

BROOKLYN RAIL

Rose Salane: *C21OWO*

By Adriana Furlong



What becomes of one's memories once they are untethered from physical space? Does the mind draw with blue tape the profile of a remembered site, commemorating it and keeping vigil each time one walks by it? There is perhaps no city on earth so invested in its unceasing regeneration than New York City, a rapidity of change that leaves micro-"generations" with memories that no longer fit the topography. I ruminate on this as I take the train up to Rose Salane's show at Hessel Museum of Art, passing by dilapidated farmhouses, the planks of which bow to the ground, splintered and chipped, reminders of the unceasing and unfeeling churning of the US—and global—economy.

C21OWO, a collaboration between curator Camila Palomino and artist Rose Salane, engenders similar feelings. Salane's incisive, sympathetic investigation into the collective memory of space and her gathering of disparate, fragmented personal narratives originating from specific sites are elements that can be found throughout her oeuvre. I enter the exhibition with the same quiet solemnity

with which one would attend a funeral—in both there is the sense that the dust has just settled from a flurry of movement. I imagine this to have been the case when the subject of Salane's exhibition, the department store Century 21, shuttered its doors this past year, inciting a frantic scurrying of customers prompted by seductive "Everything Must Go!" signs. Century 21 was a symbol of much more than a clothing outlet and, like many others, closed its doors during the pandemic. The exhibition introduces viewers to items from its liquidation sale, objects that hold similar semiotic potential to those found at an estate sale: less use-value than evocative ephemera.



Installation view: Rose Salane: *C21OWO*, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 2021. Courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa London.

Upon entering the main gallery, visitors encounter *Site of Transaction (flat)* (2021)—the remains of a Century 21 kiosk lying on the floor and the conceptual wellspring for Salane's investigation into the store as site. The disassembled kiosk evokes a sort of blueprint for consumer-salesperson interaction, yet its deconstructed form explodes the possibility for such consumeristic performances and parallels the slow devolution of the department store as a hub of cultural relevance. Rectangular openings punctuating the planes suggest past functions as receptacles for iPads and video monitors: points of exchange between consumer and corporation. But here both the human body and transactional exchanges are denied. There is no one giving or accepting payment. We face a blank floor.



Installation view: Rose Salane: C21OWO, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 2021. Courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa London.

I encountered another somatic checkpoint with *A Memory From (2002<2020)* (2021). Palomino and Salane have incised one of the gallery walls with a window framing our view of a rack of multi-colored and shockingly archaic early 2000s clothing. Salane relayed to me memories of trips with her father at age nine or ten to Century 21's Cortlandt Street location, her younger self acting as a quiet witness to shoppers' frenzied rifling through clothing as they fashioned their identities. Her's was a potent gaze from the periphery. As Century 21 was slowly dismembering, whole floors of merchandise would coalesce, the disparate inventories coagulating into one. *A Memory From* acts as a last marker of the slow demise of the department store, with the exclusion of bodies from the hanging clothing rendering them signifiers of a dying practice.

A fraught suggestion of labor and laborer imbues these objects with unsettling hauntedness. Traces of almost imperceptible subjectivity found amongst the coldness of various tools and gadgets convey Salane's careful underlining of history. In *Randomness in order of extensions* (2021), we are confronted with a RAND Corporation numbers table, a listing of random digit-groupings that serve some unknown and unnerving purpose. Mounted beside that rigid

ordering is the cradle of a landline phone with time-faded numerical extensions and names scrawled with a multicolored pen: indicators of anonymous personhood instrumental in keeping the humming business of the department store connected. This congregation of seemingly inconsequential numbers and statistical connective tissue seems an antiquated idea. Salane succinctly excavates the human hand in these now obsolete technological tools, the disintegration of the pens' scribbles suggesting the now defunct roles of both work and worker at this particular site.

The exhibition's visual crescendo is heard before it is seen. Stepping into the next gallery space, one is met with a distinct mechanical chirruping. In the middle of the room sits a Century 21 checkout counter complete with a receipt paper roll and printer that Salane secured from the liquidation sale. *Site of Transaction* (2021) requires the movement (and thus the complicity) of the passerby to "operate." Sensors connected to the machine unfurl reams of receipt paper with lines upon lines of printed text on its surface. Upon examination we find intimate notes between curator and artist, as well as emails and texts from the artist to her father. I walk around this point of sale slowly, noting my own movement as transformed into digital footprints, something that is omnipresent in the everyday and yet barely perceptible due to our habituated patterns. In *March 1, 2002, Page B00001* (2021), a narrow lightbox is perched on the adjacent wall, spread out like a fluorescent blue horizon line. A microfilm reel, embedded into the rectangular light, spells out the published happenings of March 1, 2002; among the detritus of current events and sports news is an ebullient article announcing the re-opening of Century 21. The article's title, "Gucci Bags, Satin Blouses and Joy; Century 21, a Downtown Fixture, Reopens to Cheers," dictates a certain triumphant perseverance on the part of the retail powerhouse that surpasses a mere thirst for designer clothing. The Cortlandt street location, situated only streets away from the site of the 9/11 attack, miraculously emerged with its structure fairly unscathed; the store retained its status as an enduring symbol of American consumerism.

The objects Salane has amassed function quietly and intently towards the preservation of an ideal. I leave the show cognizant of their quiet solitude, a negative space formed by the absence of both worker and body. Each object is a mere starting point for a thick web of information and history that includes fingerprints and leaning elbows, boredom and the buzz of commerce.