Catriona Jeffries

Slow Looking

Jessica Stockholder
James Carl
Matt Browning

in correspondence

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Vancouver

950 East Cordova Street Vancouver, British Columbia V6A 1M6 Canada

As part of Slow Looking*, the gallery has invited selected participating artists to be in correspondence with one another. Jessica Stockholder, James Carl, and Matt Browning wrote to each other between February 19–22, 2025*.

Jessica Stockholder, *The Watchman*, 2022, computer cases, fabric, thread, acrylic and oil paint, plaster, hardware, glue, 16 x 39 x 8 in. (41 x 98 x 19 cm); Matt Browning, *Handles*, 2025, carved Douglas fir, 28 x 2 x 2 in. (70 x 5 x 5 cm); James Carl, *Reservoir ('95 Cavalier)*, 2023, bardiglio grey and rosso cardinale marble, 20 x 23 x 9 in. (51 x 57 x 23 cm). Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

JESSICA STOCKHOLDER: As Peter Gazendam's text outlines, the title *Slow Looking* points to the famously short time visitors usually spend with any given artwork and also to this moment's demand for literary narrative. There is some storytelling in the works here: the maybe dead, definitely troubled figure in Christina Mackie's work, the expressions on the faces of Ellen Neel's carvings, and Liz Magor's off-the-shelf duffle coat that looks to be embroidered with pathos. But all of the works in the show are linked in that the physical experience of apprehending their materials mixes up with what they mean in different contexts. There's a kind of rattling together of different thought directions that is grounded in a relatively small coherent material object. The works strike me collectively as human-scaled/relatively small and weighty.

As I gather for this conversation, my husband has pointed out an article in *The New Yorker* that is about "attention" relative to concerns now about TikTok, the proliferation of ADHD diagnoses, and the efforts in politics and commerce to grab attention in the midst of so many diverse means of communication. In this context, this sculpture show feels relaxed. Each work is coherent in its autonomy and there is a kind of centre of gravity to

each work drawing me in and keeping me just a little bit quiet for a time.

I wonder how the whole show strikes each of you?

Christina Mackie, *Green Figure* (detail), 2006, modeling clay, green onyx, lighters, wax, rope, paint in seashell, glass beads, fabric and bamboo
36 x 12 in. (92 x 30 cm)

Ellen Neel, *Tsonokwa (Dzunukwa) Mask*, c. 1950, carved cedar, 9 x 7 x 5 in. (23 x 18 x 13 cm)

JAMES CARL: One thought catalyzed by opening this conversation which I will throw out there: a person said to me, “Oh I see you’re interested in the everyday.” I read it as a dismissive remark (or at least uninspired!) and I wondered later what I might have said if I was more quick-witted than I am. One answer I arrived at is that human industry, broadly considered in the sense of thoughtful labour, is more fundamental to my interests these days. That might encompass care as a visual attribute in art objects. Which makes me think of Matt’s work especially. Diligence pops up in definitions of industry, adding a moral dimension, for better or worse.

MATT BROWNING: Thanks to both of you for getting the ball rolling. James, I haven’t known your work for as long as I’ve known Jessica’s, but I’m very fond of both your practices.

Jessica, you wrote about your husband’s mention of attention, TikTok, and ADHD diagnoses, and suggested that the works in this show have an autonomous presence that might push against some of these historical developments. While I agree, I would also say that I’m of two minds regarding this contemporary problem. On the one hand, it is undeniable that our attention is fractured and pulled in many different directions at once, perhaps more now than ever before. On the other hand, specifically within the realm of art, assessing “right” and “wrong” practices of attending to artworks often served as a means of determining “good” and “bad” art viewers, a distinction which seems to frequently break along class lines. So, when I was talking with Peter about this exhibition, I wondered if there might be some way of acknowledging that art discourses have historically and consistently elevated focused, sustained attention, and denigrated distracted, partial attention, while also acknowledging the more general contemporary pressures eroding our capacity to attend to much of anything.

