



q/a

My Mother's House, My Father's House:

A Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne

by Jan Garden Castro

GENE OGAMI

Puppet Me,
2014.
Platinum silicone
rubber, phospho-
rescent pigment, wire
resin, and thread,
6 x 5 x 5 in.







For more than 30 years, Jeanne Silverthorne has investigated the psychological and physical space of the studio, as well as its successes and failures. For her, the studio is reality and more than reality. She identifies with its beat-up chairs, wiring, floorboards, spent light bulbs—even its flies. Taken from the studio, her sculptures also become stand-ins for the artist herself. “What is Real?” her show at the German Consulate last year, featured the artist in a range of guises—as *Wile E. Coyote (with Breasts)*, as a questioning, insecure Socrates bobble-head with a noose nearby, as two skeletons boxing, and as a scaled-down rubber figure in a transparent cage. The self as creative space, and everything surrounding it, is mutable, subject to change, merger, and distortion. With humor, shifts in scale, and slyly tilted revisions of history, Silverthorne collapses and expands age-old questions about art and life.



OPPOSITE:
Pneuma Machine,
2005.
Platinum silicone
rubber, phosphorescent
pigment, motors,
sensors, and LED lights,
dimensions variable.

THIS PAGE:
Pink Light Bulb,
2016.
Platinum silicone rubber
and fluorescent pigment,
dimensions variable.

Jan Garden Castro: [What drives you as an artist?](#)

Jeanne Silverthorne: I wish I knew. Nobody’s ever asked me that, even after all these years. I know I am driven. I can’t manage without doing this. I get these glimmers of an image popping into my head. Usually, I’ll make a very quick sketch—you think you’ll never forget something when it pops into your head, but of course you do. I feel compelled to make sketches on index card-size pieces of paper, but I may not always know what they mean. Over time, they take on different forms, or I start to understand their connections to other things I’ve made—to get a real sense of their conceptual schema. They start to talk to me.

JGC: [Is there a humor meter test? How do they get to the next stage of development?](#)

JS: No, but many start out as humorous images. They stand the test of time simply because it takes me so



long to get around to making them. For instance, after five years, I might say, “Yes, I have to make that one.” Time’s a great sifter of what’s interesting to make and what is not.

JGC: What are you working on next? Is that still sifting around?

JS: The incoherence of what I’m about to tell you is a good indication of how glimmery this process can be; it is not set in stone. I work a lot with images of the studio and its various manifestations as a place of dilapidation, a place of tradition, as the inside of my head, as a microcosm of the world, as my father’s house—in terms of art having been the abode of male genius for so long—and also as my mother’s house—in Colette’s sense of the word. She wrote a wonderful autobiography titled *My Mother’s House*.

When mother died about seven years ago at my sister’s house, I was the only one with her—it was my turn to be up with her all night. We knew the end was quite close. I immediately alerted people, and then I did a rather cold-blooded thing—I took a photograph of her. I am both obsessed with and terrified of making a very large sculpture of her dead head. I don’t know if I’ll do it. There’s a great Peruvian skull at the Met, and I’d like to make it that big. That’s a kernel of the next body of work I want to do.

I’ve been writing invisible texts that pay homage in various ways to disappearances of one kind or another. Colette’s *My Mother’s House* is the next book I’m writing in invisible ink. These works tie into lamp sculptures. I’ve always picked up tiny pieces of plaster, drips of rubber—debris maybe the size of a fingernail from the casting process—and blown them up. I’ve been doing this intermittently since the 1980s. Often I’ll show them with the original fragment, in a kind of parent-child relationship. For instance, the rubber base of one lamp is an enlargement of a piece of Styrofoam that was used for an under-cut; the lamp casts a blue UV light to read the invisible texts. I make the lamps in clay, cast them in rubber, and then wire them up.

The idea is now starting to be an invisible book that can be read by the light of these domestic but odd, organic-looking lamps. For me, the lamps reference Ree Morton’s rawhide tree-stump lamps in “To Each Concrete Man” at the Whitney Museum in 1974—at that time, a rare solo exhibition by a woman in a major



museum. In some ways, my lamps harken back to that work, but strangely they are also about creating domesticity in the studio. This body of work will also feature self-portraits. I'm not sure what else will come out of this; things will change enormously as they evolve and everything gets clearer.

JGC: The new lamps are different because they shine light, unlike your non-functional rubber light bulbs.

