

# Truth or Dare: A Reality Show



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Highlighting uncertainty and contradiction, the artworks featured in *Truth or Dare: A Reality Show* emphasize the importance of questioning both knowledge and belief by utilizing illusion to entice, entertain, and explore the terrain between fact and fiction, presence and absence, reality and imagination. The suspension of disbelief is invoked in works that simulate games, maps, and tricks of the eye and hand-not to deceive, but to engage and connect.

Cover:  
Slimen Elkamel  
*Catching You*, 2022 (detail)  
Acrylic on canvas



*...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such a Perfection that the map of a single province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province...*

— Jorge Luis Borges, *On Exactitude in Science* (1946)

*...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such a Perfection that the map of a single province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their forebears had been, saw that the vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the deserts of the West, still today, there are tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.*

The confusion of reality with its replica, the slippery slide into alternative worlds of alternative facts has become familiar territory eight decades after Borges penned this short story. Today, cartography is a relic, replaced with global positioning systems that describe geography through virtual, screen-based information that appears and disappears in a keystroke. If maps have outlived their original use, what truth might they still tell? In contemporary art, maps, along with books and other printed texts, remain potent sources of inspiration for exploring the intersections of knowledge and fantasy, of experience and imagination.

Ann Hamilton's photograph of sections of paperback pages, sliced and stacked, references the loss of various languages worldwide today, while Brian Dettmer repurposes encyclopedias as materials for sculpting intricate sculptures of excavated illustrations and images that may reveal new insights. Nelson Leirner's physical and political maps of South America are covered in stickers of skulls and smiley faces, respectively, drawing stark contrasts between the real economic and social conditions of the region and the international reputation crafted by politicians. The Arabic letters embellishing Pietro Ruffo's map of Europe narrate 21st-century socio-political upheaval and protest, while Manuel Antonio Domínguez utilizes maps as canvases on which to paint imagery that reveals hidden histories about the forces and figures that have shaped global conflict.

Brian Dettmer  
*Funk and Wag*, 2016  
Hardcover books, acrylic varnish





Slimen Elkamel  
*Catching You*, 2022  
Acrylic on canvas

Trained as an architect, Jorge Méndez Blake is an interdisciplinary artist who translates his literary sources into visual art. For this sculpture *Sin Título (Acto V, Escena II)*, his source is Act 5, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The texts that Blake extracts and transforms from words on paper into three-dimensional brass wall sculptures are stage directions—short asides secondary to the lines spoken by the characters. And yet, the information they contain, [The Queen Falls] and [The King Dies] describe the most critical actions of the play. Like interstitial spaces in architecture, these words are easily overlooked. Blake's practice of excavating and illuminating nuances in classical literature is both an homage to his sources and a socio-political critique: while news and gossip cycles hold our attention with tales of the latest scandals and intrigue, the truthful information we need to know may well be embedded within another drama, shared aside and offstage.

The concurrent increasing volume and decreasing value of information delivered by the media is the subject of Siebren Versteeg's *Today's Paper (with flies)*, part of the artist's practice of documenting the dematerialization of the written word amid the digital revolution. In this video installation, the artist holds a newspaper, and each morning, a new scan of the print edition of the front page is automatically downloaded and shared onscreen. Throughout the day, algorithmically animated flies appear and proliferate, suggesting how quickly breaking news grows old, stale—fly-ridden—during the 24-hour news cycle. The suspension of disbelief is invoked in other works that simulate games, maps, and tricks of the eye and hand—not to deceive, but to engage and connect. A floating, cell phone-sized replica of the monolith from Stanley Kubric's *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Josh Azzarella, a ping-pong table altered with a mirror for a game of one-on-one by Trong Gia Nguyen, and Charles Matton's hologram figure projected in a miniature library are both playful and prescient critiques of how and where we search for knowledge. Gonzalo Lebrija uses multiple colors and layers of paint to create *Unfolded Painting (Albali)*, a portrait of an unfolded paper airplane. By painting a material as mundane as a piece of paper, Lebrija advocates for the usefulness of play and the potential for brilliance in the everyday. The role of play as symbolic of the interdependence of all life forms is highlighted in Slimen Elkamel's vibrantly painted figures entwined with each other and the natural world, *Catching You*, "Every game, no matter how childish, has its own rules and history. Hide-and-seek is the birth of imagination from the womb of truth," says the artist. "A free play of the imagination through which we capture our deepest truth, catch the poetry that rans through us, and chase the other that inhabits us, another me that looks like me, brings me closer to my humanity and my nature."

