

KUNSTHALL STAVANGER

Amanda Ross-Ho

HURTS WORST

31 January – 17 March, 2019

Artist Amanda Ross-Ho (b. 1975, Chicago, IL; lives Los Angeles, CA, USA) has forged a unique practice located at the intersection of the artist's studio, the memento, and the internet. In *HURTS WORST*, the artist continues her exploration of objects and images that are at once personal and universal. Through her adoption of a symbol system traditionally used to measure physical pain, Ross-Ho creates an exaggerated metric for the collective existential agony produced by our contemporary moment.

One of the effects of the increasingly globalized and connected turn that communication has taken in the 21st century has been an attempt to create systems that might transcend distinctions between language, identity, and ability. Today, the most obvious example is, of course, the emoji, which was first developed in Japan in 1999 alongside the burgeoning cell phone industry. In 2010 emojis were popularized worldwide through the ubiquity of text messaging and their inclusion in the Unicode system, which standardized their code, thus allowing them to be used in other countries and across different platforms. This visual mode of communication also conjures associations with ancient pictographic forms, such as petroglyphs or lunar calendars and more recent, pre-internet precedents such as pictograms, emoticons, and weather forecast symbols.

In addition to the emoji, a more ominous example of a shorthand system for mass communication might include the Homeland Security Advisory System that was developed by the George W. Bush administration in 2002 following the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Modeled on the forest fire warning system, this color-coded scale was intended as an efficient way to alert the American public to the imminent threat of a terrorist attack, with the most extreme being red, or "severe risk," and, at the other end of the spectrum, green, signifying "low risk." Instead, the system was widely criticized for having the reverse effect of sowing confusion and producing unnecessary anxiety. It was ultimately retired in 2011.

Taken together, these examples resonate with yet another notable precursor, what is known as the Universal Pain Assessment Tool (UPAT). The UPAT was developed in the 1980s as a way to help patients with limited communication abilities, such as children, to better measure and describe the intensity of physical discomfort. Similar to emojis, this scale attempted to bridge barriers to communication that might be posed by age, ability, culture, and language. Still in use today, it is comprised of facial ideograms, often in different colors, that portray various emotional states. Each face is connected to a number range and basic description, sometimes written out in multiple languages, such as 1–2: *No Hurt* or *No Pain* to 9–10: *Worst Pain Possible, Hurts as much as you can imagine*, or *Hurts Worst*. It is this most extreme end of the pain scale from which Ross-Ho has produced the works in this exhibition.

At the heart of Ross-Ho's installation are twelve bodily-sized, round textiles in various colors such as pink, red, teal, and purple, of emoji-like cartoon faces that are crying and/or frowning. These are in fact enlargements of faces, all at the most dire end of the pain spectrum, that have been copied from different versions of the UPAT assessment tool. Although the images are purposefully culled from the internet, the artist's interest in the UPAT was originally inspired by her personal experiences over the years in healthcare environments. As she began to grapple with grief systems in her own life, she became interested in how these symbols were designed to try and help express the specificity of individual experience while simultaneously attempting to articulate a universal understanding of something as abstract as pain. Looking at the artworks, there is a feeling of urgency in their production—evidence of hanging loose threads, hand-stitching, and safety pins that underscore the

artworks' tactile properties and create a sense that these are in fact "anxious objects."¹ It is a purposeful gesture meant to resist the authority of the perfectly-made professional textile in favor of emphasizing the meaning of the image through its seams.

The works themselves are made by Ross-Ho in her studio—who at one time worked with textiles professionally—by projecting the images of the faces onto her fabric and collaging the elements onto its surface by means of a rough-hewn sewing technique that makes it feel like the objects are only just barely held together. This direct manner of production enables the artist to address the materiality, and indeed "objectness," of two-dimensional forms. Although she was drawn to the original crispness of the graphics, she has stated that she is interested in "resisting the flatness of the jpeg," and instead embraces the quality of the low-resolution digital image.² Several of the faces bear the traces of this mediation between virtual and physical space, and in some cases the edges are jagged, revealing that these textiles are in fact derived from pixels.

