Musser, Amber Jamilla and Sable Elyse Smith. “Sable Elyse Smith with Amber Jamilla Musser.” The Brooklyn Rail (November 2026) [ill.] [online]

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

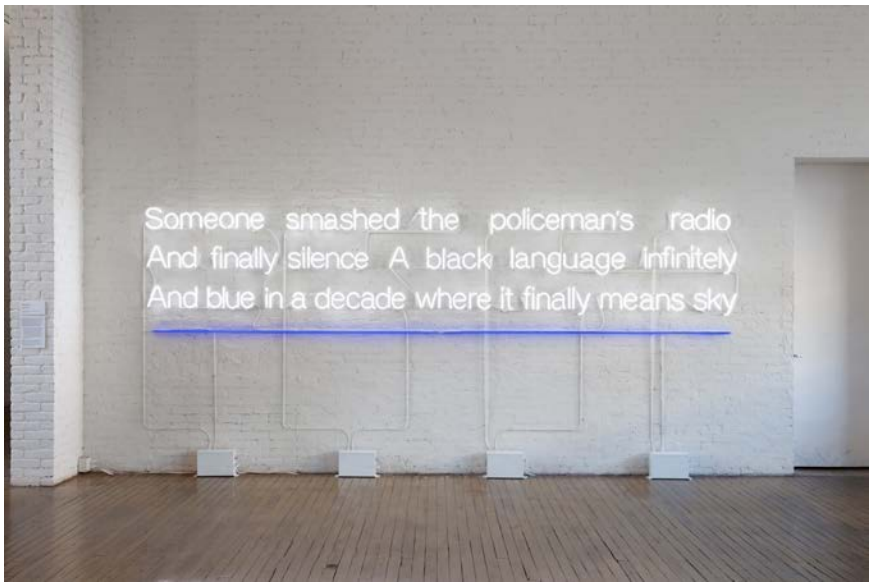
ART | NOVEMBER 2026 | IN CONVERSATION

SABLE ELYSE SMITH with Amber Jamilla Musser



Portrait of Sable Elyse Smith, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

In May of 2024 Sable Elyse Smith was awarded the Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize. It is a prestigious honor, and with it comes the opportunity of creating exhibitions at The Contemporary Austin in Texas, and the FLAG Art Foundation in New York. This year Smith launched both exhibitions, first in Texas, then in New York. On the occasion of the New York iteration, Smith joined scholar Amber Jamilla Musser on the Rail’s *New Social Environment* (Episode #1383) to discuss her approach to conceptualizing work, the way that individual pieces interact, and how different the two exhibitions turned out to be. The conversation that follows has been edited for clarity and concision.



Sable Elyse Smith, *Landscape V*, 2020. Neon, 37 × 178 inches. Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Amber Jamilla Musser (Rail): So first, I want to say congratulations on being awarded the Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize, and on your wonderful show! I had an opportunity to see the exhibition recently, and it's really stunning and tight. And I kind of use that word deliberately because the feeling of containment pervades the exhibition. Can you talk about how you created that feeling?

