

178 CASSIDY TONER PLAYING DEAD

TEXT BY
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A Baltimore native and New York expatriate, Cassidy Toner has been living in Basel for the past couple of years. It isn't clear why she traded the States for Switzerland but escapism seems the nearest answer. With its bijou scale and quaint life outside of EU norms, what city could be farthest away from the hustle of the big apple? Yet the transatlantic shift was also a conceptual leap into the new and unknown—a move not unlike Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader who at the age of 33 boarded his four-meter sailing boat for Amsterdam and disappeared somewhere in the Atlantic. *In Search of the Miraculous (Songs for the North Atlantic)* was both his last sighting and artwork. But unlike Duchamp, who spent the last 25 years of his life working on *Étant Donnés* to be unveiled only after his death, Ader's disappearance at sea isn't described as a posthumous work, rather it opens up questions around the legacy of an artist as a living artwork. It begs the question of what it means (or takes) to re-invent oneself and of the powers of resurrection and renewal. How do artworks beget myth and allegory or live on in documentation and storytelling? Does the work *need* to live on, or can it have an expiry date? I am not insinuating that Toner is trying to disappear at the age of 27 but she is doing a very good job of assembling a lineage of works that riff on their own materialization.

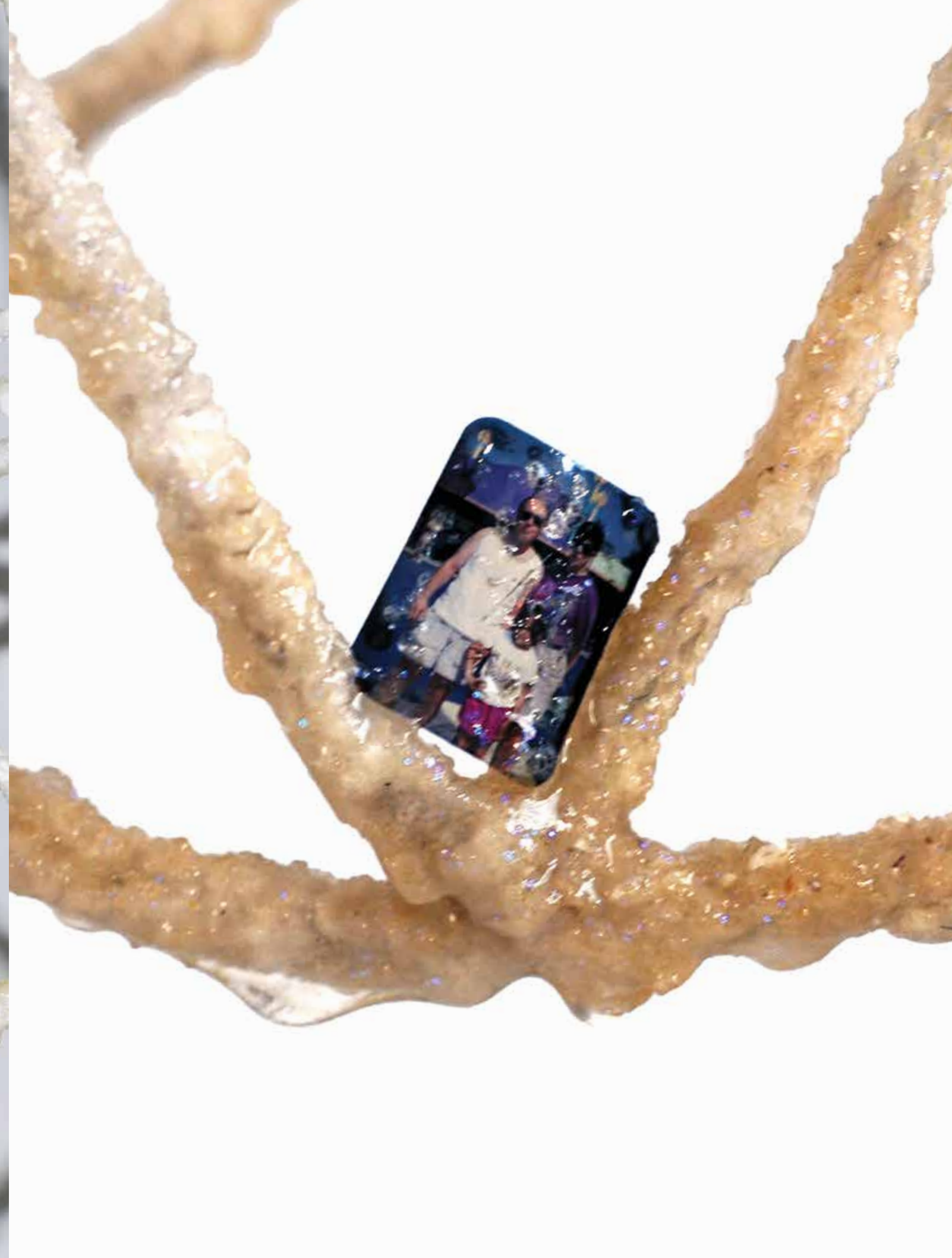
Possum—Toner's show at Zurich's Saint Luke—introduces the first of many recalcitrant objects in the artist's world: a triptych of paintings engaging us in a game of cat-and-mouse. Installed in backlit vitrines that are connected to a motion sensor, the paintings require some spatial accommodations—that is, whether or not we are able to outmaneuver the mecha-

nism. As soon as we step up to the window to take a better look the light shuts off. With their refusal to act *like* paintings, the work belies the logics of aesthetic value. The paintings are Toner's poor imitations of canonical works by the Hudson River School—a group of painters who worked in the mid-1850s in upstate New York. Toner's pick of tradition is far from coincidental—the synonymy of beauty and conquest characterizes the Hudson painters. Cassidy replicates the scenes in a style closer to finger painting and action painting than something that heralds the beauty of nature. She inserts herself into these otherwise depopulated scenes; we see her figure from behind as she wanders off into the landscape—one she knows reasonably well from hiking there as a kid. The paint is applied on thin plastic sheeting that allows a backlit LED pack to force its artificial luminescence through the paint's surface—a poke no doubt at how sweeping panoramas were idealized by Enlightenment.

