

The Dragon is the Frame

June 29-August 11, 2012

Description of works (alphabetical, by artist's last name)

Mark Aguhar, *Brown Femme Love*, 2011, ink on paper; #WHITEGIRLPROBLEMS (#NOTATHING), 2011, gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper

Aguhar created a number of small word drawings that combine hand-painted lettering with short phrases that comment on issues that were important to her—racism, gender, identity, and sexuality. Rather than presenting these challenging topics in a grave and serious manner, Aguhar used a sharp wit to strike her audience with language, as with “LOL, Reverse racism.” Aguhar’s use of internet slang (“Lol,” “ur”) references the importance of internet culture in her own life, as someone who admittedly grew up gay on the internet, and further emphasizes the casual tone of the work. Yet, the works’ strong message cannot be ignored. “I Hate Ur White Dick” addresses Aguhar’s disdain for the prototype of white, heterosexual males, whom Aguhar referred to as “uninteresting” and “boring” in her blog, *calloutqueen*, as much as it is an attack on homonormativity—a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but rather upholds and sustains them. At the same time, the work’s playfulness suggests that this hatred might be mixed with desire. Much like poetry that uses direct language to elicit various interpretations, it is the very ambiguity of these works that makes them so powerful.

Mark Aguhar, *Elijah and Garrett*, 2011, rope, Polaroid prints, and sound (12:00 min. loop)

Rope figured into Aguhar’s artistic practice in multi-faceted ways: as an independent object, often titled with a masculine name and exhibited as a sculptural form; as a component of site-specific installations; and as an element of performance wherein Aguhar used rope to bind other individuals. These performances often took place in non-art contexts (among friends and lovers), with Aguhar using rope as a tool of domination. This installation references the way in which Aguhar showed the work at her first-year MFA critique, with rope on the floor and an attendant sound piece. The Polaroid prints were added to the installation to document Aguhar’s use of rope in performance. Among Aguhar’s most challenging work, the rope pieces draw from the vocabulary of bondage to create poetic works that explore gender, queer identity, and sexual domination.

Mark Aguhar, *Making Looks*, fabric (clothing pieces)

Aguhar created hand-sewn clothing that she incorporated into her daily wardrobe and also wore as costuming in select performances. These pieces—pastel-colored dresses; long, flowing tank shirts covered in fringe—refuse the normative gender connotations that often accompany commercially available clothes. Furthermore, they challenge conventional notions of beauty, as they were custom-designed for a body that did not conform to idealized representations of the male figure. They speak to Aguhar’s love of fashion while serving as a demonstration of self-acceptance and an integral part of her ongoing bodily transformation. Documented on her blog and YouTube channel, Aguhar created “looks” by pairing her self-designed clothing with ever-changing hairdos and glamorous make-up.

Mark Aguhar, *Shaman Fag no. 2*, 2010, graphite, colored pencil, gouache, and acrylic on paper

As is common practice within the artistic community, Aguhar and Elijah Burgher traded drawings at one point in their friendship. Burgher gifted Aguhar a drawing of a symbol he uses frequently called the “anal swastika”—it is the red form embedded in the grey circle in Burgher’s *So they do not drown (for Mark)*. In return, Aguhar gave Burgher *Shaman Fag no. 2*. With its possession of androgynous sexual organs, the shaman certainly speaks to the issue of being gender queer. Meanwhile, as a figure who uses magic for the purpose of curing the sick, the shaman also embodies one of the quieter themes in Mark's work: the spiritual aspects of self-care. Aguhar returned to this theme in some of her last drawings of crystals and plants.

