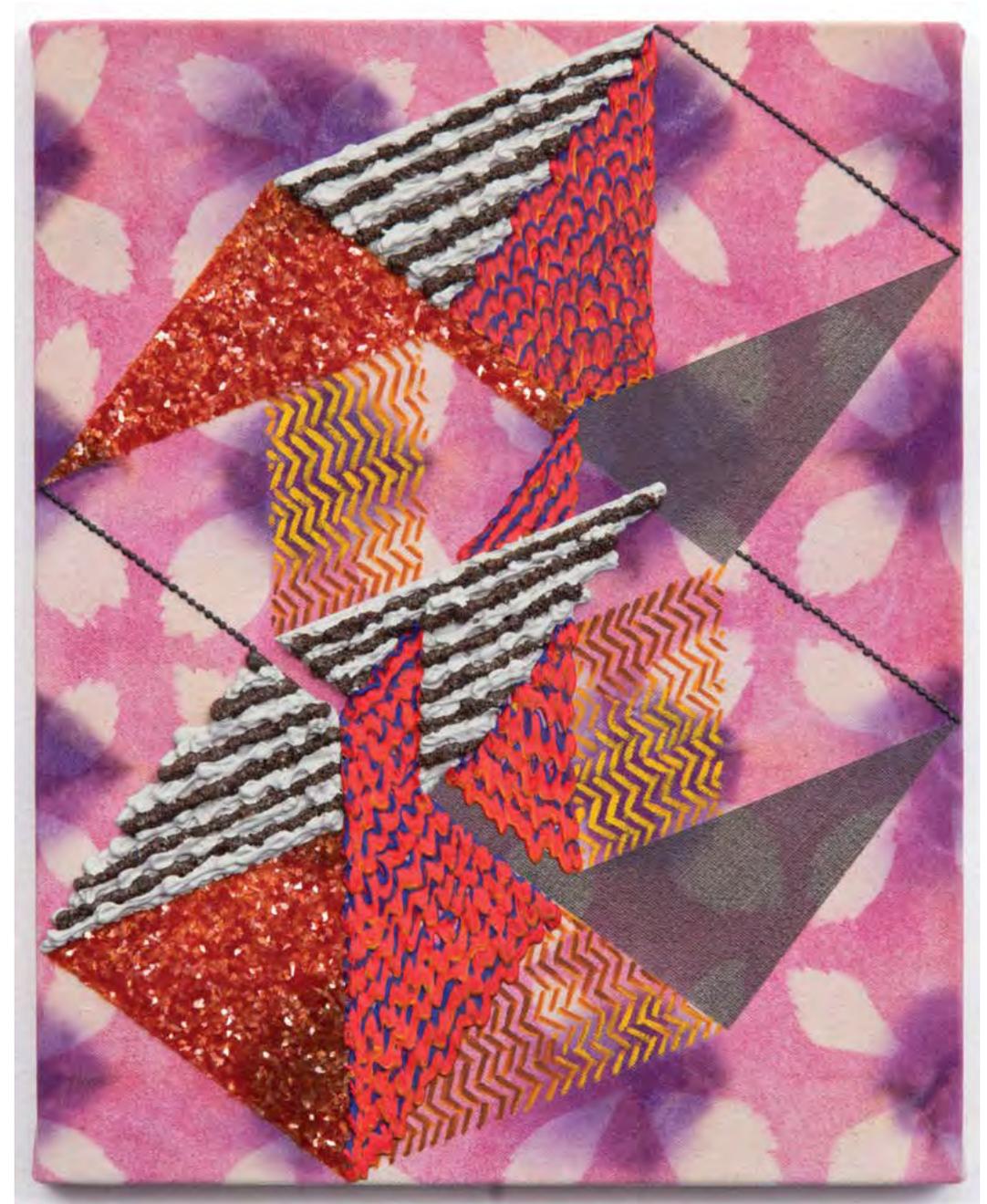
Nichole van Beek, "Necker", 2016, mica, glass, sand, and acrylic on dyed canvas, 15 x 12 inches



Sarah Bednarek, "Chartreuse Sibling", 2016, mdf, walnut veneer, paint, 9 x 20 x 9 inches



