

cae|sura

Martha Russo

August 3 – December 2, 2023
Galleries of Contemporary Art at UCCS

caesura

In Greek and Latin verse, a caesura is a break between words within a metrical foot. In modern verse, it is a pause near the middle of a line, any interruption or break.

An underpinning of all of Russo's art is to give people pause – to figure the work out. The artworks are hinged on the familiar but not quite recognizable. The forms, scales, patterns, textures, and unfamiliar gravity knock people off kilter and compel contemplation.

lacuna

24 x 7 x 12 feet

Porcelain, paper clay, metal, wood, polyethylene foam, tracing paper, adhesives, epoxy, and hardware
2023



For over thirty years, Russo has been investigating the potential of multiples, specifically how thousands of porcelain and paper clay forms can conjure up a sensation between thought and feeling, an often-wordless state felt powerfully in the body. The abstraction of form, material, and gravity coupled with a whirlwind of color and texture lures the viewer closer, inviting prolonged investigations and enticing a flood of interpretations. The grace of a school of squid gliding, darting, and skittering in cold, dark seawater is the core inspiration behind the *nomos* series, of which *lacuna* is the newest iteration.

For this exhibition, *lacuna* continues Russo's life-long investigation of these core ideas. A few years ago, Russo spent a semester in northern California, wandering in the grandeur of the Redwoods that are endemic to that area of the country. She experienced a profound moment when encountering a fallen Redwood, laying quietly on the ground. Seeing one of these massive trees on its side, Russo started to

understand and feel their true force. *lacuna* is her way of celebrating the grace, elegance, and power of being near one of these silent giants. The notion of *caesura* resides in the conflation of Russo's original inspiration, the ocean, with the newest inspirations found in the forest, specifically mossy forms and colors that relate to fungi, lichen, bark, ferns, and more.

pensum

51 x 62 x 16 inches each

Acrylic and hardware

2023



These acrylic bellies emerged from Russo's initial inspirations in her early days of making art. Throughout her career, a central tenant in Russo's process is trusting her gut to guide the work. She starts with a notion, figuring out simple parameters to push up against and investigate. Russo lets the idea run until something starts to reveal itself. In the final stage, Russo becomes more conscious of how to bring the emergent idea to fruition with material, form, gravity, and placement in space.

Russo's thought for *pensum* was to make transparent belly forms and fill them with every series of work she had ever made. However, when Russo hung the first belly on the wall and saw the shimmering shadows, she abandoned her first idea. The clear and airy spaces are enticing and enchanting on their own.

In this case, Russo started with the notion of bulbous, protruding bellies, full of potential and grace. Material morphed into forms that are hard to index: some more female and some more male, with the shadows making new shapes in themselves. These pieces bring up ideas about *caesura* with a pause or break between the piece and the shadows they create.

Incubo

24 x 10 x 3 feet

Glass, paper clay, porcelain, metal, glaze materials, and mixed media

2023

Russo has a robust studio practice, teaches at the college level, and has a full family life. Time to collect herself is usually scarce. In essence, the COVID lockdown was a gift of daily self-reflection and a continuous flow of studio time. Pre-Lockdown, Russo made a piece that was a large, circular dish form to catch the detritus from an intricate Protea flower coated with porcelain slip. Because the slip could not completely penetrate the density of the Protea, when it was fired in the kiln it did not fully stay intact. It fell apart and

the glaze at the bottom of the dish froze the flower in time. There was a quiet fossil-like feeling to the piece. Unfortunately, she did not have time to investigate this idea at the time. However, the pandemic gave Russo countless hours in the studio of focused time to play with dipped plant matter and other unconventional materials.

The contents of the dishes took a turn as Covid-19 turned into a muse. The dish forms become petri dishes, turning into reactions and abstractions of the reality of the time. What does the virus look like? How does it spread and erode the body, specifically lungs and brain? As images and descriptions flooded in from around the world, Russo tried to imagine how people felt. She scoured her studio, house, and other environments to find materials and forms to express ideas about the virus. The dish form was a receptacle to resurrect old work, to experiment with materials, and to make visual the horrors of the mysterious virus gripping the world. Making art has always been a way to filter for Russo and, thus, better understand what is going on around us. It is precious time to absorb, collect, and reflect.



phase shift (wattling)

200 x 50 x 20 feet

Shredded aspen tree wattles, plastic netting, biodegradable cloth netting, metal plates, and rebar.

2023



In 2013, there was a devastating flood in Boulder County. During the year and a half, while the canyon road was being rebuilt, Russo became enchanted with something called a wattle. Wattles are plastic netted tubes that are filled with hay or shredded aspen trees used for erosion control. Wattles are staked into the ground to stabilize newly groomed contours and surfaces.

The concept behind *phase shift (wattling)* is to free the wattles and give them an unexpected lightness. A swirl of approximately 180 wattles starts from the hallway on the south side of the Ent Center for the Arts. They flow down the hallway, cluster outside on the south terrace, appear to pierce the exterior wall of the gallery, and culminate on the interior of the gallery. The gestalt creates a sense of flow and movement as they hover

and flutter through the air, redefining and activating the architectural spaces.

The title, *phase shift (wattling)*, comes from the scientific process of phase change, which is a conversion of matter from one state to another: i.e., solids to liquids, liquids to gas. The aspen trees begin as solid wood, which is then shredded, becoming a fibrous and malleable substance. The shredded matter further changes phase during installation, floating in the air with an unexpected freedom.

chute

156 x 9 x 24 inches

Porcelain, porcelain casting slip, aluminum, paper clay, pine needles, string, rope, kitchen sponges, plastic mesh fruit bags, pinecones, potato, and wire.

2016



Aging is inevitable. The body starts to change, rebelling against what the mind, heart, and hands want to do. *chute* is about this slide; about gravity pulling one back towards the earth. The elements on the metal slide are representative of Russo's body: specifically, the shoulder, neck, and spine. These areas have gotten more and more worn over the years of artmaking: grumpy tendons and ligaments, fraying muscles, worn bones, and crinkling joints. Russo's doctor

described her injuries and the effects of the passage of time. "When you are young, your spine is like wet sponges, pliable and stacked perfectly on top of each other. As you get older the sponges start to dry out and become more misaligned. This makes everything in your body slightly off, slowly putting stress on all your basic bone and muscle structures."

To create *chute*, Russo collected old kitchen sponges, strung them together to make the exact length of her spine, dipped them in porcelain slip, and let gravity and the kiln's heat misalign them. The objects on the slide create renditions of stressed tendons, muscle fiber, ligaments and more. Perfect chaos that holds on, preventing the inevitable fall. Simply, *chute* is between holding on and letting go.

About Russo's Artworks

All of the work is purposefully obscure. It is just out of the grasp of language and, thus, brings us back to our rudimentary way of collecting information, namely, through the senses and the body. Russo's work embraces the precarious: they extend into space, hover in mid-air, pile up, and, sometimes, are on the verge of disappearing into dust. The chameleon-like properties of clay, acrylic, and wattles speak to the transient fragility of life plus the pure joy of bringing live materials to conjure up memories and interpretations.

Russo wants the works to get into your bones and guts; to touch on the raw, the visceral, the nerves; to murmur up through the body to make a time and place for contemplation and reflection about basic, biological humanness, coupled with a sense of play and discovery.