

Amie Siegel: Medium Cool

May 18 – October 12, 2019

Gallery Guide

Over the last decade, Amie 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 associative structure of poetry, the dispassionate perspective of sociology, and her own idiosyncratically paced, multi-layered approach to examine complex systems of power and value. With unhurried precision, often mirroring aspects of the systems she portrays, Siegel reveals society's obsessions and their seductions and subversions.

In the exhibition *Medium Cool*, Blaffer Art Museum features three recent works by Siegel: *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; and *Quarry*, a video following the production-to-consumption cycle of the marble facades bedecking multimillion dollar high-rise apartments. Additionally, for the Blaffer presentation, Siegel has made a new series of marble-dust paintings at the Vermont facility where much of *Quarry* was shot.

Conceived separately, these works together suggest a larger narrative of contemporary life and late-stage capitalism — a time of social stratification, unsustainable consumption, and the displacement of labor through mechanization. Freud used archaeology as a primary metaphor for his theories and collected over 2,500 ancient figurines, which we see being dusted in *Fetish*, along with lifting and vacuuming of the oriental rugs draping his analysis couch. Using an associatory, mining method similar to Freud's, *Quarry* and *Dynasty*, too, peer behind surfaces to speculate on the drives propelling society. Without providing easy answers, they ask what glossy marble surfaces — the patterns of which often resemble the Rorschach inkblots used in psychoanalysis — say about contemporary society and how it constructs value.

The exhibition title, *Medium Cool*, while referencing the coldness of the stone materials appearing in each of its component parts, also suggests the detached, almost forensic perspective Siegel employs in her various media. Additionally, it reinforces an overarching reading of her component-based works. In the 1960s, philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously described “cool media” as forms of communication requiring the audience to piece together its larger significance.

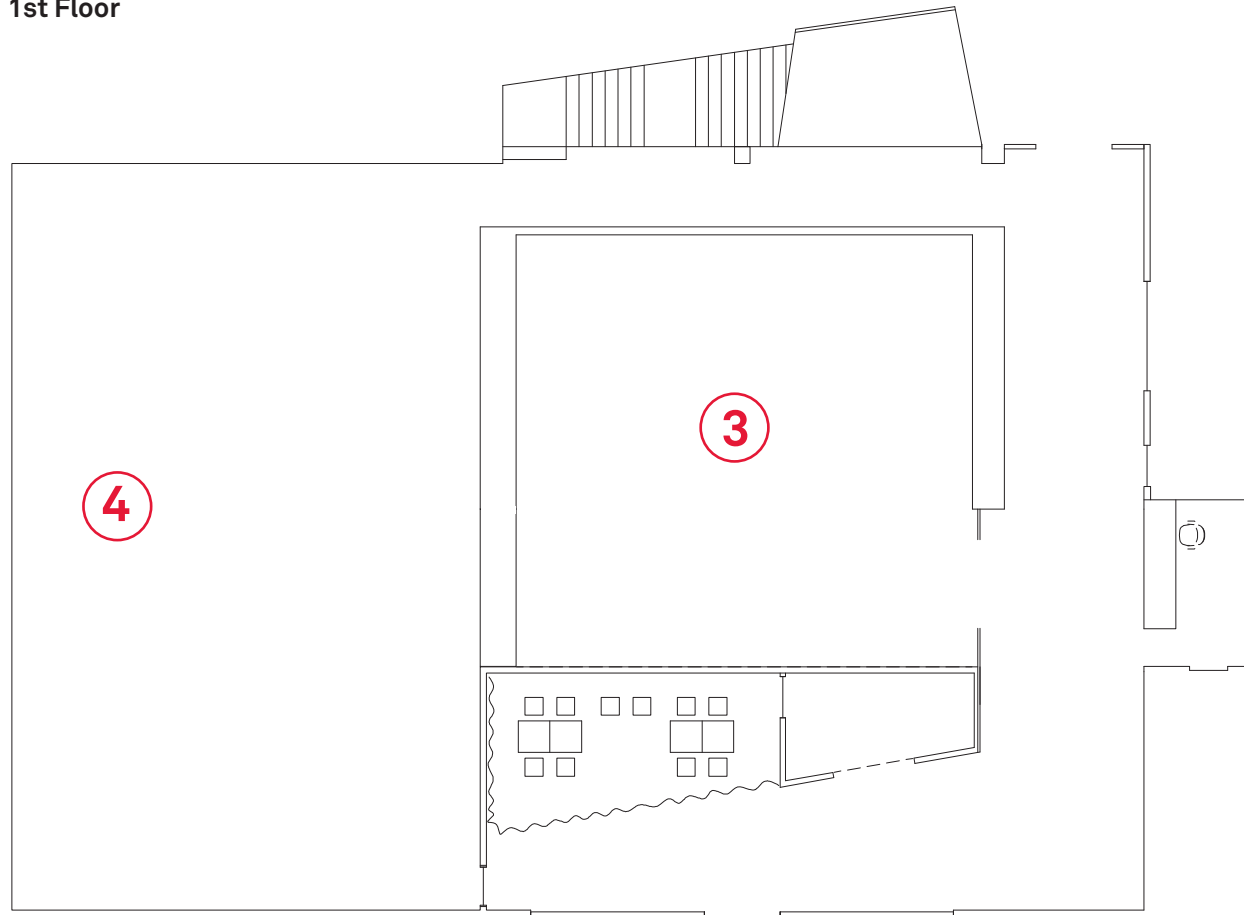
Amie Siegel: Medium Cool is organized by the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston's Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts. Generous support for the exhibition is provided by Ingrid Arneberg, Leslie and Brad Bucher, Kristen and David Buck, Jereann Chaney, Cullen K. Geiselman, Cecily Horton,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

