



# ICONICITY

PAUL W. ZUCCAIRE GALLERY | STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY | JANUARY 26 - FEBRUARY 23, 2019



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AMERICAN ARTIST  
CARLA GANNIS  
JAN ROBERT LEEGTE

GRETTA LOUW  
KEIICHI MATSUDA  
OWEN MUNDY

TABITA REZAIRE  
ALICIA ROSS  
WARNAYAKA ART CENTRE

# CONVERSATION

## ARTIST/CURATOR GRETTA LOUW & GALLERY DIRECTOR KAREN LEVITOV

**GRETTA LOUW:** Karen, we met when I was invited to do an artist talk at Stony Brook by graduate students Corinna Kirsch and Rebecca Uliasz in 2017 and you reached out soon after about doing a show together. To kick off our discussion of the *ICONICITY* exhibition this past January, I'd like to start by asking you what drew you to the original concept?

**KAREN LEVITOV:** I really loved the talk you gave here at Stony Brook. The ideas you were exploring in your art resonated with concepts I had been thinking about as well—the pervasiveness of digital technology and how that is visualized and intertwined with our lives. Your work delves into these issues in a complex and really beautiful way. I wanted to begin a conversation about how we might collaborate on a group exhibition with other artists who also investigate these themes, in very different ways.

**GL:** Yes, I so appreciated that; it's an approach that's very representative of my curatorial practice. I may start with a concept or a theme that I'm exploring in my own artistic practice, but realize that my subjective experience is not enough to achieve the breadth of understanding I'm after. Through curation (and sometimes through artistic collaborations, like with the Warnayaka Art Centre) I get to work

with artists from a huge range of perspectives that are very different to mine; I always appreciate the depth this brings.

**KL:** I am also interested in bringing a range of diverse perspectives into the gallery and I feel that my most gratifying experiences as a curator are those in which a multitude of voices can be heard. A couple of years ago I curated a show called *ANTIFORM: Packer, Patrick & Ros* that was a dynamic collaboration between the three artists and myself as curator that allowed these voices to overlay and interact. I also try to provide ways for people visiting the gallery to express their unique voices within the context of what's on view. In two of our recent exhibitions, *Guerrilla Girls* and *Race, Love & Labor*, we devoted over twenty feet of wall space for visitors to write or draw their reactions to the concepts explored in the exhibitions. The insights and depth of the responses were truly inspiring. You mentioned your collaboration with the Warnayaka Art Centre—can you elaborate on how this came about and the resulting project?

**GL:** I have been collaborating with Warnayaka (a geographically remote Warlpiri, Indigenous art centre in the Australian central desert) since 2011. It was a connection that came about through social media and developed because the

Warlpiri artists and I share an interest in both the risks and the empowering potential of digitalization and the internet; digital colonialism and the increasing centralization of power on the one hand—and cultural exchange, the preservation of cultural heritage, and self-representation on the other. Our latest project, *Mirawarri*, is a digital image-making app for iOS and Android that we developed with Owen Mundy. It offers a First Nations alternative to digital pop culture platforms like Snapchat and Instagram filters and creates an Aboriginal ‘emoji’ lexicon.

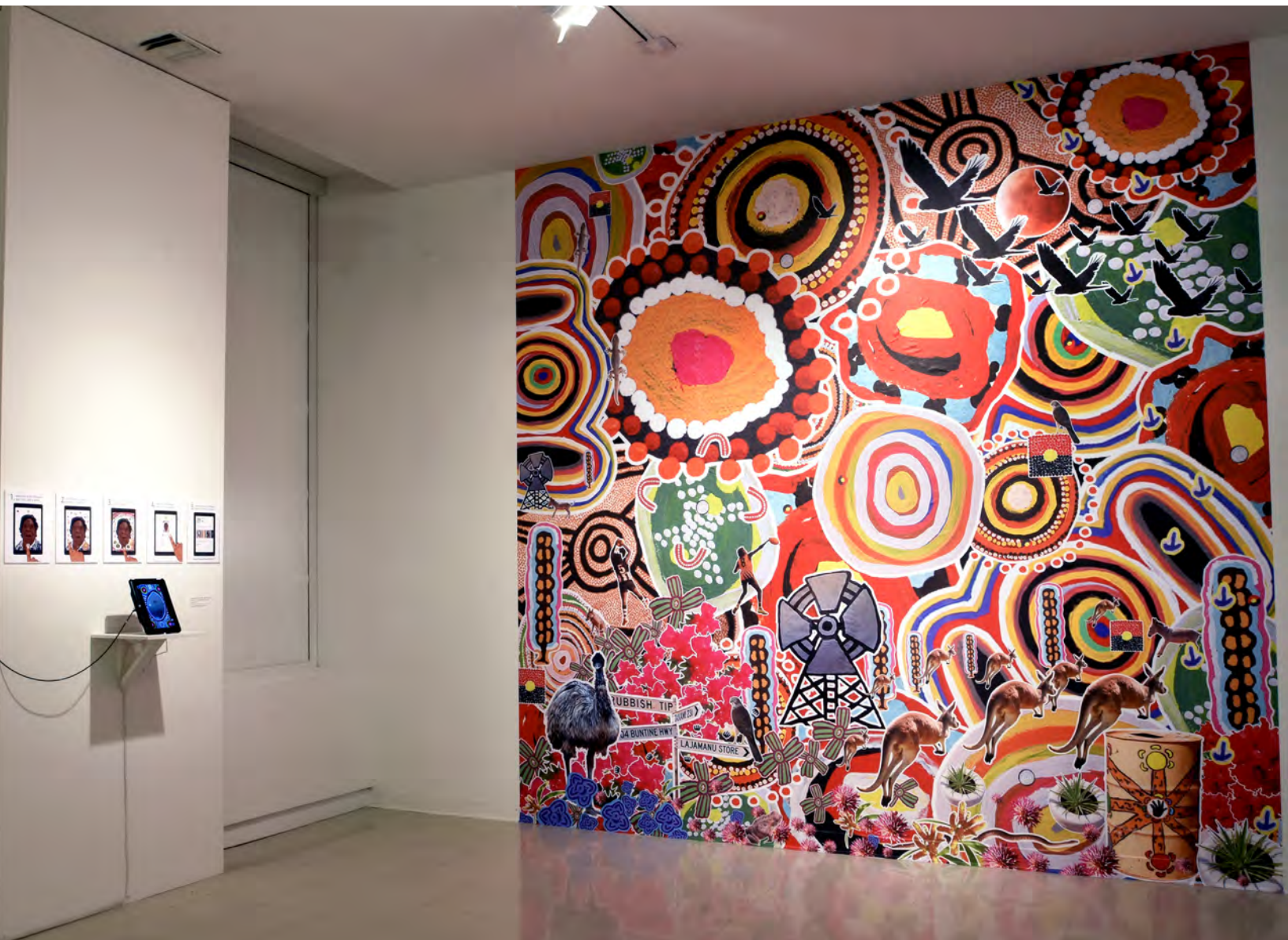
**KL:** The *Mirawarri* wallpaper and app really engaged our visitors and made them look and think about emoji in new, more expansive ways. Emoji originated in Japan in the 1990s and have since become an iconic digital language, but it wasn’t until 2015 that most platforms provided an option to vary skin tone or include women professionals. On the first day of *ICONICITY*, you gave a terrific walk-through of the exhibition. I was struck by your opening remarks about the profound impact of icons, historically and in contemporary society and how white and heteronormative the visual language of technology is. Your collaboration with the Warnayaka Art Centre, as well as the work of artists like Tabita Rezaire and American Artist, make significant contributions to reframing this dialogue.

**GL:** Well, certainly in the Silicon Valley-dominated tech world there is a dearth of cultural diversity—and that narrow perspective filters down into both hardware and software, like the automatic soap dispensers that don’t work for Black users or Tay, Microsoft’s chatbot that began

spouting fascist and sexist remarks within hours of going online. I noticed that much of the visual language that we associate with ‘tech’ was not only culturally very narrowly defined but also extremely misleading with its representations of the so-called Cloud as a disembodied, abstract entity that exists somewhere in a parallel universe of glowing, blue network nodes rather than in huge server farms on massive tracts of real estate tied together by an immense physical infrastructure of deep-sea cables, power lines, and processing devices. The sanitized imagery—the iconography of logos and pictograms—is a fig-leaf over the realities of digitalization; from its reenactment and reinforcement of imperialism to the catastrophic environmental costs.

**KL:** Absolutely true. One of the pieces in *ICONICITY* that had immediate impact as you walk into the gallery is American Artist’s *No State*. The cracked screens of 140 broken cell phone cases laid out in a precise grid on the floor were a provocative initiation to the exhibition.

