

How
Soft You
Want It

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis concludes my two-year exploration of curatorial practice within my master's program. This exhibition is less a tribute to those who have helped me, and more an acknowledgment that everything I now possess is a gift bestowed by them. I am myself, yet also all of them.

I thank my family for their unwavering support of my academic journey. This exhibition began with the questioning of the self, and I thank you for shaping me into who I am today.

To my teachers, Steven Henry Madoff, Isin Onol, Noam Segal, Brian Kuan Wood, and the myriad others who have left indelible impressions during my study, I am grateful. Thank you for instilling in me the discipline of being an adult, a citizen, a curator. Thank you for nurturing my youthful innocence and for standing as beacons for my future.

My mentor, Udo Kittelmann, deserves special thanks for affording me the privilege of his close guidance during the planning of this exhibition. From you, I learned that a good exhibition is sincere, and built on the pillars of love and courage. With you, I saw the prism of time and space and was able to break free from my own constraints. Thank you, Esenija Bannan, for being a female role model by my side. Your warmth and friendship supported me in completing this soul-searching writing in a strange city like Berlin. Thank you both for helping me fall in love with my twenty-four.

I am indebted to the project and the school for providing me with a platform and resources. To Re McBride, Ricky Ruihong Li, and Lorel Easterbrooks, thank you for your support during our exhibition set-ups and for your companionship during our studies.

Thank you, Sara Reisman and Elizabeth Harding, for being my editor, for listening to my musings about life and the world, and for your eloquent penmanship that built a sturdy bridge between my thoughts and the written word.

To all my friends who have shown boundless acceptance and support for my physical and mental well-being, my career, and my life, I am grateful. I thank my longtime comrades Angela Mingying Lu, Diana Isabel Colón, and Jas Yuxuan Sun. I am lucky to be a part of such a harmonious and loving group. Thank you Peiran Zhang and Mingrui Zhou for your work in visual design.

I extend my greatest gratitude to the artists I've had the privilege to work with: Santina Amato, Fernando Monroy, Verónica Peña, Barb Smith, and Kate Stone. Thank you for your exceptional talent and creativity. Your artwork chose me, and inspired me. They were my longest companions during the writing process. I reveled in every interaction and conversation I had with them. Thank you for being creators, for your labor, for embracing my ideas, and for standing shoulder-to-shoulder with me to bring this exhibition to life.

KEXUN ZHANG HOW SOFT YOU WANT IT

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I INTRODUCTION

The exhibition is of softness. And softness is of every human being. Physically, we are made of flesh. Our bodies are the embodiment of softness. Mentally, we crave the soft touch of understanding. Our minds are landscapes of sensitivity.

Before we develop a sense of autonomy, our bodies are literally tethered to our mothers. As we strive to become individuals, our understanding of self is invariably intertwined with the appraisal of others. The moment we step into society as natural persons, we find ourselves inextricably entangled in the constant exchange of needs constructed by capitalism. When we scrutinize our political rights, we discover that the contract between the government and society is predicated upon our willingness to relinquish a part of ourselves, to merge with others into a collective power. We humans, as social animals, are naturally interdependent. Even the power that we vie for, that we harm each other for, must exist over with an object, within a context of interactivity.

Softness is rooted in these interactions. The sociability of humans is built on constant communication and exchange. This flow shows the openness of the individual. We open ourselves to needs so that we can gain what we lack.

We provide others with what they lack, and in doing so release what we possess. This need for others is what makes us vulnerable, as we are incomplete when we lack the things we desire. This openness, while often celebrated, also exposes us to the gazes of others, and creates the conditions for potential harm by allowing external forces to intrude upon one's subjectivity.¹ It is through this process of exchange that our softness is activated.

If there has always been a moral code of taking care of others in human society, should openness be welcomed and the softness be protected at all times? As Jacques Derrida put it in *Of Hospitality*, unconditional hospitality is when the generosity of welcoming the other—the stranger—is offered unconditionally.² Calls for openness and empathy resonate with the understanding of softness. Hospitality can be understood as what it means to be humane, to offer our kindness to strangers in need. Calls for openness and empathy resonate with the understanding of softness. Yet absolute giving is hard to maintain in practice—the word “hospitality” has the same origin as “hostility”; Derrida explains that when we open ourselves to others, there is the possibility of getting hurt:

1 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004),

2 Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1989), 71.

3 Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.

4 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, (New York: Picador, 2008), 63.

Unconditional hospitality implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation. It is unbearable. If, however, there is pure hospitality, it should be pushed to this extreme.³

Softness comes into question under the threat of violence, whether that threat arrives seductively or crudely. Violence is the violation of individual will, the deprivation of subjectivity, and the betrayal of trust in social exchange. The logical precedence of softness—that which violence preys upon—does not mean that it is a prerequisite for violence. Rather, from the perspective of the individual, from the contemporary viewpoint, softness reflects the fragility of our subjectivity. It is a precondition for feeling violence, reflecting on violence, and even resisting violence.

