



WE

Sheila Pepe, Heidi Blunt, Élan Cadiz, and Cayce Zavaglia

February 21 - April 1, 2023

Opening reception: Tuesday, February 21, 5:00 - 6:30 p.m.

**Artists' Panel Discussion: Tuesday, February 21, 7:30 p.m.
Wanamaker Hall, Principia College, Elsah, Illinois**

James K. Schmidt Gallery
Voney Art Center, Principia College
Elsah, Illinois 62028



(above) Sheila Pepe, *Red Hook at Beford Terrace* (detail), 2008, Collection of Smith College Museum of Art, installed at the Bemis Center, Omaha, 2019.

(front cover, from top left moving clockwise)

Sheila Pepe, installation from the exhibition, *Hot Mess Formalism* (detail), 2019

Élan Cadiz, *Stephanie* (detail) from *Scaffold: Equity of Treatment*, 2020-21, pen, pencil, acrylic, flash paint on Shizen pastel paper, 12" x 9"

Heidi Blunt, *Blubby Dolls* (detail), 2020, fabric and polyfill, 14" h

Cayce Zavaglia, *Unseen* (detail), 2019, hand embroidery, 84" x 72"

The Rhizome of WE

Introduction and Acknowledgements

By Paul Ryan

...form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight...

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

For years I have wanted to organize an exhibition featuring the work of my friend, internationally-recognized sculptor and installation artist Sheila Pepe. And in spring 2021, after *Mistake House Magazine*, Principia College's online literary journal designed and edited by students, featured Sheila's art and studio practice in an interview and online portfolio of images, a logic of events began to unfold. In my mind the magazine feature about Sheila invited a companion "in the flesh." *WE* is that companion.

When I emailed Sheila in early fall of 2021 to invite her to show, my initial idea was to have a solo exhibition of her work that would fill the Schmidt Gallery with her signature organic grids and webs of various textiles, laces, ropes, and industrial cords, playing off of the gallery's industrial aesthetic and its apex that features a 30-foot-high ceiling. But in a Zoom call with Sheila that followed shortly, because of her demanding exhibition schedule and her unfailing instinct to be inclusive, she proposed a small group exhibition—a four-person show that would include the work of two of her former graduate students and a fourth artist that I would select from the St. Louis region. And so, in the spirit of flexibility, extension, and transformation, *WE* emerged. The title was Sheila's idea, and I immediately loved its unadorned strength and tone of inclusion, partnership, and solidarity—qualities that each of the four artists embrace, and qualities that counter the frictions in our contemporary society.

Evolving from a creative, somewhat improvisational curating process, the exhibition—both in concept and in the forms of its artwork—reflects the soul of cultural theorist Gilles Deleuze's and philosopher/activist Félix Guattari's idea of the rhizome. Originally a concept in botany, a rhizome is the main stem of a particular type of plant that grows underground horizontally, often including numerous intersecting roots or shoots that extend outward in different directions. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome as cultural model and/or metaphor is nonlinear and nonhierarchical, signifying a network of multiplicities and lively connections that open to new possibilities—a kind of organic, animated cultural web of expanding intersections. Through the processes of Sheila's initial idea and the flow of exhibition organization, curation, and installation, *WE* celebrates the dialogic works of Sheila Pepe, Wisconsin-based artist Heidi Blunt, Élan Cadiz of New York City, and St. Louis-based artist Cayce Zavaglia. Explore this fiber-based rhizome and enjoy its mix of textiles, two- and three-dimensional marks, lattices, site-specific gestures, and the play of biographical and autobiographical images and visual metaphors—sometimes humorous, sometimes confessional, and always engaged and searching.

As always, this exhibition would not be possible without the generosity of others. I want to thank the four artists of *WE*—Sheila Pepe, Heidi Blunt, Élan Cadiz, and Cayce Zavaglia—for their generous and graceful spirit in sharing their work with The Schmidt Gallery and the Principia College community. Much appreciation goes to writer and Professor of English at Principia College, Dinah Ryan, whose exhibition essay about the four artists' work makes insightful connections within and beyond the art world. The exhibition catalog and invitation were designed by Bruce Rea, who, as always, brought his discerning eye to the work. Thanks, too, to Michael McMullin for his expertise in printing technology and processes. And many thanks to Deb Wold, James K. Schmidt Gallery registrar, for her precision and support in



(top) Cayce Zavaglia, *Unspoken*, 2021, hand embroidery: crewel wool, acrylic, vintage needlepoint, pom poms, sequins and costume jewelry on raw Belgian linen, 71.25" x 68"

(right) Élan Cadiz, *Christopharaoh Spitz*, from the project, *Scaffold: Equity of Treatment*, 2020-2021, pen pencil, acrylic, flash paint on Shizen paper, 12" x 9"

(bottom) Heidi Blunt, *Bathroom*, 2023, textile collage: quilts, crochet blankets, tufted rugs, 47" by 65"

every task; to Graham Littell, 2022-2023 post-graduate teaching intern for the Department of Art and Art History, for his assistance in installing the exhibition; to Studio Art and English major Olivia Skinner and to Music and English major Nate Zipp for their help with the exhibition installation; and, to Jon Hosmer, the College's Web Director, for his advice and work on the Gallery website. Finally, much appreciation goes to my colleagues in the Department of Art and Art History for their support of all of the Schmidt Gallery exhibitions as a key part of our educational programming.

Paul Ryan is a painter and art writer, professor of art and chair of the Department of Art + Art History, and director of the James K. Schmidt Gallery, Principia College.

WE

By Dinah Ryan

The creation of something—a building, a community, a poem, a savory meal bubbling on the stove—calls for a system, interlocking elements to draw disparate parts together. Such patterns hold tension in equilibrium, use compression’s consolidating force for greater strength, withstand distortion, deploy variation for a sense of aesthetic charm. We humans tend to grope for the empirically predictable or submit to iteration, to wish for the expected or give in to the status quo. It’s an old and continuous dance: system creating order and shipshape solutions; excessive system stifling, stigmatizing, creating untenable rigidities; seeming disorder breaching patterns and breaking into a new caper, offering unexpected possibilities.

Sheila Pepe, the artist whose work and vision acts as a fulcrum for *WE*, is a master of this inventive dance. Her work, based on the traditionally functional craft of crochet, has long overtaken the boundaries of public architectural spaces, occupying them with expansive, ingenious webs of crocheted and knotted strands of industrial and domestic materials, from shoelaces to burly utility ropes. Pepe’s sculptures crawl over their spaces, floor to ceiling, taking liberties with light and shadow, even with the heft of empty space. The works reconfigure these spaces for viewers, asking them to resee the structures in which they move, to examine the relations between organizational elements and between the messaging of organizational components and themselves.

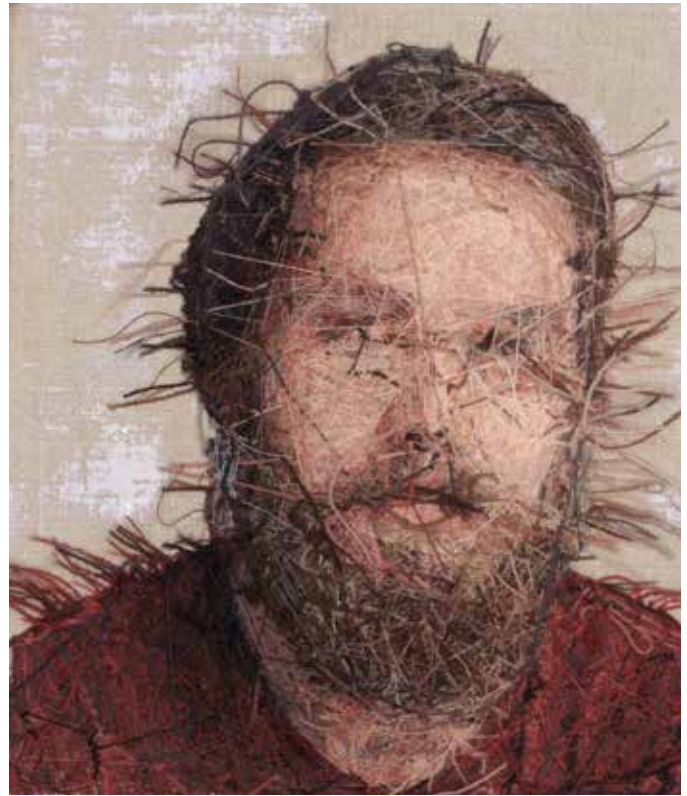
Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concepts of “family resemblance” and “language games” have influenced Pepe’s process and thinking. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein described the former as “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing.” *WE* is an enactment of family resemblance, a kind of experiential and human reinvention of Pepe’s way of working. By suggesting an exhibition that extended beyond her own work to the work of two former students and one artist unknown



Sheila Pepe, *Hot Mess Formalism* (installation view detail), 2019, DeCordova Sculpture Park and Art Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts



(left) Cayce Zavaglia, *Jackson*, 2017, hand embroidery: crewel wool on Belgian linen with acrylic, 15.5" x 13.25"



(right) Cayce Zavaglia, *Verso of Jackson*, 2017

to her, Pepe looped the strands of the disparate but related practices of four working artists together in ways that cause the viewer to resee and rethink questions about what it means to be part of a constructed space, to be a human among humans.

An English professor, I constantly scrawl across student papers that use the first-person plural questions like *Who is this "we"?* or *Is there a universal "us"?* But the "we" of *WE* is not an attempt at the universal nor is it meant to reify recognizable, uniform patterns. *WE* functions in exactly the opposite way. It is a single, multifaceted embodiment of the "overlapping and crisscrossing" resemblances, differences, strangeness, beauties, comforts, and discomforts of the questions of what it means to be both at home in oneself and to be in and of communities.

The four artists in *WE*—Sheila Pepe, Heidi Blunt, Élan Cadiz, and Cayce Zavaglia—either make use of conventionally domestic craft practices, such as embroidery or crocheting, or of familiar materials, such as neighborhood photographs or Barbie dolls, in ways that resemble Wittgenstein's language games. They take knowledge of an established syntax—for example, the mastery of manifold embroidery stitches in Zavaglia's work—and stretch and extend what is possible in each language. Their making actions show processes of play within function and context: threading, knotting, looping, reversing, constructing, stuffing, supporting, joining, collaging. Their artworks talk to each other. They speculate, report, translate, joke, explore, support, re-vision, assert, complicate, and question. They ask hard questions. They have a little fun. They offer options. And by these imaginative processes, these artists' works, collectively (as a "we") and individually, suggest opportunities for viewers to consider the processes of recognition, solace, possibility, variation, and acceptance.

Not since the culture-jamming Barbie Liberation Organization switched the voice boxes on Barbies and G. I. Joes have Barbie dolls been put to such a happily witty use as in Heidi Blunt's *Blubbies*. Barbies serve as the skeletal armatures for the *Blubbies*, but these small sculptures' velvety and voluptuous hips, breasts, thighs, buttocks move beyond reinvention of the cultural bodily stereotypes the doll represents. Like a cuddly Venus of Willendorf, each *Blubby* seems a fleshy icon whose idiosyncratic shapes invite a joyful embrace of the body and embodied experience, which are different for everyone. Blunt's practice in general intentionally mitigates the stigma of, as she puts it, "bodies that fail us" and fail to live up to internalized expectations. Her *Blubby Product*, a tufted rug sculpture the size of a body pillow, is a shaggy tube illustrated with a hefty leg covered with hornlike red hairs. It references and reconsiders the strenuous efforts made to rid the body of hairs, fleshy rolls, wrinkles, and other imperfections deemed "unacceptable." Blunt's colorful stitched constructions, recalling the brilliant color and empathic social critiques in Yayoi Kusama and Nick Cave, call to the viewer, with a fierce friendliness, to set up home in the perfectly imperfect self.

Élan Cadiz has produced a diverse body of work tied together by the desire to respond with healing to trauma, internalized suffering, and systemic and structural violence—to stitch the self together through visual storytelling. Whatever trauma's source, whether it is epigenetic or the result of events or of embedded family and cultural patterns, trauma comes in one way or another to almost every person—though relentlessly to those who are marginalized by economic disparities and by discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender. Cadiz is invested in reclaiming family relations, for self and others, and for home, neighborhood, and communities. In her artworks in general and in the *Scaffolding* project in particular, she seeks to "encourage discussions on self-reflection, self-love, and practice in deciphering what we require as individuals and ways our systems of support can better meet these needs."