**GL:** That’s right. I felt it was crucial to have this work at the threshold to the show because I think it clearly establishes not only the physicality of the digital (through the emphasis on the device) but also, more importantly, because of the truly brilliant work that American Artist does in this piece—as well as other pieces in the *Black Goopy Universe* body of work and associated essays—of unpacking technology’s antagonistic relationship to Blackness, and finding powerful ways to center Blackness within the technological realm. Artist has written about how Silicon Valley has operated as an ‘incubator for Whiteness’ and proposes the blackness of the screen, particularly the broken screen,



Warnayaka Art Centre, Gretta Lou, and Owen Mundy, *Mirawarri*, 2017, app for Android and iOS, installation view at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery with custom wallpaper by Gretta Lou and illustrations by April Phillips; photo by Maxine Hicks

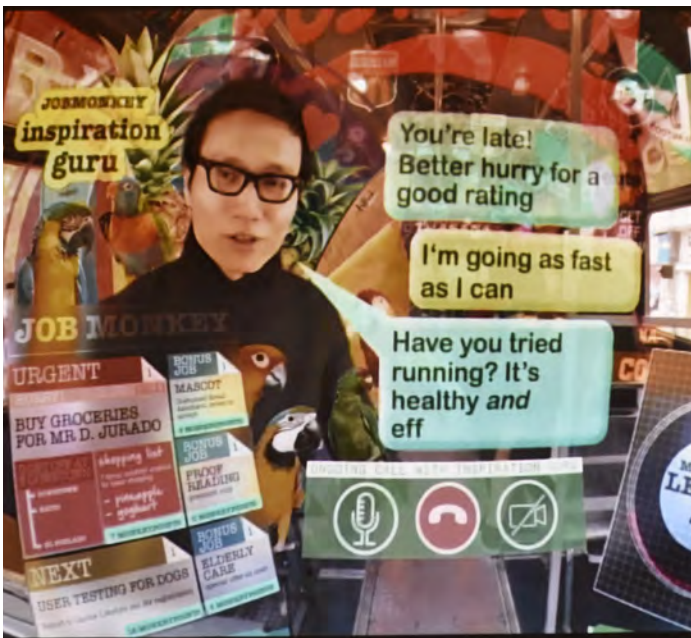
as antithetical to the inherent anti-Blackness of tech (“where white space is posited as neutral”). We urgently need more of this sort of critical thinking in both the tech and art worlds.

I think that there is a huge amount of work that needs to be done around deconstructing the ubiquitous symbols of the digital around us, which currently only serve to protect the interests of the tech elite. Tabita Rezaire is doing incredible work to build a new digital vernacular, one that resists white-washing and imagines technological networks as connected to existing ancestral, spiritual, biological, and fungal networks. It gives me flashes of hope and renewed enthusiasm for the digital. Then, situated right next to Rezaire’s work in the exhibition, we had *Hyper-Reality* by Keiichi Matsuda; a video piece that offers a dystopian warning about the path

technocapitalism is currently leading us down. It’s a contrast that gives food for thought, I think.

**KL:** I’d like to return to your ideas about the Cloud because I think it’s fascinating to see how you’ve taken these very challenging ideas—digital colonialism and the environmental devastation perpetrated by the tech industry—and created beautiful objects, but ones that make you think on a deeper level. The icon of the Cloud re-emerges in several of your pieces in the exhibition, often overlaid with an image of a jellyfish. Talk a bit about this layered iconography and also your translation of the imagery into differing media such as GIFs, lightboxes, printed fabrics, and hand-stitched pieces.

**GL:** I’ve been working on this body of work for the last 6 years, always returning to it I think because it felt so fundamental to many of the other issues I’ve made work about during that time and also to the ongoing discussions in tech-media-art-activism circles over the last few years. It’s the tech interests themselves who have primarily been defining both the language and iconography that we use to describe the digital—and that means the discourse, no matter how critical it intends to be, ends up being circumscribed. Around 2015, I started combining the work that I was doing deconstructing Cloud marketing imagery with jellyfish: I was thinking about swarms as networks; how these ancient life forms are flourishing in acidifying oceans; and reports of millions of jellyfish swimming en masse into the plumbing of coastal nuclear power plants and causing shutdowns—it’s weirder than sci-fi. I’m also very interested in the perceived contradiction between seductive beauty and inherent danger in relation to





both Medusozoa and digitalization. Then Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble*<sup>2</sup> came out and put so much of what I'd been thinking into words.

In the last year or two I've found myself increasingly drawn to heritage, artisanal, slow techniques for approaching re-thinking the hyper-capitalist digital, accelerationism, and climate collapse. In the latest works—the hand embroidered pieces on digitally printed linen—there is a conversation between neural-network-derived imagery and painstakingly slow needlework that speaks to the tension between sensuality and automation; bodies and machines; instant gratification and that

which is nourishing long-term. I suppose, in these works, I'm searching in the technicolor slime for visual metaphors that might capture the embodied digital in all of its allure and threat—and for a way of doing that that doesn't feel (as much) like it's contributing to the problem.

