

PORTALS

January 20 - March 26, 2022
Angels Gate Cultural Center
San Pedro, California

Curated by Stephanie Sherwood



Essay by Stephanie Sherwood.

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40^{TH ANNIVERSARY}
Angels Gate
Cultural Center
1982 - 2022

Angels Gate Cultural Center (AGCC) emerged from a group of San Pedro artists in the 1970s that created art studios and exhibition space within the WWII era army barracks of Angels Gate Park near the Port of Los Angeles. Today, AGCC hosts over 50 artist studios in addition to a variety of programs to engage the diverse communities of the Los Angeles Harbor region, including arts education in local schools, community classes, cultural events, and exhibitions of contemporary art. More information about AGCC is available at angelsgateart.org.



PORTALS, installation view, 2022, image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center. Photo by Justin Galligher.

Featuring

Erin Harmon

Erika Lizée

Elana Mann

Yevgeniya Mikhailik

Alicia Piller

Esther Ruiz

Howard Schwartzberg

Svetlana Shigroff



Portals — doorways and interdimensional gateways — have been a point of fascination as long as humans have been telling stories. Many portals are thought to exist across the globe; Stonehenge and the Bermuda Triangle being some of the best-known examples. Expanding into the spiritual and metaphorical senses of the term, even human beings can be considered portals. Some individuals seek out portals as gateways to alternate realities; others fear their existence for the potential monstrosities transported into our world. Before the invention of the camera, paintings were often considered portals — either into other worlds imagined by the artist or into another facet of our own capturing a bygone moment in time and space. While contemporary artists are afforded a much wider array of mediums and formal elements with which to explore their themes, many works in the current landscape still function as illusionary portals or doorways — contemplating ideas of boundaries, entrance and egress, and travel into the unknown. The passageways that artists create for viewers offer an opportunity to allow the experience to inspire change — another way of seeing our world. Similarly, ports and airports operate as machinations of change for municipalities by connecting cities to the rest of the world. The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach have operated in this way, functioning as an engine for growth for the City of Angels.

Long Beach International Gateway, 2020. Image courtesy of the Port of Long Beach.

Driving from Long Beach to San Pedro across their bridges has always been a joy. Once the Long Beach International Gateway replacing the Gerald Desmond Bridge opened in October of 2020, the journey became even more exciting. Passing through the portal of cables, the Port of Los Angeles rises up from the sea around you. Metal arms and slings reach upward to direct the marionettes of shipping containers, their bellies full of cargo. The Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach can be described as many things, except unimportant. Because of their scale and the diversity of their impacts, they have shaped the local neighborhoods, our city and the region beyond. "Ports, airports, and railway stations are all points of arrival and departure; as such they are often described as 'gateways' - to the Continent, to the South, East, North, or West."¹ Originally known as the "Bay of Smokes" in the 1500's, the Port of LA's cultural and monetary significance was proven time and time again through the contentious battles to control it. In the 1800's and 1900's, titans of industry fought over the development and fate of the port. The late 1800's saw the "Great Free Harbor Fight" between public entities and Southern Pacific Railroad, known at the time as The Octopus, a descriptive nickname referencing the stranglehold of influence that the business' many arms had on the region. As detailed in Steven P. Erie's *Globalizing L.A.*, Southern Pacific Railroad "used its considerable influence in Washington to lobby for funds to build a breakwater in Santa Monica Bay,"² which would have furthered their monopoly over the shipping industry. After a lengthy battle between SP corporate lobbyists and the Free Harbor League, composed of allies of the LA Chamber of Commerce, in 1897 the Free Harbor Fight was settled, and San Pedro was chosen as the official Port of Los Angeles over its rival Santa Monica.

Both San Pedro and Long Beach attempted to annex Wilmington, which defied those attempts and incorporated to become its own city instead. In 1906, the annexation of the Shoestring Addition³ connected the southern edge of the City of Los Angeles to Wilmington and San Pedro. By 1930, the Port surpassed San Francisco as the highest volume port on the West Coast. Despite earlier characterizations in San Diego newspapers of the Port of LA being "a mere harborette" ⁴, by 1930 most of San Diego's Port business had been captured by LA. "By 1932 the Port of Los Angeles was the first on the Pacific Coast and the third nationwide (behind New York and Philadelphia) in total tonnage."⁵ When most consider the current state of Los Angeles, they consider its roads and freeways (heavy traffic being one of its most memorable qualities), but its ports and airports are arguably more transformative elements. As summarized in 1945 by former Harbor Commission secretary Clarence H. Matson in *Building a World Gateway, the Story of Los Angeles Harbor*, "A world metropolis, such as Los Angeles was destined to become, must have highways - by seas as well as by land - and highways by sea demand a port where ships may come and go, and riches may be sent out and brought in from the uttermost parts of the earth. And so came Los Angeles Harbor."⁶

¹ Philippa Lewis, *Portals, Gates, Stiles, Windows, Bridges & Other Crossings*, p 2.

