Top: *Equivocal*, 2019
Plaster, rabbit skin glue, watercolor
2 5/8 x 6 3/8 x 6 1/8 in.

Bottom: *Mediate*, 2019
Plaster, rabbit skin glue, watercolor
1 x 6 1/8 x 7 1/8 in.
A blank page between chapters, a breath before a word, a rest before a beat. Or: an empty week between seeing each other, a long walk at noon between meetings, a ridge of trees obscuring the view. Situated between things or events, an intervening muffles and pauses, yawns and waits. It clears or draws a little space.

**Measuring in-betweens (rests and breaths are things too)**

Olivia Valentine has made a study of in-betweens. Her work is curious about rich absences and the ways we attend to them, extended transitions and how we stretch them, and edges (though not necessarily what lies on either side of them). I think her work is about attention. It whispers, “Look here,” the way someone might when parting a curtain just a few inches to point out something you overlooked. (But it also gives form to the internal dialog of the body, our feet negotiating and feeling the ground so as not to slip; and the mind, cleared of buzzing thoughts as our attention becomes trained on, caught by, absorbed in soft fascination.)

Her work devotes little time to wondering at what we deem interesting; what it does (mostly) is consider the conditions themselves that prompt us to take notice. For
Valentine, those conditions are found in the intervening(s)—the edges that draw attention to the center; the silence that draws attention to the noise; or, maybe, the silence that draws attention to itself.

A line around a nothing makes a something
While not part of her exhibition at the Des Moines Art Center, earlier work by Valentine deployed lace-making as a means to create large-scale drawings. Her piece Guest Room at the Drake (2012) re-creates the anatomy of two windows (casings, sashes, sill, and head) in black thread, leaving the view—whether into the room or out of it—to the imagination. The window as a conceit draws attention to those edges or outlines that focus attention both inward and outward; with the context absent, other than what the title conjures, what we “see” hovers between the idea of a window and what the window permits. Seeing, and how seeing might feel, is a transient experience, as captured by the title, which specifically names the Drake, a hotel in Chicago.

What works beautifully about this piece is that through lace-making, a methodology that is undoubtably time-consuming, the notion of “attention” goes deeper than where or to what the window draws us. The maker is caught up in the process—an act of careful and intentional tangling. The management of fine filaments, weighted by bobbins to keep them in line, demands a different quality of absorption than that required by other forms of making that might invite looseness.

In an email exchange, Valentine told me: “I often think about my draw to labor-intensive processes as a method for thinking—I can only really think about making things as I am making them, so I must do it slowly, so that I can be inside it.” I find this to be a compelling reflection by an artist about her own compulsions, particularly as we encounter a work like Guest Room at the Drake, which intentionally does not presume our orientation. Are we inside or out? Are we with Valentine or apart from her? And of course, what is it she wants us to see?

Finding the edge. (I am the edge.)
In early studio research, Valentine tracked the migration of lace from the center of cloth to its edge and what, when it landed there, it indicated or mediated. The hem of a slip or an underskirt, the neck of a camisole—garments that are no longer widely worn—is frequently edged in lace, which peeks out from the clothing worn over top. These articles mediate between the public-facing garments and the privacy of the body that wears them—they are interstitial costumes, and lace is an interstitial textile.

In enlarging this edge and marryng it to architecture and, later, landscape, Valentine draws attention to those thresholds to which we might be oblivious and, through her choice of media, renders those spaces with a delicacy that is germane to their circumstances. While a window casing, or a doorjamb for that matter, might be substantial in construction, the glimpse it affords us when opened is fleeting and subtle.

Imagine the affect of a room—a dining room, let’s say—and the scenes that unfold and the energy that is exchanged there. Thundering laughter! Long intense
Yürüyüş Oyası/Walking Oya (Pembe Kenar/Pink Edge), 2013-15
Archival inkjet print, dimensions variable
conversations! Joy! Collected and compressed, the memory of these exchanges has density. And what happens, what is contained, in the thin space that is the threshold? Passage. A brief intermingling of what trails from before and anticipation of what will come. Occasionally, a swift moment might teeter on that edge—a teary goodbye, a robust hello—but ultimately the threshold is a very real space that stores very little.

"A line is a dot that went for a walk”

As a 2012–13 Fulbright Fellow in Turkey, Valentine researched oya, the Turkish term for the decorative needle lace that embellishes the edge of various cloth articles. In the piece Yürüyüş Oyası (Walking Oya) (2013–15), her body became oya, trimming the landscape as she photographed herself in time lapse, walking the edges of the terrain. Wearing brightly colored clothing that contrasts with the landscape, Valentine walks the Cappadocia region, along hilltops and edges of ravines, moving her arms to mimic the intermittent points in needle lace, becoming the decorative edge. Her body, repeating across the photograph, is drawn out, "the wayfayer instantiated in the world as a line."

In his book Lines, Tim Ingold recounts how much of culture proceeds along them. The above quote is taken from a short passage on the Inuit concept of territory as an "ensemble of itineraries," wherein "as soon as a person moves he becomes a line." Likewise, Yürüyüş Oyası (Walking Oya) treats the body as the line and the line as a walk. With The shadow is my body (2019–21), included in the Des Moines Art Center exhibition, Valentine builds on this notion of walking as mark-making.

Commingling a group of inscribed plaster objects with photographs of the ground as Valentine walks it, The shadow is my body comprises both additive and reductive marks on and in plaster. It weaves in and out of being writing and drawing, blurring the distinction between the types of traces, or lines, that bodies leave. Inclined toward plaster because of its historic use as a construction material, both in Gothic cathedrals and in common plaster-and-lath walls, Valentine cast these fragments, making components that when laid out resemble tablets but also footprints, a bit like caked mud when jostled loose from the sole of a shoe.

While some of these plaster casts absorb puddles of watercolor into their grain, others hold impressions on their surface—traces of the body (readable in so many ways: are these puddles of blue water or, more dramatically, a magnification of sorrow?) that leave the same kind of space for the "reader" that the artist left in Guest Room at the Drake. The resulting body of work echoes some of Ingold’s ruminations on mark-making: "The trace is any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement...additive and reductive." He goes on to examine the verb to draw, and both the human and nonhuman capacity to leave additive or reductive traces without the use of tools. Notably, he points out that the word writing "originally referred to incisive trace-making,” with the Old English writan meaning "to incise in stone."

Sometimes Valentine’s work is about tension and the vibrating edge between silence and noise. Her mixed-
media drawings *Interruptions* (2015-20) play with disturbances and dissolutions of pattern, shadows, spills, and spray that contaminate orderly geometric tiling and weaving drafts. Out of both *Interruptions* and *The shadow is my body*, a kind of visual score emerges, whether it be the rhythm of steps in the latter or the play between the organic and order in the former. Of course, *to score* also means to scratch or notch into a surface—a kind of inscription, as much as it is a written representation of ordered sound.

It is unsurprising, then, that Valentine also works adjacent to sound. *between systems and grounds*, her collaborative project with composer Paula Matthusen, is an ongoing conversation between two generative systems: improvisatory live-electronics and, on the other hand, textile production methods, whereby a textile continues to grow in relationship to, and as the result of, a feedback loop between two modes of production, such that each composition is rendered by the other.

**Mediate/Equivocate**

I am starting a journal project in which I record a moment or a thing I take notice of each day—something I wouldn’t normally notice in passing, but that I intentionally stop to pay attention to. The texture of a sound, a distant lingering smell, a funny bit of light dancing in a corner. But even as I write, these all start to seem too obvious, too poetic. Maybe it is more like stopping suddenly and stooping to look at what I would ordinarily pass over as mundane ground, or getting very, very close to something, so that its surface starts to appear in high relief. Am I

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*Not of longing, but of light*, 2019
Plaster, rabbit skin glue, watercolor
5/8 x 6 3/4 x 6 1/4 in.
paying attention now, or overexamining? And what draws attention, anyway? Irregularities, interruptions, interventions: things that are out of context.

Puncturing a three-story wall, a series of ropes weave in and out of gallery floors, stitching the work on display into a relationship. The ropes are drawn into long floats down the atrium wall; on their flipside, they intervene into the exhibition galleries, appearing above works from the Art Center’s collection and spilling out onto the top floor.

A woven textile can sometimes be said to have a face and a back, but *Mediate/Equivocate* (2020), like much of Valentine’s earlier work, blurs the distinction between front and back, in and out. Her choice of title draws attention to this, linking ideas of intervention with ambiguity, and in doing so urging us to take notice of structures that join, areas of transition, and the in-between as potent in their seeming ambivalence.

It is this idea—that ambiguity is actually pregnant with possibility, as opposed to vacant of meaning—that forms the richest aspect of Valentine’s work. We should train our attention on small moments of transition, those intervening points in a place or a time that mark change or simply pause. In these slivers lie powerful emotions, bursts of growth, and unexamined potential. And none of these are either wholly positive or negative, although ambiguity can of course be potently negative, as it can provide space for concepts to take root that have not been thoroughly appraised.

*Mediate/Equivocate* draws attention to itself by making something that is usually small and intimate, like a stitch or the yarns in a weft, abnormally gigantic. It manifests a suture that appears to connect the cultural assets of the museum—both the architecture of Richard Meier, who designed this wing of the Des Moines Art Center, and the artworks held in the collection which have become embedded in the art historical imagination as valuable both monetarily and intellectually. But it also interrupts and intervenes in this history—primarily one of white, Western, heteronormative, male genius—by puncturing the space in which it is installed. *Mediate/Equivocate* occupies the building’s in-between (the atrium and on the obverse walls, the overlooked spaces around artwork from the collection) with an in-between gesture (appearing like a stitch that would typically be concealed in a seam, or embedded in a field of similar yarns) in an in-between color (off-white), suggesting that it intends to blend in, yet it stands out—calmly saying: “Hey you, pay attention.”

SHANNON STRATTON

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*Emphasis added.*

*Quote attributed to Paul Klee.*

1 Tim Ingold, *Lines* (Oxfordshire: Routledge Classics, 2016), 78.
2 Ibid., 77.
3 Ibid., 44.
4 Ibid., 46.
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Des Moines Art Center  
March 12 – May 16, 2021  
Organized by Jared Ledesma, Associate Curator

Cover:  
*Interruptions (Overshot)* (detail), 2020  
Graphite and watercolor on paper  
22 x 16 1/2 in.

Inside cover:  
*Walking Panorama (Klaros)* (detail), 2016  
Archival inkjet print  
Dimensions variable

Photography courtesy of Olivia Valentine, © Olivia Valentine  
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