Mark Aguhar, drawings from *Transy Girlfriend Looks* series

Aguhar produced a series of drawings focusing on bodies as observations on intimacy, gay life, gay types, the limitations of typecasting, and a quest for the legitimation of identity. Aguhar’s sketchbooks were filled with such drawings, many depicting friends or fellow members of the queer community. Aguhar began producing them before moving to Chicago to pursue an MFA, and she continued to create them as her investigation of gender and sexuality shifted to other mediums, including sculpture and performance. This selection of six figures complicates gender stereotypes by portraying androgynous bodies and male figures sporting typically female clothing and shoes. The inclusion of the artist’s own body, dressed in purple clothing that Aguhar created for performance and also wore in the studio, reflects the

positioning of her own identity within the range of gender and sexuality. The delicate patterning of the clothing alludes to Aguhar's skill with fabric, while the diva-like posture exudes confidence in her ongoing effort to challenge the status quo.

Claire Arctander, *Please please don't/Eat the daisies*, 2012, HD video, 8:25 min loop.

Claire Arctander, a Chicago-based artist who holds an MFA from UIC, creates sculpture, video, and installation work dealing with bodily issues and beauty in a way that often tests the physical limits of consumption. Arctander was particularly inspired by a YouTube video, *Daddy Loves Feeding Me Treats*, that Aguhar made in collaboration with Nathan Thomas, in which Thomas feeds powdered donuts to the dressed- and made-up Aguhar. As Arctander describes it, "their piece presents a subtle negotiation of power between two people and explores the formation of identity via consumption and rejection. It is simple, straightforward and gorgeous to watch." After seeing the video, Arctander had several conversations with Aguhar about creating their own collaborative video piece involving eating/feeding. The project was never carried out due to Aguhar's untimely death, so Arctander made *Please please don't/Eat the daisies* as a tribute to Aguhar.

Nina Barnett, *The Pool (At Last)*, 2012, graphite on paper

Nina Barnett, whose work addresses issues around space, location, and place, shared an often-discussed love of public pools with Aguhar. This new drawing recalls her experience of an abandoned underground pool that Aguhar discovered on UIC's campus. When Aguhar directed Barnett to the hidden location, the door was locked. "It was a frustrating moment for us—a charged environment hidden," Barnett recalls. A week after Aguhar's death, Barnett returned to the location and found the door propped open. In this drawing Barnett marries the vacillation between denial and access to this space that possesses a "weird emptiness and strange beauty," to her effervescent graphite marks, which reference Aguhar's quietly powerful, protective side.

Nina Barnett, *She, the Phoenix*, 2012, gold leaf on wall

In creating *She, the Phoenix* Barnett evokes the myth of the phoenix and its related concepts of immortality, transformation, and fierily flight. According to Barnett, "This relates both to Aguhar as an individual, and also the intense, almost mythical memory of her that exists now."

Barnett's use of gold leaf relates not only to the phoenix, but also to the gold backgrounds Aguhar used in several of her drawings.

Jeremy Bolen, *Through the pleated chiffon*, 2012, color reversal film transparencies

Jeremy Bolen uses site-specific photographic processes to seek and capture invisible aspects of environments. He shared with Aguhar an interest in rethinking modes of representation by altering conceptions of the document. Bolen's triptych reflects on his photographic documentation of one of Aguhar's performances for which Aguhar created a new clothing piece. Bolen was struck by the repetitive work of the pleating, which Aguhar carried out over several days. "I remember watching Mark pleating for days in preparation for the performance, and thinking how performative the pleating was. About how many performances it took to create the single image." Taking the clothing used in the performance, Bolen captures the sheer lavender pleats' manipulation of light on chrome film. In so doing, he forces the artifact to become a performative event in itself.

Elijah Burgher, *So they do not drown (for Mark)*, 2011, colored pencil on paper

Elijah Burgher's work interweaves queer culture with the occult, magic, and witchcraft—themes that share outsider status and insider signs and signals. *So they do not drown (for Mark)* came about when Aguhar asked Burgher to create a sigil, a magical emblem that encodes specific wishes or desires. He selected colors based on the maroons and oranges associated with hand-made clothing Aguhar produced and wore in Burgher's studio. The composition references Burgher's experience and witness of Aguhar's transition from an ambivalent "he" to a "maybe-lady," to asking that Aguhar be referred to as "they." The composition suggests forward movement and transformation, but without definite resolution, as both artists were experiencing tumultuous moments, and the future was especially uncertain at the time this drawing was created.

