

# *Scupper*

curated by Carlos Agredano

September 7 – October 12, 2024

Carl Cheng	Teresa Margolles
Sophie Friedman-Pappas	Park McArthur
Sayre Gomez	Ed Ruscha
David L. Johnson	Analia Saban
Rindon Johnson	Cielo Saucedo
Maren Karlson	Jesse Stecklow
Harrison Kinnane Smith	Charlotte Zhang

## *Scupper:*

*noun:* scupper; plural noun: scuppers

- a hole in a ship's side to carry water overboard from the deck.

*origin:* late Middle English: perhaps via Anglo-Norman French from Old French *escopir* 'to spit'; compare with German *Speigatt*, literally 'spit hole'.

*verb:* scupper; 3rd person present: scuppers; past tense: scuppered; past participle: scuppered; gerund or present participle: scuppering

- sink (a ship or its crew) deliberately.
- prevent from working or succeeding; thwart

*origin:* late 19th century (as military slang in the sense 'kill, especially in an ambush')

*Scupper* is a group exhibition organized around a central question: how do our infrastructural systems define, excrete, and destroy their waste?

In the 21st century, the inadequacies of our infrastructure are coalescing into the collapse of our financial, social, medical, legal, and environmental systems. In tandem with an already unstable foundation, new technologies are further accelerating this disintegration.

The exhibition functions as a mirror to the collapse. Artworks are haphazardly scattered across the gallery space, precariously hovering over and around visitors. These objects include self-destructed machines, removed pieces of hostile architecture, futile financial interventions, scavenged detritus, industrial byproducts, air pollution, human particulate matter, artificial intelligence, and forensic representations of urban wastelands.

To be a scupper (*noun*) is to function as an exit, a hole designed to remove harm to a system's structural integrity; to scupper (*verb*) is to intentionally thwart another structure from succeeding. Our globalized world embodies both noun and verb. It is a paradoxical structure that dismantles itself as it builds.

This exhibition neither scuppers nor is a scupper; it is the carnage of our cannibalized systems. *Scupper* proposes no solutions but exists as the last dregs of our crumbling infrastructure.

*The ship is sinking!*

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For decades, Carl Cheng has coiled natural and manmade objects, blurring the line between sculpture, scientific instrument, and consumer product. In 1967, Cheng developed the *John Doe Company*, a pseudonym which effectively allowed Cheng to operate his artistic practice and fabrication as a private and anonymous entity. The creation of the *John Doe Company* empowered Cheng to both participate in and critique capitalist structures while maintaining a cool anonymity.

*Erosion Landscape Bread Print. Bread Print No. 3112024 (1979)* demonstrates Cheng's interest in mass-produced items. Four pieces of "preserved bread" are marked with serial numbers, John Doe Company text, and a unique stamped pattern. A cut out ingredients list, presumably from the supermarket package which contained the bread slides, serves as an alternate medium list. The litany of countless preservatives emphasizes the unnatural quality of the bread and its industrialized resistance to degradation over time. Perhaps this work signals a warning of erosion within ourselves.

Sophie Friedman-Pappas dwells on the ecological and political histories of infrastructure and its collapse. Originally from the Financial District of Manhattan, Friedman-Pappas grew up between the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and Zuccotti Park, home of Occupy Wall Street. She realized her neighborhood's mutability early on, and since then she's understood both the impermanence and the novelty of downtown's towers. Her drawings, sculpture, and historical fictions illustrate this indeterminacy of the city's lower half. Friedman-Pappas asks us to consider how waste is settled, moved, and made new, or how it slips back in despite all cleanup efforts.

In Friedman-Pappas's ongoing series *Kiln Building*, the artist takes the kiln itself as a sculptural form and metaphorical object that represents both vessel and apparatus. The project's most recent iteration, *Kiln Building 3* is an inverted raku kiln that was made to destroy itself. The glaze inside covers the kiln's walls and floor. It's the evidence of its auto-elimination. For Friedman-Pappas, the process forges a new material: the individual minerals that went into the firing emerge as a fused mass, the difference among them dissolved. If fired again, its surfaces become like a sticky-trap, the glaze softening and attaching permanently to anything new touching its surface, revoking all potential individuation.

