

**we respond
together**
Michelle
Lopez: Ballast &
Barricades at
the Institute of
Contemporary Art,
Philadelphia, PA

The University of Pennsylvania
Fine Arts 264 : Art, Design and Digital Culture
with Avery Lawrence
Fall 2019



THROUGH MAY 10, 2020

Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades



Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades, 2019, installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Photo by: Constance Mensch.

Organizers
Alex Klein



About

In *Ballast & Barricades* Michelle Lopez employs a formal, fragmented architectural language to critique symbols of nationalism, power, and consumption. Known for her sculptural works that recast histories of minimalism and everyday objects through a feminist lens, in this exhibition Lopez brings together a selection of recent sculptures alongside a monumental, site-specific installation that creates a suspended cityscape reduced to rubble. Here, blockades, borders, flags, and natural elements bleed together while remnants of construction sites and scaffolding create a delicate system of counterweights and counterbalances—all meticulously crafted by hand. For Lopez, this sculptural terrain is suggestive of an ongoing history of bodies and violence in the absence of figuration. It is an urban landscape fabricated out of the material remains of crisis, teetering on the brink of collapse.

— Alex Klein, Dorothy and Stephen R. Weber (CHE'60) Curator


Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades is organized by Alex Klein, Dorothy and Stephen R. Weber (CHE'60) Curator. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated publication.

Michelle Lopez (b. 1970; lives Philadelphia) has been included in solo and group exhibitions at venues including the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT; LAXART, Los Angeles; PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY; the Public Art Fund, Metrotech Center, NY; and the Orange County Museum of Art, Santa Ana, CA. Formerly a faculty member at Yale School of Art, she now heads the Sculpture Division at the Fine Arts Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Stuart Weitzman School of Design. In 2019 she was a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Support

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Exhibition Guides

 [View the gallery notes from *Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades*](#) (PDF) 1 MB

Screenshot of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania *Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades* webpage



top: Michelle Lopez answers students' questions
on December 3, 2019


(photo: Avery Lawrence)










bottom: *Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades*
installation view, ICA, University of Pennsylvania

(photo: Constance Mensh)



the writers



	Catherine Campbell
	Gerardo Ramirez Lopez
	Tiffany Lu
	Anton Ludwig
	Gabriel Quiroz
	Braden Saba
	Irene Xu
	Emily Yu
	Avery Lawrence

the sections



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4. "the space of art, the space in art" *pgs 12 & 13*

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Michelle Lopez answers students' questions on
December 3, 2019
(photo: Avery Lawrence)

1. "introduction to we respond together"

Avery Lawrence

"Let's co-write a response/review/reflection in reaction to our experiences with the exhibition *Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades* at the Institute of Contemporary Art," I said to 16 students in September of 2019. Thus began an experiment in collaborative art writing. I encouraged the students to share their honest and thoughtful feelings and ideas about the show. Instead of attempting to emulate a professional art-writing style, the idea was to embrace our amateurishness as we co-crafted an unimpeded - and, maybe, unexpected - written response to an art show.

As a class, we had various encounters with the work over the course of the exhibition:

September 26, 2019 we visited the exhibition at the ICA, spending 45 minutes with the exhibition

December 3, 2019 we chatted with Michelle Lopez over Skype

The format of this collaboration was structured. 8 students elected to write about Lopez's exhibition (the other 8 wrote about Jacolby Satterwhite's work at The Fabric Workshop and Museum). Based on an initial written response to Lopez's work, the students were organized into four thematic groups. Each group of two students worked together - in person or in a shared digital document - to craft one written response to their assigned theme. Each student had a color associated with his/her/their name, his/her/their writing. In the paragraphs and pages that follow, you will find 8 students thinking and writing about art, together.

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2. “becoming, offered in contrast to being”

Catherine Campbell

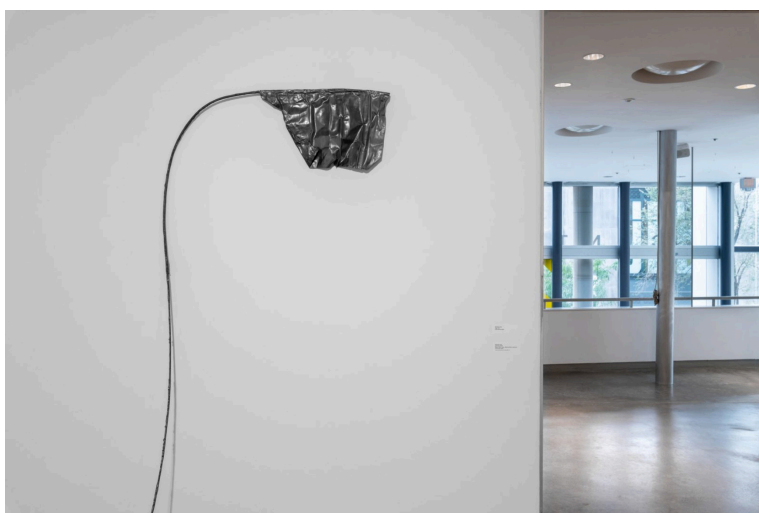
Anton Ludwig

Standing outside the main room of interconnected structures, there is a composed view of how it would look photographed; once inside, it no longer feels possible to take one picture of what is there. It feels as though the elements lie in limbo, or as if they are in a constant state of collapse. The structures seem to be floating. With equipment lingering in the gallery, the show could almost appear to be in the process of installation. Indeed, the moving ladder at the back of the room is one of the only grounded, human-scale, familiar components, and it too is on wheels.

In simultaneous processes of repair and decay, pieces of roof are torn off, and structural parts of a building show. This could either be a natural disaster, or the Wizard of Oz, with a house suspended in the air; either way, there is a sense of loss. The chunks of concrete on the floor beg the question: has someone chipped them out of the floor itself, or were they brought from the outside? Everything feels fragile and torn apart, and it almost makes the viewer worry that a slight gust could have cataclysmic consequences.

In the second room of the show, we find other, more standalone pieces. “Throne II” has an unusual, beautiful shape. As a “chair” of some variety, it interacts with the human body closely, but this particular one is too unstable, too skinny, and too tall to do so in a natural way. It almost appears as a shadow or skeleton of a real throne, like something stripped it of its shell. Some of the lead isn’t wrapped all the way, so it begs the viewer to touch it, even it out, and make it consistent. Made of lead, however, it would not be safe to touch without a protective barrier of some sort—even as a chair is an object meant to interact intimately with the body.

“Barricade” is full of tension. The reflective handkerchief dangling in the middle looks like a fourth anchor point for this clearly physically unreliable structure (like a child’s fairy house, made in a backyard of sticks and pieces of slate—touched the wrong way, it would collapse). While at first glance the image of a tripod gives a sense of stability, the realization that one of the legs is string immediately throws it out of balance. Left to dangle, not-very-neatly, from the knot on the handkerchief, its long tail is all that grounds the sculpture’s center to the floor.



Michelle Lopez: *Ballast & Barricades*, installation view at the ICA. (photo: Constance Mensh)

3. “the flag”

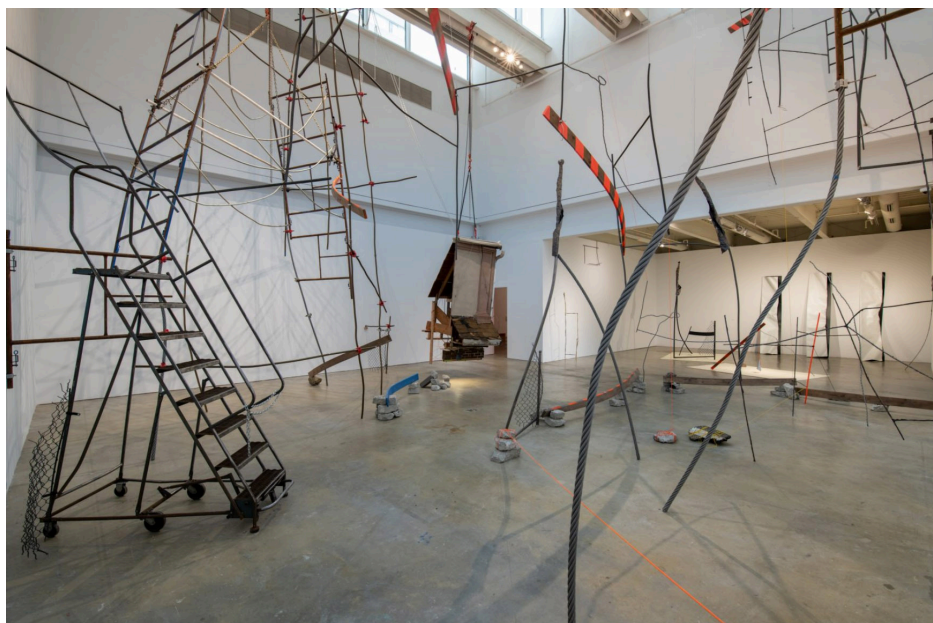
Tiffany Lu

Gabriel Quiroz

The flag in Michelle Lopez’s *Ballasts and Barricades* sets up a minimalist but powerful message throughout her exhibit. Some may believe there is a nationalistic message while others may think of the social role of the symbol. [That’s exactly what I was thinking! She leaves it open to interpretation so that the audience can choose

what to see.] Before officially entering the exhibit, most people may completely miss her first piece, "the flag," as it consumed from the bigger, more expansive installations. Her audience may notice the sound of the wind but merely brush it aside. [This is too true lol I was wondering where the noise was coming from, but I just dismissed it because I thought as an outside noise. If Avery hadn't pointed it out, I don't think I would've noticed.] Lopez intentionally camouflages this piece, representing how common the monument is around the world, but how little we acknowledge it until a time of need. [I agree. I think there's a deeper meaning behind the subtleness but I main concern is that it's too subtle that her viewers completely miss it.] Lopez's message can be taken through different perspectives depending on the audience's point of view. Her choice in the material and monotone color scheme allows them to create their own image, and ultimately interpreting their own flag.

Michelle Lopez in *Ballasts and Barricades* has a reoccurring motif across her different pieces throughout her exhibit: the flag. It is a plain flag that has no association to anything other than the assumptions the viewer makes. For example, some may believe it resembles the U.S. flag during a battle and may think that her exhibit has a patriotic connotation or that it is a social commentary on the war. [That's so true. Her exhibit invites the audience to interject their own opinion and perspectives into her work, thus making the broad exhibit into something possibly more personal.] More importantly though, and probably the most overlooked aspect of the flag, is her very first piece. It was created very cautiously to blend in with its surroundings until one takes a closer look and realizes that it is art. [Also true. Might I add that the use of material adds on to the piece's perceived unimportance because it's an opaque metallic which is part of the exhibit's color palette.] Typically, art is only perceived by one's visual sense because one can rarely touch it. However, Lopez invites her audience to expand



Michelle Lopez: *Ballast & Barricades*, installation view at the ICA. (photo: Constance Mensh)

their senses and use their hearing to have a whole new experience with not only her art but art in general. [I love exhibits that allow us to use more than just the sense of sight! Not only do I see the piece, but I also get, almost, a second-hand experience of the process behind their work.] It also allows the reader to realize that attention to detail is something imperative to have, especially in art.

4. "the space of art, the space in art"

Braden Saba

Emily Yu

I don't visit often, but every time I find myself at the Institute of Contemporary Art, I wonder why I don't stop by more often. The exhibit currently installed, *Ballast & Barricades* by Michelle Lopez is quite a spectacle. By dividing the room into half and raising the ceiling of one part, the impressive scale of this piece was accentuated further. I couldn't take my eyes off of the hanging steel rods, scaffolding, beams, ladders, and other materials that adorned

this space, which led me to wonder about the theme that the artist wanted to imply, and how she managed to hang such large pieces into the exhibition room. In addition to the scale of the sculpture, her use of color also caught my attention. I really appreciated the use of neon orange. It reminded me of the roadblocks and constructions, which may have been a clue revealing some of the artist's original intentions with this piece. Also, by providing a marble texture on the floor, it also cleverly provides a contrast from the smooth surfaces of the metal architectures. Moreover, due to the strong gravity-like attraction of the hanging shed-like structure on one side of the room, I found my attention primarily focused on that one piece rather than the other smaller ones in the room. I did walk around and view her full exhibit, but I always found myself eventually going back to the massive piece that had caught my attention at the first place.

5. "thick air, frozen time"

Gerardo Ramirez Lopez

Irene Xu

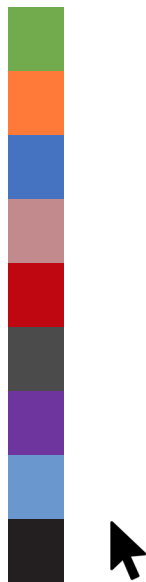
Lopez's installation seems to me like some sort of social commentary. There are bits and pieces of urban hardware scattered about, hanging from the ceiling, projected from the floor, and clinging onto the walls. Thin rods and metal scraps are placed in a seemingly disordered way. Yet everything is also in perfect balance. Buildings and roads are stripped down to their bones and it creates something rather beautiful and well-composed, but also on the verge of tumbling down in a heap of twisted metal. In fact, it seems that there is a certain prudent serenity in *Ballast and Barricades*, a serenity easily disrupted by the viewer's participation. Overall, the installation seems to be an event in which the viewer can't participate in. Lopez seems to have a negative view on modern daily life; perhaps she is pointing out how even though buildings and people seem flawless

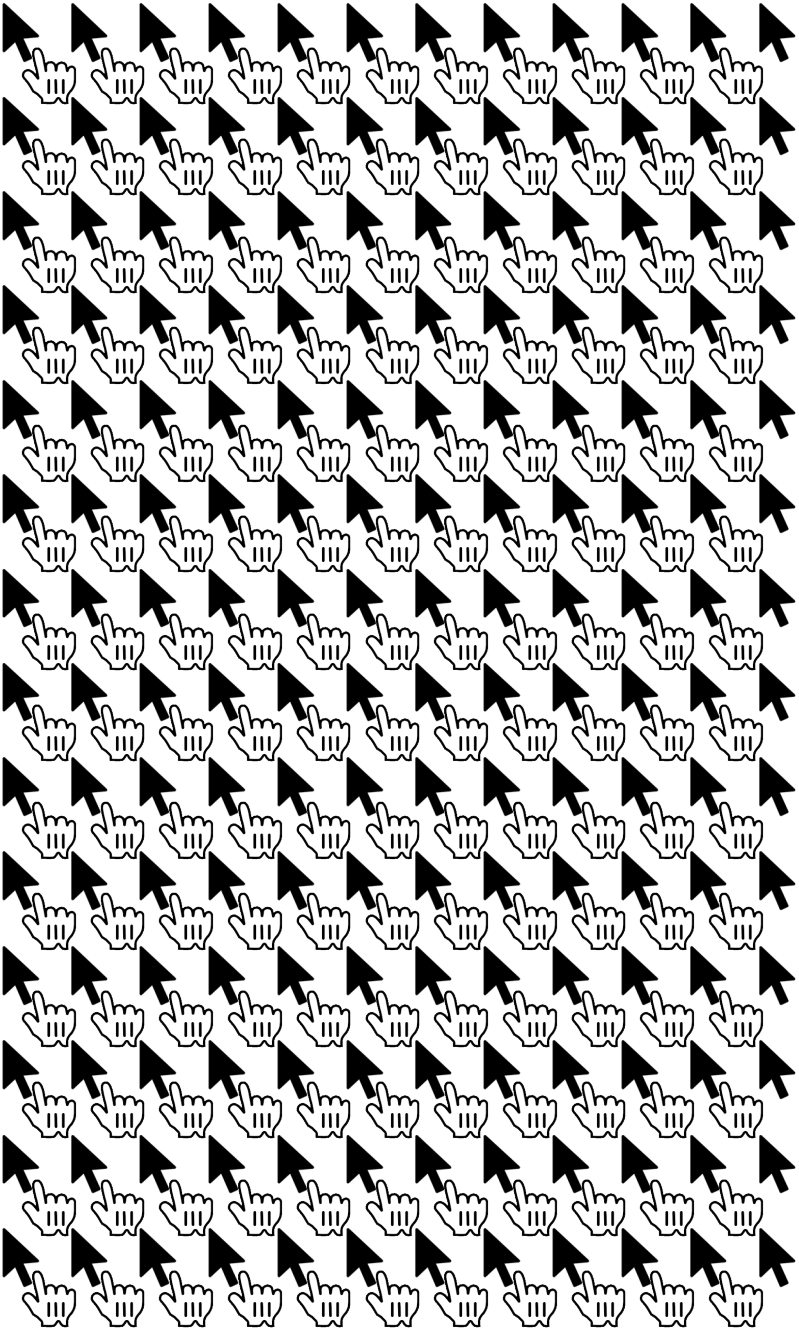
and serene on the outside, everything can waver and fall to pieces with a slight touch. Stability is only an illusion. Every object depends on another for balance, so that every piece is interconnected. There is also something organic, almost alive about the sculptures - most elements have maintained their original form, such as the staircases and ladders, but some are bent and cut. The result is a sculpture, a place in time, that is much more dynamic than a static exhibition. It looks like a concrete jungle.



Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades, installation view at the ICA. (photo: Constance Menseh)

Special thanks to Michelle Lopez for taking the time to talk with our class over Skype and to the ICA for presenting great shows and public programs





we respond together, fall 2019