ART HAPS
NEW YORK ART GUIDE

INTERVIEW

Brie Ruais

BY CORYDON COWANSAGE
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In the last week of September I visited the Sunset Park studio of Brie Ruais as she prepared for her first solo show at Nicole Klagsbrun's pop up space. Ruais works with clay, creating large, gestural reliefs that reference both the body and the landscape. Her current work is the result of a very physical, performative process. She uses her own body weight, and sometimes that of a collaborator, to sculpt a comparably-sized mound of clay—pushing, kneading, and spreading the material. The ensuing pieces act as a record of these actions, and sometimes document behaviors in a given space itself. During the studio visit Ruais told me about her process, her relationship to the medium, some of the ideas behind this particular body of work, and what she's planning for her upcoming solo show, *XO*.

Brie Ruais' Studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. September, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

Corydon Cowansage: How do you begin these pieces? Do you plan what you're going to do ahead of time or do you let things happen spontaneously?

Brie Ruais: I set up parameters for myself when making this work. I usually begin with a directive that establishes the amount of clay I will use (usually my body weight), the direction I'll push it in, and usually there will be one more step involved, like in this case it was tearing an X out of the center. The parameters allow me to be completely absorbed in making a piece and have an unselfconscious relationship with the material in that moment.

Two pieces in Brie Ruais' studio. September, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

CC: When you're making a piece that involves somebody else, how do you decide who's going to participate with you? It seems like a really personal or intimate thing to do with somebody. Could the other person be an artists' assistant or would you only do it with someone who you have a close relationship with?

BR: I've only recently started working with another person. I would only involve someone that I had a close relationship with because it is a very vulnerable act. I just finished a piece that I made with a friend where we spread our own body weight in clay towards each other on the floor, and when we met we pushed the clay vertically. In most cases it's just me making the piece alone,

and combining my weight with someone else's. The identity of that person matters less than the fact that it's two bodies combined. Adding another person's weight to my own is a way for me to think about bodies merging and coming apart.

Brie Ruais, *Two Ways Towards Center*, 300lbs, 2013. Image of work in progress, courtesy the Artist.

CC: I remember seeing Kate Gilmore's performance *Through The Claw* at Pace in 2011 in which a group of women wearing matching dresses pulled apart an enormous cube of wet clay and hurled chunks of it at the gallery walls. It was really intense. I couldn't understand how they could actually, physically do it. It just seemed so exhausting. I'm reminded of that piece because of the physical challenge involved in making your work too, and this idea of you really wrestling with the material. It also makes me wonder about the role of aggression in your work. The gestures do feel violent at times, like when you're pushing the clay or tearing pieces out.

BR: Yes, that's true. I relate to her piece—the process is so rigorous that sometimes what's required to move the material resembles an act of aggression, struggle, and violence, in a way. I find myself actually beating the material to keep it against the wall—I'm kicking it and hitting it with my knees and fists. I started working with this much material because it demands a physical encounter. I like how gestures like 'opening something up' can be read as both a metaphysical pursuit and an act of aggression. It's also interesting that making sites, and claiming and occupying space can be seen as assertive.

Kate Gilmore, *Through the Claw*, 2011. Photo by Carly Gaebe

For me, the work isn't about violence or aggression, it's about what happens when one's body is overcome by a physically demanding process. The actions seem aggressive, but they're also really basic. We are forced to remember that making something sometimes requires the laborious use of the body.

Brie Ruais, *Four-Armed Compass (X Torn from two people's combined body weight in clay)*, 2013. Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: So are your actions ones of pure functionality? You're doing what's necessary to make it behave *sort of* the way you want.
BR: Yes, it is all functional.

CC: How do you think about a piece in terms of doing something formal or aesthetic?

BR: I don't intentionally place the body impressions that are in the work, but I do make formal decisions to tear a piece open in the shape of an O or X. Breaking through the clay that I've spread on the floor is where, for me, the material stands in for the body and landscape. I'm inspired by the way that Ana Mendieta's work conflates violence, the body, and the land.