This line of questioning was informed by a couple of essays Dave Beech and John

Jessica Stockholder, *Reclining nude Spending Fractured time* (detail), 2024, truck mirror, bathroom mirror hardware, wisteria tree branch, chain, hardware, galvanized diamond plate, wire, acrylic and oil paint, fabric, rubber furniture tips, 134 x 86 x 13 in. (340 x 218 x 33 cm)

Roberts wrote in the '90s advocating for a mode of distracted attention they termed "philistine modes of attention," which were historically cast as inferior to the focused attention of the proper bourgeois connoisseur. While these essays were written before many contemporary technological developments like smart phones and various social media platforms, they do continue to provide a very rich account of battles over attention within the history of art. Beech has written a more recent essay that adds to these essays from the '90s, in which he suggests that "we can divide artworks into two categories: those that hold our attention and those that send us out into the world." I wonder if this statement might add another factor to consider in relation to *Slow Looking*: is the show advocating for the viewer's attention to be held on the artwork, in the gallery, or can attention linger in the forms of after-the-fact reflection and self-directed research that an artwork might prompt in a viewer? If the latter, then that's a type of looking I can get behind.

Which also brings me to what could have certainly been a dismissive or uninspired observation that your work was about the everyday, James. That's an assessment that carries a lot of baggage with it. However, if we follow Beech in thinking that looking might involve activities which occur far outside of the gallery and the initial encounter with the artwork, then we find ourselves pretty quickly in the realm of the everyday. And it does seem like each of the three of us in our own ways are scrounging parts of life and bringing them into our art, whether those be forms or materials. What I appreciate about both of your practices is they seem less about that romantic avant-garde impulse to deliver art back to the street, or reunify it with everyday life, and more about an honest, pragmatic relationship to everyday life as a legitimate determinant force on one's art.

JS: Just to say that I wasn't proposing that our modes of attention were either good or bad. I, like you, and *The New Yorker* piece I referred to, am interested in the complexity of our modes of attention. In my own work I am interested in how shifting points of view accumulate over time: shifting points of attention. I'm suspicious of the accumulation of ADHD diagnoses. There are many ways of being human!

There are many artists whose work explores fractured attention: Judy Pfaff comes to mind, and multichannel video installation as a form; Kurt Schwitters. For the most part though, my sense of many of the works in this Slow Looking show is that they have a centre of gravity.

I'll wait to see how James weighs in before going on!

JC: Likewise on the admiration of your works. I'm very happy to be part of what I think is a terrific show, and this conversation. Matt, I think I saw your work at the Whitney a few years ago. It may be apropos to this conversation that it's the only work that "lingered"! I read the entire New Yorker piece and am afraid to admit that while I enjoyed it, I didn't hang on to much of it.

To clarify (hopefully): One thing I find problematic with the recurring art world conversation around the everyday, especially in the last 20–30 years is the inference I get in gallery conversations that a work has somehow made an audience member look more closely at the world around them. This I think relates to Matt's sense of the lingering, after-the-fact reflection. I don't want to say that this is an unwelcome possibility, but there's something about it that makes me a bit uncomfortable if it is attributed to me as a motivation for, or intention in, the making of art. My intention is not to be a missionary for a perceptually more fit society. Which is not to say I wouldn't mind living in one!

From another perspective I think that the conversation about the everyday is unspecific (and cliché), and this was my initial discomfort with the reference—everyone's everyday is presumably very different. My romance with the Situationists has long since died but I do remember Debord likening the everyday to the Yeti—talked about but rarely ever seen. Which aspect of the everyday are we talking about? Which is what landed me on the notion of industry. The fact that the majority of people get out of bed each morning, go out into the world, and make is kind of extraordinary. And what are the things that get made and how are they then affected by our use? This might be where Liz Magor comes into the conversation—I read a very palpable absence in her coat for example. Slow wearing. One thing that engages me about Matt's work is the specific sort of attention that is visually available and results in the objects themselves. And which definitely requires time to unpack.

Liz Magor, *Perennial*, 2021, textile, paint, hair, polymerized gypsum, wood, 45 x 28 x 12 in. (114 x 71 x 31 cm)

JS: I just might add; how do you feel about your work, Matt, in regards to the question of attention?

MB: Thanks for this, and I didn't mean to lump your position in with the article's, sorry about that!

How I feel about attention/looking in relation to my work is a question I struggle with! It would be disingenuous of me to deny that I'm courting a certain level of looking and attention in the space of the gallery and in direct relation to the artworks. That said,

Matt Browning, *Plastic Freedom*, 2025, PET plastic, 5 x 5 x 2 in. (13 x 11 x 4 cm)

James Carl, *Ghiaccio (Thassos)* (detail), 2024, thassos marble, 3 x 24 x 10 in. (8 x 60 x 24 cm)

I like to think that distance and proximity function in different ways in different works. In the case of the carving or even the Dr. Pepper work, the more generic linear and cubic forms might not draw you in, but up close, there's a sensuousness to those works. It's the opposite with the plastic works, I think, where they beckon you from a distance and their seductiveness breaks down as you draw closer and see the materials and layering more clearly. So, at least in terms of the encounter with the artworks in the space of the gallery, I guess questions of distance, proximity, and magnetism are bound up with questions of attention.

Lastly, I'd say that I hope works are non-dogmatic in the types of encounters they court. They are retinal and antiretinal, optical and phenomenological, obviously very constructed but then also often composed in space. They don't advocate certain forms of viewership over others, I hope. Instead, I hope they encourage competing and contradictory forms of viewership.

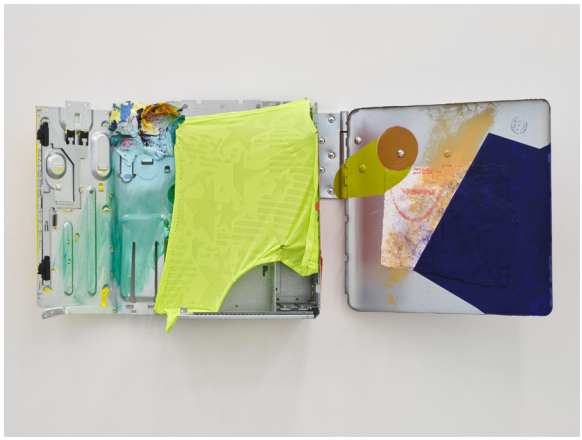
May I ask the question back to you? How do you think about attention in relation to your work? Amidst those many ways of being human, are there certain encounters with your work that you hope for?

PS—James, Richard Wollheim's class-coded lauding of the "suitably informed and sensitive spectator" is exactly what I don't want to nurture through my practice. Down with the perceptually more fit society, informed by artists and aesthetes, and up with more socially minded artists, informed by the public, à la Brecht!

JS: You've both, in different ways, brought up the question of intention. Matt, you ask if I hope for certain encounters in relation to my work. I wonder about my own intentions! Why have I, for over four decades now, been making this stuff? Perhaps, to start with, it's a way of making sense of being alive. Moving stuff around and finding ways to make some order from the chaos of being alive helps me get through the days—it gives life meaning. Perhaps my first intention is to make something that reflects internal life—intellectual and emotional. Beginning with my life, my subjectivity, and then recognizing that mine is also yours; that the structure of who I am is integrated with a web of history, economy, politics, and society. None of us thinks all alone. The stuff/objects/things that are mass produced around us reflect the thinking of

so many people. The particularity of my work involves coherence and incoherence, and I am happy when I feel that others see some of what I do in the work. Having the opportunity to share the work publicly is a privilege that feeds the work as I hear from others and my thinking is expanded.

Matt, when you talk about distance, proximity, and magnetism, I think also about the seduction that comes into play when the work provides pleasure and beauty: those also calling for attention. I think I like the stillness of visual art as it calls attention to my wandering attention! I like to be reminded of the eventfulness of my body moment to moment in contrast to the still art I'm looking at. It's challenging. This is not to say that I don't also enjoy getting lost in a great movie!



Jessica Stockholder, *The Watchman*, 2022, computer cases, fabric, thread, acrylic and oil paint, plaster, hardware, glue, 16 x 39 x 8 in. (41 x 98 x 19 cm)

James I agree with you—the everyday contains the profundity of the world. It's far from mundane, and it is myriad.

Why have I, for over four decades now, been making this stuff? Perhaps my first intention is to make something that reflects internal life—and then recognizing that mine is also yours; that the structure of who I am is integrated with a web of history, economy, politics, and society. None of us thinks all alone.

MB: Jessica, I love your observation that "the structure of who I am is integrated with a web of history, economy, politics, and society." That's a clearer articulation of what I was getting at when I closed my initial email by describing everyday life as having a "determinate force on one's art." And James, I hear you about not wanting to make someone look at the world around them, that's not my intention either. I was rather saying that the world around us, whether we like it or not, furnishes the determinate conditions of our lives and our practices. We make decisions from within those determinate conditions, but we don't make them entirely as we please. So, I was thinking of the "everyday" not in the romantic sense as a slice of life which should be shined by art, but rather more along the lines of Raymond Williams when he describes determinations as those which provide frames, pressures, limits, etc., all of which are fully imbued with history, economics, politics, and society.

It's interesting that you point out intention Jessica, as it's certainly something I believe is a part of the artmaking process, but my commitment to intention runs a little counter

Matt Browning, *Handles*, 2025, carved Douglas fir, 28 x 2 x 2 in. (70 x 5 x 5 cm)

James Carl, *Pneu* (detail), 2023, black kilkenny marble on reclaimed Ontario hemlock, 13 x 30 x 29 in. (32 x 75 x 74 cm)

to my focus on outer determination. I guess I think of intention as one of the forms of response to all of the outer determinations we face in life, one of the ways that we work with and against the historical conditions that we inherit. In this sense, internal life is a bit less of a focus for me, but what you have to say about intersubjectivity resonates.

When I was in grad school at UBC, Beau Dick was an artist in residence. He was a Kwakwaka'wakw mask carver, like Ellen Neel, but he would also host potlatches and other ceremonial events that I would attend. One of the things I found so interesting about these events was that the most important thing seemed to be bodily presence: you stayed until the end. But your focused attention didn't seem to matter as much. People would get up and wander around, take care of kids, fall asleep. This idea of presence over attention, or commitment over attention, really stuck with me.

Beauty is another one of those things I'm not fully willing to forfeit, no matter how many convincing arguments are penned against it!

JS: It is lovely to be in conversation with both of you and to be thinking about your work which I thoroughly enjoyed in the show. James, someone I spoke with after the opening had touched your inner tube piece and came away thinking that it was in fact an inner tube. That was interesting to hear! I was more obedient and didn't touch the work, but I was very happy to hear that story and I enjoyed imagining how it would feel to touch, and loved the white marble splotches that contradict the inner tube evocation. And Matt, your wooden *Handles* work holds my attention as I sort out how it was made and how it resonates with other things in the world including handles. I think about musical instruments and locks, and enjoy that it isn't anything but its very particular, non-utilitarian self.

I woke up this morning thinking about what you wrote James: “human industry, broadly considered in the sense of thoughtful labour, is more fundamental to my interests these days. Diligence pops up in definitions of industry, adding a moral dimension, for better or worse.”

This is a sculpture show we’re thinking about, full of objects that are crafted and laboured over in different ways. I’m curious how you both feel about this in relation to attention which seemed to be the first topic to grab our “attention.” :)

My working process allows for many shifts in attention, and for much coming and going; in fact my process allows for, and looks for, a process of thinking through an eventfulness of material transformation of one kind or another. I’m imagining that carving stone and wood demands an ongoing steadier attention? Matt, I wonder how you make your plastic pieces?

Human industry, broadly considered in the sense of thoughtful labour, is more fundamental to my interests these days. Diligence pops up in definitions of industry, adding a moral dimension, for better or worse.

Looking through this lens I see a range of making processes. I imagine that Liz Larner’s ceramic works involve a responsiveness to the ceramic material as she’s working, and that coming up with, and fabricating the hardware and mirrored steel that the works are mounted with demands an entirely different kind of attention. Part of my pleasure in viewing these works arises from the very different kinds of absorption of my attention as I’m drawn into the handmade ceramic/glazed surface in a kind of dreamy way, and then a more staccato putting together of information regarding how these works are fixed to the wall.

And, of course, we could talk about the moral dimension of labour… This being alive thing seems to demand that we contend with the passage of time, and we do live in a capitalist society…

JC: Well that’s a long list of high quality insights. I especially liked Jessica’s contrast between the stillness of the art object and the “eventfulness” of the body! The idea of deep stillness as a sculptural goal is one that appeals to me. Which might get back to the centre of gravity idea.

Before I move to the question of attention in the making (which is large for me when stone carving), I want to add something about attention in the viewing. I wonder if thinking about active vs passive viewing is something to consider? (As opposed to slow vs fast.) TikTok aside, I’m seeing a lot of “content forward” art out there recently that seems to expect me to passively absorb a particular argument. I’m more interested in the

kind of visual engagement that's required when our ability to know an object or image is somehow undermined or hijacked or requires active attention. I see that in much of the work in the show.

Matt, it's not that I don't welcome sensitive spectators and improved awareness of the world through art. If perceptual fitness is an outcome of protracted attention to art, maybe that's one way we participate in those large social webs. But I could never claim improving your perceptions of the world as an intention or a motivation in the studio.

MB: Jessica, the plastic pieces are made out of layers and layers of plastic bottles. I cut the top and bottom off of any old water or soda bottle, effectively converting into a large piece of heat shrink tubing. Using a heat gun, I shrink small bottles down around small bottles, stepping up to larger and larger bottles as the piece grows. It's a process that I have a fair degree of control over, but the plastic always shrinks in slightly unpredictable ways, and as you build up the layers, the piece becomes a little wonky. I've realized over the years that I like these moments in the production process where there's a little bit of chance in terms of how the material will respond. Even when carving, and especially when carving a wood like Douglas fir, with its unidirectional grain and tendency to split, each knife stroke is a little mini "gamble" in terms of how it will turn out. This "micro chance," which is a component of art based in repetitive action, differs, I think, from artworks which make chance or the aleatory their subject matter. Rather, these moments of micro chance introduce bits of excitement into the dullness of repetitive action. So at least for me, there's a push and pull between excitement, attention, boredom, fatigue, and even sometimes exasperation, often within the same set of motions I use to produce a work. I can imagine that this might resonate with James and his carving on some levels, but then I can also imagine that depictive carving might require a more focused attention than my carvings, which are executing a series of steps more than they are depicting a form.

Thanks for the considerations about active and passive viewing, James, and I completely agree with you that we've entered an odd stage of art where the artwork's insistent delivery of its contents often pushes the viewer into a passive role of receiver. It's both amusing and tragic that we've somehow managed to move from the highly polemical art of Art & Language which posed extremely particular arguments through its art as a means of engaging viewers, to where we are now. That said, and this is once again informed by Beech and Roberts' work on the philistine controversy, I'd suggest one more term in the active/passive distinction: self-directedness. When a viewer is pushed into the role of passively receiving the contents of an artwork, or the information on a didactic panel, my concern is less with the passive nature of that experience and more with the total lack of trust that the viewer is capable of engaging with the art in their own self-directed manner. When we highlight self-directedness as something we'd like to foster in the art encounter, both active and passive viewing can play a role in that process.

JC: Part of what I'm finding with this correspondence is, on the positive side, the time it allows me to spend with my own thoughts, alongside/above/below yours. But I'm also

reminded of the inevitable fact that we write about what writing allows us to write about. I do worry that writing has achieved an out-sized role in contemporary art in recent years, (I loved reading about Art & Language, Matt!) and that even speculative language like this conversation can become more deeply embedded in the world of circulated ideas than the objects. I've often wondered how Michael Fried might respond to the idea that theatre wasn't the enemy, literature was.

James Carl, *Reservoir ('95 Cavalier)*, 2023, bardiglio grey and rosso cardinale marble, 20 x 23 x 9 in. (51 x 57 x 23 cm)

Matt Browning, *Plastic Freedom*, 2025, PET plastic, 6 x 5 x 2 in. (14 x 13 x 4 cm)

I can certainly concur with Matt's studio experience as: "push and pull between excitement, attention, boredom, fatigue, and even sometimes exasperation." I might add a sense of profound pleasure and satisfaction that I don't find in other activities. I have used a variety of methods and materials over the years, and I have to admit that I seem to be drawn to labour intensive and time-consuming processes. I'm less inclined to speculate on why this might be than to follow my material attractions where they lead me. I spent the better part of a decade teaching myself to weave with venetian blinds. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Marble carving has been one aspect of my work since the 1990s. I learned the basics at school in China. It's extremely slow work and hard on the body. In the finishing process, it's essentially sandpaper vs rock—frequently for hundreds of hours. So I have put it down for years at a time and done other things. The opportunity to work with a digital interface at a studio in Italy reignited my interest somewhere around 2014. The material keeps me coming back for more: especially the white marble's ability to absorb and refract light and the way it can hold a line. Digital cameras have a hard time focussing on a honed white marble surface, which I think might also happen with the human eye. Imagining the vast geological time embodied by the material (marble used to be seabed?!) is one of the many things I have time to think about in the countless hours of slow attention.

JS: I resonate with what you say James about language in relation to visual art. It's a process of translation from one to the other that can be enormously helpful, and hurtful. I have found that talk in relation to teaching in MFA programs is more interesting than it was when I was a student—but I don't know if that's led to better art making, or just

Liz Larner, James Carl, Liz Magor, installation view, *Slow Looking*, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2025

different art making. Sometimes the language is entirely in the way. Sometimes the art is dead if divorced from the text accompanying it. (Is that a bad thing? I tend to be less interested in it.) And sometimes great work that elides language is dismissed because language has been so privileged. As art departments have taken root in universities, artists are encouraged to do "research" and craft has been relegated to a lower hierarchical rung. The line between craft and art is a storied one, and I won't dispute that it's productive to think about that line, but I do object to the intelligence that attends manual labour going unrecognized.

I'm noticing that both of you—James and Matt—make work that focuses on a single material. In my work I use many different materials focusing on the relationship between things. And on the edges of things internally and externally to the art object. This blurring, or shifting, of edges enables me to explore the care I have for how the object is and isn't dependent on its context. In relation to materials, I care a lot about their surface; the surface of materials/objects lets us know about the interiority of the material and the structure of the object. Surfaces are seductive, they can lie, and through their illusionistic potential they can fabricate whole worlds for us. I knit together various surfaces creating pictorial moments that alternately transcend their physicality, and wallow in it.

I looked up your Venetian blind woven sculptures James, and that's quite a feat. I think those blinds call to many sculptors. They are so ugly lying around on the ground; one always wonders what to do with them, and thus far I've not found a way to resuscitate them myself.

Matt, it's great to hear about the process of those bottles becoming your dense lumps of plastic. I would love to see a video of that process.

Regarding active versus passive engagement on the part of viewers—just speaking for myself as a viewer—sometimes art can be like a drug and just help me through the day; perhaps not a bad thing—even a very good thing! But in so far as art, of all kinds, helps to cultivate active and critical thinking and consciousness about ourselves engaging, so much the better. I, like James, don't set out to educate people when I make art. I try to find things out, make my passage through time more generative, and then I care to share what I've made with others to see what happens, and to feel myself as part of a larger world.