

Soft Skills

Apr 14–Jun 3, 2017

Eleanor Antin

Endia Beal

Tasha Bjelić

Danielle Dean

Heather Keung

Barbara Kruger

Suzy Lake

Jen Liu

Martha Rosler

Emily Shanahan

Frances Stark

Martha Wilson

Soft Skills

**The James Gallery
The Graduate Center, CUNY
365 Fifth Avenue at 35th Street**

centerforthehumanities.org/james-gallery

Hours:

Tue-Thu, 12-7pm

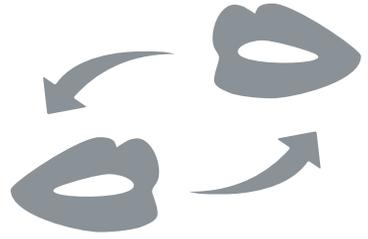
Fri-Sat, 12-6pm

Apr 14–Jun 3, 2017

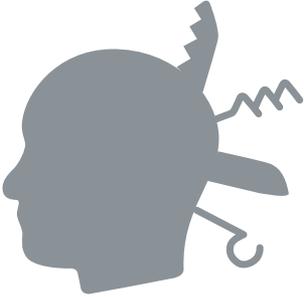
Exhibitions & Programs



Empathy



Communication



Multitasking



Flexibility



Self-Motivation



Self-Management



Positive Attitude



Cooperation

Introduction

Pairing artworks from the 1970s with contemporary practices, “Soft Skills” critically examines interpersonal capacities like communication, cooperation, empathy, and flexibility, framing them as modes of feminized performance—and moreover, as work. Early feminist art often troubled the threshold between artifice and authenticity, using devices like masquerade and fictive personae to denaturalize the relationship between subjectivity and gender. This exhibition draws parallels from that groundbreaking work to more recent art from the U.S. and Canada, historicizing their connection in light of the transformation of labor practices in those countries over the past four decades. Together, the works demonstrate role-play and self-management as both feminist performative strategies and imperatives of post-Fordist labor.

Coincident with the heyday of second-wave feminism, the 1970s saw surges in both the service economy and the female workforce. As early as 1979, sociologist Arlie Hochschild identified the commodification of “emotion work”—the labor of managing one’s own expressions and attitude, often in order to produce for others experiences of ease, well-being, and satisfaction. Hochschild analyzed the job performance of feminized or “pink collar” workers like flight attendants, correlating their obliging, diplomatic, and patient affects with women’s work in nurturing and socializing children. Rather than confined to the domestic sphere or to private life, over the past several decades affective labor has been increasingly incorporated into a wide spectrum of waged occupations. Indeed, today’s corporations place a premium on “soft skills,” an elastic repertoire of relational attitudes and amenable behaviors.

This group exhibition exposes the effort behind these “desirable qualities,” deconstructing social suppleness into a series of postures: charm, comfort, poise, persuasion. The works on view demonstrate self-presentation as a subtle negotiation with the desires of others, playing into or subverting gendered and racialized codes. In concert,

they sketch the contours of the stage-presence required in feminized work today.

—Kaegan Sparks

Exhibition Guide

The exhibition begins with a dialogue between two videos, Tasha Bjelić's *Untitled* (2015) and Endia Beal's *Office Scene (Can I touch it?)* (2013). Each work opens with a shot framing the lower half of the artist's face. Beal performs an assertive spoken-word prelude to her piece: "I'm on my way to work. It's always a performance." The charged soundtrack of *Office Scene* continues with a sequence of disembodied male voices, audibly uncomfortable as they testify to an ambiguous sensation. Prompted by the artist's own experiences as a woman of color in a mostly white, mostly male corporate office space, the video devises a savvy retort to cubicle micro-aggressions through exploiting and displacing voyeuristic desire. In response to rumors of her co-workers' fascination with her Afro, Beal offered to let them touch it, but only in exchange for their recorded testimonies, which are delivered with a mixture of titillation and confessional unease.

