

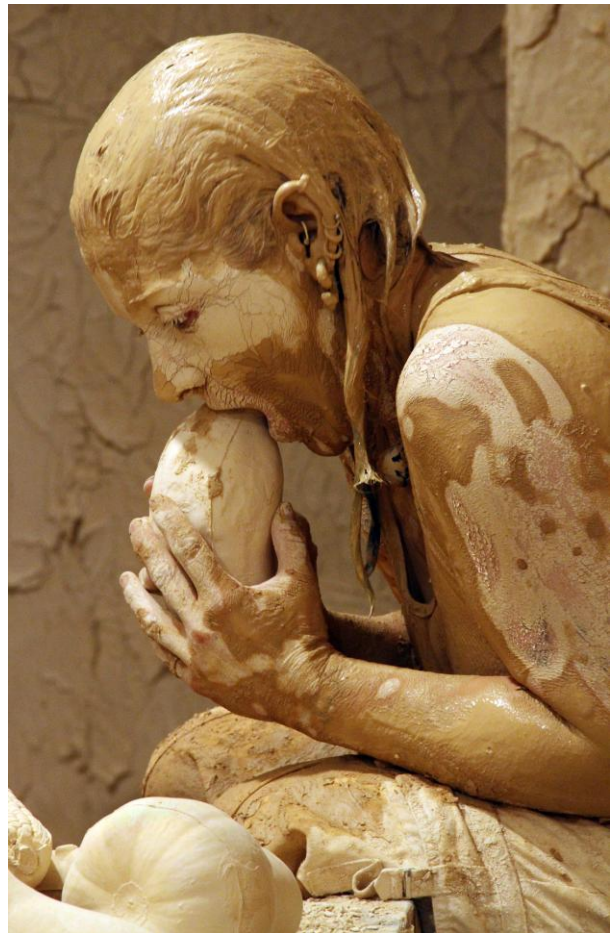
Art Scouts Exhibition, Arlington Art Center, Arlington, Virginia June 18-August 21, 2010

For the exhibition *ART SCOUTS*, six accomplished artists with strong presences in the DC metro region explain how and why they make their art—by presenting other artists who use the same materials or methods. These artists all work in different disciplines: Zoe Charlton (drawing), Mary Early (sculpture), J.J. McCracken (performance and installation), Maggie Michael (painting), Jefferson Pinder (video), and Kerry Skarbakka (photography). Each Art Scout will curate one of the AAC's seven separate gallery spaces. The result is a show that not only highlights six distinctive points of view, but also explains what it means to take a contemporary approach to a particular fine art medium.

Curatorial Statement

J.J. McCracken: Performance/Installation

I construct landscapes composed of earth materials and activated by sound, smell, taste, and living models that move through them, focused on tasks I've assigned. Sometimes, repeating cycles of productive activity yield accumulation—until things fall apart. Other times, consumption is incessant but drones on, unable to satisfy. In my work, there is (so far) always a foil for the notion of achievement, and there is (so far) always a reflection of the cycle of life.



From the exhibition phase of the *Hunger, Philadelphia* project, an active installation by J.J. McCracken (2009-2010). Clay-covered models move through an arid, monochromatic landscape eating clay casts of fruits and vegetables. The excessive consumption of a visually bountiful but non-nutritive food substitute is central to the main idea of the project, and a reference to geophagy (clay-eating). Geophagia occurs worldwide; problematic only in countries suffering severe food crises.

For me, the performed action provides an entry point into an artwork like no other. A body's simple presence touches the personal. Its activity suggests connection: Inside our decision to be witness or participant, we may locate testimony to our being. Weaving bodily activity into a multi-sensory, immersive environment allows me to construct a new, hyperphysical reality where we find ourselves suspended, fully engaged.