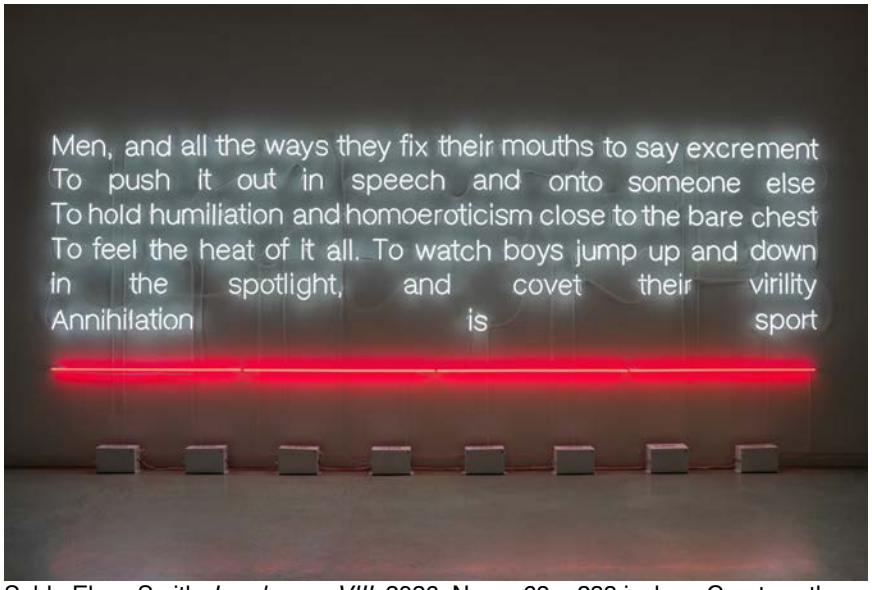
Sable Elyse Smith: Thank you, Amber. Let's see, thinking about my practice more generally, I sort of move between mediums and make a lot of different types of things. I am invested in each individual object being self-contained, but I think the thing that is a little bit more interesting to me is the resonance between objects or gestures in space. I've been trying to find ways to think about what an exhibition can do. The individual artworks are important; they can hold some information, but for me, what they're doing in space and how I'm maybe creating a catalyst for people to be more aware of their bodies and their sort of positionality in space feels closer to the work. I mean, it feels like a closer achievement of the thing that I'm interested in in the first place.

The wallpaper was kind of a first key to start to unlock that a little bit. I've used it now three times: first in an exhibition called *FAIR GROUNDS* in Los Angeles in 2023 at Regen Projects, and then more recently in the pair of exhibitions related to this prize. I was interested in thinking about this perceptual backdrop—this thing that draws attention to our looking—and, I think, some kind of trap that actually wouldn't let us escape being aware of our looking.

The series of sculptures in the exhibition make kind of a cheeky riff on Minimalism. I'm trying to supercharge them with all of this context in order to make them a little bit more palpable, but materially they're seductive. They're sleek. They're clean and geometric.

So that can create an opportunity for a viewer to escape the context or to just think about the object formally. I've been trying to think of these ways to create yet another frame around the work that actually doesn't allow that escape.

Rail: One of the things that really struck me is the entrance: how you take the elevator up to the ninth floor, and then you step out and immediately encounter the neon work, *Landscape V* (2020). Were you thinking of that experience as part of the framing?



Sable Elyse Smith, *Landscape VIII*, 2026. Neon, 68 × 233 inches. Courtesy the artist, Bortolami, New York; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Smith: Definitely—to immediately have an image that you're confronted by, right? But that image is complicated, because it's not necessarily easy. If we're thinking about exhibition making and marketing and things around it, everyone asks, "Okay, well, what's the hero image? What's the thing that's visually pleasurable and concise that lures people in to see the exhibition?" Thinking from the institutional standpoint, that's something that has a kind of pleasure embedded in it. And so, all of the elements and materials of the viewer's first encounter are technically these things that are sort of alluring; they have a kind of sleekness. But because of the collision of wallpaper, this kind of repeating pattern, there is a vibration that happens, and then the quality of the light that comes from neon—it's exciting and attractive to see. But the more time you spend there, it creates a visual and sensorial kind of difficulty, and that's the first encounter, right? And then there are all these kinds of conceptual ways that it creates an image, but I really wanted to unravel that expectation. Many things happen as you travel through the space, which also allows that first wall to really function and be even more charged once you leave it.

Rail: Everything that you're talking about is making me think about the background hum—the way that neon functions by producing these vibrations. I was really struck by

the conversation that occurs between the neon work *Landscape VIII* (2026), and the film *skin suit* (2026). There were so many ways that this particular sculpture really laid the groundwork for what we see in the film. I'm thinking specifically about the way masculinity, homoeroticism, and ideas of boyhood hover. I'm wondering about the dialogue that you see going on between those two pieces.