This tension resonates with the aural and visual aesthetic of Bjelić's video, which activates a range of liminal affects from pleasure to vulnerability. An applause track sets our focus, first, on the artist's pageant-contestant poise; her nose, mouth, and jawline are closely cropped by the camera's frame and occasionally unsettled by lip pursing and other subtle traces of facial tension. The work continues with audiovisual sequences derived from videos that circulate online among a community of ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) enthusiasts. ASMR names a synesthetic experience of tactile satisfaction triggered by certain sounds and images, often associated with repetitive activities like keyboard typing or hair brushing. The last segment of Bjelić's work appropriates a different sort of ASMR soundtrack, in which an undulating female voice envelops viewers with empathetic adulations and nurturing reassurances. The staged intimacy of both Beal's and Bjelić's works registers in the sensual but discomfiting textures of these voices, which leak out of their black-box viewing environment to provide a

tenuous acoustic backdrop to the rest of the exhibition.

In the main gallery viewers encounter the exhibition's first glance back to the 1970s, with Martha Wilson's photographic series *Composure* (1972) and short videos *Routine Performance* (1972) and *Method Art* (1973). Comprising a simple, direct monologue performed for a videocamera, *Routine Performance* suggests the format of a screen test or audition. Reading matter-of-factly from a script, Wilson announces her intention to "be as calm in appearance as possible." "This activity is ironic," she intones, "because the person who is throwing himself into acting calm is paying so much attention to the play-acting aspect, that he is seldom genuinely calm at all." Influenced by sociologist Erving Goffman's pivotal 1956 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Wilson applies a dramaturgical framework to her exercise of dissimulation—that is, suppressing certain emotional expressions to instead manifest others understood as "desirable." Her stated objective is to naturalize her performance to the point of incorporating it into her "permanent repertoire," implying that the video constitutes a rehearsal for a later social application. Wilson's video *Method Art* (1973) and photographic series *Composure* (1972) continue this exercise in self-awareness and pretense, producing affective taxonomies that foreground their synthetic means of production.

Frances Stark's large print *Called Upon (Same thing over and over)* (2007), attests to the fatiguing and flattening effects of creative labor, which increasingly demands people skills, networking, and communication. Inspired by the artist's mother's profession as a telephone operator, *Called Upon* suggests women's naturalized role as conduits for social relations. The work's cookie-cutter repetition of a telephone-woman motif wryly parodies the disingenuous spectacle of constantly being on call and on display, and the accompanying text underscores "the desolation of acting a part"—whether it be that of an artist expected to continuously produce in a trademark style, or of a call-center agent

whose tedious job requires service with a smile.

Part of her larger body of work *On Stage*, begun in 1972, Suzy Lake's duo of prints emblemizes tendencies of mimicry, masquerade, and role-play in early feminist art. One photograph pictures the artist with three other women donning glamorous costumes, while in the other Lake awkwardly assumes an exhibitionist posture redolent of a fashion photo shoot. The text of each print, rendered in English and French, declares the construct of femininity at work in these staged photographs, while also pointing to the subtle and interstitial ways that role-play suffuses everyday life, whether through social diplomacy or unconsciously imitating the expressions of others in conversation.

In the middle section of the gallery, a selection from Endia Beal's photographic series *Am I What You're Looking For?* (2015–ongoing) attends to relationships between physical postures and social positioning in the context of the workplace. The series features portraits of young African American women who have recently finished school and transitioned to the job market. The women are photographed in their family homes, domestic interiors whose color, texture, and idiosyncratic detail are thrown into relief by an incongruous photographic backdrop depicting a generic office space (the image, in fact, was taken at Yale's IT department, where Beal interned while pursuing her MFA). The artist instructed her subjects to wear what made them feel most confident and to envision that they were waiting for an interview, or in the artist's words, "preparing for a performance." Inspired by Rineke Dijkstra's *Beach Portraits* as well as James Van Der Zee's tableaux vivant of Harlem's black middle class in the 1920s and 30s, Beal's images capture a range of gestural expressions and affects, from apprehension to fierce self-possession.

