

Niloufar Emamifar, SoiL Thornton, and an Oral History of Knobkerry

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EXHIBITION

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Sara Penn/Knobkerry, Vest, n.d., 20 x 23 inches. Collection Ruth Marten. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, New York. Photo: Gregory Carideo

SculptureCenter to present exhibition featuring new work by Niloufar Emamifar and SoiL Thornton with an oral history of Knobkerry

Long Island City, NY –*Niloufar Emamifar, SoiL Thornton, and an Oral History of Knobkerry* brings artists **Niloufar Emamifar** and **SoiL Thornton** into proximity with the history of **Knobkerry**, a store founded and run by artist and designer **Sara Penn** (1927–2020) in New York City from the 1960s through the 1990s. Knobkerry traded in textiles and ethnographic objects, which Penn expertly transformed into coveted patchwork garments and arranged in elaborate and densely layered displays. In addition, the store served as an important physical and social space for a network of Black intellectuals, musicians, and artists, and for a broader subset of cultural and subcultural figures passing through New York. Foundational to the exhibition at SculptureCenter is a years-long oral history project, conceived and developed by writer and oral historian **Svetlana Kitto**, that begins to demarcate a potential sphere of influence for Penn, her work, and her store. Featuring new work made expressly for the occasion by Emamifar and Thornton, and curated by SculptureCenter Interim Director **Kyle Danciewicz**, the exhibition as a whole functions as a collaborative form of research between a curator, an oral historian, and artists whose work might be understood in new dimensions were Penn

better represented in our recent histories of sculpture, installation, commerce, fashion, and artist-run institutions.

Through relatively unstructured methods (Emamifar and Thornton were not prompted to make work directly in response to Knobkerry, for example), the exhibition aims to open a new conversation and propose further engagement with Penn's legacy—and to evade often overdetermined institutional claims of rediscovery. Sara Penn and Knobkerry are represented by a publication that collects fifteen long-form interviews with figures close to Knobkerry, conducted by Kitto between 2017 and 2020. The book also includes extensive reproductions of archival materials related to Penn and the store, collected by Kitto in collaboration with Penn and a number of her close relations. As Kitto and exhibition curator Danciewicz note, “In lieu of a large physical presentation of Penn's work or objects that passed through Knobkerry, this exhibition provides a forum for recollections of Penn's underappreciated artistic and ideological priorities. It looks to her peers to describe the expansive position she occupied and the physical, social, and aesthetic context she largely constructed for herself.”

First opened in the East Village during the major social and economic transformations of the 1960s, Knobkerry remained a critical nexus for artists and musicians downtown, even as its brick-and-mortar storefront moved to SoHo and then to TriBeCa, on a now-familiar path of rent crisis and gentrification. The store was known for its distinctive juxtaposition of clothing, materials, and artifacts, and for Penn's deep expertise in global and historical textiles, among other subjects. In Penn's hands, these items registered the local effects of globalization, including increased access to objects of international trade, eager markets for fashionable multiculturalism, and a conflicted relationship to American identity. Intimately produced with her singular expertise and craftsmanship, Penn's work was publicly lauded, circulated, copied, and codified as the archetypal “hippie” style (though Penn referred to Knobkerry's wares as “Third World Design and Art” in the 1960s) by celebrities and mainstream press outlets.

SoiL Thornton and Niloufar Emamifar will each present new work for the exhibition. Thornton's recent sculptural work has engaged the currency of acquired materials, whether store-bought clothing or household supplies. At SculptureCenter, Thornton hangs sculptures of garments: some handmade recollections of milestones in popular fashion, others more or less off the rack, and yet others modeled on a kind of paranoid vernacular performance wear, like the tinfoil Faraday cap. Dressing absent bodies, Thornton's work looks at fashion and sculpture as related and overlapping disciplines in this context, both operating as open categories for producing a gender gray area that oscillates between more and less legible, and more and less compromised, forms. In the 1960s, Knobkerry envisioned a well-researched new look for the production of an identity outside of American Eurocentric traditions, and then saw the look co-opted into a “hippie” aesthetic for a presumably white audience. Thornton's work traces a similar, if more uncanny and bizarre, flattening through the use of a Swedish snowsuit emblazoned with the logo “POC” (apparently an acronym for “piece of cake”). Accounts of those close to Knobkerry suggest that Sara Penn's global design sensibility expressed discontentment with forces of assimilation, white middle-class aspirations, and national identity as pushed against and often rejected by Penn's circle of Black artists and intellectuals in particular. In a new context, Thornton's work throws up roadblocks and

detours to the public negotiation of identity today, dead-ending, remaking, and resizing garments of a mass culture.

