

# Intimate Encounters at *Between Friends* Part I: An Interview with Curator Samantha Hiura

“ I wanted the show to be conversational and personal...I wanted the show to feel like a personal letter from me. ” —Samantha Hiura

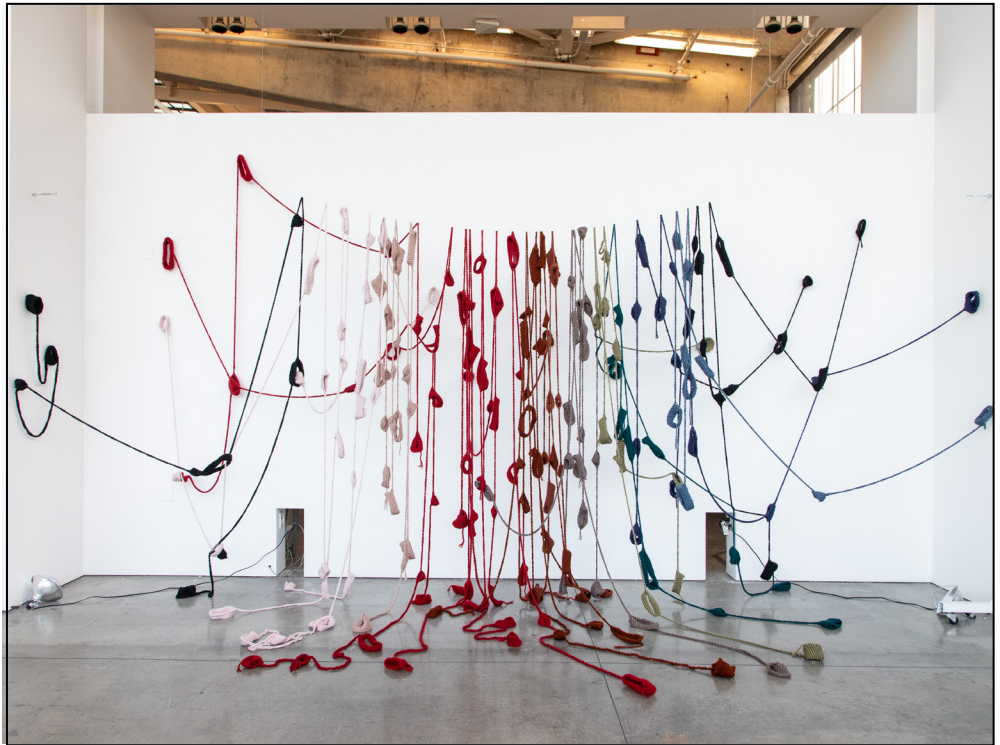
by Paulina Félix Cunillé



Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

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Deena Qabazard, *Beginnings* (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

*Between Friends* is an intimate three part exhibition curated by Samantha Hiura (MA Curatorial Practice/MA Visual & Critical Studies '25), on view at CCA's PLAYSPACE through November 22, 2023. The show gives the CCA community a peek into what some of the MFA students are exploring. Hiura's curatorial approach is in conversation with other recent exhibitions reviving archives or non-exhibited pieces; for example *Unstored 1: Contemporary Sculpture in Mexico*, curated by Darkin Hart, which was on view until last spring at ASSEMBLY in Monticello, NY. Hiura's curatorial eye creates a space for works that, as she describes, "have not yet found a home" within the artists' practices.

RRR arts reporter Paulina Félix Cunillé spoke with curator Samantha Hiura over Zoom to discuss Part 1 of the exhibition. Part 1 featured work by Xianghan Cheng, Luning Ge, Dottie Lo Bue, Deena Qabazard, Gene VanWyck, and Willow, and was on view from September 15–28, 2023. Stay tuned for more of Félix Cunillé's writing about the next two iterations of *Between Friends* (opening October 6th and November 3rd, respectively).

**Paulina Félix Cunillé (PFC):** Sam, I find it interesting that *Between Friends* revives recent pieces that weren't shown right away after being produced, as they have all been made in the last two years. How did this idea come to you (as opposed to choosing older pieces that haven't been exhibited before)?

**Samantha Hiura (SH):** I did a lot of studio visits over the summer with the MFA students. In every conversation I had there was a point where people would show or point to something that they had in their studio but weren't interested in showing for the studio visit. When I asked about those pieces, they would brush it off, because they were like "Oh, it's something that I am working on," and I liked that. I just thought it was so exciting, because many of them looked very different [from the rest of their practice] or really crazy.

**PFC:** What was the first piece that you saw and was it the reason you decided on the theme of the show?

**SH:** It was Deena's [Deena Qabazard]. I always loved her work. I did one studio visit with her beforehand. When I did the other, this piece was in there. It was the last one we talked about. It looked so seductive. It's really tactile because it's knit. It has these little



Deena Qabazard, *Beginnings* (detail) (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

loops in it, which you just want to put your body in. For Deena, knitting this piece meant a space for calmness and meditation. You just want to touch them, they are inviting. She was telling this story about how she was hanging out in the studio with a few other MFA students one night chatting. They were sitting on the ground, talking. She looked around slowly and noticed that all of them were in the piece, with the loops on. I really liked that because it felt like a peaceful embodiment of connecting with friends and having this safe space of softness. It meant, to me, an important thing to have in graduate school. That's where, at least, the title came from. There's this band called Between Friends and I don't like their music, but one song spoke to what I saw in this piece. I wanted the show to be conversational and personal. That's why the title [font] has my own writing. I vectorized it, and put it on the design. I also hand painted the title wall because I felt it was a little more of a personal gesture. Every single part of the show I made on my own. The posters around campus—I put them up. I sat here and painted the walls. I wanted the show to feel like a personal letter from me.

**PFC:** Deena's large-scale piece has a couple of formal similarities between pieces of distinct media: painting-like pieces and a couple of sculptural ones. Three of the seven pieces deviate from the traditional formal style of a painting. I am referring to those by Deena Qabazard (she/her), Gene VanWyk (they/them), and Willow (they/them), which each have their own thing going on. Qabazard's *Beginnings*, Willow's *Question* and Xianghan Cheng's (he/him) *Untitled*—a map-like plaster of mixed media—are quite eccentric in their presence. Could you tell me more about each of these pieces?

**SH:** Deena's piece normally hangs lower. We tried to do as much as we could to make it look like it did in her studio. That kind of story was really important to me, so I wanted to recreate that environment, which is why there's two color lights at the base. That was something she was unsure about. She didn't like them looking very industrial, and I would say, "But that's how it looks at your studio. It makes you feel that you are in the comfort of your studio and that's what I want, and it adds to your piece." But we added a little bit more height to be more monumental feeling than she would typically approach it, which is just above your head

height. But I think it works and I'm really happy with how it turned out. It was extremely heavy, so we had a lot of trouble. It's a million different ropes of knit which are hung over a central fishing wire with tension rods on the side.

**SH:** With Willow's piece, I like their ceramic work. Especially when you can see it alongside their painted and oil pastel work. Their aesthetic and tone pairs really well onto ceramics as a medium. In my studio visit with them, they described the process of making ceramic as an extension of the body, in the way that painting doesn't necessarily always allow. The only way you see that is in action painting, or expressionist work—a literal receipt of the body movement. But in ceramic work, by using hands to mold it, the outcome is the evidence of the artist's touch and their body/presence. When you look really closely at this piece, you see these scald marks and scratches. There are also numbers and repeating characters on their canvas that come up again within the [ceramic] piece. When you see those marks on the surface, it

feels really similar, but [is a] visually different way of communicating them. It is also very heavy. Parts of it are hollow, because otherwise they would split in the kiln. Willow was saying it was very hard to learn how to fail. Ceramics are unforgiving. You never know what's going to happen to them. It can crack, or you can paint it green and it comes out black. You never know. They were saying that figuring out more practical solutions has been an interesting learning process.

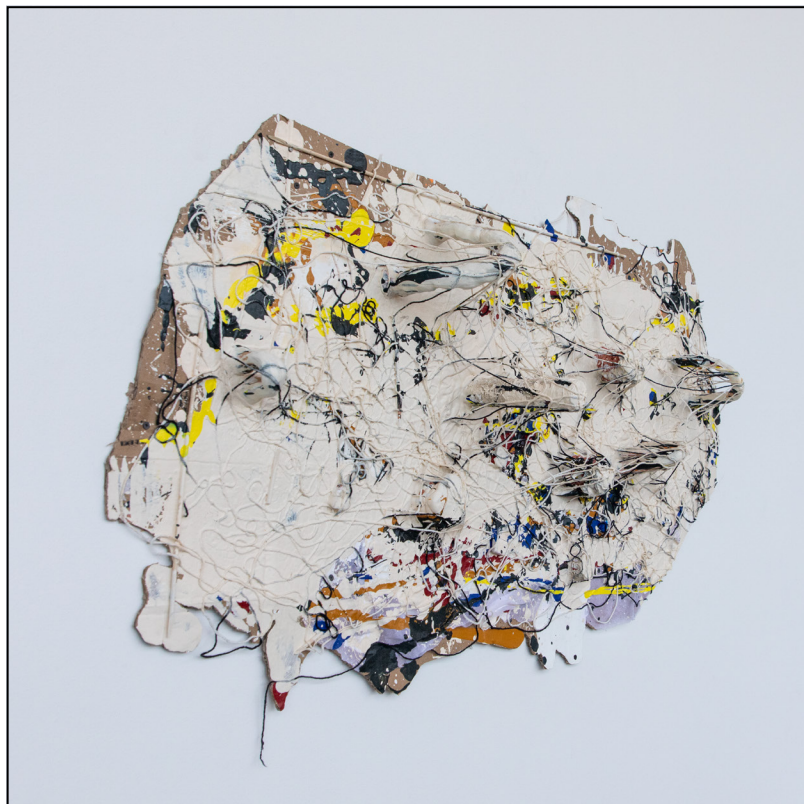
**SH:** Cheng's piece was also interesting. He usually works in a more typical abstract expressionist aesthetic. His work was recently exhibited at SOMArts in the 2023 Murphy & Cadogan Art Awards Show. I thought that it was interesting to see some of his prize winning work in that show, compared to having this piece [*Untitled*]. He works primarily in oil on



