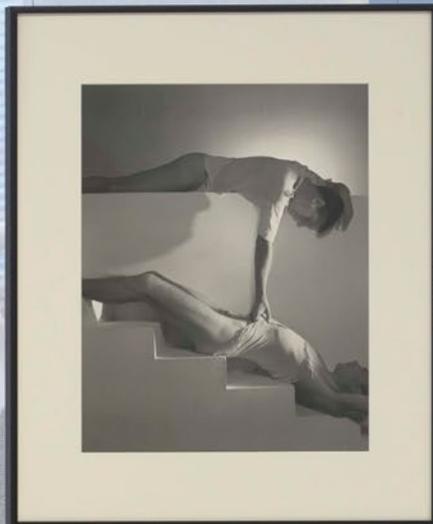


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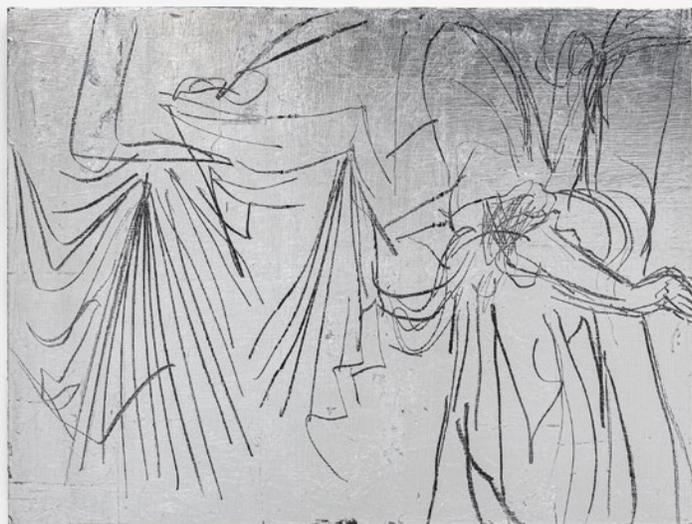


NICK MAUSS

A Simultaneously Active and Receding Presence

BY LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS

Nick Mauss has developed a multifaceted body of work spanning ceramics, drawings, paintings on mirrors and textiles, as well as exhibition displays and architectures, choreographies and costumes. His practice also draws on the work of other artists through writing and research, organizing exhibitions and performances, and creating presentations in which authorship moves in and out of focus. His 2018 solo show "Transmissions" at the Whitney Museum in New York, for example, examined the myriad connections between art and Modernist ballet from the 1930s to '50s, featuring original collaborative choreography that was performed in the exhibition spaces. "Bizarre Silks, Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts, etc." (2020) at Kunsthalle Basel, meanwhile, assembled works by other artists with a special focus on the conventions of display, such as wall text, exhibition design, and scenography, creating a network of relationships that spoke to the presence of fact and fantasy in artistic practices.



(left) Installation view of **NICK MAUSS's** "Transmissions" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2018, featuring Quenton Stuckey, Brandon Collwes, Kristina Bermudez, and works by Carl Van Vechten and George Platt Lynes. Photo by Ron Amstutz. Courtesy the artist.

(top) **NICK MAUSS**, *For Now*, 2012, aluminum leaf and gesso on board. Photo by Jiayun Deng. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

LMF: I would like to start discussing your work from the outside in, partly because ideas about what is extrinsic and intrinsic are so important to the materiality of your artistic practice. You saw Auguste Rodin's *Study for a Dressing Gown for Balzac* (1897) in Paris recently; it was the centerpiece of an exhibition at the Musée Rodin, examining the artist's process in creating a sculpture of the writer. What are your thoughts on this drapery for a body without the body, because it structurally contains manifold ideas about lines, fabric, publicity, privacy, gestures, and the pressures and temperatures that a body exerts on fabric, and so on?

NM: The body and its erotics are often very central in my work, even if there is no body—that is, a literal absence of the figure. I've made pieces that are constructed around this absence, such as a set of transparent overalls recreated from a 1930s folklore ballet about a gas station attendant, suspended in mid-air; or a trompe l'oeil antechamber in stitched velvet appliqué whose purpose is to theatricalize the transitional space between other spaces. Just recently, I staged in Tom Burr's studio/archive a sound-based performance of Jean Genet's 1948 ballet, *Adame Miroir*, with no performing bodies, only a voice reading Genet's description of the dance's décor

and denouement. In my drawings, too, figures are often absent or blank.

It's really only becoming apparent to me in talking to you, this use of a figure's trace or "shell" as a kind of open placeholder. I mention erotics because I don't want this absent body to be overdetermined by a sense of total loss. A lot of my work derives from a fixation on gesture—a hand on a railing, a deflected glance, one's passage over a threshold—by which the logic of the exhibition and the way one moves through it is made into a consequence of this otherwise neglected detail. I think the viewer inhabits that space, ordered by gesture, quite intuitively. With Genet's ballet, the audience quite literally become the dance as they move among Tom's sculptures and listen to Genet narrate the struggle between a sailor, his reflection coming to life, and death.

I like your observation about the dual function of the extrinsic and intrinsic in my work, which highlights the importance of framing, and of trying to locate or dissolve the frame. This porousness raises the question of category, and what it means to consider differently what is subject to attention. Regarding Marine Kisiel and Isabelle Collet's show revolving around Rodin's robe, it was an important object-lesson, and perhaps my favorite kind—one in which I was confronted with something I thought I already knew or understood, only to see that I don't know it at all. The exhibition essentially disrobed the Balzac monument in order to reveal the complex processes and controversies that shaped the sculpture as we know it. Taking the mirage of a historical object and unraveling it in reverse is something I relate to. At the most basic level, the act of dressing a public monument in a morning robe marks a break in traditions of representation, of publicness. But other "messy" lived aspects informed the process of this sculpture's realization, involving many tensions around holding the bodies of citizens to a certain standard.

I like your insistence on the erotics acting as a kind of counterweight to the feeling of loss. In some of your recent pieces, the subject often turns away from us somehow: *Shift* (2025), for example, comprises ink and acrylic line paintings on paper hanging underneath a white voile curtain, which depict fragmentary figures. In one drawing, a lone character has wavy lines close to his hand that make it seem as though he is smoking, and his face is obscured with a kind of scribble. Another drawing depicts a mass of bodies that seem to overlap with one another, making it hard to tell where one person begins and another ends. There are multiple ways in which these figures recede from the viewer—the smokes and scrimms and glances all seem to refract off of one another. This is accentuated when the work is reflected in a mirror elsewhere in the room, along with another series of mirror paintings that you made using a reverse painting technique.

I'm interested in how you observe the attitudes of the figures I draw—both in relation to one another, and to the viewer—as a waning, recession, or a refractive, spatially scattered way of interacting. I should point out that I'm always caught off guard by the assumption that the figures in my work are male, because I don't see them as specifically gendered—if anything, their pathos and

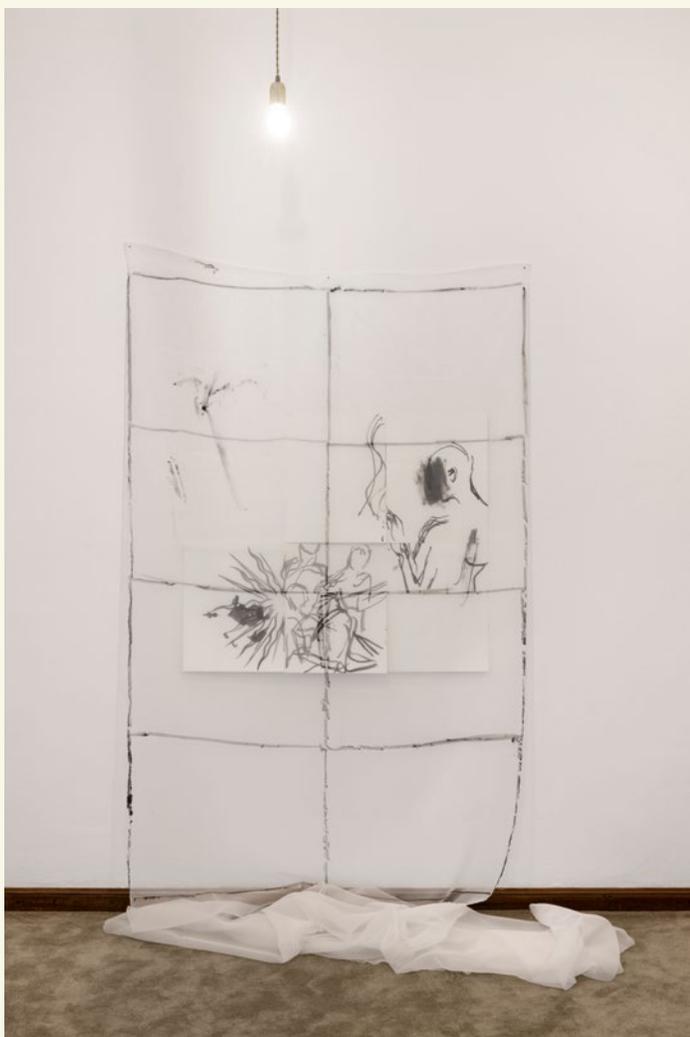
gestures are often based on feminine figures drawn from histories of painting, fashion, and performance. You are right; they can appear elusive, inchoate. I fixate on pose and gesture, as I said, rather than on the description of an individual person. I privilege "this space between the cuts," to cite filmmaker Shirley Clarke, and I use these intervals of contact or disappearance as a thread throughout the space. And then there is an inner fragmentation, or parataxis, when a work is composed of adjoining panels of glass or ceramic that don't necessarily cohere visually.

Shift is a preparatory drawing for a work on glass. I begin by pinning up drawings and transparent or semi-transparent overlays in my studio, then I arrange these layers for a long time, moving them around, adding new drawings, or drawing over old ones, hiding others, or pinning another length of voile over them. I need to lose familiarity with a drawing—with the initial feeling and temporality of it—before I can really see it. So in this layered space, I look at all these traces constantly, live with them, and also forget them. I try to arrive at a delayed or tangled legibility. Maybe that is where the sense of trying to "catch" the figures comes from; in some way, I am also trying to catch them as I arrive at them over time. But I've only recently begun showing this aspect of the process. The drawings have a very different materiality from the glass, of course, and a more fleeting form of presence, so they say something important about how drawing, touch, space, movement, and fragility relate. There is also a kind of "generation loss" built into my process, where I draw and redraw certain gestures or ornaments, or pull them through so many medial transfers that they become eroded.

I wanted to ask about your use of textiles in your compositions. A favorite quote of mine is from Lisa Robertson's 2020 novel *The Baudelaire Fractal*, describing a young woman's search for something called a "sense textile": "Reading, listing, I wanted to escape the violent sociology of beauty to experience aesthetics as an even redistribution of the senses across the most banal parts of dailiness. I wanted to write it all down, everything inchoate: light, dust, textile, pigment, sentences. Beauty would be the lust for the complex, unspoken surface of the present. I sought a sense-textile, which would flourish outside the humiliating economy of servitude that names us."

I think of the "daily" and "inchoate" with respect to what happens "between the cuts" here and the particular surfaces of your work—often corroded, blurred, among "light, dust, textile, pigment, sentences" etc. Maybe it even speaks to my misreading of the subject's gender—the "humiliating economy of servitude that names us"! Do you have a specific history with or relationship to textiles?

It was my interest in ornament that led me to textiles. I was trying to learn things I wasn't seeing in art school, so I had to set out and make my own history, which was more related to material culture, interiors, and private spaces that fulfilled an important social and cultural function. But I was mainly going straight after all the things I was told should not be taken seriously: the theatrical, the decorative, the minor. I wanted to revel in these things



(top) Installation view of **NICK MAUSS's** *Shift*, 2025, ink and acrylic on paper and organza, dimensions variable. Photo by Andrea Rossetti. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Emanuela Campoli, Milan.



(right) **NICK MAUSS, Untitled**, 2024, engobe and glaze on stoneware, dimensions variable. Photo by Jiayun Deng. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

(right) Installation view of **NICK MAUSS's** "Designing Dreams: a Celebration of Léon Bakst" at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, 2016–17. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



(bottom) Installation view of **NICK MAUSS's** *Amorphous Projection*, 2025, reverse-painted glass, mirrored, acrylic, charcoal, and ink on paper, Mylar, organza, and satin devoré, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.



that were deemed so offensive, but also understand what exactly made them so offensive. In textiles, I found repositories of ornament, technique, and invention containing a wider and less controlled sense of culture than the hierarchies of visual art. And textiles are bodily, intimate, fragile, perishable in a way that counters the false promise of art's permanence. I started introducing fabric techniques into my work to create contrasts and demand a different sort of attention from the viewer. For example, an early show I curated opened with a purse made out of a silk designed by the painter Raoul Dufy—none of the other works on view had anything to do with Dufy, or with fashion per se, but the purse functioned as a kind of signpost for how to look at the exhibition.

