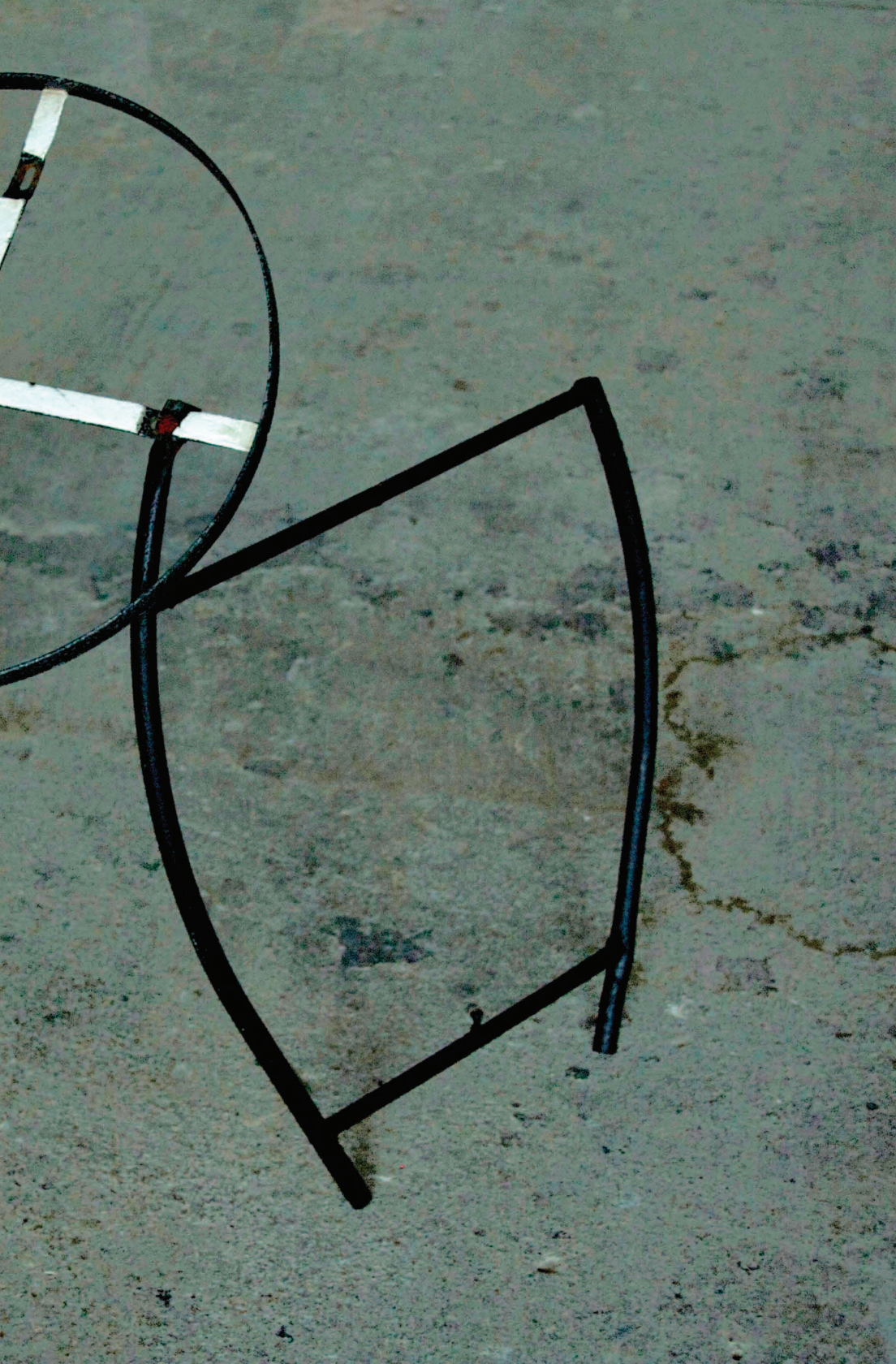




Untitled (bondage), 2012. Acrylic pedestal and steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.





Mel Trad

Incorporating raw materials collected in and around St. Louis, Mel Trad rigorously examines the sculptural medium in the process of creating each of her works of art. While conceptually and visually distinctive in their own right, Trad's works — particularly their geometric shapes, unified lines, and industrial surfaces — also subtly evoke the predominant sculptural styles and sensibilities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. CAM Assistant Curator Kelly Shindler spoke with Trad about her practice and her *Great Rivers Biennial 2012* project, installed in CAM's galleries and Performance Space.