Alejandro Almanza Pereda's *A Glass of Fruit* uses *trompe l'oeil* to create playful meditations on the history of art. Pereda re-envision's Caravaggio's 1599 painting, *Basket of Fruit* building on the anxiety and wonder produced when recognizable objects negate the laws of gravity. The imagery and soundtrack together emphasize and celebrate the tension we experience when seeing ordinary objects act in unexpected ways, allowing viewers to enjoy both the impossibility of what they are witnessing and to participate as accomplices in the ruse of a still life in motion. The still-life as *trompe l'oeil* also animates works by Laura Letinsky and Valerie Hegarty. Letinsky's recent series of tabletop still-lives, *Who Loves the Sun*, explores the artist's fascination with light as it interacts with objects. Incorporating borrowed objects, local flora, fruits, and found remnants left by a previous artist-in-residence at the Dora Maar House in Ménerbes, France, these images reflect the artist's ongoing use of still-life in her exploration of photography as a medium that bridges fiction and reality.

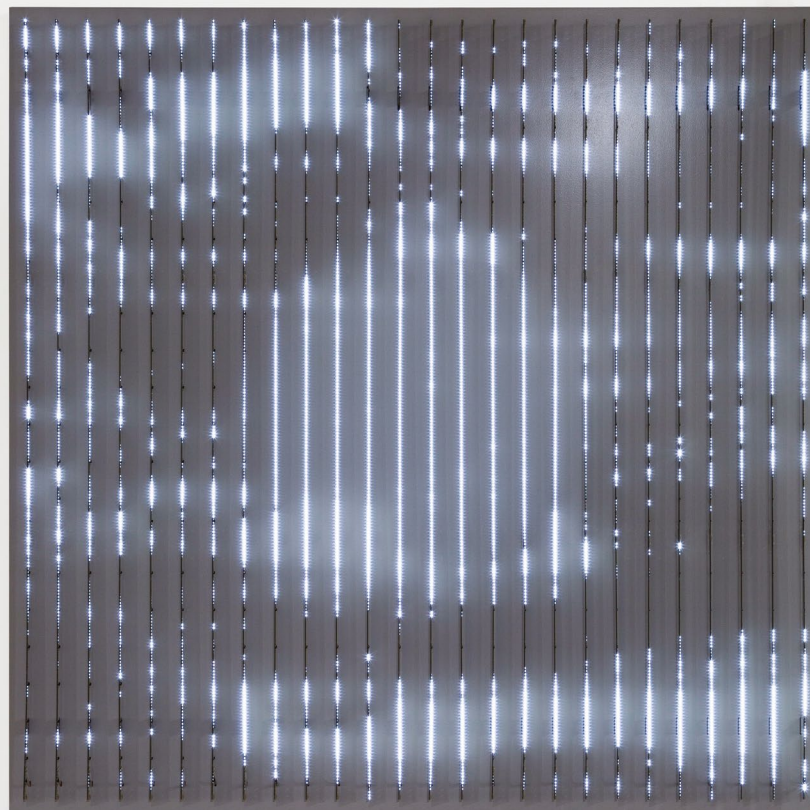
Alejandro Almanza Pereda  
*A Glass of Fruit*, 2016 (still)  
 HD video



Valerie Hegarty  
*Still Lives with Crows*, 2006  
 Archival paper, acrylic paint, glue, foam core, wire, foil, tape

In Hegarty's *Still Lives with Crows*, a paper assemblage resembles a flock of crows tearing bloody hunks of meat out of a painting of a steak. This multi-dimensional work references both Dutch *vanitas* still lives and the ancient Greek myth of the competition between two artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, to determine who could paint most realistically. Zeuxis's painting of grapes attracted hungry birds, but Parrhasios's winning depiction of a curtain fooled the human eye—his opponent's. Here, the art eats the art, creating, as Hegarty says, "a picture of image culture cannibalizing itself."

