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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

1 – 9

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Ahram Park

June 2017

Thesis Committee:

Distinguished Professor John Divola, Chairperson  
Professor Yunhee Min  
Professor Brandon Lattu  
Professor Jim Isermann

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The Thesis of Ahram Park is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Table of Contents

List of Figures	v
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	1
Chapter 3	4
Chapter 4	8
Chapter 5	10
Chapter 6	12
Chapter 7	16
Chapter 8	20
Chapter 9	21
Bibliography	28
Additional Images	29

## List of Figures

- Figure 1. Page 2: Tallgrass Road, 30 x 45 inches, Archival Inkjet print, 2014
- Figure 2. Page 3: Friendly Stranger, 30 x 45 inches, Archival Inkjet print, 2014
- Figure 3. Page 5: Throwing Eight Oranges, 50 x 45 inches, Bond Print on 40lb paper, 2015
- Figure 4. Page 6: Throwing Three Oranges, 50 x 45 inches, Bond Print on 40lb paper, 2015
- Figure 5. Page 7: Throwing Two Oranges, 50 x 45 inches, Bond Print on 40lb paper, 2015
- Figure 6. Page 8: Rain Paper (studio arrangement), 2015
- Figure 7. Page 9: Rain Paper (detail), 2015
- Figure 8. Page 10: Winter (studio arrangement), 2015
- Figure 9. Page 11: Spring (studio arrangement), 2016
- Figure 10 Page 12: Rug (books), 2016
- Figure 11 Page 13: Dune (rescan #2), 2016
- Figure 12. Page 14: Apple Tree (rescan #4), 2016
- Figure 13. Page 15: Plates (variations), 2017
- Figure 14. Page 15: Daniel Buren: les couleurs traverses = Arbeiten for Ort
- Figure 15. Page 16: Variations 'Buren', 2017
- Figure 16. Page 16: Palettes, 2017
- Figure 17. Page 17: Spirit (exhibition View), 2017
- Figure 18. Page 18: Untitled (spirit), 4 x 6 inches, Dye Sublimation Print, 2017

Figure 19. Page 19: Untitled (spirit), 4 x 6 inches, Dye Sublimation Print, 2017

Figure 20. Page 20: Sunny Day, (3) 54 x 36 inches, Bond Print on 40lb paper, 2017

Figure 21. Page 21: Cuttings and Observations (Sheffera Alboricola), (8) 4 x 6 inches, Dye Sublimation Print, 2017

Figure 22. Page 23: Cuttings and Observations (Ricinus Communis), 4 x 6 inches, Dye Sublimation Print, 2017

Figure 23. Page 24: Cuttings and Observations (Sheffera Alboricola), Installation View, 2017

Figure 24. Page 25: Cuttings and Observations (Ricinus Communis), Installation View, 2017

This thesis is an investigation of the works Ahram Park completed in conjunction with a spring, 2017, MFA, thesis exhibition. It examines the implications of gesture, experience, and image as subject. The photographs on exhibit consider the intersection of these conditions.

1.

I have a need to engage myself visually and physically with a thing I can't name, but it has to do with where I came from, how I grew up and, where I am. I want to make work that tells plainly of the mysteries I still find in the world, while also laying bare its secrets. It has been a privilege to resettle and examine my enterprise as an artist here in California. I developed a significant desire to climb quiet and untouched places, while engaging questions and ideas that have complicated my desires to be an artist. The works in the exhibition are an open set of observations, suggestive of my physical engagements and desires in the West.

2.

My first year in Riverside, I began investigating different modes of engagement. Building on a larger range of skill sets, processes, and materials. What kind of questions *could* be asked and how would they change the pictures that I make? There were times when photography felt limiting; when the observable world was



not enough. I would often make large sets of images, each image seeming to yield less and less significance. But the year before my move, I made a set of black and white photographs titled *Friendly Stranger*. In it, I photographed dust storms generated with a leaf blower on gravel roads. This urge to intervene and create the photograph distinctly changed my approach, where physical gesture became an attribute of my process.