Los Angeles serves as Sayre Gomez's primary subject. He employs a range of trompe l'oeil painting techniques derived from Hollywood set painting that capture the city's textural, sprawling, and disintegrating topography. A felt tension creeps throughout Gomez's urban depictions, alluding to obverse heterotopias of sunshine and noir that can be found in the sun-bleached details of the city's infrastructure and detritus of industries past—often set against sublime sunsets.

For *Scupper*, Gomez provides a glowing beach sunset devoid of any geographical or temporal cues. An inkling of a ship faintly exists on the horizon, giving the viewer only a speck of information to understand where they might be. This sparse yet explosive beach scene allows other works in the exhibition to take the place of Gomez's usual subjects: hostile architecture, rubbish fires, derelict buildings, and surveillance cameras. His painting in this case functions most truthfully to its formal inspiration, Hollywood background production, and holds us in suspense waiting for its acts to unfold.

David L. Johnson uses video, photography, found and stolen objects, and public installation to document and intervene in the spatial politics of cities. *Loiter* (2020-ongoing) is a series consisting of the ongoing removal of different forms of hostile architecture from urban space. When exhibited, each work exists as a form of sculpture, usually hung at the approximate height that the structure was installed on the street. In addition to its sculptural form in exhibition contexts, the work simultaneously exists as a series of growing absences

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across different cities—empty benches, steps, standpipes, etc. The titles of the works are taken from the first name of the owner(s) of the building or property where the objects were removed. The series's primary function is producing space for different forms of use, including loitering.

*Loiter (Jordi)* (2024) consists of three removed street bollards that had been installed underneath a building awning in Barcelona to prevent people from using the building's cover. The company Benito produced these bollards. Along with fabricating other forms of defensive architecture, Benito also supplies municipal street furniture and public art throughout Catalonia and Spain. Founded in 1992 for the support of the Barcelona Olympic Games, *Benito* aided in the rampant fracturing of urban space across Spain and mirrors a global trend of hostile architecture. Installed here in the context of an already hostile city, *Loiter (Jordi)* only reaffirms Los Angeles's investment in denying truly public space.

Rindon Johnson's multifaceted practice explores the complexities of identity and the human experience. He works in numerous modes, from virtual reality and sculpture to poetry and art criticism. His work often delves into themes of belonging, otherness, and the ways language can shape our perception of reality. Johnson's materials are carefully considered, building on the notion of the by-product and calling upon histories of colonial exploitation and slavery.

*The brown house was on fire to the attic. He wrote his last novel there at the inn. Even the worst will beat his low score.* (2022) is a leather work by Johnson which emphasizes his interest in byproducts as an allegory for identity in America. Using dynamic processes like aging, staining, and exposure to the elements, he encodes time and place as both materials and collaborators. A writer who embraces the ultimate failures of language to convey the depths of emotion and experience, Johnson explores these limits in works that trade in eloquence and opacity in equal measure. With a candid, sharp-edged humor, Johnson's practice balances playful experimentation with a stark examination of intimacy, violence, and historical legacy.

Maren Karlson's work is a focused examination of the inconsistencies found within systems of control. Using found materials—Stasi (East German secret police) photos of an explosion in an East German nuclear power plant; broken sewage pipes; x-rays and endoscopy footage—she investigates holes, gaps, openings, and passages by both mimicking and thwarting traditional forensic operations. Rather than cleaning away debris to establish stable ground, Karlson uses the speculative technology of painting to blow dust into the gears of the machinery. Rendering its individual parts and their assigned function more and more unrecognizable, the machine's infrastructure is slowly altered.

*Staub (Holes) 1* (2024) demonstrates Karlson's foggy forensics and is based on a classified government photo of the aftermath of a 1975 fire at the now decommissioned nuclear power station in Greifswald-Lubmin, Germany. Built with Soviet materials and technology, the plant was the biggest nuclear power station in East Germany and a premium propaganda object during the Cold War. The plant's failure represents an inconsistency of power within the structures of state and culture, using the broken system to burrow routes outside. In addition to the power plant, the larger framework of *Staub (Holes)* revolves around an imagined science-fiction narrative of an investigator who must catalog the entropy and self-sabotage of decrepit objects. The investigator unwittingly becomes a saboteur after polluted water from a waste system begins to communicate with him. No longer able to uphold the illusion of critical distance from the object of his inquiry, he becomes a conduit or recording device for the sabotage he encounters — a tool in the water's insurgency. Much like the investigator, Karlson's painting diminishes its three-dimensional distance and embeds itself with the actual structure of the gallery wall.

