



Labor&Materials

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Cover: Esmat Mohamoud
Gluttony, Gluttony, Gluttony, 2023 (detail)
Shea butter, Italian black marble, wax, damar resin



A pile of hand-shaped bricks arranged on a bicycle seat, metal branding irons designed to imprint commercial logos, a painting of a lone street sweeper in an apparently abandoned Times Square, and detailed, anonymous portraits rendered on the fabric or wood of containers once used to gather or ship goods harvested from farms and factories: the forms and materials featured in this multi-media exhibition suggest a range of contradictions, anachronisms, and dichotomies. Exploring the evolution of industry in the 21st century, *Labor&Materials* presents a precarious balance between promise and peril. The scale, scope, and speed of technological innovation heralds unprecedented changes in what, how, where, and by whom goods and services are produced and provided. Economists describe the explosion of radically new platforms and products emerging in the digital age—robots and other forms of automated labor, self-driving cars, three-dimensional printing, the explosion of bits and pixels transmitted across the internet, and the growing global network of trade driven by the shipping container—as an inflection point: a time in human history when how we live and work is utterly transformed. What does an inflection point look like? How will the transformation of commerce and consumption affect access to goods and jobs, to information and infrastructure? Given the widespread changes to everyday life generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, how work is experienced, defined, and valued has become increasingly complex and contradictory.

Héctor Zamora
Brasil, 2013
Clay bricks, metal bicycle



From photographs of today's living and working conditions by Katrin Korfmann, Alejandro Cartagena, Pieter Hugo, and Zanele Muholi; to portraits of those laboring in 21st-century fields, homes, factories, and mines by Lina Puerta, Pierre Gonnord, Serge Alain Nitegeka, and Jay Lynn Gomez; to fantastical visions of a world defined by data and digitization by James Clar, Karine Giboulo, Chen Jiagang, and Gonzalo Lebrija, the imagery on view is both nostalgic and futuristic. As today's primary means of production, the computer, becomes better, faster, stronger every day, more material and digital goods are made, shipped, transmitted, used, reused, and discarded, evoking concerns about environmental degradation and socio-economic inequities. Kara Walker's figurative sculpture of a young 19th-century enslaved laborer and Marina Zurkow's software-driven animation of today's shipping trade provide bookends to the spectrum of this investigation into our contradictory era of concurrent abundance and scarcity. *The African Boy Attendant Curio* Walker sculpted in resin and molasses references the history of slavery and the essential role enslaved labor played in the sugar industry, products from which are now consumed in dangerous excess, while Alison Saar's *Reapers* feature images of young women printed on repurposed sugar sacks, a reminder of the exploitative labor that fueled the development of agricultural industries. Within the labyrinthine code of export and import shipping tariffs that inspired Zurkow's *More&More (the invisible oceans)*, sugar—along with other former plantation crops like tobacco and cotton—constitutes a single category of classification, thus linking our agrarian past with production in the post-industrial present to envision creation, commerce, and consumption in the imminent, uncertain future.



Esmaa Mohamoud
Gluttony, Gluttony, Gluttony, 2023
 Shea butter, Italian black marble, wax, damar resin

The ongoing exploitation of young, female labor is the subject of Esmaa Mohamoud's multi-media installation, *Gluttony, Gluttony, Gluttony*, which presents three busts carved from shea butter on marble plinths, surrounded by 15,000 sculpted Ghanaian shea butter nuts. Prized as a moisturizing beauty product and often marketed to Black people, 130,000 tons of shea butter is produced in Ghana every year. While the international companies that export the material make exorbitant profits, the women who harvest and process shea nuts are ruthlessly exploited, working long hours, largely during the rainy season, and typically earning the equivalent of about two dollars after a five-day work week. "It's this system of North American consumption without regard for the environment or for the young girls who are doing the labor," Mohamoud says. "Feels like gluttony to me." Carved with precision in shea butter that has dried to an ivory color, each bust is unique, and regal, set atop a column of Italian marble, evoking the priceless portraits of revered subjects from Euro-centric art history, a canon Mohamoud's work disrupts while simultaneously illuminating the human costs of market-driven consumption.