Kelly Shindler: *You work primarily with discarded or found objects and materials, which you then transform into sculptures that are distinctly your own. Can you talk about your process? How do your ideas take shape and how does a piece come into being?*

Mel Trad: I keep my practice open-ended. I use found materials as well as fabricated objects and organic forms. My process is grounded in systematic examinations of material combined with exploratory play. Within the studio, pieces come together in a series of trial-and-error experimentations. Works start by breaking apart materials — like a larger metal form or several yards of salvaged fabric — and then organizing them based upon their basic physical properties, such as volume,

shape, color, texture, age, and mass. From this stage, the works are fleshed out by testing different arrangements of forms until a productive tension arises between one or more materials.

KS: *In other words, the works result from a kind of spontaneous interaction?*

MT: The works develop at their own pace, originating from processes specific to each piece. What they do share is a method in which I gather objects, investigate their material properties, deconstruct their form, and then reconstitute them into new artworks. Ultimately, the final form for each piece comes together in a different way but all the works share the same starting point. Some are constructed and refined over the course of as many as three months, while I have made other pieces in as little as two days.

KS: *Many of your sculptures make reference to various aspects of art history, whether particular movements such as Minimalism or iconic forms themselves, such as the reclining nude figure. How does this relationship arise?*

MT: I apply historical references to communicate the fundamental ways in which we experience art objects and the human body. *Untitled (reclining nude)* (2012), for example, references the ubiquitous tradition of portraying the nude body, from the Hellenistic era and the art of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680)

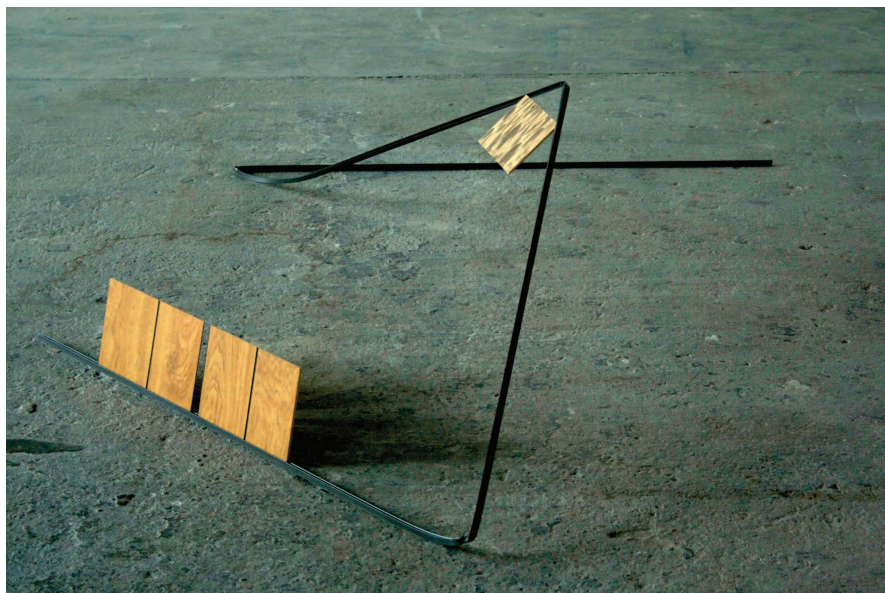
to that of Édouard Manet (1832-1883) and Henri Matisse (1869-1954). I use this reference within *Untitled (reclining nude)* to problematize how the nude body has been portrayed within painting and sculpture over time.

KS: *Taking Untitled (bondage) (2012) as an example, can you explain how your works arrive at their final form, including the title?*

MT: *Untitled (bondage)* began with a scrap of steel fencing. I secured the metal in a vice, then bent and twisted the form and sawed off a few of its legs. Originally thinking I wanted the piece to be sitting on the floor, I nonetheless experimented with its positioning. I tested out different modes of presentation, first attempting to use an old rectangular glass tile as a small platform. After further tests

with a mirrored pedestal I had in the studio, I arrived at the idea for the final piece. I subsequently hired a plastics manufacturer to produce an acrylic pedestal in high gloss white, atop which I placed the metal form. The title refers to my own interpretation of the form as a woman in S&M bondage.

KS: *In your works, there seem to be not only art historical references but also a cogent interest in anthropomorphism. In other words, through titling and associations – not to mention your working process – you animate the seemingly inert materiality of your sculptures. Could you please expand upon your interest in the human body, particularly how it manifests in your Great Rivers Biennial installations?*



Untitled (wood panels), 2012. Steel and composite wood, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

MT: I am interested in how we as humans relate to objects, not only in terms of how we construct these objects but also how they influence our behavior. From this point of departure, I create artworks that investigate how we make meaning and build relationships with things, across art history and also in everyday life.

KS: *Since the works are partially contingent upon their environment (how and where they are installed), as you note in your first response, how might their state — both in terms of their installation and how we, as viewers, experience them — shift and evolve from exhibition to exhibition?*

MT: Looking ahead to the future, I am pushing towards creating an environment — to building a body of work that acts specifically for a space. This exhibition is a good example of this kind of spatial exercise. CAM's Performance Space and the gallery in which I am exhibiting present particular factors that influence the viewer's experience. The Performance Space is the most open; steps into the space give the illusion that it is recessed into the ground, and viewers can also climb up to the balcony for panoramic views. In formal terms, the Performance Space is similar to an arena, customarily tied to venues of sport and ceremony, theater and spectacle. All the works in the space therefore address the notion of performance in some way.

The gallery is a traditional space, white-walled and smaller in scale. *Untitled (bondage)* and *Untitled (painting)* represent conventional strategies of installation. The former speaks to the sculpture's history of elevating often modest forms and the latter addresses the material assistance

necessary for painting (as seen in its wooden stretcher, Lucite frame, and metal cord affixing the piece to the wall).

KS: *How has the scale of the Great Rivers Biennial exhibition impacted how you think about your work, from production to installation?*

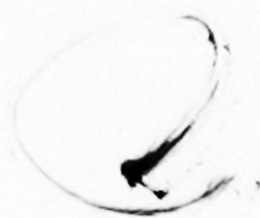
MT: In preparing for this exhibition, my work has sustained a sort of incubation period in the sense that I have developed this project in the studio over the past nine months. To illustrate this relationship to time and space, I am writing the dimensions of the studio on the low corners of the gallery walls. This is indicative of a longer production that would otherwise be invisible to the viewer.

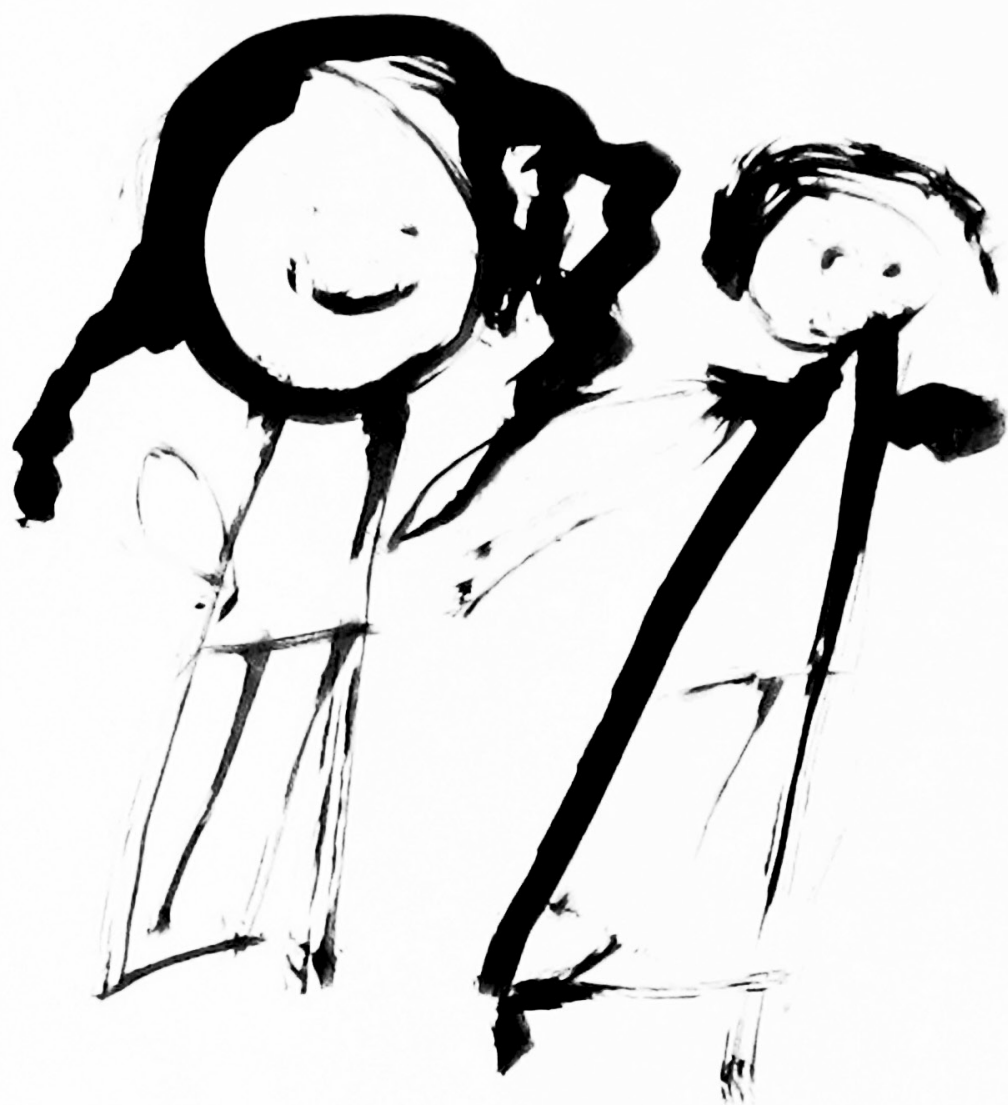
KS: *Can you talk more about the importance of play and ritual in your working process? For example, I understand that you often burn sage to scent the studio.*