JS: Yes, but they're not the first. I occasionally cast tubing with wires inside, and those lamps also work. Generally though, my lighting fixtures are dysfunctional.

JGC: What is your favorite installation so far?

JS: One of my favorites was at the Albright-Knox Gallery. I was given two rooms in "Materials, Metaphors, Narratives" (2003–04), a show that also included Petah Coyne, Tom Sachs, Fred Tomaselli, Ken Price, and Lesley Dill. It's a massive museum; I liked the idea of two rooms because I'm interested in pairings, oppositions, going from one kind of space to another. The installation came out of an earlier work called *The Scream*,

OPPOSITE:
Socrates and Me,
2019.

Platinum silicone rubber, wood, and cloth,
Socrates figure:
15.75 x 5 in.,
rubber crate:
52 x 18 x 18 in.

THIS PAGE,
LEFT TO RIGHT:

Self Portrait as a Lump of Clay,
2020.

Platinum silicone rubber,
6 x 4 x 4 in.

Self Portrait as a (baby) Lump of Clay,
2020.

Platinum silicone rubber,
3 x 1.5 x 1.5 in.

which showed the passage of a scream through the body using the architecture of a building as the body—that was at the Tang Museum and at Williams College.

I refine its elements, adding more discrete pieces as objective correlatives for emotional states such as anger or sadness. *Big Grief* and *Little Grief*, for instance, were connected rubber frames, presenting microscopic views of water and salt, meaning tears. They had pipes and rubber valves embossed with the names of the enzymes and proteins that we create when we cry and the names of drugs such as Thorazine that we take to crank the emotion up or down, concluding in a rubber teardrop dangling from the end pipe. A rubber wall piece, *Thin-Skinned*, offered a microscopic view of the gall bladder, which produces bile for anger or distress. Another one represented ulcer-causing bacteria. All these images of somaticized emotions were on the walls in one room. In the middle of the room were tiny rubber sculptures of me—a split self-portrait—one with red hair, which I had at the time, and one with white hair, which I have now, suggesting that there had been a traumatic

“ **As the studio erodes...you become** the walls, the entrails of the space, a suicidal flower, an oversize fly with eyeglasses.”





**Self Portrait as a Fly
with Glasses,**
2017.

Platinum silicone rubber,
wire, and plastic,
2.75 x 5 x 18 in.

split in this ego, this personality. The figure were tiny, dwarfed by the much larger “pictures” of emotions.

In the next room, the same thing was going on: the figure was my mother under a cloud because she suffered from depression. An open cartoon mouth, *The Scream*, connected with a spillage of large and small speech bubbles. Again, the images were of anger, distress—like being inside the pissed-off, thin-skinned, anxious body of the artist. The walls were painted gray, and the installation felt condensed into this essence.

JGC: You use scale and size dramatically.

JS: I’ve always been interested in shifts of scale, from microscopic views to big enlargements. I like the difference it makes for the viewer. When something’s small, the viewer is more powerful and in control; when something is large, the viewer is engulfed, more powerless. We go from powerful to powerless in our lives. I like to mix it up in the same way and keep people from settling into any one privileged point of view. Some of the larger installations that I did early on, including at the Whitney and the Tang Museum, involved rubber tubes crisscrossing a lobby or atrium. They were monumental but also made out of minimal lines of tubing. I was interested in scale for that reason and also as a challenge to the monumental.

JGC: Your past work is known for connecting artifacts from the studio with elements taken from the body and nature. You’ve made electronics look like intestines and self-identified as a forlorn sunflower, a fly, and a caterpillar. Is everything around us also a trope for ourselves, for decay and death, and for the vanity of life?

JS: Short answer, yes. I’m obsessed with entropy, *vanitas*, memento mori, and Thanatos—the death drive. I also have a lamentable tendency to anthropomorphize everything. That may be negative, but on the positive side, it’s also a way of dissolving boundaries. The studio is a compromised place and a ruined place for many reasons. As the studio erodes, the entity occupying that space does also; you become the walls, the entrails of the space, a suicidal flower, an oversized fly with eyeglasses; you become a lump of clay with a small head, hands, and feet. I’m projecting myself on to all these things. I’m always happily surprised by the fact that just when

I think the studio is a dead zone full of nothing but trash, if there's an infestation of flies or weeds, well, they're teeming with life, so the joke is on me.

JGC: Is there a distinction between your exacting and metaphorical self-portraits and portraits of other people that include their real hair and DNA profiles?

JS: Yes. My first self-portrait had to do with the visualization of myself as a split personality with red and white hair. Then, after 9/11, I realized that everybody in my small family was elderly, and I wanted, in the most basic way, to memorialize them. I began doing small figure because I knew I'd lose these people soon, and I made them glow in the dark so that for a few seconds after the lights went out, they'd have another chance at life even though that would also fade away. With the DNA inclusions—their DNA profile shown with them in frames—I was trying to update the portrait project because I had qualms about going into those traditional waters. When you find out where your mother's DNA has been for 15,000 years, you get a sense of how ev-

erybody on the planet is connected. That mitigates loss. Conversely, the second lab report, the genetic fingerprint of each person's DNA, shows the stretch of DNA that is different from anybody else who ever lived and can never be recovered. I then made four self-portraits of myself in distressed circumstances with the same material, scale, phosphorescence, and my own DNA.

JGC: How did you move from latex, Hydrocal, and resin to rubber?

JS: I began with Hydrocal, a dense plaster that was too breakable and heavy. Resin was toxic; I didn't have windows and wasn't happy with it. I began using latex around 1983. I was told that it would never last, but I found ways to make it last longer and still have many of those pieces. Some museums wouldn't buy those works, and I was constantly lectured to stop using latex. I then tried polysulfid rubber, which is also toxic and has "cold flow," which means that after a number of years, it slumps, so many works were lost.

Finally, I found platinum silicone rubber in about

THIS PAGE:

Wile E. Coyote (with Breasts), Studio Floor, Overgrowth, 2020.

Platinum silicone rubber, 15 x 28 x 58 in.

OPPOSITE:

Exit with Fan, 2007.

Platinum silicone rubber and phosphorescent pigment (shown glowing in dark), 96 x 96 x 48 in.



2000. It's archival and lasts indefinitely—it's clear, non-toxic, and you can control the color. Best of all, unlike other rubbers, it will stick to itself. I can cast each petal of a dandelion separately and put them together with more silicone rubber. I like the additive process and working incrementally. The other thing is if there's ever a tear, you can repair it with the same material. I've been working with it for almost 20 years.

JGC: You make rubber crates to store the sculptures, for shipping, and also as pedestals.

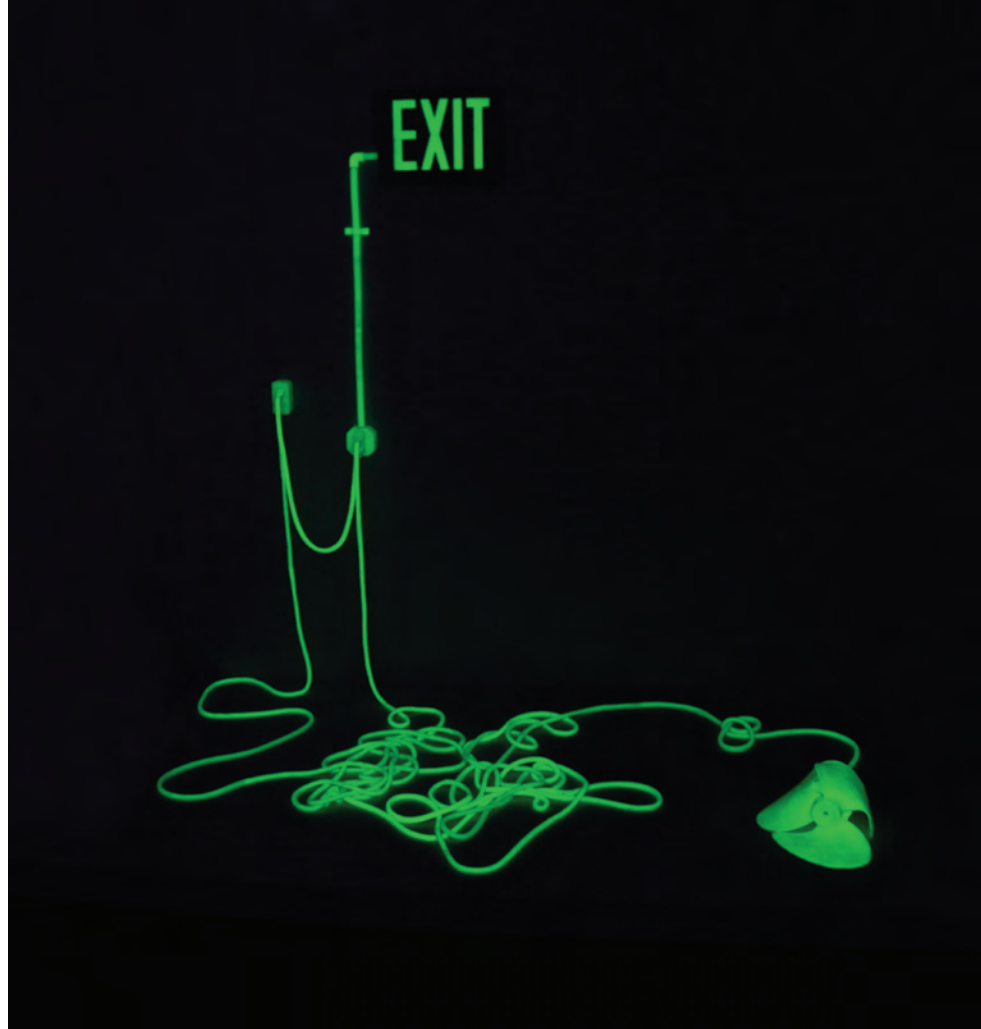
JS: The idea is that every time I make a new sculpture, I make a new rubber crate in which the work can be stored and shipped; the crate also becomes part of the exhibition. I may sell the work but not the crate, or vice-versa, so I have many no-longer-matched pieces. I'm aware of the pedestal controversy, but I'm fond of pedestals, and the crate is the perfect solution.