Smith: That's a good question. I mean, *skin suit* is the centerpiece of the exhibition, and the other works are kind of fragments extracted from it. There's a certain quality of repetition in the exhibition. The video is kind of built on this echo, and I see all of the other objects and also the way that the light is functioning, or all the sonic cues being this extended echo of the video. So we can remind ourselves that the video isn't contained to just this space, and just this kind of central viewing experience. It has this lingering residue, and the neon is an interesting way to talk about that residue.
The way I sort of came to conceptualizing the video and the wallpaper was by thinking a lot about the marriage between entertainment and violence, and all the ways where it could be either based on what it was called. Calling something "sport" makes violence permissible for a specific duration. Sports is a container in that way. Entertainment can be a container. If we think about the historical formation of traveling carnivals or fairgrounds—crossing the threshold of that architecture made different types of behaviors permissible. So I was thinking about that quality of naming, and the subtlety or porousness of that boundary was something that I wanted to heighten.

Rail: There's so much to say about that work. I think part of what you're talking about specifically with sport is the cycling between the images of boys wrestling and policeman tackling people, and the way that reverberates throughout the piece. I was also wondering about the dynamics of silence and speech, and how you think about that?
Smith: The piece is pretty dense, and there is a type of intensity to the rhythm that's created through the different montages in order for those things to have a reverberating effect—a way where we can situate ourselves and both understand and sort of unravel what's happening. I needed a kind of contrast that broke us out of our expectation of media consumption. Because it's a video work, we know it's an artwork, but we have a muscle memory for consuming various types of audiovisual content. There are expectations that have been trained into us by genre formats and narrative tropes. And that's one thing I was playing with by finding these moments, these sort of gestures that allow us to become aware of what is happening or how we're being emotionally maneuvered through the work, and then creating space where that can come into conflict—where we can break out of being lulled into a narrative, because there is a narrative drive in the work, but it's broken every time.

Silence is a gesture that can do that. But I feel like the silence in the work is this thing that takes up a lot of space and becomes loud in a way. If you think about the linger of, you know, the last image that you saw, that really gives it the space to kind of settle in, right? Like I think there's a lot of ghost imaging happening here, both physically in repetition, and then also in how things sort of bleed from one frame to another—whether

it's image or sound, or even being reminded back of that room that you just sort of walked through, where it's this kind of hyper-cold, blue color temperature, etc.

Rail: The breaking of the narrative frame is making me think about the parts in the video where there are little inset smaller scenes, and there's a lot of motion happening. So there's this sense of motion and then silence that kind of forces you to look again and to sort of rethink what's happening.

Smith: There's a repetition of a lot of these specific scenes that come up, and each time the scene is given a new context by whatever it's juxtaposed with. So it kind of undoes what we assumed was happening in the first encounter, and the silence, or the shift in frame rate or aspect ratio, allows for these things to be a little bit more open.



Sable Elyse Smith, *BARRICADE*, 2023. Powder coated aluminum, 56 × 56 × 56 inches. Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: Also in that room is the sculpture *BARRICADE* (2023), and it feels like there is this interesting conversation among different media. In addition to the film and sculpture, there are photographic works we haven't talked about yet. [*Laughter*] Can you talk a bit more about how you organized the exhibition?

Smith: Conceptualizing the show was an interesting puzzle, because it traveled from Texas, where the exhibition galleries were much larger. Here at FLAG we presented fewer works, which makes the conversation between them nuanced in different ways. I knew that the videos were going to be prominent, and that was the foundation of the show. And then through that I was trying to find ways to emphasize all the mechanisms at play in the video, and the mechanisms at play in these various power structures that I was thinking about, and that become maybe more legible in the video.

I'm thinking about this through a lens of language and semantics. This series of sculptures, they're like these one-to-one replicas based on the exact dimensions of specific prison visiting room furniture, and then those dimensions are used to create these other kinds of objects that make their initial use obsolete in a way. They're absurd objects. Sometimes they form direct images, and that creates a sub-narrative. And then sometimes they are more minimalist, abstract, geometric things. But they're all based on this logic of repetition, and they are these sort of sleek, precise, produced objects that point to the question of mass production, which makes us think about scale, and this question of how standards might be functioning, which I feel like starts to relate back to the video or open up new questions about what's happening in the video. This isn't just one episode where one bad thing happens. It's about the reproducibility of this tight system. The repetition also exists in the simplicity of a striped motif in the wallpaper, and then again in the photographs.

Rail: That felt especially apparent in the cross-type works *Gravity* (2022) and *Vanilla Wafer* (2023), one of which is all black and the other is all white. That color distinction got me thinking about the different feeling one gets from seeing the same structure repeated with different coloration, and ways that color can code things. Could you talk about your use of archival material? I'm thinking about that in relation to this discussion of mass-produced objects and scale, and how certain expectations are embedded in different systems.



Sable Elyse Smith, *Gravity*, 2022. Powder coated aluminum, 84 × 60 × 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Smith: When I think about it, I would say a kind of active collection drives my art practice. It's one form of research that happens. I am constantly looking for certain types of media content, which was probably the origin for that video. I became obsessed with thinking about that television show *Cops*, and I went down this rabbit hole trying to identify what

lineage of media and programming came from this world of *Cops*. So I have tons of video footage that relates to that.

I'm constantly going to flea markets or estate sales. I'm interested in this kind of collective participation in the production of vernacular images, and what those images mean or do, and how people image themselves. I probably have more than three hundred or so photographs I've collected. It's the same thing with the sculptures. I knew that this object existed. I encountered it, and then started researching all the companies that produced them, downloading the advertisement manuals for them, and finding the exact dimensions of the thing. So the works are not archival, but they're collected. These objects are reproduced from things that exist in the world—and for me it's important that the things I'm making are rooted in our contemporary world—then finding ways to trace the through line between them.

Even how certain people self-image themselves are out of this framework of either power, a kind of libidinal performance, or mask—how people define certain racialized identities. So in that sense, all of it is from this archival space, and I then create a separate archive of various cultural phenomena from our contemporary world, and then try to collapse the space between the two, so that they're actually closer together than we assume or think about—especially the things we kind of take for granted, or things that feel neutral or necessary in different ways.

Rail: I want to ask about the difference between the upstairs video, *LAUGH TRACK, OR WHO'S THAT PEEKING IN MY WINDOW* (2021), and the downstairs video, *skin suit*. I was noticing when I was rewatching *skin suit* that some of the images or clips reappeared—first appeared?—because *LAUGH TRACK* was made earlier, but in the exhibition you encounter it first. It feels lighter to me, though I don't know if that's the right word. There are more women in *LAUGH TRACK*. So I'm curious what echo you're finding with that and *skin suit*, or maybe because *LAUGH TRACK* was made first, how your thoughts evolved between that work and making *skin suit*?

Smith: I agree, it feels almost absurd to say, but the upstairs video, *LAUGH TRACK*, does feel lighter, even if the content is still charged. For the most part, the police reality-television footage transitions before the moment of violence, or before the moment of actual engagement. So we get the beginning of these arrest encounters, and then there is more space.

I was making that film around the time I was starting to watch a number of these television shows to collect footage. I knew I wanted to work with it, but I didn't know exactly where it would take me. In the work I've obviously been engaging these questions of violence and these systems of violence, but always trying to figure out frameworks or ways to articulate and present the information or the narrative or the object or the structure without it doing the thing that it does. So I feel like in that video, in the making of it, I hadn't quite found or figured out how to use it without it just fulfilling its

function—its narrative expectation. I was still collecting content and figuring out what the shape of it could be.

So *LAUGH TRACK* definitely is the precursor to *skin suit*. But I like the counterbalance between the two of them, especially in this exhibition, because you encounter the more intense video first. You encounter the text, right? You move through space in this way that actually starts to disorient you, or make you aware of all of your perception—it even makes you sort of question if you're actually looking at what you're looking at. The repetition of the same photograph starts to undo expectations, and the subtlety of light shifts. It is almost winding up the sensational experience of the viewer, and then once you get upstairs, the objects are still charged, but they're charged in a different way. So it feels nice to have a kind of like elongated breath where you see the same image and you can read and understand the complexity built in it, but it's not performing the same action on you that the video downstairs, *skin suit,* is doing.



Sable Elyse Smith, *skin suit*, 2026. Video with sound, 18 min., 31 sec. Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: You're making me think about some of the things that are not from police show footage in *skin suit*, like TikTok videos and the wrestling clips—where is that footage from?

Smith: College wrestling.

Rail: It gets me thinking about the ways that that violence continues outside of the shows and maybe in unexpected ways. I doubt many people are looking at TikTok thinking, "This is a continuation of violence." I'm also thinking about where we see figuration, where we see people's faces. Notably, we most often see white faces, and then whenever there are Black people or people of color, they tend to be blurred out. Did you

blur them out? Maybe the show blurred them out? I don't know really who did what—but my sense is that it's speaking to some of the ethical imperative that you were just talking about. But I guess I'm curious if you could talk a little bit more about the transmission of affect in these faces.

Smith: Yeah. That goes back to how people show up, and then the difference between who is blurred or censored, and who is not. One of the things that was fascinating to think about was the format of a cop-chase reality-television show. In just one forty-five–second clip, there's so much embedded structural information. The way that these shows function, there's typically one cameraman, maybe two, but it's a sparse crew on patrol with a police officer. The police officer decides they want to stop someone or potentially engage in arrest. They go through the motions of talking to a person. It either ends in arrest or doesn't. And then after that event happens, the producer provides that person—if they're getting arrested, before they take them to jail—with a release form, and they either sign a release or they don't. If they don't sign the release, their faces are blurred out, but their image, their person, their story is still present. So that act of "permission" is a really complicated and kind of interesting apparatus.

But that's why most of the footage is blurred. People reject participating in this thing, yet they still are. They persist. Their voice is there, their likeness is there, in a way. I thought that there's something interesting in thinking about that mechanism, especially for something that is meant for entertainment. This isn't an educational show. This is about a kind of titillating visual pleasure that then is a propagandist tool—identifying with the authority figure. The faces that you primarily see are of the college wrestlers, who are performing in a different type of permissible structure of aggression, and then in the news footage.

Additionally, the primary subjects in this work are white. It's a collection of police encounters with white people, which are not the typical images we see. In this work, there are only two moments where Black men are being arrested. One is repeatedly edited in a way where it is difficult to see the subject being arrested, but I think the viewer fills in the race. And the other is used as a comparison or direct contrast to a group of young white men stopped by the police.

Rail: Shifting gears a little bit: one of the conversations that happens on the tenth floor has to do with the crosses, *Vanilla Wafer* and *Gravity*. One of the people who is arrested in the video, the police spend a lot of time photographing his tattoos, which are explicitly religious. In some ways, the element of religion functions like an undercurrent, despite the two sculptures, since we start off with this intense way of thinking about masculinity and violence. I'm curious if you have more that you want us to know about?



Installation view: *Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork*, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, 2026–27. Photo: Steven Probert Studio.

Smith: For me, the way these crosses are functioning has a slight resonance with the photograph of the young boy. He looks like he's between eight and twelve years old, wearing an American flag durag. It's a found photo, I just re-presented it, but I adjusted the scale, the framing, and I gave it a title, which is "Young Thug"—and the naming or labeling creates a dissonance. There are people who will encounter this image and feel a kind of charge or rejection toward it because of the naming. For these works, the name is an image, and the image conjures a huge narrative and a kind of emotional resonance.

So I'm thinking about the simplicity of a symbol used as a tool to enact different types of things. It could be used as a tool for creating a positive affinity group. It has also been used as a tool to enact actual violence. I'm also thinking about the coupling of the prison apparatus in the US and how the state-imposed presence of religion functions and circulates in that space. I guess that's the kind of tension and rub for me. Structural systems can be used productively or to less-productive ends, and I think the line between that instrumentalization can get very thin sometimes.