This physical process is a return of sorts, harkening back not only to an analog way of making, but to Ross-Ho's earlier works, in which she replicated the intricate details found in images of vintage macramé wall hangings by projecting them at an increased scale onto her studio walls and precisely painting and cutting them out of canvas. This technique linked her process to the way that enlargements are approached in darkroom photography, and she has noted that she is interested in the way that an "image can be processed and anatomically reanimated."³ Indeed, a kind of *photography by other means* is one of the through lines that connects her various approaches to sculpture.⁴

Dramatic shifts in size, from the miniature to the gigantic, are also a hallmark of Ross-Ho's work. In her scholarship on the role that scale plays in the formation of desire and longing, Susan Stewart has observed that through the exaggeration of an object there is a form of estrangement. When Ross-Ho enhances a thumbnail jpeg to the bodily size of her textiles, they are extracted from the personal space of the computer and placed into the social space of the gallery. Appropriately, for Stewart, the miniature speaks to "the invention of the personal" while the gigantic is linked to "the invention of the collective."⁵

In this, Ross-Ho's interest in the aggrandizement of the everyday would seem to resonate with Pop artist Claes Oldenburg's massive public sculptures of banal consumer objects and employment of soft materials—which curator Barbara Haskell once described as an art based on the "inherent parody of opposition."⁶ Nevertheless, Ross-Ho should also be understood within a lineage of California conceptualists ranging from Allen Ruppersberg (with whom she has collaborated) and Frances Stark (a former professor). These artists distinguished themselves from their East Coast peers by infusing their appropriations and texts with a sense of humor, sentimentalism, and an examination of personal spaces like the home and the studio. Of course, to make something larger also speaks to questions of power. Another Los Angeles artist, Chris Burden, spent much of his later career exploring these dynamics. A notable example is his now-iconic *L.A.P.D. Uniform* (1993). Created in response to the 1992 beating of Rodney King by L.A.P.D. officers and the subsequent LA riots, the installation of giant police uniforms dwarfed the viewer, making them subject to their ominous presence. In so doing, Burden complicates the way an individual might read these symbols of authority, which oscillate between a sense of fear and protection.⁷

¹ From a conversation with the artist on January 13, 2019.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Both of Ross-Ho's artist parents were photographers, and the technical apparatus of photography has often been a subject of her work. For example, in her 2012 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), Ross-Ho created a towering sculpture of a photographic enlarger and placed it at the center of the gallery as a kind of keystone, and in 2013 the scale of her work grew exponentially when she created a public sculpture for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA). Titled *CHARACTER AND SHAPE OF ILLUMINATED THINGS* (2013), this mammoth public artwork depicted the head of a female mannequin and a color card that is used to help to assure the veracity of photographic hues, thus gesturing to a bygone era when photography was assumed to be factual.

⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 172.

⁶ Barbara Haskell, *Claes Oldenburg: Object into Monument*, (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1971), 10.

⁷ Burden's original installation at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia featured 30 reproductions of Los Angeles Police Department uniforms hung on hangers around the perimeter of the gallery. The uniforms were precisely replicated down to the tiniest details

In this, the backdrop of Los Angeles—a city that is always teetering between paradise and apocalypse—looms large. The expanse of space and formerly affordable rents has historically allowed artists the opportunity to work at ambitious scales. And while the Hollywood film industry is at the center of the economics of the city's cultural production, this has also enabled a generation of artists, Ross-Ho included, to make use of its varied resources, from specialized technical expertise to prop houses.

While Ross-Ho's *HURTS WORST*, perhaps points less to a specific historical incident, the tension expressed in this exhibition can be understood as a byproduct of our own moment of political rupture—from the violent rise of right-wing populism and the increased visibility of xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, and racism to the growing awareness of an imminent and totalizing ecological collapse. As a result, Ross-Ho regards this series alongside a body of work that she began making in 2016 after losing her studio as a result of the increasing gentrification of Los Angeles and during a time when she was providing care for aging and critically ill family members. All of this was compounded by the contentious U.S. presidential election.

In conjunction with the faces in the exhibition, Ross-Ho has also made enlarged black textile reproductions of the various versions of the highest number on the UPAT—10—in their original fonts and qualities of resolution. Like the faces, the numerals appear to be made with rapidity. It is as if the masses of threads that dangle down are meant to emphasize that here, gravity should be understood as both a physical property and a metaphor; and is akin to art historian Julia Bryan Wilson's examinations of the "fray," in which a radical politics has often been embedded within the history of textile production.⁸ Hung low and close together, the 10s underscore the heightened stakes of our own moment of extremes, when it often feels like everything is going off the charts.