Our contemplation of violence can begin with the primal act of slaughter: an animal instinct driving one being to extinguish the life of another. Can such an act be labeled as violence? Here, I refer to Slavoj Žižek's definition of violence:

But how can one wholly repudiate violence when struggle and aggression are part of life? The easy way out is a terminological distinction between the “aggression” that effectively amounts to a “life-force” and the “violence” that is a “death-force”: “violence,” here, is not aggression as such, but its excess, which disturbs the normal run of things by desiring always more and more. The task becomes to get rid of this excess.⁴

We question the propriety of brutal slaughter because we view it from a civilized perspective. Civilization makes

us aware of the wills of others and helps us recognize other people's right to life and property. Overreaching desires cause power to transgress boundaries it should not, resulting in violations and scars. Therefore, it is fair to say that civilization delineates parameters and determines behaviors within an acceptable limit. Within these confines, civilization safeguards not only softness, but the commitment to individual integrity that is a prerequisite for openness and exchange. When faced with potential harm, we depend on the laws of morality and its legal limits to protect us.

But the evolution of civilization is invariably protracted. While morality has always existed, we all know that restrictions intended to curb violent acts have not always been effective. When violence becomes entangled with power, money, hatred, and desire, the boundaries set by morality and law become as nebulous as the distinction between absolute and relative freedom.

Softness implies the possibility of being hurt. It is an undeniable human characteristic and an unavoidable fate. The vulnerability of softness makes us aware of the negative aspects of violence, thus creating a desire to avoid violence and seek civility. But this is a long and costly process, because the worship of power often overlooks the value of softness.

Today, multiple simultaneous wars are eroding our faith in civilization, authoritarian regimes are threatening our hopes for progressive freedom, and neoliberalism is pushing us into the black hole of capitalism. We are urgently seeking the echo of ourselves in the torrent. Conflict exposes human fragility, and the voice of vulnerability rings louder than ever. Due to the softness of human nature, we cannot deny the possibility of injury and must face the

threats we fear—the violence yet to come. This anticipation of violence is a powerful force. Faced with potential infringement, softness confines the choices of vulnerable individuals, most of whose rights have been yielded or transferred, leaving them their own bodies as the only possible object to execute powers on, rather than seeking external means to defend themselves against anticipated forms of violence. In limited circumstances, vulnerable individuals see themselves as having to choose between evasion and endurance on a spectrum that ranges from self-destruction to avoidance and tolerance. Approaching the extremum of that spectrum lies confrontation, where resistance, the tension maintained against violence, requires the courage of self-affirmation—holding onto fragile and limited capital, those soft beings can survive within the cycle of death, rebirth, and death again. Despite the constant threat of pain, one can hardly walk away from their subjectivity.

How Soft You Want It focuses on the paradox of this nihilistic anticipation to explore the inherent softness of humans and the power it possesses. Softness is an easily overlooked virtue, often associated with fragility, pain, and failure. But even when we suffer and we fail, it must be said: So what? Human history is a story of rising and falling, full of struggles. The cost of softness is unavoidable; we are left with no choice but to confront unbearable realities and muster the courage to understand the cruel reality of being. Power and plunder thrive in this world, but we must be vigilant and question whether an eye for an eye can truly end our suffering, and whether justice that departs from procedural retribution can still be called justice. Softness is not a lack of power, rather the power of softness lies in the courage to accept the tension of waiting—being able to accept different outcomes and

take responsibility for them. This is the power of resilience.

As an exhibition, *How Soft You Want It* is conceived to uphold a soft approach in order to scrutinize the human conditions of softness and to confront suffering, to strengthen the resistance that awaits its moment. The artworks in the exhibition explore the nature of softness and amplify the poetic power of acceptance and adaptation in the face of uncertainty. The exhibition intends to prompt reflection on common fears of violence and precariousness with softness and its resilient vitality.

We are beings of softness. When we gather in a shared space, we are subject to the possibility of opening established boundaries to hostility; when we step out of this space, we navigate through everyday fluctuations of power. We coexist with this chaos, and in this vast world, we ultimately dissolve.

II TO BE DEAD, TO BE BORN

5 "Soft," Online Etymology Dictionary, updated February 28, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/soft>.

6 Santina Amato, "Blurring Boundaries," Santina Amato personal website, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.santinaamato.com/blurringboundaries>.

7 "Soft," Online Etymology Dictionary.

What does softness mean?

Derived from the Old English *softe* (earlier *sefte*), the word *soft* means "gentle, mild-natured; easeful, comfortable, calm, undisturbed; luxurious." The Proto-Germanic word for *soft* is believed to have evolved from the Proto-Indo-European root *sem*, meaning one or "together with," which is also a root of the word *same*. This idea of unity or togetherness implies a lack of conflict, which conjures associations with notions of gentleness and yielding comfort. Starting around 1200, the word *soft* was used for people and hearts, signifying "tender, yielding to emotions," also meaning "easily moved or swayed; soft-hearted, sympathetic; docile."⁵

Santina Amato's practice interprets the poetry of softness and its resilient vitality. In her series *Blurring Boundaries* (2023–ongoing), pale-pink dough-like sculptures made from flour, recycled paper, and glue reveal subtle similarities between doughy lumps and the human body. Either resting in or wrestling against the furniture supporting them, these corpulent entities reflect the artist's interest in exploring domestic labor and the blurred boundaries between work and personal space.⁶ Stretched here, curled there, the forms have a wrinkled texture, with their dried

surfaces being evocative of a mother's pregnant belly and how time leaves its traces on the skin.

