

Lee Materazzi and Jordanna Kalman at Blue Sky

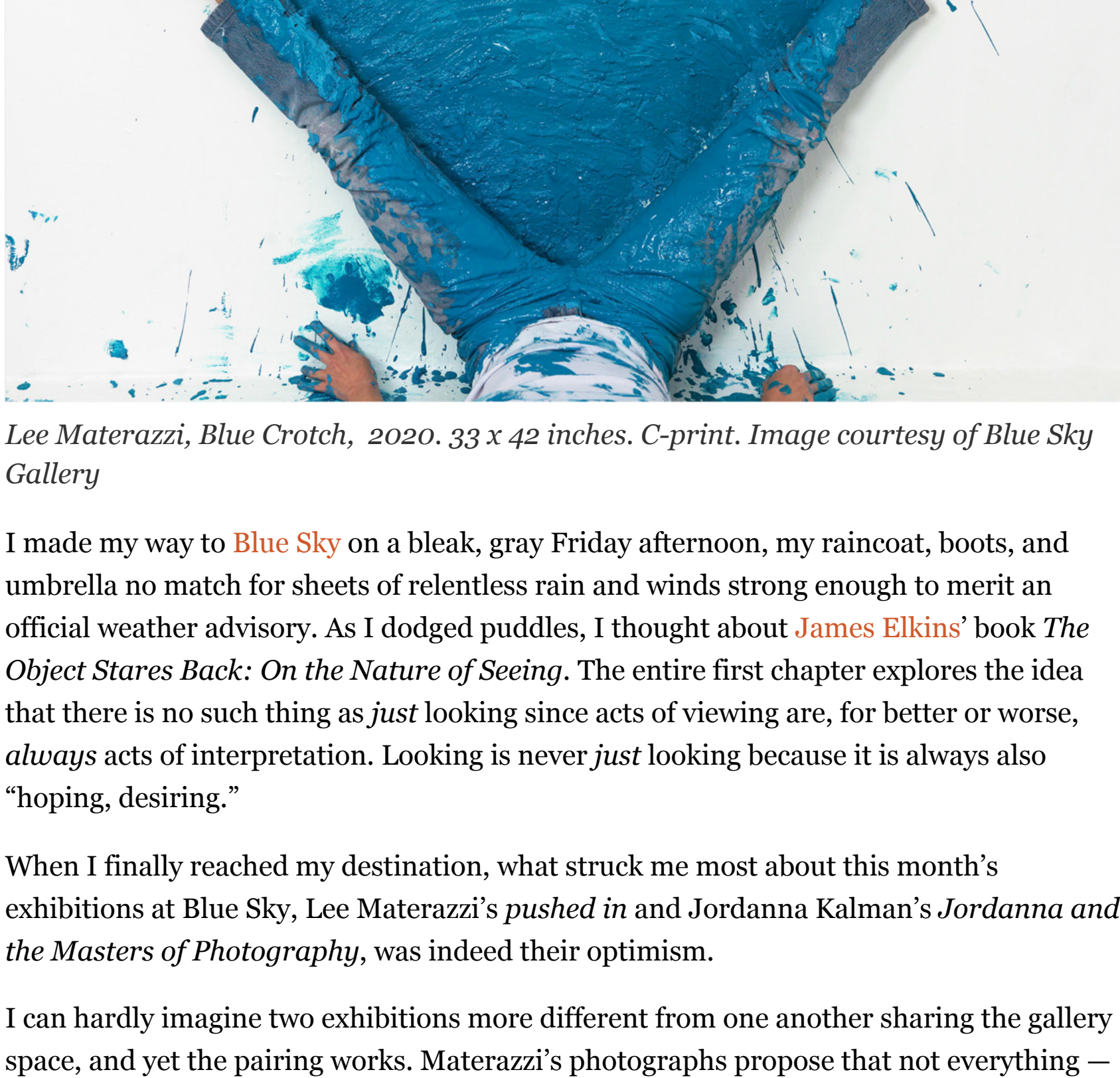
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The photographs in Blue Sky's pair of November exhibitions are profoundly different, but Shannon M. Lieberman finds common ground in the artists' optimism.

NOVEMBER 17, 2022 | SHANNON M. LIEBERMAN

VISUAL ART

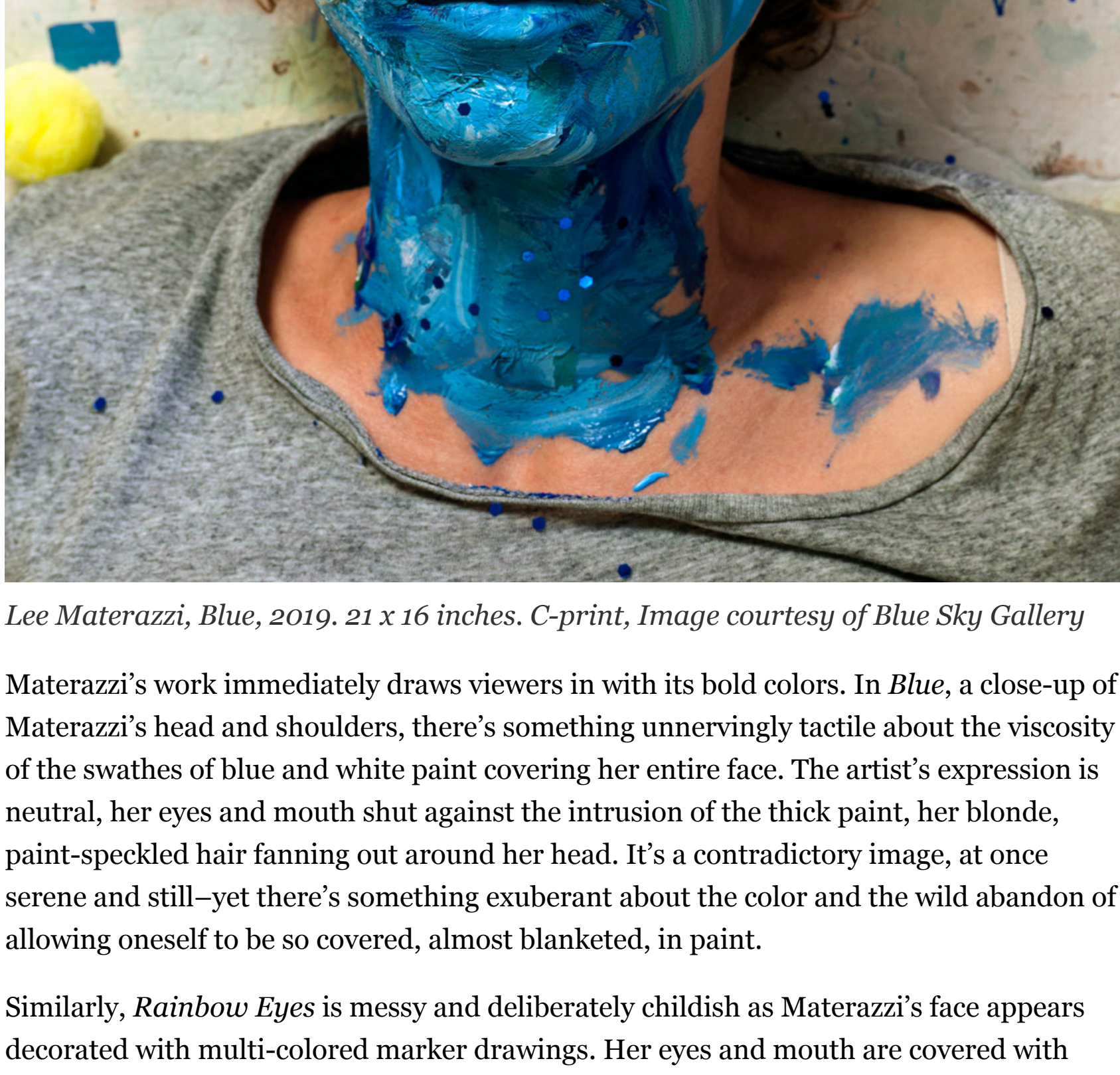


Lee Materazzi, *Blue Crotch*, 2020. 33 x 42 inches. C-print. Image courtesy of Blue Sky Gallery

I made my way to [Blue Sky](#) on a bleak, gray Friday afternoon, my raincoat, boots, and umbrella no match for sheets of relentless rain and winds strong enough to merit an official weather advisory. As I dodged puddles, I thought about [James Elkins'](#) book *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. The entire first chapter explores the idea that there is no such thing as *just* looking since acts of viewing are, for better or worse, *always* acts of interpretation. Looking is never *just* looking because it is always also “hoping, desiring.”

