

ANCIENT GRAINS

By [Madeline Weisburg](#) September 8, 2020 1:30pm



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Though [Rochelle Goldberg](#)'s exhibition "Psychomachia" originally opened at [Miguel Abreu](#) in early March, before New York's lockdown, the show revolved around what has since become the signature foodstuff of the COVID era: the sourdough loaf. The floor piece *Picnic* (2020) comprised twelve crumbling rounds of bread that were formed around glass bowls and studded with coins. Another such loaf rested on a low plinth in *Great Gardener Makes* (2020), surrounded by scattered crumbs. In *Bread Garden* (2020), hunks of bread were cast in aluminum and spread amid piles of tuna cans.

Goldberg is known for her inventive use of organic materials—ranging from snakeskin to wild lilies to felted tufts of human hair—employing them in ways that emphasize their particular behaviors and properties. Among her signature materials is chia, a plant species that propagates quickly and spreads across surfaces like grass, which she often uses to grow carpets that sprout and die over time. Other installations have incorporated pools of crude oil that emit harsh fumes as they evaporate. The peculiar array of sculptures and installations in “Psychomachia” were inspired by the story of the fifth-century saint Mary of Egypt, a prostitute and later Coptic penitent who self-exiled from Egypt to the desert, where she is said to have survived until her death on just three loaves of bread. (I was told by gallery staff that the artist’s dough recipe was the result of rigorous research into medieval breadmaking.) In these works, Goldberg directs her material fixations toward religious legend, using Mary’s miraculous ability to sustain her body amid the most inhospitable conditions to reflect on processes of growth, transformation, and decay. Sourdough, after all, is the product of a microbial magic trick—a kindly form of rot. Once it has been baked, it eventually hardens and molds, beginning a new process of mutation.

Mary’s effigy appeared in melancholy busts like *Intralocutor: towards an attraction* (2020), a fragmentary rendering of the saint’s head and emaciated torso cast in bronze and ornamented with glittery eyeshadow, and *The Life and Death of Mary* (2020), an alluring sequence of hazy monoprints lining one wall, illustrated her grim tale. While this obscure early Christian hagiography was likely unfamiliar to most viewers, Goldberg emphasizes the underlying relationship between bodily deterioration and sanctification, often expressed, in these works, as a tension between animate and inanimate. This comes across most clearly in sculptures in which the artist preserves ephemeral materials at particular stages in their life cycle, presenting them as symbols of both durability and change. In *Soiled [Resurrected]* (2017–2020), for instance, foam slabs crusted with gold foil, bronze powder, and chia are embalmed in shellac, so that the superfood seeds can no longer grow. The loaves in *Picnic* are the byproduct of sourdough starter, a culture that can live in perpetuity if fed—a process suspended once the bread is baked. Goldberg’s sculptures are neither fully alive, nor dead, simultaneously occupying logically conflicting metaphysical poles—in a sense, like Mary of Egypt, who persists on a spiritual plane despite the transience of her body. But the most affecting aspect of these works is the way that Goldberg makes materials like bread and chia seem mutable and unfamiliar, unexpectedly charged by history and myth.

Rochelle Goldberg: *Psychomachia*

By Peter Brock



Installation view, *Rochelle Goldberg: Psychomania*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Psychomachia, Rochelle Goldberg's second solo exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, brings new material explorations into her intricately structured universe of personal and art-historical iconography. The show features fragmented figures cast in bronze, unruly sourdough sculptures, and glass bowls alongside some of her usual materials. Goldberg continues to frame her work with the story of Mary of Egypt, who gave up her worldly existence to live in the desert. She is said to have carried with her only three loaves of bread, and the inverted relationship between Mary's bodily needs and her spiritual flourishing permeates the exhibition. Goldberg hones in on a series of connected symbols and combines them with such a peculiar form of precision that the boundaries of their conventional meaning begins to erode.

The force of her associative poetics builds through repetition, and this iterative approach proves necessary: Goldberg insists that even commonplace materials take on strange new significance through her understated transformations.

In the center of the long corridor that forms the beginning of the exhibition space sits a deceptively straightforward work titled *Great Gardener Makes* (2020). As the first object to confront a visitor, this sculpture serves as an orientation to, or perhaps a warning about, the strange allegorical mutations that are underway. What looks like a hearty loaf of bread sits at the far end of a low, bed-shaped platform. Crispy chunks and a dusting of crumbs lay scattered across the white cloth surface of the pedestal. As I moved closer, I noticed that something was wrong with the bread. The form was actually a glass bowl from which the dough had overflowed and become fused to the outside edges as it baked. A slow, hot, yeasty eruption played out in my head. Witnessing the crusty dough cling to the outside of the bowl made me salivate but also caused my stomach to feel like it was turning inside out. In the sunken middle of the bowl I caught a glimpse of another unexpected twist: a quarter, two nickels, and a penny sticking out of the crust. There are coins in the dough. This revelation ended my ability to relate to this substance as the combination of yeast, flour, and water. Instead I began to contemplate a viscous sludge of sustenance, at once symbolic and literal. The inseparable histories of bread and money share in their tendency to congeal value into a discrete form. The loaf and the coin are merely temporary stopping points in a process of endless exchange.



Rochelle Goldberg, *Bread*, 2020. Bronze, 42 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 11 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

At the end of this entry corridor, perched at waist height atop a slender metal support, stands another mesmerizing transfiguration of the same symbol. *Bread* (2020), is a stunningly detailed bronze cast of a handsome sourdough loaf with a dozen or so spent matchsticks protruding from its edges. The surfaces are finished with a subtle, earthy patina that has shades of warm ochre and hazy light patches that eerily resemble a dusting of flour. Some excess dough appears to have oozed from the ends of the oblong form. This lumpy shape and muted brown palette result in a parallel resemblance to a pile of animal dung. The bronze matches sticking out from this work have a

distinctive shape, thinned and slightly curved from combustion. They are cast from matches that have already burned, and this detail helps collapse the distinction between food and feces. The work is an uncanny hybrid that somehow contains all the stages of this cyclical process of ingestion. That the act of consumption and the question of nourishment figure so prominently in these sculptures implicates the living body of the viewer. This effect is accentuated by the fact that the figurative works appear to be immersed in a self-contained state of reverie, uninterested in the foods that surround them.



Peter Brock, 'Rochelle Goldberg: Psychomachia', *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2020

Psychomachia further develops a conviction that manifests throughout Goldberg's work and writing: that consumption, whether physical or visual, is necessarily a mutual process. In a text that accompanies the show, she poses a question that haunted me during my visit and afterwards. She asks, "Is it the symbiotic relationship of the symbol to its witness that enables it to live forever?" This type of dependence presents itself in an unavoidable manner in *Halo is leaking* (2020). Hung at eye level on the wall, the work consists of a round mirror nearly two feet across with a rectangular napkin-like object covering most of the center of the circular face. On top of this chalky white surface with delicate wrinkles, a shimmering gold liquid seeps out from underneath a small matchbox. A handful of used matches lie glistening, covered with this metallic fluid. Several small, star-shaped stickers appear amidst this mesmerizing flow, and a pinkish glow emanates from the top of the rectangle. Despite the presence of the matches, this scene feels immense, like gazing onto the surface of a new planet. While savoring these details, I kept catching glimpses of myself in the act of looking. Depending on the angle, the surface of the mirror would also reflect other sculptures in the room. The energy of my gaze was both absorbed by the sculpture and sent back at me. I felt compelled to immerse myself in this reciprocal exchange and to temporarily allow the confrontation to consume all of me. This interval was in fact a nourishing release from the climate of fear and anxiety that pervaded the city on the day of my visit.

