

[ALEXIS BOYLAN] Hi, everybody.
My name is Alexis Boylan.

I am the Director of Academic Affairs

at the University
of Connecticut Humanities Institute,

and it is my very great pleasure today to
be interviewing Valerie Hegarty.

And I'm going to let you,
Valerie, introduce yourself.

I think it's like better if -- I

find it interesting what people
choose to say about themselves,

so I'll sort of let you
introduce yourself.

I'll just say that I'm very excited

to have the conversation today, and I
think it should be really interesting.

As I said, this is part of the programming
and sort of

pre-conversation that we're having
around the exhibition, Seeing Truth.

And I did want to note that this
exhibition and the programming that has

gone along with it has been generously
funded by the Luce Foundation

and also supported, of course,
by the Humanities Institute and the Office

of the Provost at the
University of Connecticut.

So with that, Valerie, do you want
to tell everybody who you are?

[VALERIE HEGARTY] Sure.
Thanks, Alexis.

I'm Valerie Hegarty.

I'm a visual artist.

I work within the traditions of sculpture,

painting, and installation,
and sometimes all three at once.

And I work between New York City
and the Catskills.

And my work very generally deals
with memory, history, and place.

[ALEXIS] I like people to sort of introduce
themselves because I'm always fascinated

at what -- well, first of all,
what artists call themselves, because I do

think that now there's all of this sort
of other vocabulary: artist-maker.

And also do people add the word "visual,"

and sort of what is your medium
and all that sort of thing?

And I do think that one of the nice things
about technology is the ability to sort

of allow people to self-define
in ways that I think historically --

and we're going to get to this idea of
truth and memory and that sort of thing --

what is the truth of who you are
when you have to introduce yourself?

So I'm going to start off
with the first question.

Your art seems in constant conversation
with art of the past.

Can you talk about your relationship

to history and memory and how
that impacts your visual production?

[VALERIE] Yeah, it's an interesting question.

I think a lot of my work is drawing
from early American paintings

and sculpture,
a lot of like, Bierstadt landscapes,

Thomas Moran, like of the Grand Canyon,
the Hudson River School.

And it didn't start out as wanting to make
some sort of political statement
about the times or the environment
today.

I was drawn to those images because,
in the house I grew up in,

we had knockoffs of what looked to be
early American landscape painting.

And so those are just
like imprinted on me.

My grandparents are from Ireland

and Italy, but growing up, we didn't
have any imagery from those countries.

It was all these
landscapes or maritime works.

And I grew up outside Boston.

So you see these images a lot
in public buildings in Boston.

And also we grew up in a home that was
modeled after a historic home but was new.

Like, it was made in the, maybe it was
made in the late 50s or something.

I don't think this is uncommon
in homes around Boston.

We had, like, fake artifacts
from the Revolutionary War.

Like, we had a Revolutionary War rifle
over the fireplace and a bed warmer

and like a Paul Revere tea
set made out of steel.

So when I was younger,

I thought those were, like, ours,
like our family artifacts.

So I think I've just had a longing for,
like, an origin story or something.

And I don't know, it seems very American

to make up your origin story, but,
like, very Vegas or something.

I like the idea of making artifacts

that have something to do with my story,
but also the time and place that I'm

making art in as an artist
in the United States at this time,

I'm pulling this familiar imagery,
but altering it to maybe

comment more on what's happening today,
like socially or politically.

I don't think of myself as a political
artist, but I think you said in our last

interview, like all art is political,
I didn't realize it would be read so much

that way in a way, and then it kind
of just kept going in that direction.

I mean, I guess you can't
comment on things happening in the news

without it being political
in some way, right?

So I think I just have a desire for history.

I always loved old houses and
seeing when people go in and renovate.

And some of my early work looks like
renovated rooms that somebody's tearing

back into the walls, but it's
all made out of papier mâché.

It's all a re-creation.

And like I said, I grew up
with these re-creations.

My dad actually bought a bunch
of the paintings in the hardware store.

