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Unpeopling Portraiture



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled (Century Tree)* (detail) (2017). Photo courtesy of the Artist and JTT, New York

By  Nicola Lees

director and curator, 80WSE Gallery

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Jonathan Berger, *Untitled (Century Tree)* (2017)

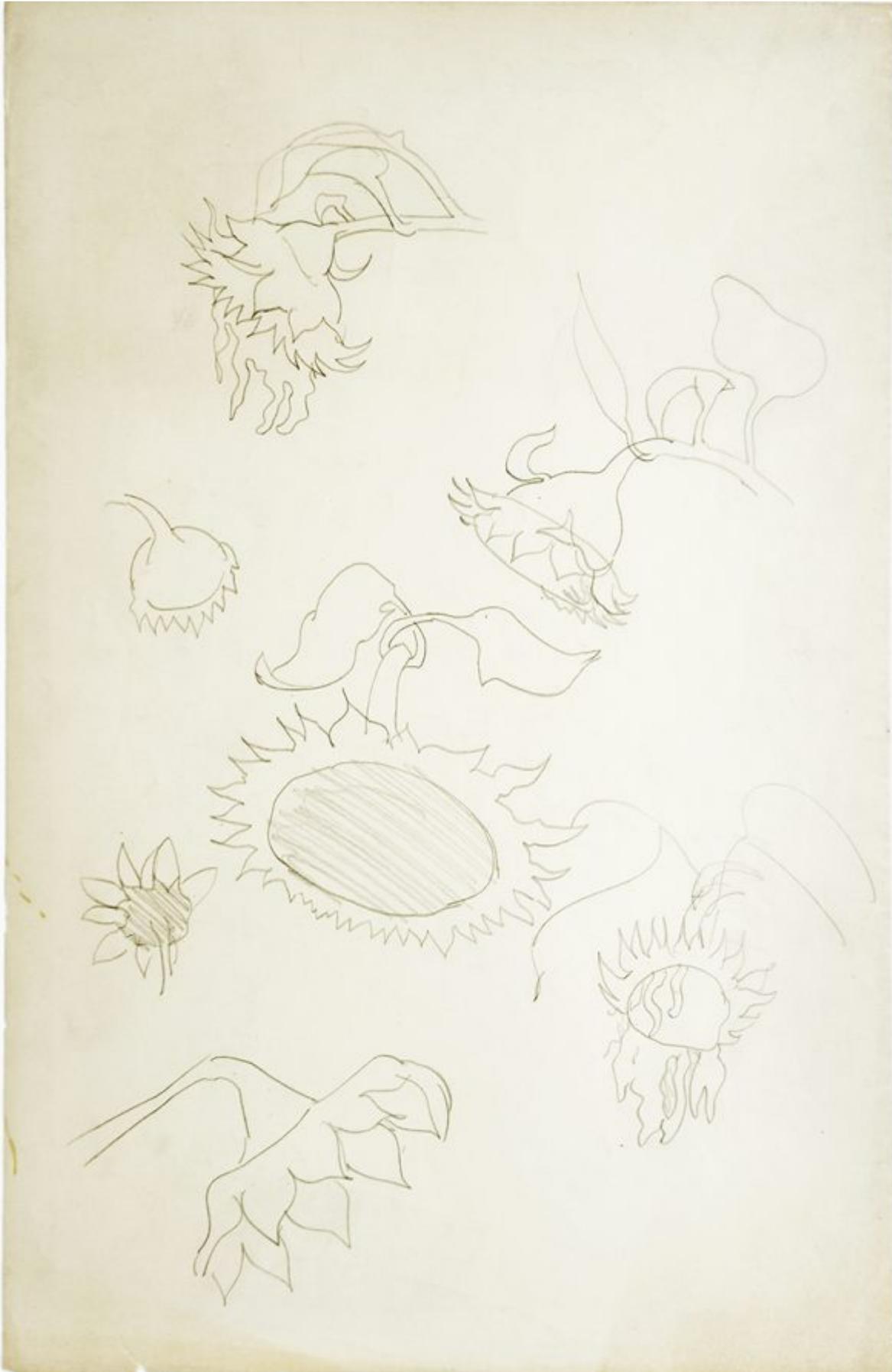
The art of [Jonathan Berger](#) rigorously picks apart the ways in which an exhibition site can be repurposed, allowing for an expansion of our understanding of what art can be and how it can be made. Berger, who has been singled out by artist [Carol Bove](#) as a “future great”, has spent much of the past decade making archival-based exhibitions, each of which functioned as an experimental biography of a historical figure, notably *Stuart Sherman: Nothing Up My Sleeve* at [Participant Inc](#) in 2009 and *Devotion: Excavating Bob Mizer* at [80WSE Gallery](#) in 2013. These projects approached exhibition-making as a form of portraiture, with Berger’s position as creator fragmented into different roles: artist, curator, journalist, producer and documentarian.