As I stood in front of *Empty Stomach* (2020), I remembered the artist's warning to me that the piece, which contains 26 glass bowls filled partially with water, might not have been properly maintained. Due to COVID-19, the gallery closed to the public immediately after the opening. I arranged a private visit and donned a mask and gloves for the bike ride across the bridge into Manhattan to spend some time with the work. *Empty Stomach* embodies a gentle optimism in that it proposes that desert sand and water might someday combine and rise to become bread. For the moment, a thin plastic sheet separates the dry earth below from a pool of water in each bowl pressing down onto the sand. That boundary could be a hygienic necessity to avoid contamination, preventing the clear water from soothing the thirst of the

parched earth and becoming mud. The work invites us to imagine the literal and symbolic transformations that might occur when these two materials overcome their temporary separation and begin to nourish each other.

Contributor

Peter Brock

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Rochelle Goldberg, *Corpse Kitty: towards a friendly fatality*, 2020, bronze, eye shadow, 19 3/4 × 40 1/8 × 12 5/8".

Rochelle Goldberg

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY | ELDRIDGE STREET

Let us remember the Chia Pet. This brand of terra-cotta animal and human figurines contained chia seeds that, with regular watering, would sprout to resemble fur or hair. Its advertising jingle, “Ch-ch-ch-chia!,” played during 1980s cartoons such as *The Transformers* and *M.A.S.K.*, which were themselves little more than extended commercials for toys that also catered to a fascination with change. To my knowledge, the artist Rochelle Goldberg has never cited the Chia Pet as an influence, but the fact remains that the work for which she first came to prominence appropriated the novelty item’s key elements and turned them into vehicles for philosophical inquiry. Ensembles of steel armatures, chia-laced foam padding, and ceramic sculptures resembling snakes, fish, or pelicans functioned like gardens that would grow or decay over the duration of an exhibition. Like the latter-day projects of Pierre Huyghe, albeit on a less grandiose scale, Goldberg’s practice helped signal what has been called contemporary art’s “ecologization,” wherein the production of static objects gives way to the orchestration of fluctuating environments.

For “Psychomachia” at Miguel Abreu Gallery, Goldberg all but excised her signature chia seeds. Their only remaining traces lay within a rectangular foam floor piece that had

previously appeared in “Intralocutors,” her show in the same space three years earlier. Coated in gold foil and retitled *Soiled [Resurrected]*, 2017–20, the work tethered the two exhibitions together into a single continuous narrative inspired by the fifth-century saint Mary of Egypt. A suite of prints hung in sequence across a nearby wall illustrated a version of her story: A dissolute woman from Alexandria, Mary travels to Jerusalem and experiences a religious awakening. She ventures into the desert and survives for many years through foraging. When she dies, a lion witnesses her body levitate seventeen inches off the ground. In “Psychomachia,” *Soiled [Resurrected]* served as one of several effigies for the saint. Instead of evoking a garden, the chia seeds now represented the rich biome of bacteria, mold, insects, and plant life that takes root in a rotting corpse.

Thus, Goldberg combined art’s recent ecological turn with the “allegorical impulse” that the critic Craig Owens ascribed to postmodernism in the 1980s. Under the operative metaphor of Mary’s corpse, narrative allusions permeated the exhibition’s open-ended arrangements of organic and inorganic substances. Glass bowls held dirt extracted from the Texas desert. Hunks of bread—a reference to the only food Mary brought on her journey—appeared in the form of actual sourdough chunks and as aluminum facsimiles. Goldberg employed bronze for several figurative sculptures of Mary’s deteriorating husk, one of which included a kitten that stood in for the original story’s lion. Typically, bronze is associated with antiquity and eternal value, but Goldberg emphasized its mutability instead. Its base element, copper, popped up throughout the exhibition in the form of scattered US pennies.

Viewers with no appetite or patience for Goldberg’s recondite sampling of Christian hagiography might have nevertheless appreciated the second allegorical motif running throughout “Psychomachia”: that of *vanitas*, typically associated with Dutch still lifes depicting opulent but ephemeral luxuries. Sculptures of Mary’s face sported sparkling eye shadow, like mortuary cadavers taking a last swipe at vitality. In *Halo: even if it’s free*, 2020, a cardboard tondo framed a clutch of plucked lilies preserved in bronze powder. *Vanitas* reminds us that no amount of artifice and adornment can stave off the inevitability of change. Sooner or later, every object made of precious metals will be melted down, bodies will lose their integrity, and, as the example of the Chia Pet readily attests, the allure of novelty will fade.

— Colby Chamberlain

214 PORTRAIT ROCHELLE GOLDBERG

TEXT BY
KARI RITTENBACH

PORTRAIT BY
KRISTA PETERS



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"It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."
Walter Benjamin¹

At the National Archives in Paris a few years ago, a remarkable exhibition documented the historical overlaps between women—categorically, and in the particular—and the French legal code. In *Présumées coupables*, leather-bound volumes stacked heavily into vitrines and exposed under soft lighting presented the oldest record of female agency in all the literature of modern France. Despite colorful vinyl graphics and a digital display, the material weight of this history expressed itself physically. On reams of yellowed parchment overflowing with (illegible) long-hand script, the woman, transgressing patriarchal proscription of social place and sexual difference, was routinely objectified—i.e., described, contained, chastised—and finally judged a criminal.

Among the poisoners, witches, and perpetrators of infanticide were the women blamed for the fires that destroyed civic buildings and private property in May 1871, during the last days of the Paris Commune.² The *pétroleuse* was the perfect villain for the counter-revolutionary forces then recapturing the capital from Versailles. Disparaged as a prostitute or else a vulgar woman disabused of bourgeois morality, the *pétroleuse* was invigorated by smoking, sexual independence, and "love of riot." That specific acts of arson were later attributed to anti-government soldiers reveals the persistence of myth in conservative ideology. The historical violence through which "the feminine" is symbolically controlled, and the false image of the *pétroleuse* sustained, has resurfaced as a problem—as a spectral figure—in the recent sculptural work of Canadian artist Rochelle Goldberg.

Her 2018 exhibition, *Pétroleuse*, at the project space Éclair—formerly a West Berlin bar frequented by male sex workers—centered

on a desolate, delicate installation: dirtied domestic carpets scattered with glowing LED strands, several dozen lit "matchsticks" (cast as they burned), light switch plates, and some loose celery root, above which a bronze mask was staked gingerly at waist height. Shrouded in waxen silk organza, the missing anatomical form of this blind interlocutor gave the impression of weightless suspension—if not self-immolation—over the sordid amber ground of its setting. Mirrors on opposite walls of the gallery endlessly reflected the latent potential for incineration. And the stain of soot—in fact, sand or dirt left over from the process of casting or organic cultivation—alluded to both fire and drought. Resting on the floor in an adjacent room, a series of glass and crystal bowls caught up in a thin sheet of plastic film (*Digesting Gold*, 2018) collected water, gold dust, and atmospheric sediment—as if attempting to recapture some form of elemental value, while balancing the electric aridity of the other installation. The ambiguous gendering of the female figure here is only one of several historical inversions; yet rather than retell, reframe, or recover an identity or fraught narrative, Goldberg instead recharges its once-empty threat. Semantically referencing the seeping petrol in her prior installations, *Pétroleuse* also stages a metaphorically inflammatory environment without any clear organization (good/evil) other than imminent ignition, thus prefiguring radical release. The same work returned, in part or in full, in: *1000 "Emotions"*, Galleria Federico Vavassori, Milan (2018); *Casa del Sol*, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno (2018); and *born in a beam of light*, Chinati Foundation, Marfa (2018) and The Power Station, Dallas (2019). In varied configurations and constellations, Goldberg developed a sculptural language by drawing energy from the materially transformative properties of light and heat—yet always in relation to the "low" (ground-level) qualities of a particular terrain, while carrying the spark of rupture as a structural and theoretical device.

