





at SPRING/BREAK Art Show
4 Times Square, New York City
February 28–March 6, 2017

FIRST PLACE | Brigitta Varadi

SECOND PLACE | Tiffany Smith

THIRD PLACE | Sterling Crispin

HONORABLE MENTION | Jinhee Park & Bex Ilsley

The ArtSlant Prize is a juried cash and exhibition award given to emerging artists within the ArtSlant Community who critically engage with contemporary culture.

ArtSlant would like to thank all participants, jurors, and partners who helped make the 2016 prize possible.

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BRIGITTA VARADI: MARKING MEMORY

By Andrea Alessi

In some way, all things are congealed moments in a longer social trajectory. All things are brief deposits of this or that property, photographs that conceal the reality of the motion from which their objecthood is a momentary respite.

—Arjun Appadurai, “The Thing Itself”¹

To hear Brigitta Varadi talk about sheep is to hear her effuse about something bigger than wool, felt, or the declining carpet and farming industries in the remote corner of North West Ireland where she lives. Her animated descriptions of how highland farmers mark and identify their sheep spin into ruminations on knowledge, memory, commerce, and social relations—and how each may be sketched onto downy fleeces or mapped onto the rural landscape.

But you don’t need to hear her speak about it; spend time with Varadi’s large, woollen paintings and you will understand how something so procedural—namely, the marking of sheep with brightly colored paint—could be the yarn knitting together an investigation of traditions, commodities, art objects, and the social relations that constitute them.

Originally from Hungary, Varadi moved to County Leitrim, in hilly North West Ireland, in 2001. Sheep farming defines the region’s rustic landscape, with enclosures tracing lines to the horizon and colorful, polka-dotted fleeces shuffling across the mountainside. Varadi, who has used wool throughout her career, first began working with farmers in the collaborative project *Talk About Fracking*, which amplified the concerns of local residents regarding hydraulic fracturing. In 2014, as she established deeper trust, farmers in Leitrim and nearby Sligo began teaching her about their work with sheep: breeding, lambing, dosing, shearing, and marking.



The resulting project, *Markings*², is a series of large, hand-felted canvases made from regional wool and painted using animal branding fluid, marking crayon, and marker spray. Each painting pays tribute to the farmer whose wool it comprises; painted dot motifs replicate symbols from each farmer's unique sheep-marking vocabulary.

In *Lorraine Brennan*, an orange line traces a circle inside a square canvas. It's an abstract gesture—evoking modern art movements like Suprematism and Minimalism—but it's also the mark that farmer Lorraine Brennan uses to record a sheep as carrying no lamb. The empty circle “is full of the emotion of a barren sheep destined to the next meat market,” describes Varadi. For farmers like Brennan, colors and shapes are cues, a legible code revealing information about ownership, sex, fertility, and vaccinations. The blue and red dots in *Noel Ruane*, for example, designate a sheep as belonging to the eponymous farmer's flock. But to understand *Markings*, you need not know that, say, a green splotch on the chest of a ram means one thing, two red circles on an ewe, another.

The act of inscription—more than the content of the inscribed markings—is paramount. In visual and material fidelity, each artwork represents a person, one whose occupation and knowledge, their ownership and memory, leave a bold mark on the canvas. These graphic representations—and they are both mimetic representations *and* abstractions—could be equally at home on a damp

Irish hillside or in the modern art gallery. In the shared gestures of the farmer and the artist, two lineages come together.

Indeed, embedded into these artworks—literally felted and matted, smeared onto their surfaces—is a history of labor and tradition: men's and women's, commercial and domestic, craft and fine art. Like Pollock straddling his drip paintings, Varadi crouches atop the wool as she felts it, counting, rolling a single piece—the fleeces of five sheep—up to 25,000 times. She works each textile as if making pastry, turning it to ensure even shrinkage as its wet fibers hook together. The physical properties of wool fight back, taxing Varadi's body as she transforms it from raw material into singular artwork.

In “The Thing Itself,” social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes:

I have continued to be engaged with the idea that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations. Thus, today's gift is tomorrow's commodity. Yesterday's commodity is tomorrow's found art object. Today's art object is tomorrow's junk. And yesterday's junk is tomorrow's heirloom.

Varadi rescues the thing from stasis. What was once the body of a living animal was briefly a commodity, then a gift (the farmers donated their wool), and now an artwork. Her fleeces are a document, a “congealed moment” in the social life of the wool, but one that acknowledges its own instability. Her paintings are the object *in transition*, slipping from one phase to another and also from one visual language to another: from a sign to an aesthetic, from the vernacular of farming to the parlance of minimalism.

