

Cooper Salmon and Selby Sohn discuss their work in "Lately," curated by Alana Heiss

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After introductions and opening comments, the conversation takes up the ubiquitous use of the exclamation mark in modern communications, most recently in texting, messaging and short form communications and Selby's use of the symbol in her work on view in "Lately".

COOPER SALMON: (when the exclamation point is used so frequently) ...all the time, like, how does that make you feel in terms of... it kind of loses the effect... and so I wonder about thinking about the work in that sense. Or even maybe with your larger body of work, if you're going for maximum emphasis all the time?

SELBY SOHN: Yeah

SALMON: Then what do people focus on... what's the highlight if everything gets highlighted?

SOHN: Yes, exactly. I mean, it does feel like we're sort of reduced to these certain symbols that we're all over-using.

And they do lose emotional registers, or they take on new ones... or you feel you communicate in a way that is expected of you...

SALMON: Yes

SOHN: ... and it definitely loses a complicated affect — which is why it's like, are you imagining this facial expression? Or, are you imagining that the exclamation point might be drying?

SALMON: Yes

SOHN: ...or it was just wet. How do we add complexity to a world that feels like it's flat?

SALMON: Yes. That makes me also wonder about... so there's obviously the embodied nature to you and the symbols that you're using, and I wonder... how do I put this into words... because you were just talking about drying, and talking about your role in that, so I wonder what... where you... hmm. I'm nervous, there's a whole crowd of people.

(Audience laughter)

SALMON: I'm on the spot, with my presenting. I guess I want to hear just more about that, more about the embodied relationship between you and the ecstatic or excitement that comes with these very set and widely acknowledged emphatic signs.

SOHN: I think of it as the process of becoming something.

It's never sort of a simple orientation of putting something on, there's also a performance aspect where I feel like I'm becoming this thing. And it's amazing how much footage I rejected. (Laughs). You'd think that it would be so simple as wearing something and then photographing it, but there were some that were so wrong, and it became more emotionally complex than I knew it was.

SALMON: Yes

SOHN: Being something in a certain way versus other ways. I don't know if that answers your question.

SALMON: No, it definitely does. So you mentioned that there's now apparently a whole archive of work that you chose not to show. Which is awesome, personally, to me.

SOHN: Right, Yes

SALMON: So (there are) a lot of different gestures that could have taken on a new meaning or context based on the set symbol of the exclamation point. And I'm curious as to how you made those decisions to show this and not that other, those other gestures.

And also, in this work I see your limbs become... they take on... you have different poses there and so that changes, for me, the meaning of the emphasis.

Also depending on how many there are — I would like to hear, maybe, the decisions you made around (the number of exclamation points in any given print).

SOHN: Yes, those are hard to answer because I think these just felt right when I looked at them. And I think that's where it's actually more emotionally complicated than I could describe. And sometimes, I feel like with art, language always fails us, in a particular way.

But I was wondering how you picked the gestures of your figures.

SALMON: It's not a very sexy answer to say it's intuition, but I totally relate to you because there is something preverbal in the images that I make, there's something about the photos that I choose.

So when I make a painting, I start from a photo. I take all my own photos based on these moments, these tableaux, that I see, as tableaux of modern life, based on friends and strangers in situations in and around the Bay Area, so all the work that I chose to show for this show are from the Bay Area, with the exception of one. I think that one there, it's called "Desert Daze" and it's from a music festival in southern California, but I went with a group of friends (some of whom are here) to caravan down to LA for that

and came back. It's just such a great moment of preparation that it had to become a part of this body of work.

I started my journey as a storyteller in musical theater...

SOHN: Oh, that's so interesting.

SALMON: ...I was a homeschooled musical theater kid, and then I made a hard pivot to painting in my teens, when it called me to it. So storytelling in that capacity is still a part of my practice, amazingly, that sometimes I forget about until I see them all together. Then I can see all these tableaux that feel theatrical to me.

SOHN: They definitely feel theatrical. Do you ask your friends to pose in a specific way when you take photos of them, or is it ...?

SALMON: Well, it's—it's a difficult thing because I find that when my friends pose, then there's a static nature to those images.

It's like, try to catch them when they're not posing, which is easy in public space but requires more care in private space, thinking about consent of image and likeness.

SOHN: True.

SALMON: So, in the bar that's easy. We've got a few bar paintings that are here. I have a self-portrait made in a Moler Barber College there at the very back.

SOHN: Oh, I love that.

SALMON: A local gem, you can get a haircut for ten dollars, little plug for that one.

I do think there's mostly a candid nature that I'm most drawn to. There's the most heart in the work, whether it's based on photos that are just life and emotion.

SOHN: That's interesting.

I think a lot about, like, I think because I'm a performance artist, of performing being real, or the performance of the real, and sort of a... because there's that whole thing where gender is a performance, but I think it's a performance that we believe in and we attribute to ourselves. So, I was wondering if you see that, sort of, in the cinematic nature of your work.

SALMON: I'm trying to figure out how to give you a short answer. It's like, thinking about performance is something that becomes intuitive, but it also, it can be very intentional, thinking about fashion, for example.

I'd love to hear your follow-up on that, thinking about this very embodied form of projecting who you want to be and who you want to be seen as. In this work too, I think

fashion does play a big role in who we see ourselves as and who we want to be, you know? So thinking about... I definitely have friends who, as a big part of their agency over their identity... I think that comes out in some of the pieces here.

For example, this piece is called "Pride and Polish 2", so it's a follow-up painting, featuring Beans the dog, the main character there. But I was invited to the home of some queer friends of mine of Pride, probably it was two years ago now, and so I sat on this image for a while. This is actually a composite image, based on two photos, that I smushed together to make one photo that had the right staging, but I like this because it's a celebratory moment. One friend and their partner surprising the figure in the jacket with two celebratory cakes for a top surgery. So I have a friend who was going to have top surgery as part of their transition, and to celebrate that, the first friend on the left made these two boob cakes, and so then we have Beans the dog christening those cakes. It feels like a made-up painting, but honestly, I don't need fiction when I have real-life moments that I can just put my own little thumbprint on in my style.

SOHN: Yes

SALMON: The fashion of the performance in the private space with this public aspect (of being represented in a painting) I think are all those things that play into the staging and the lighting. I try to stay in that space. That, to me, is where a lot of the excitement is. And I wonder... I wonder if there's a larger point that you're trying to make with this work, thinking about self-presentation or representation.

SOHN: I think I'm adding complexity. The thing I'm thinking about a lot is,—because you mentioned fashion—is pre-existing knowledge of how when we wear something, everything that we wear has a history, and it almost feels like we're erasing part of these histories in order to comport ourselves.

But who we are is never limited to those histories, it's always more complicated.

I'm trying to add more complexity to the repertoire of being myself.

SALMON: So as a performance artist, I guess—and maybe you get this question a lot, but I wonder, through these performances that... where you are... you put on a certain... I don't want to say hat, ... but there is a set space that is a performance space that you inhabit and do the performance, then you can step back and be Selby again, whatever that means. But I wonder how those performances, after many iterations, change how you see yourself, if at all.

SOHN: Yeah, I'm wondering if there is...

SALMON: I'm not trying to do these hard-hitters, but I'm just talking through. Has the work changed you at all? as a performance artist? Is it a two-way street

for you, or is it like you see yourself more as the director?

SOHN: I guess... I don't know if this is answering that question, but I remember my first big performance, Long Arm Slow Dance, I sort of thought that no one would get it... (Laughs) And that it would just be me alone with, like, seventy-four arms, and wearing them, but I was very surprised that people came and they put them on and they did things with them that I wouldn't expect. And so I think, maybe, performance has made me feel less alone, and also that the things that I project into my own mind are not at all the things that are going to happen with the work. And there's always this aspect where other people change it or see possibilities that I couldn't see in it.

SALMON: That, to me, definitely ties back to what we were just talking about with fashion and appearance designers. They make a garment with, maybe, a set eye toward a set setting for the garment in mind, but, I mean, people can buy and change and transform the use and function of those garments. Which is very profound. Have you ever listened to the podcast "Articles of Interest?"

SOHN: No.

SALMON: Not to be a podcasts person, because I'm not. But it's a great podcast that started with small things like pockets and aloha shirts but the most recent season talks about nudity and the clergy outfits and so there's so much performance in that, in history, like you were talking about, and so I'm just reminded of that because it inevitably starts to pull on these threads—pun intended—but there's a lot to explore in that.

SOHN: Oh, definitely. When you mentioned the clergy thing, I did think a lot about rituals, and how rituals can create meanings that weren't always there. Because I always think that meanings are created because something is meaningful to us, but it turns out that if we're all just doing the same thing, we can create meaning out of almost nothing.

SALMON: To that end, I want to hear you talk a little more about activation because you were starting to add with the Long Arms Slow Dancing project—which, great title, by the way—I wonder about all the unexpected things, or even just if that's a main joy of the work for you, seeing it activated by the audience in different ways that you didn't expect or couldn't envision.

SOHN: Definitely, because I think as artists usually we're alone in the studio so I think there's almost no greater joy than not being alone with your own artwork. And having it have new life.

And they do... I think they do feel like my babies in that sense, where it's like they go off and have lives of their own and perform without me.

SALMON: Yes. Definitely. I mean, for me, that is one of the best joys as well is sharing the work in any capacity. Because you maybe stay in the studio, for the most part, and so you're kind of seeing it in your own brain, most of the time, but the few opportunities I had to share it, it's quite profound for me to see people laugh and point and whisper to each other and have a social interaction with the work, and so the work takes on some of its own life or is activated by them.

And then, when you go to someone's house that you have a piece at, and you forget, it's like seeing an old friend, and then you feel better about your work.

SOHN: Yes. No, well, just to keep going with that, I think your work also is of social interactions, for the most part. Do you ever have encounters where the people in the paintings view representations of themselves, and have that experience?

SALMON: I try to invite them, yeah.

(SOHN laughs)

SALMON: Because again, it's a work characterized by Bay Area haunts, so I have the Moler Barber College, I have the Whitehorse Inn, in the back there, when it was still red. So, you know, big Bay Area name, I started this painting when it was still red and then I went there after I finished it and they completely overhauled the whole thing and made it all chic, and I was like... oh! So now this is, like, a relic lost to time, like it was a time capsule painting. And then, let's see. I've got one interior that does still have a social aspect to it. So, my best friend and I lived in Oakland on 27th street—actually, pretty close to here, by the Greenhouse Station. And she took it upon herself to start hosting community gatherings. She was trained as a chef. She would host dinner parties and invite lots of friends over, and so I wanted to grab one of those moments as well, thinking about all the different ways you can have a social interaction or cultivate that kind of social presence. To me this is an important work as well. I'm not going to go into it but there's lots of other fashion wall moments happening as well, like that one. (Pointing to the painting, *Becoming*, in which a character is wearing a Born Again Christian Dior t-shirt)

SOHN: Yes, the "Born Again Christian Dior" is strong.

SALMON: Yes. Well, my other favorite thing about this work is that I don't make these things up. These are real garments, and these are the real situations and I'm just there documenting. And then later, I put my own little thumbprint on it and make small decisions. Some of them are intuitive, like color choices, and some of them are more intentional, like grabbing two versions of the same moment and compressing them into the best image. I'm not sure if that answers your question.

SOHN: I forgot the question.

SALMON: Me too. (Audience laughter)

SALMON: Okay.

SOHN: Did we do it?

SALMON: I think we did it. I think we can answer questions.

SOHN: How do we end an artist talk? (audience laughter) Okay.
Yeah, that's right.

TAVEE LEE: (Transmission Gallery Manager) Alana [Heiss] suggested you talk a little bit about how you got to the materials you are using now.

SALMON: I want to hear how you got to your materials for this for sure.

SOHN: Okay. Well, I think these are photographs on archival paper. And then these [pointing to the sculptures] I was thinking about the exclamation point and I wanted it to be something transparent that you can see through, so it was a print on transparency and then I was really thinking about having it dry or be drying, and so I have it on a towel rack and then on a drying rack. And I love... I think honestly my favorite part of this is the arms hanging off, like it just has that moment of like... I don't know. It's kind of so sad, but so real.

SALMON: Yeah?

LEE: It's as if it speaks to the exhaustion of being "up."

SOHN: Excited all the time.

LEE: Excited all the time, yes. Like... (Sighs)" I just can't do it one more minute!"

SOHN: Yeah, I did think a lot about, like, 'how does this email find you?'
(Audience laughter)

(Sohn points to Towel Rack) This is how.

(Audience laughter)

LEE: Cooper, you mentioned coming from a theatrical background, and then painting called you. Can you speak a little more about that?

SALMON: Yes. So, in my teens, I was lucky that I went to a high school that had not yet gutted its art program, and so I was in certain classes there and started to get my training, and since then I went to undergrad at CCA [California College of the Arts] and so I had access to lots of different modalities. I took different ways and vehicles to get my ideas across. I took a furniture design class, which was awesome, and also a screen

printing class, that I got a lot out of. Screen printing, for me, is the place where a lot of different disciplines kind of find a common meeting ground, which is exciting. And I also took a jewelry and metal arts class, which I really enjoyed as well.

SOHN: Cool.

SALMON: But I always find myself coming back to painting. And I think that there's something about the flexibility, the ability to distort and hide and emphasize and stage moments in a way that is... not easier, but allows me a lot of room to move around conceptually that I don't find in other mediums, so I come back to it time and again. Although, I was talking to Laura [Van Duren] just recently about the work going forward and I would like to hear about what's next for you, Selby, as well, in terms of work. I know you made this work for the show specifically which was so exciting.

SOHN: Yeah. This was one of the ideas, but I did pick it because I felt like it would go with your work.

SALMON: Oh, interesting. I didn't know that.

SOHN: It's very figurative and I felt like this was figurative which is unusual for me. And so I was hoping for cohesion. And originally, they were going to be pink, but then the Barbie Movie came out... you know

(Audience laughter)

SALMON: That's fascinating.

SOHN: I think this has... yeah, I wasn't ready for it to be Barbie, it just wasn't the meaning I wanted.

SALMON: I think that was the right choice. Yeah, I mean there is still so much passion in the red.

SOHN: Yes.

SALMON: It's an easy way to sidestep. But I think that probably was the right choice. That's fascinating to know that there are certain pop culture phenomena that affect how you show the work.

SOHN: Yes, it's just not the meaning. And you can't help but see that meaning now.

SALMON: Definitely. Yes. That's great.

LEE: Cooper, you were about to say something about what's coming up, that you talked to Laura [Van Duren] about that.

SALMON: Oh, yes. So with newer work... so, like I said, I'm an artist with a visual

disability, so with newer work that I make, it will still be figurative, but I have a growing interest in making work that speaks to my literal point of view. The theme of that work will be perception. And so in service of that, what I want to do is start using spray paint. Start doing lots of spray effects to give a sense of the environment in a lot more abstract sense than what you're seeing here, it's less tight, but then there will be this sort of radius around the figure. 'Cause in my newer work, at this point, I am becoming more present in the work, not just as an observer or director but as the main character, and so in that more introspective work, I plan to be there with a small radius of tight work, to kind of give a sense of what I can see in my immediate space, but then there's a larger bubble around me that I want to share with people in that sense.. Also, I want that work to be larger-scale. So I want this... you know, making work that is more ambitious, I guess, because I'm not at all skilled with spray. We'll see how that goes but I'm excited...

SOHN: It'll look very fun.

SALMON: Yeah, by the messiness, because I do... sometimes get worried that... you know, when you fall back on making something look tight, well-mannered and nice, and it's not relevant. I want to... just to get to the point of, 'We get it! It's enough!' and move on to the next thing.

SOHN: Yeah, I have a piece coming up for di Rosa [Center for Contemporary Art], on October 26, and it's called "Body Tubes", and I have no idea how to make it, so...

(Audience laughter)

SOHN: I'm going to be experimenting with materials to make something that's large and structured but won't injure people.

(Audience laughter)

SALMON: Is that going to be the kind of work where the audience gets to activate it as well?

SOHN: Yes.

SALMON: Oh, okay, yes. Then that probably is a great, you know, a worthy consideration. Who's your titles guy? You have great titles for your work!

SOHN: That's good, yeah. I always think they're very obvious, but I don't know.

SALMON: Well, the humor obviously is a huge part of your work.

SOHN: Yeah. Yeah.

SALMON: I wonder if that is a way for you 'in', in terms of getting your messages across in a way that... so that other ways of framing things are not as useful to you?

SOHN: I think it's the emotion that gives me the most catharsis.

SALMON: Yeah.

SOHN: I don't know if that makes sense.

SALMON: No, it makes total sense.

SOHN: I think I get kind of bored by beauty or, like, melodrama.

SALMON: Yeah, totally.

SOHN: But when something is funny, it really gets me...

SALMON: Yes.

SOHN: And then I can't stop laughing which is usually when I know it's the piece.

SALMON: So is that when you know a piece is done? When it makes you laugh?

SOHN: Yeah, probably, yes.

SALMON: Great. Excellent.

SOHN: Or when the idea's good. Yeah, or the drawing before I make it, yeah.

SALMON: Yes. That's good. Excellent. That's fascinating. Okay.

SALMON: Okay, I think I'm ready to open up to questions.

LEE: Yes, that was great. Anybody? (Gestures to audience)

(Audience chatter)

SALMON: Yes, redhead?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a question that Selby already began to touch on about how color shows up in both of your work. Like, for this body of work, Cooper... Whenever I think of your work there's this orange and then a very cool pink with some blue in it. And it's interesting to me that Selby's red chromatically sits in between your orange-pink thing that is coming on in your work. So I guess I want to hear about... what's your relationship to color, how did you choose this palette, and then, Selby, if your work was a choice in dialogue with Cooper's work, how do you analyze for it?

SALMON: Yeah. This is a question I get a lot actually, is thinking about why I choose certain palettes, or which ones I gravitate towards. I think I'm prepared to make a grand claim that all painters go through phases of having certain colors that are 'darlings'. Like, I know a lot of people like to go with ultramarine blue, that's such a zinger of a color, of course. And the other thing I would add is that some paintings are just better paintings when you make certain decisions as an artist to exercise artistic license. Sometimes you have a great composition in a photo source image but there's kind of a blandness to the scene, and the point of the painting is to dramatize and emphasize the emotional gesture. And so some of the... a lot of the times, when I change a color,

or a texture, or part of the composition, it is in service of that. Because what I'm trying to do with the work is make work that's visually interesting but also captures in sort of this time-capsule, nostalgic way the essence and the emotional charge of a time and place. A lot of the main goal of my painting with this body of work is to hold space with the passage of time. Especially with some of these, vision is evolving with each year. So my vision is more abstract each year, so a lot of the paintings that I make in this year of figurative work are holding space for what's important to me, which is the people in my life.

SOHN: I think pink would have gone better with Cooper's work. But that was off the table and then I found a red exclamation point that I really liked, and so it's based off that exclamation point. And I... the way I made the shape is I photographed it and then I took it into photoshop and then I printed it out huge, and that became the pattern for the thing that I was wearing. So I put on this exclamation point that I found.

SALMON: How did it feel to put on the exclamation point for the first time? Was it like... a charge that, like, entered you? Or?

SOHN: Yeah, it was slightly uncomfortable. And then I kept having the Marilyn Monroe moment of it flipping up.

(Audience laughter)

SOHN: So there's a cute photo of me on the beach where it's flipping.

SALMON: You took the exclamation point to the beach! That's so funny.

SOHN: Yeah, there's a lot of beach footage that didn't make it into the show.

SALMON: Well, that's like... there's a whole other body of work where the exclamation point goes on vacation or something, you know?

(Audience laughter)

SALMON: 'Because this is all in... this is all divorced from physical space.