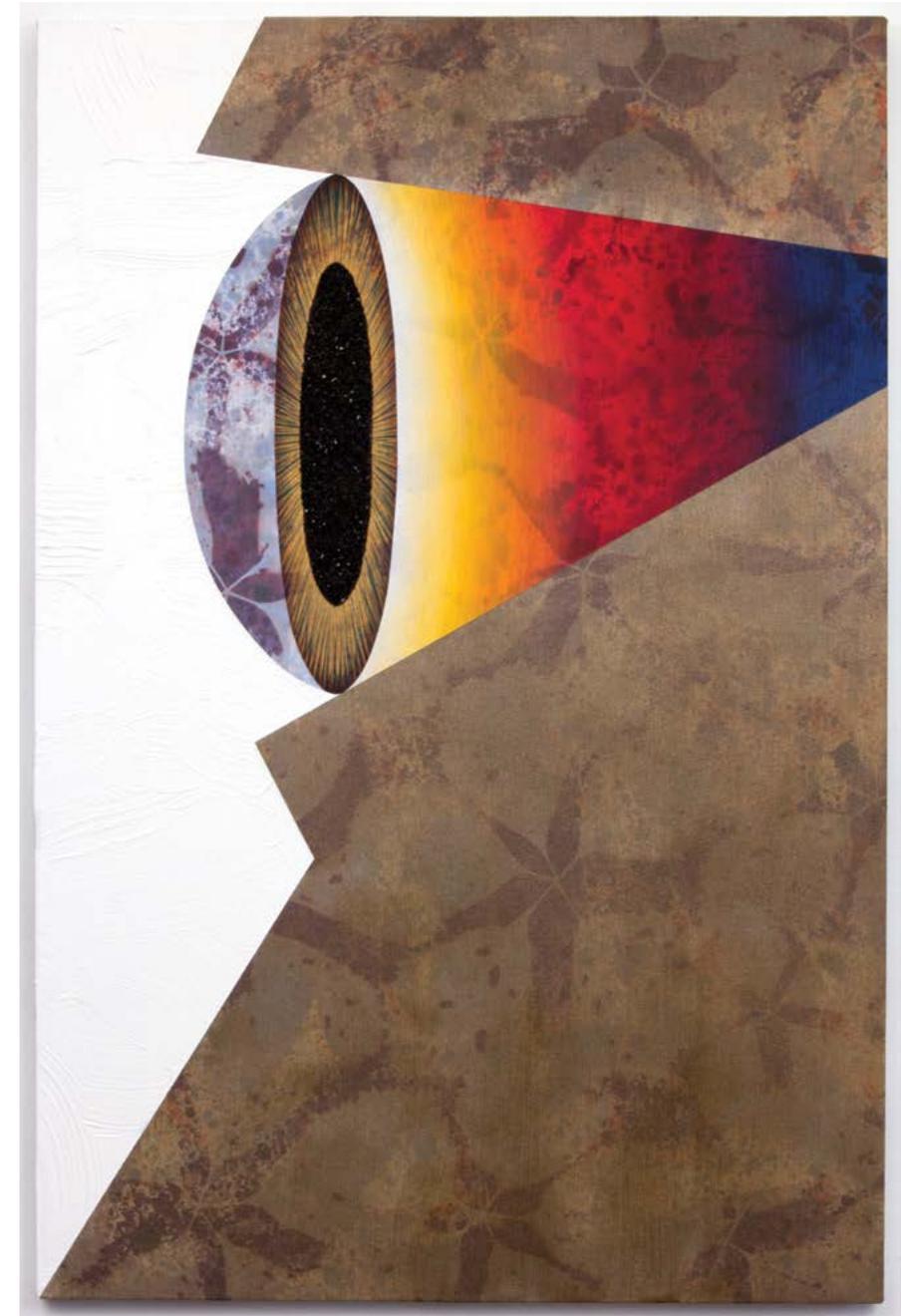
Nichole van Beek, "A Special House", 2016, glass, graphite, and acrylic on dyed canvas, 15 x 12 inches





Sarah Bednarek, "Sphenomegacorona", 2014, mdf, mahogany veneer, 60 x 30 x 42 inches

Nichole van Beek, "The Morning After", 2016, glass, glitter, and acrylic on dyed canvas, 42 x 28 inches





Sarah Bednarek, "Disphenocingulum", 2014, mdf, hickory veneer, aluminum, 60 x 42 x 48 inches

Nichole van Beek, "All Fall", 2015, glitter, fiber paste, and acrylic on dyed canvas, 15 x 12 inches





Sarah Bednarek, "Teal Sibling", 2016, mdf, oak veneer, paint, 23 x 13 x 13 inches

Nichole van Beek, "Garden Maze", 2016, acrylic and fiber paste on dyed canvas, 18 x 15 inches



Artists in Conversation (December, 2016):

NvB: Why are you interested in geometry?

