museum of arts and design

STORY MAKERS: BURKE PRIZE 2021

Real or imaginary, stories make the world go around. We consume stories all day long, through the feeds and streams of our glowing screens, sound waves, printed matter, and conversation. We wade through content subjectively to filter the frivolous from the important, but ultimately, who tells a story—and how they tell it—is crucial to its impact. The 2021 Burke Prize finalists are proficient storytellers. While some people convey stories through words alone, these artists use their hands and a wide range of tools and materials to push away from established structures of communication and challenge us to experience stories differently. With alchemical skill, they transform thoughts and feelings into objects, videos, or sounds that others can experience.

The stories are not always linear, easy to grasp, nor complete. Much like poetry, they ask us to reach beyond our physical senses to emotionally and intellectually engage. With minds, hearts, and hands, these artists craft corporeal narratives about their lives and our collective lives in ways more visceral than stories told in words alone. They are sensory archivists of humanity, history, and experience whose sensitivity keeps them attuned to the pulse of society and culture, alert to both truths and lies. Weaving the past with the present, they hold a mirror to our society.

The Burke Prize, a $50,000 unrestricted grant awarded to an artist forty-five or under who works primarily in clay, glass, fiber, wood, or metals, continues the Museum of Arts and Design's founding commitment to supporting artists working in craft. This kind of grant can be crucial to the lives and careers of artists, who are often in a vulnerable position within our capitalist society. A lot has happened since the last iteration of the prize, which took place in 2019. For over a year, a global pandemic has raged on, and despite progress, the world as we knew it has changed forever. The radical shift in our day-to-day lives challenged us to adapt and creatively rethink how we connect with others as we work toward a more culturally conscious and empathetic society.

This year's esteemed jurors, Indira Allegra (artist and 2019 Burke Prize winner), Andrew Gardner (Curatorial Assistant in Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art), and Gabriel de Guzman (Director of Arts and Chief Curator at Wave Hill), met virtually from their homes to select our finalists and winner, based on overall practice. The finalists' oeuvres encompass distinctive narratives, perspectives, and modes of expression, but when considered together, organically intersecting storylines surface—from critiques of the American Dream and humanity's physical and conceptual effects on the environment and history, to explorations of intimacy, our relationships to commonplace objects and materials, and diverse identities. Furthermore, in telling their stories they mine the past, intervene with tradition and technology, and prioritize community.

For many of our finalists, including Macon Reed, LJ Roberts, Daniel Fishkin, Melissa Cody, and Coulter Fussell, the communities they are part of, whether the ones they grew up in or those they chose later in life, play a crucial role in their practice. New York–based multidisciplinary artist Macon Reed is no stranger to reflecting on and responding to momentous events in history—especially their effects on communities—from the widespread closure of dyke bars to the presidential election of Donald Trump and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. She

constructs colorful, immersive installations using everyday materials such as paper clay and wood, demonstrating an unapologetically handmade aesthetic. Reed's installations serve as participatory spaces for sharing stories, collective reckoning, and community conversation. MAD Artist Studios alum LJ Roberts, also based in New York, often makes large-scale work in response to key events in LGBTQIA history, but also celebrates more intimate moments through intricately embroidered small portraits of the community who have supported them in the past decade. In 2020, Roberts completed a six-year project, a 14-by-20-foot fiber collage that imagines a post-apocalyptic mobile refuge for the LGBTQIA community in the form of a conversion van. MAD hosted Roberts in 2017 in the exhibition *Studio Views*, where visitors could engage with the artist during the creation of this piece. Even before its completion, many visitors sat on the artwork and participated in conversations about the seminal texts on queer van conversion, which inspired the work, and the role of nomadism in shaping identity.

Diagnosed with tinnitus, New York–based sound artist, composer, and multi-instrumentalist Daniel Fishkin began experimenting with the aesthetics of hearing damage using both traditionally made instruments and synthesizers. Fishkin is one of the few makers of the daxophone, an electrical wooden musical instrument invented in the 1980s, which he crafts for himself and others. He also produces the tongues used to play daxophones, each visually and auditorily unique. The artist has helped build a community of musicians who are preventing the instrument from fading into obscurity through regular performances and recordings. Also keeping tradition alive is fourth-generation weaver Melissa Cody, a Long Beach, California–based artist who works on a traditional Navajo loom, continuing Navajo women's long history of empowerment through craft. Associated with the Germantown Revival, a textile style born out of struggle and survival in the Navajo community during the Long Walk,[1] Cody's colorful, contemporary weavings serve as a form of storytelling and protest against the historical oppression of her people. Within her woven worlds, some narratives deal with personal grief, while some speak to issues that also impact the larger community, such as the lack of running water and the high number of Navajo people affected by Parkinson's disease.

Like Cody, Water Valley, Mississippi–based artist Coulter Fussell comes from a long line of craftspeople, in particular quilters and sewers. She, along with Sabrina Gschwandtner and Maryam Yousif, transform the material past to tell new stories about themselves and others in their respective practices. Fussell intuitively pieces together her dynamic quilts from a wide array of textiles donated to her studio. Taking the discarded materials as narrative clues that reveal aspects of their previous uses, she conceives new contexts and imbues them with a second life. In doing so, Fussell quite literally transforms others' trash into treasured conduits of personal storytelling, usually influenced by her experiences growing up in a military town, immersed in the river culture of Georgia. Filmmaker and unconventional quilter Sabrina Gschwandtner, who resides in Los Angeles, also makes use of discarded materials. During her residency at MAD's Artist Studios in 2009, she began making quilts out of film negatives from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and deaccessioned photo slides of textiles found in archives or previously used for teaching. She brings the quilts to life through light boxes and video. Unbeknownst to many, women's skills with sewing machines made them the first editors in film cutting rooms. Gschwandtner's practice calls attention to underrecognized women and their labor in the textile and film industries, fields whose histories are deeply intertwined. Likewise, San Francisco Bay Area–based ceramist Maryam Yousif makes work informed by the material remains of the past. Many of her ceramics are contemporary interpretations of ritualistic

[1] The Long Walk is a historical event in which the US government forcibly removed the Navajo from their ancestral homelands and marched them upward of 450 miles to Bosque Redondo, an internment camp in New Mexico, in 1864. By the end of internment in 1868, thousands of Indigenous lives had been lost. The remaining Navajo walked back home to Arizona, where a reservation was established.

objects from ancient Mesopotamia, partly located in modern-day Iraq, where Yousif was born. Deeply rooted in her homeland and culture, her quirky and tenderly rendered sculptures pay homage to the influential women in her life, from her mother to pan-Arab pop stars and even ancient Sumerian queens.

Rachelle Dang, Clarissa Tossin, and Diane Meyer explore connections between past, present, and future, especially in relation to how humans have affected the environment and history. A sculptor and avid researcher in New York, Rachelle Dang scrutinizes the transoceanic botanical exploitations of colonialism and imperialism and the intertwined histories of control over populations and environments. She sculpts intricate interpretations of plants and traveling greenhouses to convey the trauma of botanical specimens that, like so many humans, have been uprooted from their native lands for the consumption of colonialist powers, whether as crops, for scientific research, or simply for pageantry. Born and raised in Hawaii, Dang grew up around botanical specimens that arrived through colonialist seed-exchange programs, physical reminders of this problematic history. Her work calls attention to displays in natural history museums that continue to uphold imperialistic ideals. Brazil-born, Los Angeles–based multidisciplinary artist Clarissa Tossin is deeply interested in ecology, especially regarding the Amazon rainforest's importance in modulating global climate. Conscious of her carbon footprint, she fuses nondegradable leftover materials from her studio to make sculptures. Tossin draws inspiration from Octavia Butler's futuristic world in which a group of alien-humans restarts civilization in the Amazon. Her objects envision the material remains of a post-apocalyptic Earth, bringing together remnants of our civilization, such as plastic, with organic materials like clay, with a focus on the handmade and the cosmic. Also based in Los Angeles, artist Diane Meyer uses embroidery to painstakingly embellish photographs, pixel by pixel. While we think of photographs as memories, they are not infallible to corruption, as demonstrated by the hand-stitched pixilation. In a five-year project, Meyer documented the path of the former Berlin Wall through photographs, which she then embroidered to show where the wall had been. Through blurred squares, she conveys the restrictive impact of the wall, its physical remnants, and how hedges and other borders have replicated it. Furthermore, her work serves as a warning about the lasting effects of borders, a very relevant subject in light of current events in the United States.