JGC: What originally inspired your series related to invisibility? What is the purpose of doing painstaking invisible writing and creating works that may never be seen?

JS: This concern with invisibility is longstanding. Since around 1990, I've been interested in things that are in deep storage in the studio. I was in a show organized by Ingrid Schaffne called "Deep Storage" around 1998. I had some rubber paintings that you couldn't see because of the rubber bubble wrap around them. I brought the artifacts of the studio and even the wiring from behind the walls into the gallery.

I began to think about cardboard storage boxes, and somehow that led me to what's inside cardboard boxes, then to stacks of paper, and then, in a leap, to the idea of writing out texts about invisibility in invisible ink—short stories, novels, poems, commissioned essays. It's an ongoing series of rubber "cardboard" boxes with rubber duct tape on them, which open to reveal stacks of 1,000 sheets of paper. Without an ultraviolet light, you don't know how far down the invisible text goes, at which point the writing stops and truly blank pages begin.

Texts about invisibility are everywhere: for example, Plato's story of Gyges. Invisibility is about power, again—everybody feels invisible. I've spent hours and hours copying out Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* into a rubber book, in Palmer script. To copy out Charlotte



Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* or Emily Dickinson's epitaph is an act of homage for me. It's also a repository of time. The novel in the cardboard box is a stack of time—a concretizing of time. It's not like Tom Friedman's paper (*1000 Hours of Staring*, 1992–97), which I love, but where there really isn't anything. You can read my texts, but why would you? My copied *Frankenstein* is like the concept of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: if you've read it, you have your memory of it, however incomplete or distorted. That's what you're projecting on to those pages with invisible ink. This could be seen as an exercise in futility, but I wanted to do something that would be resistant to consumption and difficult for the marketplace.

JGC: Do you still identify as a feminist? Does feminism continue to serve as a direction empowering women?

JS: I absolutely identify as a feminist, and my work addresses gender issues in ways not always apparent to traditional feminist interpretation. Issues of scale,

for me, always talk about power—women would be chastised for working in a small scale, for instance, whereas men would not. On the other hand, quite a few of my works, like *Pneuma Machine*, are kinetic machines, with rubber parts that move, lights that dim, and a lot of other pieces that involve motors and electricity. Some people see these works as male-identified now that we acknowledge many genders, however, the model is no longer a male-female binary. I have tried to break down binaries by, on the one hand, making flow-ers and little figure and, on the other hand, making machines. What women are has been nicely complicated by the fact that there aren't just two genders.