Nearby, Barbara Kruger's photographic print *Untitled (I am your reservoir of poses)* provides a punctuating hinge for the exhibition. Breaching the temporal parameters of "Soft Skills," this work from 1982 pithily comments on much of the other art around it. Kruger's trademark appropriation

of images, as well as the aphoristic language and graphic design of advertising lends her works a fluid semantic capacity; many constitute open forms which invite variable meanings to accrue depending on their context and the position of their viewers. *Untitled (I am your reservoir of poses)* is often understood to critique the long history of objectifying the female body in representational art. Yet in the context of this exhibition, the work's striking titular phrase takes on a new resonance in reference to the flexible attitudes, strategic posturing, and amenable behaviors women are expected to perform both personally and professionally.

Martha Rosler's *Know Your Servant Series #1: North American Waitress, Coffee Shop Variety* (1976) presents a series of texts and graphics, variably appropriated and fabricated, that together comprise a critical sociology of waitstaff working protocols. The assembled materials delineate a code of deferential conduct expected of female servers in particular, prescribing the appearance and demeanor of an archetypal waitress in scrutinizing detail: "Voice is neither loud nor soft. Stands neither close nor far away.... Eases your decisions by making appropriate suggestions, with reserved appeal." Rosler's commentary on the clinical and barbaric language of restaurant-worker training literature parodies its winnowing of self-representational space: the waitress must be *both* charming and nondescript. Rerouting the information aesthetic of conceptual art, this trenchant critique places gender and class subjectivity front and center.

On a suspended screen, Heather Keung's *Self-Portrait (Smile)* (2001) projects a working temporality that is exhaustively prolonged, evoking a protracted, anxious version of Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*. In an uncomfortable close-up, the artist strains to hold a smile for the 25-minute span of the video, hewing to a trend in the artists' work in which Keung performs feats of physical endurance for a camera. Countering the masculinist overtones of 1970s precedents in the work of Vito Acconci or Chris Burden, Keung's videos instead focus attention on the subjugation and stamina of her own body as

a woman of color. As her durational portrait wears on, involuntary physical responses like twitching and drooling expose the physically taxing effort that enables her facade of enthusiasm.

Emily Shanahan's short videos *Women in Space* and *Movement Never Lies* (both 2012) overlay historical footage of astronautical and military drills for women with captions derived from performance texts by avant-garde choreographer Martha Graham. Phrases like “the smile . . . is the gift of an acrobat who practices living at the instant of danger,” cast images of synchronized marching formations as ironic, commercial-length propaganda. Suggesting that the women in training walk “the high wire of circumstance” in a high-stakes dance subject to the ominous “gravity pull of the earth,” Shanahan’s montage redoubles the notion that work is a type of emotionally contortionist theater.

The vulnerability of imminent falling is both disclosed and discreetly suppressed in Eleanor Antin's photographic series and video *Caught in the Act* (1973). In this work Antin assumes the guise of a ballerina, maintaining the ruse of feminine grace and poise in a series of carefully orchestrated poses. Yet the video reveals the artist’s amateurism, as she fails to smoothly maintain this unfamiliar identity in motion; Antin can achieve a professional image only in fugitive fits and starts for photographic capture. In addition to commenting on the regulatory and repetitious task of performing femininity, the fleeting and intermittent tempo of Antin’s exertions might offer a prognostic for the erratic rhythms of contemporary project culture. Defined by a premium on activity and short-term social impressions that perpetuate the promise of future work, precarious labor relies on an interplay of striving and contingency.

If Antin’s work emphasizes the invisible supports vital to sustaining the appearance of virtuosic autonomy, the exposed cords of the telephone-women in Frances Stark's nearby collage *Back Side of the Performance* (2008) suggest external strictures that limit the mobility of the performing (or working) body.

Danielle Dean's video *Pleasure to Burn* (2012) introduces the final phase of the exhibition. Staging an improvisatory performance among four women in a mock-corporate interior, the work revolves around a stilted dialogue of language sourced entirely from cigarette ad slogans. Adding another off-kilter dimension to this fragmentary, ventriloquized speech, several moments of physical tension crest and dissipate among the women as they momentarily assume aggressive, sympathetic, and distraught expressions and stances. Managerial power dynamics play out as caricature: “Wipe that smile on your face!” one woman growls, while another remarks, sullenly, “Progress is *everyone's* business.” Like other works on view, *Pleasure to Burn* relies on acting as a conceit to distort and foreground the labor of negotiating personal interactions, emphasizing performances of self that are in turn elastic and effusive, or solicitous and self-controlled.