² Steven P. Erie, *Globalizing L.A.: Trade, Infrastructure, and Regional Development*, p 52.

³ The Shoestring Addition is a 5.14-square-mile residential and industrial area in the Los Angeles Harbor Region which functions to connect Los Angeles to the port cities of Wilmington and San Pedro and is also known as the Harbor Gateway

⁴ Steven P. Erie, *Globalizing L.A.: Trade, Infrastructure, and Regional Development*, p 62.

⁵ Steven P. Erie, *Globalizing L.A.: Trade, Infrastructure, and Regional Development*, p 63.

⁶ Ernest Marquez and Veronique de Turenne, *Port of Los Angeles: An Illustrated History from 1850 to 1945*, p 17.

In the 1500's, the bay was described as "a ragged border of land, tall sand dunes and wide wetlands flanked by towering, golden bluffs."⁷ to be transformed into the Port of Los Angeles which is described as "one of the world's busiest seaports and leading gateway for international trade in North America and has ranked as the number one container port in the United States each year since 2000".⁸ The Port functioned as a portal into the future of Los Angeles by connecting the west coast of the United States to the rest of the world. As has been proven throughout history, connection to one another (and our goods and capital) is a primary driver towards economic growth. One can certainly pose the question: Would Los Angeles have such a vibrant arts community today if it had not seen the prosperity caused in part by the port activities?

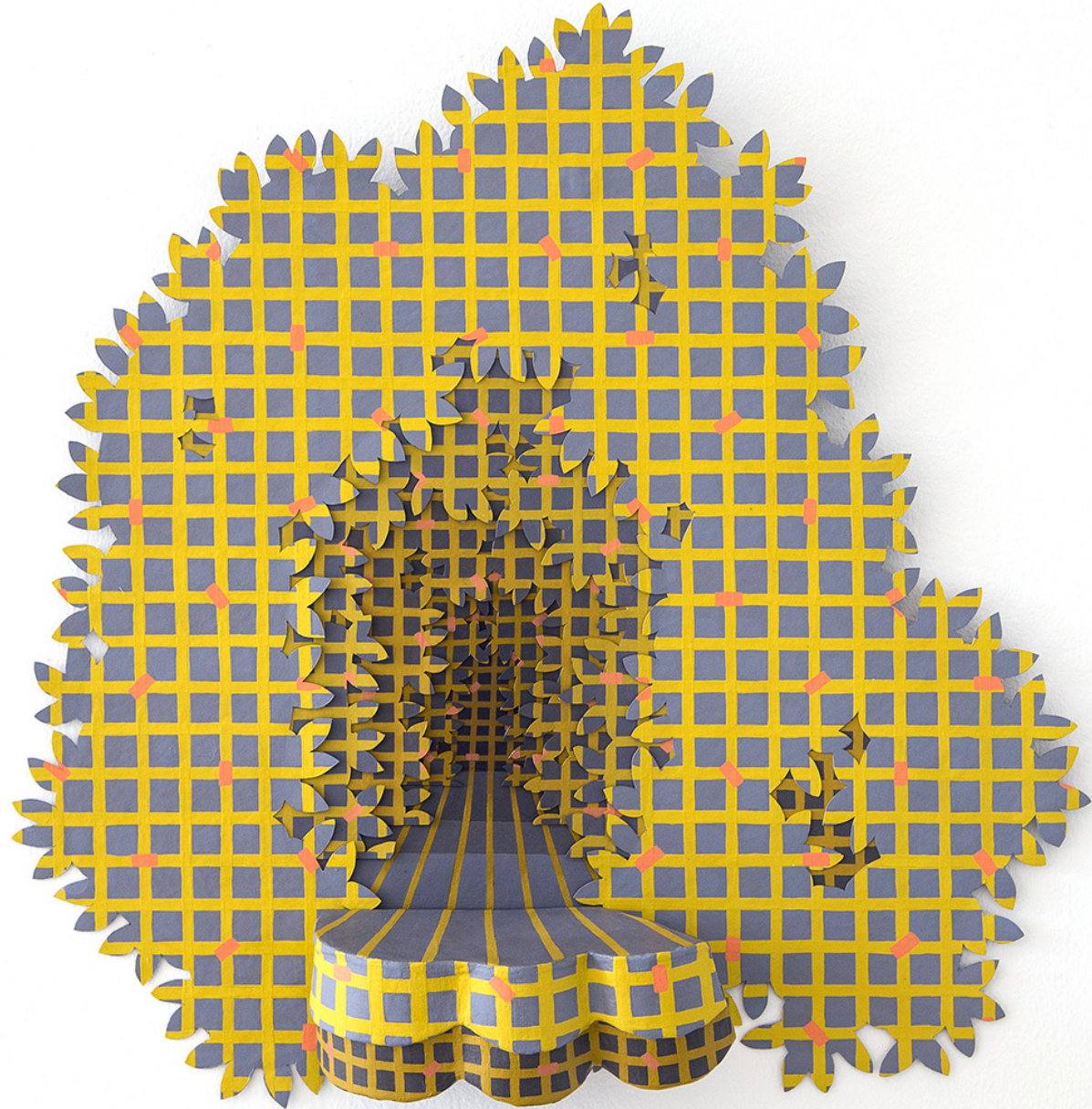
Whatever fear that entrance into the unknown may inspire, portals are facilitators of growth through the change they may welcome into our worlds. The ports in Los Angeles County might may not be popular entities with some who live in the harbor communities due to pollution and many other issues. However, there is no denying the role of the ports in transforming Los Angeles into the industrial power it is today. The abstract concept of transformative portals has become embedded into our minds over time. Portals, doorways and gateways have reappeared in our social consciousness consistently and appear as significant elements in popular culture narratives and mythology. *PORTALS* invites an experiential look at the work of eight contemporary artists whose works speak to the nature of these life-altering gateways.