SB: I became interested in geometry when I gave up political commentary in my artwork. I thought I should start over with the basic principles of line, plane, form, color, texture, scale, etc. because I had sidelined these things over a rhetorical approach to making. Since then I have appreciated things such as the symmetry of turning things inside out, or the symmetry of upside down/right side up relationships, or the interchangeability of units. These are concepts and relationships that I find interesting to explore, rather than using my work as an ideological vehicle.

NvB: That's funny that you say that because I feel like I had a similar thing happen after grad school. I believe that art can address social and political issues in a powerful way, and I was attempting to do that then, but I wasn't very good at getting a message across about a particular cause. I put some very direct references in the work: like drawings of local politicians or images with a lot of red, white, and blue. Many people seemed dismissive or almost offended by that, and I'm not sure if that was because it wasn't good or because some people prefer art to be non-political.

So after grad school I put aside the large-scale photo-based sculptures and installations that I was doing at the time and focused on the basics of color theory and composition in small work on paper. I chose one shape, a teardrop, and used that as a starting point for working through things for a couple of years in a very intimate way.

When you talk about geometry do you mean three-dimensional forms or two-dimensional geometry as well? What is the difference between geometry and composition?

SB: Isn't it funny how grad school is this intense time where you do something completely different for a couple of years and afterwards you have to do something in reaction to those years?!

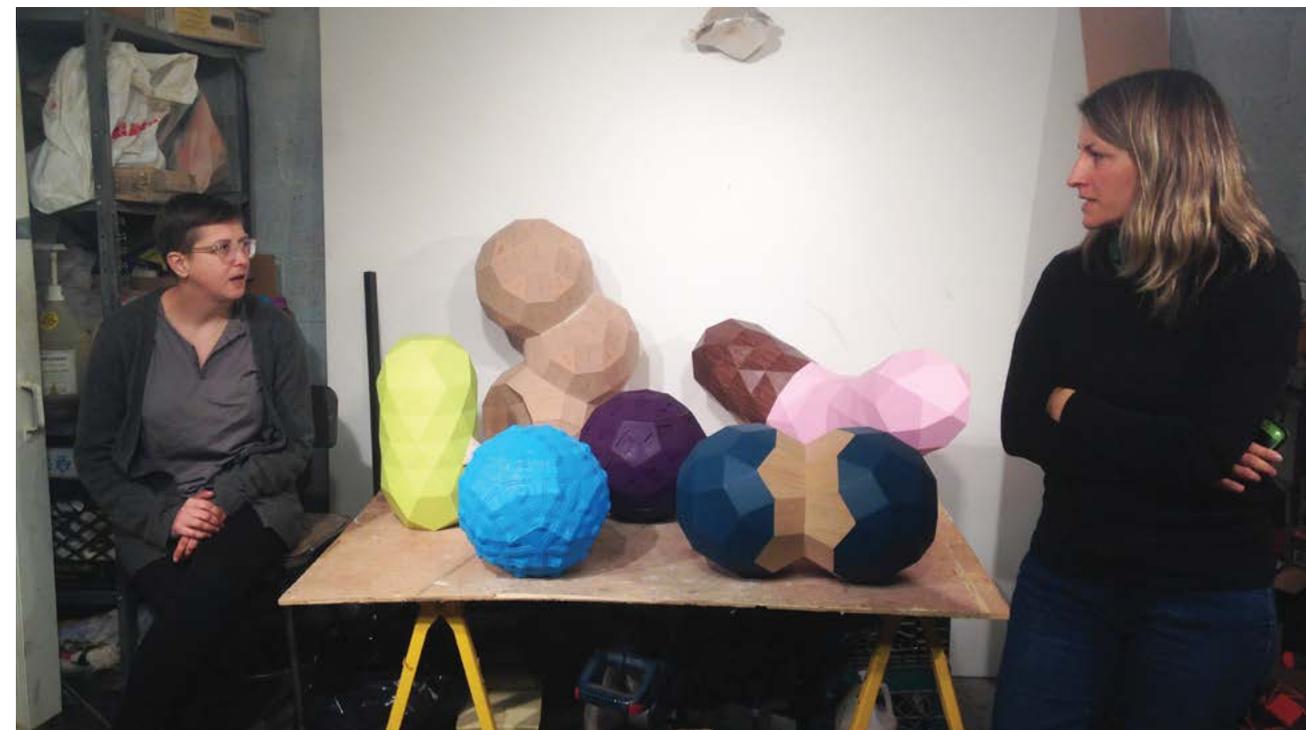
Anyway, about geometry: I guess I think of geometry as how we rationalize and calculate the world around us, and also the mathematics we use for creation within that world, whether it's the illusionistic space of the picture plane or the 3D space of 3D stuff. I've never really thought about it as an issue, but I feel like geometry is a tool to create compositions which are maybe just pleasing arrangements of stuff. Although . . . now that you brought it up, I'm beginning to think that maybe our ideas of what's pleasing are just a form of proof or equality, in a mathematical sense.

NvB: You mean in the way that the golden mean is both a mathematical formula and a way to arrive at something compositionally pleasing?

SB: Yeah, exactly. Do you think of geometry as being different from composition?

NvB: I think you're right that generally there's an association of making something "pleasing" when we talk about composition, and that geometry implies a lack of aesthetic concerns. When I'm working out the framework in my paintings and drawings, I think both in terms of what feels good compositionally and how the space is being divided mathematically. Sometimes the raw geometry is the best way of arriving at something satisfying, and sometimes I get there through a more intuitive process.

I loved Geometry class in high school. I think it was 9th grade? I also took mechanical drawing in 9th and 10 grade, which I think about often in relation to my work now. It's surprising how those things come back, and also how both of those modes of thinking and making are generally left out of traditional art school education in college.



Sarah Bednarek (left) and Nichole van Beek (right) in Sarah's Bushwick studio, 2016. Photo by Matthew Neil Gehring.

Can you talk more about what the "symmetry of turning things inside out" and "upside down/right side up relationships" means?

SB: When I think of symmetry I'm thinking of a transformation or action that occurs where no information is lost or gained. So if you turn something inside out or rotate it, it's still the same thing, it's just reoriented.

NvB: How does that relate to your work?

SB: I've been inverting areas to make an interior space, or turning things upside down, or on their side, or extruding things outward, or replacing like but similar areas, or conjoining forms. So, I guess, I'm using these units and changing them with these kind of transformations, but they're still made out of the same components.

How about you? I know you were using letter forms in the past (which, seem like units to me) and illusionistically extruding them, and in your current work you seem to be contorting or twisting the subject.

NvB: Yes, I've been using simplified letter forms as basic building blocks for a few years, and each word or phrase has its own architecture. In many of the paintings and drawings I have used words that have doubled letters, like 'wow', or phrases that imply a doubling, like 'double trouble' because in a 3D letter you have a front and back, which is the extruded form you mentioned. They have become a set of interchangeable units of cubes, cylinders, and

prisms that inhabit the space within the frame and interact in a new way each time. I also sometimes let the non-doubled letters, like the 'o' in 'wow' remain 2D and meander through the 3D construction.

The illusion comes in because I use axonometric systems to draw them, not perspectival. That means the front and back are the same size, and that mental flipping can happen that is illustrated with the basic model of the Necker cube. Maybe that's what you mean by the figure looking contorted? Also the "background" is often painted with super thick paint, or something dense like fiber paste or sand, so the space gets really confused.

Last year I started to feel the limitations of working in that way and I began looking at geometry textbooks and websites to expand my constructions. One of the first things that caught my attention were the models of 4D space. That was something that I hadn't really thought about, and I'm still trying to work out the meaning of. I think the first assumption is that you go from point, to line, to depth, to time, and that's what gives you the 4D. But representing all of that on a static 2D plane is ridiculous, and in my understanding doesn't correspond with what we know about space-time.

That was about the time I came to your studio and realized you were working with similar ideas. How and when did you get interested in those specific mathematical forms? Do you know the geometry terms for all of your pieces? I'm still working on that.

