Transcript of Interview of Christina Quarles by Curators Daniel Strong and Greg Manuel.
Conducted in Conjunction with the Exhibition, ***Queer/Dialogue***, On view at the Grinnell College Museum of Art from 3 September through 11 December 2021.

Daniel Strong:
…The origin of the show is basically a student request, and then the checklist built from there. And I had first experienced your work in Trigger at the New Museum, and then I met Irina at Regan Projects for the first time at Art Basel, I guess it must've been 2019 or 2018, now I can't remember, I think it was 2019. And that was when I first approached her of possibly being able to include your work in this exhibition of the seven artists that we're bringing together on an exhibition called Queer Dialogue. And it's intended to be just that…a dialogue amongst artists, and in the gallery, each artist will have a section of their own to show their own work, but the way we set up the gallery there'll be these permeable spaces where people can draw connections between different artists working in different media.

So that's the background, so one of the things that I found out about you early that I'm curious to ask about is both of you are Midwestern, you were born in Chicago and then moved West, and then your education actually is in an old stomping ground of mine, which is Western Massachusetts. I saw that you got your BA at Hampshire, I got my first art history degree at Williams, and then I did an internship at the Smith College Museum,

Christina Quarles:
That's great.

Daniel Strong:
... In '95, '96, and then from '97 to '99 I was at the Mead Art Museum in Amherst.

Christina Quarles:
Oh, wow.

Daniel Strong:
So how did you find yourself in school in Western Massachusetts? And how did that affect your development as an artist?

Christina Quarles:
Well, so like you said, I was born in Chicago and my whole family is from Chicago, actually both sides, but everybody left. The only person that remained there was my great-grandfather who passed away at the age of hundred and a half, and he lived in the South side of Chicago his entire life. So from 1910 to 2010, he lived in the South Side of Chicago. My whole family moved either West or East, so I grew up in Los Angeles starting from the age of six I guess, I started first grade here. I grew up near Wiltshire and La Brea, so really close to the LA County Museum of Art. And I grew up here, and my aunts and uncles were out here, and my cousins were out here. So when I applied to college... Well, first of all I had done the whole tour of schools, my junior year with my nana. And we were only looking at art schools because that's what I assumed I wanted to do, because I was going to an arts high school at the time and I was really serious about being an artist. But then I all of a sudden decided that I didn't want to go to art school, and that I actually wanted to go to liberal arts school because I felt like I had had such a extensive education in the technical aspects of art making in high school because I was at this school where you apply to get in, but once you get in it's free and then you take like four hours of art classes a day. And it's all on a college campus so it also is like, "Hey, I graduated with two years worth of college credit and art courses."

So I was like, "I don't really want to start off doing Art 101." But I was just feeling like I needed to expand what I wanted to make art about. So for that reason, I decided to scrap all the

research I'd done and just apply to liberal arts schools because I really wanted to study philosophy, and theory, and things like that. I feel like this was in 2002 that I would have been applying to colleges, and the internet was still not that great of a research tool. So I just applied to the schools that people I knew were applying to.
If I'd had the internet, I probably would have applied to a whole different graduate schools. But in the end I actually got into Hampshire, and I got into Smith, but I ended up going to Occidental College, which is here in Southern California. And I went there for a semester and then immediately was like, "Oh, this was so not the right choice for me." I mean, it's a perfectly great school but it was too close to home. So I was not really fully invested myself in that process. But then also I just found it to be such a small school, so one of the things that really drew me to reapply to Hampshire College was the fact that it was a small school but within the five college system, which I thought was really amazing. I mean, actually I took almost no classes at Hampshire, most of my classes at Smith which also my Nana was so upset that I got into Smith, didn't go to Smith and then took all my classes at Smith… She's like, "What's the point of that?"

Christina Quarles:
But I had a point which was that I wanted to still make art while studying all these different ideas and figuring out what it was like to explore those ideas in written form rather than ina visual form, and see what was at stake for me with my art practice by exploring these ideas through a medium that wasn't art making. But I still wanted to maintain an art practice, so Hampshire was one of the few schools that would allow me to do whatever I wanted. So that gave me the freedom to maintain a really rigorous studio practice, but not have to take all the art 101 courses that were required of somebody that was actually having a double major or minor in art.
So it really just allowed me the freedom to really pinpoint this really eclectic mixture of courses that could really maintain my studio practice from the inside out, because I felt like I already had those technical skills. And then plus Western Massachusetts... When you grow up in LA, it's like what you imagined college to look like.

Daniel Strong:
Exactly, yeah.

Christina Quarles:
It's like, all leaves and snow. And you're like, "Oh, today I want to study in a castle library, so I'll go to Mount Holyoke." Or it's like, "No, I want to study with world-class art historians, so I'm going to go to Smith." And then it's like, "Actually I want to go to a frat party, so I'm going to go to U Mass." So it was very much that ideal.