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Harrison Kinnane Smith's collaborative work and site-specific interventions critique public institutions and financial systems. His practice departs from the intersection of critical geography and political economy.

*Freedman's Savings and Trust Company Final Dividend Check (1883) (2024)* constitutes the latest addition to Smith's growing body of work exploring racial ideology in the history of American real estate law and finance. The artwork draws on the exploitative arrangements of two failed Reconstruction-era reparation programs in order to support a non-profit organization providing affordable housing at the site of these historical failures.

*Freedman's Savings* offers collectors the opportunity to purchase one of the last checks issued by the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, a bank chartered by the Lincoln Administration to serve freedpeople who were legally excluded by "White" banks. Depositors in the Freedman's Bank who hoped to save towards land ownership instead found their savings nearly halved when corruption and mismanagement led the bank to close after less than a decade. The check — a final payment of \$1.50 issued to a Savannah account holder — is available to prospective buyers only through a lease-to-own agreement that replicates the land contracts issued under the 1865 "Forty Acres and a Mule" order. Just as emancipated Black Americans lost their land when the "Forty Acres" order was canceled, title to the check is promptly withdrawn and prospective buyers are left only with the contract carefully crafted to exclude them from full ownership. All proceeds generated by serial leasing of this work directly support the Savannah Community Land Trust.

For nearly three decades, Teresa Margolles has made death her principal subject by emphasizing the omnipresent rise of violence across Mexico and the Southwestern United States. Trained as a forensic pathologist, Margolles worked in several morgues in Mexico City during the 1990s where she encountered countless victims of drug and police related violence. Margolles uses water, blood, bodily fluids, and sometimes actual body parts as material evidence of the political corruption and social exclusion experienced by the victims in the morgue.

In *Papeles de la Morgue*, Margolles dipped paper into a bin of cadaver water from recently washed victims in the morgue. Employing those fluids as material, Margolles creates conceptually-driven and minimalist artworks that frankly display the brutality laden in Mexico's corrupt systems and introduce them into public view. Her work creates an unavoidable cohabitation with the material of violence and pushes viewers to consider their proximity to it.

Park McArthur investigates social arrangements of dependency, care and access. Audio guides, museum wall text, wheelchair-accessible ramps, residential listing documents, and dental dams are among the objects McArthur has used in her interrogations of autonomy, independence, individualism, and the institutional practices that propagate them. Rooted in a disability studies perspective, McArthur's work asks viewers to consider their relationships to the materials and sites in which they interact and which groups are implicitly left out of these structured engagements.

*Senior in Their 30s*, takes the form of a postcard, one side containing text the artist posted on Care.com, a website where care providers and receivers seek work and/or care. On the website the areas of care are limited to three categories: child, pet, and senior. Without a clear demographic option, McArthur felt most aligned with the services available for "senior," giving the work its name. As McArthur's ad text changes over time, the text on the postcard will change correspondingly with eventual exhibitions. The card is designed to be sent and then resent by the card's initial recipient, doubling its circulation.

Ed Ruscha, best known for his playful use of language, landscape paintings, and artist books, has been an artist in Los Angeles for over 60 years. His first artist book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) portrays 26 photos

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of 26 gas stations scattered along his road trip on Route 66 from Omaha to Los Angeles. This series matter-of-factly demonstrates Ruscha's interest in the built environment through the lens of the automobile. He would later extend this appeal into his paintings which more colorfully expressed the moods and, in some cases, the grime of Los Angeles.

Ruscha's 2023 video work *Elysian Park and the Stone Quarry Hills* continues his interest in California's built environment. Filmed mostly in a moving car and accompanied by a narration by Benicio del Toro, the video recounts a history of Elysian Park and some of the oldest buildings in Los Angeles. Chavez Ravine, a neighborhood destroyed to make way for a failed urban development project and subsequently the home of current-day Dodger Stadium, is largely featured in the video as a case study for Los Angeles's abrasive and violent removal of its citizens and history.