Eddie Fake, *Palace Entrance (calloutqueen)*, 2012, ballpoint pen, ink, and gouache on paper

Eddie Fake is an artist working in Chicago who creates illustrations, drawings, tattoo designs, and printed matter. Much of Fake's work explores queer identity, particularly transgender identity, in an effort to expand the definitions governed by those labels and therefore, accommodate individual experiences. With *Palace Entrance (calloutqueen)*, Fake wanted to

create a heavenly gateway/queer palace for Aguhar. With its intricate patterning and jewel-like palette, this work shares strong aesthetic similarities with Fake's *City of Night* series—fictional representations of architectural façades that reference lost, hidden, or secret, Chicago locales. It simultaneously acts as a poignant tribute to Aguhar while serving Fake's ongoing efforts to re-imagine queer space.

Pamela Fraser, *Aguhar's Brilliant Mango and Magenta Shorts, My Sage Ombre Sweater*, 2012, acrylic on Dibond

Pamela Fraser creates paintings that take color as their main subject, exploring the philosophical underpinnings of color and testing the logic of established color systems. Until recently, Fraser served as Assistant Professor of Studio Arts at UIC, where she established a close mentoring relationship with Aguhar. Fraser started this painting several days after Mark's passing; thoughts of Aguhar had crept into the work without her even noticing and she suddenly understood the work as a form of reckoning with Aguhar's passing. Fraser's customary cheerful colors, stripes, and ombres share an affinity with much of Aguhar's aesthetics, which she describes as a "love of bright, lively, happy colors, patterns, and glittery, sparkly surfaces; in short, gorgeousness." The painting has a slightly somber, complicated tone while reflecting the joy that Aguhar also loved to display.

Tiffany Funk, *mark*, 2012, video, 13:27 min. loop

Tiffany Funk, a 2012 graduate of UIC's MFA program, is an artist, critic, and art historian who deals primarily with technological mediums in order to explore society's relationship with technological tools. Funk was both inspired by and envious of characteristics she saw in Aguhar: creativity, the ability to transform herself and her environment, and a strong will and centered vision in her artistic practice. As Funk puts it, "she didn't 'play' dress-up—this was serious and important business!—she 'played' trans identity, gender lines, anti-feminist blogs, and YouTube provocateurs." This video stems from a vintage lipstick advertisement that features an actress marking her hand with a brand lipstick and then rubbing it off to illustrate its durability. Funk manipulates the pace and overlaps imagery to transform the mark into a flickering, fleeting form.

R. E. H. Gordon, reproduction of Mark Aguhar's *No Top Needed*, 2010, gouache, pencil, watercolor, and ink on paper; reproduced image of Mark Aguhar's *Dennis*, 2011, rope and nails (produced in collaboration with Gallery 400)

R. E. H. Gordon was part of Aguhar's community of friends and artists while living in Chicago during her graduate studies. Having relocated to New York, she received news of Aguhar's death from afar and spent hours consuming everything Aguhar had left behind on the internet, "digesting this trove of fascinating, inspiring, and sometimes heartbreaking material." To satisfy her own desire to process feelings of loss, Gordon sought to provide others with something tangible of Aguhar's. She reproduced *No Top Needed*, a collage of painted paper, and an image of *Dennis*, a rope sculpture (both exhibited in the 2011 *M4M* exhibition at Lawndale Art Center in Houston) as posters. Originally available as a limited print run through her website, their inclusion in *The Dragon is the Frame* enables wider distribution and allows Gordon to continue her efforts to extend the reach of "Aguhar's art, writing, and identity." To that end, visitors are encouraged to take a copy of each poster.

