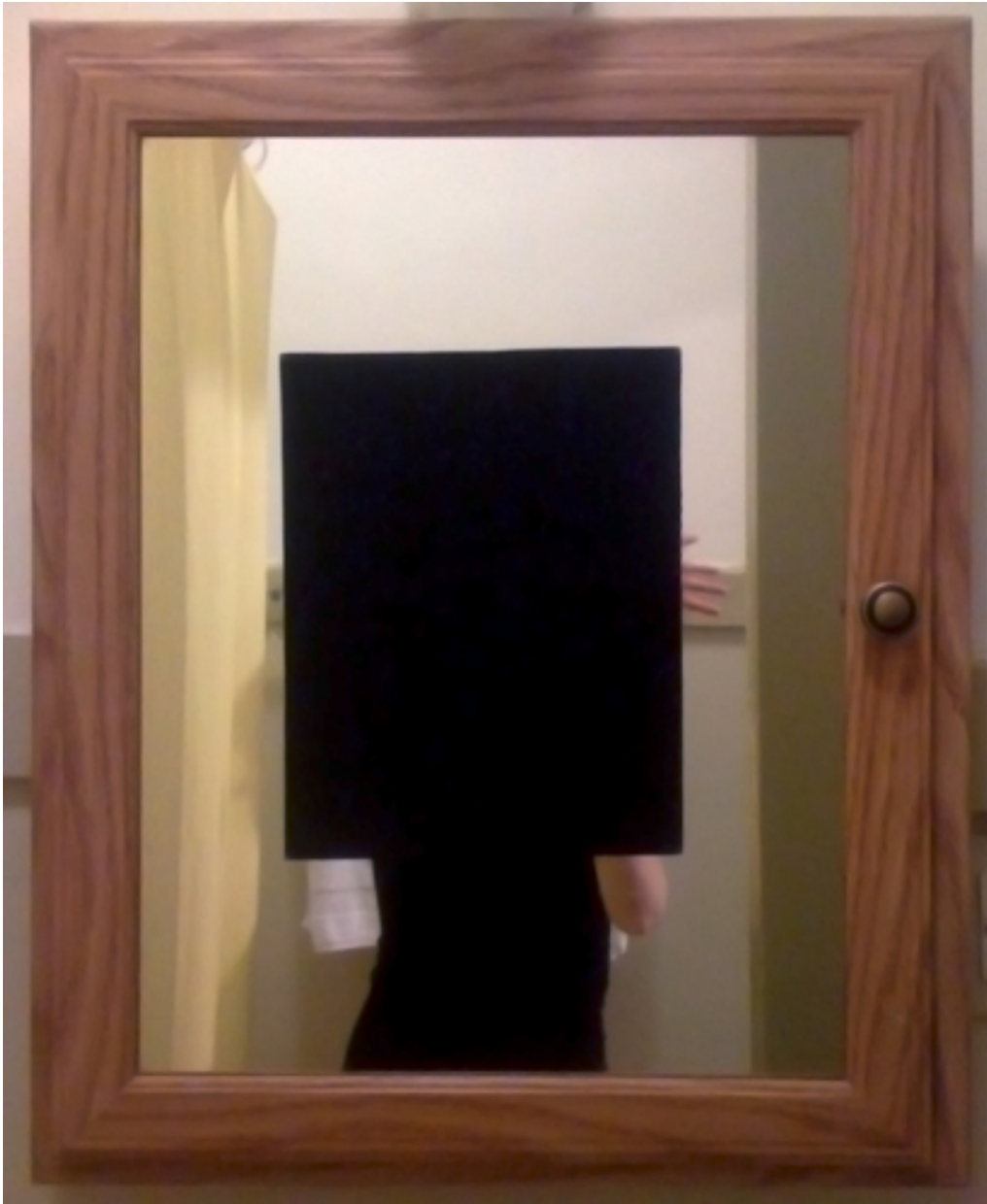


The Highlights - Labor with Rectangle



Colleen Asper, *Bathroom Mirror with Rectangle*, 2012.

I am an impatient audience to the conversations of strangers in museums. Like many artists, I have a terrible sense of entitlement in such spaces and move through them with the conviction that the work is there for me, not for those offering reports on their audio guides or reading wall labels to each other. Yet, attention is not something one can always aim. The works I have come to pay close attention to often become inseparable from their commentators, however impatiently I may wish them away. I have no memory of seeing Julie Mehretu's show at the Guggenheim that is not also a memory of listening to a couple on

their first date.

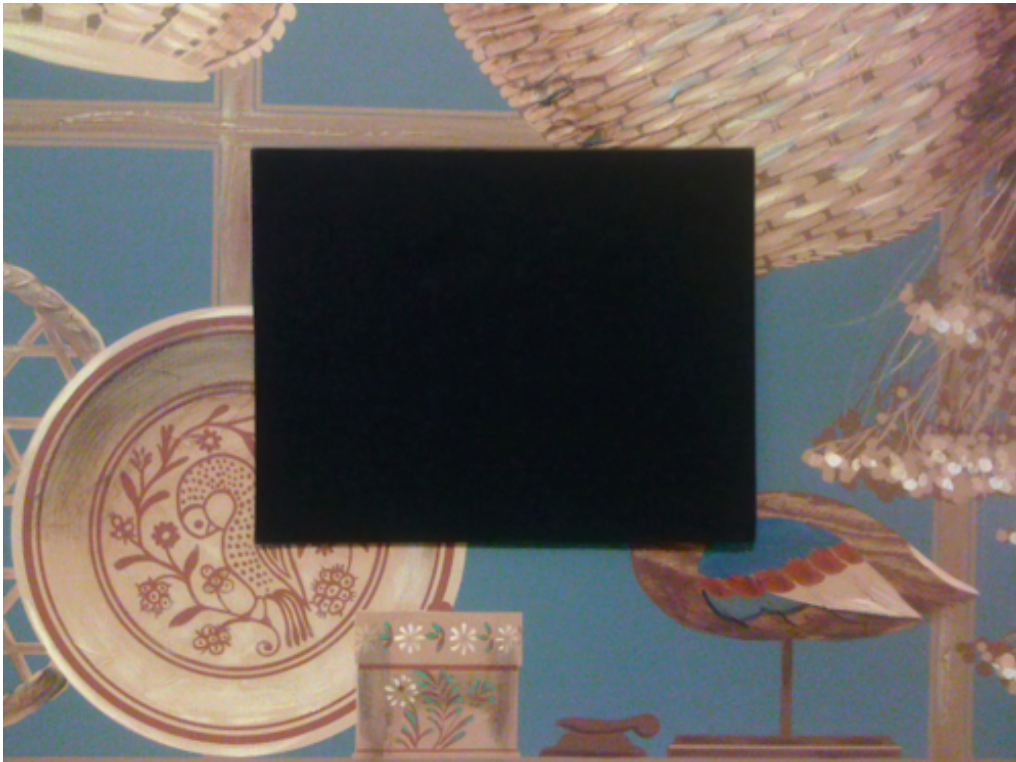
It is easy to overhear the conversations of people on first dates. The pitch of their voices is often of a public rather than private sort, as if they are speaking to each other over separate microphones at a radio station. This couple was young, probably in their early twenties; the man wore khaki pants and the woman a tight t-shirt. I wondered who had tried to impress whom with the suggestion of going to see art, as neither gave the impression of ever having sought it out before. They quickly got down to business.

"How much do you think these cost?"

"I don't know. Does it mean someone bought them if they're in a museum?"

"Probably, the paintings aren't old, so that's not why they're here."

"But how do you think they sell them? It must be hard to be an artist. How do you know what paintings people will buy?"



Colleen Asper, *Print with Rectangle*, 2012.

They were both quiet for a moment. The man examined the sides of a painting. The silence

crackled between them and I grew worried, then the man looked reassured.

"You know where I bet the real money is? Making the frames. As long as people are making paintings, they need those. Think how many they needed just for this show! The guys that makes those will never run out of people to sell them to."

I scoffed, in the manner of someone rebuking a news commentator from the comfort of one's living room. The couple looked at me and the fourth wall was breached, but I wasn't free to walk through it. I was at the Guggenheim with a class and the time I had given them to see the exhibit on their own was nearing its end. If I had spoken, what would I have said?

Clearly this couple was missing something crucial about the functioning of capitalism. In a "free" market the question, "where is the money?" is never answered by the question, "where is the labor?" Yet, ask these questions in reverse and there is a corollary-although labor doesn't produce value under capitalism, it does usually guarantee that what we value, monetarily, is what we recognize as labor. The persistent disregard for reproductive labor as a form of work, despite decades of feminist analysis to the contrary, is only one example of how labor is often invisible as such if it isn't paid.



Colleen Asper, *Bedroom Mirror with Rectangle*, 2012.



Colleen Asper, *Sign with Rectangle*, 2012.

I am writing this from a hotel in New Haven. I am a Critic in Painting at Yale University and tomorrow I will be paid for six hours of studio visits before heading back to Brooklyn, where I live. Last night I stayed at the house of someone I don't know in New Brunswick, New Jersey, because this morning I was a Lecturer in Painting at Rutgers University. This afternoon I took NJ Transit to Penn Station, went home to take a nap, and woke up in time to take Metro-North from Grand Central to New Haven. The place in New Brunswick I found through Airbnb; the only thing I know about the woman who lives there is that she is involved in a lot of Christian charities. The hotel in New Haven is home to several sex

offenders because Connecticut's sex offender registry makes landlords reluctant to rent apartments to convicted sex offenders for fear of scaring off other tenants. A couple weeks ago when I went to check into the same hotel, the man behind the front desk was fighting with one of his employees. Their screaming match escalated into a pushing match while I waited patiently for my key. Afterwards, as compensation, I was offered a ride in a hand-cranked elevator that was normally closed at that hour. My room smells strongly of smoke, it could be because of the ashtray next to the non-smoking sign.

Perhaps you feel your author has strayed. Perhaps *you* have the capacity to look only at the work in the frame and ignore the rest. But I am not a frame salesman.