MT: This is the first time I am exhibiting burning sage. Until now, I have been burning sage while I work. The sage acts as an index of ritual; it presents a different sensorial experience, while my other works are strictly visual. The sage also connects the exhibition back to my larger practice, which involves an intuitive process that breaks things down to their essentials. In order for me to do this, I start by playing with material so that I learn about it.



Between Word and Image (video still), 2012. Courtesy of the artist.





Asma Kazmi: Between Word and Image

Asma Kazmi directly engages disenfranchised communities and difficult subject matter in her work, from HIV-positive transsexual sex workers in New Delhi, India, to contemporary Halal butchering customs. She studies and often participates in various traditions and rituals to render unfamiliar experiences more readily comprehensible.

Kazmi encourages the conditions of displacement and discomfort — what she refers to as “liminality” — thereby challenging herself, her participants, and the viewer to empathize and connect with others through shared experience. CAM Assistant Curator Kelly Shindler interviewed Kazmi about *Between Word and Image*, the artist’s project for the *Great Rivers Biennial 2012*.

Kelly Shindler: *Your project involves individuals from an adult literacy program in St. Louis, asking them to create drawings that exercise their own visual language. Describe the collaborative process.*

Asma Kazmi: The three people I am working with are Nichole Collins, Larry Tillman, and John Yeates, and they are all enrolled at the Adult Education and Literacy program, which is part of the St. Louis Public School system.

The process of generating writings and drawings varies. I see my role as a facilitator, an artist, and a guide in this process. We meet every week and I do a presentation introducing the project’s participants to the work of selected artists or poets. We spend some time discussing this and finally, we generate a list of words based on the themes of my presentation. I read out the words and they are given a few seconds to write each one in a loose, gestural way. In addition, I ask Nichole, Larry, and John to write out narratives based on their life experiences or descriptions of events.

I am not sure if I would call this project a collaboration. I understand the notion of artistic collaboration as one where two or more people work together to realize a shared vision. In the case of *Between Word and Image*, there is certainly continual dialogue, arbitration, pedagogy, and a building of relationships, but there is no shared objective. Nichole, Larry, and John are the creators of the images as participants in the work. This certainly complicates the notion of artistic authorship, but I do not want to downplay the power dynamics inherent in the work. In fact, the main aim of the project is to create a platform where such power structures can be revealed and maybe even reversed.

KS: Can you talk broadly about your interest in literacy and what led you to the idea of working with partially literate adults here in St. Louis?

AK: Between Word and Image emerged out of my ongoing project *Playing Gender* (2009 - present), for which I worked with three *hijras* (cross-dressing biological men, eunuchs, or hermaphrodites) in New Delhi, learning the conventions of gender parody. During my time in India (in 2009), Mangla, one of the *hijras* I worked with, asked me many times to describe to her my experience of giving birth. Then one day, she handed me a piece of paper and told me that she had written down her own story of how she gave birth.

Mangla is functionally illiterate and a biological man. Her text was of immense interest to me for many reasons. Mangla's complete feminine identification, her trust in me to share this intimate fantasy that I could use in my work, and the marks she created on the page all imitated the form and logic of the Arabic script. Yet they were no more than controlled scribbles, holding meaning only for herself and for me, the confidant to her story. This page forced me think about what these marks were.

The marks lingered between text and image. Interpreting Mangla's marks was like decoding a gestural drawing. When a literate person reads, she has a pre-existing knowledge about a set of symbols and she decodes those symbols to derive meaning out of them. In the case of Mangla's writing, the symbols were familiar and held meaning, yet were undecipherable. This piece of paper inspired me to engage with local

semi-literate adults in a process of writing and drawing.

KS: The works in Between Word and Image are primarily pictorial. We see images of people, houses, suns, landscapes, and more — which clearly function as different kinds of mark-making from the works in your Playing Gender project. These new works are instantly more familiar to us on a symbolic register. At the same time, they evade any one reading or meaning, just as Mangla's drawings did. Has the experience of creating Between Word and Image surprised you in any way? What have you learned from working with this new group of participants?

AK: The broad framework for my practice is an exploration of liminality (a space in between the familiar and unfamiliar). Between Word and Image fits into my larger body of work since it induces liminality, or a productive disorientation between the viewer and the maker, the literate and the illiterate, and the sign and what it signifies.

Mangla's writing is based on her life experience, her fantasy, and her understanding of the form of the Arabic language. When conceiving the project, I knew that the people I would work with in St. Louis would have their own particularities and I could not account for these specificities until I got to know my subjects. Hence the process of creating marks with Nichole, Larry, and John had to be devised based on their ability to read, write, and comprehend.

Unlike Mangla, Nichole, Larry, and John are semi-literate. They are enrolled in a program to earn their GED and are on their



Between Word and Image (detail), 2012. Sumi ink on paper, 11 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

way to joining the ranks of the literate community. My challenge has been to reconcile their partial ability to read and write with the original intent of the project, which had to do with complicating the notion of personal expression, language aesthetics, and the inherent power dynamics between the so-called literate and illiterate worlds.

I think the way I accomplish this is by inviting the viewer to interpret the drawings (which linger between pictures and expressive marks) by deploying the conventional processes of decoding symbols and deriving meaning, much like the process of reading a text or analyzing a drawing. Yet this means of access is grafted onto a form — Nichole's, Larry's, and John's drawings — that escapes

such interpretive methods and leaves the viewer feeling unstable by being unable to decipher familiar signs.

KS: How does this project — particularly the way it challenges assumed paradigms of authorship, as well as the production and interpretation of meaning — relate to your larger practice? Why is it important to you to work with other people?

AK: I believe that art-making is context-sensitive and relational. My projects emerge out of questions that I have about the world and the artworks become a stage for an immersive and transdisciplinary investigation to research those questions. I see my works as dialogical events, which are grounded in the belief that facilitating complex and open-ended interactions between people in the transitional space of an art event is a transformative process that allows for an aesthetic of redefined and socially shared meaning. My own role in this production is that of a synergist or, in other words, an artist that incites a range of reciprocal actions to create dialogical artworks.



3750 63108 034, 2012. Pigment print, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.





MAY 11 — AUGUST 12, 2012

David Johnson: institutional etiquette and strange overtones

David Johnson is inspired by architectural environments, including institutional spaces such as museums, offices and other commercial spaces, and private homes. His images are produced using a large-format camera and reflect the serendipitous moments captured by the photographic process. While Johnson's photographs are rooted in various physical locations, they also suggest a universal sense of place in their elegant abstractions of the everyday interiors in which we live and work. For *institutional etiquette and strange overtones*, Johnson's project for the *Great Rivers Biennial 2012*, the artist photographed the spaces that comprise CAM as an institution — the museum's galleries and offices, as well as its patrons' private homes. Johnson spoke with CAM Assistant Curator Kelly Shindler about his practice.

Kelly Shindler: *Your work addresses the built environment and the relationship between the human occupancy of specific spaces and the subtle physical components of these spaces' interiors (such as natural and artificial light or architectural volumes and angles). Could you speak about how you come to determine sites for your projects? What do you look for when selecting a site?*

David Johnson: Site selection for my subject matter varies from project to project and space to space. When I began the work that focused on office environments (*The Office*, 2007-09), I examined several unfamiliar office buildings near my home. While photographing these environments, I intentionally began to play with angles, volume, and light. I wanted to find situations in which human personality competed with the structure of the space — perhaps detected in the discovery of a misplaced pencil sharpener, a smudge on the wall left by a chair, or the interplay between crisp daylight and buzzing fluorescent lights. The work I completed during the office project taught me a lot about formal composition, subtlety, and seeing the unexpected.