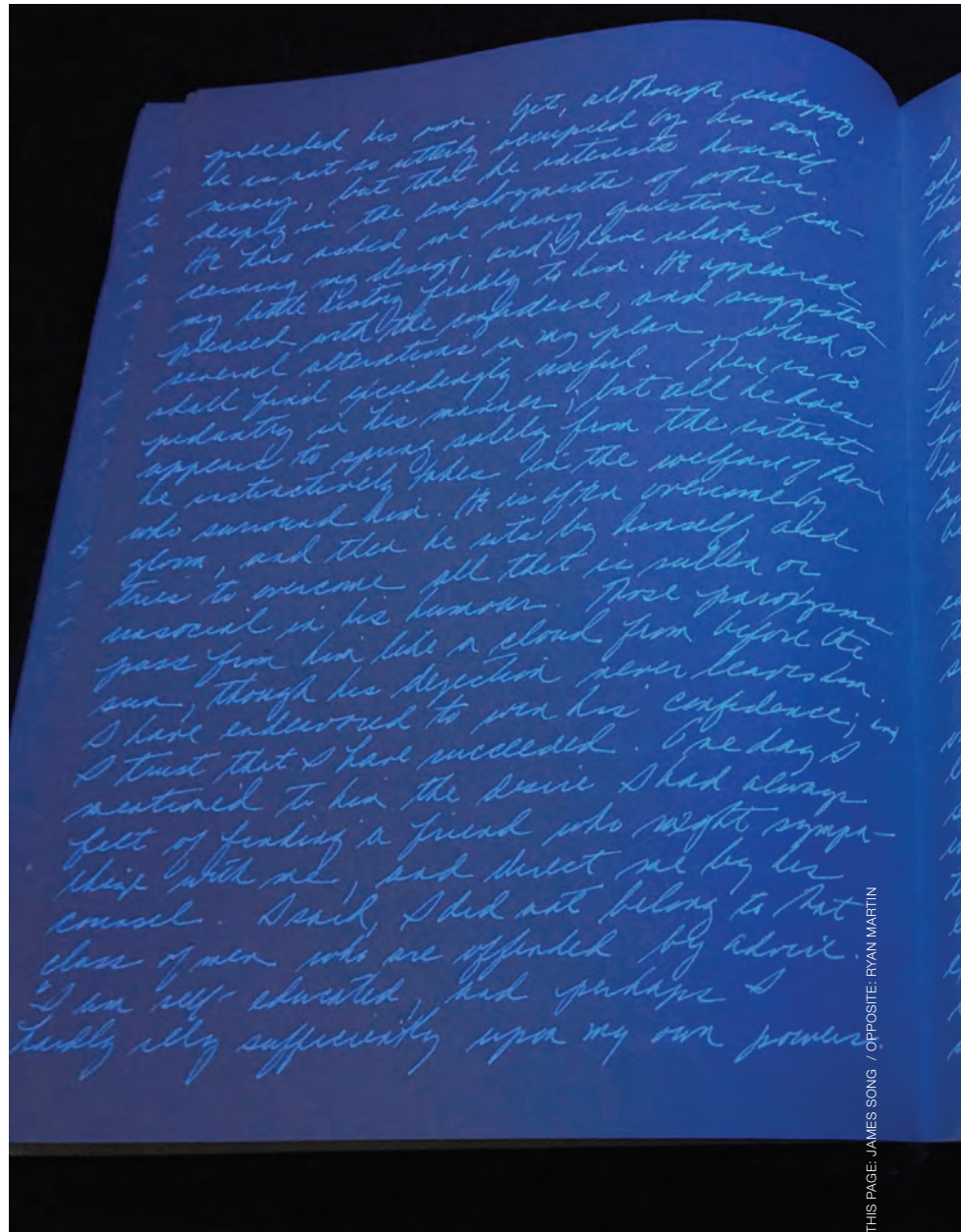
JGC: I was wondering whether the #MeToo movement and new role models like Greta Thunberg have replaced the feminism of an older generation.

JS: I wouldn't say replaced. The #MeToo movement—witnessing and speaking out—is classic feminist stuff. We're in a moment of heightened awareness of sexism, even if the situation hasn't necessarily improved. Environmental activism and feminism have long been allied. Moreover, Thunberg's autism is a feminist issue because women have been misdiagnosed ever since Asperger's was defined. High-functioning autism manifests in a completely different way for women than it does for men. I think #MeToo and Thunberg have enriched feminism—it has to be supple and able to change. There are many ways of being a woman.

JGC: Do you want to talk about your work with machines?