Kasia Houlihan, *To... To...*, 2012, artist book

A 2012 graduate of UIC's MFA program, Kasia Houlihan creates work that navigates space and the idea of closeness in both physical and emotional forms. Recently, she has collected dedications she finds in books, amassing them into a list for which she has no express purpose. In doing so, she points to the enchantment and mystery in these "micro odes" that exist between the covers of something so public and permanent. For *To... To...* Houlihan diverged from her normal method of mining published books and solicited dedications from family, friends, and friends of friends, adding another layer of giving to these collected words of acknowledgment. "My new list of dedications would be by another, to another, then passed along from other another to me," Houlihan states. "In the spirit of Mark, I claim these words that were not originally meant for me and redirect them, sending them towards a person who gave us so very much, a person I will forever miss."

Young Joon Kwak, *Rite of Trans-Mortality Document #7 (Day 5/02:34:15)*, 2012, archival pigment print

Young Joon Kwak is a Chicago-based interdisciplinary artist whose practice includes performative actions, sculpture, video, writing, and her drag-noise-music-performance group Xina Xurner. *Rite of Trans-Mortality Document #7* is part of a larger multi-media project in

which Kwak seeks to invoke in his audience a sense of agency and anticipation for transforming oneself and a meditation on cycles of life and death. It documents specific points in the ambiguous bodily transformation of Kwak’s drag persona “Lil Elote,” through which her form eventually decomposes into raw clay. Although Aguhar did not serve as a collaborator on this project as originally intended due to her untimely death, she made an indelible impact on Kwak’s art practice: “as my drag sister, her drag is a shining example of the potential to use accessible materials that constitute outward identities—including wigs, makeup, heels, and clothing—for a radical transformation of self. Our camaraderie and her bravery helped me be braver. It is in this spirit that I continue to strive to be braver in my art, drag, and life, just like Aguhar.”

Marianna Milhorat, *Hairflips*, 2012, video, 1:00 min loop.

Working in film and video, Marianna Milhorat utilizes landscape and duration to disrupt and transform notions of space and perspective. For a film that she created while in the MFA program at UIC, Milhorat asked Aguhar to participate in a scene that takes place in a steam room, in which Aguhar’s form disappears into the vapor—a profoundly elegiac tribute to Aguhar. During the filming, Milhorat created a separate video, *Hair Flips*, which depicts Aguhar glamorously flipping wet hair while a Mariah Carey soundtrack blasts in the background. For her final critique, a culminating display of artwork in the MFA program, Milhorat paired this work with a projection of a post on Aguhar’s blog *calloutqueen* commenting on the experience: “You know that thing where your friend asks you to help her with this film and she wants you to just stand in a steam room endlessly and you keep almost passing out from heat exhaustion.”

Juana Peralta, *How Do We Honor a Goddess?*, collected items and particleboard

hermana

i hate you for leaving me alone.

I hate you for not calling me.

i hate you for not telling me.

I hate you for making me love you so hard. so ugly. so glamorously. so sickening. so devastating. so beautiful.

I hate you for all those moments i took for granted. all those moments I got to be in your presence.

i hate you because you are my sister. goddess. lover. friend.

i hate because I miss you so much

i hate you because i don't know how to live without you.

i hate you because I love you and I can't tell you how much i love and adore you.

Aay Preston-Myint, *Peony Mirror*, 2012, animation, 1:00 min loop

Aay Preston-Myint is an artist, printmaker, DJ, and active member of Chicago's queer community. In tribute to Aguhar he has created an animation using a circular mirror image that is similar to works by Roy Lichtenstein but utilizes colors and patterns found in both Preston-Myint's fabric patterns and Aguhar's watercolors. The imagery is also inspired by an interior described in Aguhar's writing piece "Seeing Arrangement," — "...with the white vanity table / and the art deco shell upholstered seat / in dusty pink / with a matching chaise lounge / across the room / raised on a carpeted platform / next to a 3-view mirror..." The mirror can also be seen as a tool for scrying (a magic practice that involves seeing things psychically in a medium), referencing Preston-Myint and Aguhar's shared interest in the occult as a metaphor for queerness. Lastly, the piece references Aguhar's diaristic YouTube video practice, transferring the role of performer onto the viewer, but also stifling the possibility of performance by creating a mirror that does not reflect back—reminding us of the lack of a specific body (Aguhar's) but also the possibility of imagining a transformed or utopian body.

Macon Reed, *Femme Drag (Ritual)*, 2012, video, 21:05 min. loop

"Mark and I spent hours talking about our relationship with queer femme identity. We loved to talk trash about misogyny and heteronormativity while applying thick lipstick and contouring our cleavage.

While I can't say what embracing femme meant for Mark, I feel it was a way of stepping forward and demanding that people reckon with her and her power in the face of disempowering systems such as racism, transphobia, queerphobia, femmephobia, misogyny, fatphobia, etc. By affirming her right to be herself and to love being herself, Mark constantly gave those around her the space to be ourselves and explore our own relationships with gender. And she always looked hot doing it.

My relationship to femme is complex for different reasons. I was socialized as female and identify as female. I am skinny and white, like the majority of people in advertising being pushed into the collective consciousness as "normative" every day. This means I have the privilege of people accepting me and my gender most of the time.

As a teenager I survived a long-term abusive relationship, in which imagery of myself in high femme attire played a part. I grew up to associate my being femme as dangerous, associating it with disempowerment and fear. I now understand that one of the best things I can do to heal is to own that power for myself- to redefine my original femme identity and live in it for me. Mark was unendingly enthusiastic and affirming of this process as I began to articulate it last year. I am so grateful for her.

Femme Drag (Ritual) explores my relationship to femme identity, beauty, and power through the ritual of drag performance and preparation.”

Michael Sirianni, *Sissey Sexes Yes Sis*, 2012, gold-plated sterling silver

Michael Sirianni's work continues a lineage of queer identity art, dealing in myth, metaphor, and iconography ranging from the ancient Greeks to contemporary sex clubs and internet chat rooms. Queer identity is at the forefront of *Sissey Sexes Yes Sis*, which is about naming and naming systems; taken together, the four necklaces present an index of possible names that operate as a palindrome, repeating themselves forwards and backwards. According to Sirianni, “This strong, yet ambiguous affirmation, that has a fluid state (operating as a phrase and as individual words) mirrors my memory of Mark, constantly affirming, proud and forever in flux. The words chosen also represent my relationship to Mark, as a fellow sissey and sister. In a way the phrase also acts as a two way message, like a palindrome, from Mark to Me from Me to Mark.” As such, Sirianni's work is largely about sisterhood and the loss of a “sister,” further

emphasized by the form and material that mimic that of the “Carrie” necklace that character Carrie Bradshaw wore on the HBO series *Sex and the City*.

Neal Vandenberg, *A Hole is a Thing in a Thing it is Not*, graphite on paper

Neal Vandenberg is a 2012 graduate from UIC’s MFA program and a Chicago-based artist working in sculpture, drawing, and video both in and outside of traditional exhibition spaces. *A Hole is a Thing in a Thing it is Not* responds to conversations Vandenberg had with Aguhar about rage, punk, and getting into fights. Although it alludes to these larger issues, the drawing responds to a particular event: On April 24th a group of self-identified “angry queers” threw rocks through the windows of Mars Hill Church in Portland, Oregon—an anti-gay and anti-woman church. The action was taken in the name of Mark Aguhar.

Allison Yasukawa, *I fucked up my nails*, 2012, nail polish and flower petals on wall

Allison Yasukawa, who received an MFA from UIC in 2010, met Aguhar when she was a prospective student and was Aguhar’s classmate in a course taught by Professor Kevin Kumashiro on the topic of Asian American Genders and Sexualities. For *The Dragon is the Frame*, Yasukawa created a site-specific installation, in which fresh flower petals are affixed to the wall with gold nail polish. The gold nail polish references Aguhar’s flamboyance and sparkling personality, while the wilted flowers possess an air of melancholy in their reference to the passing of time. Yasukawa describes the inspiration for this piece: “I have one very fond memory of a time Mark and I got manicures. They take, you know, awhile, and it was a wonderful to hang out with Mark while we paused to get our nails did. After we parted ways, she sent me a text, like, two minutes later to say that she’d already fucked up two of her nails. It was such a great Mark moment (and memory) it always makes me smile.”

