In 1849, Gustave Courbet painted The Stonebreakers, an image of an old man and a young boy crushing gravel under a glaring midday sun. This depiction of backbreaking toil, which was made at the outset of the industrial revolution and destroyed during World War II, became famous as a foundational work of Realism, an international movement in art and literature using naturalistic styles to highlight the plight of the individual. Made one year after the publication of the Communist Manifesto and 20 years after the invention of photography, it used a new form of socially engaged reportage and filmic veracity to strike a blow against its era’s prevailing romanticism and for true-to-life depictions of actual human conditions.

Nearly 170 years later, at the twilight of industrialized capitalism, Amie Siegel forges a new form of realism. And like Courbet she also uses stone—in this case decorative and carved—in her Blaffer Art Museum exhibition Medium Cool to consider work, value, and the human psyche. But Siegel’s engagements with the real in this project are anything but gritty depictions of manual labor. Instead, they echo the hyperreality our highly mediated, screen-based time. Her high-definition videos, installations, and paintings, reflect layered, shifting flows of images and information. Additionally, material culture, the objects surrounding us, rather than any individuals who may have produced it, are the primary subjects in the three featured works: Dynasty, 2017, an installation centered on a fragment of pink marble from Trump Tower; Fetish, 2016, a video exposing the annual cleaning of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud’s practice room and archaeological collection; Quarry, 2015, a large-scale video installation following the high-tech production-to-consumption cycle of the marble facades be decking multimillion dollar high-rise apartments; and, made especially for the Blaffer presentation, a new series of marble-dust paintings made at the Vermont, facility where the first half of Quarry was shot.

Over the last decade, Siegel (b. 1974, Chicago) has employed film, video, photography, performance, and installation to explore a breadth of themes, including history, psychoanalysis, economics, and the global trade in art and artefacts. Her works use the structure of poetry, the dispassionate perspective of sociology, and her own idiosyncratically paced, conceptually layered approach to investigate complex systems of power and wealth. With unhurried precision, often mirroring aspects of the systems she portrays, Siegel reveals society’s obsessions and their seductions and subversions.

Amie Siegel: Medium Cool
Toby Kamps

Amie Siegel: Medium Cool is organized by the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston’s Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts. Generous support for the exhibition is provided by Ingrid Arneberg, Leslie and Brad Bucher, Kristen and David Buck, Jereann Chaney, Culen K. Geiselman, Cecily Horton, and Sallie Morian.

Additional exhibition and program funding is provided by the Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, the George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation, the Sarah C. Morian Endowment, the John P McGovern Foundation, Jo and Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment at Blaffer Art Museum, the Farrell Family Foundation, and Blaffer Art Museum’s Advisory Board members.
The exhibition title, *Medium Cool*, while perhaps referencing the coldness of the stone material appearing in each of its component parts, also hints at the detached, almost forensic perspective with which Siegel employs in her various media. The title also references an overarching reading of component works. In the early 1960s, philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan described “cool media” as forms of communication, such as television, requiring the audience to piece together its larger significance. McLuhan’s idea inspired the innovative 1968 film by Haskell Wexler, *Medium Cool*, which blended the fictional, cinéma-vérité story of a jaded television news cameraman covering the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations that year’s Democratic National Convention in Chicago with real footage of the violent police riots that ensued.

Conceived separately, the works in *Medium Cool* together suggest a larger narrative of life in contemporary, late-stage capitalism—a time of social stratification, unsustainable consumption, and the displacement of labor through mechanization. The work *Fetish* is key to this reading. It depicts the annual deep-cleaning of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud’s practice rooms in his eponymous museum in London. When Freud fled Austria to the United Kingdom in 1938, he brought his extensive collection of over 2,500 photographs made from high-resolution scans of the surfaces of book-matchet, or mirror-image, slabs of the same stone, which resembles a giant Rorschach inkblot, an abstract mark used to provoke testing interpretations by psychoanalytic patients. A wall text lists the work’s contents and the stone’s provenance, or origin. Partly polished, partly rough and craggy and covered with cement on its backside, the marble fragment conjures up thoughts of opulent facades and future ruins, while its title calls to mind both Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1818 poem “Ozymandias” describing a crumbling monument to a long-forgotten empire and the popular, kitschy 1980s television drama of the same name chronicling the lives of a wealthy, scandal-plagued family.

Shown for the first time in the United States, *Quarry* looks at the transformation of marble from raw material to luxury product, from cold stone to a cool medium, a material prized by contemporary architects as a sign of wealth and sophistication. The video begins deep underground in a quarry in Danby, Vermont, where, incidentally, the decorative boulders dotting the interior courtyards of Houston’s Menil Drawing Institute and the stratified panels lining its restrooms were mined. Accompanied by an otherworldly musical score, Siegel uses her trademark gliding dolly shots to explore vast caverns, flooded grottoes, and underground cutting rooms. A two-part structure is revealed when the music repeats and the camera moves above ground to artfully staged model furniture onboard private yachts—Siegel comments on the ways the mundane can be transmuted into the precious. Her paintings perform a comparable alchemical act—a transformative feat common to both art and extractive industries.

In them, marble dust, a castoff, nearly worthless material made during the production of valuable marble statues or surfaces—and, incidentally, an ingredient in the usually invisible gesso used to prime a canvas before it is painted—becomes itself both the subject and the substance of a painting, traditionally one of the most valuable forms of fine art. The images themselves are extraordinary. Manifesting a three-dimensional quality, they resemble billowing, roiling clouds or erupting geysers, and their spatters and sprays replicate aspects of the act of sculpting. Sprays and spratters produce both additive, built-up surfaces and subtractive effects as they blast through primer layers to reveal raw linen supports. The fact that these works were produced in collaboration with automated honing and milling equipment points to the “animal spirits” enlivening all markets and the innate human capacity to perceive aesthetic gestures, whether human or naturally occurring.

By letting the self-actualizing and self-fulfilling aspects of aesthetic, economic, and ontological systems—whether the art world, real estate, or psychoanalysis—manifest themselves, Siegel turns the seductive languages of wealth-driven, information-age society back on itself. Because they provide no easy answers, her subtle, slow-burning critiques of contemporary social and economic life are themselves the coolest of media. Like environmentally scaled Rorschach inkblots, they ask their viewers to piece together a larger, essential narrative: to imagine the deepest dreams and desires of art and money and the largely invisible labor—manual and artistic—that produced them.

Amie Siegel earned a BA from Bard College in 1996 and a MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. Except for 2003—08, when she was based in Berlin—including on a DAAD Berliner-Künstlerprogramm residency, later as a Guggenheim Fellow — she has lived and worked in New York. She has had solo exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; South London Gallery; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; and Museum Villa Stuck, Munich and Kunstmuseum Stuttgart. Her work has been in group shows including Witte de With, Rotterdam; CAPC Bordeaux; Vancouver Art Gallery; MAXXI Museum, Rome; Hayward Gallery, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco; the 2018 Gwangju Biennale; and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.


Toby Kamps is the former Jane Dow Owen Director and Chief Curator at Blaffer Art Museum.