Regardless of our disposition as individuals, softness is a quality we all yearn for, one that provides us with empathy and leniency. Our desire for softness is akin to our longing for a mother's care, to be nurtured, wrapped in warmth, given a chance to rest and be forgiven. But few actively pursue softness. Based on its etymological meaning, softness is perceived as something external, offering a "smooth and agreeable" sensation to the body and mind, thereby providing a sense of care and empathy.⁷ Yet if we consider softness and how we interact with it from a more subjective point of view, it becomes clear that softness begins with the self. It makes us more open to and perceptive of the external world, and it allows us to embrace possibilities with flexibility and adaptability. It attempts to foster mutual respect among individuals who share benevolent mindsets, thereby cultivating cooperation and communities. It is an attitude of service and sacrifice.

Amato transforms the otherness of softness by endowing her work with a high degree of autonomy and soul. While Amato was working in a studio at the One Eyed Residence during



Santina Amato, *Soft And Misshapen Awkward Attempts*, 2023, domestic furniture, recycled paper and plastic, plaster gauze, joint compound, flour, toilet paper, glue, latex paint. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

the end of the pandemic, she created a larger-than-life sculpture made of pliable-looking forms and household furniture. These forms that accumulate in *Soft And Misshapen Awkward Attempts* (2023) appear to cling to the couch, table, and chairs, which Amato selected as the support. The seemingly flowing body spills across and over the furniture. Gravity causes its viscous flesh to sag, and the dry air hardens its skin, leaving fine lines and deep wrinkles. The fluidity of the work echoes Amato's feminist practice and her nuanced embrace of change, process, and the passage of time. With flour added in before the sculpture dried and hardened, the possibility of its aging and decay becomes a metaphor for the cycles of life—representing not only the inevitability of change but also the resilience inherent in transformation. This resilience, often considered a feminine trait, exceeds softness and passivity to include strength, endurance, and adaptability. In being made from what is initially mutable materials that become fixed in the process of making, Amato's art transcends conventional, gendered associations; her work is a multifaceted exploration of human existence that challenges and subverts societal norms.

At the end of her residency, Amato had to sever her brief yet profound connection to this piece. Amato was born into an Italian family and has often joked about the traditional expectations for women to be nurturing and soft. She says she has always felt an innate toughness coursing through her veins. In a bold departure, she picked up a baseball bat, choosing to say goodbye to her soft creation in a violent performance.

Amato's destruction of her own artwork is a testament to her identity as both an artist and a woman; each strike and blow represents a cry for agency. The death of this artwork, *Soft And*



Santina Amato, *Rescued*, 2023, domestic furniture, recycled paper and plastic, plaster gauze, joint compound, flour, toilet paper, glue, latex paint, 28 X 25 X 13 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Misshapen Awkward Attempts, hastened by the artist's aggression, was swift and unabashedly thorough. Amato recorded this entire process, from destruction to finding remnants in the wreckage. The video is a reminder of the past's inevitable dissolution and the promise of a future yet to unfold.

The combination of raw vulnerability and past trauma that converge in Amato's work conveys a deeper understanding of softness. The fear of being hurt that softness implies is inescapable. If resilience can shape the self, it can also subvert threats, transforming destruction into the possibility of rebirth.



Kate Stone, *The Longing of Slow Accumulations*, 2023. Wool, carpet, baby teeth, mom and dad's hair, wire, polyurethane foam, wood, 96 x 132 x 76 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

8 Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 83.

III FEAR THY NEIGHBOUR

The selflessness inherent in softness evolves into a kind of moral code, a responsibility of tolerance. This openness aligns with Derrida's musings on hospitality: there is a fundamental set of morals that demands we welcome the stranger.⁸ Our intrinsic self-interest understandably makes us fear softness, dread the loss of our individuality, and resist the uncontrollable feeling of becoming "the other." But softness is not something we can escape. Telling the story of humanity from a soft point of view is a way to explore the inherent contradictions of human nature.

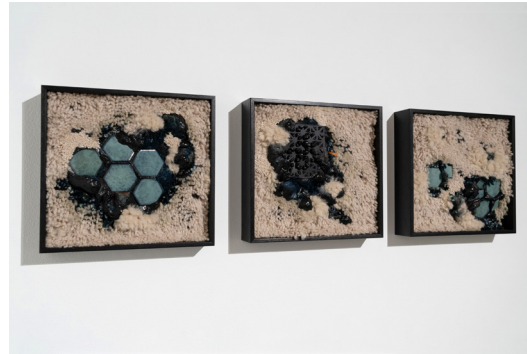
We can see the empathy that softness creates by looking at intimate relationships. It is precisely within this delicate proximity that our attempts to empathize can lead us into the depths of another's world. Does the morality symbolized by softness merely represent a romanticized notion of our individuality? Why is a characteristic that is so fundamentally human and formative so often evaded and denied?