Daniel Strong:
The summer before I went to Williams... I didn't go to undergrad there I went to their master's program, and the summer before I got there was the summer that Dead Poet's Society came out, I was like, "Yeah, I want that life except for the part of the suicide at the end."

Daniel Strong:
I'm going to school with buildings like that. But at that point were you already focused on painting? Or were you…

Christina Quarles:
No, I was really drawing a lot more. So I finished college in 2007 and then I was like, "Oh, now I'll just be a successful artist." Then the recession happened right after that, and I don't know, I had a lot to learn still, I think in my studio practice. So I ended up taking seven years off in between undergrad and grad school. And in that time I went in and out of studio practice, so sometimes I'd be more intense with it and other times I would be having it really tried to fold it

into my day job. I ultimately ended up being a graphic designer for many years. [bang] Sorry, my dog was dropping a bone behind me. She's in trouble today because she chased a skunk last night and got sprayed at 11:00 PM. It's the whole thing, I'm very mad. [laughter].

Christina Quarles:
But all this time I really thought of myself as somebody who drew. So that was something that was I think more accessible to me as a super young artist, I'm talking like an eight year old, where I was able to just draw in the margins of my notebook. And then I took a figure drawing class, with a nude model when I was 12, it was super young. Then I was like, "I'm very serious about making art." And then in my high school, there was also one of my most influential teachers was the figure drawing teacher, and even in undergrad, I was working on these very large sheets of arches watercolor paper. So I was really doing a drawing practice even when I entered grad school in 2014.
And I entered grad school I had just taken a figure painting class to teach myself how oil paints even work, because I wasn't that sure of the chemistry behind how to make all the different mediums. And then in grad school, it was really this journey of wanting to do more with my drawings materially, and just having the gesture be something that wasn't always having to be confined to a line. So being in this painting program that was so prestigious at Yale, and all these people that were really brought up as painter painters was an interesting environment for me as somebody who felt like I had a very traditional education in drawing, and a really homespun education in painting. So combining those two, I think really led to the style and the type of work that I make now.

Daniel Strong:
Well, the interviews that I've heard, and you've talked about the differences drawing and painting, and I'm interested in the idea of line and gesture. And I think of line is kind of a calligraphic thing or a writing thing, whereas gesture is more painterly, but it's also more of an instinctive thing. This idea of narrative in presenting something visually... I mean, the difference between that and verbally, or having something be versus something to be read. And I'm wondering if you can talk about the difference between line and gesture a little bit more.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, it's interesting. Well, I guess the idea of gesture as being a way to take this comfortable language of a line that I had practiced for so many years, and finding to really hone in on the gesture of a line as being something that then could be used with the many different materials and scales that's available to painting. So I find that the gestural quality allows for something to... I don't know, it's like this big moment that opened up for me in grad school was when I started drawing with a brush instead of drawing with... before then I was like, "What I would do is I would draw with a colored pencil and then I would fill it in with paint."

Christina Quarles:
So I'd have this really inventive, interesting drawing that then was just filled in with paint. And the paint was almost secondary and it covered up this interesting drawing with something that felt like it wasn't that interesting, and all the decisions felt arbitrary. So one time I was actually through writing on a painting, at the time I was doing a lot of texts in my paintings, and I was writing with a brush and there was a professor that was like, "Oh, here here you wrote the words with this brush instead of with a pencil, the variation in lines suddenly becomes more interesting." And that really opened up this idea that if I just *drew with a brush* suddenly a lot of my problems could be solved, no longer having to fill in with paint.
I mean there's many moments in my paintings where I'm still doing gestural lie work but the material is maybe a six inch wide brush that's dipped in paint and has all these little feathered marks that happen at the same time, or it's the gesture of raking a comb through something so

that there's many parallel lines that all can be in a ripple effect. So I found that that was a way to take this very practiced gestural line quality, but then just expand the width, and the texture, and the color variation that a line could be so that there was no longer a need to fill in an arm because the entire gesture was the arm.

Daniel Strong:
Literally going outside the lines instead of-

Christina Quarles:
Yeah. So it was a big thing for me with my work, it really then made painting make a lot more sense for me as well, because I was able to get to what I felt like was lacking in my drawing practice, which was really feeling like I was confined to a specific scale because I ultimately had to work with the scale of a drawing material. I mean, you can get crazy big pieces of charcoal and graphite, I guess, but for the most part you're working with this single tip. I still have a drawing practice, but I think of it as something that's much more located in the scale of my wrist, whereas with painting the gesture can be small, like with my wrist, or even smaller like my finger when I work on the computer. But it can also be these grand gestures that are much more located, I always see it as like shoulder location. So it just opened up the scale of gesture because suddenly it wasn't having to relate only to the scale of a single tool.

Greg Manuel:
Did that timing realization that you could expand your practice and the materials that you use... I'm curious about the thematic or the themes within your work, were your drawings and the paintings similarly themed? Or was your time at Yale also the time when you decided to focus in on ideas around identity, and you've mentioned a phrase I like, "Excess of identity." Was that something you were always dealing with it? I mean, you've always been you, but did you decide to put it in your work at that point? Or was that earlier or later?

Christina Quarles:
I mean, it's something I always wanted to talk about, but it's something that I feel like didn't really quite gel with my work until my final semester in grad school when I started painting in a way that you could see as being very similar to the types of paintings I do now. I entered grad school with the goal of being able to have these... My goal was to make work that was very explicitly and clearly about ambiguity. This is like an impossible goal, it's seems so contradictory, but I really wanted to use my work to talk about ambiguity, but I didn't want to be ambiguous about that topic.

Christina Quarles:
So that was my goal that I set out to do, and I really tried to do it in many different ways. I took every class you could and in grad school, and I was doing sculpture, and printmaking, and still doing these large works on paper. At one point I even started doing these larger wallpaper style pieces, to Yale's credit for the painting program they have your thesis at the beginning of your final semester, which at the time I was like, "This is horrible." Because I had to do a thesis and I'm still so young, so only three semesters into grad school. But what's great about it is the thesis has all this pressure on it, and all this expectation that you place on yourself, and then you do it and you actually learn a lot from it, and then that's when you can actually start to make the work that you want to make.
So by having it at the beginning of the semester, it allows you to really see this thing that you've put so much pressure and so much emphasis on and then take lessons from that and move into your studio practice. So it was having that early on in that final semester, and then being able to still work through those ideas with the same group of people that had been critiquing my work all that time, and not have to then also move and figure out money and all

those things. That I think allowed for me to really make the work that really honed in on that idea of ambiguity that I was interested in before.
So it was the synthesis of all of the critiques, and studio visits, and all that stuff. And also with the thesis work, it's a piece that's actually going to be in Dusseldorf this summer but I've shown it a few times. And it's this larger wall scale piece of canvas with the trompe l'oeil effect that looks like it's raw canvases hung onto wallpaper, but it's actually just large sheets of canvas with some blocked off rectangles of raw canvas and then the rest of it's pattern. So in that work I was really able to play with pattern, and also at the time, I was really thinking about the edge as being the X, Y axis, you look at the piece on my website or Dusseldorf if you're there. It's a very frontal idea of flatness and of surface.
So it took actually seeing a two-story painting of mine in space that was so flat to be able to see it at an angle, it so simple really, but by seeing it at an angle that was what opened up the Z axis for me. So suddenly I was able to see flatness in perspectival space, because I literally made a 20 foot by 30 foot wall with this pattern, and with my figures, and with these rectangles on it. And by seeing that in space through so many different critiques I'd have around that work, that's I think what opened up this idea of these planes that started to enter my work after that thesis piece. So that's when I was like, "Oh, just because I'm interested in surface, because I'm interested in boundary and edge and flatness, that doesn't mean it can't also be tilted into space." So that really opened that up for me along with many other things.
But I think that for me, I mean, in undergrad school I'm sure my thesis work was a written piece about exploring a multiply situated racial identity, and wanting to find language that could encapsulate an identity that was not fixed, or that was multiply fixed rather. So that it wasn't just this idea of like, "Oh, you're mixed race." So that's a single harmonious mixture of race, finding fault with that because I found that my experience as somebody who could be classified as mixed race was that I didn't have this unified vision of myself as being the melting pot of Blackness and whiteness. I felt more like I was constantly conflicted with the sense of being in these two simultaneous races that are oftentimes not compatible with one another in a single identity, so wanting to find that location of feeling like my legibility of race was often times undermined because I had excess of race rather than a lack of race.
So in the work that I made in grad school, and then after grad school, it was always going back to this idea that originally started to form in undergrad with this idea of wanting to explore an identity that's multiply situated, and one that gains meaning by context, but then also loses definition by the more and more you start to explore it and understand it. So it's always an interest of mine.

Daniel Strong:
So were you already reconciled if that's even the right word in your identity by then, or has painting been your way of exploring it, or expressing it or both, or?

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, I think so. I mean, I still don't feel fully like I understand my identity. I'm always struggling with it, honestly. And part of that is because things are constantly changing. When I was an undergrad I was at Hampshire which was such a radical school in a way. And I remember at the time we had all gender bathrooms, but that was unheard of between 2004, 2007, then when I was in grad school suddenly that was a conversation that places like Yale were having about trying to start things like that. The amount that changes especially in academic circles just over the course of 10 years, I found to be so remarkable. And then how culture and mass media picks up on that too. I mean, conversations that people are having right now are not conversations that were happening 10 years ago or 20 years ago at all. My wife and I in quarantine we were rewatching 30 Rock, and rewatching The Office, at the time those seemed totally fine and now it's like, "Oh my God, those are misogynistic, and racist, and homophobic in a shocking way." And then you're like, "And that was 2012? That’s not that long ago even!.”

So I think that one of the things that I make a practice of is continuing to give an account of myself, or continuing to assess where I am and what my positions to privilege are, and what my identity position is. And to continue to reflect on that and on my work, and just try to be really honest with my experience as much as possible, and transparent with it. and try to use the work as a way to serve these ideas that I think are difficult to explain in language because language is so linear. So I mean, to be careful with language, you have to get into the super high end, academic jargon way of speaking, which is just so inaccessible. But that's what you have to do in order to make something not just problematic in it's formation or not reinforce the binary by saying, "Biracial." And it's just things like that.
But then when you start to be really careful with language, it can feel very overburdened with this inaccessible academia. So I find that painting is a great way to talk about simultaneity and contradiction, and still have the sense of visual, cohesion and harmony and an unfolding that can happen at a different pace. So yeah, I find that the paintings are for me just a way of creating a representational language for an identity position that I've often found to be shortchanged by other forms of representation. But yeah, it's something that I still continue to figure out. Over the last year and with this resurgence in the mass culture of thinking about Black Lives Matter, and everything with police brutality over the last year, especially coming into the focus. Things like that have made me have to rethink where my racial identity lies because I have the understanding of somebody who is a person of color, or of somebody like in my family who's Black because I'm continuously aware of my racial position, I think about race all the time.
But I also move through the world in a body that's seen as White, especially by White people, which was made all the more clear in the aftermath of George Floyd when White family members or friends would call me up and be like, "What should we do?" And I'd be like, "Well, what should you do? Because I'm not White, remember? So it was interesting in that time to see even with my work and my continuing to assert my identity there is still this underlying I think part of Whiteness is excluding other races from being a part of Whiteness, this whole idea of a one drop rule. But it also makes it so that there's an inability to see a spectrum of identity within Whiteness. It's very difficult to have a queer understanding of White identity, because it's so often seen as this non race on which other identities get put on top of, and that's how it maintains its power and its privilege.

Christina Quarles:
But a side effect of that is that it makes it very difficult, even when I'm just clearly like, "I'm multiracial. I have a Black dad, and a White mom." It's still for people... even in my family, even my mom will forget that I'm anything other than White, because I visually have this White appearance, especially again to White people who are not used to seeing a spectrum of Whiteness. I got pulled over by the cops the other day, because I did a California roll through a stop sign where I slowed down, but I didn't fully stop. And I got pulled over by the cops and that's a moment where I'm like, "Yeah. I know that I'm going to look White to these White cops." And then that is something that distances me from being Black in America and 2021. So yeah, I've found actually a lot of liberation in this idea of queerness as being this first identity that I felt like actually did create a community of people that could encompass this multitude of experience that didn't feel like it had to be so pinned down.

Greg Manuel:
The idea behind the show, one of the things that we've talked about with many of the other artists is just that it's that term queer, and how it's changed over the years, because even when you're talking about your experiences in school, even coming to terms with certain language, and certain identities, and certain descriptors is important. But it does seem to be a word, but now at least for us and I think I'm hoping for you too, or maybe not, that that is a place where there can be a coming together under that umbrella term, and an understanding that we're all different within it, but there is at least one thing that we can. And that thing is actually an

understanding that everybody's different as opposed to an understanding that.... It's like your work, there's this absolute specificity of ambiguity and in queer you can have that as well. You can identify because that by definition means an openness or an unidentifiable thing.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, I think that's the thing that I find so interesting is how often we will self sabotage, or self censor our identities in order to be a part of a community, or in order to feel like we belong. And I mean I think that it's easy to be like, "Oh, there's society pressure to fit into a certain box." But I think it's actually oftentimes it's our own desire to want to be seen or understood by people and wanting to be part of a community. But I think that I often return to this quote from Joshua Gamson, who was talking about queer and I think the paper's, called The Queer Dilemma. But it talks about how a fixed identity can be used to marginalize a group of people, but can also be used by a marginalized group of people to advocate for civil rights.

Christina Quarles:
So I think of that a lot about how we actually need communities where we feel like we can be understood, or we feel like we all fit in. But that's impossible in a way, because we all have such a specific relationship to our own intersections of identity, and our own specific upbringing, and culture, and community and all of these different things. But I think that we will oftentimes, and especially I found in situations when I've been in, like school situations or any closed community, there's this needs to privilege certain identities over other ones or to ignore like, "Well, yeah, I did grow up maybe in this rich neighborhood." But they're like, "Super dark skin." It's like you've limit those full body, full brownness of your experience to fit into these categories so that you can be understood, and be in a community people where you can let your hair down and just be yourself. But then you're ironically not being your full self in order to gain access. So I think that the queer community is interesting because it has that potential to allow for something to feel like you belong without having to fragment or self censor.

Greg Manuel:
Yeah, Go ahead, Dan. Sorry.

Daniel Strong:
No, you go ahead.

Greg Manuel:
What you were just saying reminds me, I wrote down and I think it was when you were talking about painting and drawing, and then digital and the combination of those three things that sometimes one thing brings something to the work, and drawing may bring something to the work that digital doesn't, and they're necessary to be a full, complete thing. And then I was reading something else about, I forget, but the specificity of what you had said, but it reminded me of the term code switching, and you've almost talked about it a little bit. When you're in a diverse group of people and certain identities become the one that matter at that moment, and you shift so it's like code switching, but for also for gender, for sexuality, for race, all of these things.
I just thought it was this interesting. At the end of the day the desire of a queer identity is to, I think to make that unnecessary. And I'm wondering if that's something you think about. Again, I was reading earlier and talking to Dan about Franz Fanon and the idea of being ‘overdetermined from without’, and how you're almost talking about the opposite of that, except you're overdetermined from the fact that you're read White or that you ‘pass’. All these ideas of passing, of code switching, of determining things come up in your work, but you're also very ambiguous. The work itself is ambiguous, but you're not when you talk about it. I think that's what's interesting for me, is there's this real understanding of a desired position that isn't necessarily one that you get to inhabit.

Christina Quarles:
Right. I think that the things that comes up with my work a lot... I mean, sometimes it gets skewed more into just being overtly sexual. But I think of my work really as dealing with these moments of intimacy, and thinking about intimacy as something that's not just having sex. It's like any moment I find that we can live this fully contradictory and incongruous sense of self, whether it's with another person or on our own. So that can happen with sex, but it also can happen if you're really hungry or if you're really vulnerable for some reason, you're sick, or if you're in mourning. Or it could happen with a familial relationship or a friendship that's a very close friendship, where you really know somebody inside out, or it could happen in a moment of violence, or in a moment of extreme rage or hate.
But it's really these moments, I think where it's anytime that we exceed the flattened sense of self that we oftentimes encounter with other people. I think a lot about how, when we are not in a Zoom meet situation, when we meet somebody we really concentrate on their face and their face is the most important thing about them. And I talK about this a lot with my work, because so often in my work, the faces are obscured and the expression Is much more articulated in the hands and the feet. Because I think about when we are having these face-to-face encounters in the real world we really prioritize other people's faces, and we maybe see what they're wearing, but we don't spend too much time staring at their body and certainly not like looking at the back of their heads or anything like that.
But for our own selves, we have no idea what our faces look like when we're off of Zoom. And this thing that we prioritize and every other person is this thing that we don't have in ourselves, but instead we have access to our hands or feet. And those are the things that we see the front and the backs of, but we really see ourselves as these fragmented limbs without the one thing that we prioritize in everybody else. So I think it gives us this false sense that everybody else is more cohesive than we are. And relating to code switching, we only know other people in relation to us. So we know other people in the context that they are to us, but we know ourselves in the context that we are to every other encounter that we have.

Christina Quarles:
So in that sense, we also know ourselves not only as these fragmented limbs, but also as these people that can change so drastically between a job interview to talking to your parents, to talking to your friend, talking to an ex lover or something, you just know how different you can be. So I think that it's that timeline of contradiction that undermines again the sense of cohesion of our own sense of self. Whereas everybody else again, not only do they have the benefit of being a total face, but they're always just in relation to me. So I only know what people are like when they talk to me. And that is a specific code that I'm creating. So yeah with the work since I think about it is really being this experience of what it is to be in your own body, looking out into the world and understanding things. So I'll oftentimes prioritize that articulation hands and the feet, but then also it is this fragmented sense of self that comes in and out of making sense.
So I like to play a lot too with this first read of a painting as making a lot more sense, because I know how much we want to make sense of things. So it's this first read that makes sense. And then hopefully the longer somebody wants to stick with the painting, the more that, that initial read of being like, 'Oh yeah, it's like two women kissing. Well, wait, actually there's 15 different hands, and there's seven legs, and there's actually no real specific thing about gender here. And actually they aren't even, face-to-face, they're back to back." So the hope is that there's certain things that will bring people into that quick read, and then that quick read similar to an intimate experience, it gets more and more complicated the more you get to know the painting.

Greg Manuel:
I like that.

Daniel Strong:
It gets a little bit into process. I mean, do you think about this before you've begun painting, or does the painting just begin and then it gels as you're working on? Or do you know what you're going to paint before you paint it? You talk about going from painting to the digital, does it ever start at the digital and go onto the canvas?

Christina Quarles:
No, I mean, it always starts gesturally on the canvas, I never have an idea of what I want to do ahead of time. But the idea will start to form the more I look at the painting. So I start off pretty gesturally and then it gets through a process of looking at the abstract of gesture. So I try to not complete body parts right away, and then I will start to fill in the form. I try to challenge myself to make different connections than what I maybe would have done if I just stuck in a gestural mode. So I try to combine that gesture with observation as well, and then I'll bring it into the computer and that's when I play around with the different plains, and the different patterns, and different gestures that aren't so confined to the scale of my own body, because I mean, all the figures tend to be around the same size. It's just really the boundaries of the canvas that changes.

Christina Quarles:
But with the digital mark, I work in Illustrator, so it's specifically designed so that you can scale it up or down infinitely because it's not pixel based. So that's just really a way for me to think without having it always been additive marks because I can play around with a lot of different possibilities on Illustrator and still ultimately have an area of blank canvas that I can just return to. But it allows for a scale shift to be less physically rooted and more, I don't know, mentally rooted.

Daniel Strong:
[inaudible 00:42:19].

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, exactly. But I feel like this last year has become even more relevant, this idea of your physical space and your projected reality of what you see on the endless scroll on your phone or the newsreel really not matching up with your daily experience. Like, "Okay, everything's terrible, and everyone's dying, there's a plague, pandemic, the economy's garbage and it's so violent, and there's so much division." And then you look outside and you're like, "Oh, the sun is shining and there's that hummingbird I've been looking at for the last six weeks." It's so peaceful on one hand and then so brutal on the other. So I've been finding that digital intervention has been even more interesting to me for the last year.
And then it's just constantly a back and forth. I think that it's been a interesting experience of making the paintings because it's so similar to that interpersonal relationship in that it's this play between intention, and then what's actually happening and then having to respond to the actuality, and improvise from the actuality with more intention and just keeps going back and forth. So with the painting, I'll intend something, but then maybe a drip will happen that's an accident. And then through observing it, I will be like, "Well, actually that drip, and that other drip are creating these two parallel lines, which is now creating this like plane in my imagination that I'm actually going to emphasize because I think it's really interesting. So then suddenly I start doing things to emphasize these more accidental moments that happen in the paintings. So it's just a back and forth, and then a painting is done really when I no longer get stuck on any one area that needs to be omitted or added to or anything like that. My eyes just move around and I just start looking at the painting without stopping. And that's when I know that the painting is probably done.

Daniel Strong:
I was going to ask if in finishing a painting, if you ever get to the point where, "Oh, I better stop or I'm going to ruin it."?

Christina Quarles:
No, I always feel really far with the painting but I do tend to have a time limit on when I make it because otherwise I'll get too attached to certain areas, and then I will keep an area even if it's not working because I've just grown so used to it. So the idea is to make a painting in an amount of time where even if I love a certain hand, or a face or something, if it's too distracting or if it's not serving the center of the painting, meaning just the emotional center of a painting, that I won't be afraid to just cover it with plaster paint or something like that. But yeah, I find that the longer I spend looking at a piece, the more I become attached to it, or I can't see it as clearly. So I try to do things within a few weeks or else then I'm like, "I don't know if I want it." I never want to tiptoe around my paintings I guess, but I'm happy to go too far because there's no plan ahead of time. There's nothing I'm trying to make the painting look like. It's nice because it actually gives me the freedom to never mess up a painting because it's never trying to be anything other than what it is. I don't know. I could see how it would seem intimidating, but it's actually really freeing because it's like, "Yeah, well, I mean, this painting is going to be this piece that's about something that's maybe more complicated." Maybe there's a really ugly moment in it because that's what it is calling for.

Daniel Strong:
We all have ugly moments.

Christina Quarles:
Exactly maybe this one needs to be about that part or…

Daniel Strong:
Has this past year been difficult creatively, has it been inhibiting? You talked before about how painters are alone in their studio anyway. So in that regard it may be the same, but has creativity been free-flowing for you or has it been different?

Christina Quarles:
I feel a little bit of both. I mean, I definitely the first few months of lockdown last year were shocking. I think partially also because I had worked in a bit of a break for myself during that time, because it was supposed to be when I was going to be installing my show in Chicago and having that open up. So mentally, I was already prepared for this period of time of having to travel, not be in the studio. So then I suddenly was like, "Well, I'm not traveling so I can be in the studio." But I don't know, it was surprising how distracting everything was considering that my studio was just behind my house, and I had canvases and paints and I could work and there was nothing holding me back from working other than just being distracted by the news and the unknown. So that was a hurdle to overcome. And then once I did, I found it to be really nice to have the outlet of painting and the focus of not having to do... I don't know, there's this sweet spot where nobody had quite figured out how to do studio visit over Zoom, and it was actually just nice to have a period of time where it felt like everyone was leaving me alone, but it wasn't because nobody wanted to talk to me. No, it was just because nobody had the technology or understanding how to, so it was a really nice break and I feel like I was able to get a lot of interesting things done in the studio and also just with how devastating everything was in the world, and how emotionally taxing that was.
I think a lot about how in the last year we've just lost a lot of that daily improvising that we have to do. We just go to the grocery store and then you run into somebody, and then you start talking to them and these little serendipitous moments mixed with little hassle moments, "Oh no, there's a street fair that's blocking this road so we have to go around. But now I'm seeing this cool house." There's all these things where you have to respond in the moment, and I think

it keeps our brains agile, and in quarantine we've had so much chaos that we've had to really control our daily activities to the point where you just know exactly what's going to happen because you're just at home and on Zoom. And every day Trump would say something crazy, or there'd be some horrendous act of violence, or there'd be a protest. I don't know, there just would be some huge thing in the news that felt so uncontrollable.
And then daily life felt so boring and tedious that it was really nice to have a painting process because that allowed for that sense of improvisation and an unexpected thing that I had to respond to, so I feel like it kept my mind from going too soft, but I do miss exhibitions. I miss seeing other people's work, and I miss seeing my own work installed.

