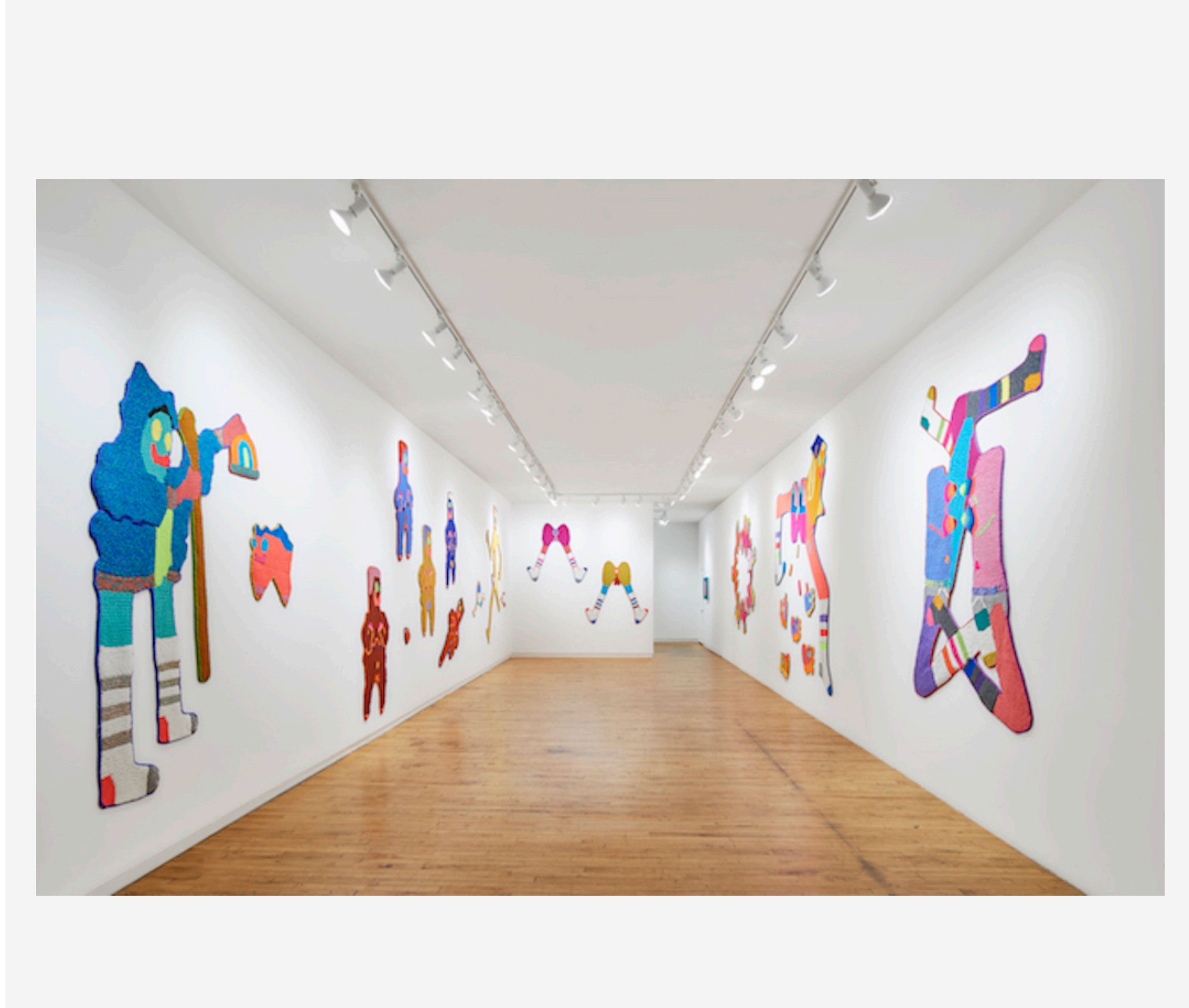




## Interview: Caroline Wells Chandler's Queertopia

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**Caroline Wells Chandler's delightfully cheeky crocheted paintings, with titles like *Cornholio Victory*, inspire love at first sight. Here's a choice quote from this exclusive interview: "I can't really imagine anything worse than having studio assistants," which is proof of how hard this artist works. He talks about color as "fundamental in moving from a murky to a luminous state," which is exactly what the world needs now.**

While the vibe is playful, he has serious intentions, at one point using "the language of folk to destabilize heartland values in effort to celebrate otherness through using everyday, unpretentious materials." Caroline makes art for world peace, and he wears tie-dye all day to prove it.

**Kristin Farr: You studied painting and printmaking but you seem to be focused on textiles now, how did the shift happen? Or were you free to explore fiber art in your painting programs?**

**Caroline Wells Chandler:** I started making seriously at the age of fifteen. Craft has always been present in my work. In high school, I made paintings, secular altars, and installations. Once I tried to cast raw pigs feet in fiberglass and inadvertently made a Damien Hirst. My dad wasn't too happy about the maggot situation in his garage, and later, the trash cans. I was pretty spoiled growing up and trashed my parent's garage. I still feel like the set up I had in high school was the best studio I ever had. I guess it was like an artist residency except I wasn't aware of temporality or how good I had it until I went off to school. My mom was my studio assistant. She would drive me around the neighborhood on trash day so I could gather materials for my sculptures.