Images of natural phenomena do not depict environmental elements, but rather what the human eye and mind project onto the outside world: Leandro Erlich's visions of skies once seen or imagined above Venice and Leo Villareal's pulsating light sculpture render visible the ethereal mysteriousness of the misting of clouds. Húbert Nói Jóhannesson's *Málverk af málverki [Painting of a Painting]* offers a pristine view of a lakeside, mountainous horizon in saturated shades of blue, enclosed and reflected within the blue of the sky, and of the painted blue frame of a *trompe l'oeil* wall. Jóhannesson's subject is the symbiotic transformation of vision and viewer: gazing at a pristine horizon of sea and sky evokes wonder, nostalgia, and calm; rendered in the cool, deep, and soft blues of painted pigment, the effect is even more pronounced. Using many colored *ghungroos*—small bells traditionally worn on ankle bracelets by classical Indian dancers, Vibha Galhotra weaves an image of the earth as it was during the year of her birth, 1978. These bells were traditionally worn by dancers to “make their presence felt in the natural world.” Now, *ghungroos* are no longer necessary; the effects of human behavior on the planet are evident nearly everywhere. Galhotra's earth shows no political divisions, only the landmasses and weather systems that affect everyone, while the bells that were once intended to announce a human presence have gone silent.

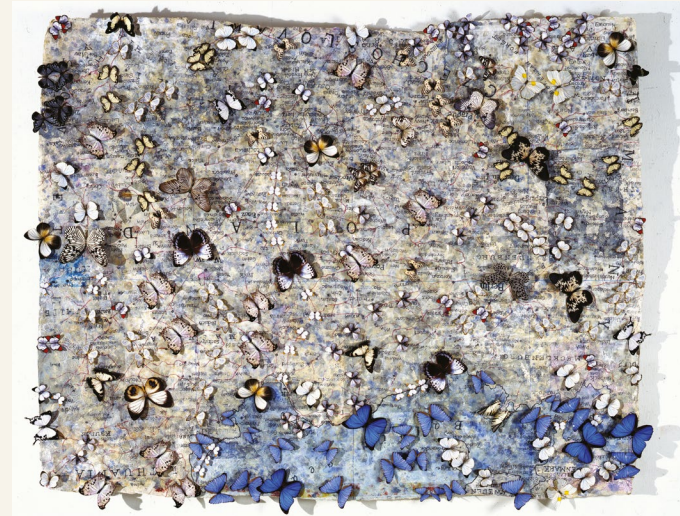


Leo Villareal  
*Cloud Drawing*, 2016  
LEDs, acrylic, custom software and electrical hardware

As in the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, whose writings are evoked in many of the works on view, dreamlike imagery often illuminates harsh reality and the vulnerability of the human conditions: a portrait by Youssef Nabil is a meditation on memory and mortality, and landscapes painted on steel by Sair García expose ecological erosion and the ensuing displacement of human and other living beings. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer subverts technology designed for surveillance in his interactive *Redundant Assembly*, in which facial recognition software is programmed to offer viewers a reflection of themselves from six different perspectives, and to melt together the features of multiple participants, effectively denying fixed identity. Collapsing the immediate distance between what is seen and what is known, Lozano-Hemmer's *Zero Noon* is a clock that runs on internet-refreshed statistics, conflating time and data into a screen-based experience of consumption. Drawing on hundreds of sources, the clock tells the local time based on various metrics, such as the average number of daily human breaths, the number of firearms produced in the U.S. per day, the number of cups of tea drunk in the UK, etc. Each day at 12:00 pm, the clock resets and the numbers all revert to zero, ever so briefly suspending the exponential onslaught of these indices of activity worldwide. Photographic sleights of eye and hand animate works by Julius von Bismarck and Miguel Angel Ríos, both of which utilize non-human species to comment on human behavior. Belonging to a series Bismarck entitles *Animals are Angels with Fur*, the diptych features a fox and a raccoon appearing to float weightlessly in the room, "like astronauts in outer space," says the artist."

But they are not moving; they have not been able to for a long time," he explains. They are taxidermy animals photographed in an artificial wind tunnel used, amongst other things, to practice parachuting. Bismarck's anthropomorphism suggests both empathy for non-humans and a critique of human indifference or callousness: "Perhaps animals do have a soul, float in heaven and look down upon us, although we think we are observing them," says the artist. "Perhaps they also think that the people who are teetering so strangely in the gallery are also dead and their stuffed shells are moved by external forces so that they appear to be alive." Combining elements of documentary journalism and staged aesthetics, Ríos's video, *Mulas*, confronts the human cost of drug trafficking in the Americas through a dreamlike film of riderless mules moving precariously across the Andes towards a chaotic climax in which the animals spook and disperse, the white powder from their packs spreading across a landscape in which they, like the human "mules" paid to transport cocaine, are lost and potentially doomed.

Jane Hammond  
*All Souls (Bielawa)*, 2006  
Gouache, acrylic paint, organza, mica and metal leaf on assorted handmade papers with graphite, colored pencil, archival digital prints and horsehair



Facing continuing global strife, political instability, and economic disparity, the artworks featured in *Truth or Dare* speak truth to power through unconventional, often playful juxtapositions of imagery and materials, asking viewers to look and think—and question—twice: Anthony Adcock's steel *Column* is actually oil on wood, while Ben Jackel's drone sculpture is rendered in mahogany and graphite. Combining subversion and social critique, Addie Wagenknecht adapts the design for a 3D-printed handgun into a vase, while Pedro Reyes's *Lady Liberty (as Trojan Horse)* resembles an oversize wooden toy replica of the iconic public sculpture, presented on an army tank-base, carrying the torch of peace and freedom into battle. The sculpture was created in conjunction with Reyes's multi-media *Doomacracry*, an interactive installation commissioned by New York-based Creative Time and inspired both by the spectacle of a haunted house and by that of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Gavin Nolan embeds his portrait of a late 20th-century American corporate executive with myriad symbolic references to both popular culture and art history that act as clues to the character of his subject. Nolan explains:



Pedro Reyes  
*Lady Liberty (as Trojan horse)*, 2016  
Wood

“The title is an anagram of the subject’s name. The painting is based on an image of Rawleigh Warner Junior—former president and CEO of Mobil Oil—in a boardroom, standing in front of a map of the world. He was once described as an ‘oil aristocrat with old school Hollywood looks’. He was an early adopter of the idea of positive ‘spin’ in relation to oil companies’ strategies (exploration, government collusion and environmental damage etc.), paying for puff pieces in the press, influencing government strategy, funding sympathetic scientific research, and introducing *Masterpiece Theatre* to U.S. television audiences”. Nolan’s painting functions like a puzzle, requiring the viewer to trace the origins and meaning of his imagery; to engage in a game of knowledge in order to understand how those in power obscure truth and manipulate public opinion, effectively playing with the people and resources they control.





Federico Solmi  
*The Good Samaritans*, 2015-2016  
LED monitor, HD animated video, acrylic, gold and silver leaf, wood,  
Plexiglas, running time 1:35 minutes

Comedy and critique, politics and play also share the stage in Federico Solmi's cartoonish video animations, which feature a recognizable cast the artist describes as "heroes and anti-heroes, villains and swine"—political, religious, and cultural figures whose exploitations are showcased in Solmi's searing parodies. Combining traditional hand-painted animation with digital tools utilizing both virtual reality and computer gaming technology, Solmi's subjects are both historical and contemporary figures, the "insatiable tyrants, depraved, corrupt leaders who bear only the physical semblance of human beings." The exaggerated, flattened features and saturated, nearly garish coloration of Solmi's simulations reflect the artist's honest response to the news of both the past and present day: the hyperreality into which Solmi deploys his conquistadores and colonizers, Popes and Presidents is as true—or more so—as the surreality of current events. As the artist explains, the realm of fantasy, or art, creates a space in which to examine or expose the factual most directly: "I do believe that an artist must create his own alternative and imaginary universe, in which the viewer can reflect upon reality." The alternative reality of the 21st-century artist's imaginative universe may offer the ideal arena in which to confront the present and envision the future.

**Alice Gray Stites**  
Chief Curator, Museum Director

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## 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.

Guests can enjoy 21c Museum Hotels in Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati, Ohio; Bentonville, Arkansas; Durham, North Carolina; Lexington, Kentucky; Chicago, Illinois and St. Louis, Missouri.

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