# Cyber Fantasy:

Exploring Image Culture, Obsolescence, and the Digital Realm through Photography, Digital Collage, and Installation

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A Thesis presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri – Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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by

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**The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined**

**the thesis entitled**

**CYBER FANTASY: EXPLORING IMAGE CULTURE, OBSOLESCENCE, AND THE**

**DIGITAL REALM THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY, DIGITAL COLLAGE, AND**

**INSTALLATION**

**presented by Savannah Calhoun, a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine**

**Arts in Visual Studies, emphasis in Photography, and hereby certify that, in their**

**opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.**

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**DEDICATION**

To my loving partner, Zachary Allen, as well as several loving friends and family

members, who have all been undoubtedly supportive and encouraging through my artistic

and educational endeavors. You have been my rock and my reason to continue through

such a harsh world at this time. I love you.

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Special thanks to my graduate peers who came before, during, and after me, who have been confidantes, friends, and support systems for both my art and myself. Special

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Lastly, a second thanks and acknowledgement for my loving partner, who has not only been an emotional support, but also a direct assistant in the studio throughout this process.

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**ABSTRACT**

The exhibition and concepts of *Cyber Fantasy* challenge the borders of both the frame and the screen by digitizing and manipulating the traditional still life to further investigate photography's place in such a cyber world. The title derives from contextualizing the definitions: "cyber" meaning of or relating to computers, typically to one of the technology domains named with the combining form cyber-, as cyberterrorism, cyberwarfare, or cyberattack: and "fantasy" meaning imagination, especially when extravagant and unrestrained. I think of myself as optimistic about technological progress, curious about an ever changing physical and digital world of images, despite an inevitable anxiety caused by it.

According to the philosophical writings of Vilém Flusser, as our current image culture becomes increasingly saturated, images have come to serve the same purpose as linear texts: that is, to distribute information, record history, and express language[1]. There now exists a repeated, infinite feedback loop between image makers and image consumers. This rise in media consumption as well as the rise of digital technology leaves us with a mental and emotional phenomenon that feels very human despite lacking the same intimacy as verbal communication. Subsequently, the internet has developed itself as both a place of permanence and ever-flowing, abundant information. All of this accounted for, this series questions where photography stands and how an image maker can quantify meaning within a space where images exist so abundantly.

By combining themes of mortality with themes of excess and referencing the

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[1] Flusser, Vilém. *Into the Universe of Technical Images.* pp. 1-26.

symbolism and iconography of Vanitas and Dutch still life, this series explores the overlaps between the obsolescence of technology, and the consequential state of photography in a highly saturated image culture. This cross-examination establishes the relationship between the digital and the temporary. Despite the almost universal use of digital tools as cosmetic tools for photographs, this series asks how those digital tools can be used as an extension of the hand to be used as a means to make art. By including my own hands as the artist to interact with my arrangements, I aim to reference myself as a creator of photographs while solving my relationship with the impermanence of photography and the internet.

**LIST OF FIGURES**

**INTRODUCTION**

> The task of a philosophy of photography is to reflect upon this possibility of freedom -
> and thus its significance - in a world dominated by apparatuses; to reflect upon the way
> in which, despite everything, it is possible for human beings to give significance to their
> lives in the face of the chance necessity of death. Such a philosophy is necessary
> because it is the only form of revolution left open to us.[2]

*Cyber Fantasy* was an exhibition on display from February 21, 2022 until March 4, 2022. It served as a show of photographs, photo murals, and installations within George Caleb Bingham Gallery. Altering the white cube[3] that is the gallery, images sat superimposed on walls and layered with framed images to suggest an immersive experience when viewing the exhibition.

The subject matter within these images consisted of several repeating symbols as well as discarded pieces of technology including but not limited to: 1995 iMac, security monitors, iPads, computer mice, keyboards, and floppy discs. Most of the items used were donated to the University of Missouri Surplus warehouse, so by using them within the imagery, they were re-used within the same institution and figuratively given a new life within the image. Thematically, by doing this, the work begins to plunge into concepts that have historically been addressed in still life painting such as Dutch and Vanitas, including death and excess.

Theoretically, the work is driven by media theorists such as Vilém Flusser, Legacy Russell, and Nathan Jurgensen, respectively. Each of these writers has a

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[2] Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography.* pg. 82.
[3] Refers to a certain gallery aesthetic characterized by its square or oblong shape, white walls and a light source usually from the ceiling. Tate.

unique perspective on media theory and photography itself, with significant overlap regarding the excessiveness and consumption practices within it.

Within this project, digital photography, photographic tools, studio lighting, and editing softwares like Adobe Photoshop both serve as tools and subject matter. This work is made up of a mixture of straight photographs, digital collages, and illustrations. Through this research I have asked myself to consider digital tools as extensions of the body in the same way that we consider physical tools and devices.

## I.  MATERIALS AND PROCESS
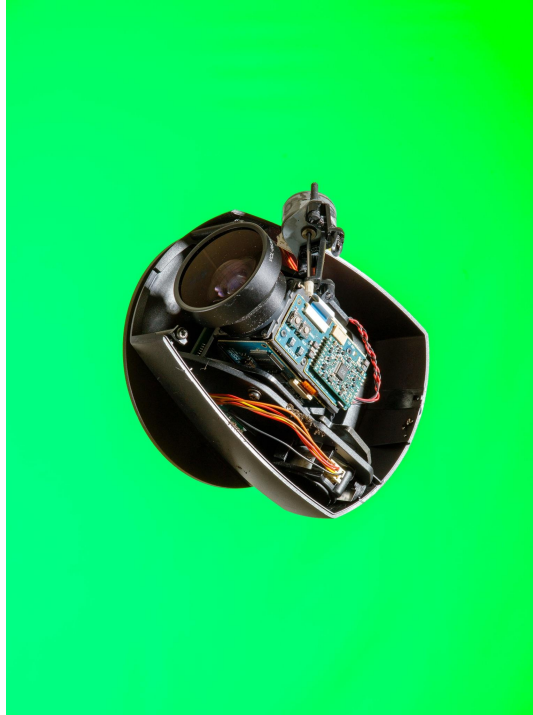


**Savannah Calhoun, *Innards,* Inkjet Print, 2022**

*Cyber Fantasy* is evidence of the playful and intense relationship that I have with both photography and the internet as a landscape. I consider myself to be in dialogue with post-internet art and its attempts to define the era in which we are living.[4]

The resulting series of photographs and installations that would come to make *Cyber Fantasy* are made of parts: parts of the photograph (pixels), parts of the machinery in which I photograph (see *Innards,* above), and parts of all of the other materials necessary to shoot, edit, and print a photograph. Throughout the process of making, I have been consistently and deeply concerned with all of the inner parts, the

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[4]Ryan Cherewaty, "Where Do We Go from Here? Investigations into Post-Internetism"

building blocks of the image. Other parts that construct the work in conversation with its subject matter of discarded pieces of technology and symbols of authorship include digital photographs, computers, and a controlled studio environment, which are all still made of information and pixels that could be broken into infinitely smaller pieces.

Reconciling with photography's constituent parts is the driving force of the process of my making. The photograph is already a conglomerate of the media that existed before it.  It is a mechanical capture of a still that would otherwise be fleeting to the eye. Over time its iterations have seen themselves as a substitute for painting or text, as well as a tool for science and documentation. Regardless of how it is used, photography exists infinitely and has only become more accessible after nearly two centuries of existence and continues to grow exponentially[5]. 1.72 trillion photos are taken worldwide every year, which equals 54,400 per second, or 4.7 billion per day. By 2030, around 2.3 trillion photos will be taken every year.[6]



**Screenshot from Snowden files, captioned: "A single frame of scrambled video imagery." 2013**

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[5]Rebecca Young, "The Birth of Photography"

[6]Broz, Matic. "How Many Photos Are There?"

Artists like Hito Steyerl have written about excesses of data and how we are at a point beyond collection or gathering, and have escalated to having to sort and decipher through a metaphorical sea of data that is full of objectively useless material. In her essay *A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-) Recognition,* this issue of sifting through "truckloads of data" to try to find any relevant information is addressed, saying: "analysts are choking on intercepted communication. They need to unscramble, filter, decrypt, refine, and process 'truckloads of data.' The focus moves from acquisition to discerning, from adding on to filtering, from research to pattern recognition. The problem is not restricted Secret Services."[7]

This is not a simple issue of someone having too many photos on their camera roll or not enough storage on their iPhone, but rather something that is affecting the masses to such a point it also reaches federal programs like the NSA and deals with the political issues surrounding such an excess of data, and those that have contributed to cyber means of whistle-blowing like Edward Snowden. The *search* for any kind of information is now a process of filtration as opposed to gathering.  In the same right, she also describes apophenia: the perception of patterns within random data. She suggests that a still from the Snowden files, shown below and labeled "SECRET" could be perceived as a waving body of water, something pleasant to drown in. She uses this example to describe a phenomenon that exists very widely: the inability for humans to perceive technical signals when they aren't translated accordingly.

The intangible aspects of image making: digital data and pixels, are comparable to the sun, moon, stars, and other celestial and natural bodies. For example, in the

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[7]Hito Steyerl, "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition"

piece titled *Rainbow Floppy* both a comparison to rainbows and a night sky are made with the resulting imagery composed of floppy disks. Through photographs like these, I acknowledge the amount of digital data that has been created, even at the level of photographs. I find this to be both terrifying and fantastic. As an image maker, it feels like anything is possible, even with the anxiety that such a swarm brings. I found Steyerl's use of the defining term for this optimism toward imagery (apophenia) even when its existence is so vast, to be comparable to my own opinions on the larger topic of photography in an internet landscape.

My process begins by a similar sifting that Steyerl discusses in reference to data. Choosing to deal with discarded objects reminiscent of Y2K or the turn of the
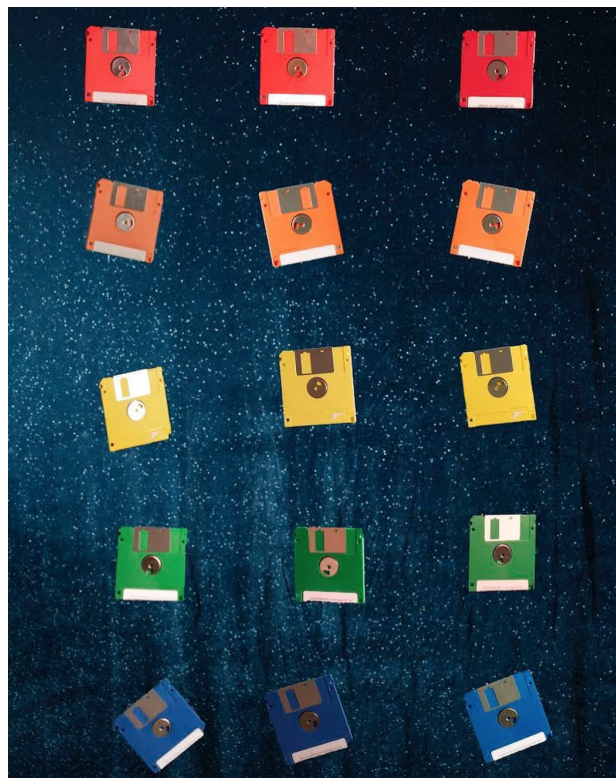


**Savannah Calhoun, *Rainbow Floppy,* Inkjet Print, 2022**

millennium, I begin with visiting the University's surplus warehouse. There, I find what has been considered to be trash by others, obsolete, replaced with something new. The warehouse is the remnants of a University that has to keep up with the advancements in technology that faculty and students need. What I find relies on what the University chooses to discard, so there is an element of chance to what I find and what finds its way into a photograph. My consistency in visiting the warehouse eventually led to finding what I needed in waves. In images like *Screen Glitch* (below) I photograph an object such as this security monitor manufactured in 1988, and repurposed images to produce a digital collage in which my hands sit within and contribute to the chaos of the image. Throughout this work, hands, keyboards, mouths, and tools, all come to represent my authorship and address the ability of humans to control data, and, consequently, possess guilt for the heap that has developed as a result.

The digital collaging process involves digital files made from photographs in a controlled studio environment that are then layered, altered, distorted, and reshaped to create a new conglomerate. *Cyber Fantasy* came to contain a mixture of both straight photographs as well as heavily handled digital composites like *Screen Glitch* among others. But, in the images that resulted in the exhibition, the ability for a viewer to be able to make those assumptions and observations of what is real became increasingly diminished.

With my own imagery, the work can take respectively one of two directions: that is, existing as a straight photograph, or as a digital collage. Both processes involve digital software and digital printing like Adobe Photoshop. However, the difference lies between simple photographic grooming versus allowing the software to be the primary

tool that constructs the resulting piece of art. There is perhaps a noticeable difference upon inspection of images like *Screen Glitch* when compared to those like *SHIFT,* where one is impossible AFK[8] in a literal sense and one is not.
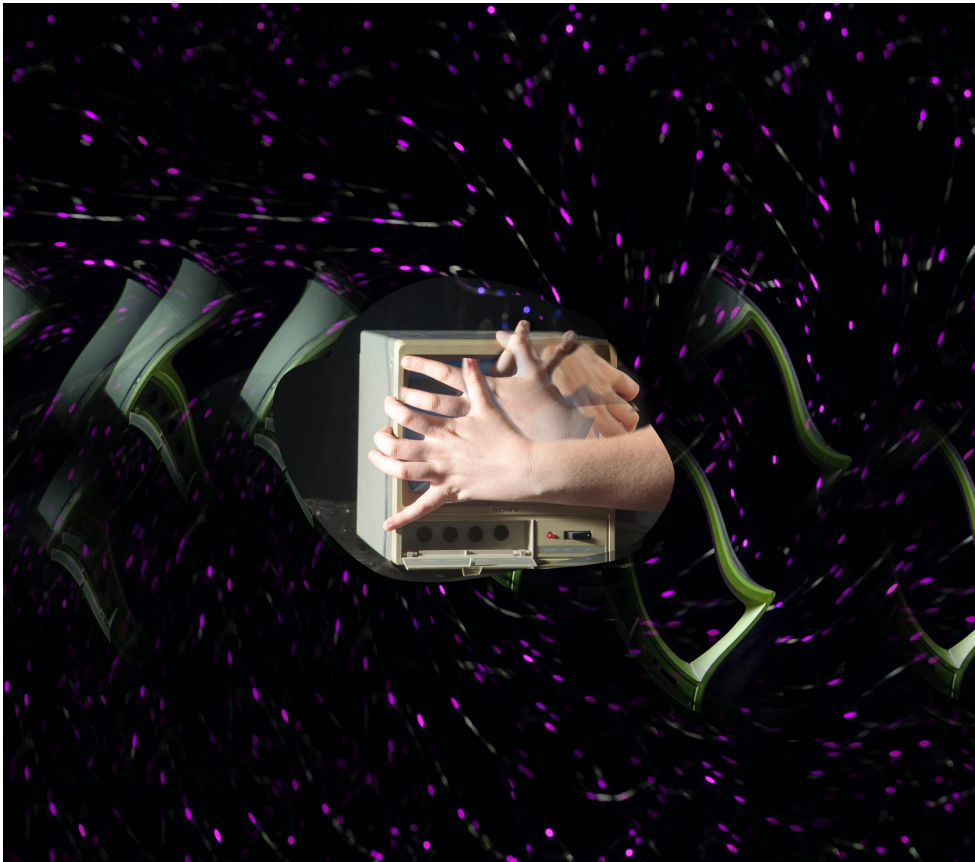


**Savannah Calhoun,** ***Screen Glitch,*** **Inkjet Print, 2022**

This practice of considering the meanings that are carried within the tools I choose to use takes cues from artists I am inspired by and think about in my making process, specifically Lucas Blalock and Jordan Tate. During Blalock's artist lecture for the New Photography 2015 *Ocean of Images* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art,

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[8]AFK means "away from keyboard." Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto.* pg 6.

he spoke at length about the importance of treating digital tools like hand tools in his work beyond the means of basic correction, and typical photographic editing process.[9]
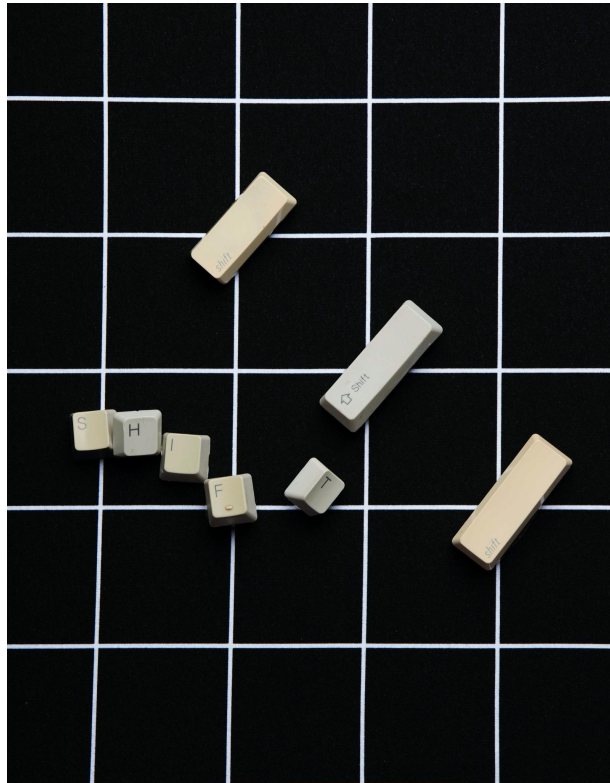