While recently recognized as essential workers, the often invisible, overlooked, or under recognized, Latinx laborers who farm crops, take care of children, clean homes and commercial buildings, landscape yards, and cook food, are the central subjects in works by Lina Puerta, Narsiso Martinez, and Jay Lynn Gomez. Each of Puerta's series, *From Field to Table: Seven Tapestries Honoring Latino Farm Laborers from the American South* portray the people who work labor-intensive crops predominantly grown in the southern United States. Puerta illustrates the backbreaking labor of harvesting strawberries in *Strawberry Crop Picker*, depicting the worker doubled over, his back arched over a small bush of *la fruta del diablo* (the devil's fruit)—so called by those who must bend down all day to tend to them. Puerta creates her tapestries in a papermaking studio, combining fabrics, cotton and linen pulp, ribbons, beaded appliqués, fur, feathers, and chains, to create images of the leaves, flowers, fruit, and pollinators who contribute to the process of bringing food from the field to the consumer. "I love the idea of the worker being part of this chain, or process, or dance. I think that there is something poetic in that whole process that I wanted to highlight," Puerta notes. Her layered, vibrant works combine images inspired by photographs with quotations describing the crop workers' experiences, such as, "When you first get here, your waist, hands and feet can't take it," and "In a 2012 report, Human Rights Watch surveyed female farmworkers. Nearly all of them had experienced sexual violence or knew others who had." The materiality, form, and visual composition of these works recalls the art-historical precedent of Medieval-era tapestries, which often illustrated tales of royal heroism or religious mythology; Puerta's 21st-century tapestries present anonymous images of Latinx laborers as worthy of reverence. "For me, it was important to show them with integrity and respect and recognition of their hard work, a work that is not recognized by our system."

Narsiso Martinez immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico as a teenager, and spent many summers picking fruit in Washington state, an experience that inspires his practice. "Representing my community is important," says Martinez, referring to the subject depicted in *Essential Since 2013*, an anonymous, undocumented farm worker whose labor fills the produce sections of grocery stores and restaurant kitchens in the U.S. and beyond. Painting in a style that recalls both 1930s Social Realist art and the Mexican Muralist tradition, Martinez enlarges the figure, emphasizing at once his visibility and vulnerability: the portrait is painted directly on the discarded cardboard boxes in which the harvested fruit was packed. The gold leaf used to create the QR code behind the figure's head suggests reverence, even divinity, but the QR code itself is taken from the subject's ID card, used in the fields by "checkers" who measure and track the harvests for each worker—a reminder of the reality of how "essential" labor is valued.

Narsiso Martinez
Essential Since 2013, 2023
 Ink, gouache, charcoal, simple leaf, collage,
 and matte gel on produce boxes





Lina Puerta
Strawberry Crop Picker, 2017
 Cotton and linen pulp, lace, velvet, sequined fabrics, handmade woven textile, trims, appliqués, velvet ribbon, fake fur, feathers, pom-poms and gouache

Reflecting the experiences of her family and friends at labor, Gomez depicts Latinx domestic and custodial workers, obscuring their features and rendering their faces unreadable. In Gomez's painting, *A Man Sweeping (Times Square)*, the lone figure wears a bright red uniform, and yet remains unseen in one of the most trafficked areas of densely populated New York City. The working man's face turns towards the ground, his shoulders slightly hunch over—all subtle coping mechanisms, as Gomez calls them, and visual markers of shame, tension, sadness, or frustration. His blurred features echo his blurred status; visible but invisible in a setting that both needs and denies his existence and role in American society and domestic life. The child of Mexican immigrants, Gomez illuminates the hidden realities of domestic and custodial work in the U.S. today by making the labor and laborers prominent in spaces where they were previously unseen, visually linking the lives and histories of unnamed laborers across the country.

Turning the camera on themselves and their family history, Zanele Muholi's staged photographs of themselves as a domestic worker pay tribute to their mother, who worked for the same family in South Africa for forty-two years. Muholi's series historicizes the labor of their mother and of many Black women who were and who continue to be trapped within a system that controls Black female labor. Muholi notes "The series is meant to acknowledge all domestic workers around the globe who continue to labor with dignity, while often facing physical, financial, and emotional abuses in their places of work."

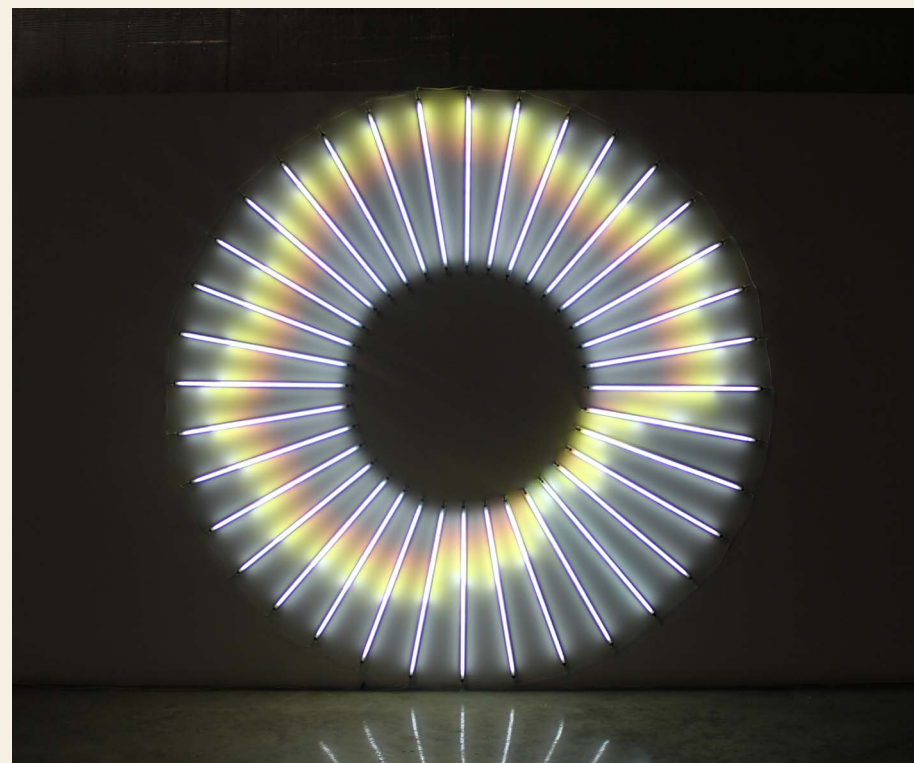
Alejandro Cartagena's photographs narrate the everyday struggle for survival in the city of Monterrey, Mexico. Photographing early in the morning from highway overpasses, Cartagena captures images of truck beds filled with workers and tools as they embark on long commutes from the economically depressed suburbs to more affluent towns and cities within Mexico. The seriality of Cartagena's *Carpoolers*—multiple images of different men in different cars, all choosing to get to work in the most efficient way possible—emphasizes the invisibility of these workers and the ubiquity of their situation.

This extreme vulnerability and the human cost of the exploitation of labor is the subject of Serge Alain Nitegeka's paintings created on pieces of salvaged shipping crates. Nitegeka spent much of his young life escaping civil strife in Burundi, Rwanda, and Kenya and is now based in South Africa; his multi-media artworks address the plight of the refugee and the migrant, depicting his vulnerable subjects' innate dignity. Using everyday materials like charcoal, coffee, and tea, Nitegeka paints images of people as if they were confined within the crates; the barcodes from the containers become stamps on the human bodies, a reference to the persistence of human trafficking and the role of unseen, human labor within the global economy.

Many of the tools that previously powered industry, guided transport, branded property, and built products have become obsolete; their forms are now fodder for artistic innovation. Purdy Eaton and Catherine Yass's photographs of monumental structures within the landscape are simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic. Eaton's image of the omnipresent windmills of her native Midwest transforms an icon of 21st-century energy technology into a symbol of potential obsolescence while Yass's lighthouse sits unmanned, its original function now automated by the global positioning systems accessible to anyone with a smartphone. One of very few remaining offshore lighthouses, Yass's glowing, color-saturated image—taken from a boat looking directly into the sun—transforms the 1970s lighthouse from a cutting-edge triumph of industrial utility into a nostalgic, other-worldly icon of a world in transition.

Invented by the ancient Egyptians and used by the ancient Romans and civilizations since to show ownership of livestock and of slaves, Erik Brunetti's 21st-century branding irons hold familiar logos and recognizable symbols, often ones that consumers purchase voluntarily, willingly marking themselves as the property of a corporation. James Clar's *NASDAQ Recursive Loop* renders the omnipresent machine of corporate commerce as color and light; the vicissitudes of the stock market are made visual, just hinting at the rippling effects of such economic fluctuations on the daily lives of those far removed from Wall Street.