New paintings from Jen Liu's ongoing series *The Pink Detachment* (2015–ongoing) elaborate upon the iconography of disembodied, prodding fingers in her previous work to construct fantastic circuits of female “empowerment.” Synthesizing both the repetitive, atomized tempos of assembly line work and dematerialized economies of desire and influence, Liu’s paintings contend with the mixed landscape of contemporary feminized labor, from electronics factories in China to Silicon Valley boardrooms. Liu’s zany systems could be seen to pervert Sheryl Sandberg’s mantra—much maligned among leftist feminists—of leaning in with men to get ahead; here charisma and nimble pressure take precedent instead. Among Liu’s influences for the series are the “charm offensive” soft power tactics of Asia’s international relations—privileging flattery and persuasion over military force—and Drunk Tank Pink, a bubblegum shade known for its palliative psychological effects. Flat, feminine faces roll off of cylinders and fold back onto themselves in Liu’s paintings, gesturing back to Martha Wilson’s manufactured composure at the exhibition’s start.

—Kaegan Sparks

Checklist

Endia Beal

Office Scene (Can I Touch It?), 2013

HD video projection with sound

3:30 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Tasha Bjelić

Untitled, 2015

Video projection with sound

10:15 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Martha Wilson

Composure, 1972

Eleven vintage gelatin silver prints

15 1/2 x 13 inches each

Courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W.

Martha Wilson

Routine Performance, 1972

Video with sound

2:12 minutes

Courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W.

Martha Wilson

Method Art, 1973

Video with sound

6:15 minutes

Courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W.

Frances Stark

Called upon (Same thing over and over),
2007

Graphite, vinyl paint, and inlaid laser prints on
paper

80 x 60 inches

Courtesy Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert
collection

Suzy Lake

On Stage/Bank Pose, 1972

On Stage/Miss Montreal, 1972

Archival inkjet prints

25¼ x 21¼ inches each

Courtesy the artist and Georgia Scherman
Projects

Endia Beal

Am I What You're Looking For?, 2015–
ongoing

Six chromogenic prints

40 x 30 inches each

Courtesy the artist

First row, left to right:

Alexus

Melanie

Tianna

Second row, left to right:

Martinique

Kennedy

Sabrina and Katrina

Barbara Kruger

Untitled (I am your reservoir of poses), 1982

Photograph

72 x 48 inches

Courtesy Kim and Brad Keywell, Chicago

Martha Rosler

*Know Your Servant Series, #1: North
American Waitress, Coffee Shop Variety*,
1976

Seven digital prints

20 x 16 inches each

Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes &
Nash, New York

Heather Keung

Self Portrait (Smile), 2001

Video

25 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Vtape

Emily Shanahan

Movement Never Lies, 2012

Video

1:50 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Emily Shanahan

Women in Space, 2012

Video

1:50 minutes

Courtesy the artist

Eleanor Antin
*Caught in the Act: Choreography II—
Curtain Call (Long Tutu), 1973*
Unique set of seven black and white
photographs mounted on board
10 ¾ x 41 ½ inches overall
Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine
Arts, New York

Eleanor Antin
Caught in the Act: At the Barre, 1973
Unique set of eight black and white
photographs mounted on board
10¾ x 47 inches overall
Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine
Arts, New York

Eleanor Antin
The Two Eleanors, 1973
Black and white photograph mounted on
board
11 x 14 inches
Private collection, courtesy Ronald Feldman
Fine Arts, New York

Eleanor Antin
Caught in the Act, 1973
Black and white video with sound
36 minutes
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New
York

Frances Stark
Back Side of the Performance, 2008
Paper, paillettes, and escutcheon pins on
foam board
40 x 68 ½ inches
Courtesy Julia Stoschek Foundation e.v.,
Düsseldorf

Danielle Dean
Pleasure to Burn, 2012
HD video with sound
7:42 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Jen Liu
*The Pink Detachment: Principle of ISO
(International Organization for
Standardization), 2017*
Acrylic ink, acrylic gouache, gesso and
watercolor on paper
51 x 33 inches
Courtesy the artist and Upstream Gallery,
Amsterdam