Throughout her practice, Emamifar casts artistic production as an excess of psychically charged architectures of regulation, maintenance tasks, and compromises for how to access, use, and pay for space—and, subsequently, to “freely” express ideas, or to engage in self-determining activities. Emamifar’s project for the exhibition has drawn from SculptureCenter’s disordered archive (from its founding as “Clay Club” in 1928 to its present life) to consider institutional spaces of production and how they reflect the material realities of the artists and artworks with which they engage. As a lens on Emamifar’s concerns, Penn’s pioneering proprietorship, especially as a Black woman in downtown New York in the 1960s, foregrounds what it means to produce a publicly oriented culture outside of direct institutional support, instead utilizing a private commercial form which nevertheless remains prey to the business incentives of commercial real estate rental. Penn’s entrepreneurial vision for global design in the ’60s prefigured a very different ’90s global economy with detrimental storefront-level effects; Emamifar’s work locates the scraps, tensions, and challenges of working within this order today.

Despite the diverging forms of visibility Penn enjoyed at various times in her life, her legacy remains largely unexplored, and Knobkerry has not entered a significant conversation with the artist-run commercial enterprises often invoked to define the socioeconomic-aesthetic whirlwind of 1970s New York. Even now, when the relationship between art, retail, and extra-institutional practices have become more legible, Penn’s contributions are not adequately appreciated. Almost two years after Penn’s death, this exhibition and Kitto’s oral history project offer the time and space to investigate what Knobkerry might mean in retrospect. In this way, the project reflects a new approach to SculptureCenter’s longstanding support of underacknowledged artists and work.

Publication

Sara Penn’s Knobkerry: An Oral History Sourcebook

By Svetlana Kitto (SculptureCenter and New York Consolidated, 2021)

Conceived and developed by **Svetlana Kitto**, the book includes longform interviews with **Sara Penn, Andrea Aranow, Charles Daniel Dawson, David Hammons, Joanne Robinson Hill, Sana Musasama, Kate Prendergast** and **Jane Barrell Yadav, Eric Robertson, Fumi Schmidt, Seret Scott, Elena Solow, Carol Thompson, Ken Tisa, and Paulette Young**. The publication is designed by **Pacific**.

Svetlana Kitto is a writer, editor, and oral historian. Her writing has been featured in *New York, Ursula, Guernica, the New York Times, Interview, and BOMB*, among other periodicals. She is the editor of the art publications *1996* by Matt Keegan (New York Consolidated, 2020); *Talking to the Sun at Fire Island* (BOFFO, 2019); *Courage and Persistence: Art That Fueled the Fight for Women’s Suffrage* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2020); and *Adult Contemporary Volume 1* (Wesleyan University, 2017). As an oral historian, she has contributed primary material to archives and exhibitions at the Brooklyn Historical Society; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York; the New York Public Library for Performing Arts; and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, for which she

conducted interviews with Robert Morris, Barbara Hammer, and Bill T. Jones. Since 2013, she has curated the reading and performance series *Adult Contemporary*, which has been presented at Storm King Art Center, CANADA, Hauser & Wirth, Performa, Printed Matter, and elsewhere. In addition to freelance writing and interviewing, she works as a writer and editor for the gallery Gordon Robichaux in New York.

Sara Penn's Knobkerry: An Oral History Sourcebook is co-published with New York Consolidated. A second companion volume with new critical texts will be co-published by SculptureCenter and New York Consolidated in summer 2022.

Public Programs

Knobkerry Roundtable

October 7, 2021

Shopkeeping

December 2, 2021

With Carmen Hammons, Joanne Robinson Hill, Kathleen McDonnell, Seret Scott, and Ken Tisa. The program is moderated by Charles Daniel Dawson and Svetlana Kitto and will be livestreamed on Zoom.

About SculptureCenter

SculptureCenter leads the conversation on contemporary art by supporting artistic innovation and independent thought highlighting sculpture's specific potential to change the way we engage with the world. Positioning artists' work in larger cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts, SculptureCenter discerns and interprets emerging ideas. Founded by artists in 1928, SculptureCenter provides an international forum that connects artists and audiences by presenting exhibitions, commissioning new work, and generating scholarship.

Since relocating to Long Island City in 2001, SculptureCenter has presented works by over nine hundred artists through its annual exhibition program, and today, it is considered one of New York's most important kunsthallen. Placing emphasis on investment, inclusiveness, independence, transparency, and rigor, SculptureCenter has developed a strong reputation for championing underrecognized and emerging artists, many of whom have gone on to celebrated and substantial careers; these include Nairy Baghramian, Sanford Biggers, Tom Burr, Liz Glynn, Rochelle Goldberg, Leslie Hewitt, Tishan Hsu, Rashid Johnson, Rindon Johnson, Ugo Rondinone, Gedi Sibony, Alexandre Singh, Monika Sosnowska, Mika Tajima, Jesse Wine, Turner Prize winner Charlotte Prodger and nominee Anthea Hamilton, and Hugo Boss Prize winners Anicka Yi and Simone Leigh. SculptureCenter continuously offers a dynamic series of free public programs and events including artist talks, performances, film screenings, and publications.

Leadership support of SculptureCenter's exhibitions and programs is provided by Carol Bove, Jill and Peter Kraus, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Lee Elliott and Robert K. Elliott, Eleanor Heyman Propp, Miyoung Lee and Neil Simpkins, Jacques Louis Vidal, and Robert Soros and Jamie Singer Soros.

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