Like, there was an artist
that had a studio in the hardware store.

And I guess my dad said the artist went
out of town and the guy was selling

his painting because he owed him rent.

But I always loved these.

They kind of look like
the Alps or the Rockies.

That's where that comes
from, those images.

And then once I started working with them,
I learned more about them.

I don't really remember learning about

Manifest Destiny in high school,
although maybe we did.

So as I read more about them -- I mean,
I always knew they were used to define

an identity for America,
the wilderness, the Western landscapes.

But by working with them,
I just learned more about that.

And I don't think people need to know
everything about our history or about

everything about how these
paintings are thought of.

My hope is they can enter the work
just by seeing this kind of familiar

imagery and having it broken
or altered in some way.

They're able to enter it at that level.

Like, what does it mean to be
a broken painting in a museum?

[ALEXIS] So I'm going to back up and ask you two
questions, because actually,

I have to say, I'm fascinated at this idea
of there being antiques or family

heirlooms around the house
that are not family.

They're both not antiques
and not family heirlooms.

I loved when you said

that you wanted them to be.

You wanted them to be something more than

they were and that you
wanted this origin story.

I find that so

fascinating in this idea of sort
of creating a visual that makes

the narrative complete or makes
something sort of make sense.

But I want to pull back.

Was it your mom or your dad who was buying --

if your dad bought some
of these paintings,

I'm fascinated at where the replicas came

from and who was bringing
them in the house.

What point were you like --

did you ask them where they came from?
And they were like,

oh, the store?

Was that a heartbreaking moment for you,
or was it just a knowledge

that was always sort of there but you were
playing with it in your head as a kid?

[VALERIE] I can't remember actually,
because we used to play with them.

I remember there was,
like a gunpowder horn with leather.

My guess is my dad bought them or I don't

know if the house came with some of them,
but I do remember

we had an addition put on,
and there were these big,

huge beams in the ceiling
that looked like big old beams.

I remember my dad being like that's actually, like five piece boards put

together and sanded and look what a great job they did.

You can't even tell.

I just remember being like, yeah, that is cool.

[ALEXIS] I love his pleasure at the fakeness of it.

Look how amazing they made it look.

Like, the technology of making it look real.

I also think it's charming that he's sort of encouraging you early, like

before you maybe even conceived of yourself as an artist,

"This is how you make things," like materiality of objects.

[VALERIE] He's still alive, but he's always, like,

fixing things, and his workshop is, like, insane.

I'll have to send you a picture, but he really

works with all kinds of materials just to fix things around the house.

[ALEXIS] Right.

[VALERIE] And I think as immigrant children, there's this desire to be American,

because they both were from poor families in Boston and this desire to be more

successful or wealthier or cross social levels.

And these are the things wealthy people have in their houses.

They have paintings of clipper ships and so on.

[ALEXIS] It's very analogous in many ways,

the way that those Hudson River Schools
paintings initially found so much appeal,

because, again,

it was about sort of bonding together
people who might have come from different

classes and different ethnic backgrounds
and sort of creating this

manufactured vision of cohesiveness,
of an Americanness.

This all fits together.

This all makes sense.

Even though the country is so
getting increasingly large,

there's a way in which there's

a sort of a visual connection
between all of these places.

So it's actually very

fitting that your parents would in trying and adopting many of those same

sort of desires, use this as their visual
vocabulary. Although it makes me then very

interested, Valerie, in particularly how
many then of your -- particularly the works.

They're three dimensional,

but they're meant to mimic
paintings that have curdled.

You mentioned this before.

Like, the images that are broken.
So much of your visual

representation seems to suggest
almost the sort of hollowness or the lack

of cohesiveness or the lack of stability
in these images. Because it sounds like

what you're talking about is that in your
home and with your family,

there was this way in which these
images created and that you then as

a child were using
the pieces to create a cohesive narrative

of history and your
family and the landscape.

But I would say that your art

to me, again, I think curdled is the best
word to use for some of those images where

it literally looks like they're
wrapping into themselves and warped.