Jovencio de la Paz and Nicki Green challenge the coded ways in which gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are materially enforced. Singapore-born artist Jovencio de la Paz, who lives in Eugene, Oregon, focuses on the relationship between weaving and computers, given the binary nature of looms (warp and weft) and computer code (0s and 1s). Based on this relationship, de la Paz developed specialized software to design weavings of patterns and landscapes, which are created on a digital loom. Fracturing code to challenge how fabric is usually conceived, their work uses color and geometry to inquire into the history of people of color, women, and queer bodies. In the San Francisco Bay Area, transdisciplinary artist Nicki Green explores trans and Jewish identities and ideas of otherness through ceramic sculptures. Queering ordinary objects such as tubs and sinks, Green interrogates the implicit and often violent ways in which binary gender manifests in the bathroom—a place that should be dedicated to care and cleansing—especially during religious rituals. She recently developed a series of morel sculptures that fit into corners, to convey how otherness can lead to adaptability and the unexpected.

Hugh Hayden and Ilana Harris-Babou similarly recontextualize commonplace objects, specifically underscoring the fallacy of the American Dream for Black Americans. Originally from Texas and now living in New York, Hugh Hayden often tackles ideas of belonging, with reference to the American Dream and the contributions of Black Americans to American culture. Sculpting familiar objects such as a kitchen table, a basketball hoop, or a skillet, he shares multilayered narratives that encourage a deeper reflection on everyday objects, materials, and

history, and our relationships to these. Although he primarily works with wood, Hayden also employs a wide range of carefully considered and sometimes unexpected materials, from sports drinks to medicinal ointment. New York–based multidisciplinary artist and MAD 2017 Artist Fellow Ilana Harris-Babou punctuates the absurdity of the American Dream by writing, directing, producing, and starring in videos that satirize aspirational television, such as cooking and home improvement shows. She also makes dysfunctional sculptures of familiar objects, primarily in clay, that serve as props to advance the narrative. Taking on the role of “Reparator,” she envisions humorous reparations for Black Americans that critically bring awareness to the lack of reparations made to this community. For Harris-Babou, the American Dream is like one of her ceramic hammers—functional in theory, dysfunctional in practice.

Charisse Pearlina Weston and Erin M. Riley, both based in New York, focus much of their practices on intimacy. MAD 2021 Artist Fellow Charisse Pearlina Weston explores the symbolic and material uses of glass in modern architecture and surveillance as a signifier of intimacy, freedom, and power. In particular, she investigates how a seemingly neutral material has historically defined Black intimacies, interiors, and spatial movement. Through concealing gestures such as enfolding and layering, she creates glass sculptures that embody the resistance intrinsic to intimacy in Black life. While Weston focuses on obstructing access, Erin M. Riley exposes what is typically kept hidden. She weaves large-scale tapestries depicting intimate moments that can be challenging due to their explicit nature. Whether erotic or violent, the tapestries provoke a sense of voyeurism. Riley taps personal memories, internet stories, news articles, and other ephemera to create weavings centered on themes of desire, trauma, mental health—especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic—and multigenerational violence against women.

This essay gives but a translated glimpse into the stories manifested by the finalists for this year’s Burke Prize, presenting a starting point for engaging with their work. For this third iteration of the prize, we break from physical space and celebrate our phenomenal cohort of finalists through a digital experience. Explore the 2021 Burke Prize online platform to learn more about our talented artists and the stories they have dedicated themselves to sharing through their dynamic practices. Together, our 2021 finalists demonstrate craft’s unique potential for storytelling and the exciting possibilities within the field.

—Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy, Assistant Curator