Her artworks resist discrete ascriptions of meaning from these social frameworks, however. Varadi wrestles with her medium but never tames it into complete submission. Materially, it remains



“the thing itself”: raw wool, its fibers reconfigured, but smelling, looking, feeling like itself. Locks pull away from the felted base, each canvas defiantly flocculent, sheep-like. At a human scale—just over six feet tall—these paintings assert their woolliness, suggesting comfort and physical intimacy. In a related sculpture, fittingly titled *Transition*, viewers are invited to sit inside a fleece-lined box, to touch and surround themselves in the shaggy material, to bury their noses and inhale its earthy fragrance.

But let us return to the farmers, as Varadi’s passion for wool is matched only by her enthusiasm for the people and interactions surrounding it. At a time when traditional methods of farming are in decline, her artworks are vessels, repositories of knowledge and memory. Many farmers have taken up second jobs as the price of raw wool remains low. Three farmers Varadi documented are bachelors, with no children to inherit their flocks or their expertise. They are, says Varadi, “really, really happy that somebody is talking about sheep farming.”

Today, under European regulations, sheep must be marked with a uniformly coded ear tag. But farmers persist in painting their sheep. What may seem like an anachronism demonstrates hard-earned knowledge, pragmatism, and creativity. A few years ago, in Devon, UK, one farmer painted his entire flock orange to combat the growing threat of sheep rustling during the recession (no harm came to the sheep, nor the farmer’s bottom line—none were stolen that season). Like distinctive enclosure fences mended with found objects—Varadi says she can tell whose land is whose just by looking—these visual cues represent a history of human ingenuity mapped onto the bodies of animals and the environment.

The artist recently completed a residency in Upstate New York, a place where first-generation farmers are leaving the city to raise animals for small-batch wool production. Only two larger, traditional sheep farms remain in the area. “These newcomers are setting up a farm after the traditional knowledge is gone,” Varadi says, “There is a gap between tradition dying out and the new



generation starting over, and in that gap there is a lot of lost knowledge. A lot of lost information.”

Back in Ireland, Benedict Gallagher, a farmer whose wool appears in *Markings* and other projects, realized he hadn’t even told his sons the things he had divulged to Varadi about his vocation. As oral tradition breaks down, material culture—maintaining its own rich social life, but also imbued with meaning and legacies shared amongst people—steps up. Through mark-making and learned, practiced gestures, Varadi inscribes and embodies the memories of a place, its people, their labor, and her own. *Markings* is the residue of this memorializing practice.

“There’s no record of these markings and there’s no record of this creativity,” says the artist. “In a small way I am trying to record the tradition for future resources, not only by written knowledge, or images or recordings, but with the work to awake memories through all the senses in people.” In their journey from one space, one cultural language, to another, Varadi’s woolly canvases are record and receptacle, something owned and something given, something remembered and something passed on.

1. Appadurai, Arjun. “The Thing Itself.” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 15-22.
2. Supported by Leitrim Sculpture Centre Fellowship and Artist in Residence Programme, Arts Council of Ireland, Leitrim County Council Art Office



TIFFANY SMITH: THE PERPETUAL TOURIST

By Suhaly Bautista-Carolina

When Tiffany Smith enters a home, she looks at every item, searching for clues to reveal identity and personal history. She combs the space for intimate hints that work together to tell a story.

Raised between Nassau, Bahamas, and Miami, Florida, by her Caribbean parents, Smith has put her faith in photography, using the camera to confront stereotypes about Caribbean culture and identity formation. While earning her BA in photography at the Savannah School of Art and Design, Smith would spend 4–5 hours working on one image, becoming lost in her process; procedure turned to ritual. This same process taught Smith to understand the magic of letting go, of waiting for the unpredictable moment to occur—the moment when the portrait is truly made. Foraging for hints of cultural identity had its limitations. Instead, she waited for the clues to surface to the top, learning to trust they would appear naturally in her subject’s pose. Smith says, “The image doesn’t come together until the person lets their guard down. That’s when you know it’s the shot. You can’t control that moment.”

Each of Smith’s portraits is a carefully crafted story that weaves together truth and myth, the here and the there, the foreigner and the native inhabiting the same self. Her current photo series, *A Woman, Phenomenally*, has been slow to develop, a measured and gradual simmer involving hours of intimate conversation with her subjects coupled with intense research about their homelands and histories.

Her portraits started as a conversation with close friends sharing the similarities of their island-life childhoods and celebrating the differences of their cultures. Smith isn’t looking for performers in her work. Instead, she provides us with gestures and guides that all point to the subjects’ cultural realities, rather than the falsity of per-



formance. The artist wants to build on the rhythm of her subjects' overlapping experiences. The work becomes about the way women of color experience each other's sameness and uniqueness. What comes through most triumphantly is how these women are bonded through oppression and mutual misrepresentation.