Ana Mendieta, *"Untitled (Body Tracks)"* (1974), Lifetime color photograph. ©Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

CC: It's also interesting the way the material changes once its fired. I saw some images online of unfired pieces and they were fleshy, even grotesque. Then in the fired pieces you often use these colored clays. For example, this one is metallic [pointing at Inside Peeled Out] and it's very beautiful. What do you think about making something that's beautiful?

BR: I think about that a lot. You could argue that the metallic glazes aestheticize the work. I'm okay with the glaze functioning that way, even though that's not its intention. For me, the metallic glazes transform the material. A lot of people see the metallic pieces as metal, or they can't quite identify what the material is, which I think is interesting—to give ceramics the opportunity to be just sculpture.

Brie Ruais, *Inside Peeled Out, 132 lbs of Terracotta*, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

Brie Ruais, *Inside Peeled Out, 132 lbs of Terracotta*, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

But in addition to that, the metallic surface refers to the fluid-like nature that clay has before it's fired, when it has the potential for continual transformation. Which is where the work is influenced by feminist theory and ideas about more fluid boundaries between gender.

What is always a difficult experience for me—regarding the timeline of the work—is that I make the pieces in under an hour, and I do it as quickly as I can so that the energy is embedded in the material. Then it takes three or four weeks to fire a piece and to hang it.

Pigmented ceramic tests, Brie Ruais' Studio, September 2013. Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: You don't change them in that time? You leave them exactly as they were at the end of that hour?

BR: Yes, the only intervention is cutting them into tiles or sections. Later I make decisions about the glazed surfaces. The colored pieces, however, are made with stained clay and the color is imbedded in the material, so make color decisions in advance.

Disassembled pieces in Brie Ruais' studio, October 2013. Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: Why do you cut them into tiles? Is it for practical reasons?

BR: I arrived at cutting them into pieces because it would be impossible—even if I had a kiln the size of the work—to move such heavy, thin ceramics without them breaking. I've settled on the brick-like grid for the solid pieces, and radial cuts for the ring-shaped pieces.

Brie Ruais, *Movement from Outside to Inside (Threshold of Studio)*, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

CC: It's odd, but when I first looked at these pieces I wasn't fully conscious that they were cut into tiles, or at least I didn't initially give it much thought. I think because I was so focused on the larger gestures and marks.

BR: That's great that you see it that way. I also like that when you notice the individual tiles the gesture becomes slow—as if they're frozen moments. Cutting the tiles is a strange experience. It feels like dissecting something. Single tiles rarely speak for the whole piece. I often take tiles out of the kiln and think, "This is going to be so bad. The colors are wrong," but when I put the pieces together again the whole image comes back, and it has the strength of one continuous stroke.

Brie Ruais, *Part of a Whole, Cropped Gesture*, 2013. 11.75 x 10 x 1.5 inches (Single Tile). Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: Yeah, the mark making almost looks topographical at times, and the tiling makes me think of when you're in an airplane looking down onto the land—that kind of patchwork or gridding that happens.

BR: Yes, definitely. I like that imposition of a grid on something that's really gestural or "natural"—like the land. I'm reminded of Agnes Martin's grid paintings, where she laid a hand-painted grid over very brushy, watery grounds.