Now is the time to reflect on softness, a trait that belongs to and constructs us all—and yet, which we still aspire to escape from, to deny. The fear of softness stems from the human instinct to avoid pain, because softness implies the possibility of being hurt. In

her artistic practice, Kate Stone humorously presents the awkwardness of softness. Stone takes inspiration from common household carpets. They are used in domestic interiors to make people feel comfortable, but accumulate dust and dander, becoming a breeding ground for bacteria and mites. In Stone's work, the carpet becomes a surreal life form, apparently possessing its own will, squirming and engulfing the objects around it. In *The Longing of Slow Accumulations* (2023), the vitality of a beige carpet reaches a formal peak, swallowing the artist's hair, her mother's jewelry, and her nephew's baby teeth. The material of the work, a repurposed carpet, rises vertically from its previous form into a stalagmite, as tall as a human. It's easy to imagine that the sculptural installation embodies life, slowly growing, returning the gaze to those who stare. Stone creates a narrow domestic scene for this work; the color of the walls and the floor lamp in the corner instantly transport the viewer from the white cube to a place of domestic comforts. In this space, the audience has no choice but to stare at the objects they might normally avoid in their daily lives. The discomfort of seeing human hair and teeth embedded in the carpet contributes to the claustrophobia of the artist's installation.



Kate Stone, *The Unknown Grins at Us From Deep Within and Deep Without*, 2023. Carpet, fake teeth, wood, 27 x 24 x 2 in. Image courtesy of the artist.



Kate Stone, *Soft Tectonics #1-3 (Lost Pin)*, 2023. Wool, found enamel pin, tile, polyurethane foam, aluminum, joint compound, epoxy clay, wire, wood, acrylic paint, 10 x 10 x 2 in (each). Image courtesy of the artist.



Kate Stone, *Threshold*, 2023. Wool, mom's gold crown, polyurethane foam, wire, wood, recycled cardboard, epoxy clay, LEDs, 13 x 13 x 2 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Stone's work provokes discomfort precisely because we are facing unspeakable truths we would otherwise prefer to deny. Our enjoyment of the carpet is a guilty pleasure. But we must admit that what we avoid and loathe was once a part of us.

Stone's other works further amplify the fear derived from softness. Her wall installations show how the carpet fabric full of ambitious, eroding accretions such as ceramic tiles, dropped breast pins, and fallen-out baby teeth. Here, the carpet takes on the qualities of a creature. Whether it picked the teeth up or grew them itself, the suggestion of its free will is truly chilling.

The softness in Stone's work is no longer an unconditional virtue. Like Amato, Stone is drawn to domestic environments and guides us to observe and reflect on the unseen. What is our relationship with softness? We like softness, we yearn for a measure of softness, to wrap our unease, to soothe our fatigue of confronting the outside world. We are also wary of softness, because the unfixed boundaries of softness can make us lose control. Our tense imagination of the carpet resembles our resistance to ourselves; if we were as soft as the carpet, we too would have no choice but to accumulate the trash of the outside world, and would slowly become despised, scorned things. Vulnerability comes from losing control. We fear vulnerability, so we resist softness, resist undefined boundaries, resist uncontrollable empathy, resist uncertainty.

IV SUSPENDED BREATH

⁹ Verónica Peña, "The Body In The Substance," Verónica Peña personal website, accessed February 9, 2024, http://www.veronicapena.com/the_body_in_the_substance.html.

¹⁰ Peña, "The Body In The Substance."

As we grow, we become more resilient, more capable of grappling with the world. But when we reexamine softness, a condition that originates at the onset of life and persistently follows us, a question arises: Do we still possess the ability to coexist with it? Can we coexist with ourselves, with our very essence?

The Body In The Substance (2015–2022) is a performance piece by Verónica Peña in which she immerses her entire body in a slowly solidifying liquid. Peña has stated, "When the 'substance' thickens, I am confined in the most beautiful stillness: as vulnerable as the ones still in the womb—unable to move, talk, or see, unable to hurt others."⁹ This exploration of regression also functions as a test of endurance. It is an act of courage for the artist to put herself in such a challenging situation, one in which she renounces all her power and reverts to the vulnerability inherent to all creatures. In the performance, Peña is completely naked as her body sinks and floats. Accompanied by an ethereal, melancholic human voice, the artist slowly opens her eyes to the liquid and turns her body. She uses her hands for assistance, but there is no struggle, only the palpability of her existence in the silence.

Underwater, light and sound behave differently than they do in air; water

also dulls human senses. The buoyancy of water provides a sense of security but simultaneously challenges our breathing. When I was learning to dive in the sea as a child, it took me a while to get comfortable using a snorkel, despite my confidence in swimming, proficiency in diving, and ability to hold my breath. This novel method of breathing unnerved me. I was expected to stay underwater for extended periods of time with the aid of the snorkel, but the irregular rhythm of my breathing kept me from submerging my head below the water's surface. It wasn't until later that I learned a crucial lesson: the most important aspect of diving is to trust oneself—trust in one's ability to breathe.