So,

what happened in the story or

the narrative that brings
the warping in for you?

[VALERIE] I think when I was in grad school,
I made these videos of

me and my family dressing up like
we were like pilgrims going around.

But I was thinking, like,
my whole identity based on nothing.

It's based on
plastic objects that are about a myth.

Like, that's my identity.

And now I just was like, oh, no.
I had this panic about it.

I guess I want to, with the warping --

like, I've been thinking a lot
about funhouse mirrors lately.

Like, is the image skewed or is
how we're looking at it skewed?

We're just reflecting each
other. Part of the warping, too,

I think about

when an artist makes a failed drawing,
they crumple it and throw it away.

So I'm thinking about this giant hand crumpling nature is supposed to be

in the image of God, but God's, like,
This is a failure and crumbling

to toss in the trash.

[ALEXIS] It's an epically

devastating commentary
on the United States and ways

in which 19th-century visual artists
attempted to create this idea

of an America, which is
really you get into this --

I mean, this is really a conversation
about whiteness and about whiteness

and the way in which there is whiteness
permeates that landscape and then perhaps

curdles it. That there's something
there.

[VALERIE] It feels inauthentic to me as

a white person,

so somebody of color has got to have
that reaction to a whole other degree.

[ALEXIS] Right.

It brings to mind an artist like
Robert Duncanson,

a 19th-century African American artist who
fully embraced a kind of Hudson River

style visual vocabulary, made these
absolutely epic and beautiful images.

But there's always this sort of conflict

about sort of what is
his racial positioning.

I mean, he felt this during
his own time period.

How much of landscapes, then,
is somehow a commentary on person

and racial positioning and citizenship
and belonging. That actually makes me want

to pivot to this other idea, because
gallery spaces and indeed museums,

it seems like function is this
really crucial part of both.

So much of your work plays with this idea
of what we're supposed to be looking

at in a museum or what we're supposed
to be protecting in a museum.

But also so much of your work seems to be
pulled from the sort of vocabularies

of preciousness and importance,
canon-making that museums do.

So I guess I was sort of wondering
if you could speak a little bit --

and this is sort of pulling us back

to the Seeing Truth exhibition
and ideas that we're playing with --

what is your relationship to museums?

Both -- I think as an artist,

your relationship to museums
is always fraught.

[VALERIE] Right.

[ALEXIS] Because you need them.

But you're also a visitor.

You're also a person who goes to museums.

That's how we interface with work.
On the one hand,

museums are where we go to see both art
of the past and art of the present.

And on the other hand, these locations
have always been and are increasingly

understood as centers of mythology,
of racism, of classism,

homophobia and ableism, all of that,
but also of disinformation.

This idea that museums are creating

this vision of "this is the most important art" or "this is the story of this or that,"

and science museums and historical museums do the same sort of teaching.

And increasingly,
those teachings have been suggested

to have been massive disinformation distribution centers.

Like, you go in and you learn a story that is false, that is only half-told.

So I was wondering sort of how you negotiate museum spaces.

These are the truths that you both want

to speak to and that you want to see about US history.

If you could just talk through sort

of where you see museums for you right now, both as locations where your art

could be, but also as stories about what is the truth of us in knowledge-making.

[VALERIE] Yeah, it's a hard one.

[ALEXIS] I excel at multi-part, super dense. Yeah,

no, you're not --

the actually,
there's people who are watching all these

interviews are going to be like, how can anyone answer any of these questions?

So maybe just talk about-- let's break it down.

What is your relationship to museums as spaces of knowledge and truth?

[VALERIE] If I feel like I want to know the truth

about something, I probably wouldn't go to a museum.

I'd probably look at news sources.

I'd probably do Internet research,

look at new sources that I trust.

I do think it's important when the museum is inviting diverse artists,

contemporary artists,
to go in and reconfigure things,

to create their own project,
to insert into the collection so that

we get that perspective from the current times and from a diverse population.

I think the museums are all reorganizing

the American Wing -- I mean, for years -- but that will probably just be ongoing.

I think of the museum more like

an archeological site and what archeologists find is through the lens

of their times and what they're looking for, basically.

And so the contemporary artists are

important to be brought into these institutions that look like

the stories are immobile or really fixed so they can shake it up.

But as an artist,
I get more information about what other

artists are doing or,
if you want to read all the literature

stuck on the wall, the museums try to tell you more of the story.

I only learned this
when I took art history when I was much

older, but I feel like there's a lot of subliminal messaging going on.

I sort of enjoy using it
just for the aesthetics.

I don't get really caught up
in what they're conveying to me.

[ALEXIS] Okay,

so I find this fascinating because your art is typically shown -- not typically,

I mean, it exists in all kinds

of locations -- but you've been collected by an enormous amount of major

museums, and your pieces have then been in shows, and they have functioned very

much as sort of -- I know you hesitated -- you have complex feelings about

being a political artist, but I'm interested then, because so often

your art is shown in the context of disrupting that museum space.

So I think it's interesting that you're like, I don't go to museums to sort of get

anything, but then your art is actually functioning as a way -- I think, curators are

pulling in your work as a way of disrupting the authority of that space.

Do you think your work is disruptive or not

really?

[VALERIE] Yeah, I think it is.

[ALEXIS] Okay.

[VALERIE] It's disruptive in this very easy to access way. In the Brooklyn Museum,

my piece, *Fallen Bierstadt*, had been in the American Wing for a long

time, and it's just like a broken -- it looks like a Bierstadt painting that's

warped and broken and that's disruptive. It's right next to an actual Bierstadt,

"*The Storm Over the Rockies*," and

so much time and money goes into restoring these works that they just seem timeless.

And that's part of the story

being like immobile.

But these works are not timeless.

They're decaying, like in front
of our eyes, but you never see that.

So I think just shaking that up a little
bit, and it also

gives people pause to consider what
they're looking at so that it stops them

and makes them reassess
what they're looking at.

And they can take that
onto the other works.

I think museums is, like,
the best context for my work. I guess,

saying I don't go
to museums for certain things --

I do really like when there's contemporary
artists inserted in historic collections.

I do really like going to see contemporary

artist shows and they're
always in museums or galleries.

Those are the spaces we're
given to get our work shown,

so trying to figure out
how to work within them.

My work is stronger, actually,

in a museum of the historic collection
than in a contemporary gallery.

[ALEXIS] That's interesting and tying it together
to your stories about thinking

about the home that you grew up
in, where paintings are lived

with, this idea of there being
a more organic home for them.

And galleries are notoriously
just so white, so white-walled.

They're meant to just focus you

in on the art.

Your work, particularly your more recent work,
moves more towards installation,

but have you ever thought about

an entire, all-room installation or
does that not appeal?

[VALERIE] No, definitely.

The closest I came was doing
the installations in the period rooms

at the Brooklyn Museum,
so I didn't recreate everything,

but my work was inserted
in three different rooms.

And so that was interesting to work within
a context that was already there,

not the white-wall context. Because
period rooms, that would be the place,

I would think, that
there was some authenticity,

like, this is what the room looked like.

This is what was in the room.

But when I worked on the installation,

they were like, oh, this might have
been in a room at this time period.

This is actually a re-creation from the 70s

of the 40s. And one of the rooms,
the Cupola House,

the Brooklyn Museum bought the interior

from North Carolina, because
the town couldn't afford to restore it,

and they moved the whole interior of the
Cupola House to the Brooklyn Museum.

And then in the meantime,

the town got more money and now they don't
have the interior to the historic house,

so they replicated the interior.

So, the actual historic site has
a copy of the interior and that's when I

was like, oh, yeah, it's all fact
and fiction just thrown together.

[ALEXIS] It's all fact and fiction thrown
together and it's all to create this --

it's about creating this idea of history,
that we could immerse ourselves in.

I always think that the corollary
is like the time travel novels,

which are often seen as so SciFi or so fantasy,

but then museums really
do sort of promise this,

like, "if you step into this space,
we're going to help transform" --

and I always love also how those period

rooms are often, they can only really
have a couple of people in them.

So they really are trying to make you
go on this journey.

[VALERIE] Yeah,

in the Brooklyn Museum,
you can't go in them.

They're just walled off with glasses.

You can only look through
the window in the door.

It really controls your viewpoint.

But you get that feeling
it is like a time capsule.

[ALEXIS] Right.

[VALERIE] When I did my installations,

I asked the art deck curator, did you
get any hate mail about my project?

He said, no more than usual.

And I was like, well, what's your usual hate mail about the period rooms?

And he's like, It's the same people every time. They hate if we change them.

They want them to be the same every time they come.
[ALEXIS] Right.

[VALERIE] And I thought that was really interesting.

[ALEXIS] The Seeing Truth exhibition is working so

much with the American
Natural History Museum,

and I think that they find the same.
Like those dioramas.

And when they had changed them, most recently they tried to change one,

Indigenous Peoples, and to put more information and to

make it not so racist and make it more actual information about tribes and what

information was fact and what information was perhaps misunderstandings.

But they got a lot of hate mail about that.

There's a lot of controversy about that.

Should you just tear it all down?

Should you try to reconstruct it?

But of course, sort of like the squid and the whale.

That's a total fantasy scenario.

I mean, they think they've seen suckers on whales and they've seen ingested.

But I think that -- I feel like sometimes all of New York would shut down if they

did anything to that diorama, because it's absolutely fundamental.

There's a whole movie about it and all kinds of literary allusions.

And

these things become part of other
histories that then they have their own

fragility and preciousness
attached to them.

[VALERIE] Yeah.

There's a lot of, like,
nostalgia around those things.

[ALEXIS] That are, of course, made to theoretically be this

factual, that are meant
to be these knowledge conveyors.

But along these lines,
I was wondering if you could actually talk

about your piece, the Silver Skeleton
Series, Full Skeleton from 2019.

I was interested in how
the work came about.

I know you're going to prickle at this,

but sort of, what truth are
you speaking to in that piece?

[VALERIE] No, no prickling.

Okay,

so the Silver Skeleton came about because
the Winterthur Museum,

which is a DuPont mansion with,
like over 100 period rooms, all American.

He collected all American objects.

I met the curator, Stephanie Delamaire,

and she invited me to come to the Museum.
And they showed me around and to do some

sort of project,
like responding to the Museum.

And the Museum
is overflowing with decorative arts.

They have a huge

ceramic and glass and silver collection.

And I had been thinking about this

previously, just the materials being used
in the artworks, and thought this was like

a good opportunity to do
something about silver.

So the truth is, like bringing in more

of the story of where the silver comes
from and the human cost of mining silver.

And I wasn't familiar with the history
per se, so I was reading more about

the history of the silver trade and the
mines in Bolivia, in Mexico,

and how they were bringing
in enslaved Africans to work the mines.

They're incredibly dangerous
and incredibly poisonous.

And they would enslave
the Indigenous Peoples that live near

the mine, but then all those people would
die, and so they have to go out a bigger

radius, and then all
those people would die.

And the only reason they started having

better safety at the mines is they
had basically run out of workforce.

And that's not something
I personally think about when I'm

in a Museum, which is kind
of shocking, actually.

So the fact that the end product is this
very expensive, very collectible

object that the wealthy are collecting,
it's very literal in a way.

The pieces like human bones
combined with a silver serving set.

So we're basically just collecting

the bones of these miners.

It was also, like, interesting
that about the miners themselves.

They would make these sculptures
in the mines -- I think it was called --

they worshiped,
like the God of the underworld.

When they were in the mine,
I think it's Il Tito maybe.

And they would make these effigies
that were like half-human.

They look like these monsters,

and they'd be in the mines and they
would go, before they go down --

when they went down there,
they'd give it tobacco and alcohol

and things to appease it so that they
wouldn't be killed in the mine.

But when they were above ground,
they were Catholic.

So it's really interesting.

So when I was making the silver set,
it has this macabre quality,

but it's in keeping with kind of these
effigies they were building also.

So that's just trying to insert

this other part of the story
back into the Museum.

And so I wanted to put the silver set
back into the Winterthur Museum.

You know, when you do stuff like that in

the Museum, some people are
not going to be on board.

Some people are going to be on board.

It wasn't something that could easily
happen, and they might put it in when they

do a show that's about putting
a critical eye on the collection.

That's kind of a great context for it,

is to put it back into a Museum
collection.

[ALEXIS] Right.

It's a fabulous piece.

I also think that
increasingly it feels necessary to speak

to how much collecting
has gone on in museums.

I think that natural history museums,
of course, and the anthropological museums,

rightfully,
bear more of the brunt of this

dialogue, but as spaces that are
essentially masking genocide and masking

it on this whole sort of like
an aesthetic level,

and as a knowledge-making level,
let us not look at this aspect.

Let us look at what is
important on this aspect.

And I think that what I love so much about
the Silver Skeleton series is

it is this very visceral piece that is
sort of saying, like,

when you look at silver,
what you are looking at is death,

and you can pretty it
up and you can make it --

and again,
I think the other thing that you do

in that piece that I find so disruptive --
I'll just use that word again --

is that reminding us how often silver,
then is used to eat things.

So it's about this sort of process

of ingesting this death and ingesting this
genocide,

of capitalism, of greed,
but also of racism and colonial

empire-building that I
think that piece is so interesting

because, again, it is also
very aesthetically pleasing.

You want to look at it in the same way

that when you go to museums,
you often want to sort of like look

at beautiful silver and look
at ceramics and that sort of thing.

[VALERIE] Yeah, I was thinking about that recently
because my last show,

some of the works kind of looked
like a decaying oven or whatever.

It's kind of got an icky factor.

And I was thinking,

the work I've been making recently is really leaning on the romanticism

to draw you into the story,
because that's why we love -- or if we love

these paintings, there's this very romantic quality to them.

In a way, when you do a commentary,
if it's too off-putting,

like people might not even get pulled into
it. They can just totally disregard it.

Yeah,
and basically using the language of how

these images and objects were created
in the first place to make something very

aesthetically pleasing so that you almost
don't realize you're getting this truth.

[ALEXIS] Right.

Well, and I do think that there have been

another Worcester Art Museum,
and my colleague Elizabeth Atkins did this

piece of trying to make these connections
with the history of slavery and so much

American art and the ways
in which museums have done so much work to

distance these
pieces from their origins or

from the moment in which they're created
or the people who created them and how

important it is to do the work
to bring those things back together

again.

I tease you about the prickly stuff,
but I do find that artists often

have complicated relationships
to the idea of truth.

I think also those of us who are

of a particular age and who in many ways
came up intellectually in a postmodern

moment then also have this sort of like
"there is no truth, truth is relative,"

but that's something that was ingrained in
a lot of our college thinking and beyond.

But so much of your work plays with ideas
of mythology and truth and history.

So I was wondering if you could actually

just talk about, what is your
relationship to the idea of truth?

But then more broadly --

this is my multi-tier question --

what obligation do you as an artist
or your art have to truth?

Or do you think the truth is something
that you don't really have any truck

with it, that your story is,

that art can do other things that it

doesn't need to even have
a relationship with truth?

[VALERIE] Well, I have the initial response you're
talking about, like there is no truth.

Nothing is really objective at first.

And then I was thinking, well,
what about Russia bombed Ukraine?

Is there no truth there?

And then suddenly it seems like it gets
really dangerous to say there's no truth.

When I think of how I
get bits of the truth in the world,

it's in this poetic way,
almost like the Cabinet of Curiosities.

We're doing a better job than we do now.

It's through different things that are

related or maybe not related,
that you form connections.

And then there's some truth
that comes out of that.

I think with my work,
because I'm using these paintings or

objects, I can't really separate them
from some of the truth about them.

