

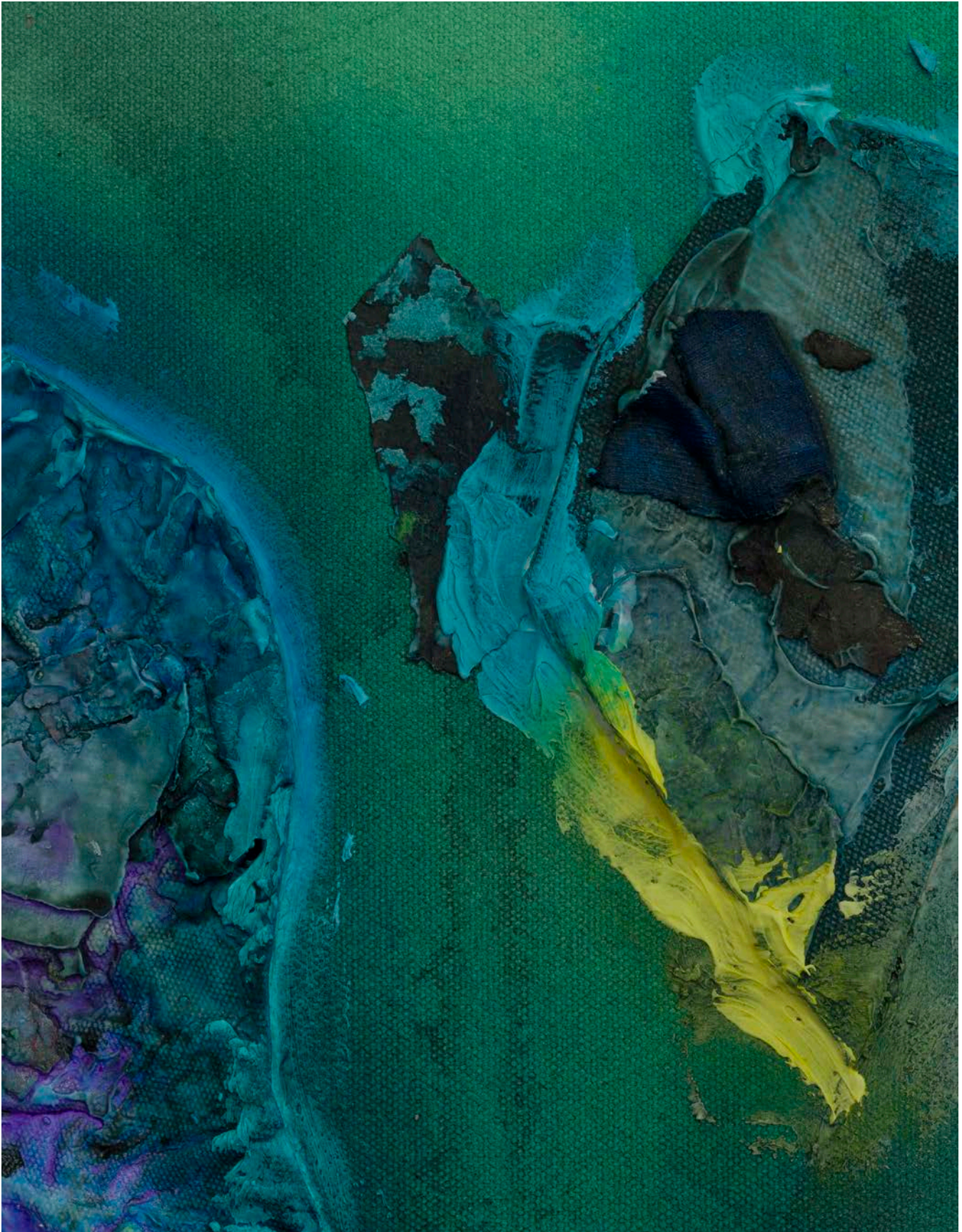


Exhibition Brochure

Leslie Martinez: The Secrecy of Water

Blaffer Art Museum

January 20, 2023—March 12, 2023



Twisting Roots Summon the Thorns, 2023. Fabric and paper scraps, charcoal, fine ballast, pumice and acrylic on canvas, 90 x 70 x 5 inches.

here & there: caring, edging, being, revealing

For artist Leslie Martinez, abstraction is the means to gather stories, places, histories, bodies, life, death, love, joy, and growth in one place. The artist's canvases—from small to monumental—resemble alchemical admixtures of paint, color, corporeal texture, and other elements that sometimes elude comprehension. Martinez's paintings evoke many things at once, with surfaces sometimes resembling jumbled, earthy shards and sometimes suggesting a starburst constellation. It is here, in this simultaneity, that Martinez invites us to experience and feel our way through their work.