Before she began taking photographs of other women, Smith's first ethnographic study was focused on investigating her own narrative. Making self-portraits was a growth process that helped her to empathize with the position of the subject. "I needed to know what I wanted to bring out of the other women," she explains. The artist explored turn-of-the-century portraiture of women of color and homed in on the exoticized gaze, asking herself, *Who is looking at these women? Why are they taking these photos? How much power do these women have over how they are being depicted?* It is through these questions that Smith begins to investigate the idea of the non-native self. Her first images in this research are studies, points of discovery imparted with her own memory of growing up between worlds.

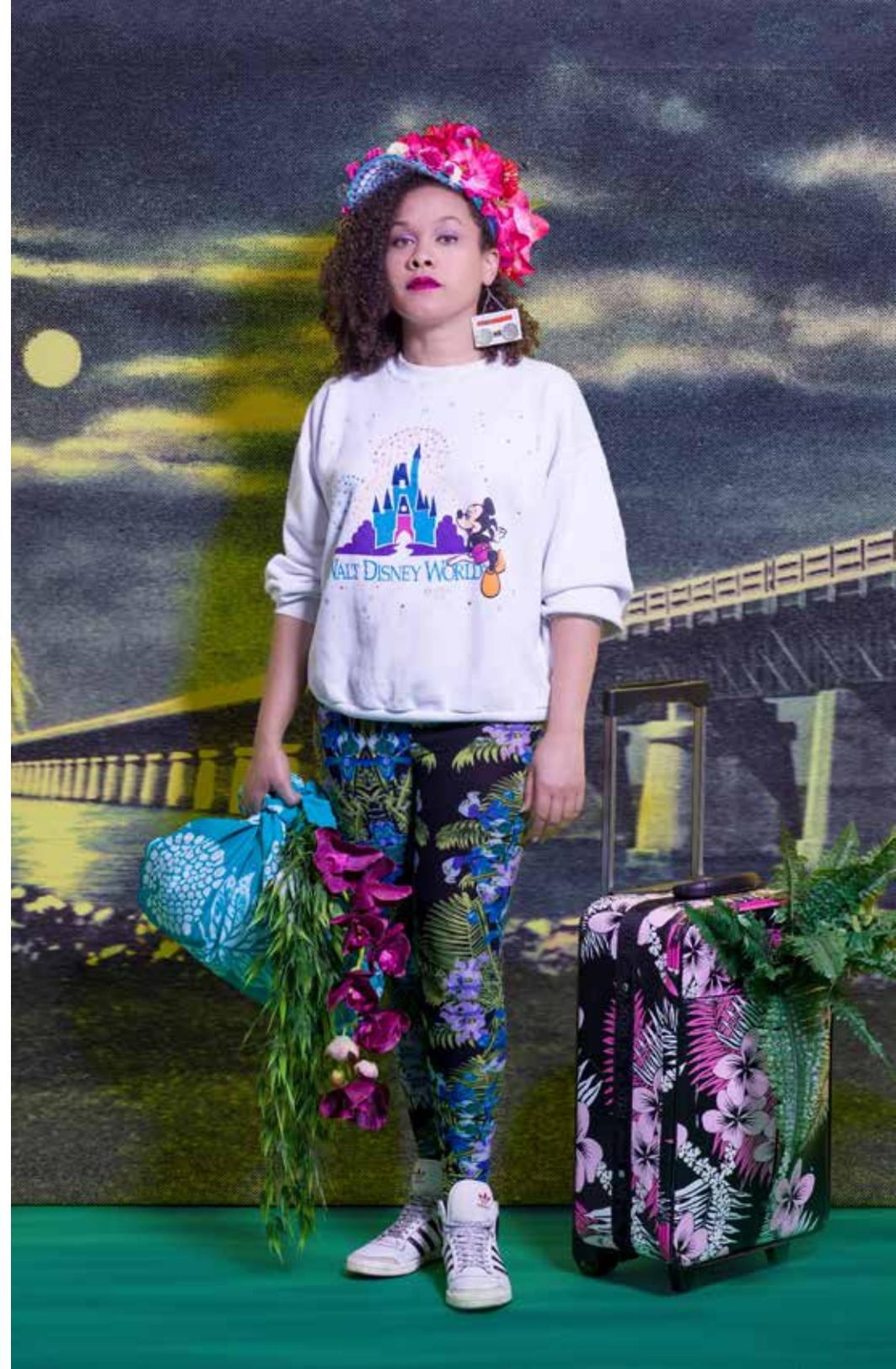
Creating the portraits in *A Woman, Phenomenally*, Smith focused on the construction of identity, returning to the idea of having agency in assembling the way we are seen, authoring our own narratives. Visual propping and symbolism are critical devices of communication laced between the portraits. The props, including bright blue, hand-made paper boats, wooden Filipino kitchenware, and African headdresses stacked to form a crown, are not only objects developed from her conversations with these women, but opportunities to draw direct, trustworthy routes to the sitter's culture for the witness. As the series develops, the way the photos are shown together is also transformed. A portrait of a woman veiled in white lace becomes a resting image tucked in between the tropical forest of bright greens, purples, and pinks, a quiet moment and necessary breath in the series.

During graduate school at the School of Visual Arts, Smith started experimenting with installations, her way of stretching the portraits into experiences. Organizing the portraits into installations was a way to demarcate space, to force the viewer into a curated expe-

rience using markers that operate both as authentic cultural symbols for the subject and as stereotypes of an island lifestyle being applied from the outside(r). Smith uses these props to lure viewers into a more melodramatic moment with the subject, but also as stand-in cultural references to actual Caribbean life. The wallpaper backgrounds are created with colorful, botanical illustrations of plants that are native to the same places the subjects are from. Her use of artificial tropical plants produces a distancing exoticism she wants her viewer to grapple with, heightened by the apparent tension between impression and reality. Smith is challenging stereotypes and exoticized depictions of the women in her photographs, blurring the line between what is factual and what is artificial.

In her series, *From Foreign*, the artist confronts stereotypes about Jamaican life and culture, searching for connections to herself and revealing the many ways cultural identity can be formed. Creating candid photographs of her family in Jamaica, Smith constructs a figurative pathway into a typical Caribbean home, featuring concrete block patterns, curtains the colors of the Jamaican flag, and a white, wire dish filled with tropical fruits. The photographs are a push-and-pull, offering a glimpse into Smith's experience as both a native and a foreigner in this place, or, as she has often called herself, "the perpetual tourist."

They are also her tools to tell the story of an individual, much like herself, who feels foreign in their home. Four of the photos in *From Foreign* feature some sort of a veil/curtain, highlighting the way one shifts in different locations and circumstances. Smith draws attention to a portal that can push you out or pull you into a cultural identity or place. These veils allow the artist to explore what it means to have a fluid sense of home and how an individual can form an identity within that fluidity. They encourage us to ask: "Where is home?"





STERLING CRISPIN: BEGIN WITH THE END

By Joel Kuennen

What does the end, *The End*, look like? Is it a transcendent experience like the religious and singularitarians believe? Will humans transform into iridescent angels of ethereal nature, timeless in their march towards oneness? Will the end look like an episode of *The Walking Dead*? Like an episode of *Doomsday Preppers*? Will the remnants of society scabble together the few resources left to

find baseline survival the underlying truth of excess? Does the end resemble a person sitting in a concrete box buried underground swallowing baked beans out of a can, or do we become waves of energy, identifiable not by our body but by a collection of experiences and tropes traveling from host to host, like a *Westworld* protagonist?

It is hard to conceive of a greater tension between these two visions and yet they exist, in tandem, in our collective imaginations. “To imagine civilization dwindling down to a couple thousand people, the Earth in environmental hell, taking global collapse to its conclusion—it’s unimaginably terrible,” says artist Sterling Crispin. “But,” he continues, “take techno-optimism to its extreme, with humans living for hundreds of thousands of years, and it’s also kind of unimaginable.”

Sterling Crispin explores the end. From a fascination with Buddhist conceptions of oneness and propelled by the rapid technological pace in the era of Moore’s Law¹, Crispin takes as his subject the hurtling hulk of humanity as it flies towards some kind of imagined or real conclusion. “Transhumanism is on my mind a lot,” he says.

Crispin’s materials are birthed in today’s technology. Aluminum server frames, Alexa towers, emergency water filtration systems, canned food, Bitcoin miners, extruded plastics and resins—these are the vocabulary of an end-times practice.

The singularity as a concept comes from a 1993 paper² by mathematician Vernor Vinge in which he states: “We are on the edge of change comparable to the rise of human life on Earth. The precise cause of this change is the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater-than-human intelligence.” The basic principle of singularitarianism is that, at a certain point, advancement will be out of human hands. Technology will be free to replicate and improve on its own. Futurist Ray Kurzweil³ believes that at this point a massive rupture in human culture, philosophy, and civilization will occur, characterized by the end of death and anthropocentric



evolution. Kurzweil's end is an apocalypse of a different sort. His is a moment of becoming and transcendence beyond the human.