When I finally reached my destination, what struck me most about this month's exhibitions at Blue Sky, Lee Materazzi's *pushed in* and Jordanna Kalman's *Jordanna and the Masters of Photography*, was indeed their optimism.

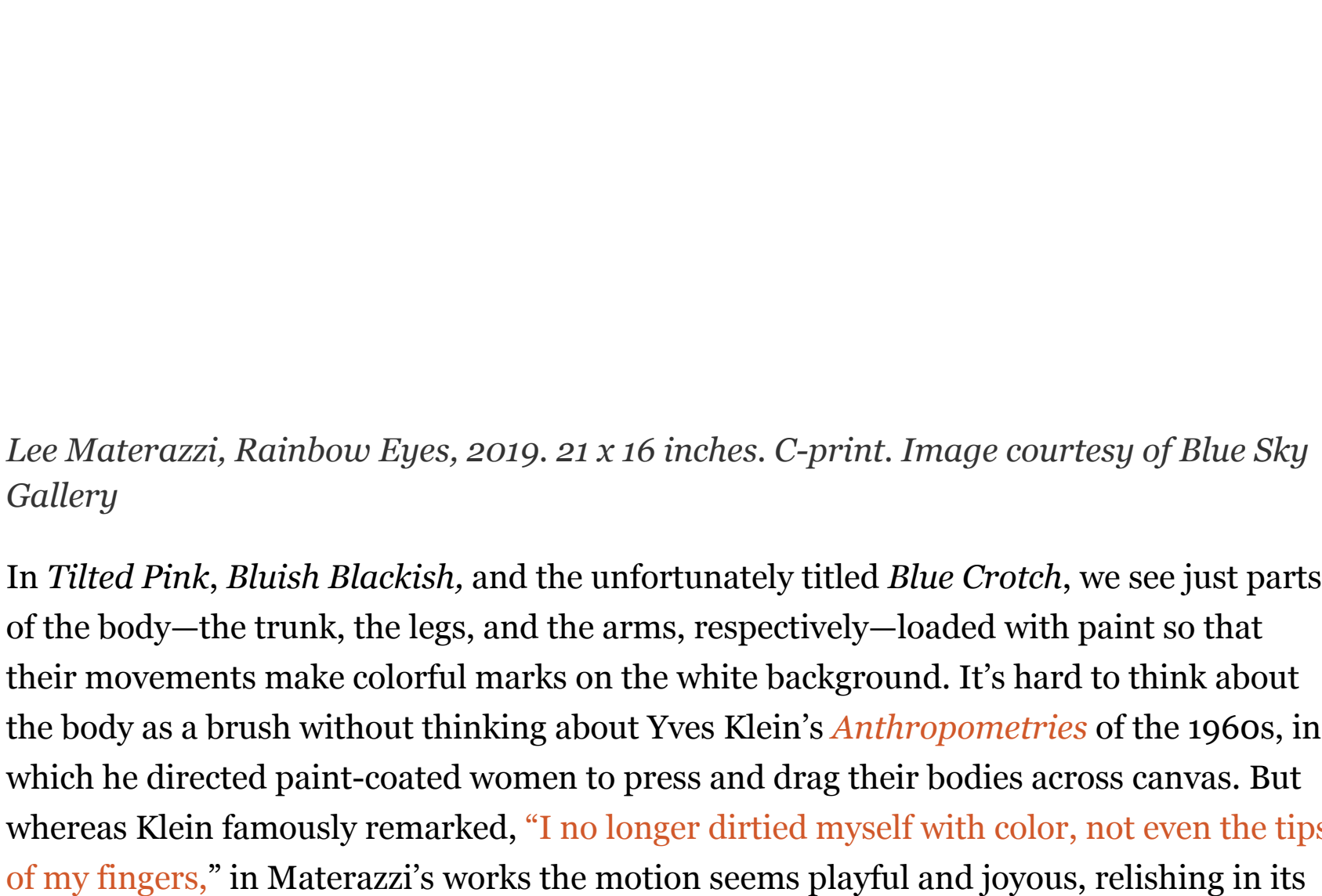
I can hardly imagine two exhibitions more different from one another sharing the gallery space, and yet the pairing works. Materazzi's photographs propose that not everything — parenthood, artmaking, life in general — has to be taken so seriously, and that there's value in joyful, messy exploration. Kalman's work demonstrates how exclusionary systems both in the history of photography and society at large can be exposed and dismantled. Taken together, Materazzi's and Kalman's exhibitions show that flouting the status quo is not only crucial, but playful, generative, and even healing.