Daniel Strong:
I was just going to ask you about influences and about what it has been like the absence of an art world. I mean, you're obviously surrounded by your own work, I have a collection at the museum that is seven blocks from me, but I haven't seen it in months because I haven't been in work. So I actually haven't seen recent acquisitions we've made, I haven't seen yet because I haven't been to work. It's bizarre living without an art world, but do you feel the same way with that?

Christina Quarles:
I think it's good in a way, I mean it hasn't been good for the practical side of people needing to work and museums need to make money and things, but I do think it's created this sense of, I don't know, the value of seeing work in person and to not take that for granted and to not exhaust ourselves to the point where that's no longer interesting. Because I think I was starting to feel the sense of fatigue and obligation, around February of 2020, where I was just going to openings because I felt like I had to, or going to shows because I felt like I had to, and taking the obligatory picture for my Instagram and then leaving. And now the few times I've been able to see art, it's such a treat and I really spend time with it. And it's like an event, I'm like, "I'm going to see that show today." And that's something I think I really hope can last for a while. Is that sense of, I don't know, having a quality experience with art rather than just trying to do it all.

Daniel Strong:
I think it's given a new appreciation for me at least of the figurative, it's this the sense of the physical in this time when we have not been physical, and in the time that we live in with Black Lives Matter. And I think at least for me, there was this idea that identity and White supremacy for example, were matters of policy, there they were political or conceptual and what we've... Or at least what I've experienced with the past year is the physicality of it. I think you mentioned a little while ago about being stopped by the cops and it being a sensation of physical, not just a procedural or a legal matter, but actually potentially impacting your body. And that's something that I see in your work is the intense physicality of it. There may be a narrative, but it's seen and not necessarily read, not necessarily spoken, or not necessarily verbal, it's physical. I mean, I've always gravitated towards figurative work but in your work to me it's especially important that concept of the physicality of it and not just The verbal or intellectual capacity of it.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah. I mean, I think that we've all seen what's at stake. I mean, I guess what's interesting is how much we can do now remotely, and how much of our lives can be lived in this way and yet what's still lacking, I think is that physicality. I think it's been a really important time to see what is important, and what we value and this intangible thing that you can't really intellectualize that is so crucial that's been lacking over the last year. If we could see people's faces, and connect with people on the phone, and have your groceries delivered, and you can look at art online. We have the internet, it's not like it'S 1919 or what they did during the pandemic, I guess they

read aloud to each other. I don't know. I don't know what you would do then, but now you have so much access and yet it's still been so difficult.

Daniel Strong:
The only thing you're touching is a keyboard, you have so much access, but these are only hitting like computer parts.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, exactly. I mean, and even with work too, my work I think does read really well on the computer, but you lose a sense of scale, and you lose a sense of materiality, and there's all sorts of things. I have my first in-person studio visit in like a year recently. And they were like, "Oh my God, I forgot all these different textures." And there's all these references that your work makes on a computer to other paintings that are not here when they see it in person. And it's suddenly it's it's own thing. And it's because as a painter you're making decisions that are very materially situated as well. And when you see things on a screen, everything's the same size. Everything gets reduced to an image. And yeah, I think it is that thing you're saying where it becomes much more like reading, or much more intellectualized in that way. And it's much less of a physical embodied experience, which I think can taps into a different register. What's great about this last year is that maybe now we'll be like, "Okay, yeah, we can't just only have digital art. We can't just only have online viewing rooms. We need to be with art, and live with it.

Daniel Strong:
Yeah, as a museum curator, I have to quote Susan Sontag. I don't know where she said it, but said that a work of art isn't about something it is something.

Christina Quarles:
Right, yeah. Exactly.

Daniel Strong:
As curator that's one of my biggest frustrations is having to... I mean, so many people expect me to interpret a work of art to help them understand it. And that's the difficult balance I have is I first want you to see it before you hear me explain it to you.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah. No, I think that that's so important the process of being with a piece of work is really where it's potential lies. I mean, for me it's the process of making the work that's so important, and what freed up my practice was taking away the idea of trying to make work, like you said, about something, because as soon as you try to make work about race, or about queerness, it isn't that. It's just didactic and it's explaining something, but doesn't embody that thing. And as soon as I allowed myself to make work that's when it suddenly could encompass these issues that were important to me rather than just being illustrations of an idea that was important to me.

Christina Quarles:
And I think as a person that looks at art, it's about that as well. If you want to just get the synopsis of a piece of work, then you're actually probably be better served reading theory or not even really because reading theory really is also it’s own process. I don't know what you do, but you better start... I don't know…

Daniel Strong:
It has it's own limitation.