Jen Liu
The Pink Detachment: Principle of BLA, 2017
Acrylic ink, acrylic gouache, gesso and
watercolor on paper
51 x 33 inches
Courtesy the artist and Upstream Gallery,
Amsterdam

Jen Liu
*The Pink Detachment: Principle of Equations
and Equivalences, 2017*
Acrylic ink, acrylic gouache, gesso and
watercolor on paper
70 x 51 inches
Courtesy the artist and Upstream Gallery,
Amsterdam

Feminist Protest Songs

Amalle Dublon, PhD Program in Literature,
Duke University; Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn,
artist.

More smiles, more money.”—Silvia Federici,
“Wages against Housework,” 1974

Marginalized strands of the second-wave feminist movement, such as the International Wages for Housework Campaign—which included the Wages Due Lesbians and Black Women for Wages for Housework—advocated for salaried domestic labor. These feminist groups formed in the 1970s to raise awareness of how housework and childcare are the basis of all social reproduction and industrial work. Their demands were, however, often sidelined by mainstream feminist goals like equal opportunity in the labor market. These groups were not only discussion clubs or thought experiments, but real activist efforts whose demands were often expressed through protest songs.

Artist Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn will discuss her current research on the music these women’s groups created to articulate their frustrations through embodied collective experience. She will be joined in conversation by scholar Amalle Dublon, whose research focuses on sound, aurality, and reproduction in all its valences.

The James Gallery

Fri, Apr 28, 6:00pm
Panel discussion

Labors of Love

Lalaie Ameeriar, Asian American Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara; Kaegan Sparks, PhD Program in Art History, The Graduate Center, CUNY; Kathi Weeks, Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, Duke University; Shiloh Whitney, Philosophy, Fordham University.

This panel brings together scholars from the fields of anthropology, gender studies, and philosophy to address problems at the intersection of affect and work.

Drawing on her ethnographic fieldwork with immigrant nurses in Toronto, anthropologist Lalaie Ameeriar (author of *Downwardly Global: Women, Work, and Citizenship in the Pakistani Diaspora*) will discuss pedagogies of affect in job training, arguing that teaching women workers Western notions of docility and deference reproduces a racialized notion of gendered labor.

Political theorist Kathi Weeks (author of *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*) will present “Down with Love: Feminist Critique and the New Ideologies of Work,” a paper comprising new research on love and happiness in popular management discourses.

Philosopher Shiloh Whitney will critique the use of authenticity as a framework for analyzing affective labor, suggesting instead a notion of affective agency that allows us to rethink emotions outside of the binary of sovereign and spontaneous versus forced or feigned.

These presentations will be followed by a conversation moderated by Kaegan Sparks, curator of “Soft Skills.”

The Skylight Room (9100)

Thu, May 4, 6:30pm
Reading & Performance

Professions for Women

Corina Copp, writer; Diana Hamilton, writer.

“Whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. . . . Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.”
—Virginia Woolf

In her 1931 speech “Professions for Women,” Virginia Woolf wields a polemic against the “Angel in the House,” the Victorian archetype of a selfless, sacrificial woman who devotes herself to soothing, flattering, and comforting the men around her. Taking this text and the exhibition “Soft Skills” as points of departure, poets Corina Copp and Diana Hamilton will address routines of feminized sociality—including communication and care—in and through the work of writing.

Building on her recent work on humor in Chantal Akerman’s films, Copp will present a performance-lecture set in motion by Frances Stark’s telephone motif as “performance-dress.” Talking through vocal imitations and dialogic repetitions in cinema, Copp’s performance will culminate in a theatrical script that models the emotional labor of phone conversations.

Hamilton’s book of poetry, *Okay, Okay*, focuses on crying in the workplace (among other inappropriate places), collecting, for example, women’s strategies for hiding their tears, together with managerial advice about keeping it together and paranoid descriptions of office floorplans. In addition to reading from this work, Hamilton will discuss the question of “empathy” as it is coded as *hard*, *easy*, *soft*—and how we might separate “empathy” from its marketability.