**Savannah Calhoun, *SHIFT,* Inkjet Print, 2022**

Many of his works, like *Shoe* (below) which was featured in the aforementioned exhibition, are the result of analog photography that is then used as a tool or ingredient to create a different work of art entirely via tools in Adobe Photoshop such as the clone stamp. In his Art 21 special titled "Lucas Blalock's Digital Toolkit,"[10] much of his process is revealed, displaying his use of large format photography alongside

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[9]*Panel Discussion | Ocean of Images New Photography 2015*

[10]Blalock, Lucas. "Lucas Blalock's Digital Toolkit."

digital tools like Adobe Photoshop to resolve his work. He explains his ideas of Photoshop as the replacement for the darkroom and how he as a photographer exists in a liminal space of analog and digital imagery. I understand his work as addressing photography as a being, and fluctuating between exposing and censoring his labor as an artist as a form of subversion. The tools that both he and I use have a history of standards for how they are used and what they are to create. His claim, which I agree with, is that photography has historically been a medium that hides a significant amount of labor, the end goal is to hide as much labor as possible and situate the image within a believable reality. However, by making such bold marks within the image, Blalock shows his labor explicitly.



*Shoe,* Lucas Blalock, Inkjet Print, 2013

In a different light of *Cyber Fantasy,* image relationships are forced by placement and superimposition, as well as recognizing the constituents of photography in a similar way to the early work of Jordan Tate. In exhibitions such as his simply titled *New Work* from 2011, Tate uses a non-traditional framing and hanging sequence to

literally pit photographs against each other and boldly ask the viewer to consider the relationships of the photographs from one to another just as much as the individual photographs themselves. These singular images reference the tools used to make a photograph, for example, a photograph of a strobe light, and another containing the famously recognized gray and white checkerboard that serves as the transparency layer in Adobe Photoshop.



**Jordan Tate, *New Work,* installation view, 2011**

In an interview with Rhizome, Tate explains the boundaries he places between photographs and technology in his work, and how the photograph is simply the starting point of his practice. He states, regarding this: "My use of photography is an attempt to expand the notions of what a photograph is, and how that functions - essentially, to use technological mediation to highlight the role of photography as a medium."[11]

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[11]Huff, "Artist Profile: Jordan Tate"

In works such as *New Work #93 & #97,* the subject matter of the image is a constituent to the process of making. Tate photographs a strobe light and a still life sitting on a fabric that is referential of Photoshop's transparency layer, suggesting a discourse on the tools that artists use to make their work and how they can themselves be a source of meaning within the medium. As opposed to previous analogue practices, artists like Lucas Blalock and Jordan Tate acknowledge and embrace an era that is difficult to define due to the uncertainty and acceleration of technological progress. Their work serves as subversions that resist the unspoken rules of photography: that it should seem as lifelike as possible and display little to no evidence of the photographer's labor, and also that the medium itself and its tools should not be addressed.
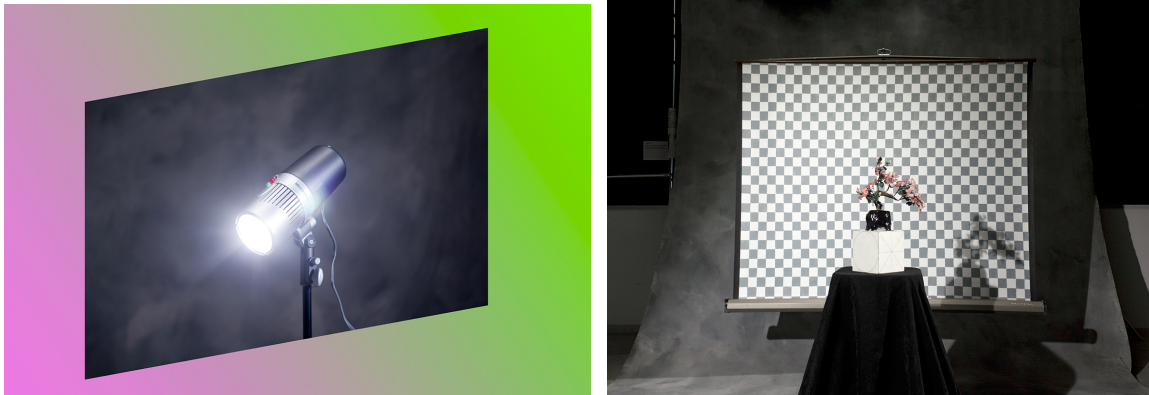


Jordan Tate, *New Work #97 & #93,* Inkjet Prints, 2011

I find myself responding in a similar way in images like *Cyborg* (below). In a similar vein, I use digital collage to show a modem (transmission to the internet) and a hand curling outward (the tactile transmission between humans and cyber spaces)

and like Tate, for example, explore the object points of transmission within photography and the internet.

I consider myself to be a photographer, but also an intermedia artist. I use photography as a tool to reach my means within my art, and I am immersed in photography to an extent that it is a significant element of my subject matter. *Cyber Fantasy*'s installation was an examination of photography and digital spaces through installation, digital photography, and digital collage.



**Savannah Calhoun, *Cyborg*, Inkjet Print, 2022**

. The installation format is essential to the work, as it allows the images to interact with one another in a different fashion. Here, superimposition creates new relationships between images. The work's eccentricity led it to have a necessity to exist beyond a rectangular frame and hanging on a wall.  The later processes of creating this work heavily involved deciding what those relationships were, and allowing the installations to bring new ideas to the work involving materiality.

***Cyber Fantasy* installation view, Savannah Calhoun, 2022**

The relationships between images become important when they are shown this way, as well as the magnification of the appointed wallpapers or backgrounds. Some of the material inspections made between superimposing images grew to be something I could tell was strengthening the work, however, I saw opportunities to make increasingly absurd material observations. For example, in the piece titled *TV* (below), the only point of comparison I can draw from the inside of the image to its corresponding background was the color orange of both the fur and the extension cord and otherwise shared virtually nothing in common. Likewise, there was a radial effect happening within this installation, as the grid pattern outside the borders of the TV screen echoed the pattern of the keyboard keys that each out beyond it. These material observations in the form of installation echo a similar idea of forcing image relationships and addressing the pixels,

threads, objects, or other parts that amalgamate to create a resulting photograph. By doing this, I exaggerate the action of working with parts or pieces.
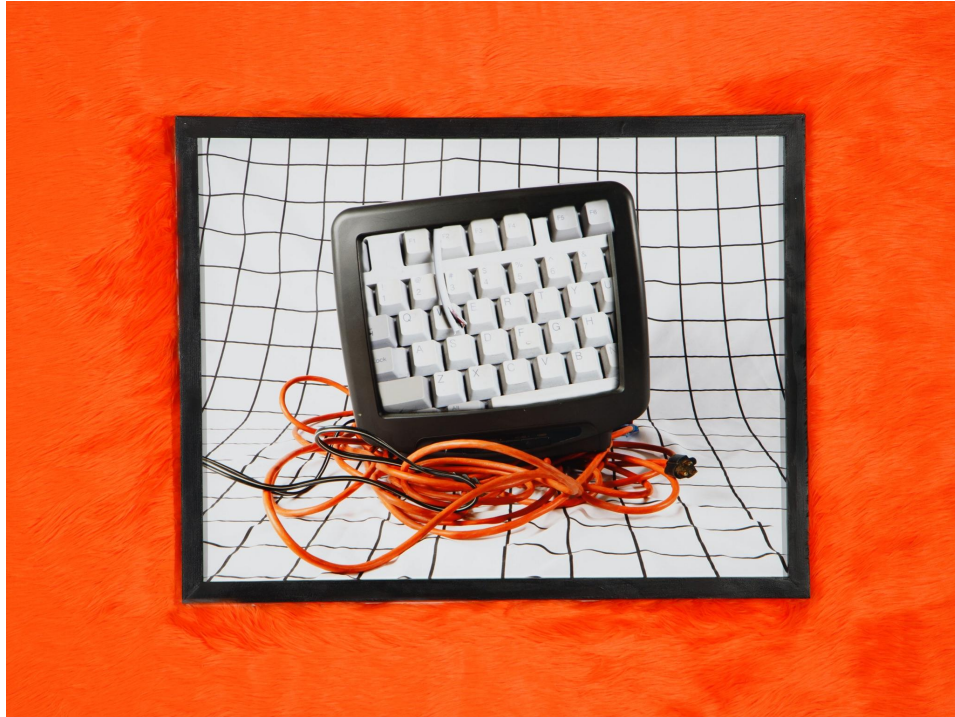


*TV*, installation view, Savannah Calhoun, 2022

## II.  VISUAL REFERENCE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

My work as a whole has maintained an influence from still life, both Dutch and Vanitas. Both of these practices of still life acknowledged two different ideas through the expression of possessions and objects: for seventeenth-century Dutch still lives, objects served as expressions of wealth and joy; whereas Vanitas refers to the idea of "memento mori" and uses objects in a darker sense, that is, in reference to the ever-existent possibility of death, reminding viewers of their own mortality and that of others[12]



**Peter Claesz,** *Vanitas Still Life,* **Oil on Panel, 1685**

Dutch still life of the Golden Age often uses its subject matter to express a time of

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[12]Bryson, *Looking At The Overlooked.* pp 136-175

joy, ostentation, and celebration through religious iconography and objects of wealth. These still lives often contained fruitful objects: flowers, feasts, heaving amounts of excess and opulence[13]. On the contrary, Vanitas still lives in the same period and region use organic materials such as plants or food and reminders of fleeting time, beauty, youth, and all things that symbolize time passing and mortality. For example in the painting *Vanitas Still Life* by Peter Claesz pictured is a human skull, flora, a burning candle, a pocketwatch, and other items that suggest morality and/or a passage of time, especially when grouped together.

Particularly, I was drawn to the act of using objects as a point of study through photography and history, and in *Cyber Fantasy,* that applied to the recent past (the last 20 years or so) and present, including computer parts, iPads, screens, and keys. Using practices that were used for social commentary centuries ago, I found myself inspired to apply similar ideas to photography, art, and the internet with a different set of objects and a newer medium. I could draw similar thematic expressions between both Dutcch and Vanitas still life, and I find that using more recently invented objects simply applies these ideas to the present. The opulence and excessiveness of Golden Age Dutch still lives are comparable to the vastness that is photography and the internet. The idea of material wealth translates to intangible digital possibilities. By comparison, the mortal themes of Vanitas still lives apply to the obsolescence of technology, specifically the objects photographed within *Cyber Fantasy*

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[13]Bryson *Looking At The Overlooked.* pp 60-136.

The two pieces in this exhibition titled, respectively, *Untitled Still Life #1* and *Untitled Still Life #2*, are a diptych, and complement and depend on one another in their installation. They each sit with lemons and/or limes, grids, flora, and a level of disbelief that might place them in a discomfort in the uncertainty of the images' origins.



**Savannah Calhoun, installation view of *Untitled Still Lives #1 & #2, Cyber Fantasy,* 2022**

In this work, I imbue meaning onto objects that have existed in still life in the past. In this case, I have consistently had strong conviction that lemons and limes, in my work, exist as metaphors for rapid change, by using the way they affect the senses.

Lemons, and limes, are sweet, but, also, they are sour. They are jarring and bitter. But with application, they are much more. There is also the common saying of "turning lemons into lemonade" which I find charming, as it sits within my attempts to create a positive situation or a positive outlook out of something that can otherwise cause self-inflicted anxiety and overwhelming. On another note, as a photographer dealing with photography as a subject matter, the act of creating is metaphorical and important in this work, which can also lend itself to the labor of 'making lemonade.'

I pair lemons, limes, and all of this conversation confirming a broken iPad, and a webcam. By applying the same sensory ideas to these tools, I see them as an extension of the human body, particularly, the eye. By pairing these two groups of things, a comparison about the state of the internet, photography, and its sweetness and bitterness as it expands, and contrasting them between black on white and white on black grids, I sum up the ideas of optimism, fear, anxiety, and mixed emotions towards media.

I had the privilege to see Farah al-Qasimi's installation *Everywhere there is splendor* at the St. Louis Contemporary Art Museum while it was installed between September of 2021 and February of 2022. I was able to spend a significant amount of time observing this work, multiple times in person, as well as attending al-Qasimi's artist talk when she visited the Contemporary Art Museum. Her work, while working with images and imagery, deals with a more personal, anecdotal subject matter of her bicultural identity as a woman from both the United Arab Emirates and the northeastern

United States. In this way, I was inspired by the application of icons and repeating imagery, and the connections that could be made between images, to the artist's life and personal experience. While my own work is seemingly less personal, there was something to digest from hearing al-Qasimi speak about the connections of color within the works, and the concept of the color pink as bodily and inherently tied to identity, which connects the resulting installation.



**Farah al-Qasimi,** *Everywhere there is splendor,* **installation view, 2021**

By taking cues from photographic artists like Farah al-Qasimi, Jordan Tate, and others, photographic murals such as that of the two hand-cloud images speak to the materiality and composition of the images that are framed and superimposed over them.

In this case, the mural is a high-res scan of a small section of a larger cloud fabric used as a backdrop to make the two front photographs. They contrast and create tension with one another, as the skies that occupy the framed images are seamless and realistic, and the mural sitting behind is hyper detailed. A viewer can see the weaving patterns easily and distinguish the different textures of the two.



Savannah Calhoun, *Clouds* installation views, *Cyber Fantasy,* 2022

I have discussed symbolism in this work briefly, in terms of still life, but it is important to note several repeating symbols within *Cyber Fantasy.* In the sense of the *Clouds* installation, both hands, which appear in other works, and clouds, which only appear in this work in the show, are symbolic. Here, hands coincide with the idea of ownership, authorship, and responsibility for something that has been made or done. Contrasting between each side of the corner within this installation is a straight

photograph and also a digital collage with layerings of my hands moving in an

upward-left direction. While the tension exists between what is made by a camera and

what is made by a computer, the wholeness of the installation comes from the

backgrounds of a blue cloudy sky within the images, and re-presented once again with

a digital scan of a section of the same fabric used to create the images. By doing this, I

further investigate the ideas of materiality in imagemaking, and, as mentioned prior,

working with pixels and immeasurably small units that congregate to form a whole.
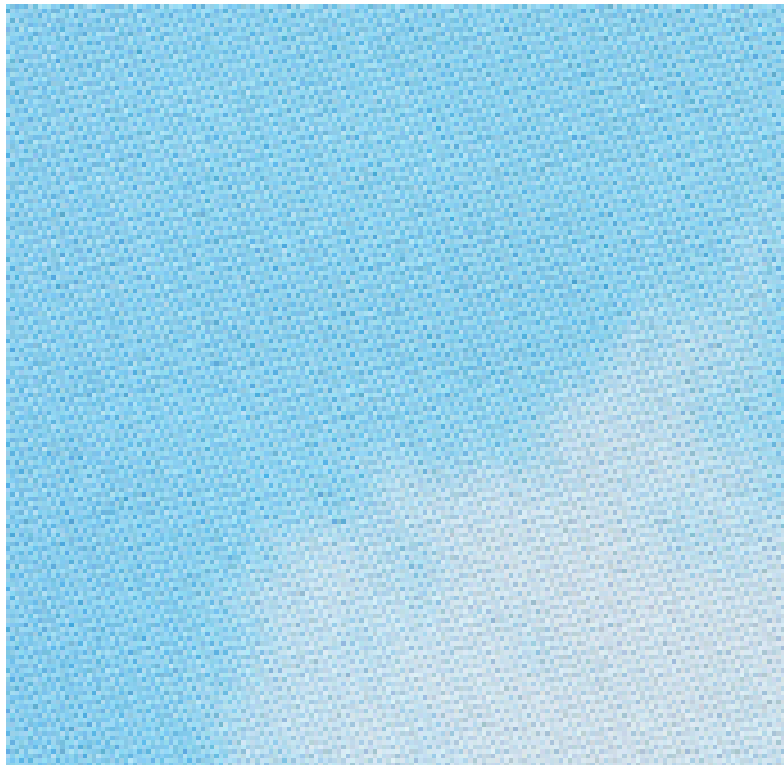


**Savannah Calhoun, close up of scan from *Clouds* installation, 2022**

Regarding the cloud as a symbol, it is easily tied to *the* cloud: that being a series

of services that provide online storage or software as opposed to holding data locally on

a computer. [14] Clouds in this sense make data accessible across multiple devices, and

[14]Cha, Bonnie. "Too Embarrassed to Ask: What Is 'The Cloud' and How Does It Work?"

for sharing. In theory, it is exponentially larger storage than any single person owns

locally, but also serves as a means for data sharing, connecting people somehow in a

new way via the massive body that is the internet.

I have always been intrigued by the language choice for describing technological

beings. In this case, clouds are both an acquired concept of data, the internet, and

storage, but also, a celestial body from Earth, something we can see but not touch. In

this regard, I see a perception of the internet, being intangible, as a celestial body in and

of itself. This point can be made not only in its sheer size that is measured in intangible

measurements, but also by human interaction. The more we contribute to the internet's

body, the larger it becomes.