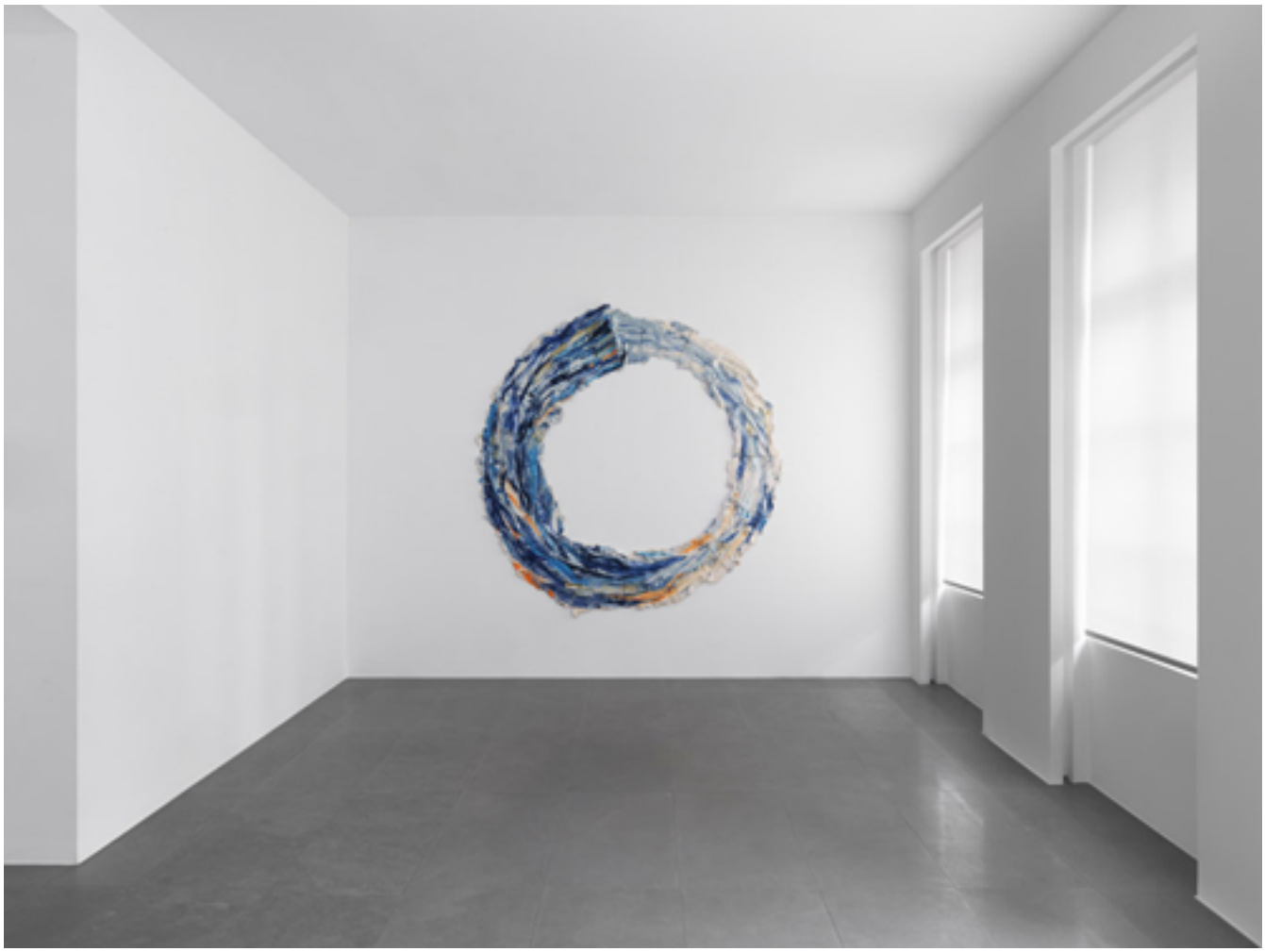
Brie Ruais, *The Big Push #1 (250 Pounds of clay)*, 2011. Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: So you're working in a very physical way with a material that has these possible association with gender, craft, and domesticity, while also relating to macho artists and art historical moments. For example, you've mentioned your interest in AbEx and Richard Serra's work before. It seems like a pretty essential part of this project for you. Did you think about those associations overtly when you initially started using the clay, or was it something that you came to more gradually as you were working?

BR: When I started working with clay, I was invested in its material capabilities and its associations with craft and gender. I began by making pots with the female-as-vessel tradition in mind. Then I moved into making small abstract pieces that were formed by kicking clay. I decided I needed to work with more clay than I could possibly manage, an amount that would literally demand a confrontation. So I thought, “I’m going to force 200 pounds of clay up the wall and spread it as high as I can reach”. I realized the influence of Richard Serra’s lead throws, and I had a moment when I thought of myself as making the feminist version of his work.