Rail: In the smaller gallery where *Vanilla Wafer* and *Riot III* (2022) are paired with the photograph *00:00:00:00* (2026), I feel like the red coloration amplifies the subtext of religiosity you were just talking about. But I'm curious what feeling this room is conjuring for you? Because for me, I felt like I walked into a David Lynch situation.

Smith: I mean, that's great, right? I feel like the whole show—hopefully, or that's kind of the aim—is just completely topsy turvy, right? For the most part, many of the objects or the materials in the space are legible. We can locate them. There is even a kind of familiarity to them. We know what a family photograph is; we know these things as

legible, vernacular images. We can recognize material. There's text. Maybe the text has a bit of a push and pull, or charge, but everything is pretty legible. My intent is to turn all of that upside down, completely destabilize our expectations, and create a kind of repulsion in what we're viewing too, and sometimes rejection. Some of these things are incredibly humorous to me, but they're provocations to other people. There are various symbols that point to people's worldviews, and the way that they're used here is maybe technically a misuse. So Lynchian feels right on the money, in a way. [*Laughter*]



Installation view: *Sable Elyse Smith: Clockwork*, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, 2026–27. Photo: Steven Probert Studio.

Rail: It's interesting—we started the conversation talking about different elements of seducing the viewer and what feels attractive, and now we've circled around to talking about repulsion. It's an interesting way to move through the exhibition. But I want to go back to *Landscape VIII* and talk about the words—well, really, I want to call it a poem. We've talked about the ways that it's in conversation with *skin suit*, but there is also something specific about this object and what it's saying. I was intrigued by the spacing between the words. We get the most words at the top, and then as it goes down, the fewest. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Smith: I've made eight of these neon works so far, and they all have this naming convention. They're all "Landscape" I–VIII, subsequently. I was thinking about Western landscape paintings: these beautiful, romantic landscapes celebrating the sublime of natural life, right? I was especially thinking about the paintings that are focused Western landscapes, in which all the people of the Americas are not represented, and how that was connected to manifest destiny. So I was thinking about that, and about the scale of grand masterwork oil paintings, and wanting to conceptualize something that took up space on the wall in that way, or dealt with that kind of horizontality. And this is how I arrived at that single line at the bottom of the piece, which is this pseudo-horizon line.

It's this very abstracted way to point to something, or allow us to fill in the gap of the image in our minds. But then, for me, the text paints the picture of the "landscape," or the world. It could also be a psychological space. So, here is my landscape painting, right? And with each of these works the world of it gets a lot more complicated. The neon also has the light. It has this glow, and that light is kind of alluring in the beginning. It's a light that we can associate with lots of different things: commerce, advertising, etc. But then placing words in this format, at this scale, in this material—it requires a type of labor. It's a thing that actually starts to become more difficult or sort of harsher to get through, and reading slows us down.

We're contemplating the possibility of each one of these words, or what meaning might be made through line break and syntax. That's where the poetic impulse comes in. And, of course, it requires power. It requires energy. It requires a negotiation between the space or the architecture and the thing to be continuously populated, and all of those elements are in the background. Obviously, the text and what the text says or what the text kind of implies is the foregrounded experience. But these other things are functioning too, and then we get that sound, which for me is almost the equivalent of a ghost image. When you leave the room and the sound isn't there, the sound becomes more prominent, or you become reminded. You mark the difference. So there's a different way that time is memorialized in your body's experience of being in a space.



Sable Elyse Smith, *skin suit*, 2026. Video with sound, 18 min., 31 sec. Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Rail: I don't want to talk too much about contemporary news, but it feels like an accurate read of the dynamics that are happening right now. And it connects in that way to *skin suit*.