SB: Most of the stuff in this show, in the recent past, and upcoming, were originally based on the Johnson solids, which are a limited group of theoretical objects following certain rules including convexity, symmetry on a certain number of planes, faces composed of regular polygons, etc. The reason I became interested in this stuff is because I had a ceramics residency and couldn't reconcile the material to the kind of work I was doing before, mainly geometric origami/folding. Making vessels, of a sort, out of hand-built slabs was more consistent with the material than trying to make clay fold or bend (obviously). Shortly after I realized I could use wood and also that I didn't have to conform to the rules for Johnson solids (or any other class of solids, such as Platonic) things began to have extrusions, depressions, extensions and mixing and matching because the parts are interchangeable and thus you can do any action you want, really.

Anyway, all that aside, I was definitely interested in the idea that there are theoretical mathematical objects floating around in our minds that we can visualize, that mathematicians have been studying, that they have names (like Sphenomegacaron, or Disphingulum), and that there are rules put in place that I was free to follow or break according to whim because I'm an artist, not a scientist.

NvB: Those are great names. And along the same line I've been thinking about my use of math in the same way a science fiction writer uses science. As an artist or a fiction writer you are free to bend the rules. I also use my work as a way to get to know something better, even though I might not understand it in the way a mathematician would, like the concept of higher dimensions.

SB: At this point I haven't made too many forays into special geometry spaces, such as non-Euclidean or 4D, but I do think they are of particular interest in your work. It's absurd that scientists, mathematicians, and geometers (if that's still a thing) try to approximate these spaces that are imaginary, theoretical, or something on a 2D plane in a book or on a screen. We spoke briefly about the experience of what it might be like to be one of the Flatlanders in the Flatland book encountering three-dimensional travelers; there might be a parallel to how we try to illustrate additional dimensions or irregular space on a 2D plane. Our eyes, our bodies, and our remembered experience are mostly unequipped to imagine such a thing, and so we try to use analogies and it doesn't really work. It's also completely ridiculous to try to represent the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface, but, of course, we've been doing that for 20,000 years or something so, you know, whatever works.

NvB: I guess one of the biggest differences now is the use of a computer, although it's interesting that we both avoid it. Why is it important for you to make an object by hand?

SB: I have tried to use a computer to aid in the process of making my work, but it is slower and less useful for me. In addition, I have found out, by building the models, by doing the math, that I am more interested. It's as if using the computer distances me from the process and thereby makes it less worthwhile because all the hard work is hidden inside the box.

I also try to avoid machine made surfaces, and while I do use some power tools in my process I try to do a lot of it by hand (like using a brush to paint instead of spraying). Honestly, I'm not sure why, except that it feels right.

NvB: I know what you mean. The choice to focus on drawings and paintings was for me a move away from digital photography and photography, which I had been engaged with for nearly ten years after undergrad. I moved back to NYC from California in 2007 and I realized if I wanted to continue what I was doing I would need to keep up with the newest camera, printer, computer, and software, not to mention find space and facilities to make sculptures and installations. It was all so equipment-heavy and I didn't want to be tied to it.

I was also finding it hard to make anything with the computer and printer that was satisfying in terms of surface, and issues of durability kept coming up. I was printing on paper and fabric and using that to construct objects, and even though it was intensely handmade it always felt kind of distant, like you said. The prints came out so crisp and it's difficult to reconcile that with any smudges, wrinkles, or tears that unframed work on paper will naturally accrue. I cut them up and glued them and even tried to laminate the prints but then they were just gross pieces of plastic. I think some artists are able to deal with that finicky nature of paper-based work directly: I just saw a show of Monica Palma's work at Ortega y Gasset that incorporated tears and folds and Letha Wilson's combination of photos with sculptural materials like concrete come to mind.

SB: Love those guys' work!

NvB: Beyond all that I really don't want to be stuck sitting in front of a computer all day to make art. The physical aspect of that is too draining. However, I think the foundations of my interests in the perceptual questions that come up through the representation of 3D space began in part during some classes in undergrad in 3D animation. Our exposure to and understanding of virtual space gives our generation a fundamentally altered conception of representation and maybe of reality.

SB: You know, I think humans will never be able to give up making stuff by hand. I'm going to sound like a total luddite here, but I guess, my point is that, I have a body and it does stuff, and that is way more interesting than what the computer can do.