Another symbol present within *Cyber Fantasy* is the grid. It appears so often

within this work that is figuratively drilled into the viewer by the end of viewing the

exhibition and clearly is important to address. The historical concept of the grid via

Rosalind Krauss was the primary inspiration for this; where tying the reflections of 20th

century to 19th century art and comparing the juxtaposition of those observations to that

between when she initially wrote and published *Grids* to when I as an artist am making

work, after the "warm-up" of the 21st century in the early 2020s. Krauss's essay claims

that there is a mysterious meaning hidden behind the grid as a symbol of modernism;

she famously stated "the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art."[15]

In the same way that grids establish space practically and also within art, in

*Cyber Fantasy,* they serve as a metaphor to address spatial awareness of cyber spaces

and photography when concerning physical space and temporal space. Grids are

seldom left to exist as they are by me, I am far more interested in warping and

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[15] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myth*s, p.1.

questioning the grid's integrity. In a studio setting, this is done by easily bending the

grid backdrop, and further amplified in post production.
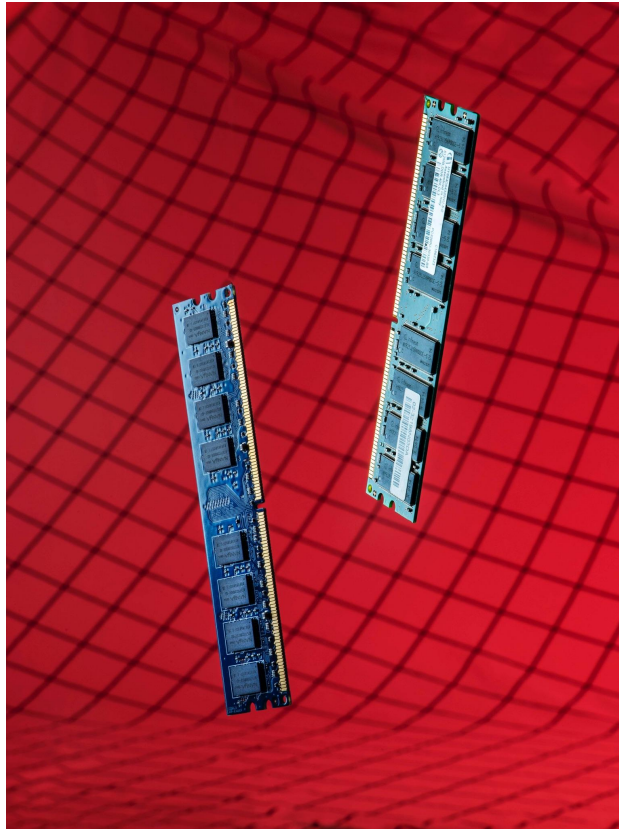


**Savannah Calhoun, *Motherboards,* Archival Inkjet Print, 2022**

As an artist, confronting art history in the context of the making of my own work is

obviously important, however, even more pressing than that is the temporal ambiguity

within *Cyber Fantasy.* A mixture exists within the work of both older and less old, almost

new, remains of technology, ranging from monitors of the 1990s and even 1980s, to the

first generation of the iPad, released in the early 2010s. The grid is important temporally

in this way, as well, continuing to self reference and contribute to the image's materiality.

## III.	CYBER FANTASY AND DIGITAL AMBIVALENCE

> NOW, WE'RE A SPECIES OF EDITORS. WE ALL RECYCLE, CLIP AND CUT, REMIX AND UPLOAD. WE CAN MAKE IMAGES DO ANYTHING. ALL WE NEED IS AN EYE, A BRAIN, A CAMERA, A PHONE, A LAPTOP, A SCANNER, A POINT OF VIEW. AND WHEN WE'RE NOT EDITING, WE'RE MAKING. WE'RE MAKING MORE THAN EVER, BECAUSE OUR RESOURCES ARE LIMITLESS AND THE POSSIBILITIES ENDLESS. WE HAVE AN INTERNET FULL OF INSPIRATION: THE PROFOUND, THE BEAUTIFUL, THE DISTURBING, THE RIDICULOUS, THE TRIVIAL, THE VERNACULAR AND THE INTIMATE. WE HAVE NEXT-TO-NOTHING CAMERAS THAT RECORD THE LIGHTEST LIGHT, THE DARKEST DARK. THIS TECHNOLOGICAL POTENTIAL HAS CREATIVE CONSEQUENCES. IT CHANGES OUR SENSE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO MAKE. IT RESULTS IN WORK THAT FEELS LIKE PLAY. WORK THAT TURNS OLD INTO NEW, ELEVATES THE BANAL. WORK THAT HAS A PAST BUT FEELS ABSOLUTELY PRESENT. WE WANT TO GIVE THIS WORK A NEW STATUS. THINGS WILL BE DIFFERENT FROM HERE ON…[16]

The comparable metaphor between the urge to document our lives and post them online for all to see and death is that when posting photographs and documenting, rather than interacting with the present, we are creating a future past. By this I mean that photos posted online are consistently fixed as being in the past, but as they are gazed upon by the timeline's passersby, they are evidence of the past, and this simply continues indefinitely into the future. Photographs can never be as new again, and in this way, they are not meant to be. In Jurgensen's essay titled *Documentary Vision* from *The Social Photo*, this phenomenon is discussed. When focusing on the 24-hour story format that Instagram, Snapchat, and now Twitter and Facebook have, and their consequential sense of ephemerality, he says:

> While the photograph has long been associated with death, as an object in which experience is entombed and calcified, the social photo instead emphasizes an ongoing exchange, a springboard to future action and dialogue. It is necessarily less sentimental and nostalgic. Less at war with vanishing, this more ephemeral photography embraces disappearance and deliberately stages it for new ends,

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[16] Clement Cheroux, Joan Fontcuberta, Eric Kessels, Martin Parr, and Joachim Schmid, Joint Manifesto for From Here On, Rencontres d'Arles Photography Festival

ones that aren't merely about being able to use the present at some later date. Some may wrongly label the temporary photo as frivolous or trivial– after all, only unimportant images could be so easily parted with. But there is importance and meaning in witnessing ephemerality itself.[17]

Since there is a constant cycle of images posted for temporary viewing, those of us posting have adapted to this format and have a desire to curate accordingly. We are fully aware of the impending disappearance of our words and images via stories. Jurgensen's reference to using the present for a later date is more in line with social media culture in the feed or archived profile posts.