These sentiments are brought together by a series of canvases at the entrance to the exhibition that announce the words that accompanied the original faces and corresponding numbers (and also reproduced in their original fonts and resolution). One canvas reads: "Unimaginable / *Unspeakable*," while another states, "This pain is / UNBEARABLE / overwhelming. / We will not / want to move. / We will be in / tears this is /our breaking / point." Ross-Ho has observed that when the individual phrases are grouped together and hung on the wall they read like a kind of concrete poetry and prepare the viewers for the wailing faces in the following gallery that are akin to "a Greek chorus describing global pain."⁹

This recalls yet another motif often found in Ross-Ho's work, the sock and buskin, or the ancient Greek symbol depicting the masks for comedy and tragedy. She reflects, "...Sadness, stupidity, and everything else needs a colossal space in which to coexist. The kind of classic comedy and tragedy pairing...is my favorite sort of polar opposition."¹⁰ As such, it is worth recalling her 2010 sculpture, *Double Feature (DOUBLE TRAGEDY)*, a giant gold costume jewelry pin of two tragedy masks linked together by a chain and with their facades to the wall. Here, like the unhappy faces in *HURTS WORST*, the artist asks: What happens when tragedy is missing its other half? What if this is *a//*tragedy?

Of course, words, images, and metrics can only begin to describe our internal states, but through their materialization in space they also provide a way to relate to others and to communicate a shared experience. While there is certainly a sense of despair embedded in this new body of work, it is purposefully delivered with humor. As such, the incongruousness of the "double tragedy" would seem to be a perfect encapsulation of the absurdity of our own times, in which it is so often impossible to know whether it is better to laugh or to cry. For Ross-Ho, this is an emergency.

HURTS WORST was first shown at Mary Mary in Glasgow in 2018.

Text by Alex Klein. Klein is an artist and curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

of the badge, baton, and gun, with the only difference being that they had been increased in size to fit someone standing an improbable seven-feet, four-inches tall.

⁸ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁹ From a conversation with the artist on January 13, 2019.

¹⁰ Rebecca Morse, "Sad is Stupid Big: Amanda Ross-Ho in Conversation with João Ribas," *Amanda Ross-Ho*, (Los Angeles: MOCA Los Angeles, 2012), 309.

Amanda Ross-Ho (b. Chicago, Illinois, 1975. Lives and works in Los Angeles) holds a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MFA from the Roski School of Art, University of Southern California. She has exhibited widely, both nationally and internationally.

Selected solo exhibitions include 'MY PEN IS HUGE', Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York; Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn; 'Untitled Period Piece', Tramway, Glasgow (all 2017); 'Untitled Period Piece', De Vleeshal Center for Contemporary Art, Middelburg, The Netherlands (2016); 'How To Remove Dark Spots', Praz-Delavallade, Paris (2015); 'Who Buries Who', The Approach, London (2014); 'CRADLE OF FILTH', Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago (2013); 'Teeny Tiny Woman', The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (2012); 'Untitled Nothing Factory', Visual Arts Center, University of Texas, Austin (2011); 'A Stack of Black Pants', Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; 'Project Series 40', The Pomona Museum of Art (both 2010); and 'Untitled Event', Hoet Bekaert Gallery, Ghent (2007).

Selected group exhibitions include 'Curve of a hill like the curve of a green shoulder', Mary Mary, Glasgow (2017); 'Ordinary Pictures', The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2016) 'Pairings: The Collection at 50, The Orange County Museum of Art (2012); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2011); 'Image Transfer', The Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; 'Free' The New Museum, New York; 'New Photography', The Museum of Modern Art, New York; 'Production Site: The Artist's Studio Inside and Out', The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (all 2010); 'George Herms: Xenophilia (Love of the Unknown)'; 'Wall Works' The Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (both 2009); The 2008 Whitney Biennial; and 'Nina in Position', Artists Space, New York (both 2008).