The liquid substance in Peña's performance work can be understood as uncertainty, that which is "unknown, between the here and there, past and present, life and death."¹⁰ While submerged, Peña modulates her breathing and concentrates on her survival instinct, and her performance also prompts the audience to decelerate and notice their breathing: the gaseous exchange between their bodily organs and the external world. The performance engenders empathy; we feel as if we too are laid bare in the liquid, defenseless. When submerged in water, we experience absolute coexistence with our-



Verónica Peña, *The Body In The Substance*, 2015-2022, performance. Image courtesy of the artist.

selves, intensely examining the sensation of corporeal existence.

All bodies are part of the social world. For Peña, her softness and vulnerability coexist with her identity as a woman and as an immigrant. Putting herself in danger enacts a kind of passive resistance to external threats, but it also highlights how some people are deprived of agency by those in positions of excessive power. To examine one's own vulnerability is to confront external violence and to challenge one's fears from both without and within.

V RUNNING WOUND

11 The Estate of Francis Bacon, "Biography," Francis Bacon official website, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.francis-bacon.com/biography>.

12 Steven Jaron, "Francis Bacon's Nervous System," in *Bacon and the Mind: Art, Neuroscience and Psychology*, ed. Martin Harrison (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 42.

How do we perceive violence, and how do we interpret pain?

Fernando Monroy's work presents us with an opportunity to see the intricate human emotions concealed behind the concept of pain. The milky white hue of vinyl, evocative of skin, anchors our associations to metaphors for our own bodies—our soft yet resilient encasements. In the tension created by the nails pushing into the vinyl from behind it, we can also discern an impatient yearning for growth. The tension of this yearning is conveyed in *Rasguño* (2023) by spikes on the verge of breaking through the surface, subcutaneous bruising, and the dried yet vividly scarlet wounds. The modest dimensions of Monroy's four pieces compel viewers to closely observe the torment of this standoff, which reflects the existential anxiety of modernity—behind the trauma of conflict, a sense of meaningless impotence punctures the soul.

Monroy openly acknowledges that he draws inspiration from Francis Bacon, whose paintings are deeply interested in explorations of pain, desire, and struggle. Bacon's repressed childhood abuse, which included sexual violence at the hands of his father, is closely intertwined with his later alcoholism, gambling addiction, and loneliness in

an era intolerant of homosexuality—all the bleeding wounds that manifest in his paintings.¹¹

From a postwar scream to a contemporary shout, Monroy's work reexamines the social struggles of the queer community, not by representing the niche suffering of a group, but by exploring the shared human fears and desires therein. Monroy created these works during the pandemic—a seemingly endless period of homebound isolation and negative news that contributed to a collective experience of powerlessness. The guilt of longing for intimate connections between people gives way to the anxiety thumping over a traumatic situation. This is also reflected in Bacon's obsession with the universal human experience of vulnerability—a state of *Hilflosigkeit* or "helplessness" that Freud identified as the cause of anxiety, a primordial reaction to danger.¹²

Anxiety is a dizziness of fear, a fear that derives from desires of attachment that, in recent years, during the pandemic, have been exacerbated by more extreme isolation. In Monroy's work, there is the scarred skin and the spikes on the verge of breaking through. Freedom and restraint coexist in tension, while pain and pleasure are interwoven.

Which side we empathize with is a question of subjectivity; or it's the oneness—one that strives to transgress the internal boundaries, while enduring harm inflicted by external forces. In this light, the greatest torment comes not from the spikes, but from the presumption that the thorns must be wrapped. The anticipation of that sting is a reminder, and a stark symbol of a distinct subjectivity. Pleasure arises from this distorted sense of control over self-perception—it is evidence of a stubborn vitality.



Fernando Monroy, *Rasguño*, 2023, stretched vinyl and acrylic, 10.5 x 14 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

VI SUBJECT, OBJECT

The idea of growth comes up in the work of several artists featured in *How Soft You Want It*. There are the piercing spikes in Fernando Monroy's work, and the unsettlingly erect stalactites in Kate Stone's installation, both revealing the pressing tension contained within softness. In Barb Smith's *Push* (2016), a vertical desire subtly extends, but in *Memory of a tiptoe* (2016), this force is exerted downward into a more constrained bundle of energy.

Smith uses memory foam in her practice to explore the impressions of bodies and objects. Upon a lump of repeatedly folded memory foam encased in Aqua-Resin, Smith leaves footprints—the fleeting yet temporal pressure is preserved by the soft material, leaving the ghost of gravity. The surrounding tiles support the crushed memory foam, providing a rationale for the temporary cessation of gravity's downward pull. The connection between the footprints and the expected action of the ghost prints of feet taking the next steps onto the tiles becomes awkward due to the limited area of the tiles—the area serves as a barrier, but also as evidence of the existence of an ineffable entity.

Smith's *Memory of a tiptoe* is a silent sculpture, modest in size, dutifully pre-



Barb Smith, *Push*, 2016, memory foam and aqua resin, 14 X 14 X 10 in. Installation view at 601Artspace. Image courtesy of Etienne Frossard.

serving the state of a past moment. Even in its solidified state, its soft nature still harbors a desire to flow. It is waiting—waiting to relax, and awaiting a heavier blow.

Push (2016) was made by compressing four pieces of memory foam. The lateral force lends it a new direction of growth. Smith stacked the pieces of foam and pressed them close together at the middle, creating a bloom at the top of the sculpture. Positioned on a pedestal, this work is presented almost exactly at eye level, drawing attention to the texture of the spongy material. The random pores of the foam give the work an airy quality; the fine lines and cracks bear witness to the passage of time.

In this exploration of soft narratives, there is no perfect soft subject. Memory foam is soft, but encased in Aqua-Resin, its flexibility is sealed; force also shapes the form's highs and lows into memories of powerlessness. As for the body that exerts force, the flesh is indeed soft, but once it has the power to shape, even using the intimate wrapping action, it becomes a force of violent engulfment.

There is such an enticing allure between intimacy and violence—we can see this in the attachment to pain in Monroy's work, but also in the entanglement between the two subjects in Smith's work: the foam is continuously compressed by the body through an hours-long shaping process, making the act of squeezing seem like a persistent channeling of desire.

At this moment, we can't help but reflect again: What is softness? What threatens our softness? The definition I can propose here and now is that softness is the constant concession to one's subjectivity, and it is this concession that deprives the subject of the possibility of approaching reality.



Barb Smith, *Memory of a tiptoe*, 2016, memory foam, aqua resin, cement backerboard tiles, 12 X 12 X 7 in. Installation view at 601Artspace. Image courtesy of Etienne Frossard.

VII CONCLUSION

The regression of subjectivity seems particularly prevalent in the contemporary era, one that is dominated by neoliberalism. Under the current system of capitalism, people are quantified by their labor and by their role as consumers; market parameters are also applied to the ontological exchange of identities, thoughts, and feelings. In the political realm, power alienates people, and makes “freedom” a continued state of captivity.¹³ When we speak of softness today we are also talking about individuals as subjects and the modes of existence and paths of evolution they possess. Softness encapsulates our care for the world and our dedication to others; at the same time, it is also a predisposed condition we don't necessarily choose. In a fast-moving, ever-changing world, we try to soften ourselves out of a fear of nonconformity. The degree of softness becomes one of our few controllable choices: How soft do you want it to be?

Sometimes softness becomes a disadvantage, as if our agency to decide for ourselves is dissipating. The loss of a sense of belonging puts people today in a state of floatation. Without the ground to rely on, the pull of gravity brings immense fear of the unknown. When the foothold is beyond time, the crisis faced by softness is like a suspend-

ed object. Once the balance is broken, a fall is inevitable. In her investigation of contemporary life, Hito Steyerl calls for loving the free fall:

It takes place in an opening we could endure or enjoy, embrace or suffer, or simply accept as reality. . . . But falling does not only mean falling apart, it can also mean a new certainty falling into place. Grappling with crumbling futures that propel us backwards onto an agonizing present, we may realize that the place we are falling toward is no longer grounded, nor is it stable. It promises no community, but a shifting formation.¹⁴

Transformation is what imbues an object of softness with aesthetic value. This can be seen in Amato's dismantlement, Peña's creation, Stone's accumulation, Monroy's penetration, and Smith's distortion. Softness, therefore, is an embodiment of life's eternal flux.

What underpins such transformations is the undeniable force of resistance behind softness, which is the wellspring of humanity's capacity to respond and adapt. Authority has the oppressive power to dissolve the voice of the other, but art challenges this power by representing the very individuals that the system seeks to suppress. Meanwhile, it serves as a testament to suffering, and exposes our vulnerabili-

13 Iskra Geshoska, “The Collective Alice, or, on Fear, Death, Multitudes, and Pain,” e-flux journal, no. 119 (June 2021): 12-23, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/119/403048/the-collective-alice-or-on-fear-death-multitudes-and-pain/>

14 Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” e-flux journal, no. 42-52 (April 2011): 49, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

ties and fears. Artistic practice opens a window to self-observation, a means to rediscover our sense of self. Only when we truly possess ourselves, can we feel the liberating wind that meets us in our fall.

Desire is a force of chaos. Humans reach outward and pray inward, longing for validations of our own illusory existence. Among the value systems of the modern world, softness is seldom seen as a trait to be proudly owned. Yet to choose softness is to choose tolerance of the unknown, to accept the possibility of failure, and is therefore a form of courageous resistance. It is only when one truly confronts and embraces their inner softness that one can truly own themselves and have the tools to navigate the world. If only there were a single moment, a point of clarity for us all when we could say, This is how soft you want it.

This exhibition, with its multifaceted artworks, beckons us to reevaluate the societal values that define us and the narratives that have shaped them. It dares to challenge the conventional glorification of toughness and power, advocating instead for a paradigm shift whereby softness and vulnerability are recognized not as weaknesses, but as profound forms of resilience.