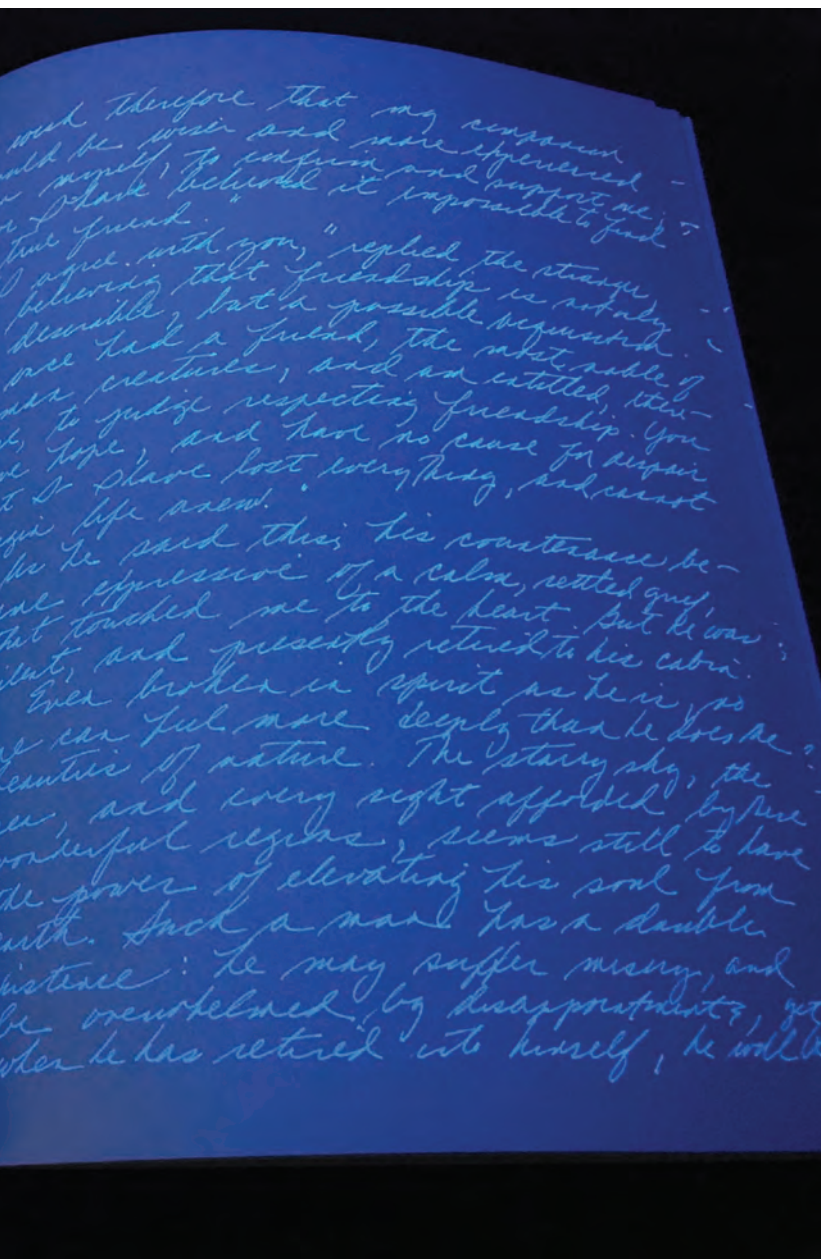
JS: The studio is, in countless ways, my mother's house, and especially Virginia Woolf's "room of my own." It's also my father's house. My machines have a lot to do with my father. He could make anything, wire anything, and he was also an inventor. I love motors and things that move. Of course, things with motors are obsolete now—another disappearance, another thing to archive, to retrieve from the ruin. ■

"More Flesh and Bone," a show of Silverthorne's new cast rubber works, is on view at the University of Kentucky Museum through February 13, 2021. Connecticut's Mattatuck Museum will host another exhibition of her work in the spring.



THIS PAGE: JAMES SONG / OPPOSITE: RYAN MARTIN

“ I have a lamentable tendency to anthropomorphize everything...on the positive side, it's a way to dissolve boundaries.”



FROM LEFT:
Frankenstein,
 2018.
 Handwritten text
 in invisible ink, rubber
 binding and cover,
 and UV light,
 11 x 15 in. open.

**Bubble-Wrapped
 Task Chair,**
 2016.
 Platinum silicone rubber
 and metallic pigment,
 37 x 26 x 26 in.