Fig. 1



*Tallgrass road, 2014*  
Archival inkjet print  
30 x 45 inches

Around this time, I found myself looking at photographs of the Dust bowl; how devastatingly bleak they echoed even today. Photographs of the large, billowing dust storms quickly lost my attention, as I began to focus on faces that pointed beyond hunger, fields that lacked sympathy, and a larger gripping blankness.

The victims of the Dust Bowl all sought beyond their conditions, some migrating to California in hopes of *something*. Looking back, *Friendly Stranger* seemed to reveal my desires to generate those dust storms. Wanting to take control in a time when I otherwise felt helpless. Although I was not consciously thinking about the Dust Bowl when making the images, *Friendly Stranger* revealed to me that the images could find a context beyond my original intentions; *something* beyond the conditions of those motionless summer days.

Fig. 2



*Friendly Stranger*, 2014  
Archival inkjet print  
30 x 45 inches

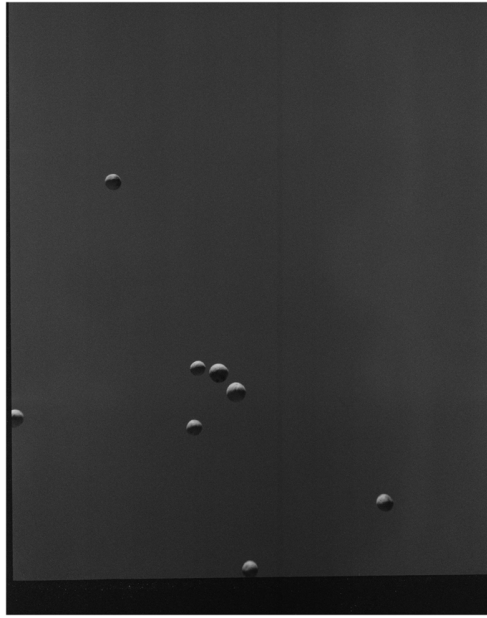
3.

In California, I began surveying what the land had to offer. The light was different here; harsh, bright, unforgiving at times. Yet it contained a signature glow—something I noticed in pictures made by California photographers. As a Kansas

native, where winters held a four-month grey, things were much brighter here. And the plants, often unfriendly to the touch, were antithetical to the water-hungry crops of the Midwest. Every year in California, winter seemed to creep up, then ultimately fail; leaving me with a feeling that time had not passed. The rain, infrequently as it came, showered me with an embarrassing amount of nostalgia. Noticing these changes, I took advantage of my disoriented and heightened senses.

Using a medium-format camera, I began photographing the land; first its trees, then its fruit. Mainly oranges. After booking a tour with the Citrus Research station at U.C. Riverside, it wasn't long before I began throwing oranges into the sky, photographing them in mid-air. Pitching oranges was immensely satisfying, while photographing them felt like an odd, sympathetic gesture. The black-and-white film produced a sea of grey tones, making it somewhat difficult to recognize the objects as fruit. It reminded me of early photographs of UFOs, of objects floating in space, ambiguous of material and origin (fig. 3-5). The photographs were captured in a vertical orientation, referencing of my somatic engagement with the land.

Fig. 3



*Throwing Eight Oranges, 2015*  
Bond Print on 40lb paper  
50 x 40 inches

My initial objectives were to rebuild the contextual framing of the fruit, first by my gesture of throwing. Tossing the oranges was a way to detach my subject from its place of origin. Subsequently, I began recognizing my attraction to provisional moments; a collection of ephemeral engagements with the land. Formal qualities of the photograph were introduced during the negative scanning process. I would offset the negative in the film holder, thereby creating a black 'horizon line' at the bottom of the photograph; introducing an index of technology into the vocabulary of my gesture.

Fig. 4



*Throwing Three Oranges, 2015*  
Bond Print on 40lb paper  
50 x 40 inches

Fig. 5



*Throwing Two Oranges*, 2015  
Bond Print on 40lb paper  
50 x 40 inches

This work initiated my move away from the conventions of digital printing, to coarser, more vernacular methods of photograph production. I began to engage the physical vocabulary of the medium as a component of subject. Context rearrangement, reduction, and engagement of medium, remain components of my process.

4.

When the California rains would finally come, I would hold large sheets of butcher paper above my head and walk through the showers. The length of exposure would depend on the precipitation rate: the harder the rain, the shorter the exposure. Once the papers had dried, I would determine if they had been 'properly' exposed, looking for a marker of depth deep enough for a satisfying relief. The process was intentionally reductive to an essentialism that is parallel to the attributes of indexical representation. For me, the process of creating *Rain Papers* manifested a new and direct engagement with materials, analogous to the photographic process.

Fig. 6



*Rain Paper (studio arrangement), 2015*

In the studio, I would arrange and install multiple *Rain Papers* on the walls. The dates, hand-written on the papers, reflected the range of varying storms. While the storms were generally light, heavy rains would leave marks of high relief. The simplicity of the process alerted me to the sheer complexity of rain. I imagined the exposed papers as small, compartmentalized fingerprints of the rainstorms—in some way, sharing the indexical qualities of a photograph. I continue this practice even today.

