

# Friendships Unfold in *Between Friends* at PLAYSPACE

“ *Between Friends* was an embrace of friendship; an intimate and poignant series of events that, little by little, unfolded a connection full of softness, uncanniness, and renewal. ”

by Paulina Félix Cunillé



Xiaohan Zhou, *Return to 170 No. 1* (2022)  
Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

VOL.7





Installation view of *Between Friends: Part 3*  
Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

*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 from September 15–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.

*Between Friends: Part 3*, on view from November 3–November 22, 2023, featured works by Lynse Cooper, Kelley Finley, Badri Valian, Yue Xiang, and Xiaohan Zhou. In this final chapter of her semester-long coverage of the show, *RRR* arts reporter Paulina Félix Cunillé, reflects on all three parts of *Between Friends*, bringing us a moment of closure at the end of this intimate series. Read Félix-Cunillé's interview with curator Sam Hiura [here](#) and her review of *OKRa/repair for the Un-dead/*, a performance piece by Zedekiah Gonsalvez Schild and Jeunée Simon included in Part 2, [here](#).

Although each piece had its own story tied to the developing practice of each featured MFA student, curator Samantha Hiura weaved a soft connection between them in *Between Friends: Part 1*. Luning Ge's blowing kiss in *Anxiety Eats Me Alive* struck me as especially tender. Ge plays with the liminality of softness and illegibility, prompting me to think about the strangeness of getting to know someone for the first time. It is a process that has no defined path; a friendship can happen or it can undo itself. Ge's kiss both welcomed us to the rest of the exhibition and blew us away towards artworks whose materials disguise a delicate theme. *Question* (2023), for example, a ceramic piece by Willow, holds an implacable commitment to be who it wants to be. How else do friendships grow? In the end, everything was weaved together by Deena Qabazard's yarn wristbands in her monumental piece *Beginnings* (2023). Its tactile qualities teased me to put my wrists through a couple of them. Made from dozens of yarn loops, so many wristbands are still available for others to fill. Softness is made from connections.



Installation view of *Between Friends: Part 2*  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

While the first iteration related to softness, the second iteration conveyed an eerie side of the exchange between people. Jesse Muñoz's series *Piece of Me* (2023) dominated the room despite its small size. The work consists of phone case-like painted wood



pieces with a touch of copper wire, aluminum, and the artist's own hair; the perfect metaphor for our dependency on our phones. Although this idea is not new, the viscerality of the piece was unexpected. Installed close to *Piece of Me*, was Molly Barker's *4 5 2023 2* (2023). White patches of paint in this strangely large portrait of an otherworldly face, show the void that some of us face when trying to connect with someone new. *Squish* (2023) by Amanda Bristow (the only first year MFA student in the show) provided an escape from this eeriness. *Squish* presents a pinkish round portrait of a body, made out of wood and plaster. Faceless, the piece centers on the torso and belly of a fat femme body. Its 3D format pops out of the round frame. An arm and hand emanates from this faceless body and rests delicately on its breasts, covering its nipples. The pose resembles a portrait one would see on the cover of a fashion magazine. *Squish* conveys a feeling of reassurance; the same type of feeling as when one makes amends and establishes a healthy relationship to their body, thanks to the uncanny journey of not knowing where to begin loving oneself.



Jesse Muñoz, *Piece of Me* (detail) (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno



Amanda Bristow, *Squish* (detail) (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

Finally, the third iteration of the exhibition invoked pain and renewal that deviated from the traditional idea of a friendship. Xiang's performance *Dear Brad* (2023) talked about the pain of an ending friendship. Xiang turned a memory full of physical and mental pain into an experience that expelled these emotions, through the embodied action of purifying oneself. Although *Dear Brad* originally took place as a performance on the opening night of *Between Friends: Part 3*, it was immortalized in a video on



Badri Valian, *We Only Were The Kids* (2023)  
Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

view throughout the run of the show. Badri Valian's *We Only Were The Kids* (2023) reminded us that we have a friendship with ourselves and spoke to the necessary self-expression that leads to emotional bonds. In connection to her upbringing empty of the color pink, Valian regained power with an explosion of this color, used in both an acrylic version of the piece and a handmade quilt version. Textiles had a strong presence in this iteration of *Between Friends*, as demonstrated by both Xiang's and Valian's work, as well as in Kelley Finley's hair sculpture *liminal spaces, the memoirs I tell myself* (2023). This work presented a new material purpose for strands of hair, which, wrapped and braided around a steel structure, worked as a gateway to new beginnings.

Overall, Hiura's project was successfully ambitious; an exploration of a group of people she cares about and whose practices she admires. She bolstered the small potential of PLAYSPACE – the room that CCA destined for this curatorial project – and made more with less (this as a call to CCA to provide more financial support for student exhibitions). In *Between Friends*, Hiura's critical eye stood out as she selected and arranged pieces in correlation to the possible meanings of friendship, challenging the dynamics of the exhibition space. In each iteration, the powerful white walls of the gallery made the pieces appear more subtle than they might in a different environment. Although there were a couple of big sculptures in each iteration, the smallness governed and thus pointed towards the students' interests in exploring material and content above all. *Between Friends* was an embrace of friendship; an intimate and poignant series of events that, little by little, unfolded a connection full of softness, uncanniness, and renewal.

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.



Kelley Finley, *liminal spaces, the memoirs I tell myself* (detail) (2023)

Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly