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“I Always Wanted to Participate”: In Conversation with Vijay Masharani

Mimi Howard July 25, 2025

Vijay Masharani, *My Coarsening*, 2023 (still). Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan.

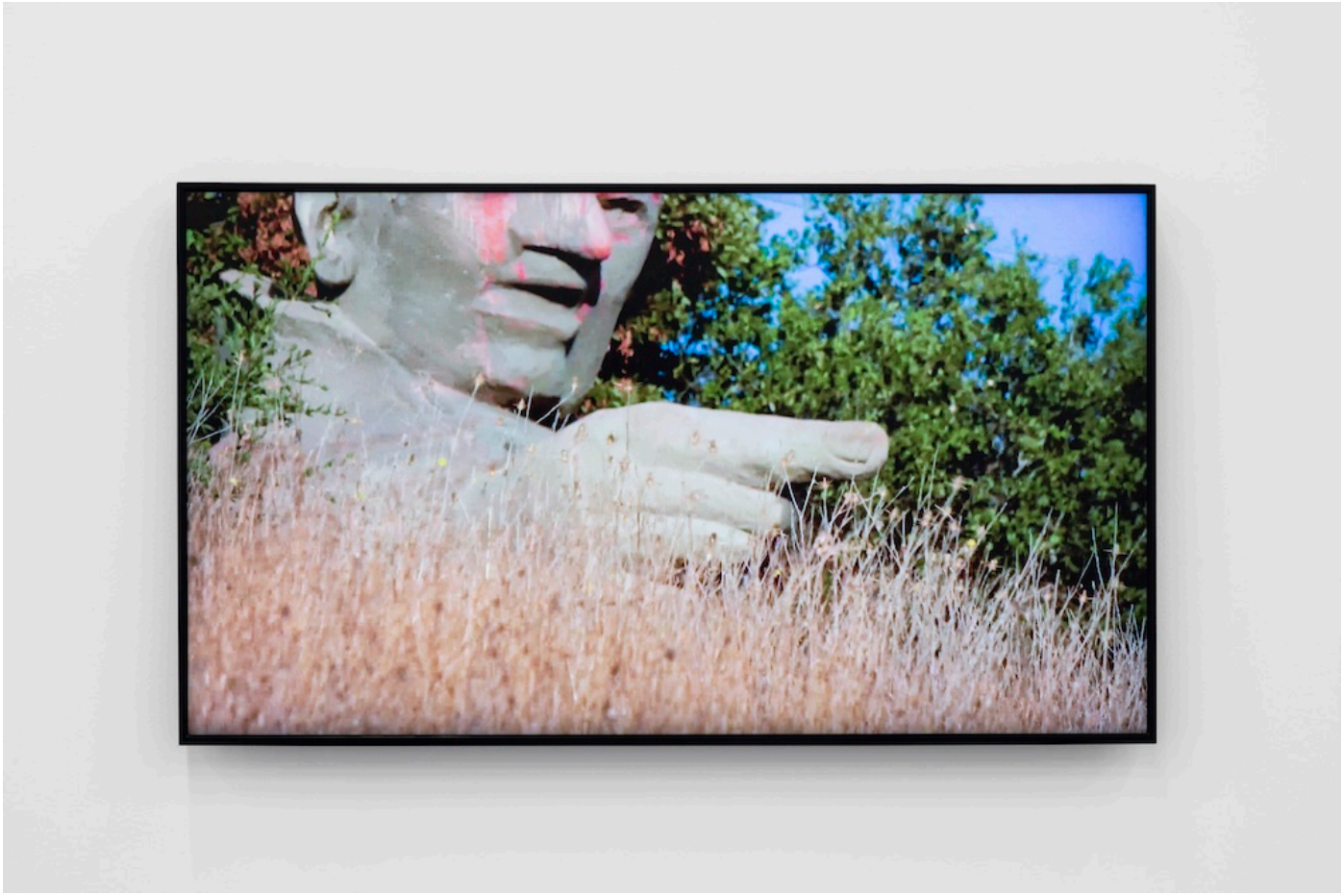
At three intervals throughout Vijay Masharani’s eighteen-minute video *Good Attack* (2021), the camera fixates on a sign hanging in a pet store above the cash register. The letters on the sign are animated; they rearrange themselves until the original phrase—“Die Terrorist Scum”—is at once contracted and expanded into a new chain of words: *meretricious*, *moisturised*, and, finally, *rotisserie*. It has been said that the contemporary artist is concerned primarily with the manipulation of signs rather than the production of objects. Coaxing this truism of art theory into the literal, Masharani punctures the original phrase with a pinprick. The play with words

is reminiscent of Marcel Broodthaers, but as though run through the gauntlet of the post–9/11 era's inadvertent Dada. Good attack, we could say, is *détournement* put otherwise.

The world as it appears in Masharani's work is cracked, continually falling to pieces—and yet, for that very reason, subject to rearrangement. In his video *Thunder Scene* (2020–21), a Ford Thunderbird is burned and broken down on the side of a highway; the sounds of cars whooshing by can be heard, but the cars themselves have been edited out of the video, leaving the scene to flicker a bit with the shadows of absent things, their afterimage. The mechanic's job is then reconfigured: not to repair, exactly, but to expose the seams—install a sputtering mechanism into the seduction of representational media.

At Masharani's show at Kunsthalle Zürich this spring, *Big Casino*, his more recent video work was exhibited alongside a new series of drawings, which isolate and repeat symbols like mandalas, stars, the Earth, and ladders. An unlikely encounter with gestural abstraction emerges from this approach. Still, taken together, Masharani's videos, drawings, and animations tease out moments of contradiction inherent within categories like abstraction in the first place. In *Knot (Fog, Eucalyptus, Methotrexate)* (2024), the camera whirs vertically as it moves between images of a green signal light, an IV bag, an industrial-looking roof, trees through a window, and the artist's reflection in a mirror. The fragments become a kind of weight, pressing down upon the brittle either-or between form and abstraction, breaking it apart.

In May, I met with Masharani to discuss his influences and ideas of repetition and fidelity in art and writing, as well as the relationship between illness and modernism. We spoke ahead of his inclusion in a forthcoming group exhibition at Canal Projects in New York and his solo exhibitions at Veronica in Seattle and Clima in Milan.



Vijay Masharani, *Pointer*, 2024, single-channel video. Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan. Kunsthalle Zürich. Photograph by Cedric Mussano.

Mimi Howard: You grew up in the Bay Area—does being back there now bring up any early influences that still resonate in your work?

Vijay Masharani: When I was growing up I liked Group f/64. I had never seen images like that, even though I had been to places like Yosemite, and they were legibly virtuosic. I was reading Thomas Crow's book *The Artist in the Counterculture* [Princeton University Press, 2023]. It starts with Bruce Conner, moves into artists who showed or taught at Pomona under Helene Winer's directorship, and discusses others like Bonnie Ora Sherk and Terry Fox. I thought, Wow, I really respond to some of these guys.

Now what I'm getting from some West Coast artists is an understanding of the formally expansive ways that they metabolized their political convictions. While working on the show at Kunsthalle Zürich, I was at home a lot because I was recovering, but I kept going back to see a show at Berkeley Art

Museum called *To Exalt the Ephemeral*—a friend, Tausif Noor, was the curatorial fellow. There were a few works I revisited over and over, including a Rosemary Mayer drawing, a collage by Chris Corales, and a Bruce Conner painting. You always remember works that you've seen in person a bit better.

MH: I can see how some of these canonical West Coast concerns about landscape show up in your work, but shaded with a kind of ambivalence. I'm thinking of the end of your video *My Coarsening* [2023], which features this image of your dad's forehead in the foreground, and a wildfire-orange sky behind him in the background. In your lecture performance with the Center for Experimental Lectures in 2022, you talk about what he thought the California sky looked like when he first moved there—"like a David Hockney painting"—and the disappointment upon seeing it thick with smoke. There's a kind of melancholy at work in the relation to place or to the Californian landscape in particular. Place-basedness, as it relates to a diasporic not-at-homeness or displacement, seems important to your work in general. How did you end up moving from the States to London?

Vijay Masharani. *My Coarsening*, 2023 (still). Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan.

VM: I grew up going to London because my whole extended family is British. My mom left Uganda to go to London, and my dad left Kenya; you know, they had British passports.

MH: So you were retracing their steps by going to study there?

VM: Yes, and also, after the pandemic, a lot of my peers were going back to grad school. So there was some personal retreading—diasporic, and also, this is what a person like me does right now.

Paul Gilroy had just founded this program at University College London [UCL] on the study of racialization. It was an interdisciplinary humanities degree, and I was test-driving academia because I was very unclear of the trajectory that art was going to take. But then, studying with Gilroy was important because I had never had a really good teacher before.

I was reading a lot more Black studies, sociology, and political theory, and it also felt like after the uprisings [of summer 2020] there was a sense that art is less important than a project of general social transformation, which felt really possible at the time. But I still had to make work in a way that felt meaningful during a bipolar moment marked by political possibility, mass death, and personal despair. *Triage*, my first show with Clima gallery in Milan, was my attempt to reconcile all this, although that's not how I framed it at the time. And that's also one thing that's interesting and anxiety-provoking, I think for a lot of artists: when someone asks you to talk about your work, the explanations are kind of provisional.

MH: Historical contingency: so mundane as "you know what, I moved," or it can be an insurrection that creates the discursive field that we use to describe what's happening and what the work is in relation to. I feel like this is why intellectual history is this impossible and hilarious task, because you know that people are just grasping at the vocabularies that are available to them in a specific time and feel proximate and relevant, and those are highly changeable. But it does maybe tell you something about the conditions in

which art gets made.

VM: I think it's super important. I didn't start reading artist biographical histories until recently, but I recommend it to all my students because I think it's really good for getting things moving in the studio. Skowhegan had a really good library there, and I could read, for example, about Jay DeFeo's experiences traveling in Europe. And how later she was pretty poor and didn't take care of her health—her gums became infected and her teeth fell out. And then she made those collages of her real and false teeth.

Vijay Masharani in *Pacing: Vijay Masharani, Yamini Nayar, Sharon Yaoxi He* (installation view, Thomas Erben Gallery), 2025. Photograph by Sabrina Slavin. Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan.

MH: Right, the body is there.

VM: This understanding of life as the substrate of the practice—I don't think it's self-evident. I do think you need to teach it. At least I did. Methodologically speaking, maybe it's bourgeois, but it is a discrete way of

understanding these things that I had to learn. For a long time I didn't know what to write my dissertation on at UCL and was reading Benjamin Buchloh's *Formalism and Historicity* and Robert Storr's *Writings on Art*. They didn't like each other; or, at least, Storr viewed *October* as imperious. Politically, I am much more sympathetic to Buchloh, but there is something ruthless about how he slots everything into this historical materialist framework. Whereas Storr, I think, because he's also a painter, he would go to artists' studios; he would talk about where they studied and what stacks of books are in their studio. It feels truer to the process.

MH: There's Storr, the painter's critic, and Buchloh, the critic's critic. I'm interested in how that same split, or differing sets of priorities, maps onto—or maybe doesn't map onto—your own different identities of how you've worked as a critic versus how you've worked as an artist. Did you always write criticism alongside making work?

VM: I always wanted to participate. But it didn't feel guaranteed that I would be able to do that. I went to New York after MICA and it was really different from Baltimore. In Baltimore, it felt like there was a lot of room. In New York, it felt like everyone was an artist. Given the fact that I could write and also have a studio practice, I chose to pursue both of those things because I was not sure that either was going to happen in the way I wanted it to. I got lucky and people responded to both.

MH: How do you approach critical writing? What is important to you when writing criticism?

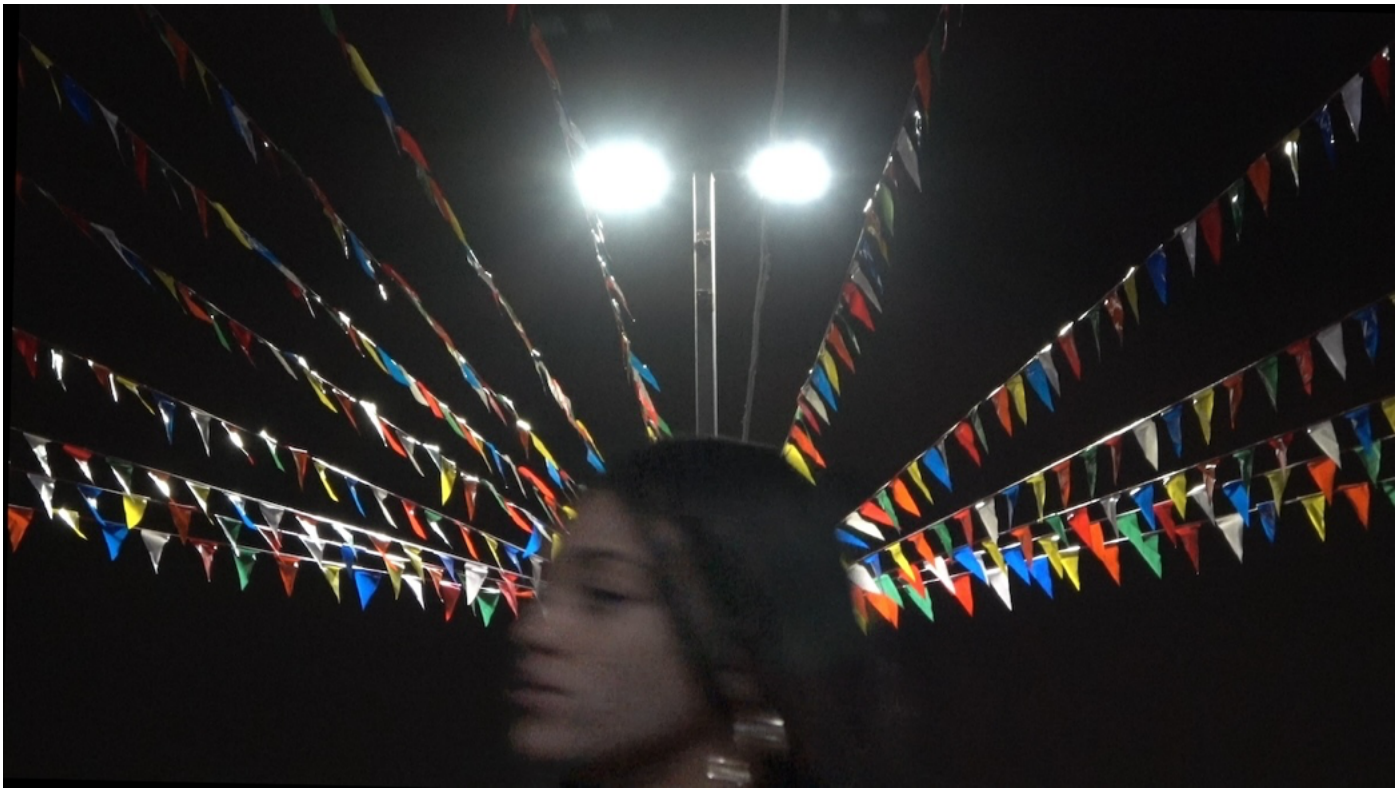
VM: I do think I'm a maker first; I think I'm better at it. But when I write critical essays, there's this question of fidelity. I don't know if that's the term that you use in your historical work, but you can't just say anything. You have to honor the history, and the truth. Presumably you're writing about things that you care about. In my opinion, there shouldn't be a moment where it's unclear how I got from the evidence to a claim. There shouldn't be gaps. But I did feel worried about this when I was writing my dissertation, that it was

maybe too speculative.

MH: So there's a moment where the fidelity becomes difficult to sustain—you have to reach out to speculation, psychologizing, to fill it out. Do you feel there's a similar moment in your art practice? Or, maybe that moment is when you turn more to making art?

VM: I'm trying to think if there's a corollary to fidelity. With art, I often feel like a mechanic: I've got these media objects, these fragments, and I think I can get them to work. It is more of a technician mindset. And then this is undergirded by ethical and political commitments.

MH: Fidelity as you're describing it in criticism means there has to be a logic to the writing, and if that were to enter this machinery of art making, it would slightly render the process impossible. But some work does become beholden to a kind of strict rationality. Video art is maybe most susceptible to this, and feels like a pitfall that artists fell into, especially a few years ago. Do you feel more drawn to video work that allows for open-endedness?



Vijay Masharani, *Mourning in advance,* 2019 (video still). Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan.