I feel like computers have yet to evolve into something more than a tool for manufacturing. They're really good at making it easy to make lots of something, but if you want to do something singular it's more interesting to do it yourself. As a maker I can give myself permission to make illogical or taste-based decisions but a computer can only do what I tell it to do. There's no surprise in that.

NvB: Surprises in art are really gratifying. How great is it when you walk into a gallery and can't suppress laughing out loud? Your new pink spread-eagle sculpture is kind of like that!

SB: That's really flattering! I'm always worried that my choices aren't actually funny and that I'm only laughing with myself, especially when I'm working with something as "dry" as geometry. Sometimes being funny can highlight other concerns in your work though, such as slyly commenting on political realities. I feel a responsibility to do

something to prevent tyranny right now, but I'm often not sure art or the art world are the right place to do so.

NvB: Maybe the question is not so much about whether art is the right place for political or activist discussions but rather if it is effective. An artist can have explicit political content in the work but it doesn't mean that it will help solve the problem it is highlighting, and if doesn't instigate change what's the point? But determining the level of effect an artwork might have on the world isn't easy.

I entertain the thought that the choice to make personal, formal decisions about composition, color, surface, or materials is a kind of political act. It certainly stands in the face of mechanization and mass production, and ultimately mass consumption, which is a huge problem for us. But then does that just mean we are making bespoke objects for the wealthy?

SB: I think it's really easy, if someone has an axe to grind, to accuse formal work of being baubles for rich people, but it's not like suddenly when you make politically engaged work it resists being a commodity. Just like anything else, art is susceptible to cooptation. I'm convinced that institutional critique, when bought by the very institutions it criticizes, is completely useless as a tool for change. With this in mind, the choice to make something individual, personal, and considered, while maybe not attacking the political issues of the day, is a more radical choice. The individual is engaged, and isn't that where all change begins anyway? Of course, you could also say that this is just what yuppies love with their artisanal this and that.

NvB: Choosing to focus on small or medium-scale drawings and paintings has brought that question up a lot for me. It's very recognizably art and doesn't challenge the status quo in form all that much, but I think limitations in scale and medium can also be liberating. It allows for more iterations that can support the evolution of ideas, and lets you be more self-reliant.

I admit that with Trump's election I feel like I've been complacent for the past eight years. I'm looking at what I've been doing with new questions and wondering if all the subtlety in abstract work makes sense as we slip into this pit of disinformation. In the face of this I don't think it's wrong for artists to keep doing what they've been doing and what they feel they know the best, but I also think it would be natural to want to shift the focus or reallocate time.

SB: We're all reevaluating our decisions now that the world of politics has gone so crazy. And one of the discussions we're having now is about feminism and artwork. I've been a feminist since becoming aware as a child that there are cultural and social restrictions on the female gender. So, for me, feminism became one of my primary concerns. I am most interested in building things and I think that bears a relationship to the kind of feminist I am. If it can be claimed that woodworking and metalwork are the domain of men, then I have been undermining that assertion by working artistically and professionally in those fields all of my life. My point is that I try to live ordinary life in a feminist way, and there isn't a separation from my everyday feminism and my studio.

I know you're a feminist, do you think about your work in that context?

NvB: Yes. It's hard to put aside an awareness that most of the art historical narrative presented in museums and books tells about the work of men. I think of what I'm doing as in dialogue with all of that. A person's relationship to their own gender (or race) shapes how they view the world, and of course in turn the type of work they make. Some artists choose to say that gender is not a part of how their work is formed, but I don't see how that could be the case. Even if you thought of yourself as completely genderless wouldn't that be a part of your work?

I do think it's easier now for women, at least in some parts of the world, to have equal opportunities, and maybe that's why people seem to get confused about the need for feminism. I've heard younger artists dismiss those kind of questions, and I would guess they are thinking about how things are for them and their peers rather than the

dismal statistics about major museum shows or how buyers tend to be men and want work that reflects their manliness.

One tactic for addressing feminism is to do what you are talking about: subverting traditionally male roles in a particular craft. That can also be in a subject, like math, architecture, or engineering, although that is tricky to talk about because it's counterproductive to characterize all women as doing those things just to subvert traditional roles and not as natural things that they just do. Another method is to focus on traditionally female craft or subject matter, and stand by it as something that warrants equal attention.

SB: You're absolutely right about that, and I think that's one of the things that's really nice about feminism now. You can do both, neither are "wrong" or against orthodoxy.