Lee Materazzi, *Blue*, 2019. 21 x 16 inches. C-print, Image courtesy of Blue Sky Gallery

Materazzi's work immediately draws viewers in with its bold colors. In *Blue*, a close-up of Materazzi's head and shoulders, there's something unneringly tactile about the viscosity of the swaths of blue and white paint covering her entire face. The artist's expression is neutral, her eyes and mouth shut against the intrusion of the thick paint, her blonde, paint-speckled hair fanning out around her head. It's a contradictory image, at once serene and still—yet there's something exuberant about the color and the wild abandon of allowing oneself to be so covered, almost blanketed, in paint.

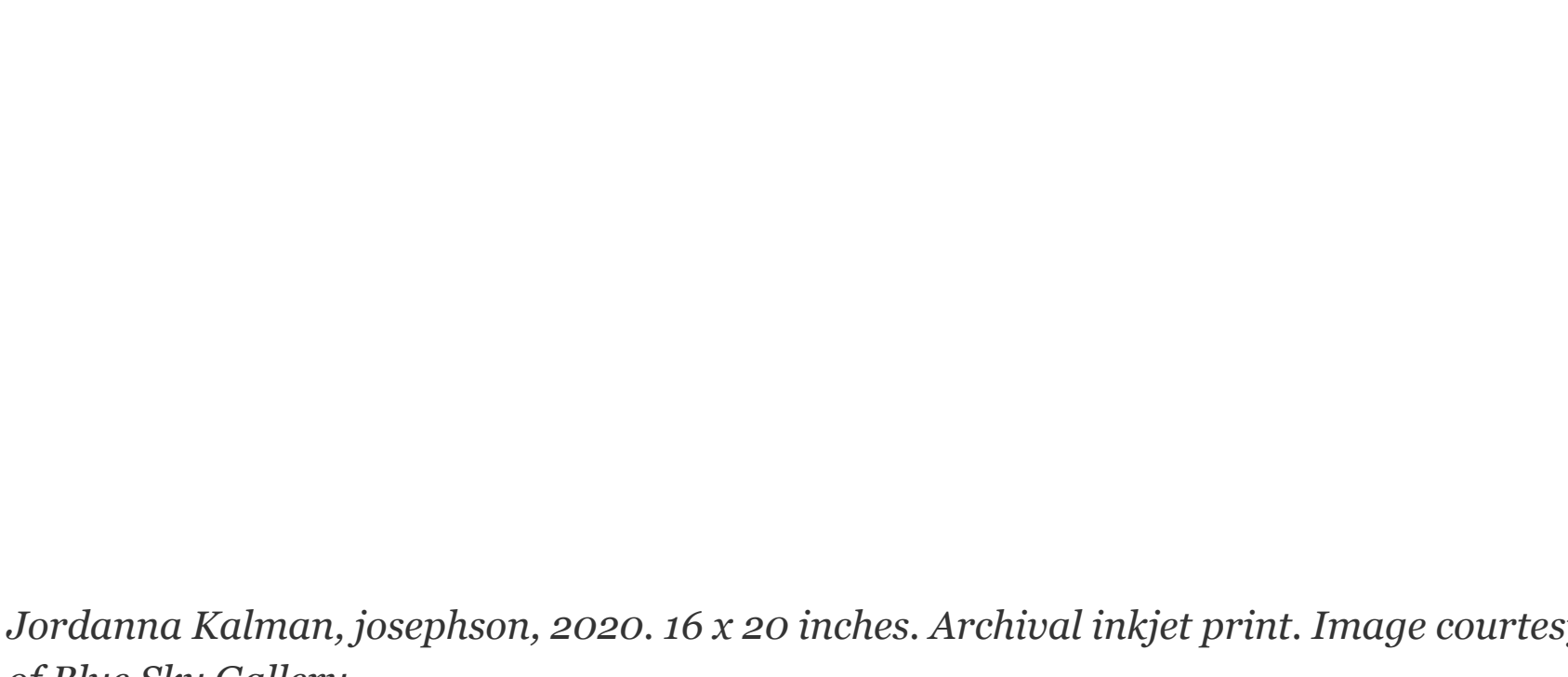
Similarly, *Rainbow Eyes* is messy and deliberately childish as Materazzi's face appears decorated with multi-colored marker drawings. Her eyes and mouth are covered with stickers and her forehead and hair arrayed with foam letters that do not cohere into words. The introductory wall text, a poem that also serves as the artist's statement, refers to “collaborations with my children, encouraged by their disregard for inhibition.” Considered in this light, Materazzi's work invites us to indulge in the silliness and fun of tapping into a childlike sense of freedom. Yet there's something else, perhaps slightly darker, underlying the work. Maybe it's the fatigue of parenting, or of trying to keep up appearances, or the struggle to be creative in the midst of such difficult circumstances in the world. What is most compelling about these works is that they are exuberant on the surface level but I think looking closely allows a kind of tension to emerge.