⁷ Ernest Marquez and Veronique de Turenne, *Port of Los Angeles: An Illustrated History from 1850 to 1945*, p 45.

⁸ According to portoflosangeles.org ©2020 Port of Los Angeles, City of Los Angeles, 2021



Elana Mann, *histophone*, plastic and enamel on metal and felt stand, edition of 10, 2014-16. Image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center, photo by Justin Galligher.



“ ‘Oh, Kitty! how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I’m sure its got, oh! such beautiful things in it! Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through--’ She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass WAS beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.”
-Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1871.

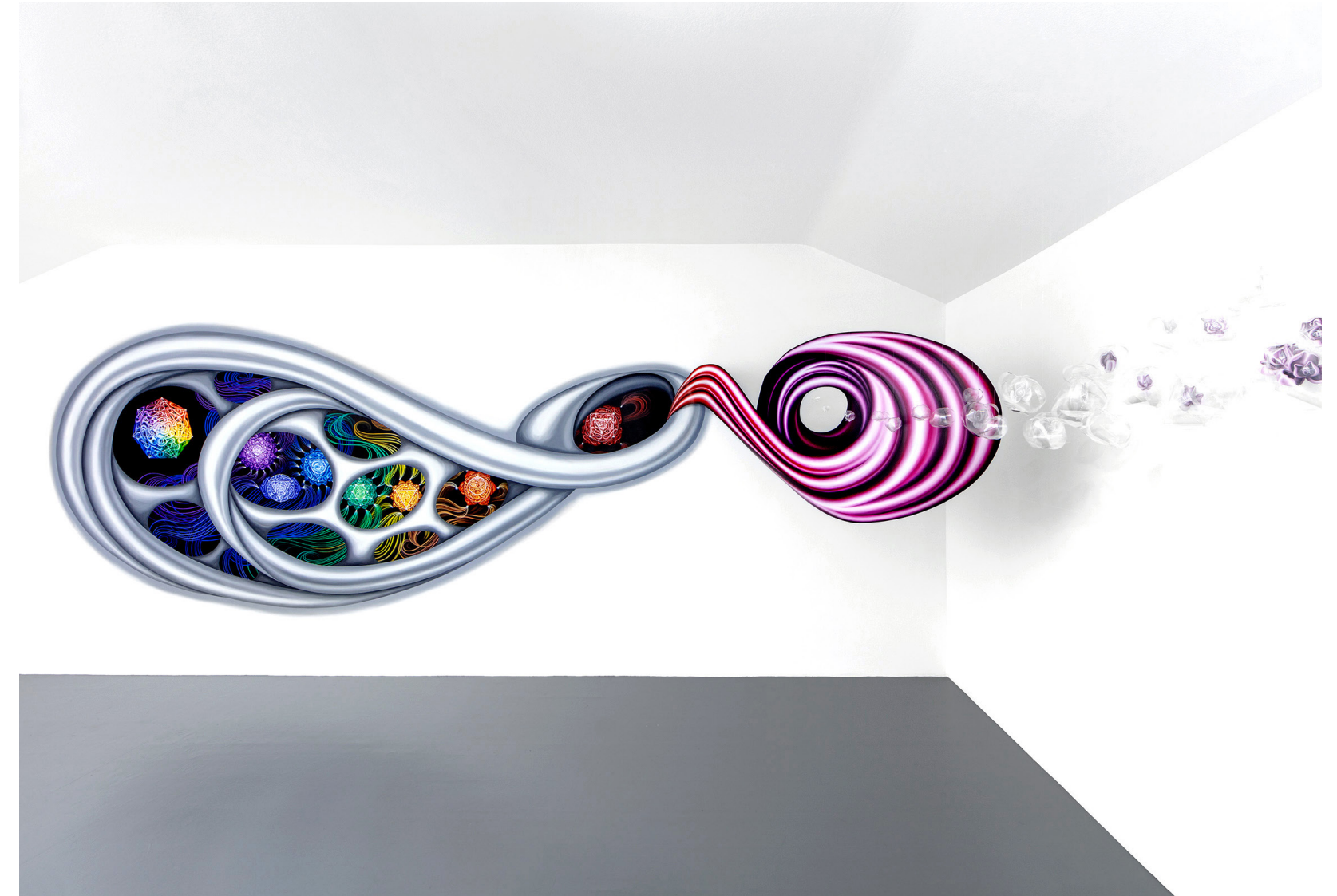
Inhabiting dreamlike, interstitial spaces, the work of Erin Harmon employs a mastery of color, material and composition. Her pieces embody a tricky place where the eye of the viewer becomes the site where new spaces are formed. Transforming materials historically used in theatrical or set design such as gouache, tyvek, and paper mache, the artist’s manipulation of color invites us into the performative realm. Woven and layered chunks and strips of hues become the doorways into these spaces which are at once quiet and loud. Although employing vastly different techniques than her collage works, *The Life Of The Moon May Be Inside* inspires a similar feeling of exploring a new world, its glowing edges and ceramic skin giving the sensation of passing through an asteroid belt in space. The confounding visual experience of taking in the elements of the work which lie against the wall and its floating, glowing sculptural elements gives the experience of a warm daydream.