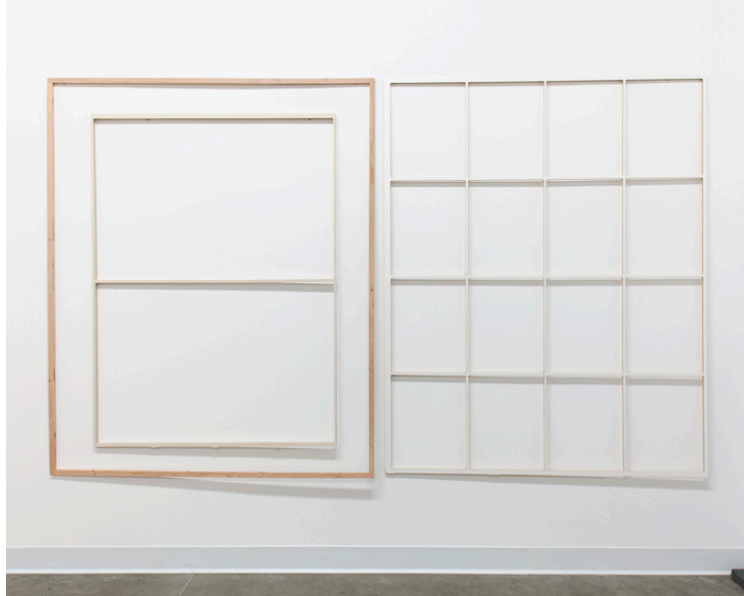
Fig. 7



*Rain Paper (detail), 2015*



Fig. 8



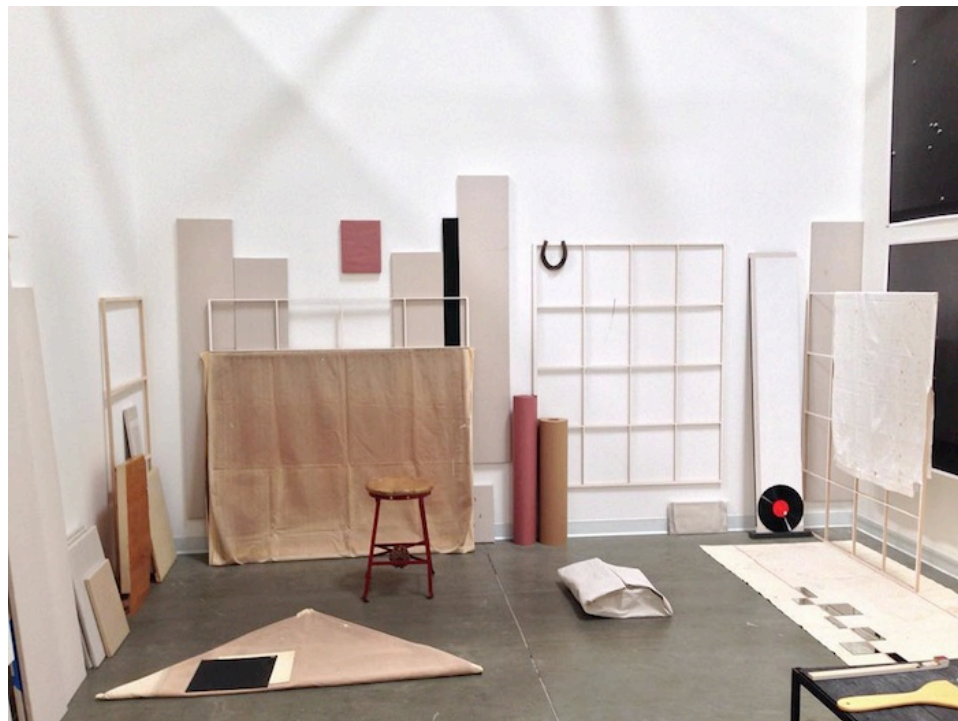
*Winter (studio arrangement), 2015*

5.

Surveying the land, I began frequenting a discount home improvement and materials store. Here, one can find reusable waste from nearby furniture manufacturing warehouses in Riverside. I became interested in the leftover materials—collecting scrap CNC'd plywood sheets in particular. They indicated a production of machine labor, industrial cuts maximizing usable surface area from single sheets of plywood. My collection of these *Cutouts* began to grow. I enjoyed looking at the fragile leftover forms, appreciating the precision of mechanized cutting. The forms exemplified efficiency and cost effectiveness. In the winter of 2015, I installed twenty *Cutouts* throughout my studio, organizing them by decipherable shapes and aesthetic uniformity. I would later start placing

photographs, books, coins, mirrors, and matches on incut areas of the *Cutouts*. Sometimes in arrangements that included horseshoes, pine cones, found vinyl records, letters, and cloth materials. The quick, movable nature of objects and frames, helped me discover aggregates of spatially pleasing arrangements; constantly shifting and rearrangeable. No assemblage felt permanent; making way for unstable composition of objects, codified by the personal, decorative, and industrial. The *Cutouts* came from my desire to step away from images, a move towards constructing relationships between objects. These works would set the tone for other avenues of imagination and installation

Fig. 9

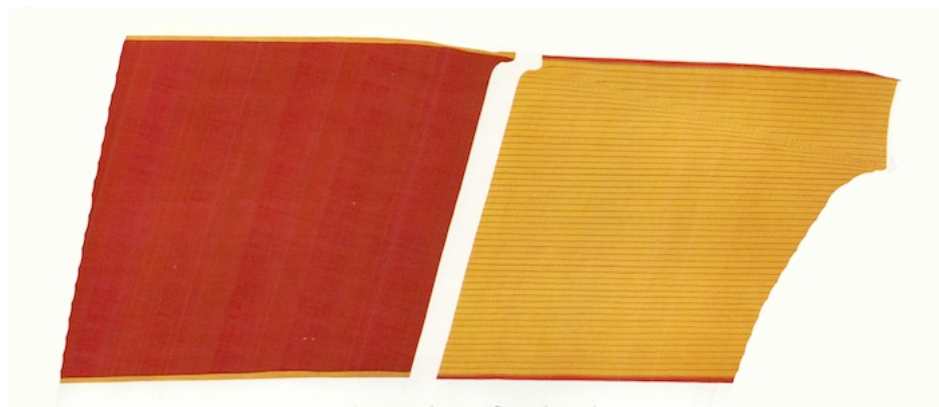


*Spring (studio arrangement), 2016*

6.