Lee Materazzi, *Rainbow Eyes*, 2019. 21 x 16 inches. C-print. Image courtesy of Blue Sky Gallery

In *Tilted Pink*, *Bluish Blackish*, and the unfortunately titled *Blue Crotch*, we see just parts of the body—the trunk, the legs, and the arms, respectively—loaded with paint so that their movements make colorful marks on the white background. It's hard to think about the body as a brush without thinking about Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* of the 1960s, in which he directed paint-coated women to press and drag their bodies across canvas. But whereas Klein famously remarked, “[I no longer dirtied myself with color, not even the tips of my fingers](#),” in Materazzi's works the motion seems playful and joyous, relishing in its messiness. Her work disrupts the idea that childish things are only for children, that adults must grow up and therefore give up the unfettered experimentation of youth. Perhaps insisting that grown-ups can play, too, doesn't seem revolutionary. Yet when I think about how the adult coloring book craze of 2015-2016 tapped into a repressed urge many adults have to do things that are not practical, productive, or, well, “adult,” I see the subversiveness in Materazzi's work that actively celebrates silliness even when it is tinged with melancholy.

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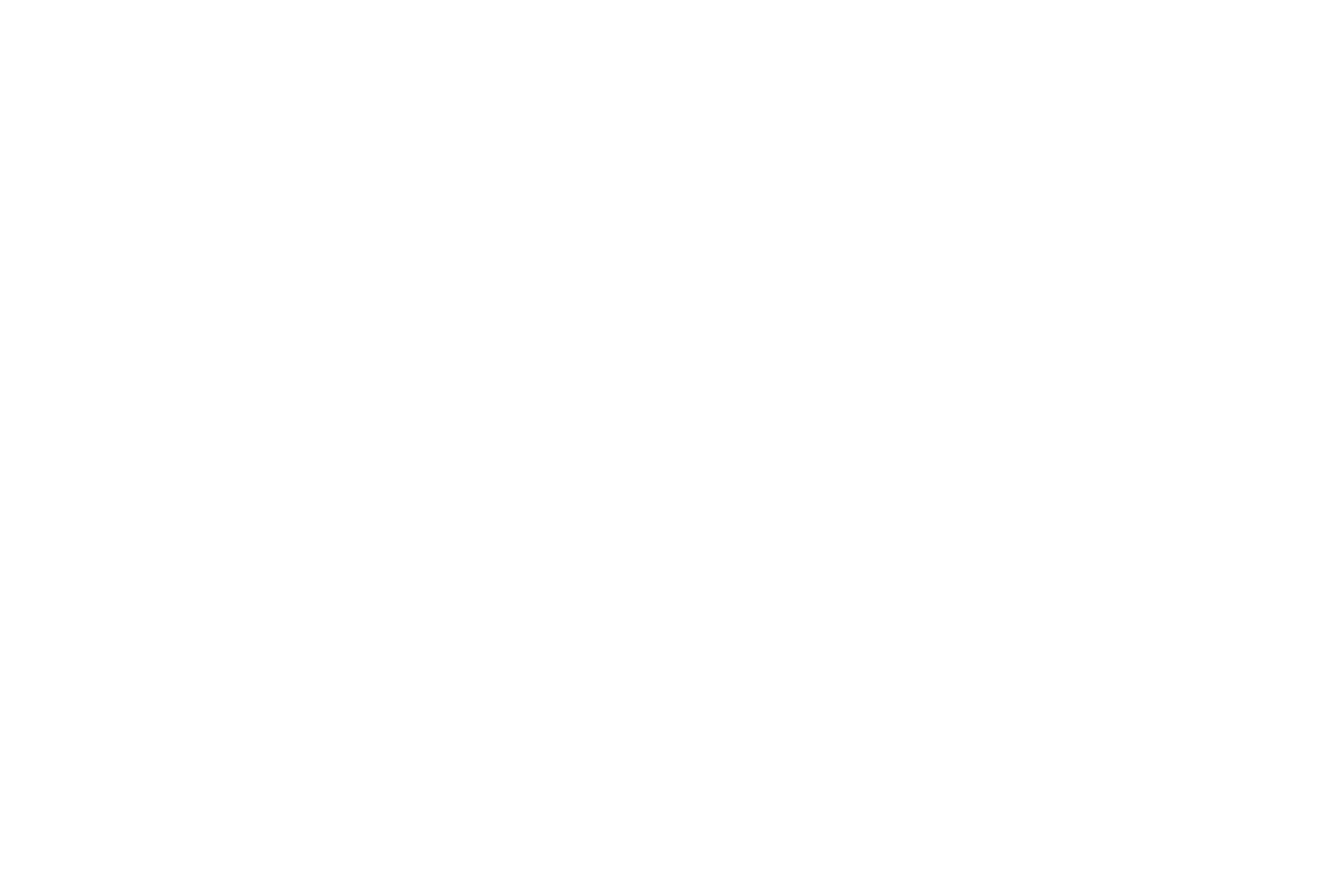
Jordanna Kalman, *Josephson*, 2020. 16 x 20 inches. Archival inkjet print. Image courtesy of Blue Sky Gallery