Willow, *Question* (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

canvas. This piece is interesting because of the textures. He uses the arch as a shape. I feel I can't do justice to how he explains it, but he describes these shapes as comforting to him. The shapes calm him. Someone told me that in a group critique for class, Cheng was talking about one of his paintings and about the arch, and he was positioned in such a way that an arch in the work would fit around his body when he was standing in front of it. I saw all of the softness. Even though its tall shape can be intimidating, its soft curve gives comfort.

**SH:** You can see the arches in this piece if you observe them [carefully] while standing below the piece. When it's lit up, the shadows are crazy due to the arches' different sizes that extend out and create a loop. He is also very interested in layers in his painting practice. He talked a lot about layering the painting and the perceived obscurity in what lies behind the layers. It is as if it's keeping a secret and he only knows about it. It is very experimental so I am very excited about this.



Xianghan Cheng, *Untitled* (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

**PFC:** Are these pieces completely different from what the artists have been working on in the past or are they related to other series?

**SH:** I would say yes and no. It was an open call show. In it I asked for pieces that didn't quite have a home in the artist's practice yet. They were their B-sides, things they didn't want to put in their theses. Since most of them are in their second year [of grad school], they are thinking about [their thesis shows] and cutting things, rather than expanding and creating a more vast practice. They are creating those things but they aren't necessarily presenting them. For example, Cheng's piece is still oil paint and it is abstract, but it is totally different from his [other] work.



Xianghan Cheng, *Untitled* (detail) (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

**PFC:** Dottie Lo Bue's *Constellation* belongs to her series *Fences*, which is characterized by the pointed tops in both the painting and the shape of the paper. Unlike the paintings on her website, this one has a frame. Is it the only one like this? Why does the artist make this formal decision? Could you expand on whether there is an emotional component involved, considering that she plays with just charcoal on a white canvas?

Dottie Lo Bue, *Constellation* (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno



Dottie Lo Bue, *Constellation* (detail) (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno



**SH:** Although I didn't make a studio visit with her, I knew Dottie's work from class. Dottie's work can have a real sense of quiet thoughtfulness in her painting work and some of her drawings. She has a lot of human figures and loose, fresh handling. I think this work, putting it in a master frame, unlike the ones on her website that are on the floor, slouched, generally unframed, adds something to it. It adds a context to the shape of the piece. It looks like a house. When you see picket fences, you always think of a house. The flowers on top of the fence remind me of a garden. Obviously the colors are in complete contrast to what you imagine when you think of a garden. Therefore, there are unsettling parts of the piece, playing with your expectations versus what is there. The handling of the charcoal looks different from what she normally works in. It explores the blending she does in her paintings, more so than other charcoal works.



**PFC:** It looks like an oil painting. In most of the charcoal pieces I have seen, there tend to be gaps in between the marks, which Lo Bue's work doesn't have.

**SH:** I like her fingerprints at the edge of it. They are not intentional smudges, as a brushstroke would be.



Luning Ge, *Anxiety Eats Me Alive* (2022)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

**PFC:** In that sense, personally, I enjoy subtlety in pieces that play within the dichotomy of the "real" and the surreal world. Luning Ge's *Anxiety Eats Me Alive* and *When I Look at You*, seem like an example of this. Do they have a specific connection with gestures, hence the use of hands as a constant motif in both of the paintings? And if so, could you expand on this, please?

**SH:** There is a dream-like feel to their paintings within the show. That is due to the indication of a human presence, but not quite. Especially because both the titles have a human implication, but there isn't a scene happening. Both look like a feeling. That vagueness appears in the work, too.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

Paulina Félix Cunillé is an in-process writer and researcher connecting her experiences of self-love and an interest for community-bonding with a focus on music, film and performance. Félix Cunillé engages with the work of femme, women and queer artists which explore notions of justice, climate change, language, and community. In the last year, she has written a couple of reviews for Rewind Review Respond (San Francisco) and OndaMx (Mexico). Félix Cunillé is currently the Research Fellow of The Wattis Institute, San Francisco. She is a candidate for the MA in Visual and Critical Studies at California College of the Arts, class 2024.



Curator Samantha Hiura (left) having a good time at the opening with MFA student Yue Xiang (right), a performance artist who will participate in *Between Friends* Part 3

Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly