Dave McKenzie in conversation with Maddie Klett, The Brooklyn Rail, July – August 2021
https://brooklynrail.org/2021/07/art/DAVE-MCKENZIE-with-Maddie-Klett

Dave McKenzie with Maddie Klett

"I am often really interested in *not doing anything*. That's not quite the way I want to say it. Or doing less?"

JUL-AUG 2021

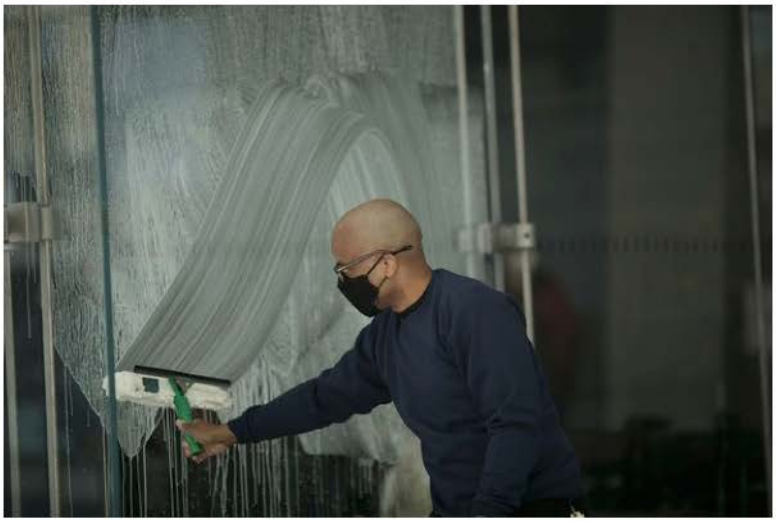
Portrait of Dave McKenzie, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

On View

Whitney Museum of American Art
Dave McKenzie: The Story I Tell Myself,
May 1 – October 4, 2021
New York

Disturbing the View at the Whitney is a performance happening throughout the summer by New York-based artist Dave McKenzie. McKenzie uses window-washing instruments to activate the museum's floor-to-ceiling windows by repeatedly, and rhythmically, apply a chalky substance. This action indeed *disturbs the view* to the stunning vistas overlooking Lower Manhattan.

A small survey of McKenzie's filmed performances over the last 20 years is staged on the third floor, and grounds *Disturbing the View* in the artist's explorations into the everyday performance of moving through space. In this June 2021 conversation, we talk about grocery stores, adolescence, and the desire to make art that we want to see in the world.



Dave McKenzie, *Disturbing the View*. Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art, May 1, 2021. Photo: © Paula Court.

Maddie Klett (Rail): You've said this show was a long time coming, can you talk about that? Why does the show look the way it does?

Dave McKenzie: The show started with an invitation from Adrienne Edwards to do a performance at the Whitney. Adrienne is someone I've worked with before, and I think the first time we worked together was for a Performa Biennial in 2013. The conversations we have are generative, so when she invited me I was like, "Oh, yeah, of course."

In the beginning, we were just going to do a performance. I initially came up with this idea to harness myself to the building, and ascend and descend in a west to east or east to west loop, much like I'm doing now, but actually using a harness to go up and down the building. So we thought about that initial idea, and we worked really hard to make the harnessing work, but due to legal obstacles, we couldn't really do that in the city.

As we talked about the performance, and what it might look like for people to see me hovering over the windows and operating on them throughout the day, Adrienne thought it would be helpful to also think about ways that we might contextualize the performance through other performances I had done, documentation of other performances, or even object-based works. It turned out that we didn't go the route of objects in the show, but we decided that we should include works that were primarily made for video, or documented through video, as a way to contextualize the performance for people who would be seeing it throughout the day when I'd be performing.

The idea for the realized performance came about pretty quickly. I had a lot of ideas that came about while doing site visits. I was thinking about what museums are, but also about the way that architecture, art, and neighborhood all come together. We were in rehearsal, right before COVID, so we were basically ready to go and COVID was the thing that put it all on hold.