In this era of unprecedented challenges—marked by the rise of authoritarian regimes, endless wars, contentious debates over migrant crises and border disputes—we are compelled to reassess our societal values and strategies to navigate this turbulent world. In both our private lives and the political arena, the preservation of softness—interpreted here as empathy, adaptability, and a readiness to seek common ground—emerges not merely as a survival strategy, but a potent form of resistance against the uncompromising

interests that so often fuel these conflicts.

Central to *How Soft You Want It* is a fundamental truth: as creatures of flesh and blood, softness is an intrinsic part of our existence. To reject softness is to abandon our capacity for compassion, openness, unity, and resilience. These are the positive connotations of softness, the very virtues that are under siege in this era when kindness and adaptability are being tested like never before. Now more than ever, humanity must take more than a second look at the meaning of softness, to wholeheartedly reembrace it. In the face of adversity, we have the chance to reclaim our soft strength, our resilience, and our path forward.

If what we are facing now is an existential black hole, take it easy. Let's jump into it. Let's go. Let us go.

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ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Santina Amato

Santina Amato was born in Melbourne, Australia to Italian immigrants, and has lived and worked in the USA since 2010. She works in a wide range of mediums and formats from sculpture to live performances, and explores the experience of the intimate body. In her work, desire and erotica are translated into a broader consideration of the physical, psychological, and social functions of the female body through domestic materials such as bread dough and used bedsheets. She considers and incorporates domestic labour when handling these materials that become signifiers for a personal and intimate space.

Amato received an MFA (Photography) from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2017) and was a 2022 AIM Fellow at the Bronx Museum of Art in New York. In 2023, she received funding from the New York State Council on the Art, Individual Artist Grant, and a 2023 Queens Arts Fund, New Work Grant, and was a Mentor for the New York Foundation for the Arts, Immigrant Artist Program. She also was the Program Director of an Artist-In-Residence Summer Pilot Program at Rockella Space in Queens, New York.

Amato's work is currently on view at the Bronx Museum as part of The Sixth AIM Biennale. Her work has been exhibited and screened at Field Projects, NYC, Springbreak, NYC, Samek Art Museum, Bucknell University, PA, The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL, MOCA Tucson, AZ, Here Arts Center, NYC, Governors Island Art Fair, NYC and the Kuntshalle Detroit Museum of Contemporary Art, MI. She has received funding from city and state agencies in New York and Illinois, and the Australian Council for the Arts among others. Her work has been included in publications such as Chicago Artist Writers, Emergency Index, Psychology Tomorrow Magazine, CreateMagazine, and Lenscratch.

In 2018, Amato was named as a Hot Pick Artist by Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY, and she has held positions as Fellow and Artist-in-Residence at MoCA Tucson, AZ, supported by the Illinois Arts Council Agency (IACA), MASS MoCA in North Adams, MA supported by the City of Chicago's DCASE, 2018 IAP Grant, Crosstown Arts, Memphis, TN, Process Park, Arslant & Chashama, Pine Plains, NY, BRIC Arts Media, Brooklyn, NY. Amato Founded and Directed Moving_Image_00:00, a biannual festival in Chicago of moving image works by Chicago-based artists from 2016-2019.

Her work is part of a collective photographic portfolio at The Joan Flasch Artist' Book Collection and The Art Institute of Chicago, and video collection at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia and the Samek Art Museum, Lewisburg, PA.

Fernando Monroy

Fernando is a Mexican artist that works with digital medium and latex, his work is mostly focused on pop culture and phobias, he tries to expose his inner fears on his latex sculptures, and for his digital practice he tries to find a new way to show images and symbols that are already embedded on society.

Verónica Peña

Verónica Peña is an interdisciplinary artist, independent curator, and international community advocate from Spain based in the US since 2006, and living in Australia since 2024. Her work explores absence, separation, and the search for harmony through performance art, science, and technology. In her performance installations, Peña uses prolonged underwater submersion, body transfiguration, durational process, audience participation, and visual imprint to address global issues of migration, cross-cultural dialogue, peaceful resistance, public liberation, death, body-mind fluidity, and women's empowerment.

Peña performs and exhibits primarily in Europe, and America. In America: Rockella (Artist-In-Residence, NYC, 2023), Museo Ex Teresa (ZonaMaco, Mexico City, 2022), Queens Arts Council (NYC, 2022), EmergeNYC (NYC, 2021), Satellite Art Fair (Miami Art Week, 2021), ChaShaMa (NYC, 2021), Grace Exhibition Space (NYC, 2021), Franklin Furnace (NYC, 2021), NARS Foundation (Artist-In-Residence, NYC, 2021), Coaxial Arts Foundation (LA, 2021), BAAD! (NYC, 2019), Smack Mellon Foundation (NYC, 2018), Triskelion Arts (NYC, 2017), Hemispheric Institute (Encuentro Chile, 2016), Queens Museum (2016), Sala Luis Miro Quesada Garland (Lima, Perú), School of the Art Institute of Chicago (Visiting Artist), Times Square Alliance, Armory Show, Purdue University, Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery, Momenta Art Gallery, Pøst Art Gallery, Dumbo Arts Festival, Consulate of Spain in NY, among others. In Europe: PEPA (Madrid, 2024), Est_Art Gallery (Madrid, 2023), Live Art Ireland (2022), Fundación Bilbaoarte (Bilbao, 2021), Museo La NeomudéJar (Madrid, 2019), Friche La Belle De Mai (Marseille, 2018), Festival Intramurs (Valencia, 2018), La Tabacalera (Madrid, 2018), Zaratán Arte Contemporáneo (Lisbon, 2017), Casa de América (Madrid), among others. Peña was selected for the Creative Capital NYC Taller 2020, received a FCA Foundation for the Contemporary Arts Grant 2022, Queens Arts Council Grant 2022, and a Franklin Furnace Fund 2018. She was a recipient of the Socrates and Erasmus Grants, and a Universidad Complutense de Madrid Fellowship (Juan Genovés painting workshop). She published "The Presence Of The Absent", was reviewed by Donald Kuspit, and on Hyperallergic. She curates Collective Becoming, to make cities less hostile, and founded/leads Performance Art Open Call, a +33,900 members FB Community. Peña received an MFA from Stony Brook University.

Barb Smith

Barb Smith is a Queens-based artist born in Kokomo, Indiana. She holds an MFA in Sculpture from Bard College. Her work invites reflection on one's relationship to the material world by mining the tension between seeing, touching, and recalling.

Solo exhibitions include Cradle, Essex Flowers Window Box, NY, NY; Mother Tongue, Fine Arts Center Gallery, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR; Gravity Forgiveness, Stepsister, NY, NY; Cup at 315 Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. Group exhibitions include Art Work, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Latent Memory: Dust on my Tongue, Miriam, Brooklyn, NY; Float, fly, transcend, Alabama Contemporary, Mobile, AL; The Backroom, Museo Tamayo, CDMX, Mexico; Tiny Things, September, Hudson, NY; the Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts, American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY; MAD Collects, Museum of Arts and Design, NY; In Practice: Material Deviance, SculptureCenter, NY; Queens International, Queens Museum, NY.

Smith is the recipient of a Mayer Foundation Grant, a Peter S. Reed Foundation Individual Artist Grant, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow in Sculpture. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2012. Her work has been featured in such publications as Less than Half, Cream Magazine, The Brooklyn Rail, The Washington Post, and Hyperallergic. Her writing has been featured in The Shawangunk Review, No, Dear Magazine, The Saint Lucy, Makhzin, and The Brooklyn Rail.

Kate Stone

Kate Stone works across installation, sculpture and animation to explore psychological space, the domestic uncanny and narratives embedded in everyday architectural structures. Her animations combine stop-motion, collage techniques and miniature sets to describe labyrinthine, distorted interiors. Her sculptures employ carpet, found furniture and other household materials to imagine a process in which domestic space absorbs so much residue of life that it is animated into a living organism, taking the form of stalagmites or growths. Stone sees architecture as a recording device - a structure for the accumulation of history, a repository for the things we leave behind and an extension of ourselves. Her work responds to her experience growing up in American suburbia, its aesthetics as well as its cultural role as a site for ambient dread and anxiety. We consume the horrors of the external world from the (dis)comfort of our living room sofas. Stone's work explores that cognitive dissonance and how the states of our minds and our bodies are reflected in and absorbed by the spaces we occupy. Drawing inspiration from myths, conspiracy theories, quantum physics, anatomy and horror tropes, she constructs liminal worlds that exist somewhere between interior and exterior, between reality and superstition, between

architecture and the body. They are psychological spaces that are often in the midst of transformation, being overtaken by natural, supernatural or invisible forces. These forces serve as stand-ins for the anxiety that current world events bring into our personal lives and private spaces.

Kate Stone is a Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary artist. She received a BA from Bard College and an MFA from Parsons the New School for Design. She has been awarded the Tierney Fellowship, The Lotos Foundation Prize, an FST StudioProjects Grant and a Kone Foundation Grant. She has attended residencies at NARS Foundation, Artists Alliance LES Studio Program, Kone Foundation, MASS MoCA and Mudhouse Residency in rural Greece. Her work has been exhibited at 601Artspace, bitforms gallery, Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space, Dinner Gallery, FiveMyles, Ortega y Gasset Projects, Rubber Factory, Spring Break Art Show, South Bend Museum of Art, The Museum of Broken Relationships and Transmitter Gallery, among others.

This exhibition offers an exploration of the quality of softness in different human registers—emotional, physical, and societal—and the resilience it manifests in a time when power and plunder thrive. Featuring five artists whose diverse practices span sculpture, installation, performance, and moving images, *How Soft You Want It* weaves a collective narrative that highlights the courage to accept vulnerability as crucial to our humanity and to confront suffering, while celebrating our capacity to endure, adapt, and transform ourselves and the world that around us.

How Soft You Want It

April 18, 2024

Pfizer Building

630 Flushing Ave, Brooklyn, NY

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By Kexun Zhang

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MA Curatorial Practice

School of Visual Arts

132 West 21st Street, 10th floor

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