



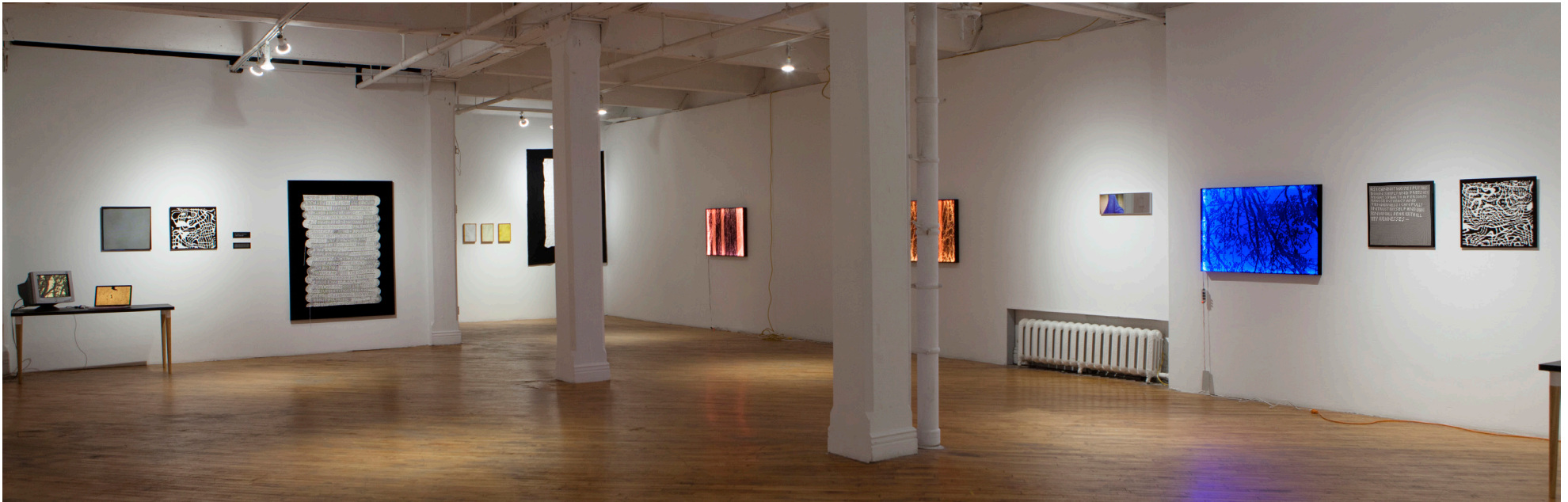
Shining Tapestry

STEVEN
LEYDEN COCHRANE

Famine Stela, Crocheted cotton thread.

All photos by Karen Asher.

September 15 – October 5, 2018



Shining Tapestry by Steven Leyden Cochrane

A response by

Francesca Carella Arfinengo

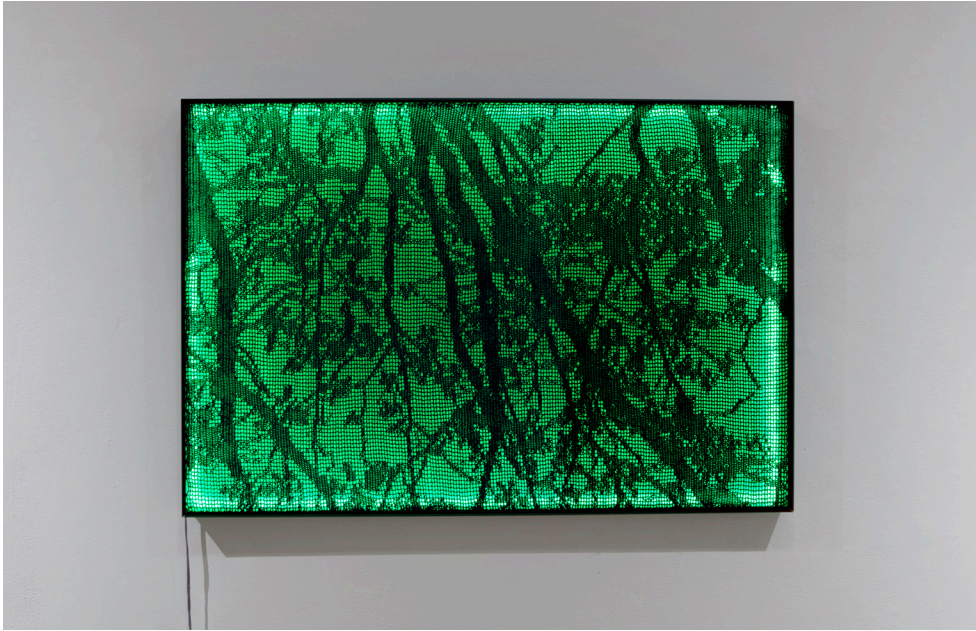
There is an understanding that the gallery is not a space meant for mourning; expressing feelings in general has been contested in the context of contemporary art. Sol Le Witt, an artist regarded as a founder of Minimalism and Conceptual art, stated that “it is the objective of the artist who is concerned with Conceptual art, to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator...therefore he would want it to become emotionally dry.”¹ But intellect and emotions cannot be split apart so cleanly. Le Witt’s claim is amplified by patriarchy, which genders emotion as ‘feminine’ and deems its manifestation of it as a sign of weakness. In *Shining Tapestry*, Steven Leyden Cochrane draws on aspects of Conceptual art while rooting the work in highly emotional, personal experiences to give the lie to Le Witt’s reductionist view.

One of the first works we encounter in the exhibition is a large crochet piece made of white cotton thread and pinned onto black felt. Upon close



inspection one can appreciate the intricate filet crochet technique Leyden Cochrane has used to construct the work. Filet crochet consists of two stitches combined on a grid, analogous to pixel art. The textile is built with chain stitch to make up empty squares (black background), and double crochet stitch to make up filled-in squares (white). Leyden Cochrane uses the technique to reproduce a digital photograph, but the material restricts the reproduction to a low resolution image. When seen at a distance, the scale of the piece engulfs one's body. The image is disorienting: a building behind a sparse forest in the precise moment when the rays of the sun shine above the horizon line. The light creates sharp shadows from the trees, which extend to the foreground. The explosion of light creates dizzying movement throughout the image, one cannot tell where the ground and sky really are. *Melech House, where mom died* (2018, crocheted cotton thread [filet crochet] 2.4m x 1.4m) also gives an indication as to what trauma Leyden Cochrane is referring to in his artist statement: here he intentionally revisits and recreates the site of distress. The choice to do so by crocheting, a technique consisting of repetitive motions that rely on orderly patterns,





is in sharp contrast to the chaotic and destabilizing qualities of grief and overwhelming emotion.

Repetition and multiples are key aspects of Leyden Cochrane's body of work, present in both his media and content. A digital collage of tree branches is used in multiple pieces of the exhibition. This collage is given physical form using filet crochet in *Black hour one, two, three and four* (2017, crocheted cotton thread (filet crochet), LED light boxes 109cm x 73cm). Mounted on light boxes, their appearance is reminiscent of distorted analog TV signals; each crochet piece is done in black cotton thread with vertical bands done in a second colour which matches the colour of the LED light in each piece. We get lost in the dense forest. Revisiting the same image of tree branches multiple times, but each time losing information and resolution, alludes to failed attempts at making sense of things after grief and not being able to



let go. In his recent artist talk, Leyden Cochrane described his interest in redundancy, calling it “repetition that spills over”² excess of information and emotion is a thread that runs through the exhibition, weighing the viewer down as they search for meaning.

The aforementioned digital collage of tree branches is also used in the animations *Game of Life (Black hours, amber monochrome)* and *Game of Life (Seneca Lake dusk, blue screen)* (2016, digital animation). These were created by inputting the digital collage into the software *Game of life*, invented by mathematician John Conway as a simulator where “a collection of cells ... based on a few mathematical rules, can live, die or multiply.”³ The game works on a grid, like filet crochet, where each pixel can be inputted as a ‘cell’. The software dissolves the image into ‘living’ at different speeds on two monitors and your phone, after reading the QR code. Similarly, across

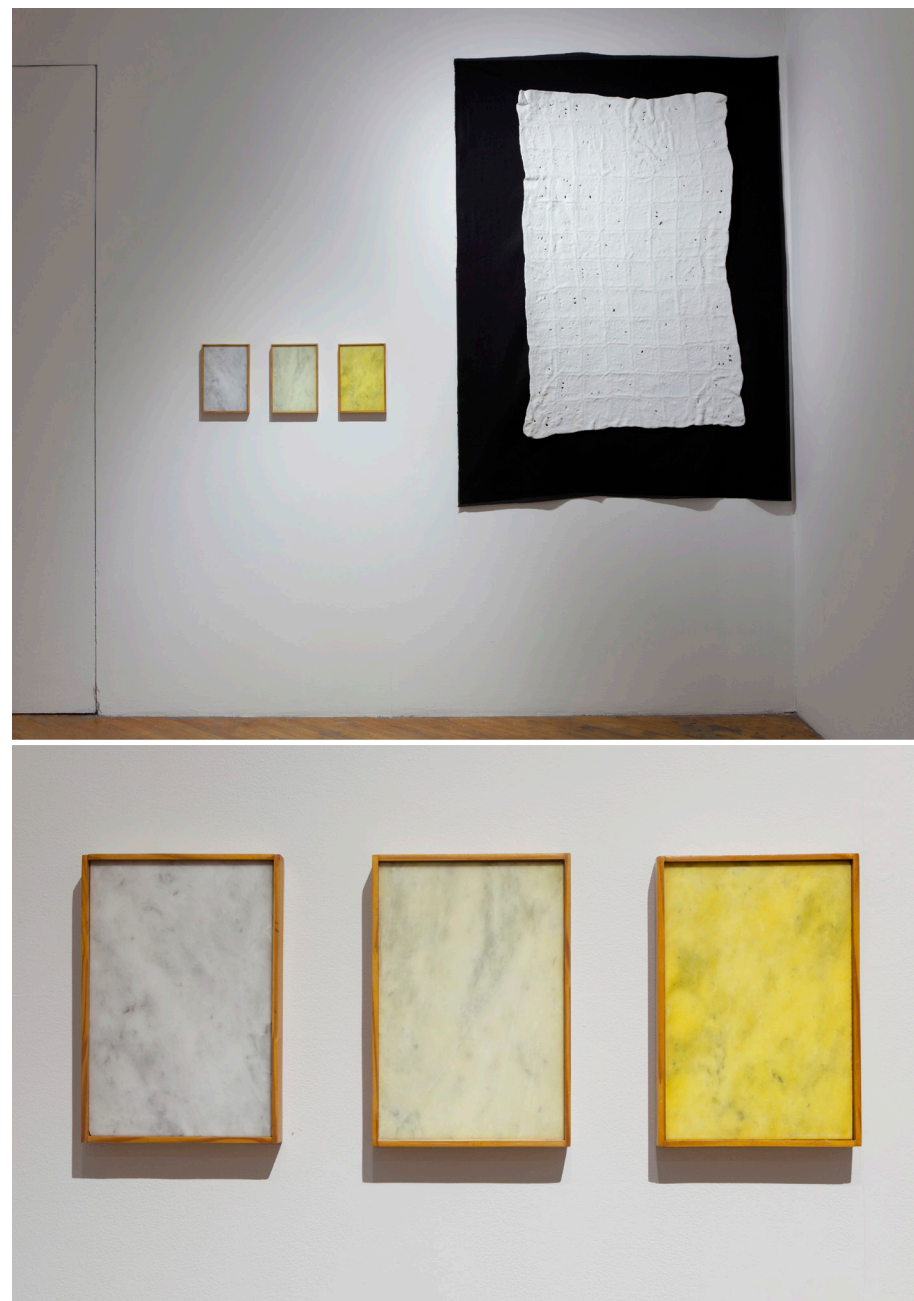


Melech House, where mom died, Crocheted cotton thread (filet crochet).

the room on the other desk, the image dissolves into 'dying' at different speeds. Choosing the Conway simulator as the animation software is a witty metaphor for our awareness, and unawareness, of how invisible forces determine life or death.

There are moments of uneasy humor in the exhibition. *Ooo-ooo, ooo-ooo* (2009, framed photograph and mirror, 60cm x 21.5cm) presents a body, the artist, taking a selfie but his face is hidden beneath a blue sweater. The shape he makes is like a child's impression of a ghost ready to spook you. The mirror is hung high up so the average person is sure to miss the chance to look at themselves but instead sees a reflection of the gallery. The piece is reminiscent of scrying: using reflective surfaces like mirrors to call upon the dead.

Leyden Cochrane gives an equally droll treatment to how language can and cannot convey our experiences. *Famine Stela* (2017, crocheted cotton thread, 1.2m x 1.75m), is a crocheted string of text shaped like a snake coiled on top of itself, where every second line is upside down, making it hard to read. The words are like a stream of consciousness journal entry, each line references a particular thing, often hard to pinpoint: *Famine Stela* refers to an Egyptian inscription on a natural granite cliff "which tells of a seven-year period of drought and famine,"⁴ the famine paralleling the grieving process perhaps. *White Shit* reads next, a derogatory term to describe himself? *Old Weed* comes after, certainly a disappointment... *Witches Tit*, Manitoba winters being as cold as one ... *Terrified/Moon Hoax* ... *Pathetic Fallacy* ... as one continues to read the piece from top to bottom each crocheted sentence evokes strong feelings, mostly embarrassing and painful. Leyden Cochrane described it as a "confessional" during his artist talk and mentioned Elizabeth Parker's Sampler as a starting point.⁵ Parker was a domestic servant who wrote a confessional by cross-stitching each letter in red thread on linen cloth; the text is hard to bear witness to as she reveals her soul and desperation with each stitch. Similarly, Leyden Cochrane shares private thoughts and personal pain, performing an



exorcism with each letter via the repetitive motions of crocheting. However, he presents them in a coded and layered way, keenly aware that his multitude of references will intermingle with those of each viewer. This points to the limits of language, where the meaning of words are relative to each person and the relaying of experience is understood within the limitations of the point of view of the recipient.

Multiplicity of meaning is also prominent in *Untitled (Someone to watch over me)* (2017, engraved plastic desk signs, each 31.75cm x 5cm). Six signs share a desk with the *Game of Life (Seneca Lake dusk, blue screen)* monitors. The simple shape of two white dots on a black background is accompanied by text stating six different interpretations: *someone to watch over me, a cat's eyes catching the light ...*. The plastic signs emphasize just how far our minds can take something as apparently simple as two white dots. The signs mimic those in institutions that officially indicate the name and title of the desk owner: they infer authority and thus omniscience. Leyden Cochrane pokes fun at our need to find meaning in everything and also the bizarre officiousness that surrounds our most personal experiences such as birth and death or displaying art in institutions.

The two white dots on the desk signs precede the last two, quite unambiguously emotive, works of the exhibition. *Collar, wreath, sclera, cenote (Mom)* and *Collar, wreath, sclera, cenote (Koko)* (2018, crocheted cotton thread, unfinished, 53cm x 53cm) The crocheted pieces, done in the round, read "I'm failing" and "Comfortable hole, bye". The words come from both a deeply personal source and obscure pop knowledge. The crocheted pieces are mounted on velvet of impenetrable blackness: both finite and infinite. The pieces draw heavily on canonical symbolism: the text is surrounded by green leaves, like a wreath at a funeral, for example. Wreaths symbolize eternal life and serve as a means to express sympathy, however, Leyden Cochrane's wreaths are unfinished, as indicated by the medium information and evident

by the hanging threads and needles still pinned. This gesture brings the viewer out of the beauty of the commemorative object itself to question the possibility of ever overcoming grief.

I'm failing

Leyden Cochrane's work moves us towards compassion by making us witness the disorientation of suffering, the disconnect from reality resultant of mourning, the struggle in understanding one's feelings, and the limitations of language when communicating them to others. In *Shining Tapestry* the gallery is transformed into a place where grief can be held in complex, layered ways; a much-needed respite from a society obsessed with happiness.

*"Sometimes I get sad
It's not all that bad
One day, maybe never
I'll come around."*⁶

Notes

- 1 Sol Le Witt. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." *Art Forum*, 1967. <http://sfaq.us/2011/11/sol-lewitt-on-conceptual-art-1967/> Accessed September 28th, 2018.
- 2 Artist talk, September 22nd, 2018 held at [aceartinc](http://aceartinc.com).
- 3 John Conway. "Game of Life." <https://bitstorm.org/gameoflife/> Accessed September 23rd, 2018.
- 4 "Famine Stela". In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. n.d. Accessed October 4th, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famine_Stela
- 5 Parker, Elizabeth. "Sampler". 1830. Linen, embroidered with red silk in cross stitch. Height: 85.8 cm, Width: 74.4 cm. London, Victoria & Albert Museum. Accessed October 18th, 2018. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/>
- 6 Lyrics from the song *City Looks Pretty* by Courtney Barnett from her 2018 album *Tell Me How your Really Feel*.



000-000, 000-000, Framed photograph and mirror.

Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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Francesca Carella Arfinengo is a settler person of colour based in Winnipeg. She is an arts administrator and emerging artist. Using mostly textiles, her art practice explores displacement and immigration. She is interested in the effects of colonialism in humanity's relationship to the land.

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