The James Gallery

Thu, May 18, 6:30pm
Screening & Conversation

Glitch Girls

Jen Liu, artist; Aliza Shvarts, PhD Program in Performance Studies, New York University.

“Soft Skills” artist Jen Liu will screen and discuss her video work *The Pink Detachment* (2016), as well as portions of her work in progress, *Pink Slime Caesar Shift*. Following her presentation Liu will be joined by artist and performance theorist Aliza Shvarts for a conversation on resistant reproductive temporalities and opacity as an intersectional strategy.

A counterpart to the paintings on view in “Soft Skills,” Liu’s *The Pink Detachment* reinterprets *The Red Detachment of Women* (1970), a Model Opera ballet from China’s Cultural Revolution, replacing its peasant girl protagonist with an accident-prone, inefficient meat worker. Valorizing “pink slime,” a processed paste of low-grade meat scraps, Liu’s work proposes a speculative solution to China’s current crises in meat supply. The work shifts the register of the color pink, as a symbol of femininity, from “natural” fleshy softness to a synthetic, potentially violent, hybridity.

Liu’s new multi-part work *Pink Slime Caesar Shift* comprises another generative fiction about meat production in China, this time centering on the inability of Chinese factory workers to organize due to state-controlled social media. If synthetic meat based on stem cell technologies is grown on an industrial scale, the work suggests, workers may have a new vessel for distributing secret messages through ciphers programmed into the meat’s genome.

The James Gallery

Wed, May 24, 6:30pm
Conversation

Intimate Measures

Nitin Ahuja, Gastroenterology, Johns Hopkins Hospital; Amy Herzog, Media Studies, Queens College and Theatre, Music, Film, and Women’s Studies, the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Self-management—defined as “management of or by oneself; taking responsibility for one’s own behavior and well-being”—is a term that crops up in diverse contexts across contemporary culture, from corporate PowerPoints that extol lean labor to diet blogs and internet support groups for dealing with chronic pain. Media studies scholar Amy Herzog will present new research exploring self-management in relation to digestion and the human microbiome, with particular attention to how neoliberal attitudes inflict the burgeoning market for designer gut-health regimens. Herzog will examine the rhetoric of self-betterment and self-control at play in digestion-focused internet communities, tracing psychosomatic connections between cultivating intestinal flora and regulating emotion. She will be joined by gastroenterologist and writer Nitin Ahuja to discuss the current vogue for microbial management, as well as other forms of digitally mediated self-help, including ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) videos. Inspired by Tasha Bjelić’s work *Untitled* (2015), on view in “Soft Skills,” and related to his previous writing on the YouTube phenomenon of clinical pantomime, Ahuja will address the simulated intimacy of ASMR culture, in which strangers role-play caregiving through tender voices and soothing scenarios.

Herzog’s presentation is an offshoot of “My Colony,” a research project commissioned by Triple Canopy.

The James Gallery

Exhibition Curator: Kaegan Sparks
James Gallery Curator: Katherine Carl
Exhibitions Coordinator: Jennifer Wilkinson
Design: Aliza Dzik

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The Amie and Tony James Gallery, located in midtown Manhattan at the nexus of the academy, contemporary art, and the city, is dedicated to exhibition-making as a form of advanced research embedded in the scholarly work of the Graduate Center across multiple disciplines. The gallery creates and presents artwork to the public in a variety of formats. While some exhibitions remain on view for extended contemplation, other activities such as performances, workshops, reading groups, roundtable discussions, salons, and screenings have a short duration. The gallery works with scholars, students, artists and the public to explore working methods that may lie outside usual disciplinary boundaries.

The James Gallery

Exhibitions & Programs

- Apr 14 Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn
Amalle Dublon
- Apr 19 Eleanor Antin
Endia Beal
Tasha Bjelić
Danielle Dean
Heather Keung
Barbara Kruger
Suzy Lake
Jen Liu
Martha Rosler
Emily Shanahan
Frances Stark
Martha Wilson
- Apr 28 Lalaie Ameeriar
Kaegan Sparks
Kathi Weeks
Shiloh Whitney
- May 4 Corina Copp
Diana Hamilton
- May 18 Jen Liu
Aliza Shvarts
- May 24 Nitin Ahuja
Amy Herzog