

FAILINGS

FAILINGS, curated by Ejecta Projects
On display April 2 – May 21, 2022

Failings, as a concept, implies a perceived shortcoming. Imagined as a moral deficit, a material miscalculation, or some other misalignment of desire versus outcome, failings, or one's failure, is typically perceived as negative. And yet, a successful studio practice – explicitly courting failure by defying expectations, taking risks, and pushing material or conceptual boundaries – frequently defines avant-garde achievements, professional success, and creativity in general.

This exhibition considers how failure is perceived and successfully reflected in videos, drawings, paintings, poetry, prints, photographs, and sculptures by artists: H Boone, John Brady, Sarah Crofts, Virginia Dal Magro, Ronald Gonzalez, Sarah Kain Gutowski, Lauren Charlene Havel, Tim Hutchings, Stacy Isenbarger, Carla Lobmier, Cory Mahoney, Sharon Pierce McCullough, Jonathan McFadden, JoAnne McFarland, SV Randall, Sarah Sagarin, Thom Sawyer, Zahra Pars, Jeff Slomba, Meredith Starr, Lisa Wicka, Nick Witten, Camila Villa Zertuche, and Annie Chen Ziyao.

The artworks on display were selected from over 1000 images submitted by 131 artists through an open call for entries. The artists were asked to consider this theme of failings through processes that have gone awry, content or subject matter that addresses the idea specifically, or through some other evocation of deficiency or defeat.

All the works included in this exhibition allude, sometimes obliquely and with incredible diversity, to various modes of failings.

For instance, **Jonathan McFadden**, **Jeff Slomba**, and **Thom Sawyer** examine the potential of democracy failing and contemporary political threats to institutions that once seemed stable. Slomba's Parthenon-like temple – a symbol of democracy – crumbles repeatedly in his video *Doric Collapse*. The architecture, according to the artist, is rigged as a push-puppet. Slomba explains, "As hidden strings are released and pulled, and the structure falls and rises, the iconic form strives to remake itself, but fails every time in large and small ways."

McFadden more specifically addresses political failings and threats to democracy with his installation *#Failing*. The title, in the artist's words, is "a reference to language used by [Donald] Trump in which anything he disagreed with or didn't fit his ideology was failing." McFadden pairs this hashtag, repeated boldly in vinyl on the gallery wall, with three photogravure self-portraits, where he, as another nod to Trump's penchant for gaudy gold décor, covered areas of imperfection in the prints with gold leaf.

Sawyer's exquisite drawing from his *Arc de Triomphe* series invokes another profoundly violent failing related to Trump. Subtitled *Lafayette Square*, the drawing alludes to the place where peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters were violently assaulted by the U.S. Park Police and National Guard Troops as Trump posed for a photograph holding a Bible at a nearby church. While the Arc de Triomphe honors those who fought in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Sawyer's arches are not clearly triumphant. Instead, this structure, shrouded by a thin curtain is suggestive of the sometimes deceptive and dangerous political strategies in the United States.

Carla Lobmier and **Zahra Pars** consider the issue of financial success, or its lack. Pars's title is a kind of personal confession, as she is "not a breadwinner" in her family. "I am an American of Iranian ancestry," she reveals, "and failure in my culture is something that is often hidden and silenced." Her abstract painting is intricately rendered and labor-intensive. The subtleties of her composition and exquisite attention to detailed mark-making -- clear evidence of artistic rigor and tenacity -- are in tense dialogue with what she sees as "a journal of personal failures." The text in Lobmier's painting greedily asks, "Where is my basket of money?" The artist confides that the words are "stinging visual letters to myself," and speak to the self-inflicted abuses and insecurities that stymie success.

The text in **JoAnne McFarland's** painting titled *Use in a Sentence: Beet* challenges the viewer's expectations about creativity and language. The implied violence of the sentence "Bound and beaten, woman lives to tell all," is inscribed, somewhat incongruously, about above a bunch of plump purple beets with lush green foliage and vividly red stems. The immediacy and naturalism of the vegetable, with an intimacy and delicacy reminiscent of Chardin's eighteenth-century paintings of ripe fruit, seems at odds with the suggested assault and eventual triumph of McFarland's narrative. McFarland explains how her artistic practice confronts the "brutal truth about what I see around me," and her willingness "to honor and celebrate my own and others' ability to thrive, sometimes in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles." Here, McFarland's sumptuous beets stand in for a sense of thriving present-ness despite the aggression and fear suggested in the text.

Camila Villa Zertuche, **H Boone**, and **Annie Chen Ziyao** address the various perceived failures of bodies in terms of gendered identities, social conventions, and restrictive expectations. Zertuche explains, "I begin creating a figure in relationship to hyper femme beauty standards, yet through the process of retracing marks, layering paint, and leaving raw canvas exposed, I am failing to meet those standards." Her painting at once refers to a child-like style of painting, as well as the strangely surreal doll-like aesthetic of female faces

– with large eyes, exaggerated lips, and almost invisible noses – celebrated in popular, patriarchal, capitalist culture.

Ziyao approaches similar issues of “perfect” femininity through a different medium and aesthetic. Her video *Ms. Meta Meta* was prompted by her perceived “failure of fulfilling society’s beauty standard, the flawless porcelain complexion.” The social media alter ego she creates, Ms. Meta Meta, “embraces visible flaws” through a series of irreverent, humorous, and “cyber-feminist” make-up tutorials.

Boone’s *Bust* is analogously surreal, as the artist questions the limitations and identifications of binary gender and creates a head that is once male and female with head and genitalia, chest and face combined. Boone offers that “being a queer person is inexorably linked to failure. Failure to conform. As my own body fails to align with binary understandings of gender presentation. My work hails to solidify itself as recognizable bodies. Parts mashed together, meaning and autonomy in flux. Gender as prosthetic.”

John Christian Brady claims that the failing of the photograph *Distracted* might be the trace of the imperfect photographic process – where light seeps through and obscures the under- or over-exposed image. This photographic flaw, a white horizontal slash, effaces a young boy who sits on a bus, staring intently on his phone. Because the boy is attentive only to his device, he seems unaware as the photographer (and viewer) turn their attention toward him. Viewing (and photographing) compare to a sort of voyeurism, an act that mirrors the distanced consumption of intimate content always offered on the internet. For many of us, one of the central failings of the present time is the dependence on screens and technologies for communication and connection. The result, as most of us know, is a disjointed, distracted, and depressed sense of self.

A notion of dejectedness infuses the form and content of works by **SV Randall, Ronald Gonzalez, and Cory Mahoney**. For instance, Randall’s sculpture *Trophy (LACK series)* translates a symbol of winning (a trophy) into an object of defeat and decay. Moreover, Randall plays with the word “Lack” in his title, to refer both to the name of simply-designed tables and shelves sold by Ikea (of which the structures in the sculpture might be a part) and to the idea of shortcomings. The ruinous trophy is the award for failure.

The title of Mahoney’s sculpture *Exemplary Frailty* alludes at first to the material precariousness of ceramics, the possibility of breaks and cracks at every step of the sculpting, firing, shipping, and exhibiting process. Mahoney’s intention in his work is to acknowledge the “abundance and the decline that exists simultaneously in our late-capitalist society,” by creating forms with an aesthetic of decay and with textures that “imply both scabs healing and structures at the mercy of the elements and an absence of care.” Despite the care taken to create this sculpture, with intricate forms and varying glazes, and to pack it snugly in a large crate labeled “FRAGILE,” shards of ceramic nonetheless chipped and dropped from the original sculpture as it arrived at Ejecta Projects.

So here, the artist – and gallery – acknowledge the myriad ways the process of creation, curation, and transportation might cause a work to fail.

Gonzalez describes his small armature figures as “anguished, isolated, and mute.” Lined up, the tiny figures reveal their vulnerabilities and idiosyncrasies that emblemize more universal feelings of deficiency or weakness. In other words, the gnarled, pitted surfaces that seem to heavily burden the thin armatures act as a kind of metaphor for a larger state of weariness.

A resistor controls the flow of power, and **Sharon Pierce McCullough’s** sculpture incorporates “real” parts of a resistor to metaphorically evoke the conflation of power and failure. While the base of the sculpture is a lump of refuse – a failing of material intended to simply be discarded – McCullough rescues and resists this fate. The power then is subverted, as value systems in art, materiality, and technology are questioned by both artist and viewer.

Relatedly, **Nick Witten’s** filmy photograph of a Halloween decoration nestled under snow at night at first seems antithetical to the criteria of a “good” photograph – clear, focused, and with a sensational or sublime subject. Because of the unexpected smile of a jack-o-lantern, forgotten on this wintry street, Witten acknowledges that these perceived formal failings – distortion, banality, and blurriness – can convey a narrative and set a scene stranger or more unsettling than any clearer counterparts.

Tim Hutchings asks the viewer to participate and willingly engage in an activity that invites knowing imperfection. Hutchings instructs the viewer to hold two colored markers in one hand, and with one gesture, draw a set of concentric circles without lifting one’s hand or let the lines cross. He encourages and admonishes, “It is a task that can be accomplished, but not perfectly and certainly without a loss of dignity.”

The text in **Lisa Wicka’s** mixed media works *worse*, *better* and *it’s fine* are the mantras/advice we might tell ourselves when situations feel bleak or failures arise, when things “could be worse.” These statements perhaps could be seen as framing the narrative conveyed in **Lauren Charlene Havel’s** painting *Emergency Exit*. Havel paints a somewhat humorous scene of a failed evening out, as one friend hold the hair back of a queasy woman in the back alley of a bar. Amid the cartoonish bodies, with exaggerated limbs and high heels, is an impression of reality, as the acrid smear of paint unmistakably conveys her vomit.

Artist **Meredith Starr** collaborated with writer **Sarah Kain Gutowski** in a series of cyanotypes and poems to reflect on the pandemic years through tragedies and failings large and small. Gutowski writes, “Praise your failures for what they’ve wrought from your stubborn foolish love.” Seen together with Starr’s lushly abstract print, titled *All My Pets Are Houseplants and I’ve Already Killed One*, each artist alludes to the mundane corners of

home that drew our attention, that provided a kind of comfort through losses and uncertainties.

The ghostly, tangled bodies in **Sarah Sagarin's** *Origin Story* enact a kind of morality play about creation, reproduction, or relationships more broadly. Two bodies seem to be connected to each other with a kind of amorphous primordial soup whirring between them. With the title of her painting in mind, Sagarin seems to be conjuring the notion of original sin, or that failings and failures are an innate part of the human condition.

Sarah Croft's lumen print of a chain link fence in Red Hook, Brooklyn is part of a larger project where she examines this rapidly gentrifying area of New York and the corresponding social failings. She explains, "Gentrification and other large-scale development projects owe their success, at least in part, to the systemic failure of society to protect and create space for people who aren't part of the powerful plan of wealth consolidation." Her work can be understood as a kind of mapping of what is lost in the landscape. This impression of deterioration is underscored by the instability of the medium, a light-sensitive lumen print (i.e., a camera-less photograph). By choosing to not "fix" or chemically stabilize the image, Croft invites persistent fading and inevitable change in her work to signify these larger environmental losses.

Virginia Dal Magro takes a specific interest in mapping with print *Can I Find a Way There?* Dal Magro clarifies, "Can I find a way there?" is the interrogation to what appears on Google Maps when you search for an unreachable place, which is 'Can't find a way there, try again.'" She creates what she calls "non-places that form atlases of possibility." Dal Magro sets as her destination the unexplored ocean floor to acknowledge the failure of technology – the dark, underwater places Google Maps cannot find – as well as the glitches and ruptures of 3-d printing. For Dal Magro, and other artists in the exhibition, errors open new ways of seeing and exploring.

The letters "ing." are created from Astroturf and cascade down the wall in **Stacy Isenbarger's** sculpture *A Stab At...* This work, part of an ongoing series titled *Hanging Directives*, refers to all the activities the artist expects to be doing – making, presenting, teaching, laboring, etc. With its sort of sad flop of the period onto the floor, the sculpture suggests the Sisyphean feeling of always working and sometimes failing.

Ultimately, none of the artists in the exhibition is a failure. Asked to define their work in relation to this concept, the artists – with sincerity, insight, and vulnerability – provided a variety of responses and diverse narratives, subjects, and modes of making. Although the initial call for entries might have resulted in a catalogue of weariness and woe, the exhibition instead provides a nuanced, sometimes humorous, and always astute interpretation of a feeling, a failing, most of us have experienced. Taken together, the artworks in *Failings* encourage a surprising sense of success and hope among larger faults and frailties.

The curators of *Failings*, artist **Anthony Cervino** and art historian **Shannon Egan**, who are also spouses, have been examining the theme of failure since 2015, when they designed an exhibition and completed a corresponding book titled *Ejecta*. For this earlier project they considered how shifting expectations of success defined them as individuals and also in relation to their marital and professional partnership. As an outcome of this initial collaboration, in 2018, Cervino and Egan opened an art gallery and curatorial workshop, Ejecta Projects, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with the name chosen - in part - because *Ejecta* connotes the word *reject*, the antithesis of accomplishment. In their life at home and as educators, artists, or curators, their failures continue to give context to their successes, and perhaps most relatable, these setbacks often push us forward as we seek meaning in loss, dismissal, and other significant “f**k ups.”