The exhibition's title refers to a larger set of terms subtended by Toner's paintings: that of play-acting and reality. Colloquially known as faking death or 'playing possum,' the phenomenon of *thanatosis* is a physiological response some animals make when threatened. Though it is often involuntary or automatic in animals, there is a long history of humans 'playing possum' to avoid legal or financial troubles. Perhaps it's the case that we're just another animal trying to avoid being eaten, as Toner describes: "some people just desire to start a new life, free from the burdens of their former one." But, like Ader's search for the miraculous, there's an element of renewal, "others use it as a way to symbolically kill their former self," Toner remarks, "like Harold in the movie



Wile E. Coyote Wonders What Keeps Him Going (He just read Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*), 2018





Harold and Maude. Whether it's the fantasy of *terra nullius* for the Hudson painters or the painting itself playing hard to get, reality involves some level of play and acting.

Toner admits to being wary of commitments and is taken by the paradox of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time. She wants to be the *puppet* and the *puppeteer*, but would prefer to be the one *overseeing* the puppeteer. It's a Kaufmann-esque or Kafka-esque sensibility that places the viewer at her mercy. Cassidy's kinetic objects and sculptures deliberately confuse, but their willfulness pulls us into new and unforeseen games. At the heart of this playfulness lies a deeper existential wrangling with the nature of artistic experience: if artworks are proxies for the artists that make them, how do they convey the artist's indecisive or impulsive demands? What does it mean to separate the object from the artist? And what would 'death of the author' look like if its author were secretly playing possum?

If it were up to Toner, an organized troupe would venture out after her death and destroy her works in private homes and public institutions, decimating all markers of her life as an artist. The Abstract Expressionist Ad Reinhardt was famous for his bad temper and for having talked his way into collectors' homes only to destroy his own works just in case he didn't approve of the buyer. Toner's wish to have her work destroyed after her death couldn't be further from Duchamp's gesture of prosperity or Ad Reinhardt's destruction of his own work. Both teeter on the romantic gesture, but reveal a darker streak of total control. Toner's idea of posthumous destruction follows a specific gripe: why should the work live on? Toner suggests that the destruction of work can offer a kind of catharsis or break from the body as the site of self-destruction, "I've attempted to channel [self-destruction] into my art instead of myself," she says, "I think of my work a lot as a worker. And whenever I've been a worker I feel very alienated, so I imagine my work must feel the same. Its job is to be viewed. I wonder how an artwork avoids doing the task it's been asked to perform." *Possum* queries the way in which artworks are made to embody meaning transferred by their maker. The flickering lights establish a contradictory nature or a lack of compliance.

Toner acts accordingly, playing with her visibility as an artist and the logics of legibility that tie her to her work and vice versa. The way she approaches her Basel studio (shared with the

French artist Marie Matusz) reads as an extension of these ideas. Rheum Room, as she calls it, is an exhibition space that she is running from her bed. Access is by appointment (and then only if someone is available to answer the phone or answer the door). Rheum Room has hosted artists such as David Horvitz, an artist Toner admires and an invitation with a history (she worked for him in her early days working as an artist in New York). Artists such as Raphael Linsi, Em Rooney, Jordany Genao and Gil Pellaton have also shown work there. If you're lucky, Toner will crack the door just enough for you to get a glimpse of the work.

The atmosphere inside her studio is wholly different. Things are not on the precipice of combustion as may seem, but in progress *everywhere*. On the floor are various mobile objects Toner refers to as *Dust Bunnies*. These are battery-driven and faux-fur clad balls that hurtle into surfaces before shooting off, picking up the dirt and trash on its ways. Unlike the ramblings of desert tumbleweeds, these little creatures tear about like substitute pets, while other wildlife denizens recall the artist's roots in American soil. Though out of context they soon become second nature as if they were part of the artist herself: "the dust bunnies are adorned with things I have consumed—book pages, cigs, candy, drugs and movie tickets, and continue to collect debris on the floor." The bunnies are a sponge for Toner's habits of consumption, analogizing, as Toner puts it, "how life mixes it together."

Elsewhere, clay maquettes of Wile E. Coyote frozen in a range of compromising postures connect to a set of watercolors wired to a countdown clock and gunpowder. The combination intensifies the comic absurdity of Toner's project of self-destruction. As she explains: "The cartoon character is based on Mark Twain's writing about the American coyote. He says the creature is the living breathing allegory of 'want'—he is always hungry. The Coyote is never satisfied." Toner identifies with the character's perpetual hunger as a metonym for desire. One of the models shows Coyote being crushed by the weight of the world (hit on the head by a globe), another appropriates Toner's own driving license to roll a line of coke. Toner's coyote joins a tragicomic cast of dust bunnies and possums. Each of these characters steps across a virtual threshold into her world. They may be caricatures of colossal mishaps, yet they are capable of teasing us back. In the end playing possum is a game of risk: the work is not really hell-bent on destruction, but about bending the synaptic chains of meaning making. Indeed, by opening things up to risk and pretence, we can never be sure what the dust bunnies will uncover.



Shooting Myself in the Foot (with Azurite Healing Crystal Toe Ring) 2018 (p. 184)
All images Courtesy: the artist

Self Scaffolding, 2019 (pp. 180-181) Dust Bunny #2, 2018 (p. 182) Dust Bunny #1, 2018 (p. 183)