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1st Floor



1 *Dynasty, 2017*
Trump Tower marble fragment, two chromogenic prints, archival pigment print, and vinyl wall text

Dynasty is an installation centered around a small piece of pink Italian Breccia Perniche marble taken from the lobby of Manhattan's Trump Tower, which Siegel purchased on eBay during the November 2016 election. The stone was selected by the president's first wife Ivana Trump, and he once bragged that it cost more than the "entire rent" of his buildings in Brooklyn. Spotlit in a vitrine, this chunk of stone is paired with a small, framed snapshot provided by the eBay seller to document its original location. Also featured in the gallery are two large, 1:1 scale photographs made from high-resolution scans of the surfaces of book matched, or mirror-image, slabs of the same stone. A wall text lists the work's contents and provenance. Partly polished, partly rough and craggy, this fragment conjures up thoughts of future ruins, while its title calls to mind both Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 poem "Ozymandias," which describes a crumbling monument to a long-forgotten empire, and the popular 1980s television drama of the same name chronicling the lives of a wealthy, scandal-plagued family.

2 *Fetish, 2016*
HD video, color/sound. 10 min.

Fetish 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 entire office with him, including his extensive collection of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian figurines. Siegel films the slow, painstaking processes of dusting and vacuuming in close-up detail, at once delicate and voyeuristic. Gloved hands touch ancient fetish objects, and vacuum cleaner hoses reach under the oriental rugs draping Freud's analysis couch. Eerily intimate and obsessive, Siegel's piece calls to mind the age-old struggle to understand the conflicted human psyche. With cool precision, Siegel depicts Freud's office as a fussed-over, fetishized time capsule. The work asks disconcerting questions: how did such a dynamic, destabilizing force emerge from this fusty space, and what secrets of human consciousness remain? Excavating layers of consciousness was central to Freud's psychoanalytic work, and the ways Siegel mirrors his methods in her study of the painstaking maintenance of his workspace in *Fetish* make it a key to the other works in *Medium Cool*.

3 *Quarry, 2015*
HD video, color/sound. 34 min.

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 minimalist aesthetic and an international symbol of wealth and sophistication. The video begins deep underground in a quarry in Vermont. 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 multimillion dollar apartments high above New York. The "real" and the "rendered" become indistinguishable, as Siegel alternates between actual footage of artfully staged model apartments and slick virtual renderings of life in the skyline. Ending on an open, windblown concrete high-rise construction deck, *Quarry* showcases the ways we are beguiled by luxury and its slick and opulent facades.

4 *Marble Dust Paintings, 2019*
Marble dust on linen and duvetyn

As a pendant to *Quarry*, Siegel has produced a new series of abstract paintings made from marble dust thrown off by equipment in the Vermont mine. These works, Siegel suggests, are both works of art in their own right and reproductions of the systems she considers. They continue modern art's interest in chance compositions — in this case the patterns and accumulations created by the actions of mining machinery, which their surfaces have collected — and also her investigations of how value accrues in the art market. In her 2013 work *Provenance*, for example, Siegel considers the global trade in 1950s armchairs designed by Pierre Jeanneret for a modernist government building in Chandigarh, India, by architect Le Corbusier. Tracing the movement of the chairs — from their dilapidated, cast-away state in India, to their restoration and sale as icons of mid-century design at Christie's auction house in New York, to their new lives as furniture onboard private yachts — Siegel comments on the ways the mundane can be transmuted into the precious. Her paintings perform a comparable alchemical act. Here, marble dust, a castoff, nearly worthless material made during the production of valuable marble statues or surfaces — and, incidentally, an ingredient in the usually unseen gesso used to prime a canvas before it is painted — becomes itself both the subject and substance of a painting, traditionally one of the most valuable forms of fine art.

All works courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston Gallery, New York.

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 — initially 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.

2nd Floor