Gwendolyn Zabicki, *Shoes from Google, Shoes from Life*, 2012, pencil, Micron pen, and Prismacolor marker on paper

A 2012 graduate of UIC’s MFA program, Gwendolyn Zabicki creates paintings with subjects drawn from everyday urban landscapes. *Shoes from Google, Shoes from Life* is a new drawing Zabicki created based on discussions she shared with Aguhar regarding teaching methods. Specifically, the two took issue with their students’ lack of engagement when using online tools like google as source material during drawing exercises. “We wanted them to be aware of the

difference between drawing from life and drawing an object from the Internet that had been photographed in a way to make it instantly readable, universal, and ideal,” Zabicki states. The two brainstormed various assignments that could encourage students to use google search in a more imaginative way; however, Aguhar’s untimely death left the project unrealized. With this drawing, Zabicki makes an attempt towards actualizing the unfinished project.

Latham Zearfoss, *Flipped*, 2012, Four-channel sound installation (4:42 min. loop) with disco ball and colored lights

Latham Zearfoss is an artist and cultural producer living and working in Chicago whose creative practice often centers on reclaiming historical and mythological texts and revising them to incorporate radical notions of love and sex, possibility, and probability. His commitment to art and activism has also manifested in the creation of sporadic, temporary utopias like Chances Dances—a laid back, dive-style, dance optional LGBTIQ safe space. For his contribution to *The Dragon is the Frame*, Zearfoss set out to create a portrait of a person (Mark Aguhar) without using an image of that person. The resulting work is a sound piece featuring voices of Aguhar’s friends and dance partners who share their recollections of Aguhar on the dance floor. The language you hear conjures her in your mind while the disco ball serves as a focal point for your thoughts, a reflective depository for a de-centered and collective memory. Its sparkling surface recalls Aguhar’s powerful aura in the club environment.

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The Dragon is the Frame

Artwork from 27 artists inspired by the life and work of the indomitable Mark Aguhar (1987-2012) is presented alongside pieces by this fearless and beautiful artist/activist/goddess. Uncompromising, incisive, and charismatic in her investigations of gender, queer advocacy, and the politics of marginalized identity, Mark deeply transformed the communities of which she was a part. *The Dragon is the Frame* presents the challenging, compelling artwork she created in dialogue with pieces made by those she was closest to in Chicago. The exhibition format, which intersperses Mark’s works throughout the installation, is an attempt at capturing the way Mark’s communities functioned—individuals in constant communication, always sharing and influencing one another.

Artist bio

Mark Aguhar (1987-2012) made work that explores queer expression and what it means to have grown up gay on the Internet. She—Mark identified as “femme” and wanted to be referred to as “she”—collected visual artifacts from queer online communities and used them in her work to define and re-define her self and body. Aguhar worked in drawing, sculpture, video, and performance. She combined porn, fashion, textiles, and queer jokes to produce a range of optical effects that reflected many trans-identities. Her blog, *calloutqueen*, is a mash-up of searching questions about identity and an amused fascination with pop culture. Rather than attempt to represent the entire queer community, Aguhar was interested in voicing her own unique experience on the spectrum in real and personal terms. In 2011, Aguhar exhibited work at the Lawndale Art Center in Houston. Her work was also included in *Torch Song*, the University of Illinois at Chicago’s MFA thesis exhibition in 2012. Aguhar completed a BA at the University of Texas at Austin and received an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The information presented here, as well as other information on *The Dragon is the Frame*, can be accessed at <http://gallery400.uic.edu/exhibitions/the-dragon-is-the-frame>.