(left) Élan Cadiz, *Aaric*, from *Scaffold: Equity of Treatment*, 2020-2021, pen, pencil, acrylic, flash paint on Shizen paper, 12" x 9"

(right) Élan Cadiz, *Fermin & Diane*, from *Scaffold: Equity of Treatment*, 2020-2021, pen, pencil, acrylic, flash paint on Shizen paper, 12" x 9"



Heidi Blunt, *Vanity (detail)*, 2023, Textile Collage: quilts, crochet blankets, tufted rugs, 38" by 78"



Heidi Blunt, *Buoyant Blubby and the Toybox*, 2020, 7' x 3' installed, multimedia soft sculpture

The *Scaffolding* series depicts Cadiz's Harlem neighbors in their everyday lives, surrounded by delicately supportive frameworks. These structures seem to fluidly adapt to enfold each person or group. They hold beauty and motherliness, the love between mother and child, between a man and a dog, the love between friends and lovers. They hold confident selves and vibrant expressiveness and individuals who've put it on for the business day. A man on a bicycle is sustained by his scaffold as he pedals his wares, bags of socks and small items of clothing, to his street kiosk. And there is Sheila Pepe, depicted in all her upfront fierceness, arms akimbo, gazing at the viewer as if to say they'd better hold on to those scaffolds and make use of their strengths.

Within the familiarity of friends and family, recognizability seems unremarkable, ordinary, and expected. Cayce Zavaglia's practice interrogates this recognizability. In her painstakingly detailed embroidered portraits, she stitch-by-stitch sees and records every pore, every strand of hair, every nuance of eyelash and brow. Each of her subjects presents with a direct gaze, a clear affect. They seem to see the viewer and the viewer to recognize in return a defined self. But that is on the recto—the front side—of her portraits. On the back, the verso, recognition is complicated by what has been required to produce a meticulously precise representation. Things are tangled, knotted, crisscrossed, shadowy, and obscured. Zavaglia speaks in her statement of the disjunction between public and private selves and her intricate works embody the involute nature of this public/private process. Her portraits, both embroidered and painted,

raise the question of the complicated fictions required to create understandable images of ourselves and others. What is initially represented and received as clear and settled is produced by a complex process of imbrication and eclipse. Zavaglia's investigation of this veiled/unveiled process asks the viewer to consider and reconsider the constructed narratives of self and other.

At the center of *WE*, this juicy, obsessive, tangled, raw, sometimes raucous but tender exhibition, is Sheila Pepe's sculpture. The crocheted ropes scale the height of the gallery, disappearing at the top in an ethereal cloud of red coils—a kind of curly haired cosmos, spiraling—and hung with crocheted banners wafting like prayer flags above the viewer. Then they reach down and grab those massive pipes snaking along the walls, tie to them like lines to a cleat, holding a ship to a dock. The work swoops and loops as it gracefully traverses the space, creating a webbing like a cradle.

Pepe's work that occupies the center of the gallery in *WE*, like her central intention in conceiving the exhibition, as a group of distinct but entwined voices, recalls the wordplay of "crochet." The etymology of the word goes back to the Old English "cradol, cradle, cot." Climb into this exhibition, swing in it, rest in the forms it has stitched together. Explore the possibilities that *WE* offers to play, to accept, to come together in a disparate wholeness.

Writer and cultural critic Dinah Ryan is Professor of English at Principia College and a Contributing Editor for *Art Papers Magazine*.



Sheila Pepe, *Mind the Gap* (installation view detail), 2005, Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

The Artists

Based in New York City, highly acclaimed artist **Sheila Pepe** is best known for crocheting her large-scale, ephemeral installations and sculptures made from domestic and industrial materials. Pepe has exhibited her work at a wide range of venues nationally and internationally. For more than 30 years she has accumulated a family resemblance (see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*) of works in sculpture, installation, drawing and other singular and hybrid forms. Some are drawings that are sculpture, or sculpture that is furniture, fiber works that appear as paintings, or tabletop objects that look like models for monuments and stand as votives for a secular religion. The cultural sources and the meanings twisted together are from canonical arts of the 20th century, home crafts, lesbian, queer and feminist aesthetics, 2nd Vatican Council, American design, an array of Roman Catholic sources as well as their ancient precedents. The constant conceptual pursuit of Pepe's research, making, teaching and writing has been to contest received knowledge, opinions and taste.



Heidi Blunt is a 2021 Master of Fine Arts graduate from The Vermont College of Fine Arts, Visual Arts program; she is a former student of Sheila Pepe. She lives and works along the shores of Lake Superior in Superior, Wisconsin and is an instructor at The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. Blunt's goal as an artist is to encourage a celebratory embrace of fat bodies as imperfectly perfect. Contrary to the vast and intricate systems that shame and demonize fat bodies, she feels it is imperative to point out that having a fat body is neither a moral deficiency nor intellectual failing. She unapologetically represents the body as positive and as a space for inquisitive exploration of the body's intrinsic contribution to the building of self-identity – a crucial step in the process of self-embodiment. While investigating questions that she has about her own embodiment, Blunt's work holds space for viewers to question and experiment with theirs. These investigations often take the form of participatory opportunities in which she incorporates the aesthetic tools of camp, humor, kitsch, play, and an uplifting color palette to encourage celebration of the fat body.



Living and working in New York City, interdisciplinary artist **Élan Cadiz** deconstructs and balances her intersectionality through her projects. Her art and practice are grounded in the documentation of personal narratives through the use of historical imagery and the domestic. Cadiz's art speaks to the promise in each individual and the struggle to overcome the barriers that prevent them from realizing their true, boundless potential. Her goal is to have viewers question their condition(s) in ways that bring about positive change in their lives and the lives of others. Cadiz attended Fashion Institute of Technology for two years after high school and continued and completed her undergraduate degree at City College of New York with a BA in Studio Art. Cadiz received a MFA Fine Arts degree from the School of Visual Arts where she was awarded the SVA Merit Scholarship, Paul Rhodes Memorial Award, and the Martha Trevor Award. She is a former student of Sheila Pepe. Cadiz has been commissioned by the Studio Museum in Harlem, El Museo de Barrio, Art in Flux Harlem, Mount Vernon Hotel Museum and more. She was one of the first residents at the Sustainable Arts Foundation AIRspace Parent Artist Residence at Abrons Art Center; and, her *An American Family Album* series was featured in *VOGUE*. Her artworks can also be found in *New American Paintings* magazine, issue #146, juried by Jerry Saltz and issue #153 juried by curator Lauren Haynes.



St.Louis-based artist **Cayce Zavaglia** earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Wheaton College in 1994 and her Master of Fine Arts in Painting from Washington University in 1998. In 2001, she began incorporating wool and cotton thread into her practice and embarked on a series of hand-embroidered portraits of family and friends. Her unique sewing technique has allowed her to blend colors and establish tonalities that resemble the techniques used in classical oil painting. Her stitching methodology borders on the obsessive, but it ultimately has allowed her to visually evoke painterly renditions of flesh, hair, and cloth. A few years ago, she began highlighting the reverse side of her embroideries in a series of gouache, acrylic, and mixed media "Verso" portraits. Historically, in embroidery, this side is always hidden from view. Zavaglia's work challenges traditional embroidery etiquette and the place of "craft" in art by allowing the viewer to see the loose ends, knots, and the movements of the maker on the back of each portrait. In doing so, she has initiated a conversation about the divergence between our presented and private selves. The production of both Recto and Verso portraits is now the primary focus of her studio work. In 2014, Zavaglia was selected for the Great Rivers Biennial, and she mounted her first solo museum solo exhibition entitled *Recto/Verso* at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis. That same year, she was also awarded the prestigious Regional Arts Commission Artist Fellowship, which allowed her to embark on a research trip to Australia to document childhood friends for future works and exhibitions. Zavaglia has had solo exhibitions in Miami, Chicago, St. Louis, and New York City. Her works are included in the permanent collections of the 21c Museum and the University of Maine's Zillman Museum of Art, the West Collection, The Ria and Lex Daniels Collection in the Hague, and numerous private collections across the United States. Zavaglia has been living and working in St.Louis since graduation and is represented by William Shearburn Gallery in St. Louis.





(from top left moving clockwise)

Sheila Pepe, installation view of *Hot Mess Formalism* (detail), 2019, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts

Élan Cadiz, *Gerald Leavell III, from Scaffold: Equity of Treatment*, 2020-2021, pen pencil, acrylic, flash paint on Shizen paper, 12" x 9"

Heidi Blunt, *Blubby Panel* (detail), 2020, 30" x 18", multimedia soft sculpture

Cayce Zavaglia, *Unconditional* (detail), 2021, crewel wool, acrylic, pom poms, glitter, paillettes on Belgian linen, 57.5" x 53"

All of Sheila Pepe's, Heidi Blunt's, Élan Cadiz's, and Cayce Zavaglia's artwork images copyright of each respective artist.

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This exhibition was initiated and curated by the James K. Schmidt Gallery.

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