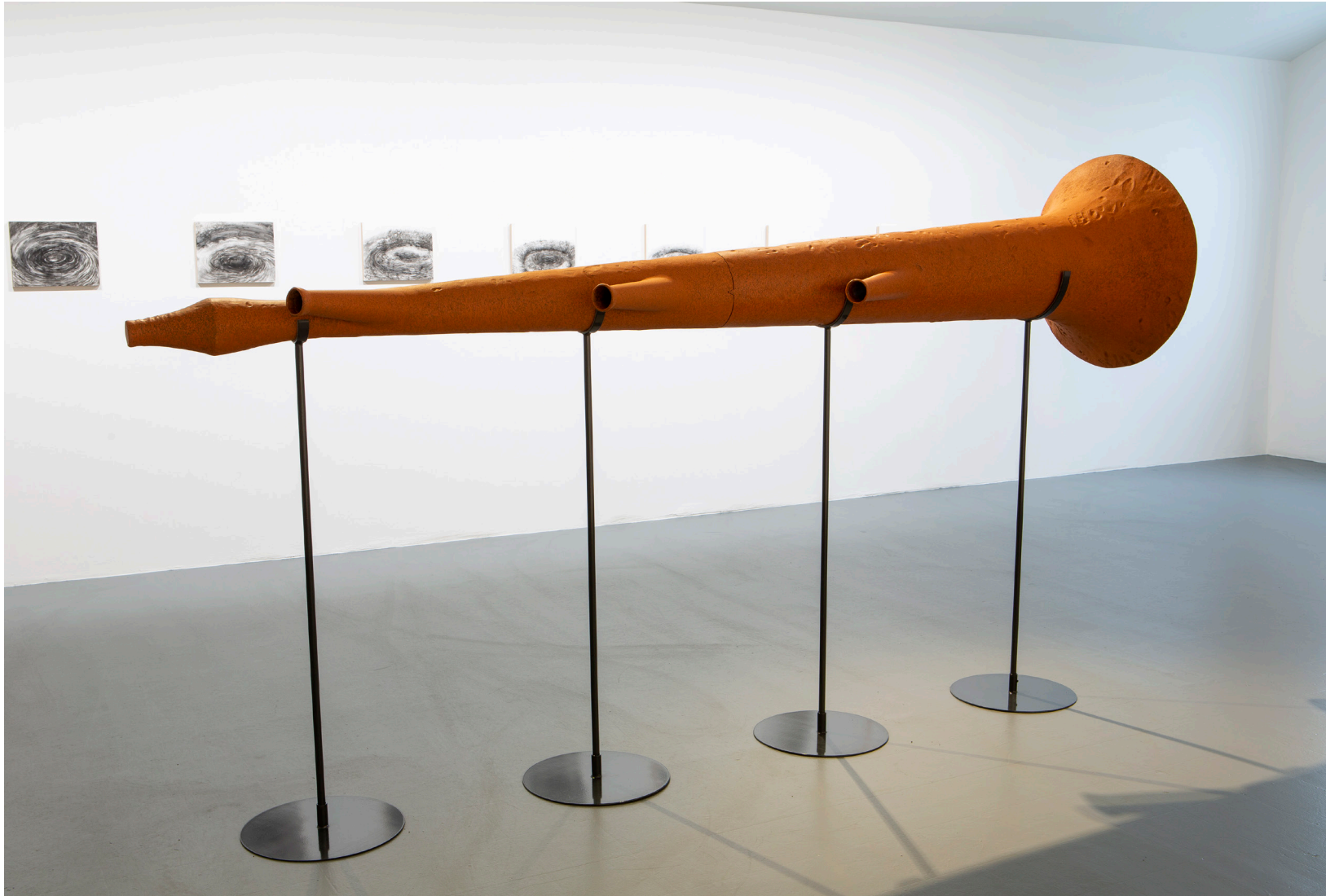
Erin Harmon, *Lattice Supertemporal*, gouache, tyvek, and paper mache, 9 x 19.5 x 4 inches, 2017.
Courtesy of the artist.