Christina Quarles:
…reading People Magazine, I guess. But it's so much about that process that I think is the value. I mean, that's some of the things that we need to reconcile as we're starting to come into this time of thinking about what to do about equity and racism, and things like that in this country and everywhere around the world, really. But it's really this question of, "Do we use this..." We can't really just solve the problem. It's actually a process-based solution that isn't just definitive. And I think people are constantly... Especially this last summer, we're like, "How do I come out as being an anti-racist?" And it's like, "Well, it's not just a single thing it's a lifelong process." And we can't just think in terms of a final solution because that's the capitalist way of thinking that got us into these problems to begin with.
And I think as soon as we start thinking of artwork as that final definitive solution, again, it's seeing it as this commodified product rather than as this potential that opens up a whole process of becoming, and I think that that's the political potency of artwork is not in its static image, but in its totality of an experience. So that's what I'm looking forward to experiencing.

Daniel Strong:
So you have your show in Chicago and I have the catalog right here. Have you been able to see it?

Christina Quarles:
No. I'm looking to go next month because I'll be fully vaccinated and ready to go next month.

Daniel Strong:
I got my first shot today, this morning at nine o'clock. So I'm half I'm vaccinated. I got the Pfizer one. I mean, I would love to get to Chicago. It's only four and a half hours for me, but I don't know.

Christina Quarles:
I know at this point I'm like, "I'm not going to do anything until I'm fully vaccinated." Because it's so close, and then I feel like this summer going to definitely see the Chicago show even if I have to drive, I'll drive there. I'm working on it for like three and a half years, so.

Daniel Strong:
Yeah, really. So do you have other shows coming up after Chicago?

Christina Quarles:
The show that's up right now in Beijing, which I won't go to because that's too far. And then I have a show opening this summer at the South London Gallery. I may or may not go to, I don't know. I also don't want to just rush into suddenly going from no travel in a year to traveling every other week.

Daniel Strong:
Right, yeah.

Christina Quarles:
And yeah, so those are the big museum shows that I have coming up, the same time this summer. And that thesis piece from Yale is going to be up in Dusseldorf.

Daniel Strong:
I have been to, I was there a long time ago, But I don't have plans to go. It's actually very nice. Well, Greg, have you got-

Greg Manuel:
I think we're coming to a close. We've done about an hour with everyone I think. And I think we're, good. I mean, I think one of the questions that we tend to ask at the end, or just to make sure, is there anything that you wanted to talk about or that you wanted to mention that we didn't get a chance to, or anything that you've been thinking about that you want to make sure gets said or shout outs to anybody?

Christina Quarles:
No, not really. I mean, I think we covered a lot of interesting things and yeah, I'm super excited about this exhibition. I mean, I don't know if I can go to it or not. Maybe I can, I'm going to be in Chicago, but its not like I can go to the whole Midwest. But yeah, I mean, it's…

Daniel Strong:
We're hoping to be able to invite people here. I mean, right now the college is expecting the fall semester to be normal, so one of the points of having this show and as I said in the beginning, it was inspired by a student's desire to do a queer art show what he said is, is to give the students exposure to the artists themselves, and to engage in this dialogue which hopefully would not in the end just be over computer chats. So that's one of the things we're hoping. So hopefully invitations will go out. Right now, the public isn't allowed on campus except by appointment. And we're hoping that will change because we do love to bring artists to town. So hopefully that will be coming. And I guess we're borrowing at least one painting from you, and we would be remiss if we didn't let you know that if there are other works available at the end of the summer please keep us in mind because right now we have two paintings, and two drawings coming of yours. But if there are other opportunities we'd be happy to explore them.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, for sure. Yeah. I'll definitely keep that in mind with everything right now it's just been changing every 10 minutes it seems.

Daniel Strong:
Exactly.

Christina Quarles:
I wasn't really supposed to have these three museum shows happening at the same time. But then COVID made them all happen at the same time. So that's just an extraordinary amount of paintings that are on loan all at once. So yeah, because each one is a huge space. So it's great.

Daniel Strong:
It's really great.

Christina Quarles:
It's an opportunity to have my work in very different parts of the world, but also I'm suddenly like, "Oh no, I'm running out of works here. I'll make some new ones." Yeah, I'm excited to see the exhibition hopefully in person, but at least online and hear some of the other conversations. I think it'll be really great to hear… I really admire all the artists on the show.

Greg Manuel:
Well, and if you're open to it, as we move through and as things shift, if it's not possible to have everyone there in person, I mean maybe there will be opportunities to have this conversation, but with some of the other artists that there's more of an actual dialog between not just Dan and I, but with you and I know you know many of the artists, but I think it'd be a good opportunity to have those spaces. So hopefully we'll talk again very soon sometime in the next

short while, long while, I don't know, so many times already, but yeah. Thank you again for agreeing to sit down with us and to be part of this, it's going to be great.

Christina Quarles:
Yeah, definitely.

Greg Manuel:
We appreciate it. Great. Thank you, Christina.

Christina Quarles:
Have a great rest of your day.

Greg Manuel:
You too.

Daniel Strong:
You too. Have a great day as well.
Christina Quarles:
Bye-bye.

Greg Manuel:
Bye-bye.