In the back room of the gallery, Jordanna Kalman's *Jordanna and the Masters of Photography* is a marked shift from Materazzi's colorful exuberance. Most of Kalman's works (around 32 in all) are small format, black-and-white, photos in soft focus, and hung in simple white frames. The presentation creates a subdued tone, making palpable the kind of reverence that has long been afforded to “masters of photography.” And yet in its content, Kalman's work exposes and disrupts this cachet, urging the viewer to consider what the gendered concept of “mastery” truly means.

Kalman jarringly disrupts the surfaces of works by well-known male photographers with her own imagery, often featuring women's bodies. In the five-part series *Keys*, Kalman captures the front covers of photography books by men, each with cutout windows in the center that reveal a close up of a vulva. The irreverence of pubic hair and labia poking out through the covers of the books insistently remind the viewers that this history of photography is not neutral, but rather constructed as a biased, patriarchal narrative.

“In my formal education in photography,” Kalman writes in an artist statement, “99.99% of the work I was introduced to and studied was made by men. When we're taught by example, that this is the IMPORTANT AND CORRECT way to emulate; a male point of view, where does that leave me?”

Most of the works are titled by the surname of the famous photographer whose work Kalman has used as a springboard. There are many expected names here: [Richard Avedon](#), [Robert Frank](#), [Man Ray](#), [Paul Strand](#), [Edward Weston](#), and so on, as well as less conventional choices, like the work of [Kenneth Josephson](#) and [Emmet Gowin](#).



Jordanna Kalman, *Friedlander*, 2022. 16 x 20 inches. Archival inkjet print. Image courtesy of Blue Sky Gallery

In *Friedlander*, based on American photographer [Lee Friedlander's](#) 1972 [original](#), Kalman inserts a nude woman standing posed on a bed into an ordinary street scene. It's an image that blurs the line between public and private space, and that seems to ask us as viewers to reflect on how these spaces have conventionally been gendered.

What makes Kalman's images effective is that there's no attempt to blend her imagery into the original compositions. Unlike, say, [Deborah Bright](#), who almost seamlessly inserted her own image into stills from [Hollywood movies](#) to infuse them with a lesbian sensibility, Kalman makes certain that we see her interventions. They are presented as obvious additions with their blurred focus that does not always match the focus of the originals, with their ragged, uneven edges, sometimes even allowing the shaggy ends of cut photographic paper to remain visible. We are meant to see the seams, to be aware of the pastiche. In this way the work of “masters of photography” is no longer something to be revered, but rather the space of Kalman's critical analysis of that work and its ideological framing.



Jordanna Kalman, *winogrand*, 2021. 16 x 20 inches. Archival inkjet print. Image courtesy of Blue Sky Gallery

A standout in the exhibition is *winogrand*, in which Kalman reworks Garry Winogrand's [original](#), black-and-white photo of men watching a stripper at Los Angeles' Ivar Theater. Taken in 1982, in Winogrand's original the audience takes up the majority of the composition, while the nude woman on stage is the literal picture of objectification; she is above the crowd, removed from them by the stage, and reduced to a body since her head is cropped from the frame.

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Winogrand's image was fundamentally about looking; we, as viewers, look at the men, who in turn look at—and photograph—the woman. Kalman's version is much less sharply focused, blurring the men's faces so that they are indistinct and pushing the viewer to read the figures' body language. For me, it has the effect of enhancing the creepiness of a man in the front row who holds his hands together, somewhere between prayer and an almost cartoonishly exaggerated gesture of eagerness. With biting wit, Kalman inserts in the background a large image of a praying mantis, its arms raised to loosely parallel the gesture of the man in the front row. Since female praying mantises notoriously eat the heads of their male partners during mating, the parallel between the stripper and the insect—the only figures facing toward the audience—suggests a kind of agency beyond what is directly visible.

Kalman's work brought me right back to thinking about Elkins, and his contention that looking itself can be a form of violence. Women have long been objectified, valued only for their bodies, their beauty, and their sexuality. *Winogrand*, and Kalman's exhibition as a whole, urges us to see both how women have been represented and made into absent, anonymous, objects rather than subjects. And, perhaps in the case of the stripper, how they have nonetheless found autonomy in navigating such fraught power dynamics.

In their challenges to cultural norms, especially those related to bodies, both Kalman's and Materazzi's work expresses a desire for things to be different. Where Kalman's work addresses the violence of gender-based marginalization and exclusion in the hope that change is possible, Materazzi's work is about “[rejecting acceptable social norms that regulate the human body](#).” For me, looking at these works together was an act of, in Elkins' words, “hoping, desiring” for a world in which freedom from such cultural baggage does not require any justification.

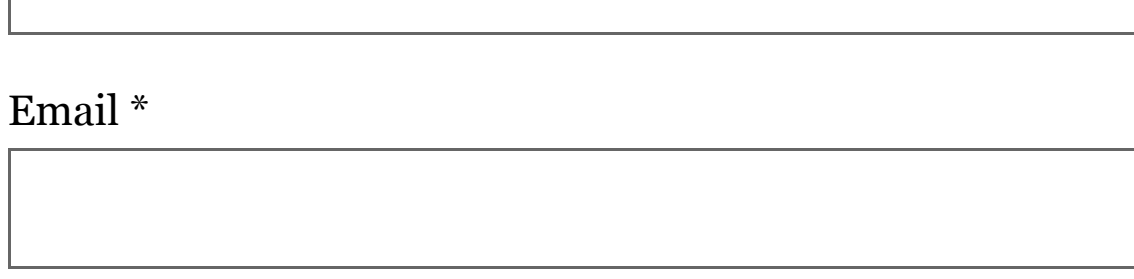
Wildly divergent in their materials and aesthetics, seeing these exhibitions together made me think about how, yes, of course the world is messy, and difficult, and sometimes utterly baffling, but there are ways to navigate it with hope, to create your own space, to challenge and remake what is wrong, and to leave your own mark.

Blue Sky Gallery is located at 122 NW 8th Ave in Portland. The gallery is open Wednesday-Sunday from 12-5. Lee Materazzi is pushed in and Jordanna Kalman: Jordanna and the Masters of Photography are on view through December 10.

Shannon M. Lieberman

Shannon M. Lieberman is an art historian whose research focuses on art and gender, exhibition histories, and intersections between art and social justice. She holds a PhD from the University of California, Santa Barbara and teaches art history and visual culture at Pacific Northwest College of Art. In addition to her love of visual art, Shannon is an avid reader and passionate audiophile.

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