James Clar
NASDAQ Recursive Loop, 2013
 LEDs, acrylic tubes, and filters





Kara Walker
African Boy Attendant Curio with Molasses and Brown Sugar, from "The Marvelous Sugar Baby" Installation at the Old Domino Sugar Factory Warehouse (Front Basket), 2014
 Cast pigmented polyester resin with polyurethane coating and molasses

The challenges faced living and laboring in burgeoning urban centers, by those workers deemed "essential," yet often remain undervalued, are explored in works by Héctor Zamora, Katrin Korfmann, and Karine Giboulo. Zamora's *Brasil*, a bicycle, stacked high with handmade clay bricks, is a portrait of his adopted country, Brazil, and an homage to the Brazilian laborer. As more people flock to cities across the globe to seek work and shelter, these bricks have become the ubiquitous building components of DIY housing, and of businesses quickly conceived and abandoned. The precariousness of the sculpture alludes to the volatile construction and unstable foundations of these structures, which place workers and inhabitants at risk. Towering piles of glass dwarf a factory worker in Katrin Korfmann's *Glass, Anix*. Part of her *Back Stages* series created in collaboration with Jens Pfeifer, Korfmann's photograph reveals the behind-the-scenes of mass production making the people, places, and processes visible within the larger manufacturing system. The factory floor, cramped dormitories, bloated consumers, and the trash-strewn environment are the subjects of Giboulo's *Electronic Village*. Her carefully sculpted, painted, and electronic dioramas are based on what she witnessed when she posed as a CEO and gained unrestricted access to a factory and its workers in Shenzhen, China; unrelenting, repetitive labor, environmental degradation and pollution, greed and excess—all generated by the seemingly endless demand for technology.

Using the human body within the natural landscape as a metaphor for change, both Chen Jiagang and Zhang Huan's photographs examine China's rapidly changing landscape and the impact of the global marketplace on humans and the environment. Best known for photographing decaying industrial sites in rapidly developing Chinese cities, Chen deploys the lone figure in *Cold Forest* amidst a wintry rural hinterland, unfamiliar to those seeking an urban foothold in China's new economy. A poetic futility informs Zhang's performance *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond*. Zhang, who left his rural home to pursue an education in Beijing, has gained international recognition for demanding performance art connecting contemporary notions of identity with nature, history, politics, and labor. Here, performers connect intimately with the landscape and engage in ephemeral work—adding enough bodies to a fish pond to enact meaningful change.

As illustrated by Marina Zurkow's *More&More (the invisible oceans)*, today's ever-expanding, often opaque shipping trade exerts an unparalleled impact on communities worldwide, and on the global environment. Considerable amounts of refuse from the post-industrial world—innumerable plastics, obsolete hardware—comes ashore in places like the polluted Agbogbloshie market in Ghana, photographed by Pieter Hugo, and in the favelas outside of Rio de Janeiro, where Vik Muniz maintains a warehouse studio. Here, Muniz engages young residents in creating works such as *Pictures of Junk: The Education of Cupid*, after *Correggio*, transforming a world of waste into the raw materials for an art practice that fosters the essential work of collaboration and ingenuity, connection and visibility.

Alice Gray Stites
Chief Curator, Museum Director

Alejandro Cartagena
Carpoolers #14, 2011-2012
Archival pigment print



ABOUT 21c MUSEUM HOTELS

21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

The company was founded as a single property by contemporary art collectors and preservationists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, whose mission was to share thought-provoking contemporary art with the public and participate in the revitalization of downtown Louisville. The couple opened the first 21c in 2006 along downtown's West Main Street, rehabilitating a series of 19th century warehouses to create a union of genuine hospitality, thoughtful design, and culinary creativity—all anchored by a contemporary art museum that is free and open to the public every day of the year.

21c is one of the largest contemporary art museums in the U.S., and North America's only collecting museum dedicated solely to art of the 21st century. 21c presents a range of arts programming curated by Museum Director, Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites, including both solo and group exhibitions that reflect the global nature of art today, as well as site-specific, commissioned installations, and a variety of cultural events. The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists and organizations worldwide, including Speed Art Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Creative Time, For Freedoms, and others.

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21c is one of the largest museums in the U.S., and collecting museum dedicated to the 21st century. 21c presents programming curated by Chief Curator Alice Gray, solo and group exhibitions that explore the nature of art today, as well as commissioned installations and cultural events. The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists worldwide, including Speed Art Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Museum Center, and others.

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