The globe just scored a hat trick of hottest years on record. The doomsday clock has begun ticking towards midnight again. Amidst the statistical evidence, markers of impending doom keep pinging us. The cries of apocryphal evangelists are beginning to ring true.

With each passing meteor, every seemingly-significant date on an ancient calendar that appears on our Julian calendar, throngs proclaim the end with rapturous fervency. But the end interrogated by Crispin is not fanciful. His work has a sincere immediacy: "Trump's presidency and the collapse of civil society really gets you thinking about how fragile our whole global economy is and how loosely everything is held together." He goes on, "Next month, some catastrophe could happen that could close down international shipping, close off the internet; millions of people could die because there wasn't enough food. We're just on the edge of this all of the time."

Never has the world been so interconnected. In 2015, \$16 trillion (21% of GWP) in merchandise exchanged hands across the world.

In 2013, one fifth of the average American's diet was imported. This interdependence isn't trivial. As political forces around the world begin to pull back from the integrated system of globalized advanced capitalism, the connections holding it all together seem more tenuous than ever.

Crispin's suite of four sculptures, *N.A.N.O.*, *B.I.O.*, *I.N.F.O.*, *C.O.G.N.O.* (2015), serves as sentries. Each monolith is attached to an industry stock: *N.A.N.O.* comes with 100 shares of stock in a nanotechnology company, *B.I.O.*, biotechnology, *I.N.F.O.*, informatics, and *C.O.G.N.O.*, cognitive research. If separated, these Gundam-like structures will track each other: a GPS display shows you where the other three horsemen are at all times. An emergency water purifier and food rations anchor the sculptures. *N.A.N.O.* et al. recall ancient statues guarding a crypt, protectors of humanity straight out of anime waiting for the right time to awaken and save the world. They reach towards the promises of advanced capital, zeroing in on the industries most likely to transform humanity via the singularity and save it from itself.

Of course, if that doesn't work out, there's always a jerrycan of clean water and some freeze-dried beef.⁴

Self-Contained Investment Module and Contingency Package (2015), like *N.A.N.O.*..., is practical and sculptural. Inside an aluminum frame sits an ASIC Bitcoin mining tube, a Lifesaver Systems 4000 ultra-filtration water bottle, an emergency radio, Mayday emergency food rations, a knife, heirloom seeds, etc. The connections are barely waiting to be pieced together by the viewer: they're all there, visible in the cube. Crispin's work makes hard connections, direct metaphors, in his search for the aesthetic of the end. "The metaphors I use are heavy-handed but rounded in the utility of their function in reality," relays the artist.

This frankness fights the obfuscating nature of reality. Are things really as dire as they seem? It is readily accepted that things will be okay; we tell ourselves the same often enough. But why is it so

difficult to accept that things might not be okay? Is it so difficult to imagine that, *shit, we're fucked?*

In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the “history of the world”; but a minute was all it was. After nature had drawn just a few more breaths the planet froze and the clever animals had to die.⁵

There is something reflected in the gleaming aluminum, the candy-apple neon, and low hum of *Self-Contained*. An optimism, perhaps, that if we structure things just right, if we allow for recursive corrections, if we prepare and adjust, we won't be the ones responsible for bringing the short reign of humanity to an end. We might not be Nietzsche's arrogant creatures doomed to death on a frozen, or in this case, scorched Earth. We may just be the ones that *become* what's next. Either way, be prepared.

1. Moore's Law holds that the number of transistors in an integrated circuit doubles every two years. This law has been extrapolated to include the exponential rate of computational and technological advancement more broadly.
2. Vernor Vinge, “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era” (paper presented at the VISION-21 Symposium sponsored by NASA Lewis Research Center and the Ohio Aerospace Institute, March 30-31, 1993).
3. Kurzweil, it should be noted, is driven to defeat death so that he may resurrect his father who died early on in Kurzweil's life. How human is that?!
4. It's difficult to ignore humor when discussing the end. One cannot approach nothingness without being a bit glib.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*, Trans. Ronald Spiers. 1873.



IMAGE CREDITS:

Front and Back Covers: Brigitta Varadi, *Noel Ruane* (detail), 2015. Image by Keith Nolan Photography.

P. 4: Brigitta Varadi, *Lorraine Brennan*, 2015. Image by Keith Nolan Photography.

P. 6: Brigitta Varadi preparing a woollen canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

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P. 21: Sterling Crispin, *Self-Contained Investment Module and Contingency Package (Cloud-Enabled Modular Emergency-Enterprise Application Platform)* (detail), 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