VM: As I learn more about the history of video, I realize there have been a lot of approaches that are not adequately represented in museums, not being taken up as much by contemporary artists, that I ended up having to come across on my own. The videos that stick in my mind are often minor, gestural, peripheral works by artists who are better known for other things: João Maria Gusmao and Pedro Paiva's *The Initiate* [2008], Zlatko Bourek and Pavao Štalter's *Wiener Blut* [2014], Alfred Leslie's *The Last Clean Shirt* [1964], Anthea Hamilton's *Over the Rainbow* [1999], Ann Messner's *4 small fires* [1977] are a few examples. They interest me more than what has now felt paradigmatic for some time within institutional exhibitions, which is either big, sober, grant-supported experimental documentary or filmed performance art. I might have simply missed when these artists were showing. Many of them are old or dead.

Maybe it's more of a problem with historicization, archiving, and access than curatorial practice. I wonder if video art's intermedia status, existing between sculpture, installation, performance, film, music, and a glut of non-art "content," has led to it being nobody's responsibility. I didn't think about this a few years ago, but I've become more concerned with stewardship since getting sick. Someone like Barbara London does valuable work, but I think because she was at MoMA, her tendencies tend toward grand, impressive installations. I'm worried that many minor works slip through the interstices of the discipline, resulting in a skewed conception of the medium.

MH: Your video *Give me that fucking content, Universe* [2023] seems to operate in this category you're describing, a more minor key in video art. It's almost a kind of filmed dérive. But it could also be read as a response to post-internet video art—especially the kind of causticness and sense of humor. There's a tension between real environment and the specter of the internet—the transformation of reality into "content." It's also one of the few videos of yours where the viewer hears your voice, delivering this refrain in which you ask the universe to provide you with content, with this very real, raw, tone of frustration. It's a counterpose to what Ina Blom calls "intelligent

video art voice." Where do you think that voice came from?

VM: I think of that voice as Cracked Vijay. I had just moved back to New York from London and there was broken glass everywhere. I was hypersensitive also to the amount of intense human suffering. I felt lost in life at that point. It was part of a moment in my practice when I either wanted to be outside finding things or have them be delivered like an epiphany. It's a strange piece because most people find it funny, and it is, but I was at a pretty low point—it didn't preclude me from having a sense of humor. Soon after making this video, I began to focus more on drawing. I also stopped using appropriated media and voiceover in my videos around this time.

MH: It's interesting that this video marked the end of something. I think it's similar to how I read the work because it expresses such a frustrated relation to the idea of the figure of the artist, especially the contemporary artist. What is the artist's relationship to the world as a source of inspiration now? Is it one of receiving—this kind of romantic view of an eighteenth-century painter waiting for the muses to strike, or is there something more extractive and exhausted happening?

VM: Maybe something that's also latent in that piece is how it addresses the cosmos in kind of a wink-wink spiritual way. I have this ambivalent relationship to the cosmos. When I started drawing the earth, I also thought it was hilarious.

Vijay Masharani, *Yellow scene,* 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan. Photograph by Sabrina Slavin.

MH: In your lecture performance for *Big Casino* you mentioned that spirituality crept into the work through the backdoor. I guess it's smuggled in through these recurring shapes in your drawings: the Earth, the circles, the orbs, bursts of light. There's something about the way repetition or recurring imagery operates in your work, alongside ideas of chance or causality, that strikes me as a callback to modernism. How do you position yourself within, against, after modernism?

VM: When I took modernism in undergrad, I did not think, This is it. At the time, I was more interested in contemporary practices and theory than art history. Then in grad school I spent so much time with Du Bois, who is a

quintessential modernist thinker. I spent so much time with questions about horizons, utopia, shapes of history, contingency, and forms of consciousness. Then I went back to the studio and started to draw in a different way. I became interested in nascent moments of abstraction within my previous approach to drawing, which looked more like automatism—delicate, linear works that had many competing formal approaches within a constrained space. One of the approaches was a kind of representation of emergence, rupture, explosion, dismemberment—omnidirectional movement, really. Those were the moments that I isolated, leading to that explosive star form.

MH: It's interesting that formally the relation to modernism emerges, by necessity, through your drawing. It can't come out through the video, maybe for technical and historical reasons. Does the relation to modernism feel like a more recent concern in your work? It seems like a strange or unlikely frame to use in working with video in particular.

VM: Before encountering attempts at integrating video into modernist discourses about autonomy and medium specificity, I hadn't thought about the many differences between film and video, or the affinity between video and sound recording, as Bill Viola discusses in his essay "The Sound of One Line Scanning." There's a relation between modernism and illness, too. I got the catalogue from De Chirico's 1982 MoMA exhibition while I was finishing up the Zürich show, and read how he dealt with intestinal issues his entire life, and attributed the origin of Metaphysical painting to an epiphany he had after recovering from an illness. I was in bed for half of last year, and again for the past two months—you do need things to sustain you.

Everyone's different. It's not the practices that announce themselves as helpful or altruistic in some way, or that expand the social frame, that are necessarily the most sustaining. Something is actually lost with the expansion that we associate with some conceptual and critical practices, and I'm still trying to figure out what it is. It's hard not to speak in vitalistic

terms, but you need things to keep you going. At the same time, inasmuch as I don't feel vivified by overacademicized art, the backlash against it is oftentimes a conservative exalting of intuition over intellect—an old, familiar dead end. I'm trying to work through my dissatisfaction carefully, and hopefully will land somewhere more interesting.

MH: I think this is what excites me about your work. It disturbs some distinction between a turn to social practice and formalism by seeking to address a similar set of problems through formal questions of color, shape, and repetition. On that note, I have a final question about the motif of lights—and green lights in particular in your video work—especially in *Urchin Foragers* [2024]*, My Coarsening* [2023], and *Green Signal* [2024]. What's going on with all of the lights?

Vijay Masharani, *Urchin Foragers* (still), 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Clima, Milan.

VM: It's a nice thing to have a studio practice because these formal preoccupations emerge, and then it's more exciting when you have a chance to do it again. With *Green Signal*, I was looking at this green IV light when I was in the hospital. I was interested in the IV pole and these moments of

abstraction within representational space. I was filming the light on the back of the pump, and was aware that I was elaborating on, say, the bright light triggered by a barking dog in *My Coarsening*, the green lasers in *Command | Plea* [2020–21] and *Mourning in advance* [2019], the palette of the soccer pitch in *Errant Lesson* [2020–21], and other shots from the hospital in which I was filming the green-colored chemotherapy methotrexate. It's a nice formalism occurring where the shape of the circle is the aperture of the camera—among other things, it's a way to illuminate your tools.

MH: *Green Signal* reminded me a bit of the Michael Snow film *Wavelength* [1967] that depicts a loft via a forty-five-minute extended zoom and, by its end, the camera is close-up on this postcard with an image of waves. The camera sits on the waves for a while until it becomes a defamiliarized, strange image. Similar to your video, Snow shows how connected abstraction is to an incredibly situated space, like a hospital room or an apartment—and you end up with an abstraction that's unfolding in time, that's almost narrative in some way.

VM: I'm not sure where the focus on the lights or green lights came from—probably because it came from many different places and reemerged multiple times. When I lived in New York, I felt like the city's recognizability overrode my artistry, which led to me abstracting the city in order to slightly anonymize it. The shots in *Mourning in advance* with streetlights and lasers was partly inspired by the laser eyes of the monkey spirits in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee* [2010] and Michael E. Smith's rotating laser in his 2017 show at PS1; the influence of Cyprien Gaillard's *Nightlife* [2015]—which was introduced to me in 2018 by Kamron Hazel aka mhm, mhm—whose video work also used flares. During the pandemic, I lived with three sound artists. Being exposed to minimalist composition influenced the dark, one-shot, single light source videos I showed in *Triage*, many of which ended up around song-length. I went fishing with a friend, and the way his headlamp illuminated the baitfish was beautiful.

MH: I like what you said earlier about your video work trying to capture abstraction within representational space. Because there's also a tension or impossibility lodged in that task. Green is never just green. It carries a lot of meaning societally: drive the car, walk across the street—you're getting a thumbs up.

VM: You know, I haven't thought about that, and it's something I'll take with me from this conversation. I think part of it, too, might just be that I'm a bit of a magpie, you know, filming lights. But I think it's a way to find abstraction formally. Cameras have a hard time with filming light, both artificial light and even natural light, like fire. Filming light is a way to formally produce a sense of rupture—or a sense that something is not fully able to be apprehended.