“And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.”
-Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave, Republic, 514a-520a.*

Erika Lizée’s body of work is difficult to truly categorize - her use of both illusionistic painting and installation of her painted surfaces is at once mesmerizing and disorienting. Her exploration of shapes and forms has roots in sacred geometry; she dives deep into the surprising interconnectedness of our world. Mathematics, patterns and shapes are discovered as she works - following the work into the glowing rabbit holes that evolve. Working primarily with acrylic paint and duralar, Lizée’s site-specific pieces wrap and hug walls and corners as well as the viewer. Lizée’s monumental piece, *The Subtle Body Prepares for Emergence*, explores the transcendental nature of the seven chakras of the body via the form of a seven-sided heptagon which moves towards the threshold of emergence. Although seductive in their beauty, the works are unsettling - almost as though they are lulling us into a trance so they may devour us like the aggressive mimicry of predators in the animal kingdom. The works lend themselves to questions regarding our place in the universe and can inspire doubt about which gateway to pass through into our future.

Erika Lizée, *The Subtle Body Prepares for Emergence*, acrylic on duralar, 30 x 8 x 3 feet, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist and Panic Studio LA.





“ ‘I really can’t see what Dr. Dischord was so concerned about; there certainly couldn’t be anything unpleasant along this road.’ And just as the thought crossed his mind they passed through a heavy stone gateway and everything was very different. At first it was difficult to tell just what had changed—it all looked the same and it all smelled the same—but, for some reason, nothing sounded the same.”
-Norman Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, 1961.

Elana Mann has historically engaged with sound in her practice, creating objects which address the intersection of sound and social justice. The artist’s Jewish identity lends cultural context to her practice, as she cites the prayer “shema” as beginning with the word “listen”. Mann’s series of recent work includes multiples of sculptural objects which combine elements of the human body with musical instruments. These sculptural objects have been used in peaceful protests as poignant commentary on the amplification of the voice of the people. *Our work is never done (unfinished business)* is inspired by the “Mega-Kazoo Horn” (1970) made by Charles Chase, founder of the Folk Music Center and Museum which can be played by multiple people at once and is intended to be used at large events such as protests. The piece includes hand and fingerprints on its surface to hint towards its intended use and the power of collective speaking and listening. The series of works entitled *histophone* (titled from the Greek words for tissue and phone) are functional objects which cover the user’s mouth while amplifying their voice. Mann’s handsome sculptural objects speak to the transformative nature of portals, both in the way that voices and sound can be transformed by such instruments and the way in which large protests of like-minded people can affect change in their countries and communities. If those who are passionate about fighting for social justice and equity could truly amplify one-another and speak as one, the potential for change could be limitless.

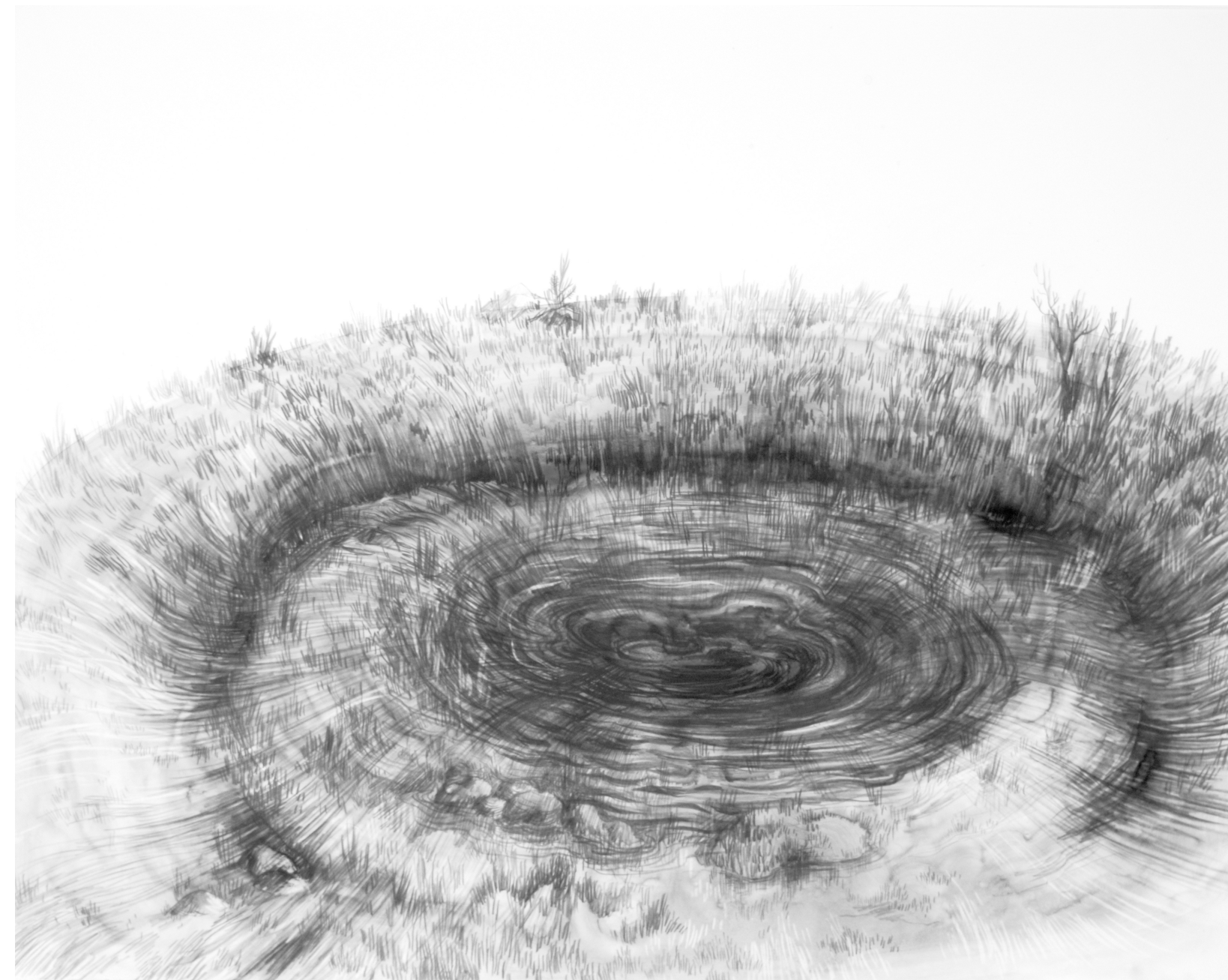
Elana Mann, *Our work is never done (unfinished business)*, (installation view), fiberglass, resin, enamel and paint, 28 x 28 x 120 inches, 2020-21. Image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center, photo by Justin Galligher. Originally commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio.

“This is of great scientific importance, captain. We are actually passing through ripples in time... A Time Portal, captain. A gateway to other times and dimensions, if I’m correct”

-Star Trek: The Original Series episode The City on the Edge of Forever, 1967.

The work of Yevgeniya Mikhailik explores the natural beauty of planet earth through delicately rendered interpretations of natural phenomena and environments - sometimes transforming into more imaginative realms of possibility. Recently, Mikhailik spent time in Wexford, Ireland for an artist residency in which she researched burial mounds created by local communities in the region thousands of years prior. Inspired by the Great Heath Barrow, located in County Laois, west of Dublin, she created the Barrow Series of drawings in graphite. Employing her unique accumulative method of rendering, Mikhailik allows the work to dive deeper and deeper into the subject allowing us to sink in and pass through into the unknown. According to records found during the era the burial mounds were created, the communities initially created obelisks to honor the dead but these were destroyed during a series of earthquakes. This in turn caused the shift towards mounds which were carved and built into the earth, resulting in long lasting structures.

Yevgeniya Mikhailik, *Barrow IV*, graphite on paper, mounted on panel, 11 x 14 inches, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.





“And then... disappearance. Abrupt. Complete. Not even a piece of torn, silver wreckage visible against the land when daylight came. Or an empty life jacket floating on the surface. Or even an unusually heavy concentration of sharks and barracuda in the clear water...”

-George X. Sand, Sea Mystery at Our Back Door, The Bermuda Triangle, 1952.