What I find so moving about the way Robertson writes about textiles is the implicit acknowledgement that we all have a particular relationship to them—that relationship is unavoidable, almost like a technique of the body. My mother trained as a seamstress and taught me how to sew. I used to draw fabric patterns as a job. There are all sorts of banal ways in which we all connect with fabric and the affects it holds. When I've written "about" fashion it was not thanks to any particular expertise, but because I wanted to take the work seriously, and I had to invent a way to bring language to it. Similarly, when I use fabric, I start from a place of not having the language for it, but then it becomes a support or develops into an exhibition scenography. In preparation for the 2016–17 exhibition "Designing Dreams: a Celebration of Léon Bakst" at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, I looked closely at Ballets Russes dance costumes and realized that much of their patterning had been made by spraying through intricate stencils, which gave them a surprisingly contemporary look. I subsequently stenciled the entire museum and made huge lengths of fabric sprayed with ornaments derived from Bakst's own fabric designs. Recently, I've become more deeply involved in fashion history (one day I would love to teach a history of modern art from the pages of *Vogue*) because it branches into art and performance histories in such unexpected ways.

Your engagement with the practices of others has become a core part of your own artistic methodology. Has the way that you think about research or curating changed over time? Do you have a sense of how these histories flow into the tactile areas of your own artmaking?

To teach art history from the pages of *Vogue* is simply to use another frame and, in doing so, show how arbitrary the standard frame is. I try to flip, as you say, what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic. When I began making work, I was very concerned with acknowledging, if not foregrounding, how what I make exists in relation to other artists and histories. Not on the level of reference, but more so in that every artist is tethered—and indebted—to so many strands, and has to invent their own genealogy. That is the space into which I invite the viewer, along with other artists and their works. I've found different ways to keep this process constantly active, and changing, and sometimes it becomes very material, at other times it remains immaterial, perhaps "just" producing new knowledge, or a new reading. The risk is that my authorship becomes subsumed, but what I like the most is

when there is a simultaneously active and receding sense of my presence in relation to the ensembles I construct with other artists, histories, performers, and contexts. If anything has changed, I would say that the performative dimension has intensified, especially in exhibitions I curate, as well as in the work I make. I trust that if I have an intense engagement with a text I'm working on, or a certain process I set in motion as part of an exhibition, that this will ultimately surface in how I arrive at making something, and vice versa. It's not a stable causal relationship, it's a process with its own (anti-formulaic, inefficient) momentum.

In terms of research, I always knew it was important to look in the wrong places. And doing research, for me, is quite emotional. I think about it as looking very carefully, very closely at something—so closely that it starts to appear as itself again, and all the clichés fall away. Of course, my reading of an object or practice is far from objective, and what I choose to pay attention to is very specific, but I just mean to say that the point of the research, more than uncovering something, is to show a very particular form of respect. In my curatorial projects, I think about space and distance, but I am also thinking about a kind of ethics of display, wondering how an object wants to be shown, how to give it its full complexity, and how a viewer can be led to that place.

Nick Mauss has developed intimate ways of working with materials such as ceramic, textile, and reverse-painted glass to catalyze both cognitive and bodily shifts in the viewer. Integrating histories of performance and staging in his studio practice, he proposes new relations between spectator, performer, artwork, and institution. He has held solo exhibitions across the world, including at Kunsthalle Basel; the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; and Fundação de Serralves, Porto, among others.

Laura McLean-Ferris is a New York-born writer and curator based in Paris. Her work has appeared in *4Columns*, *Artforum*, *ArtReview*, *Bookforum*, *Frieze*, *Flash Art International*, and *Mousse*, among other publications. Formerly, she was chief curator at the Swiss Institute, New York, where she organized numerous projects and exhibitions, including "Rosemary Mayer – Ways of Attaching" (2021).