Richard Serra’s “Gutter Corner Splash: Night Shift”. John Weber, courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

It’s important for women to pick up on that tradition of work. Process-art was so dominated by men, it’s interesting to see the materials that women use and the way the treatment is potentially gendered. Ursula Von Rydingsvard and Kate Gilmore’s works are both really confrontational and physical, but their processes involve this subtle tending-to, you know? Ursula treats the surfaces very specifically with graphite, and Gilmore pays careful attention to the women’s clothing and accessories. Some friends have said recently that my work used to be very detail-oriented and controlled and that I’ve completely abandoned that. But it’s still there, in the process of tending to the tiles through firing and glazing. I do see clay as a gendered material—perhaps that’s why I feel connected to it.



Brie Ruais, *Circle Game (Push 350 pounds of clay in a circle until the end becomes the beginning and the color de-saturates)*, 2012. Image courtesy Xavier Hufkens Gallery.

CC: It seems like somewhat recently there's been a lot of renewed interest in the material possibilities of ceramics.

BR: Yeah, it's great. It's being used in a really expressive way, a very bodily and physical way, like Arlene Shechet and Jessica Jackson Hutchins. It's such a basic and satisfying sculptural material. It doesn't need to be mediated with machinery or tools. I can't think of another material that you can sculpt with your hands as easily.

Brie Ruais, *Movement from Outside to Inside (Threshold of Studio)*, 2013 (Detail). Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: It's very direct. You can make a mark and it's there, and it stays there.

BR: Yeah, it doesn't need a container or a mold to hold its shape.

CC: And it doesn't have the same kind of time limitations either, necessarily.

BR: Right, it doesn't have a set-time, so you can keep it wet for as long as you want. Sometimes I'm sad about losing that flexibility in the material when it goes to the kiln. It becomes rigid and unchanging.

Brie Ruais, *Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner (Big Push in a New Space)*, 2012. Image courtesy the Artist and Nicole Klagsbrun.

CC: So you've been firing your most recent work?

BR: Yeah, I've only made a few pieces on site that I leave raw.

CC: That seems like it would be a little bit nerve-wracking.

BR: It is. I have less control over it. I made a piece in the corner at Nicole Klagsbrun's gallery last year, and it cracked a lot as it was drying. The ephemerality of the work is much more present when made on-site.

Installation View, *Movement in Three Parts*, 2012 Brie Ruais, Oscar Murillo at Nicole Klagsbrun. Image courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun.

CC: Did you like that about it?

BR: Yes. It had a life cycle in the gallery that it would never have had in my studio—

CC: And at any moment if someone walked in it might look different.

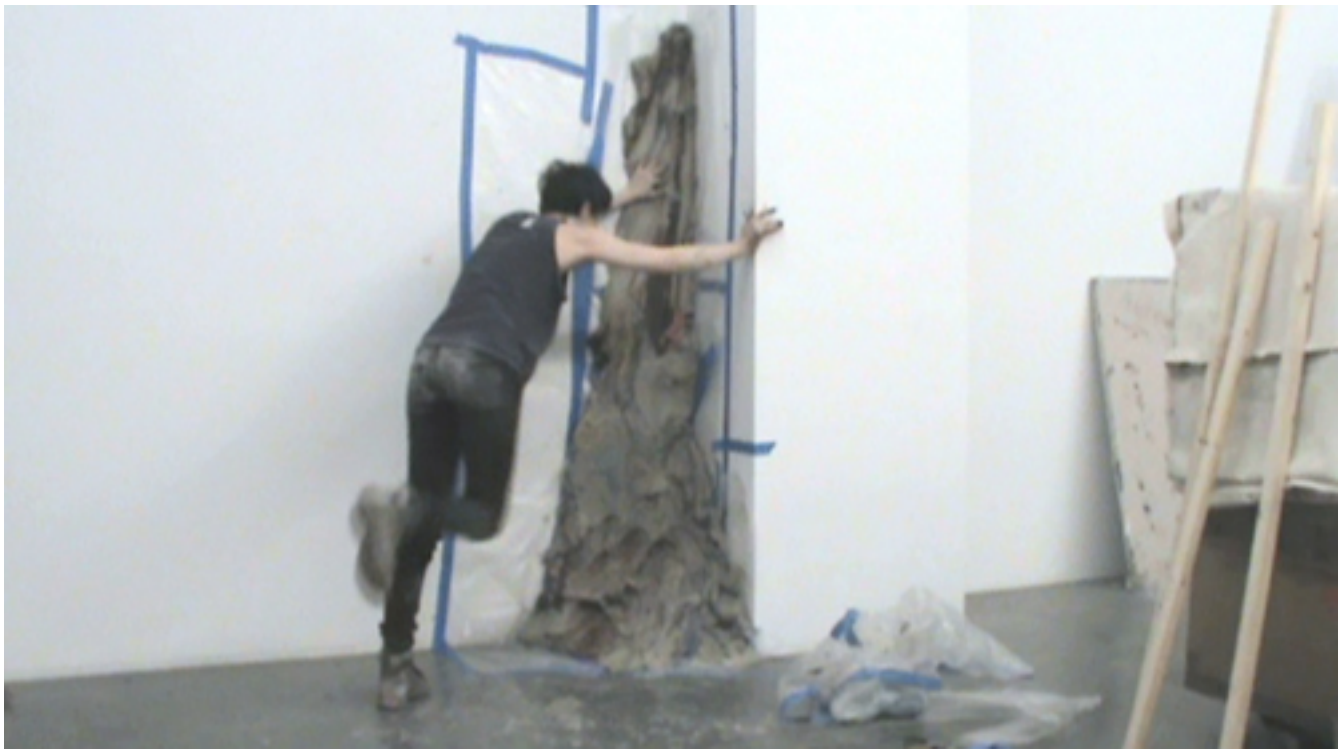
BR: Yeah!