In her video essay "how real are we on social media? about the fictional and nonfictional in digital spheres," Birke Laubinger uses insight from both *Reality Hunger: a manifesto* by David Shields and Jurgensen's *The Social Photo* to describe the discrepancy between our ideas of what is reality and what is not in the realm of social media. She explains that social media is a special and unique curation by its post author to project their own ideas of themselves, i.e., the performed version of themselves, their own individual ideal, etc.  She uses the example of her own fitness and health, saying that the choice of hers, for example, to post a photo of a smoothie or herself exercising convinces her social media audience that she is an athletic, smart, young woman.

Rightfully, for many of us, this creates an intense temptation to compare ourselves to one another, as we are all advertising how it is that we would *like* to be seen, but not necessarily the way we are objectively observed. However, Laubinger suggests this is still *a reality* that we exist in. It may only be a fraction of a second captured by a pocket computer such as the iPhone, but nonetheless, it still "counts." To elaborate, deciding that there even is one single way to perceive an individual is further from the truth than a few

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[17] Jurgensen, *The Social Photo,* pg. 26.

smaller components of photographic documentation, acting as puzzle pieces to create a public image.

Multiple, contrasting truths are fully capable of both being true despite their compromise. The arranged culture of the internet also opens passageways for escapism, an escapism that can be the opportunity for some to fully express themselves when AFK (away from keyboard) their surroundings are too dangerous to do so, whether they be political opinions, sexual orientation, or gender. But, here, a mutual symbiosis exists.

My work as well as my personal philosophies have been significantly influenced by the book *Glitch Feminism* by Legacy Russell. In *Cyber Fantasy,* that is made clear by the embrace of the glitch, or of digital imperfections. Russell writes of "embracing the casualty of 'error,'"[18] in the context of feminism, queerness, or any other marginalized group of people active in online spaces. They create spaces for people to exist freely, on one hand, in anonymous online spaces, but also understand dissent against hegemony. In this right, Russell creates a graspable metaphor between glitching, or digital error, and the choice, especially regarding gender, sexuality, and race, to change the personal perspective of what is actually an error, or why we are made to believe something is erroneous in the first place.

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[18] Russell, "#GLITCHFEMINISM"
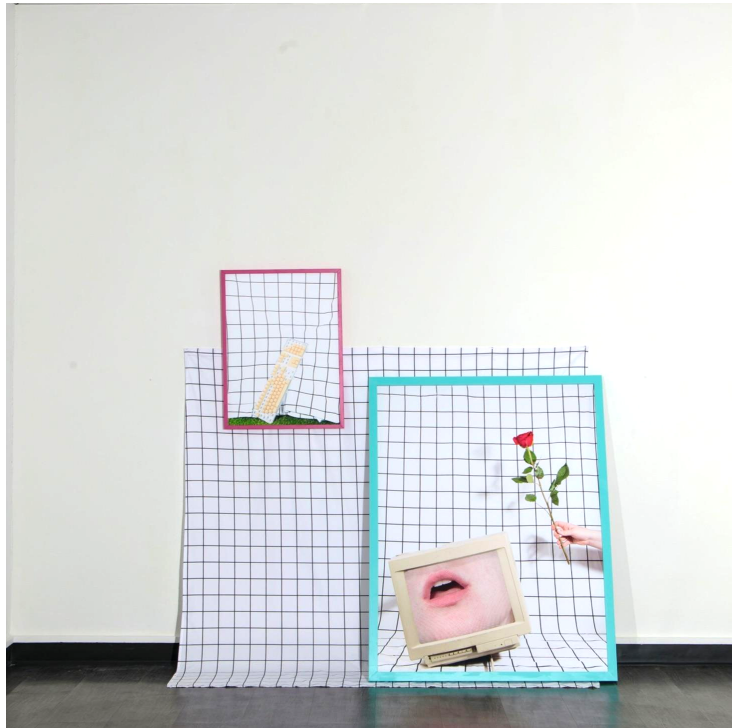
**Savannah Calhoun, *In My 4x3,* installation view, 2022.**

In terms of symbolism and representation, it has been established that

photography is in good company with the concept of death, and now, communication. I

feel personally like I have been taken through a whirlwind. I have whiplash. I am both

anxious and burned out by how much I see, and I am not alone in this. However, all of the

tools and inspiration I could ever need, beyond my needs, beyond anything I will ever do,

is at my disposal. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps I have also

significantly increased my screen time compared to before, and interacted with the ideas

of how my self and my work is affected by the internet.

Here is where the concepts of authorship and the self become a loop. I am both a

producer of images, and someone who has been subjected to a "second life" on the

internet. In a sense, *Cyber Fantasy* actually does reflect my self, my ideas, and how I feel

about making art, and how I have experienced it. It serves as a message from within in a sense, as I find the work is photographic while simultaneously discussing photography. By the same vein, I feature my own body within the frame as a move of self portraiture but even more importantly, self immersion.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter is much more in line with my prevailing feelings on this topic. I feel immense pressure as an artist to begin with, but the amazement I face in the middle of a digital and even photographic renaissance, both adds to the excitement and fervor that I possess to continue producing art, and the anxiety that might hinder some of my otherwise bolder moves in my work. Like Lucas Blalock, I consider myself a digital craftsperson in the sense that I have developed a set of tools that feels so vast in reference to the possibilities of art making and photography. Artists also, upon developing just a few technical skills, truly have limitless potential.

The moment that we give in to pessimism and accept the realities of how overly loud and stimulating the world is, without considering what might be hiding within, is the same moment that all hope is truly lost. A fantasy truly exists in digital spaces, but must be found.

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