When I applied to undergrad, everything was still in slide form. I had a really tall piece that needed to be documented. When my dad was out running errands, we drove the family car across the backyard so that I could stand up on top of it to nail a drop cloth into the back of the house to photograph an installation. Often, when trying to shoot work, it would be windy and wax would blow from the illuminated altars all over the drop cloths, and I would swear a bunch. My mom would hold up one end of the cloth and threaten to go inside if I didn't cleanup my language.

Because I used materials in unsafe and hazardous ways, I developed really bad allergies related to oil-based media and solvents, which pushed my work into a nontoxic territory. By the time that I attended Yale's Painting and Printmaking program, my work more so dealt with pushing painting paradigms through material experimentation. Even though my work is fiber-based, I still think of myself as a painter, because that is the primary history that has influenced my work. I spent most of my time there trying to figure out how I could use the language of folk to destabilize heartland values in effort to celebrate otherness through using everyday, unpretentious materials.



**What personal references are most apparent in your work?**

Language is really interesting to me, especially how I sublimate idioms and transform them into forms. My partner sometimes refers to me as "butthead." I can't say for sure where forms come from, but the body of the trolls could be read literally as a butt and a head. I started making the B.O.R.G.s (bootylicious organisms radiating goodness) and B.E.R.T.s (barreling energy resonance transmitters) around the same time I started double-stacking my tie-dye clothes. My niece Bertie was born when I started making B.E.R.T.s. These things are random coincidences. Maybe that has something to do with what I'm doing.

**Who are these figures?**

I'm in the process of expanding the cast of characters that occupy my *Queertopia*. Most of them come from my imagination and getting inspired by art history, or things that I've read. Some of the figures are portraits of artists that I admire. I am primarily interested in contributing to the history of figuration by populating it with gender queer bodies that affirmationally celebrate in-between-ness.

**Do you make everything yourself or have a crew? Are you very particular about yarns? Like you mentioned, it does seem like you are painting with fibers.**

I'm delighted that you said "painting with fibers." That relates a lot to how I think about color. Before I even consider color, I make a ton of drawings. I make black and white drawings on computer paper with marker because it's cheap and it's a very effective to get lots of thoughts down. When I have a show, I ask for a floorplan and I make works specifically for that space, and I intuitively make color decisions so that the individual pieces also work together as a whole. I make all color decisions during the day because I need natural sunlight to see what I'm doing. The work is installation-based, and I want it to create a feeling as if someone is walking inside of a painting.

Most of the yarn I get is from Michaels or Lion Brand Yarn. When I go to Michaels, I buy in bulk with a coupon. Because my cart is overflowing and often because I wear a vest, patrons think I work there and they ask me project questions.

It's funny that you mentioned a crew, because lately, for the past three years I get these emails from art students from all across the country requesting to be my summer intern. For awhile, the requests were so frequent, that it made me wonder if one of my friends punked me by putting out an ad. I can't really imagine anything worse than having studio assistants. Right now I am a Visiting Assistant Professor at Pratt where I teach *Drawing and The Expanded Field*. So I feel like I give plenty of time and guidance to younger artists in the capacity of the classroom. I am an object maker, and when I'm not in the classroom, I like to be squirrely and get my weird on in my jammies. My studio is a 120-square-foot room in my tiny 500-square-foot Queens apartment. My partner and I both have home studios in this space. The compression of space is really good for my work because it helps me edit and focus.