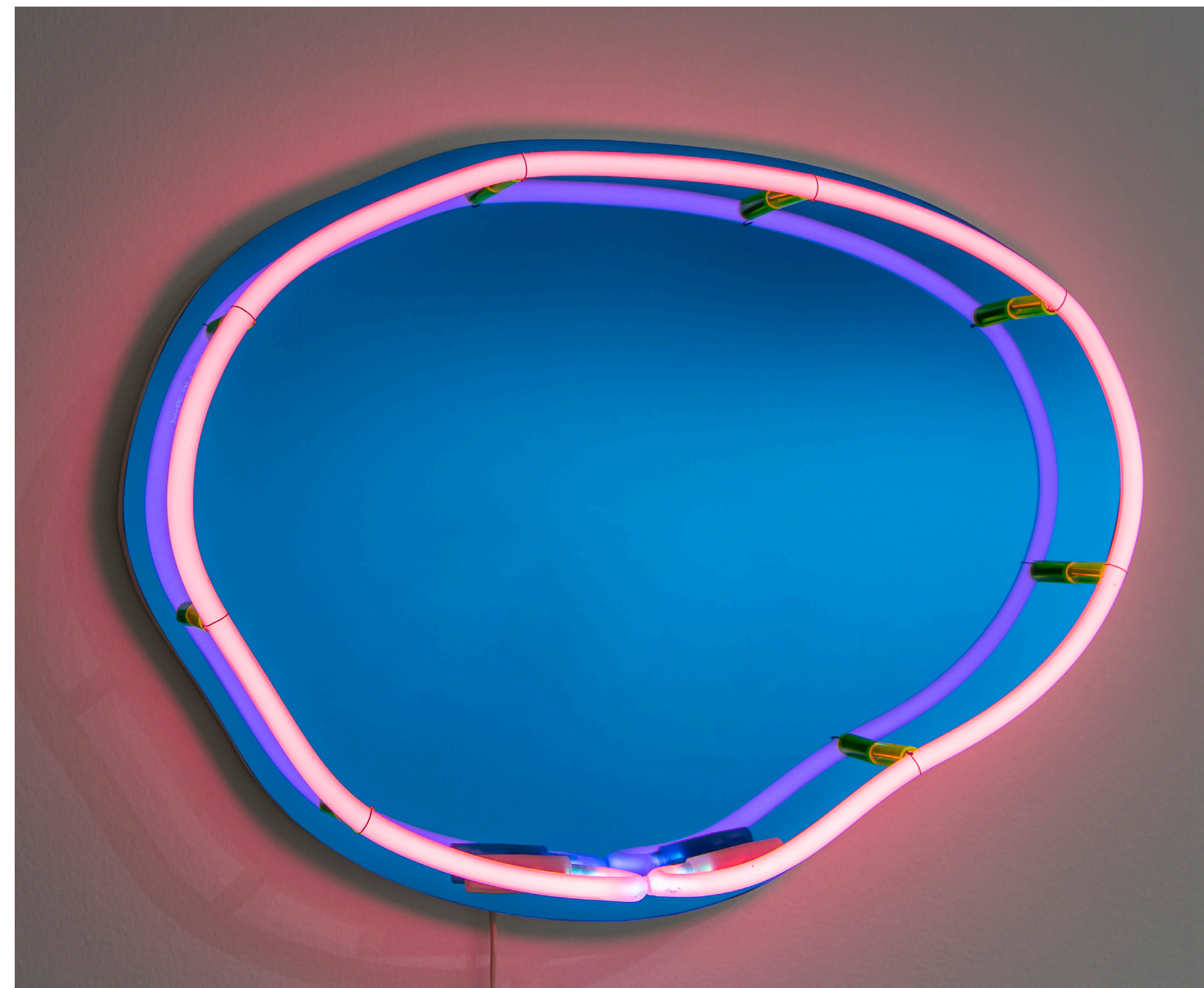
The work of Alicia Piller made a sudden impact in the Los Angeles art scene towards the completion of her degree at Cal Arts. Transforming materials such as vinyl, recycled laser prints and masking tape into decisively shaped and dimensional pieces, Piller's works range from intimate to monumental in scale. Even Piller's smallest works seemingly open up into their own universes with intricately woven details such as found beading which inspire queries of their histories in combination with the laser printed imagery. Excavating often traumatic histories such as the injustices suffered by African American communities, the artist's practice is guided by both honoring the past and imagining a better future for all. Her labor-intensive process of hand making each intricate piece is very narrative driven as each body of work starts from a specific history, which includes several pieces dealing with certain events as well as works imagining the future that could be. Piller's *Blue Memories, Flooding Back. Navigating Tongva Waters.* examines the history of the land the Port of Los Angeles occupies and transforms materials such as vinyl, latex and resin into a rich, abstract form for visitors to pass through. Through the act of examining the works and transitioning from micro to macro, the viewer moves from past to present, marveling at the beauty resulting in the artist's processing of such ugly histories. The ability to look unblinkingly at histories which most might choose to forget while still remaining optimistic for the future is a powerful combination.

Alicia Piller, *Blue Memories, Flooding Back. Navigating Tongva Waters.* (installation view), mixed media: vinyl, foam, latex balloons, resin, gel medium, plastic, paper, rope, wood, wire, 116 x 119.5 x 75 inches, 2021. Image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center, photo by Justin Galligher.

“ ‘We are delighted to be able to report to you today that we have seen what we thought was unseeable,’ added project director Shep Doeleman of the Harvard-Smithsonian Institute for Astrophysics. ‘What you are seeing is evidence of an event horizon ... we now have visual evidence of a black hole.’ ”
-Nadia Drake, *First-ever picture of a black hole unveiled*, nationalgeographic.com, 2019.

Esther Ruiz' series of Wells consist of elegantly combined mirrored plexiglass and neon lights which create the enchanting effect of being able to fall through its glowing perimeters into another realm. The reflective surfaces of the wells allow us to pass through them visually and imagine the colorful worlds that could exist beyond them. The history of her current practice began with studies into geology - learning the specific process of coring earth to learn more about its certain stone compositions and age. These geological studies spurred the artist's interest in the formal qualities of core samples and their ability to inspire imagined worlds. The artist experiments with both freestanding and wall-mounted sculpture, employing a palette of rich colors and crisp neons to imagine these unexplored territories. *Well XXV*, created during the lockdowns immediately following the initial COVID-19 wave in the US, was created with a marbled industrial material in place of acrylic as Ruiz' usual supplier was temporarily closed. This allowed *Well XXV* to connect her body of well works to her freestanding sculptures which typically include a variety of stone materials. It would not be far off to envision the cast of *Star Trek* stumbling across one of these unexplored landscapes like they did the ubiquitous Vasquez Rocks in Santa Clarita Valley.