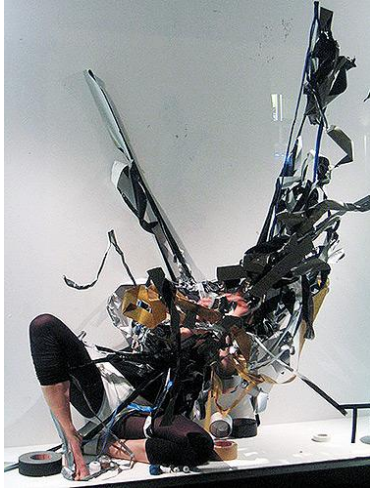
For this exhibition, I have chosen 3 artists setting task-based activity (labor and play) into the constructed landscape. The fourth brings the landscape surrounding the exhibition site inside the gallery.

My current project focuses on hunger and looks specifically at geophagy (clay-eating) in regions of the world suffering severe food crises. Jerry Kaba's *Play Date* shares a similar civic-mindedness, enticing consideration of a pressing environmental concern close to home: chemical pollutants poisoning our neighborhoods and playgrounds. His child performers emotionally reattach us to the issue, cracking the shell of desensitization formed by our response to an over-stimulated, over-dramatized Nancy Grace news climate. In the intersection of play and plight, the threat emerges more real, and all the more grave.



Jerry Kaba's *Play Date*, between performances. The installation includes cold-war-era playground equipment and gas masks, employed to reference a time when technology-testing ran rampant, without caution or consideration for its public health impact.

Madeline Stillwell shoulders the burden of industrial detritus. She struggles, shedding and nesting, and shedding again. She succumbs to the weight of her chosen materials and, at times, to that of her own body—and then she moves on, returning to the struggle, and so pitting production against waste. Stillwell quotes from dance, making line/drawing tangible as she works amidst rubble. She draws elegance and purpose out of the discarded, transforming the mundane into the sublime.



Video stills from *Live Drawing*, 2008 (left) and *Siren Sessions #2*, 2008 (right) by Madeline Stillwell. Stillwell constructs installations from urban detritus through which she explores non-choreographed performative action. Her task-based activity deals with excessive & abrasive materiality, endurance & persistence, and submission, negotiation, & triumph.

In the 1978 Richard Donner film, Superman's secret sanctuary sprang from a crystal while he watched. Ryan Kelly's Superman painstakingly rebuilds the *Fortress of Solitude* with his own two hands. A day's labor yields but a fortress-fragment. The impact of his choice of non-permanent materials is compounded by the (temporary) display of the act of making itself. Humor and celebration only momentarily cloak the intriguing details of the work, such as Kelly's choice of both materials and location/context, and the subtexts of his subject matter.



Video still from *Fortress of Solitude*, a performance/installation by Ryan Kelly, 2009. Kelly's work is "a balance of timelessness (in the familiar narratives) and the immediate (in the ephemeral quality of the materials [cardboard and tape] used to portray that, along with actions, which are also temporary)."

Oscar Santillan captured a mouthful of the Potomac River and brought it on foot into the gallery in Arlington, thereby using his own body as vessel for transportation. In this piece, Santillan sets a simple gesture of

tenderness against the backdrop of a dramatic and laborious journey. The decision to document this act with but a vague and fragile sculptural artifact leaves its presence tenuous, and connects us to the finite lifespan of the work. The impossibility of capture/communication despite heroic intention paints the artist as tragic figure.



The Manifesto of Goodness, a site-specific performance by Oscar Santillan, 2009. Conducted in Richmond, VA; Santillan walked to the nearby James River, collected a mouthful of water, and walked back to his apartment where he watered a small plant with his mouth's contents. Already struggling in its indoor environment, the now overwatered plant drowned as a result of his action.

I am interested in the paths of inquiry each of these artists pursue as they form their studio practice. They run parallel to my own: from Jerry Kaba's social engagement, playful and menacing in equal measure; to Madeline Stillwell's cycles of doing and not-doing; to Ryan Kelly's display of the process of making within the framework of pop culture myths; to Oscar Santillan's display of endurance and thwarted intentions. Questions about the lasting and the momentary, inherent in the discourses of both performance and installation art themselves, weave through each of our explorations.

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Learn more about the artists at:

www.JJMcCracken.com

www.JerryKaba.com

www.MadelineStillwell.com

www.RyanWilsonKelly.com

<http://OscarSantillan.blogspot.com>

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<https://www.arlingtonartscenter.org>