In the winter of 2016, I started scanning surfaces with a handheld scanning device. Meant for high-resolution scans of documents, I could make images with the swipe of a hand. It became a simultaneous recording of image and gesture. I started scanning books, cars, bathroom stalls, then perforated surfaces, and eventually my own large format photographs. The arc of my hand as I scanned was not too dissimilar from that of a paintbrush, equivalent to the brush as an extension of my physical being. This temporarily shifted my concerns from the content of the images to the physical nature and characteristics of gesture embodied in the scanner technology. My process focused on the *translation* of the represented image; was at once a reproduction and a gesture in a temporal frame.

Fig. 10



*Rug (books), 2016*

In the books, I felt like a street photographer of the printed world. I discovered large format books most fitting. My favorite book to scan was Edward and Brett Weston's *Dune*. The book was filled with oily black and white images of sand dunes outside of Oceana, California. I must have scanned some of the pages a dozen times; in each instance deriving a new version (fig. 11). The scanned images were never straight. Lines were bowed and wavy, showing eccentricities in the gesture of my hand.

Fig. 11



*Dune (rescan #2), 2016*

Moving outside, I would scan the surface area of entire doors, walls, and car hoods, later combining them into a single image. Working through the world by way of surfaces, I began considering my own large-format photographs as subject. In the studio, I would 'collage' sections of my large black-and-white photographs of apple trees. But by scanning sections of these large prints, the 'collage' would create a gestalt that shifted the image from representational to the abstract. Simultaneously collaging gestures in time.

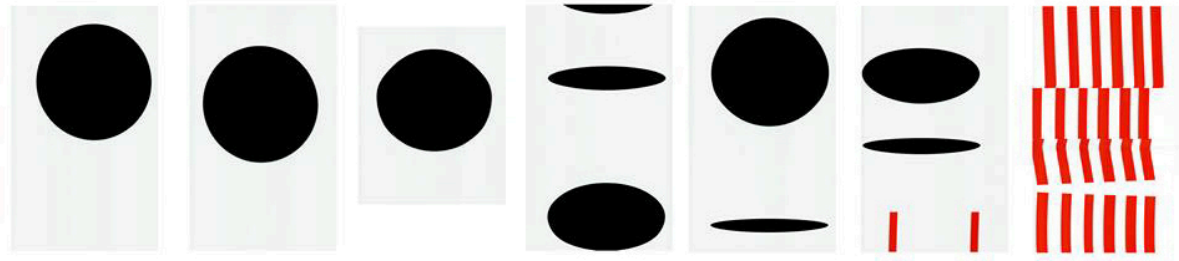
Fig. 12



*Apple Tree (rescan #4), 2016*

Next, I began digitally illustrating colored forms and gradients, making large-format prints that would serve as my 'palette' for the scanner. By making repeated handheld scans, I could make infinite gestural variations of the forms and gradients.

Fig. 13



*Plates (variations), 2017*

The inspiration came from a Daniel Buren catalog titled, *Daniel Buren: les couleurs traversees = Arbeiten for Ort*, which documents an installation at the Kunsthaus Bregenz in Germany. In it, large repetitive patterns were strewn throughout the book, most notably on the cover; signature of Buren's interest in eliminating painterly gesture and subjectivity through identical repetition.

Fig. 14



*Daniel Buren: les couleurs traversees = Arbeiten for Ort*

With scanner in hand, I would derive variations of these patterns, breaking the repetition and introducing my own gesture as subject (fig. 15). I would later do the same with Olivier Mosset's circle paintings series, in which he made over 200 identical painting of a black circle, attempting to eliminate the significance of the artist's gesture.

Fig. 15



*Variations 'Buren'*

Fig. 16



*Palettes, 2016*

7.