SOHN: Right.

SALMON: But the implication of what you've just shared is funny because, you know...

SOHN: I know, it has a past.

SALMON: Yeah. Oh, I got it, I got it.

(Sohn laughs)

LEE: So what's the material of the exclamation point that you put on and wear?

SOHN: It's felt, and from the discount fabric store. And then, luckily I ordered a face paint that was the exact same color, because I thought that I would have to paint the

felt the face paint color, but I think they mostly are going off this one red for commercial products, which was lucky for me.

SALMON: Yeah, first try. Excellent.

SOHN: Yes.

LEE: What was your experience going out into the world with the exclamation point?

SOHN: It was not my first time doing something bizarre in public.

(Audience laughter)

SOHN: I remember the first time I did something like this, I was in Hollywood and I did expect more attention from being this bizarre figure in public. But then I received no attention, and I was at a bar with my friend who photographed the work, and then people came up to me and I thought it was my moment. They were like, do you want Chinese food?

(Audience laughter)

SOHN: And so, I think San Francisco and Hollywood are bad. People just expect you to be this way anyway.

SALMON: Yes.

SOHN: You're not really a spectacle.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah, so you go to the midwest?

SOHN: Yes.

(Audience laughter)

SOHN: I'm still searching for that moment.

LEE: Any other questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a question for each of you. So, Selby, why... the exclamation marks are drying. Why were they wet?

SOHN: That is a really good question. I really don't have an answer to that.

(Audience laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Maybe they had to take a shower because they were tired.

SOHN: I think that I really wanted to question, like, the moisture level of our communication, or, like, we assume such a flat tonality to things, but what if it was more complicated? Or what if it was showering? I don't know.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And then Cooper, I'm wondering on the eyes, there's something going on in the eyes of the people mentioned here.

SALMON: Yes, so that's by design. The treatment of the eyes is something that I exercise a lot of care and attention to in the work, thinking about motifs that speak to my disability. More and more, how I treat the eyes becomes a big part of the painting. Because, A, the most expressive part of the face is the eyes, and the eyebrows also help a lot. But there's a lot of emotion that happens in the eyes, so in certain pieces I experiment with just including the eyes, sometimes the eyes and the mouth, or, every now and then, I'll try just the nose. But it just doesn't quite cut it because the eyes are where the heart and soul come through the body, and so, especially my self-portraits, that's quite pronounced and speaks to the intent of the painting. Just thinking about sight, and disability, and seeing, and being seen. And all those things. But it does come out in different ways to the personality of the other characters that populate the work as well. Any other questions? Any brave audience members?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was curious, because the live performance with you [Sohn] and the influence of performance that [unintelligible] has, adds to this. Like, puts you facing the world with performance that is peculiar and strange. Like, influences your day-to-day habits, and how the performance gives back to you.

SOHN: Yeah, no, that is a great question.

LEE: Could you repeat that so we can hear better?

SOHN: Yeah, so, they asked how my performance influences my performance of life in the day-to-day, and I think about this a lot. Because I do think in the Bay Area, there's a pressure to be sincere sometimes. And I usually... I kind of think everyone's performing all the time. So how do we perform the real? Because I'm a heartfelt person, but I also don't want to be constrained by a sense of realness. I want my identity to slide into different registers and I want it to also be open to options of things that I don't know about myself. Because we all are forced to assume that we know this specific position. And I also think about it when I dress every day. Does that answer your question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It doesn't. I was also interested in the [unintelligible] part of your day? Where you are now, and facing the world. In your house, brushing your teeth, these are [unintelligible] that affect performance. Like, these kinds of things.

SOHN: Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [unintelligible]

SOHN: Yeah. So, maybe my husband can get to that? I—yeah, no, I think it's funny because I think at home, we kind of have our own language, and I think there is a lot

where we do kind of characterize things differently together. And I've noticed when we communicate in our home, we don't have the articles in sentences. We'll refer to it as "home" and not "the home". So... I don't know. But I think home is where you try everything out for the first time, because it's a safe space and you're with your partner or by yourself.

Thank you.