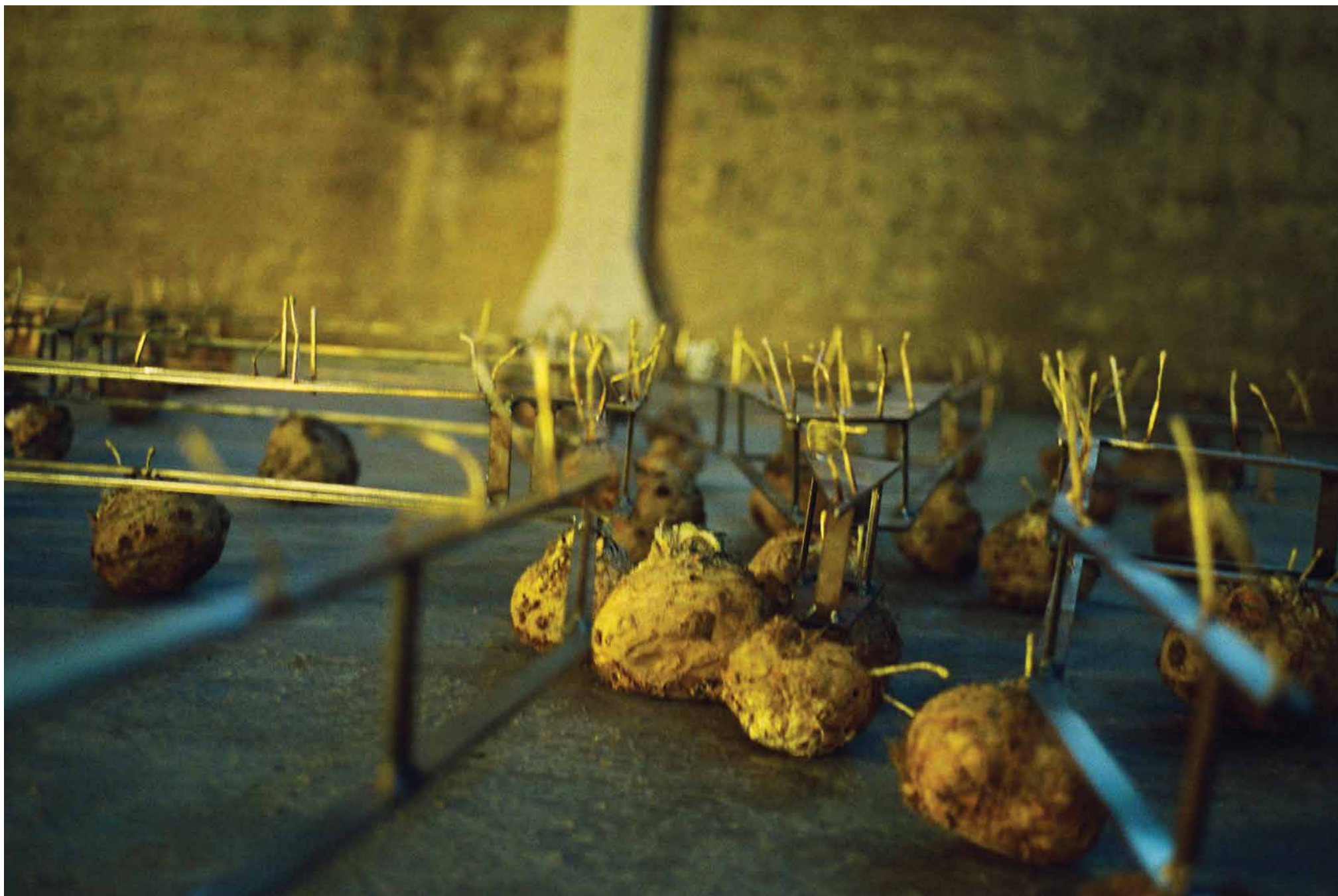
1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 463.

2. "[The] men [...] were dangerous enough. But women posed even greater threats to the social order." Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 58.

All images installation views and details born in a beam of light. The Power Station Dallas, 2019 Courtesy: the artist



Kari Rittenbach, 'Rochelle Goldberg', *CURA* 30, March 2019



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