That leads nicely into Alicia Ross's works as well. Her incredible fiber pieces from the *Command\_ments* series are so evocative and sculptural in the space—and, of course, the content of the work is so incisive. I remember that we both had quite a visceral reaction to seeing the works in the flesh for the first time when they arrived at the gallery.

Opposite page: Keiichi Matsuda, *Hyper-Reality*, 2016, digital HD video

This page: Tabita Rezaire, *PREMIUM CONNECT*, 2017, video with light glow; photo by Maxine Hicks



**KL:** I loved opening the box and taking out these amazing textile pieces that are so opulent and lush with their rich fabrics, delicate embroidery, and tactile surfaces. Once hanging and draped in the space, the metallic threads and satin fabrics picked up the light and became shimmering icons themselves. The pieces use the forms of Catholic vestments and altar textiles but in place of liturgical icons, Ross embellishes these works with keyboard symbols such as the Command, Escape and Return signs. They become physical embodiments of the quasi-religious fervor of technology.

**GL:** I completely agree. Similarly, Jan Robert Leegte's works were a remarkable presence in the gallery. They are so simple but powerful, connecting architectural ornamentation and art history with web design and the psychology of our engagement with the digital.

**KL:** With just a few lines, Leegte suggests the rudimentary elements of computing—keyboards, screens with windows, virtual buttons clicked on or off—in both his analog and digital works.

This page: Alicia Ross, *Command\_ments* series, 2017-2019, fiber; photo by Olaoluwa John Alake

Opposite page: Carla Gannis, *Portraits in Landscape*, 2018, digital prints on foamcore; *Chimera Series*, 2019, 3D printed sculpture and custom garment; photo by Olaoluwa John Alake



**GL:** One thing we discussed early on and which became a guiding principle in curating this show was that I wanted there to be a range of media bridging the immaterial (projections), hardware (software and screens), sculptural, and analogue. I felt this was important in drawing the audience in and facilitating a critical re-thinking of the digital that might happen beyond just the intellectual level. This is something that I think Carla Gannis's work epitomizes. She works seamlessly across time-based, printed, and 3-dimensional mediums—and I know her work is always a crowd favorite. Could you speak about some of the reactions to Gannis's work, and possibly the exhibition more broadly?

**KL:** Gannis's sharp-witted work is immensely appealing and accessible, despite its intellectual and technical complexity. The 2D print series presented here is based on the 16th-century Italian artist Arcimboldo's Mannerist portraits in which the artist painted his subjects as made up of various vegetables. Gannis takes this idea into the 21st century with her portraits and backgrounds made up of emojis and digital icons. Much to the pleasure of our art history students and faculty, the exhibition also included Gannis's *Garden of Emoji Delights*, an animated riff off Hieronymus Bosch's triptych from around 1500, in which the sins of earthly beings are transmorphed into a digital dystopia. Visitors were also intrigued by Gannis's 3D-printed figures that have a Barbie-like appearance until you look closely and see their distorted limbs and tech-fashionable attire.

In a university setting, the exhibition as a whole provided significant intellectual fodder—complemented by a provocative

artist talk with American Artist in conversation with visiting artists Dread Scott & Jenny Polak and Stony Brook University Professor of Art Stephanie Dinkins, discussing the visual language of borders and technology as they relate to issues of race and identity. For me, what was super exciting about this exhibition was that each artist engaged with relevant issues in ways that are intellectually stimulating, deeply thoughtful, and often frankly gorgeous, and that each of their voices could be heard as a unique entity as well as in concert with others in the gallery, making new connections and generating new ideas.

**GL:** There's still so much work to be done to unpack the environmental, political,



social, cultural, and psychological impacts of digitalization that it can feel overwhelming, particularly in the context of such rapid technological change and looming climate catastrophes. That is all the more reason to resist the obfuscating effects of the sanitized language and iconography. We need to continue to expand our shared vocabulary—both verbally and visually—around these topics so that these new languages can form the

basis for creative, wide-reaching, collaborative, un-furling worldings beyond the proscribed limits of proprietary systems and tech-industry-approved modes of thinking and acting.

It was such an honor to have the chance to work with this amazing group of artists—and you and your fantastic team at the gallery. Thank you, Karen.

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- 1 American Artist, *Black Goopy Universe*, *unbag* Issue 2, <http://unbag.net/issue-2-end/black-goopy-universe/>, accessed 20.01.2019
  - 2 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016

*ICONICITY* installation at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, 2019, showing works by Gretta Louw and Jan Robert Leegte; photo by Maxine Hicks



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Karen Levitov  
Director and Curator



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