The artist was born in the southernmost tip of Texas in the city of McAllen close to Rio Grande City, which is located within the Rio Grande Valley just minutes from the border of Mexico. Shortly after their birth, Martinez's immediate family moved to the Dallas metroplex (where Martinez would primarily grow up), but they all regularly made the 9-hour car ride in the summers to visit remaining family members in the borderlands. In a 2020 feature with the *Dallas Morning News*, the artist recalls how, on one of these trips, their family would have to stop at a patrol checkpoint about an hour north of the US-Mexico border. Although they were still in Texas, a young Martinez remembers believing that the family had crossed into Mexico.¹ Here

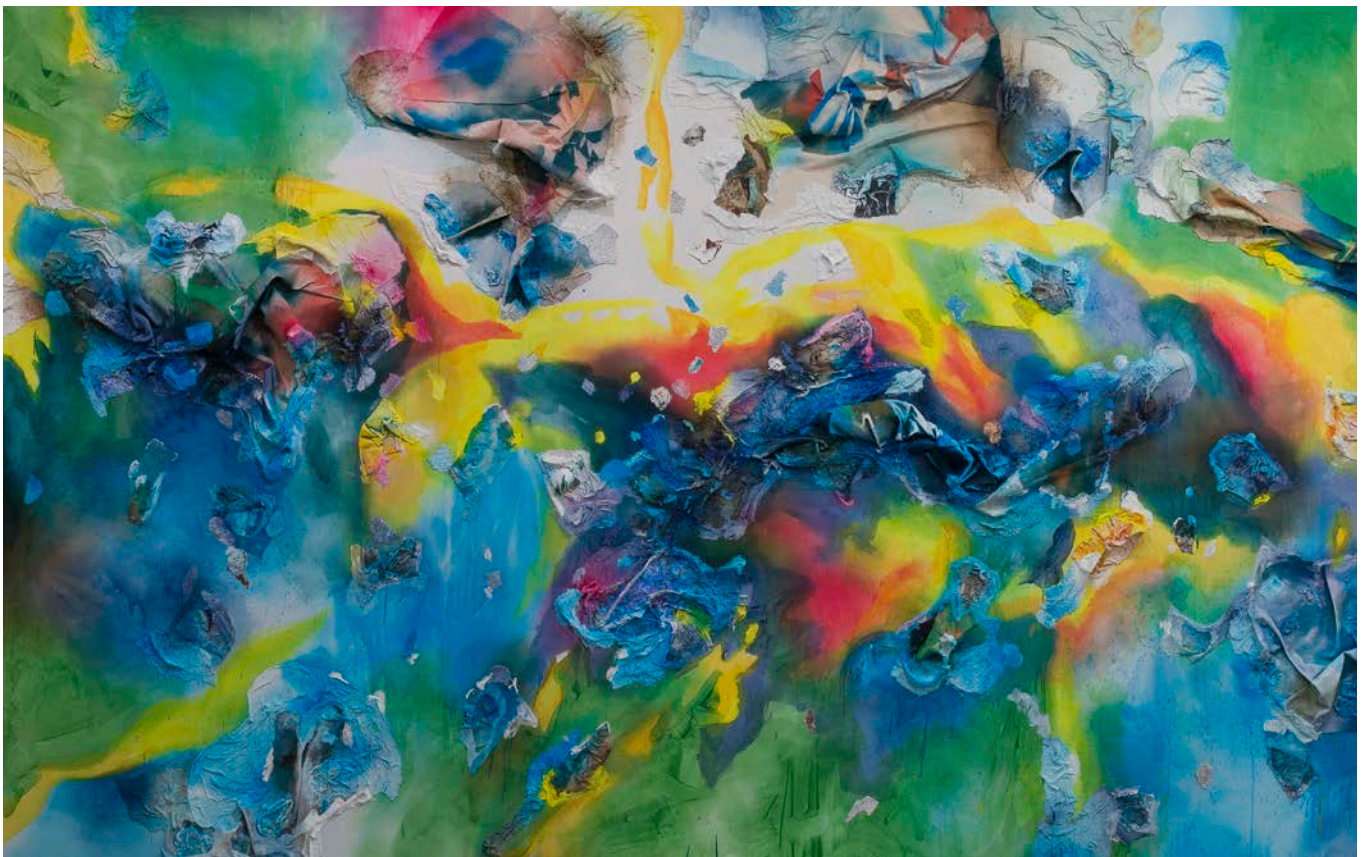
(or perhaps there?), betwixt reality and mind, the artist apparently existed in two places at once. Indeed, from the very start, Martinez became conscious of borders—whether edges, fringes, margins, ridges, or ends, which might also indicate beginnings. The consideration of an international border, perhaps at any age, also comes with complex, mind-transforming ideas of the meanings of citizenship, belonging, identity, place, home, economy, landscape, social relations, politics, (dis)location, history, and more. Certainly, today Martinez has formed an attachment to this notion of duality/periphery—both here and there—as well as a fondness for the look and feel of the land of their birthplace. Martinez describes the inherent grit and brown dirt and dust of the ground and brush in the untouched landscape, as well as areas around buildings in much of the Rio Grande Valley as eerily beautiful and distinct.² Adding to its character, the region is also perpetually parched despite its proximity to the Rio Grande river and the Gulf of Mexico. This ecological makeup, as well as the deteriorating aesthetic characteristics of the area's infrastructure and buildings, remains a definitive reference for the artist's manner of achieving granular, multimodal textures for their canvases. Martinez's paintings, which incorporate physical elements of discarded or recycled fabric, stone pebbles, dirt, and cast-off paint buildup (among other

things), sometimes resemble geological topographies or multicolor spillages/clouds of debris and liquid that can seem kindred with the Texas landscape.

Martinez's recent paintings, like the ones featured in the Blaffer Art Museum exhibition *The Secrecy of Water*, are commanding, breathtaking, and dense. Conceived as a singular body of work—a narrative-based approach akin to the way Martinez made works for a late 2022 solo presentation at AND NOW in Dallas—the paintings in the Blaffer exhibition feature a unique palette for the artist. Different green, blue, yellow, orange, and black hues comprise these works, which are partially inspired by a period of severe drought in Texas in 2022. Martinez witnessed blackened patches of crops while driving through the state and likened them to scabs over a human body—dehydrated and trying to heal. Over the course of many months, Martinez watched as the scorched vegetation slowly came back to life—revealing water

as an active gradient of healing. Across the canvases in the *Secrecy of Water*, we also see recurrent wildfire-like motifs (abstract articulations of electric canary yellow, ochre, and tangerine orange) that alternately advance across the picture and collide or diminish with other elements. Here, topics of climate change and the environment come to the fore as important, timely issues for our discussion and, ultimately, solutions.

On another level, the artist's speckled, polychromatic accretions and swaths—indeed, their use of bright colors in general—over the sabulous surfaces also potentially evoke *rasquachismo*, which can be described as a theory or worldview or sensibility originally asserted by Chicano scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 1989. Ybarra-Frausto describes *rasquachismo* as “an underdog perspective—a view from *los de abajo* [those below]. An attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style.”³



Every Fiber of the Beast, 2023. Fabric and paper scraps, charcoal, fine ballast, pumice, and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 144 x 5 inches.



Cistern and Artifact at the Golden Edge of the Sky Rim, 2021. Fabric, paper, fine ballast, pumice, Pearlex mica powder, iron oxide, curly saw dust, wood ash, charcoal, and acrylic on canvas with aluminum stretcher frame, 90 x 70 inches.



Figure 1

In this sense, when applied to an aesthetic context, *rasquachismo* emblemizes practices that adopt an oppositional stance to the dominant, mainstream, and often white culture while also articulating a specific Chicano identity. Further, in Chicana artist-activist-writer-curator Amalia Mesa-Bains's 1999 critical effort to expand this sensibility to iterate a feminist perspective within *rasquachismo*, Mesa-Bains posits:

“In *rasquachismo*, the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least. In *rasquachismo*, one has a stance that is both defiant and inventive. Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials such as tires, broken plates, plastic containers, which are recombined with elaborate and bold display in yard shrines (*capillas*), domestic decor (*altares*), and even embellishment of the car. In its broadest sense it is a combination

of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity. The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*.”⁴ (fig. 1-2)

Mesa-Bains goes on to establish a new term, *domesticana*, which is a female-centric parallel to *rasquachismo* that is informed by the domestic aesthetic sensibility of Chicanas. These gendered but simultaneous attitudes—a more “male” version of *rasquachismo* and a broadened, feminist *domesticana*—are fused within Martinez’s queered artistic identity through the artist’s connections to ancestral generations of Chicanos who lived and loved and worked in proximity to the border. Within Martinez’s work, aesthetic “celebration” or expression via vibrant color is intrinsically tied with the toughened, resilient



Figure 2

point of view of the historic “underdog.” Relatedly, the artist’s penchant for the land, too, is evident in their paintings, and, fascinatingly, could be interpreted as a continuation of shared history and labor—as Martinez’s father, grandparents, and other family members worked as traveling farmers earlier across the 20th century. In their paintings, Martinez conjures abstract images using color-drenched, literal detritus—trash and rocks, oftentimes, but sometimes recycled, found t-shirts or rags—that recall Rio Grande Valley scenes where things alternately emerge and sink from the ground, depending on the frequency of rain or human traffic.⁵ This practice of constructing and manipulating their materials on the canvas becomes a metaphorical

gathering of cultural histories and memories and land. Martinez places these elements in tension with each other—always buoyantly embellished with effervescent color in true *rasquachismo* fashion—ensuring there are never simple dichotomies. This methodology, in turn, is combinatory and new, creating a visualized borderland imaginary that, for Martinez, is both speculative and deeply familiar.

At the same time, Martinez’s works sometimes seem to allude to bodily membranes or zoomed-in images of veins seen on one’s skin. For the artist, who identifies as transgender and gender nonbinary, the relationship between body and painting is inextricable and crucial.



Figure 3

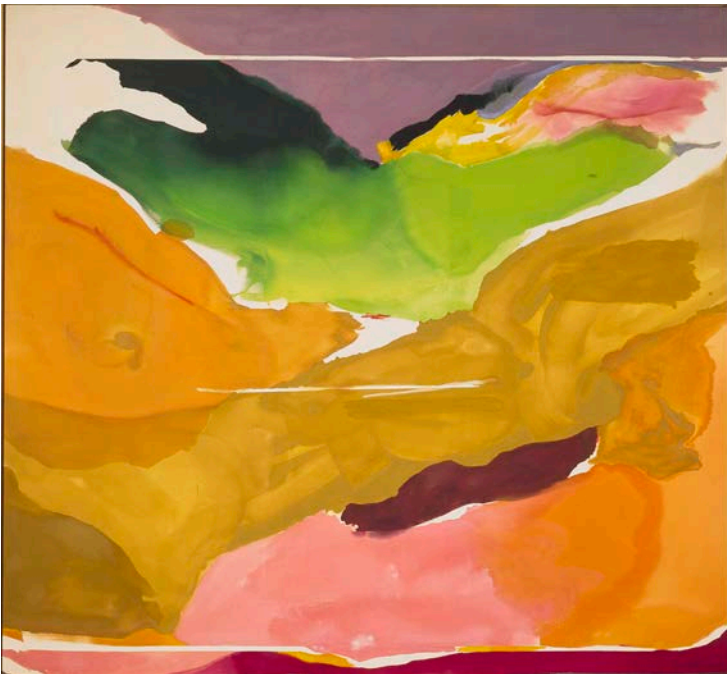


Figure 4



Figure 5

As Martinez works to create a painting, which usually includes the aforementioned materials of cloth and rock and dirt, they spend significant time deliberating and modifying and manipulating the many layers of composition in the lead-up to “completion”—a process which often takes a physical toll on the artist’s own torso. Broad gestural paint swaths and stains, which might unintentionally recall Sam Gilliam (fig. 3) or Helen Frankenthaler (fig. 4), are visually weighed against painted, sometimes pleated fabric and/or canvas additions (à la Simon Hantaï (fig. 5)) physically attached through many stages of progression. Then, as one might detail a car or perform surgery, the artist hones in on each and every inch of the painting’s surface, often working with a small brush to highlight important visual ingredients or to delineate conjunction points between the prismatic elements we see. If Martinez’s paintings might be considered extensions of Martinez’s own body, then these small marks with a delicate, thin brush might be considered minuscule, laborious acts of care. These impressions, precise and perhaps “healing” marks, are imparted directly from the artist “back” to these paintings/inanimate bodies. Furthermore, Martinez’s use of recycled rags—a common signifier of tender compassion and concern or applicator of attention or tidiness—is foundational to the artist’s practice; rags make their way into virtually every painting. Similarly, when rags or other fabrics are made to create relief on the surface of a canvas, the artist also makes concerted efforts to “patch” any resultant holes or crevices with the same level of detail—in effect, safeguarding or conserving any “vulnerable,” penetrable features of the painting. Thus, for Martinez, their abstract paintings speak to the existence of a queer, trans body that is fragile but sturdy and prospering. Here, the art is an extension/transference of the artist.