I do love work that has no agenda.

I'm not like going in with an agenda

necessarily, but I do think work
can be whatever we want to be.

But because I'm using these images,
this content is going to come with it,

and I need to acknowledge that I want
to be on the right side of history.

I don't want to perpetuate racism

with my work -- I want,
if anything, just like illuminate it or --

I'm picking paintings that are very generalized in a way.

It's not like this is like this particular person's experience at this time.

It's like this is a Clipper ship.

So I don't want to go into specifics, because I don't feel like as a Caucasian

artist, that's how I experience the history.

I experience it more through these images and museums.

But I do feel like I have to acknowledge that that content is coming with the image

and then that ends up being what I'm playing with anyway.

The truth I'm trying to tell are maybe

the truths that are not immediately revealed in the work.

Like, with the Silver Skeleton, there's not a plaque next to the

silver canteen saying 100 people died making this amount of silver.

[ALEXIS] Well, it really calls questions as to why we look at it. All of a sudden it pulls

in a whole mess of ideas that, in fact, so much of our culture goes to great

lengths to hide and just even to be very sort of banal about it,

but how many people are actually damaged

by each package that arrives to our house in the grand scheme of people who are --

the environment and labor and all this sort of thing?

It's not the same thing that we're not encouraged to think of costs in a broader

sense and how much of the things that give us pleasure

come at these tremendous
and unconscionable costs.

[VALERIE] Yeah, I think we're hit
with that information more and more.

I think there can be an overload, too.

"It doesn't matter what I do."

But artists mostly are liberals, are
like trying to do the right thing.

But we also want to be comfortable.

[ALEXIS] Actually, I was really drawn to that

you are conscious of wanting to be
on the right side of history.

I love that phrase.

And that phrase has been so interesting

for this project because, of course,
if you sort of suggest that there's

a right and a wrong side of history
in some ways, you're negating that there's

a truth -- that you want to
win. Winning is, that's the truth

if it wins or if that's the right side
of history or that sort of thing.

It's very grounding to hear you say that these are ideas and these are

worries that preoccupy
your thinking about your own artistic

production. That it is important to sort
of speak to all of the pieces that are

coming in that are influencing
you and that sort of thing.

[VALERIE] I can show you one behind me.

[ALEXIS] Sure.

Yeah.

[VALERIE] This is a Clippership painting,
like turning into a shell.

So I was thinking about

aesthetically trying to make it really romantic and beautiful looking.

But when you look inside, the ship is actually going down into this world.

So it's like I wanted to pull the viewer into the kind of the beauty of it,

and everybody loves shells, but then

the clipper ship's upside down and getting sunk sent down the spiral.

[ALEXIS] Well, I'm thinking then, about particularly in the US,

this very devastating history of moving bodies across water and ships for slavery.

That piece is great.

I have to say, I'm interested in how light it is.

It looks like it should be very heavy, but it seems very light.

Yeah.

[VALERIE] And it's partly like papier mâché and then part kind of this epoxy clay.

A lot of my work is extremely light.

[ALEXIS] Right.

Oh, that's fascinating.

I would actually not have thought

that from having seen your work, because they actually seem very heavy.

[VALERIE] Yeah.

When people come to pick it up,

they're always shocked, like the guys who come to move it.

Here's another chipper ship kind of getting absorbed into the shell.

[ALEXIS] I love the barnacles on it, too.

I think that's such -- the idea of the aging --

oh, that's fantastic.

[VALERIE] Well, again,

almost like trying to make something
that looks like an artifact.

[ALEXIS] Right.

What I like about those pieces,

too, is that in some ways, because of the
shells, they exist in a sort of limit.

They could be in a natural history museum,
they could be in an art museum and sort

of pointing out how
the spaces in between those designations

are very artificial, that objects
always exist in a liminal state.

And then we feel the need to define them

and place them and put them
in trajectories of knowledge and history.

[VALERIE] Yeah, it's true, because I was like, oh,

where would be a great
place to show these?