I first worked with the artist in 2014 on his [project](#) for Frieze London, *An Overture to Andy Kaufman*. He reassembled fragments from the personal life and career of the American entertainer Andy Kaufman (1949-84), creating an archive of ephemera and restaging a forgotten overture from Kaufman’s 1979 variety [show](#) at Carnegie Hall. This was just one part of a six-year investigative portrait of Kaufman, using abstract configurations of primary information in the form of artefacts and testimony to create an accurate, though inconclusive, portrayal of him.

Then, last year, after an eight-year hiatus, Berger returned to the construction of objects. Four of these will be on view at the [Independent art fair in New York](#) from 2-5 March at a booth shared by [JTT](#) and [Adams and Ollman](#) galleries. A central plinth will display these elaborately crafted, small-scale objects identified by the artist as being made from ‘elementary’ materials such as tin, chalk and putty.

One work, *Untitled (Century Tree)* (2017), depicts a [flowering agave](#)—which has roughly the same lifespan as a person, but dies after its first and only blooming. Made from a piece of salvaged tin, the silver surface of which appears both mirrored and corroded, Berger’s sculpture is installed on an imperfectly gridded plinth constructed from hundreds of small chalk blocks. These four autonomous works constitute Berger’s set-like, nearly monochromatic presentation.

Charles Burchfield, *Untitled (Sunflower Patterns IV)* (around 1915)



Chris Burchfield, *Untitled (Sunflower Patterns IV)* (c. 1915). Courtesy of Adams and Ollman, Portland

The galleries will also be showing nine nature studies by the American 20th-century painter [Charles Burchfield](#) (1893-1967) who worked almost exclusively in watercolor, focusing on his immediate landscape: his garden, snow turning to slush, the sounds of insects and bells and vibrating telephone lines. Burchfield was recently celebrated by the artist Robert Gober—he

included Burchfield's work in a mini-show within his own retrospective at [MoMA](#) in 2014. (Gober also curated an exhibition of Burchfield's paintings at the Hammer museum in LA, titled [Heat Waves in a Swamp](#), in 2009)

Ellen Lesperance, *Wounded Amazon (Ghost Ship)* (2017)



Ellen Lesperance, *Wounded Amazon (Ghost Ship)* (2017). Courtesy of Adams and Ollman, Portland

Berger and Burchfield will also be in dialogue with new large-scale paintings on paper by the American artist [Ellen Lesperance](#), which function as memorials to women involved in confrontational acts of civil disobedience. The artist is known for her paintings inspired by the hand-knitted sweaters often worn by women involved in protests, sit-ins, demonstrations

and civil disobedience.

Her meticulous painting of such sweaters upon a hand-drawn grid can serve as actual patterns for the recreation of these garments—in this way capturing the potential of past events to inspire future actions. By transforming source material into something interactive, the works speak to participation and protest as being not radical, but essential and personal.