CC: You've mentioned that you videotape yourself making these pieces. Have you shown any of the videos?

BR: Yeah I've shown one in a group show at the Horticultural Society.

CC: How did you feel about that?

BR: I was comfortable with it because it felt anonymous. The video is very low-res and you can't really see my face. I also liked that there was a disconnect between the work in the video and the wall piece that was also shown—the video wasn't an illustration of making it. But I wouldn't show the video documentation of recent pieces because they seem hyper-sexual. The piece at the Horticultural Society isn't sexual in the same way, I think. It reads as more aggressive.



Brie Ruais, *Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner (Big Push in a New Space)*, Video Still, 2012. Image courtesy the Artist and Nicole Klagsbrun.

CC: I was curious about that because they are so performative, but at the same time the mystery to them is very appealing. I like trying to figure out what you were doing and how the marks came to be. For example I can see elbow impressions or a footprint. So I wonder how much of that—

BR: I want you to see.

CC: Right, but then at the same time, actually seeing you pushing the clay up against the wall is interesting too. I do understand your choice not to show the video of you making a piece with the piece itself. That would be too didactic or something, like "here is the work, here is how I made it".

BR: I agree. I did that in one case at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, but it was a space where that didactic quality was appropriate. They have a lot of educational programming

for young people. It was a piece that I made on the floor where I spread clay over a large area, then used it as a workspace. The video mostly shows me occupying the space and carrying out studio-related tasks.

Brie Ruais, *Mapping Studio Floor, HVCCA (Lee Krasner Palette on my Floor)*, Video Still, 2012. Image courtesy the Artist.

CC: So you're experimenting with how you present your work? It seems like your testing different installations out to some extent.

BR: Yes. Installation allows the work to operate in different ways. I recently showed a two-part sculpture in a small space at Halsey McKay, which was great because the size of the space dialed up the connection between them. The piece was How One Becomes Two, and was made by spreading out the equivalent of two people's weight in clay, and then tearing out the middle, so the resulting forms were a ring and a circle. They were hung on opposite walls, about 14 feet apart. The viewer occupied the space between them, unable to see both at the same time, but recalling one as they turned to the other. I'm thinking about how the pieces can affect space.

Brie Ruais, ‘How One Becomes Two,’ in ‘Two Wholes’ at Halsey McKay Gallery. July, 2013. Image courtesy Halsey McKay Gallery.

Brie Ruais, ‘How One Becomes Two,’ in ‘Two Wholes’ at Halsey McKay Gallery. July, 2013. Image courtesy Halsey McKay Gallery.