Analia Saban's practice subverts our expectations of how material should behave. It begins where one medium resembles another: the barriers between domestic item and art object; technology and nature; invisible anxiety and physical force. Paper, linen, and concrete are stretched, contorted, and compressed to points that seem physically impossible. Saban likens the collapse of our outer world to our own ever-changing consciousnesses — they all reach their breaking points in a measured demolition.

Her *Folded Concrete* series embodies this calculated destruction. Working with engineers, Saban developed a method of folding large concrete slabs until they fracture into something resembling a razed sidewalk. In the context of Los Angeles's seismological landscape, Saban's sculptures present us with a small yet powerful image of the sheer destruction capable underneath our feet, waiting to devour us completely. Saban's work turns our ecology of fear into a tangible reality.

Cielo Saucedo's work exists under conditions of impairment, automation, and universalized design. In the work *Captioning System* (2024), Saucedo uses security cameras, machine learning models, and artificial intelligence to generate real time captions of the gallery and the people and artwork inside it on an LED screen outside the exhibition space. A rotating camera is rigged onto a C-stand, employing both the aesthetics of surveillance and studio photography. To "capture" a photo has extended meaning for Saucedo, who actively thinks about what it means to own and control digital images.

The captions generated by these images provide an alternate exhibition text, one that constantly changes as viewers engage with the show over time. Invoking disability culture's concept of conflicting access needs, Saucedo causes embodiment and perception to butt up against each other. When facing the camera in the gallery, viewers are unable to read how their image is processed, thereby reordering the typical hierarchy of experience between viewing an artwork and being viewed by it. Utilizing an image-to-text generative language model, the work relies on existing libraries of images, underscoring the implicit biases that structure both digital and public life.

Jesse Stecklow's practice translates modes of data collection and information flow into sculptures and installations. His individual objects are the result of aggregation, referencing both earlier artworks and prior installations. Collectively, his projects create a web of connections between works of the past, present, and future.

Stecklow's growing lexicon of materials can largely be attributed to *Untitled (Air Sampler)*, a series of sculptures that take on the form of an air vent. Installed on the rafters of the gallery, *Untitled (Air Sampler)* (2024) collects data about the air composition during the course of the entire exhibition. This data is then sent

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to a lab and processed to create a list of pollutants and other materials collected from the air. After a series of *Air Sampler* installations, Stecklow noticed that corn consistently appears in the air sample data. Departing from this surprising ubiquity, Stecklow decided to utilize distillers grain (a nutrient-poor byproduct of the corn industry) to create fragile and non-usable art objects. His series *Untitled (Corn-fed Sampler)* (2022) is a press mold of the air vent made entirely of the distillers grain, which will crack apart during the run of the show. Hovering above the entry to the gallery is *Glue Trap for Non-Living Things*, a two sided wall work that contains fly trap glue which attracts insects and four moth balls which repel them.

Charlotte Zhang is an artist and filmmaker interested in social scripts produced by spectacle and the libidinal investments which undergird state-sanctioned violence; vengeance. Zhang's recent research centers on the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the classification of the "riot" at large – both as a criminalizing instrument and the articulation of an unrehearsed spillage of intensities which exceeds the coherence of authorized politics, charting lines of disparity which dissect the city, and the intimacies between law enforcement, property, and the propertied.

In her new work, *The Garden (Ueberrothian render pipelines and winking hammers)* the edges of images dissolve upon impact in an explosive, disjointed landscape punctuated by smiling faces and burning cars. The composition is printed on a grid of handmade paper, each individual sheet a unique blend of pulps and detritus. Through references to the infamous "Weed and Seed" program, the hyper-militarization of the LAPD engendered by the 1984 Olympics, as well as the failed post-riot Rebuild Los Angeles venture headed by Olympics mastermind and business magnate Peter Ueberroth, Zhang considers the collapse of celebration and terror which defines the latter 20th Century in Los Angeles, where policing is consolidated with social services and corporate tax breaks constitute "urban renewal". These shifting configurations of power depend on a narrative of the city as a garden, but one overtaken by weeds – though Zhang's work implies there were never any flowers to protect, only a violent symbolic order which defines who must be liquidated, and provides a framework of profit and pleasure for doing so.