Rail: Could you describe the performance you ended up doing, *Disturbing the View*, for those who haven't seen it? You're washing the windows of the Whitney.

McKenzie: I know that when I spoke to the staff at the Whitney, I kept being like, "Oh, no, I'm not cleaning." [*Laughs*] I start by taking this mixture, which is not very opaque, and then doing what looks like a cleaning job on the window, although it's super repetitive. I'm often on the same window for a long time. I'm most often applying material as opposed to removing it, although I will occasionally also remove material—

Rail: I was waiting for you to use a squeegee or something and it never came.

McKenzie: Yeah. The only time that I do the removal stroke is when I need to re-obscure the surface. Maybe dirtying is actually a totally fine way to think about it. I'm applying a film to the glass. I guess "film" works as a description. That kind of quality where you can still see very clearly through it, but it's also hazy. It feels like somebody should come along and clean it. And in fact, one of the reasons why I don't rely on the language of cleaning is because I'm very conscious that somebody else will come along and clean it. And the staff actually does clean it for me. On the days that I perform, after I perform, a crew comes through and cleans it and they're really amazing. I'm really grateful to them.

There are a lot of people in the museum who are cleaning all the time. They're cleaning and disinfecting. So you will often see another person in the museum, either wiping down handrails, or cleaning the turnstiles as you enter and leave. There are these really interesting moments where I feel like our versions of "cleaning" overlap. But they are also in opposition to one another, which is something I'm still really thinking about, because they're potentially valued differently, but not necessarily.

If you know that I'm making my work, or you just understand the language, then you look at it like an artwork. But for the people who are not concerned with what I'm doing, I think they also read the person who is actually cleaning the windows or the handrails and my weird action as the same. They're both easy to ignore. They need to or want to quickly move past them. And that's something that I recognize I feel as well.

Dave McKenzie, *Disturbing the View*. Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art, May 1, 2021. Photo: © Paula Court.

Rail: I followed you on your entire eight-floor loop, and I was the only person doing that on that day, which is maybe not surprising? Even to the staff at the entrance I had to explain, "Oh, I'm here to see Dave," because I was getting in their way and appearing to cut the line. And then you left the museum entrance, and I had to ask, "Wait, what floor did he go to?" So I had more interaction with the staff than usual. They kindly shared your usual route. I asked the elevator operator what floor you went to.

While following you around, especially on the outdoor terraces, it's clear that the view is the sole attraction on the upper floors. People aren't paying attention to the performance that's happening, even though your movements are very repetitive and kind of dramatic—more dramatic than you'd imagine for window washing.

McKenzie: There is a real balancing of attention between the artworks on view and the building itself. It's been really entertaining and illuminating to actually watch people in the museum. I often will go up to the eighth floor after performing in the downstairs space, and I'll see people get off the elevator and they'll just immediately go outside. The view from the museum is an unbelievable draw, right? Even for me when I'm working there, it's hard not to turn around and take in the city. So the performance came about after thinking about the Whitney's architecture, and then placing those thoughts in relation to things I often think about with regards to visibility and invisibility.

The thing that you mentioned about the staff is really important to me, and the staff there is really, really generous. There's one woman, Annie, who just makes fun of me. And she really loves giving me a hard time, but I appreciate it. And one of the guys who is normally in the elevator, when I get off on the eighth floor, he'll say to another person riding the elevator—he sort of tries to do it out of earshot—he'll say, "that's the artist." He's announcing me in this really interesting way. There was one staff member who was kind enough to share his thoughts on the piece and I was like, "Oh, yeah, that's exactly some of the things that I'm thinking." So I feel the staff is really on board with the project in a way that I hadn't anticipated.

Rail: I also imagine it's interesting for the staff to see how the performance pans out every day. It's always going to be different in terms of how visitors interact with you, or don't interact with you. This brings me to the exhibition component of your work on the third floor, because I got into a conversation with Ronnie—the guard who was there when I went on Monday. He's an older Black guy, former NYPD, he said he's chatted with you.

McKenzie: Yes, we chatted a couple of times. [*Laughter*]

Rail: I was watching the work that opens the show, *Self Portrait Piñata*, when I first entered, and we started chatting about it. The work was made for the Queens Museum in 2002. During the Queens International, right?

McKenzie: Yeah.

Rail: Was it the first Queens International?

McKenzie: That I don't remember, maybe.

Rail: In the film you're in the Queens Museum and you're raising a piñata that resembles your own body in what looks like the education gallery or something, because there's a bunch of kids surrounding it and they start beating the piñata. It's your self-portrait, as the title implies, but there's this moment when you actually see you raising the piñata on the pulley. That really got me because it's this strange doubling; you raising this effigy of yourself. The kids are going wild and there's so much joy in the work but also violence.

That's what I was talking about with Ronnie. He said, "It disturbs some people more than others, because it looks this one way, because he's Black." I said, "Right, because it looks like a lynching." He was like, "Yeah, of course. I don't know if that's what Dave was thinking when he was making the work or not. But certain people think that way."

I don't know if that was something you intended? Your wall label includes a blurb of you talking about the body as material. And how our bodies have this dual experience. We have both this control and lack of control over how we're perceived. Because the piñata is dressed in khakis and a blue button down, it reads like a mid-level corporate worker to me. So my mind also went to different places.

McKenzie: It's difficult in some ways to put my head back in that space. But like a lot of my work, when I was doing it I learned a lot really quickly. I was surprised when I made that work. Surprised by how much people read into it, which I think is natural, but also by how much was quickly misread—and it didn't always matter what I said, thought, or had actually made.

To give you an abbreviated version of its early life, I made that project when I was in residence at the P.S. 1 Studio Program, and it was supposed to be shown there. And for a variety of reasons, I pulled it out of the show. Much of the conversation at the time was essentially, "How do we explain this to people who come to the museum and see this thing?" I think there was great hesitancy and an inability to live with this complexity that you and Ronnie were talking about. At P.S. 1, it was very much like, "Okay, you can do it, but it has to be away from people. And then as soon as it's over it has to be cleaned up." And I was like, "What?" [*Laughter*]

So I decided not to show it there. But regardless, I'm often in this position, thinking about the various bodies that we have and the various positions that we operate through, and how they get read. Sometimes it's necessary for that to be material, right? For us to be commenting on that and deal with that through our various complexities. And sometimes it's just fucking annoying. All these things can be happening simultaneously.

One thing about the children and why I'm so grateful for the children is that, I feel like for them in that moment, it's just a device that delivers candy. And I was thinking, "Oh, at some point, they're going to be able to read history and all sorts of other things onto this body and other bodies and their own bodies." I'm deeply interested in and scared of and excited by the difficulty of trying to negotiate that. And I don't feel like it's my job to only think one thing. I bounce between how I feel about these things and I also want to deal with that bouncing.

Rail: That moment of recognition when a child is exposed to certain things that affect the readability of certain people and certain actions, it's fascinating but also scary to think about. Because *Self-Portrait Piñata* might also be read very differently in 30 years, right? We don't know.

McKenzie: Yeah, I think that's right. Furthermore, I feel that, again, bouncing between positions, and dealing with your body and its history. These complexities are necessary to think about. But there was a part of me at the time that just really wanted to see this thing. Even though, yes, I know it's difficult, and the whole history that it brings up around lynching and racialized violence is difficult. I do feel I have a responsibility to myself and others, but also a desire to see something and live something. Regardless of how "good" or appropriate it is. So it's a very difficult work in a lot of ways for me, still.

Rail: It is also the largest video presentation in the show and it opens the show. And you can see it from the stairwell, which is actually used more now than it ever was, because people are less likely to use the elevator, I think.

McKenzie: Yeah. I'm very grateful to the team at the Whitney for their planning around the show. In some ways it's the opposite of what happened at P.S. 1, where the work was initially going to be performed. At P.S. 1 the work was going to be in the direct view of the entry and a visitor wouldn't be able to miss it while it was happening. There is something beautifully perverse about it being this thing that you see as you walk up the stairs. Again, I think this idea of a "view" is important and also what happens when there is a visual confrontation. And I hadn't made that connection previously, but yeah, I'm deeply thrilled.

Rail: I wanted to talk about how a lot of these works were made 20 years ago, in the early 2000s. And some of the wall labels talk about residencies you were doing when you were making them. What was your life like in the early 2000s? What was your lifestyle? How did you end up making these videos? Who/what was influencing you? What resources did you have?

McKenzie: Those are a great questions. I hadn't really thought about exactly how to frame it because in some ways, when I think about my work, there's a lot of anachronistic ideas about me putting certain images and ideas together. One big thing that happened to me was when I went to Skowhegan in the summer of 2000. I had never been in a residency program and I was right out of undergrad. I was a really young artist. I didn't know anything about art, which is true for a lot of young artists, I know. But I didn't come from a family that went to museums, and we certainly didn't go to galleries. I didn't know anyone who was an artist. I was not that far removed from thinking that all artists were, you know, dead or starving in a basement someplace.

So right after undergrad, or maybe in my senior year of undergrad, I got interested in performance. I always think about myself in the library flipping through books and catalogs. And I remember discovering the work of Chris Burden, who is also in the Whitney show. I couldn't believe somebody made this work and no one told me about it! These were just unbelievably exciting discoveries because I was a printmaker in school. But I thought, "I'm looking at this thing from 30 years ago and I can't quite process it." So it was really strange to look at something from the past that felt so unbelievably futuristic at the same time. I was interested in his work, but didn't really know how to make it, and I certainly didn't feel like I was going to have anyone to shoot me or anything. [*Laughs*]

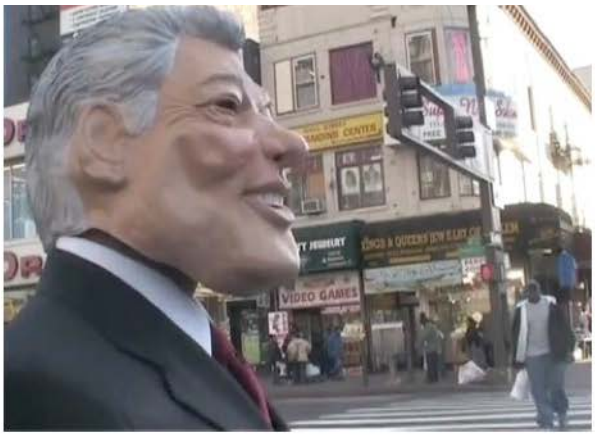
When I got to Skowhegan, there was an opportunity to play around with video. I made maybe two videos before that in school. There was an opportunity for me to play around with cameras, and I could edit video by myself for the first time. I remember the artist Shane Hope showing me how to edit video. It was really exciting. I could experiment in a way that I hadn't before. And I also had a different kind of control over the editing process.

Dave McKenzie, *Edward and Me*, 2000. Video, color, sound, 4:29 min. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist.

Edward and Me (2000) came about because the camera was really flexible. Or I guess I found video really flexible. And yes, I did a bunch of residencies in the early 2000s. P.S. 1, which I mentioned, and then later I'd do the Studio Museum, but I had never thought it would be feasible for me to have a studio that I was paying for under normal circumstances, especially at that time in my life. And even now, it seems impossible. But I definitely couldn't imagine spending hundreds or more for a studio, and paying rent. I'm definitely someone who is looking for ways of making that feel economical. Performance and video making, they don't really take up physical space. And they were exciting to me. I didn't really know any of the rules that one might feel like they need to know, but didn't feel like it mattered either. I felt like I could always have a camera, and it was always exciting to edit and just rearrange things.

Video editing makes me think of writing. I'm not very good at writing, but the thing about video editing for me, maybe less so now because I don't do it quite as much, is that I can sit in front of the screen and go over and over again and rearrange it and it's really exciting. It feels like I'm producing new text. And even when they're really simplistic, which they most often are, it's exciting to just move a thing left, right, or on top of another video. There's something about it that I could do all night in the early days, but even now too. Although things have changed with what I make.

Right now I'm looking around my studio, which is in my home. Behind me there's a table saw, a small foldable one, right? But when I was doing mostly performances I didn't have things like that. So even when I would get studios through residency programs, like the Studio Museum, where I made *We Shall Overcome* (2004) with the Bill Clinton walk. I guess I found it freeing to not depend on making large objects.



Dave McKenzie, *We Shall Overcome*, 2004. Video, color, sound; 5:46 min. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: You made *Edward and Me* at Skowhegan, outside of a closed supermarket. This was the first time I saw that video in full and it's probably one of your better-known video works. When viewing the video, it's clear it is after hours because the automatic doors aren't working, and aren't sensing your presence. There is this whole spectral/ghostly thing going on, because you've edited it this way where there's moments that overlap. Your body does these different movements and fades in and out. The store is like this dead mechanism, or this mechanism that's asleep. How did you come across the supermarket? Why did you decide to return to it after it closed?

McKenzie: Yes, that was one of those weird things that was made at Skowhegan. You know, the Skowhegan outside of the art community at the residency program is a very small town. So you spend a lot of time going to the shopping plaza area. It was an obvious place to go, because I could easily get there without a car. I just got on this old rickety bicycle that they had there and rode downhill. Beyond that, for me, that's definitely a site that, growing up in the suburbs, I would have played in—skateboarding, etc. They're really transformative places in that way. I was really interested in their other uses.

I think I probably started there. Edward Norton in *Fight Club* is also a reference for me; he has a fight in a parking lot. But more importantly, I think I was interested in the stage of it. I didn't really know that at the time, but I just remember feeling like I could set my camera up here, put it on a tripod, and film it. It makes an obvious stage for counter programming. Much like suburban kids trying to make something out of nothing. Especially in a landscape that is pretty bleak. I'm thinking more about the suburbs I grew up in, that are just a little bit vanilla—to say the least. So I think it kind of came from that and from needing a container.

But I really like what you said about the doors and a lack of acknowledgement. Because this is actually something that comes up later for me in performing and with the *Disturbing the View* project a little bit. I am often really interested in *not doing anything*. That's not quite the way I want to say it. Or doing less?

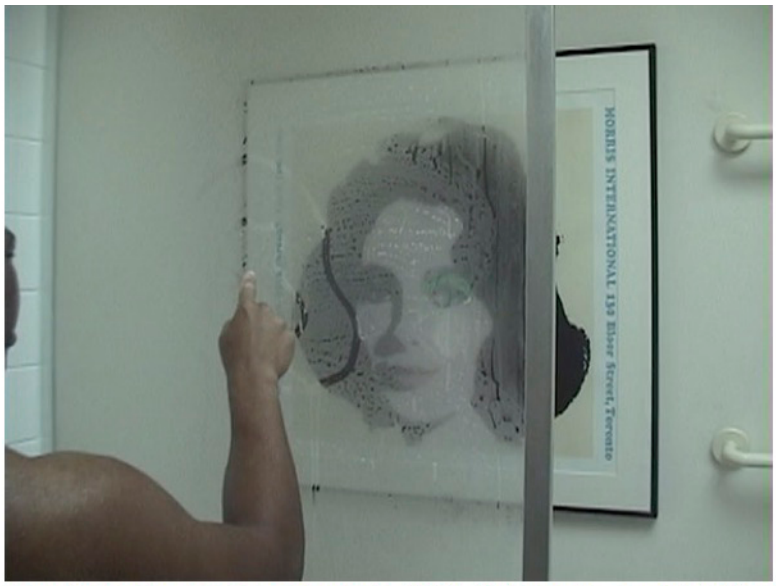
I think sometimes, especially around performance, there's an expectation that I am not always interested in it. So it's a real battle for me sometimes. Especially because I like performances of all sorts. Sometimes the performance that I want to do is me on a bench, sitting. I wonder how disappointed people are by that. But also being okay with that. And sometimes not only being okay with that, but really wanting to advocate for various forms that are not only pleasing and not only about the here-and-now, but having ways of really stretching them through time.

Rail: That makes sense. I thought of these doors as being asleep because the first thing I think about when I see these doors and recognize it's a grocery store is that whole ritual of going through them. These automatic doors are almost operatic. When you say "staging," these doors open for you and it's almost this grand entrance. It's just not coded that way because the grocery store is such a daily errand. And then there's that antiseptic scent that hits you in a grocery store, and this bakery smell but not like a French patisserie. It's definitely a grocery store bagel smell. [*Laughter*] It's also a gush of icy air because they keep grocery stores really cold.

McKenzie: Oh totally!

Rail: So there's all these sensory things that contribute to a change in stasis from the parking lot to inside the store. There's a lot going on. And in *Edward and Me*, you're not only sitting on a bench, right? You're kind of hurting yourself. You're doing dance/wrestling moves onto a concrete sidewalk.

McKenzie: I really like the environmental aspect of this kind of architecture. I hadn't really thought about it much that way. Although that storefront is very different from, say, the Whitney's public-facing front. Even though that work is documented on video and the videos are the way the performances travel, I do think about that site. I mean, there could have been another late night viewer, or the person closing up, cashing out the till or something. There's no obvious viewer, but I think that is important too. It could have been important at the time anyway. A lot of those thoughts play in my head.



Dave McKenzie, *Drawing After Andy*, 2001. Video, color, sound; 1:22 min. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: To me this everyday staging is also evident with the shower for that performance, *Drawing After Andy* (2001). Oh, and by the way, I love the title cards in these videos. [*Laughter*] Because the works are on a loop, I was darting around the gallery trying to catch each when the title cards came up. They reminded me of old movies, where the title cards are so beautiful. You don't see them in a lot of contemporary video work.

McKenzie: Yeah. That's true.

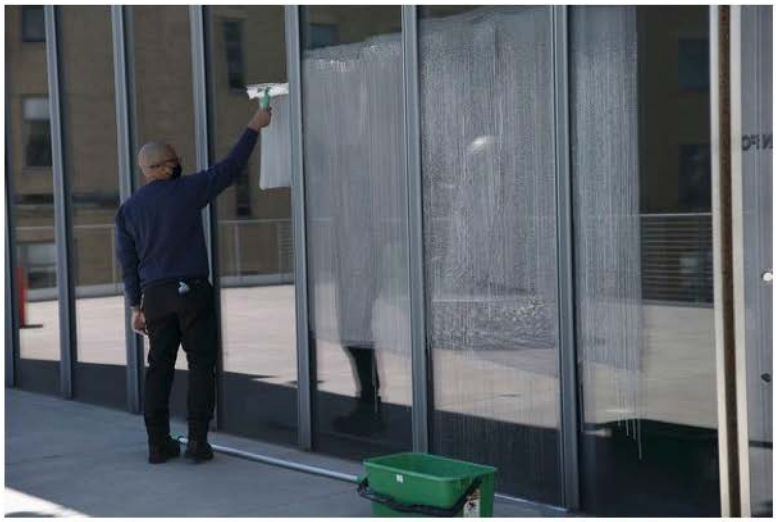
Rail: So for *Drawing After Andy*, you're in the shower, and there's this connection to the performance that you're doing at the Whitney because you're drawing with your finger on the fogged glass. You're outlining that contoured portrait of Elizabeth Taylor by Andy Warhol. There's a poster of it on the wall opposite the shower, and you're tracing it with your finger. And then the camera pans around to you. And you see your face through this drawing that you've just done of Elizabeth Taylor. It's imprinted on your face. It's a distorted view of both you and the portrait.

I thought about the performance at the Whitney as I watched it, because so many visitors to the museum are encountering you through windows. And you said you were interested in the sense of impermeability that you're creating through that action.

McKenzie: Yeah. There's definitely these kinds of overlapping positions. In *Drawing After Andy* I wasn't thinking that. But I do think that way that the camera turns to me creates this sense of both looking and being looked at. And then all the ways that that vision either gets, if not obscured, slightly altered. I'm interested in all the ways that this lens—I just broadly call it a lens—gets played out.

The example in the performance at the Whitney I would give is, I really love working downstairs, just in terms of the scale of the window. But in the rest of the museum, the seventh floor is my new favorite. And it has all to do with this Nick Mauss work that's on view. Because the work is painted on glass. Or it is painted on mirrors, rather. So when I'm working on the windows, a couple of things happen. One, I can see myself, which is really weird

And people tend to use that room, not only as a place to sit, but they also sit there and stare at their reflections. They adjust their hair, they also take a lot of photos. So part of my way of performing there is, just broadly speaking, way more aggressive. It's really hard to not see me. My presence tends to do things. I'm often just following someone and ruining their photo. It's the most jerk-y thing I probably do. I'm just there and I, generally speaking, don't stop. So you'll just be sitting there and I'm going over and over the same ground of the window. You can't help but see me. I think about where I am at that moment. I'm both behind you and in front of you because you can see me through the mirrored surface. Much like the weird thing in *Drawing After Andy*.



Dave McKenzie, *Disturbing the View*. Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art, May 1, 2021. Photo: © Paula Court.

Rail: And then there's a big Mehretu on another floor—now I'm thinking about all the works you're looking at during your performance. [*Laughs*] You're looking at the café at one point, with the Louise Lawler.

McKenzie: Oh! Yes, yes!

Rail: One of the coloring book paintings.

McKenzie: Thank you, I was forgetting who that was.

Rail: When I was following you it was like being on your tour of the museum. You know, "Dave's Picks." [*Laughs*]

I have one closing thought. The more I think about your work, especially the video works, the more it brings me back to my adolescence. I don't know if anyone has told you that before?

McKenzie: How so? Tell me more.

Rail: You were talking about the grocery store and skateboarding. And for me that was one of the first places I could go by myself and be independent. You know, spend my pocket money on Archie Comics or whatever. Going back to *Self-Portrait Piñata*, we were talking about these kids at the Queens Museum. You did this action and to them, they see it as a more celebratory event. They don't have so many associations. What you've decided to do, and what you wanted to bring into the world, might look different to them depending on their personal experiences. And that purview changes over time. The moment when experience starts to color the lens of someone's worldview is during adolescence, right?

McKenzie: Yeah.

Rail: And you focus on everyday exposures. I don't know if it's because I also grew up in suburbia, but these places are coded in all these different ways. And part of adolescence was realizing how my body moves through space and how I am perceived by other people. How I want it to be perceived by other people, or how I want to be invisible. There are all these tensions. It really brings me back to that time, which I actually find fascinating. I don't know if anyone has said that to you before.

McKenzie: No. That's the first time I've heard that, but it makes a lot of sense. I grew up in suburbia too. And not only everything you just said, but most of the places I operated through were in predominantly white suburbia. I think a lot of these various understandings or awakenings, not to mention the fact that my parents and I—my parents more importantly than me, because I left Jamaica when I was two—we come from a predominantly Black country.

So I was always working things out. Maybe in adolescence it was the beginning of a little bit more language around that, or, if not language, different kinds of discomfort and trying to find areas of safety and all sorts of other things. So yeah. What you're saying makes a lot of sense to me.

Contributor

Maddie Klett

Maddie Klett is a writer and researcher based in NYC and Virginia, U.S.A.