Smith: I think people get it. But sometimes people can misread, or they can try to find a way to distance the thing that makes them uncomfortable, which is what I was talking about before with the sculptures. Maybe people can find enough distance between that and not wrestle with the content, but I feel like with *Landscape VIII*, it's difficult to not wrestle with the content. It's there. It's a text-based work, so the emphasis is on speech. As you're reading it, you are kind of moving through the speech act, and then it is pointing out speech as this extreme tool. This is a work there is no escape from, and I like that.

Rail: I think especially in the way it's currently installed, the shininess of the floor enhances the spread of neon light, so the viewer becomes sort of physically embedded in the situation. And you're hearing yourself read the words.

Smith: Definitely, and I feel like there is an interesting awareness of the publicness of viewing the work, or encountering the ideas. Maybe you're aware of other people in the gallery watching you engage with the work. I think there are so many things that feel sharp or shocking, things that people might not want to deal with, or things that people have contradictory ideas about, and it's all happening in a room where there are other witnesses. That feels like a part of it too, and maybe there's something to do with scale that helps facilitate that aspect.

Rail: There's something about being there that made me feel vulnerable as a viewer, and I feel like there was something about the space itself that made it feel beyond you. Not quite just that you were viewing something, but that there was a lot at stake for the viewer. Was it like that in Texas as well? Can you take us through some of the choices you had to make about resituating the exhibition in a smaller venue, and what the effect was on the work?

Smith: Sure. It's a really good question, because they are so wildly different that it's absurd, in a way. [*Laughter*] So the show in Austin came first. I was thinking about that location, and a lot of the effort went into figuring that out. There were a lot of simple choices that went into conceptualizing the Austin show. One was that the scale of the space was expansive, and so I knew I wanted to have one floor that was primarily just a sculpture show in order to actually see everything in relationship to each other—that potentially has a different type of vibration.

And then there was a fifteen-foot kinetic sculpture in that show that kind of drove the dialogue of the exhibition. It was about this slow, monotonous turn, and that piece is titled *A Clockwork* (2021), which is where I kind of stole the proper title for the exhibition. I hadn't had a major show in Texas before; so, in a practical sense, it felt important to kind of contextualize my overall practice in a different way. That felt like a straightforward approach.

The downstairs had a number of works from this "Coloring Book" series of pseudo-paintings that I've been making, which feel childlike and kind of whimsical. I think with

those works too, there's always a misread. They're intentionally kind of misunderstood in a way, and a selection of those works were installed on the wallpaper. There's a similar kind of vibration that creates this funhouse effect. It was more carnivalesque in a way. And then you still heard the sound bleed of the two videos on that floor. So that also created a charge between what we think is childlike and sweet or cute with this kind of aggressive interruption of the language and the soundscape of the two videos. And then upstairs was more minimalist; it's the sculptures in space.

It allowed me to see what all of these sculptures can do together, which was important to me. And then, thinking about contextualizing the work and creating this harsh contrast: just because of the nature of the "Coloring Book" works, I feel like that softened in a way. It's whimsical when you walk in, and then you start to look at each individual work, and that allows the shift to happen. But that shift happens personally and individually as you move through the exhibition. I think this kind of sounds absurd to say, but it's quieter in a way.

So then when we get to the New York version, obviously I had to reduce the exhibition. It's a different context, a different audience. I knew that the show could be sharper. The beauty of the FLAG galleries is that they are spacious, but how you navigate them creates a kind of intimacy, and I wanted to exploit that. I wanted to make the spaces feel even tighter in a way, almost like humidity in the room—something thick.
In order to do that, we selected the locations of some works based on what they produce, so that cold and blue neon in the beginning, but then the wallpaper creates another layer of intensity and aggression. And then I wanted the viewer to be surrounded by this group of "thugs" on the first floor—so that everywhere you turn, there's this other body in space—and for that to be haunting in a way. I guess for me the color temperature, the repetition, the frenetic perceptual energy was a kind of haunt, which I think is present in the videos as well—especially *skin suit*. So that was the way I sort of defined and tried to organize different decisions in the FLAG show.