And so like, oh, would it be
the natural History museum?

Would it be like the Met?

[ALEXIS] One of the questions we are asking
everybody to speak to for this project is

one of the instigator items that I want
to say instigated you or provoked you.

So did anything strike your fancy
or make you mad or draw you in?

[VALERIE] I was immediately drawn in by
the Henry Moore sculpture that looks like

a shell, so that the objects --
there's like a real shell

and then there's this
little -- it might be bronze.

It doesn't look very big.

At first.

I thought it was a horn, like
from an Indigenous people.

Sometimes they make the horns out
of the sea shells. It looks like
some kind of Indigenous artifact.

But it's actually titled, let's see,
"Standing Figure, shell skirt."

So it actually looks like
a little woman with a dress.

And I just thought it was like
a very poetic-looking object.

And because I'm working on these
seashells, too, it pulled me in.

And then I think,
because you're talking about truths,

it was like, well, is this
telling me some sort of truth?

I'm just admiring it
for its formal qualities.

And I'm like, well, there's a woman
and it's being related to nature.

So is this perpetuating this women are
like nature, so we can
dominate both of them?

Did I just get sucked into that?

You can just analyze it in different ways.

But

I was pulled in because I am working
on -- in a way, it's like maybe minor,

like culture meets the seashell, and this
is like nature meets the seashell.

I mean, women meets the seashell.

Maybe the colonial narratives are
more like male-centered right now.

[ALEXIS] It's interesting.

I mean, we're still doing research

on the piece, but it appears that he did those for an exhibition installation.

[VALERIE] So then I clicked and I read that it's called The Hall of Mollusks and Mankind, which is an amazing title.

[ALEXIS] I know, I know.

[VALERIE] And it said his piece was put in the center of the tree.

And it's funny because I was just in the show that traveled.

It was last at the Crystal Bridges, but it was called In American Waters,

and it was about the history of these maritime paintings.

But I think I had one of the only sculptures, which was a painting turning

into a shell, and they put it in the middle of the tree.

And so I thought that was kind of cool.

[ALEXIS] We'll have to go talk to the people at the Museum to see if we can maybe get

a photograph of the Henry Moore in situ and maybe get yours.

We could do a little comparison side by side.

Very cool.
All right.

Well, I'm going to ask you the last question,

valerie.
It has been amazing to talk with you.

In keeping with my hard questions,

we're not going to end on, like, a light note or easy question.

So one of the ways that I've been ending these interviews is asking people to tell

me one truth that you know,
one thing in the whole world that you know

is true, and it's a truth
that you feel committed to.

And I was wondering then if after you tell
us this truth, what evidence do you have

for this truthful statement or this
truthful belief that you hold onto?

[VALERIE] I ran through a lot of things,

and I thought, I'm just going to say
that Russia's bombing Ukraine.

The evidence I have is, I guess,

all from the media and news sources that I
trust and then also from my community

of artists.

I believe it's true because they all

believe it's true and it's being
reported from sources I trust.

Like, at first I was going to say that I

die, and then I'm like but I
don't actually know that.

I just thought I picked something that's

happening right now that seems
important to acknowledge as truth.

[ALEXIS] Right.

No, I mean, we keep it a really open-ended
question because we want people to sort

of, again, sort of speak to what they
want to do with that idea of truth.

And also in your particular moment,

what truth is the most important
for you to articulate?

[VALERIE] So yeah, that's the most important.

[ALEXIS] Yeah.

Well, and I think you're also speaking
to sort of your

role as being somebody who what it means
to personally speak the truth,

which I think is really important
and interesting, too,

and certainly something that the whole
project keeps sort of pulling back to.

[VALERIE] It's a really interesting project.

[ALEXIS] Yeah, I think so.

I'm excited for the show to open
and excited for the audience to get

to hear about your art and you're
ideas and that sort of thing.

So thank you so much, Valerie.

This was amazing.

[VALERIE] Thank you for that.

[ALEXIS] And it was lovely talking with you.