In contrast to the office environments, my work within domestic spaces was more of an outgrowth of happenstance. I took these images while staying at friends' homes on various road trips. I tend to be a curious person, so it is natural for me to look inside someone's refrigerator or tour all the rooms in a house. So, if I identified something particularly interesting, I'd retrieve my camera.

I became interested in the interiors of exhibition spaces while preparing for exhibitions of mine at Boots Contemporary Art Space and Los Caminos, both in St. Louis. I turned my camera to the walls of the galleries and used the quality of light as my subject matter. I hoped that people might move through the space and ask questions about the exhibition in relation to both the architecture and their own positions as viewers.

KS: You frequently move between a public and private setting in this series — from the galleries and offices of CAM to the personal homes of the museum's patrons, featuring their private collections. What was it like for you as a photographer to temporarily occupy these spaces?

DJ: When photographing each patron's home, I disciplined myself to be an inobtrusive voyeur. I was there to capture the essence of an individual's domestic space without attempting to express greater commentary on him or her as a person. I want these images to be intimate and provide something to which the viewer can relate, yet also maintain an element of ambiguity.

This work raises questions about how private spaces are organized or even curated. It is true that there are very

personal possessions within the space. However, these belongings are set out for specific reasons, namely that they might be shared with visitors or guests.

The offices of the museum become interesting intersections between public and private. They represent a very private part of the museum as a public institution, and they provide another opportunity to blur the notion of clearly defined public and private spaces. I am interested in photographing a place of work and not the worker, but sometimes a personal object on someone's desk becomes conceptually appealing — a dead orchid, a slightly offset stack of books, and a conference room with flip chart pages affixed to the wall testify to how the owners of these items intentionally place the objects. However, the use and intention of the objects become muddled in a frame that lacks context.

KS: Can you talk about the process of creating your images for this project? How was the experience different for each site?

DJ: In the private residences, trying not to outstay my welcome, I generally tried to keep the photo shoot to under four hours. I only had one opportunity and because I use a large format camera, I had to be very purposeful with my limited time. I knew what type of image I wanted to make, but I also kept an eye open for the unexpected. To be honest, I was quite amazed by the distinctiveness of each home. And I was even more surprised by how certain individual's art collections held my attention. This came from observing how I moved around a newly constructed International Style condo versus a home built in the 1920s, for example.

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Photographing in the museum was a wholly different mode of image-making. I had ample time with each shoot and the ability to return to the space often. This luxury allowed for more discoveries within the space. CAM is a space that is in constant flux. The art changes from exhibition to exhibition, personnel changes happen, and although they are less noticeable, cracks accumulate in the museum's structure. Therefore, it became necessary to photograph what was compelling at a given moment.

KS: *Can you share some of your artistic touchstones, both contemporary and historical?*

DJ: Historically, I am fascinated by Jacques Tati's films, particularly how they address setting and architecture. In my favorite film, *Play Time* (1967), which takes place in a modern version of Paris, Tati's protagonists only observe the iconic symbols of the city (such as the Eiffel Tower and the Sacré-Cœur Basilica) through reflections on buildings, windows, and doors. I've also been influenced by the New Topographic photographers Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Lewis Baltz. Their images challenged conventionally romanticized notions of landscape, whereas my work challenges our understanding of how space is inhabited or occupied.

My work is in direct conversation with contemporary artists Louise Lawler and Candida Höfer, who photograph interior architecture and institutions, respectively. Also, Olafur Eliasson's installations are significant for me. They produce an experience that I strive for in my own photographs — to have the viewer

become more aware of him- or herself in relation to the space of the exhibition.

KS: *What are you looking to achieve in your project for the Great Rivers Biennial?*

DJ: In my work for this exhibition, I hope to bring all of the ideas and subjects from previous projects together. Each site granted me access and trust, which enabled me to study and photograph a variety of otherwise inaccessible spaces.

For *institutional etiquette and strange overtones*, I want to explore not only how CAM works on a formal level, but also how individual people understand the various facets of the institution. The details of the space existing below the viewer's threshold are the ones that catch my attention. Cracks, a wire, a rainbow, shadows, daylight, the white walls, and the warm gray floors of the gallery spaces become the bass line (in the musical sense) for this body of work. The domestic spaces are the high notes. These high notes give the bass personality. The difference between high notes and bass notes, or as I understand the museum images, is truly minimal; subject matter, color, and composition are all very subdued. In juxtaposition, the domestic images are heavy with objects and color, and contain less formal focus.