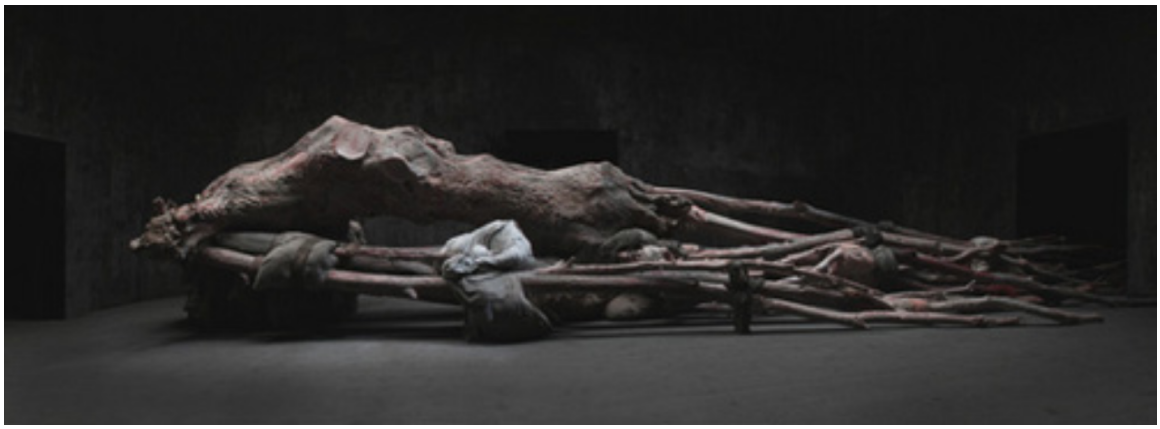
CC: So this one was made on the floor also? [pointing to Two Ways Out From Center, No Rain]. I see the prints from your feet.

BR: That's my body weight pushed in opposite directions. When it was on the floor it didn't seem so long. When I was measuring it to hang it, I realized it was ten feet.

Two Ways Out From Center, No Rain, 132lbs, 2013 in Brie Ruais' Studio. September, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

CC: Yeah, I think sometimes when you switch the orientation of something that you're accustomed to it makes the scale feel very different.

BR: I love that transition. I was very affected by Berlinde De Bruyckere's piece at the Venice Biennale. You walk into a central room to find what looks like a fallen tree, and it's so long that it continues from that central room into two small adjacent rooms whose entrances are blocked by the tree. In thinking about horizontality versus verticality—we mostly experience trees vertically, right, and then to have this massive tree that's treated like a body—it's bandaged in places, you realize that now you feel an intimacy with it.



Berlinde De Bruyckere
Kreupelhout – Cripplewood, 2013
Pavilion of Belgium, 55th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia
1 June - 24 November 2013
Photo: Mirjam Devriendt

CC: Do you have any upcoming projects that you're working on right now?

BR: I'm working towards my first solo show, and for the first time I'm thinking about what happens when there's a lot of work in one place. The show at David Zwirner of Richard Serra's early work has been a huge influence. It's provided a sense of what it might be like to have many discreet pieces in a room together, and to see them operate together, like words in a sentence. I want the work to be autonomous and at the same time in dialogue with one another.

CC: When is it?

BR: It's in November. The title of the show is 'XO,' which refers to the formal shapes of the work, to the gestures and symbols we use for indicating sites, as well as, you know, to its lighter vernacular uses….

Preparatory photos in Brie Ruais' Studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. September, 2013. Photo by Corydon Cowansage

Brie Ruais was born in 1982 in Southern California and received her MFA from Columbia University's School of the Arts in 2011. Most recently, she has exhibited with Nicole Klagsbrun, Salon 94, Abrons Art Center, Eli Ping in New York, Xavier Hufkens in Brussels, Marc Selwyn Fine Art in LA, the Horticultural Society of New York, Interstate Projects and 247365 in New York, and Halsey McKay in East Hampton. Her work is currently on view in Come Together: Surviving Sandy Year 1, curated by Phong Bui at Industry City, and Ajar, curated by Natasha Llorens at Reverse in Brooklyn. This is Ruais' first exhibition with Nicole Klagsbrun. She lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Corydon Cowansage is a painter living and working in New York. She received an MFA in painting from RISD and a BA in art from Vassar College.