Esther Ruiz, *Well XV*, neon, MDF, acrylic, paint, hardware, 43 x 26 x 3 inches, 2017. Courtesy of Nick McPhail. Image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center, photo by Justin Galligher.





*“He says the best way out is always through.
And I agree to that, or in so far
As that I can see no way out but through—”
-Robert Frost, A Servant to Servants, 1915.*

Howard Schwartzberg passes through the formal elements of paintings, tearing them apart to reform them into hybrid sculptural pieces. The artist cites death and decay as part of his process as each series begins with destruction and ends with reformation in an entirely new object. His stunning series of *Open Space Bandage Paintings* rethink the traditional relationships of canvas, paint and wood by allowing the deceptively thickly laid swath of paint to surround the “picture plane” which is the wood base of the piece or in some cases the wall behind it. This all is bandaged up in an unprimed strip of canvas - the element which holds everything together. The artist has been conceptually pushing these ideas for decades, even molding the Earth itself into a monumental piece at Socrates Sculpture Park entitled *Surface*. *Surface* creates the experience of viewing the bulging segment of earth at eye level and creates a relationship between the viewer and the environment as a forceful structure. The plush grass of the contained landscape and the aroma of specially planted chamomile surround visitors as they walk through the steps of the piece. Another conceptual aspect of his practice is evident in the *Beginning and End Drawings* from 1993, where the artist explores various thoughts and states of mind through language and utilizes earth - this time as a pigment worked into the waxed paper.

Howard Schwartzberg, *Open Space Bandage Painting (cerulean blue)*. Canvas, paint, wood, hydrocal, foam, glue, staples, tacks, 9.5 x 9 x 6 inches, 2020. Image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center, photo by Justin Galligher.

“ ‘This must be a simply enormous wardrobe!’ thought Lucy, going still further in and pushing the soft folds of the coats aside to make room for her. Then she noticed that there was something crunching under her feet. ‘I wonder is that more moth-balls?’ she thought, stooping down to feel it with her hand. But instead of feeling the hard, smooth wood of the floor of the wardrobe, she felt something soft and powdery and extremely cold. ‘This is very queer,’ she said, and went on a step or two further. Next moment she found that what was rubbing against her face and hands was no longer soft fur but something hard and rough and even prickly. ‘Why, it is just like branches of trees!’ exclaimed Lucy. And then she saw that there was a light ahead of her; not a few inches away where the back of the wardrobe ought to have been, but a long way off. Something cold and soft was falling on her. A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air.”

-C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950.

Primarily working in the realm of fiber art, Svetlana Shigroff makes large scale hand-tufted tapestries of psychedelic creatures and goddesses. Her imagery explores the multiplicity of the self, creating portraits of herself as various deities or monsters to “transform the defeated into triumphant ghouls, to slay assailants or to comfort the tormented.” Each piece is an exploration of an alternative narrative or reality which opens up the possibilities of coping with a world which continues to provide fresh new horrors. Each figure appears to us from its shadow world to share a new perspective on our world - or to welcome us into theirs. The perspective from an alternate universe could be just what we need to survive in our own. The glowing, sickly palette of Shigroff’s work lends itself to visions of an altered state, her fabrics are reclaimed from various fashion companies operating out of Los Angeles’ fashion district nearby her studio and reflect recent textile trends.

Svetlana Shigroff, *Intermit Relations*, canvas, air brush, cotton thread, new and reclaimed fabric, acrylic, 110 x 104 x 9 inches, 2021 (left) and *Sim-Ya*, reclaimed and new fabrics, fabric dye, acrylic paint, metal charms, 84 x 45 inches, 2019 (right). Image courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center, photo by Justin Galligher.



Sited in proximity to the Port of Los Angeles from high up on the hills above the bluffs, *PORTALS* reflects on the nature of these liminal spaces and how they can change us. Imaginative instruments created by Elana Mann amplify the delicate processing of history by Alicia Piller. Yevgeniya Mikhailik and Erin Harmon employ vastly different techniques and color palettes to create spaces in the picture plane for us to enter into. Erika Lizée's entrancing paintings tussle with the physicality of Howard Schwartzberg's bandaged pieces. The radioactive deities in Svetlana Shigroff's tapestries might rule planets bathed in the neon light of Esther Ruiz's glowing wells. Whether the grass is always greener on the other side or we are to abandon all hope ye who enter here,¹ we are constantly pulled towards the unknown. It takes an attuned gut instinct to judge which may be portals best for us to pass through.

¹ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, 1814 English translation.



PORTALS, installation view, 2022, courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center. Photo by Justin Galliger.



PORTALS, installation view, 2022, courtesy of Angels Gate Cultural Center. Photo by Justin Galliger.