The history of photography is littered with 'corrections' to the image-making process. From cleaning dusty negatives, to adjustment of color, these corrections deal with our attempts to match perceptual reality. While dusting digitally-scanned negatives, I accidentally 'cloned' a twenty-pixel-wide image onto another image. The mark left an uncanny perceptual effect, where one could not

distinguish between the image and the mark. Consequently, I began digitally cloning large swatches of image onto other images. I thought of it as painting photos onto other photos, each photo becoming a palette for the other. Sometimes the mashup of marks would become the palette. The wide mark would often reveal the image being 'painted,' so I began making smaller marks and smaller prints, amplifying the perceptual effects, which appeared conceivable yet somehow uncanny. The content of the photographs was not of deliberate significance, although the photos were mostly shot at night and in various unidentifiable locations. The gesture of my interventions attempted to escape a conscious composition, making uncontrolled scribbles, resembling scratches (fig. 17). I have discovered that the subconscious eye is incredibly hard to escape. This might be evident in the photographs (fig.18). There are six 4 x 6 inch dye sublimation prints in the exhibition, all matted and framed at 11 x 14 inches (fig. 17). Collectively they are titled *Spirit*.

Fig. 17



*Spirit (exhibition view), 2017*



Fig. 18



*Untitled (spirit)*, 2017  
Dye Sublimation Print  
4 x 6 Inches

Fig. 19



*Untitled (spirit)*, 2017  
Dye Sublimation Print  
4 x 6 Inches

8.

In the spring and summer of 2016, I produced a series of self-portraits using a 35mm point-and-shoot camera. I would climb Cottonwood trees as high as my fear would allow, oftentimes far from the top. At this point, I would photograph myself touching the tree. In the other series, I would turn the camera around and photograph the space between my shirt and body. Notably, the photographs in both series shared many formal attributes. Although one series focuses on the physical act of climbing and touching (intimacy of experience), the stationary photographs of my torso (the embodiment of private space) simply points towards a void (fig. 20). The large-format bond prints can be shown in groupings mixed and matched from either series. The three photographs in the exhibition are 54 x 36 inches in dimension and are collectively titled *Sunny Day*.

Fig. 20



*Sunny Day*, 2017  
Bond Print on 40lb paper  
(3) 54 x 36 inches

9.

My latest work, *Cuttings and Observations*, examines the intersection of gesture and perception. A few days after the 2017 US election, I started cutting leaves and photographing them; first my indoor plants, then moving outdoors, hunting for well-adjusted invasive species. Though I cannot pinpoint the reasoning behind this new activity, nonetheless echoes in the arena of loss.

Fig. 21



*Cuttings and Observations (Sheffera Alboricola)*, 2017  
Dye sublimation print  
(8) 4 x 6 inches

In the studio, I started cutting and photographing my personal *Sheffera Alboricola*, otherwise known as a Dwarf Umbrella Tree. It is a common houseplant with up to seven to nine palmately-compound lobes that radiate from the center point to leaf's edge. The breed is popular due to its tolerance for neglect and its ability to flourish in poor lighting conditions. I would photograph the clipping of each lobe, then print and display the photographs out of sequence. There was no logic to the sequencing, inviting a narrative effect of lobes disappearing and reappearing; complicating the analytic logic of progression (fig. 21).

Outdoors, I would regularly visit a Castor-oil plant located behind the studios. *Ricinus Communis*, a native of the Mediterranean basin. It also displayed palmately compound lobes that radiate from the center by way of red veins. Most commonly found in pockets of wasteland, it is notable for its production of Ricin—a water-soluble poison collected from the seed. I was initially drawn to this plant by its robust presence in an otherwise deserted landscape. The leaves were often large and lobed, the perfect candidate for my purposes of cutting. While I was limited by my personal attachment to the Dwarf Umbrella Tree, and a desire to preserve its decorative function, the Castor plant felt less consequential. Opening the cutting process to a larger set of variables. I began cutting shapes into the leaves (fig. 22), often cutting one or two lobes off and keeping the rest. Sometimes I would cut the leaves down to small geometric forms, clearly

indicating my hand. The photos of my cutting interventions were interwoven with straightforward, observational photographs, where I had not tampered with the plant.

Fig. 22



*Cuttings and Observations (Ricinus Communis)*, 2017  
Dye sublimation print  
4 x 6 inches

Collectively, their composition opens up to a larger set of concerns (fig. 23). The indoor plants are arranged in three rows, each set horizontally grouped on top of the other. On each row, individual photographs are spaced apart in groups of two or three, with no clear logic to the grouping. The outdoor plants are arranged in a similar way; three vertical rows of images of smaller groupings; more dense and varied. The unaltered photographs began countervailing the cut ones, working

towards an insecurity of logic. Through the repetition of identical images, it shifted, moved the conversation from logic of progression, to one of differences. Oddly, some of the shaped leaves seemed to imply digital manipulation, illuminating micro perceptual oddities at the juncture of gesture and perception. These photographs largely suggest different modalities of reception, subverting them as individual, and inviting the analytic and cognitive (fig. 23). They are working towards a fulcrum, as an array of a larger gestalt; oscillating between abstraction and ambiguity of gesture in the digital condition (fig. 24).

Fig. 23



*Cuttings and Observations (Sheffera Alboricola)*, 2017  
*Installation View*

Fig. 24



*Cuttings and Observations (Ricinus Communis)*, 2017  
Installation View  
Studio Installation of *Cuttings and Observations*





Studio Installation of *Cuttings and Observations*





Works Cited

Schneider, Eckhard, and Daniel Buren. *Daniel Buren, Les Couleurs Traversees*  
*Arbeiten Vor Ort* ;. Koln: Konig, 2001. Print.

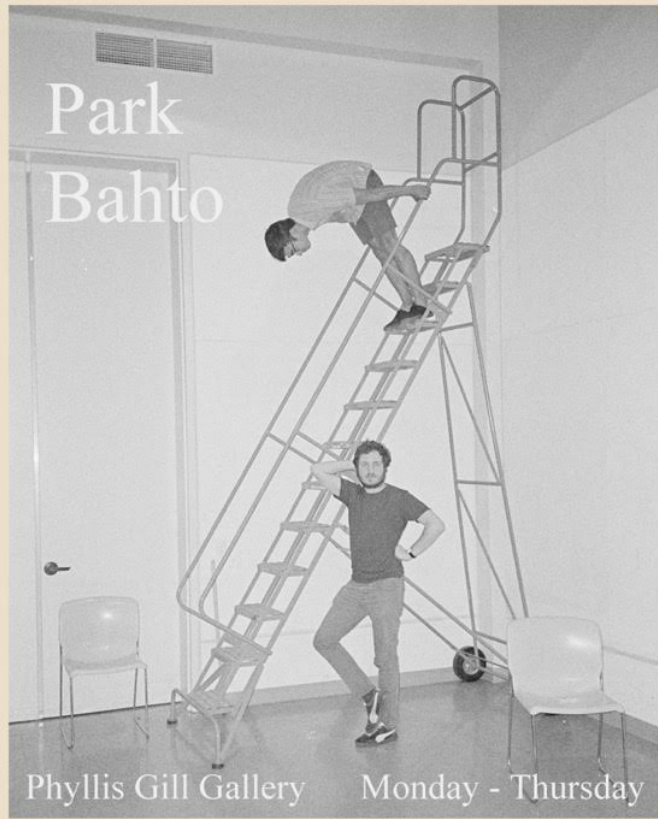
Additional Images

Phyllis Gill Gallery 1/23

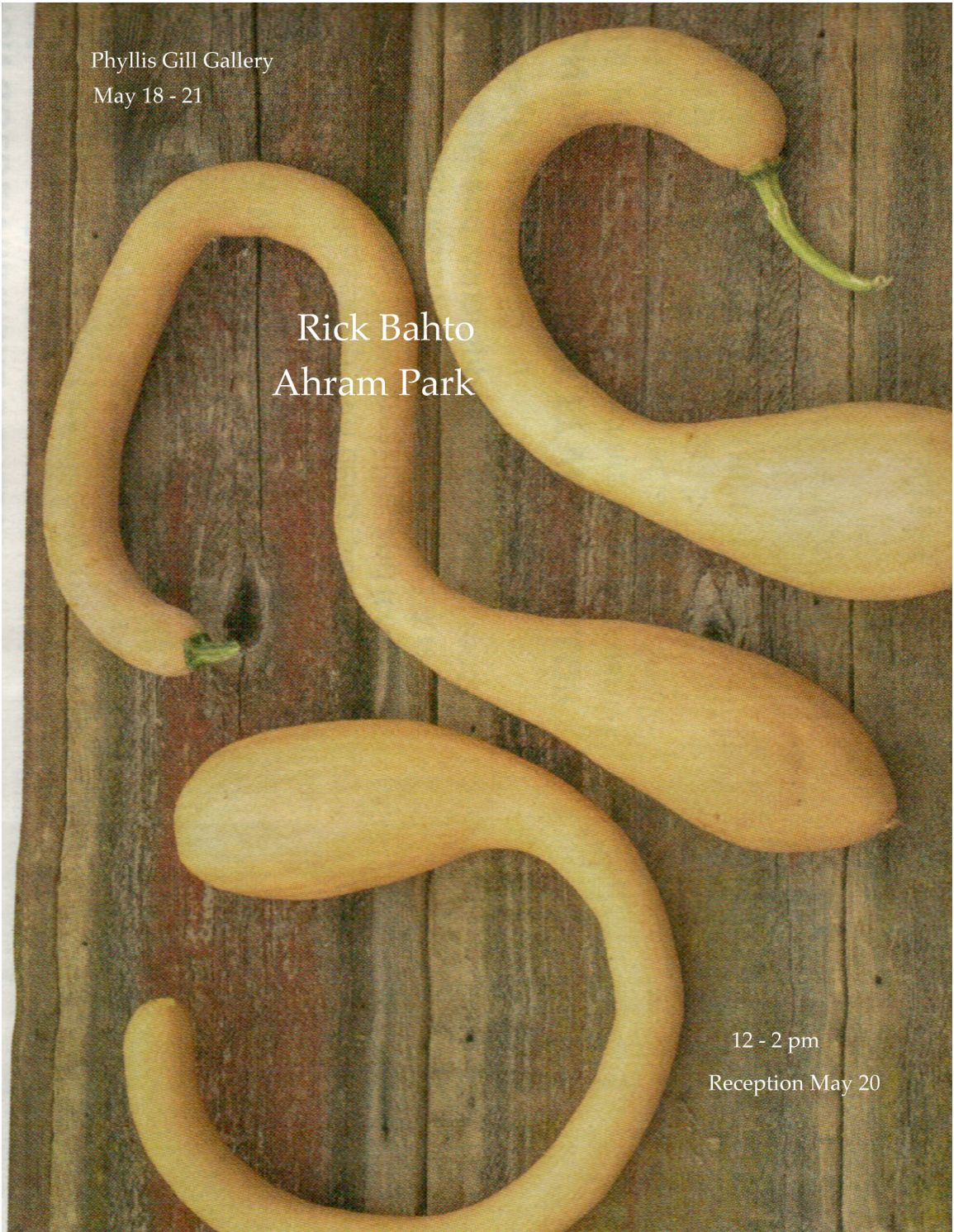
Ahram Park  
Dicky Bahto

Closing Reception  
& Film Screening:  
Thursday, January 26<sup>th</sup>  
12:30pm

*Exhibition Flyer, 2017*  
Stacks, Rivera Library



*Exhibition Flyer, 2016*  
Photograph of artists by John Divola



Phyllis Gill Gallery  
May 18 - 21

Rick Bahto  
Ahram Park

12 - 2 pm  
Reception May 20

*Exhibition Flyer, 2015*  
Scan from 2015 seed catalog