NvB: I do wonder how much of those decisions translate to the viewer, and that comes back to a question of how the current social/political situation will affect what we're doing in next couple of years. It is possible that I will want to make less abstract work, but in fact I'm not always sure that my work is abstract. Do you consider yours to be? How does it relate to other conceptions of abstraction?

SB: I do consider my work to be abstract. I really like the Minimalists and I feel specifically like their concept of the gestalt is particularly of interest. It's really hard to purge contexts, inferences, and connotations and to pursue a whole just in itself. I am interested in this idea, but also try to break the rules in other ways, like referring to the body or to furniture - which was totally verboten according to some of the minimalists.

NvB: That word gestalt is also something that I find hard to define because it is used in different contexts. What does it mean to you?

SB: I guess what I mean when I'm using the word gestalt is an indivisible object that can not be appreciated unless it is taken just as itself (rather than the definition used in psychology). My guess is that you don't feel that your work engages with gestalts because your work has so much variety. Perhaps this is one of the places where we differ?

NvB: Ha! My understanding of gestalt is probably more in terms of the psychology definition, in which a whole that is not seen fully is constructed from the parts or pieces. In that sense I use it very directly because I often remove sections of lines in my drawings which then asks the viewer to reconstruct the object in their mind.

SB: You mentioned earlier that you're not sure your work is abstract, can you elaborate?

NvB: Abstraction is hard to pin down. It means something different from person to person and in different disciplines or historical contexts. Normally I tell people I make abstract paintings and drawings, because at first glance they are shapes and colors, but I get caught up with the fact that there is often an object in the work, which can be a kind of architectural structure, or a still-life arrangement, or sometimes even a human or animal form.

At the *Inventing Abstraction* show at the MoMA a few years ago there was a 1917 drawing by Theo van Doesburg "Studies for Composition (The Cow)" in several steps from representational to abstract. The first was clearly a cow as you might draw from a photograph, and the last was a bunch of squares, triangles, and circles. In this case abstraction means starting with a reference and turning that into a formal or geometric composition. But what if you are starting with shapes and then finding the references as you go along? Like a triangular prism might look like an A-frame house, a cylinder a can of soup, or a dodecahedron a head?

SB: Yeah, I think know what you mean, like what if the process of abstracting goes backwards, from a geometric form towards something that's more connotative? I think you and I might do something like that.



Sarah Bednarek earned her BFA from the University of Minnesota in 2002 and her MFA from the Sculpture and Extended Media program at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2005. Her exhibition record includes solo, curated, and group shows, both nationally and internationally with recent shows at the Thomas Hunter Project Space, Hunter College (New York, NY), ADA Gallery (Richmond, VA), ruSalon (Brooklyn, NY), Yashar Gallery (Brooklyn, NY), The Parlor (Brooklyn, NY), Zurcher Gallery (New York, NY), and Mulherin + Pollard (New York, NY). She has received awards and scholarships in support of her art including recent residencies at Hunter College (New York, NY), and the Sculpture Space Residency (Utica, NY). Currently a cancer survivor, she is focusing on her work. She lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.



Nichole van Beek earned her BFA from The Cooper Union in 1998 and her MFA from The University of California, Santa Barbara in 2007. She is represented by Jeff Bailey Gallery in Hudson, NY and has exhibited work at Geoffrey Young Gallery (Great Barrington, MA), Morgan Lehman Gallery (New York, NY), Interstitial (Seattle, WA), and Ortega y Gasset and The Parlour Bushwick in Brooklyn, among other spaces. In 2016 she received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant to attend the Vermont Studio Center. She was also the recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts grant in painting in 2012, and in 2011 she participated in Socrates Sculpture Park Emerging Artist Fellowship. She has taught in the Intensive English Program at Pratt Institute since 2012. She lives and works in Queens, NY.

Photo credit: Andrea Bergart

Pivotal Axes

Sarah Bednarek and Nichole van Beek

February 9 - March 7, 2017

Flecker Gallery

Suffolk County Community College, Ammerman Campus

533 College Road, Selden, NY 11784

<http://sunysuffolk.edu>

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Essay by: Karen Schiff

Dialogue by Sarah Bednarek and Nichole van Beek

Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Unless otherwise noted, all photos appear courtesy of the artists.

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