As anti-LGBTQI+, anti-abortion, anti-immigrant, and anti-trans legislation and social stances have swept the United States and Texas in the wake of Donald Trump’s period in the White House, Martinez has been keenly aware of the direct effects this oppositional atmosphere has on the artist’s family, friends, and the artist themselves. The paintings in *The Secrecy of Water* invite readings of our current “climate”—both our physical environment and the larger sociopolitical timbre (or the political mood). Throughout our history, the “climate” has drastically affected the ways in which people are able to exist or move through the world, akin to the ongoing 21st-century form of border imperialism at the nexus of the US and Mexico. Similarly, much in the same sense that wildfire might threaten the natural environment, viral untruths about queer people or migrants can surge unchecked across the American conscience without remorse or regard for the people impacted. Trans peoples and people of color often are most frequently targeted in these blistering conservative crusades, and perhaps obviously, they are the very real recipients of violence and systemic injustice. In this way, Martinez’s paintings both acknowledge this reality and provide a motley balm of joy and protection.

In all their allusions, Martinez’s poetic meditations in paint and discard can serve as a marker for our current moment and the state of the world, as well as an opportunity to reflect on the entangled histories that brought us to the political and environmental climates we currently occupy. The artist’s project, then, is one that builds new, fluid worlds where we are invited to imagine a queered future—informed by our shared pasts—that offers opportunities for self-determination, comfort, and well-being.

Front Cover: Leslie Martinez, detail of *Latent and Supine*, 2022. Fabric and paper scraps, charcoal, fine ballast, pumice, and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 144 x 5 inches.

Back Cover: Leslie Martinez, detail of *Shadow of a Flying V*, 2020. Canvas scraps, jersey shop rags, terrycloth, mop fibers, course ballast, pumice gel, paper pulp, paper, acrylic, and iron oxide on canvas, 60 x 48 inches.

All images © Courtesy of the artist and AND NOW, Dallas. Photos: Evan Sheldon

Figures:

¹Amalia Mesa-Bains, detail of *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, 1984 (revised 1991). Mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter, 96 x 72 x 48 inches (243.8 x 182.9 x 121.9 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program. © 1991, Amalia Mesa-Bains.

²Amalia Mesa-Bains, detail of *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, 1984 (revised 1991). Mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter, 96 x 72 x 48 inches (243.8 x 182.9 x 121.9 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program. © 1991, Amalia Mesa-Bains.

³Sam Gilliam, *Carousel II of Double Merge (Carousel I and Carousel II)*, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, Left Panel: 122 x 800 ½ inches (309.9 x 2033.3 cm), Right Panel: 118 5/8 x 862 ½ inches (301.3 x 2190.8 cm). Purchased jointly by the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, with funds from the Caroline

Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund; and by the Dia Art Foundation. Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Dia Art Foundation; Bill Jacobson Studio.

⁴Helen Frankenthaler, *Nature Abhors a Vacuum*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 103 ½ x 112 inches (262.9 x 284.5 cm). Collection National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Patrons' Permanent Fund and Gift of Audrey and David Mirvish, Toronto, Canada, 2004.129.1. © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

⁵Simon Hantaï, *Etude*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 108 ¾ x 94 ½ inches. Collection of Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. © Archives Simon Hantaï / Adagp, Paris. Photo: Eric Emo/Parisienne de Photographie

Footnotes:

¹Danielle Avram, "Artist Leslie Martinez explores material transformation in new Dallas exhibition," *Dallas Morning News*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.dallasnews.com/arts-entertainment/visual-arts/2020/08/07/an-artist-without-a-country-leslie-martinez-plumbs-ideas-of-simultaneity-perception-and-borders/>.

²Leslie Martinez, conversation with author, December 26, 2022.

³Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: a Chicano sensibility," in *Chicano aesthetics: Rasquachismo* exhibition catalogue, (Phoenix, AZ: MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Rio Salado, 1989), 5-8.

⁴Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Domesticana: the sensibility of Chicana rasquache," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 157-158

⁵Martinez, conversation with author, December 26, 2022.

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January 20, 2023—March 12, 2023

Leslie Martinez: The Secrecy of Water is organized by Tyler Blackwell, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Speed Art Museum and former Cynthia Woods Mitchell Associate Curator at Blaffer Art Museum.

Generous support for this exhibition is provided by J. Patrick Collins, Marguerite Hoffman, and Christopher Scott & Cody Fitzsimmons. Special thanks to AND NOW, Dallas for their assistance in organizing this exhibition.

Major annual funding is provided by Leslie & Brad Bucher, the Stolbun Family Foundation, and the John

P. McGovern Foundation. Generous annual support is provided by Ingrid Arneberg, Sarah C. Morian & Michael Clark, Andrew & Robin Schirrmeister, and Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members. The following donors sustain Blaffer Art Museum in perpetuity by giving through endowments: Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, Jane Dale Owen Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Jo & Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Sarah C. Morian Endowment, and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Blaffer Gallery Endowment.

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