Public commissions include 'Untitled Findings (ACCESS)' Parcours, Art Basel, Switzerland (2017); The Public Art Fund, City Hall Park, New York (2015); and 'THE CHARACTER AND SHAPE OF ILLUMINATED THINGS', Plaza Project, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2014). Ross-Ho's work has been featured in Artforum, The New York Times, Art Review, Modern Painters, Art in America, Flash Art, Art + Auction, and Frieze among others. She is an Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the University of California, Irvine.

Amanda Ross-Ho

HURTS WORST

31 January – 17 March, 2019

ARTWORKS

1. *Untitled Assessment (As bad as it could be, nothing else matters)*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 71.12 cm
10.000 USD
2. *Untitled Assessment (HURTS WORST)*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 71.12 cm
10.000 USD
3. *Untitled Assessment (This pain is UNBEARABLE overwhelming We will not want to move. We will be in tears this is our breaking point)*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 71.12 cm
10.000 USD
4. *Untitled Assessment (Restless unsettled Cries inconsolably/Unbearable, Torturing, Crushing, Tearing)*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96 cm (each, diptych)
10.000 USD
5. *Untitled Assessment (Unimaginable Unspeakable)*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 71.12 cm
10.000 USD
6. *Untitled Assessment (Excruciating)*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96 cm
7.000 USD
7. *Untitled Crisis Actor (HURTS WORST)*, 2018
Canvas, bull denim, batting, thread, 150 x 144 cm
22.000 USD
8. *Untitled Crisis Actor (Restless unsettled Cries inconsolably)*, 2018
Canvas, fleece, burlap, polyester, Pro-Brite mesh, patent leather, felt, batting, thread, safety pins, 148 x 142 cm
22.000 USD
9. *Untitled Crisis Actor (This pain is UNBEARABLE overwhelming We will not want to move. We will be in tears this is our breaking point)*, 2018
Canvas, satin, basket weave, cotton, textured vinyl, specialty, knit fleece, batting, thread, 148 x 144 cm
22.000 USD
10. *Untitled Crisis Actor (Untitled Crisis Actor (HURTS WORST Worst Pain Imaginable)*, 2018
Canvas, heavy duty canvas, dye sublimation on canvas, polka dot cotton, muslin, batting, thread, safety pins, 148 x 141 cm
22.000 USD
11. *Untitled Crisis Actor (As bad as it could be. nothing else matters)*, 2018
Canvas, Discount Safin Polyester Tahari, batting, thread, safety pins, 151 x 107 cm
22.000 USD

12. *Untitled Crisis Actor (WORST PAIN IMAGINABLE)*, 2018
Canvas, stretch knit, jersey mesh, textured polyester charmeuse, batting, thread, safety pins,
142 x 140 cm
22.000 USD
13. *Untitled Crisis Actor (WORST PAIN POSSIBLE)*, 2018
Canvas, Discount Satin Polyester Tahari, Special Sale Fleece, metallic lycra, patent leather, vinyl,
nylon net, batting, thread, 144 x 134 cm
22.000 USD
14. *Untitled Crisis Actor (10)*, 2018
Canvas, décor suede, vinyl, lining, batting, thread 148 x 107 cm
22.000 USD
15. *Untitled Metrics (TENS)*, 2018
Heavy duty canvas, lace, vinyl, perforated vinyl, satin, felt, thread, Dimensions variable, 24 parts
12.000 USD
16. *Untitled Crisis Actor (WORST POSSIBLE PAIN)*, 2018
Canvas, swiss dot, specialty fleece knit, batting, thread, 150 x 111 cm
22.000 USD
17. *Untitled Crisis Actor (Excruciating unbearable tortuous crushing tearing)*, 2018
Canvas, lycra polyester Marni II, batting, thread, safety pins, 143 x 137 cm
22.000 USD
18. *Untitled Crisis Actor (Worst Possible Pain)*, 2018
Canvas, polyester charmeuse, rip stop nylon, textured polyester charmeuse, satin, white linen,
batting, thread, safety pin, 152 x 134 cm
22.000 USD
19. *Untitled Crisis Actor (Unimaginable, Unspeakable)*, 2018
Canvas, polyester charmeuse, stretch lace, snakeskin print cotton, white linen, heavy duty canvas,
batting, thread, safety pins, 147 x 144 cm
22.000 USD
20. *Untitled Croquis Drawings*, 2018
(Please ask in reception for a detailed list of titles)
38 x 28 cm (12 drawings)
5.000 USD each