**What topics come up most often in your work?**

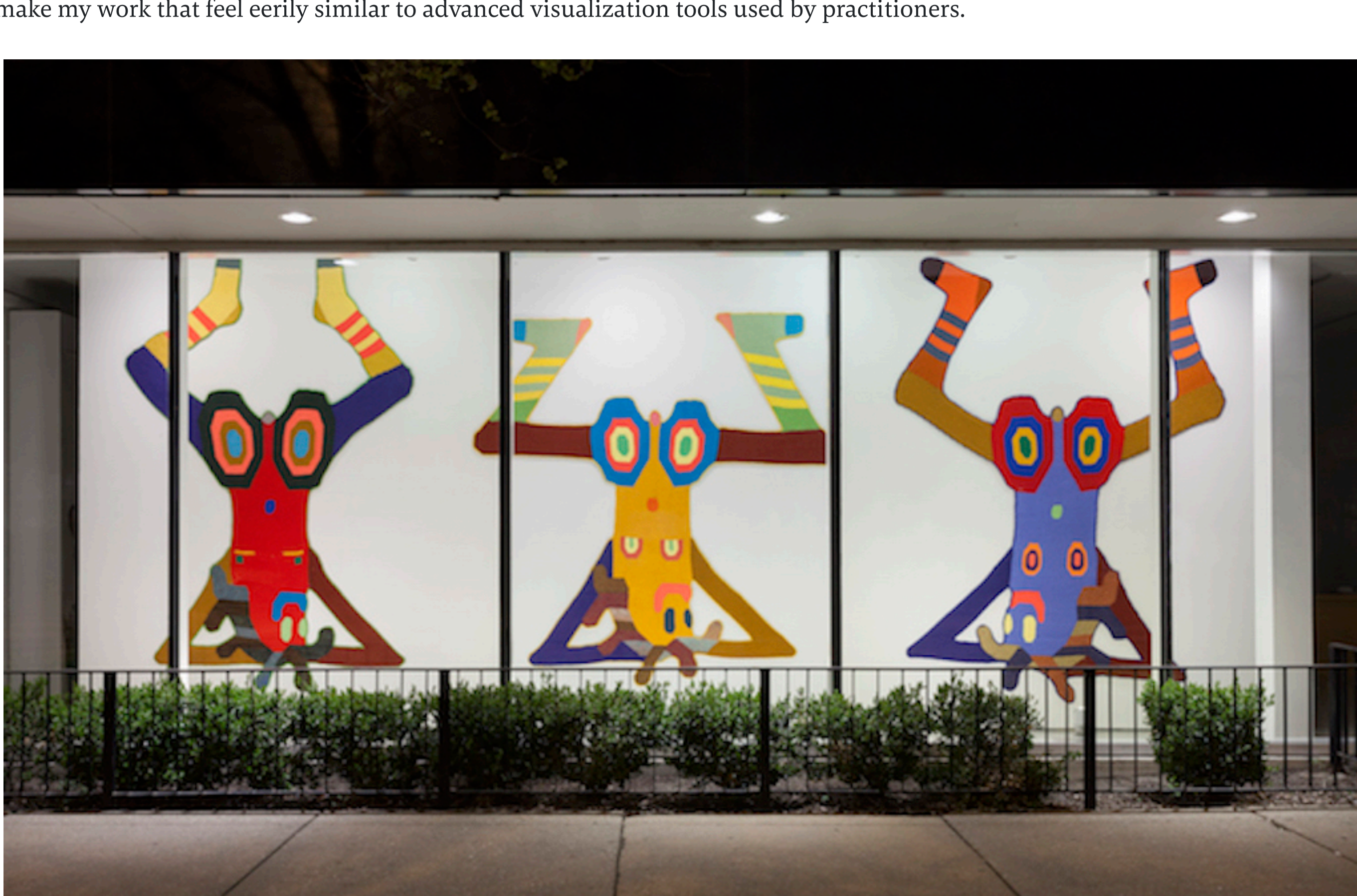
I'm in a show that just opened which takes to make. The work is labor intensive and I work really hard. I ice and stretch out my arm like an athlete. I have chosen to create a life for myself centered around art. For artists, retirement is not an option. One hopes that they are able to participate and continue making better work.

**Amen. What are subjects and colors that come really naturally to you?**

I love working with a cadmium red pale, olive green, and golden yellow color palette and the tonal variations that come with those relationships. I like alchemical interpretations that speak to these colors being fundamental in moving from a murky to a luminous state. I am an atheist, but I like to think of my works as unlikely containers for a metaphysical experience.

**What are you making right now, like the last thing you worked on in your studio?**

I just finished these large panels loosely based off of the conceptual rituals used in the enactment of rituals in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. I find that there are several parallels, both formally and conceptually, between my enacts which are titled *Carpet Munchers*, and the filleted carpets used as tools in Esoteric rites associated with protective deities. The pursuit of a higher spiritual awareness through detachment from the corporeal body by quelling ignorance, greed, and hate is at the core of Vajrayana. As an artist, I use similar tools to make my work that feel eerily similar to advanced visualization tools used by practitioners.



**If your figures could make noise, what would they say or emit?**

Whenever I enjoy a boozy IPA, I get this feeling in my chest that is best described as a barrel of elves with a secret on the verge of bursting into laughter and truths. I think most of them would sound like that which is basically the flood of emotions that come over me when watching down-on-his-luck private eye Eddie Valiant cross over the threshold to Toonsville, come over me visually and audibly assaulted by saccharine bombastic archetypes of the collective unconscious in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Farts, toots, grinding metal, sprinkles, chimes, gongs, a downward spiral tunnel of doom with a friendly jumbo blueberry jelly bean illuminating the path, a creaky door, R2D2's *Now That's What I Call Holiday Music Remix* are all possibilities.

**Hell yes! Any shows coming up?**

I'm in a show that just opened with Wendy White, Samantha Bittman, and Robert Burnier at VACATION gallery in New York. My Chicago gallerist Andrew Rafacz is in town for the entire month and taking over the LES space for the month of March. I'm in a herb-themed show that opens 4/20 at Mrs. in Maspeth. I'm in a two person show with Jennifer Coates at Crush Curatorial titled *Electric Mayhem* in Chelsea in May, and in another two person show with Kari Cholnoky at Left Field in San Luis Obispo in August. Getting to show and work with people that I respect and admire has been one of the highlights of my life.

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