



**SEEING RED**  
**LIBBY ROSA**



This catalogue documents Libby Rosa's exhibition  
*Seeing Red* at Blah Blah, June 2 - 30, 2023

*Dedicated to friends in Philadelphia*



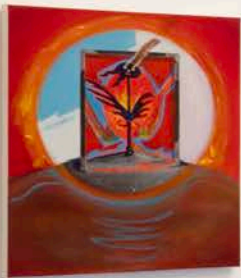












## FIRE PHYSICS: LIBBY ROSA'S MAGIC CIRCLE

*Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.*—Johan Huizinga

Libby Rosa's premiere Philadelphia solo show *Seeing Red* at Blah Blah Gallery reconfigures sky, land, and water with daring efficiency. On entering, two elements catch the eye straight away: long, flaming curtains softening the window light, pierced at the top with large insect pin armatures, and a floor painted bright cerulean, color climbing up the wall just a few inches, a shallow puddle extinguishing the flames, or at least containing them. Immediately, the room ricochets in scale and signification; the giant pin of the curtain rod makes me miniature, and though the burning curtains dwarf all else in the room, they may as well be tissues set ablaze by a mischievous child. I might be a toad or a grasshopper collected from the yard for a potion. But spend time with the show's expert and intimately scaled paintings, and I feel myself growing back. One thing is clear: this is a spell.

Rosa has been casting them since childhood. Whisked here and there by frequent family relocation, magic play was for her a means of claiming agency. Time and again, she made friends from scratch, brewing them into being with gathered detritus. This is the essence of a painter; she makes what she needs to see—she does so with mud. Rosa accessed that power early on, and now she has it down to witchcraft.



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Images can be miraculous, and many painters have devoted lifetimes to breathing mystics into paint. Leonora Carrington,<sup>1</sup> Hilma Af Klimt,<sup>5</sup> William Blake,<sup>6</sup> Agnes Pelton,<sup>4</sup> Odilon Redon<sup>2</sup>—each a branch in Rosa's genealogy—were all invested in accessing new spiritual realms by use of psychological symbols and bold color. What Rosa offers to this tradition is a knack for manipulating space in installation to set us into a kind of dance, and a matter-of-fact, calligraphic touch that makes the work dance itself. Her painting is a cyclone of movement in which a single stroke defines itself—this one, a beating eyelash; this one, a flame. Color and form fuse tightly, vivifying one another.

In the paintings on view in *Seeing Red*, bright and exaggerated forms call on the visual world of American childhood, tinged with grotesque witchery and fantastic escapes. Drawing on color, character, set design, and stagecraft, Rosa invokes the hallucinatory magic of *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>3</sup> Curtains aflame with witchery get doused in water. Notes of yellow pave a road for the eye around the room. Poppy fields bloom. In one set of paintings, portals slip into and out of spotlight intensity, gateways to opiate dreams. Enter this space, Rosa seems to say, and leave rationality at the door.

Through so many moves—the painted floor, the shrouded windows, her mutating imagery—Rosa enacts what cultural historian Johan Heizinga coined a “magic circle,” a drawn boundary where the rigidity of homeostasis dissolves, and the implausibility of play takes over, a breakdown of the logic of life. Ritual and magic have it, but more broadly it occurs in any sense of play that happens somewhere “isolated” from the world, “hedged round,







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hallowed, within which special rules obtain.” The arena, yes, but so too the court of law, the theater stage, and, now, the gallery.

In these spaces, invented and arbitrary sets of conditions give rise, if only temporarily, to something altogether physiologically unnecessary: meaning. In a game of soccer, the striker is totally sure of his purpose: to score. The goalie: to block. Even the most lax and blurrily defined game rules develop their own set of play motives. Simply watch a child enter into a jungle gym and you’ll see how quickly the character of life shifts, and the objective of the game transforms from exploration and discovery to dominance and mastery.

So in this gallery world, what is Rosa playing at? What rules are set? As with all art, it begins simply: we are to look. To admire and imagine. To make moves, craning our necks and crouching down. On the ground, a small sculpture of a rock with the negative of a butterfly carved through its center frames a painting hanging down low. The sculpture, titled *Metamorphosis of Medusa*, achieves airiness despite its heft and position on the floor. One has the sense of a flight for freedom—emerged from its cocoon, the butterfly evades a second petrification. We might very easily see Rosa herself in the image of the butterfly, flitting from sculpture to painting to installation, evading our attempts to pin her down.

That sense of flutter animates the experience of Rosa’s paintings. Beautifully painted as they are, they reject any notion of the heroic, singular image, and instead call out to each other in a harmony of echo. The work hums together the way one would expect from a talented curator (Rosa has brought twenty exhibitions to Philadelphia through her self-run gallery Peep



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Projects). Throughout the room, regular rhythms of color, figure, and scale—pairings of dancing witches and desert landscapes all sized at eight by eight inches—pick up on similar themes to illicit inklings of *deja vu*. Amongst the syncopated flow of works, an eddy of movement sets me spinning. This is part of the magic.

To keep the dance going, Rosa has collaborated with her partner Samuel Garigliano on a sound piece that plays on a 10 minute loop in the gallery. Featuring samples recorded from their home in North Philadelphia—children playing in the street, their purring cats—as well as Garigliano’s own slow-build, atmospheric assemblage pulling on guitar, synth, sax, drums, and more, the work sits firmly in the realm of music rather than sound art, built on regular rhythmic structure and prevailing harmonics. Against a minor key, the beat functions like the ticking of a sinister clock, a countdown, a pulse. When the dirge ends and the procession stops, where do we find ourselves? In what guise?

One particularly powerful piece, *Red Me Red You*, achieves the formal alchemy that the sculpture and the imagery of the more traditionally stretched canvases allude to. Rosa hews jagged, scalloped cuts out of a wood panel, shaping an object that flickers between flame and war ax. On it, a contorted, feminine slick of flesh flings about black hair – another witch, this time melting. The softness of pastel slides across harder colors of flashe, folding in on itself and abstracting the figure into slippery beauty. Shimmering between object and image, the work is a triumph, and its placement by the butterfly sculpture, suggests that this small piece (roughly nine by eight inches and jutting out from the wall by another two) is the show’s true moment of transformation, where Rosa crystalizes the ineffable.





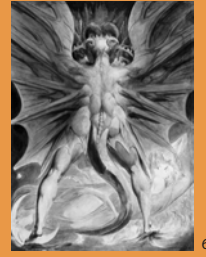




I left the gallery entranced but uneasy. To be honest, horoscopes and witchiness feel all ablaze in folly, unhelpful symptoms of a larger societal descent into irrationality that has left us teetering on the brink of autocracy and vulnerable to disease, whatever the root causes may be (the rise of social media and, with it, hyperindividualism? the failure of supposedly rational institutions to provide any security to the people they purportedly serve?). What can we gain through superstition, through drawing magic circles and grasping at order in the scattered stars, when we live in a world of airborne viruses and strongmen dictators?

Some 700 miles north, in Quebec and Ontario, fires had been burning. In Nova Scotia, a storm system pulled the smoke down south, and then to the east. The fallout was manifold and visceral. That week, just days after *Seeing Red's* opening, birds started to fly into the chimney of my building and emerge from vents in the basement. Who knows what drastic measures other wildlife took? Various news outlets proclaimed we were breathing the equivalent smoke of between 3 and 20 cigarettes a day, though the reality was far more dire, especially for the many who suffered inflammation leading to deadly strokes and heart attacks.

Even if we were so lucky to stay inside, wear masks, be young and healthy enough to get out relatively unscathed, at least for now—the damage to our lungs may have in fact been permanent—the smoke cast a pall like a necromancer. As it traveled in the atmosphere, exposure to UV radiation transfigured its particles into free radicals, volatile molecules capable of altering our very DNA. We were breathing trees from Canada, and who knows what else. But all of that was effectively immaterial compared to what met our



eyes (seeing is believing, they say). A dissolution of sightlines, of boundaries between land, sky, and flesh in the vein of Rosa's own entanglements, settled over us. Our cities, which on the East Coast we so easily fool ourselves into thinking hardy as mountains, so tame is our landscape, vanished. I took the Girard Bridge on my commute home, normally a perfect vantage of Center City Philadelphia, and saw only dull orange.

After the opening, after the smoke had passed (though, of course, it always lingers), I visited *Seeing Red* again. The windows opened, a breeze fluttered through the flaming curtains. I stared at the floor; its blue was so bright, so unlike any color of water I know. Rather, I realized it was sky. Or a future memory of sky, once it has been tinged permanently with Earth. How much longer will it stay blue? The world we inhabit now is under a spell, our air churning with things from the ground. Particles of the long-and-recently-dead, unearthed and burning, coat our lungs and slip into our blood. A switch has flipped on a mechanism so complex that rationality can hardly hope to reverse it—instead, in our web of needs, reason comes constantly to a head with itself, with its competing and violently rational demands. This is just the beginning. How do we settle in for the onslaught? How do we grieve a lost home? I realized then and there what game Rosa had proposed. What can we do now, but play with the fire?

**TODD STONG**

















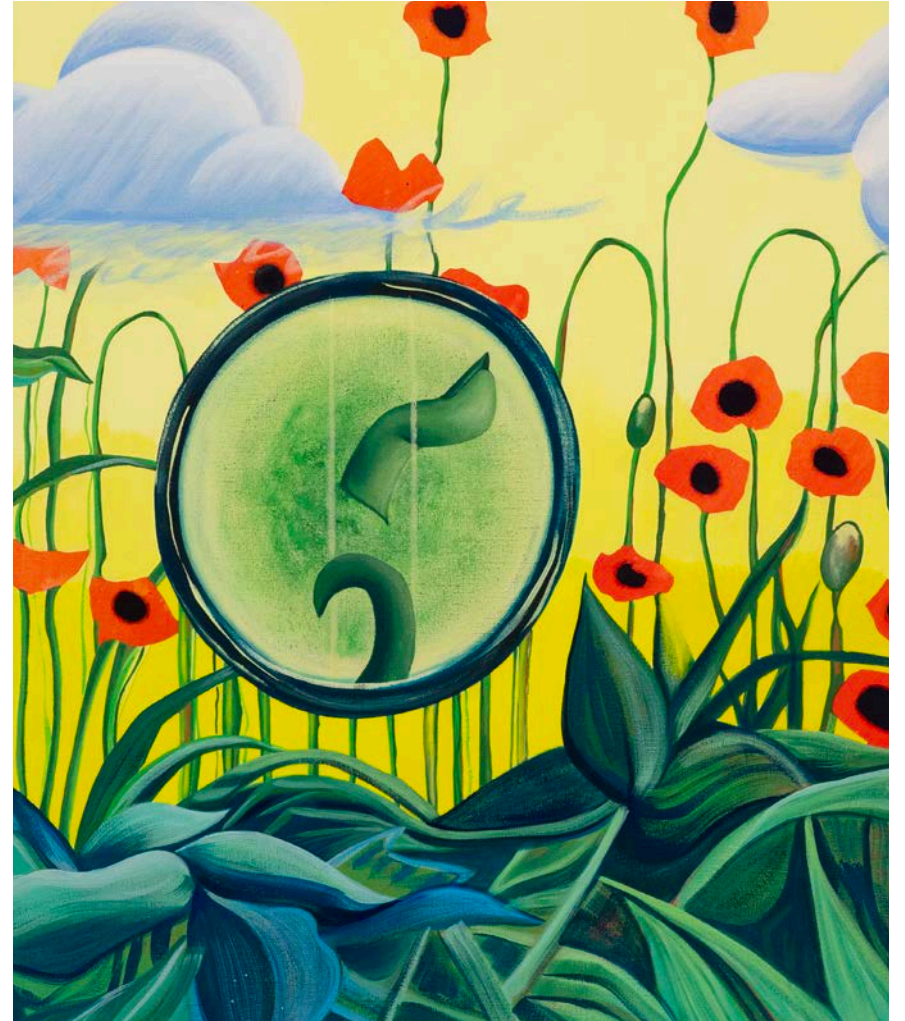










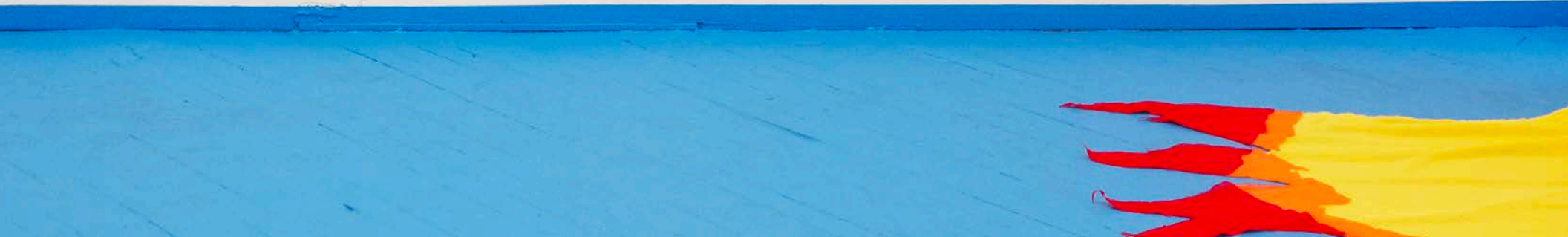
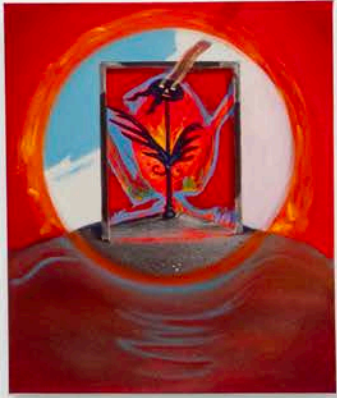


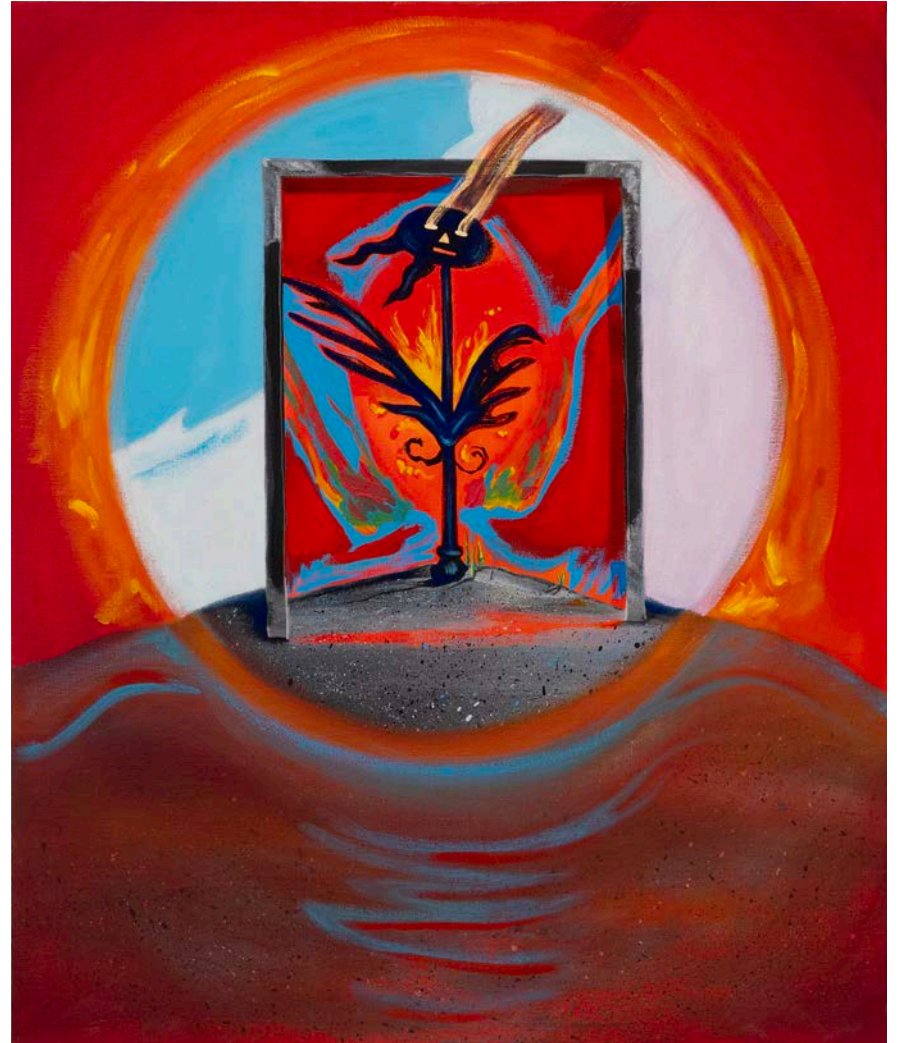
















*Day and Night*  
Poem by **ROBERT WHITEHEAD**

AT THE TOPMOST EDGE, THE SKY WAS FOLDED LIKE A BLUE ENVELOPE. WE WHISPERED INTO IT A HALF-REMEMBERED SPELL TO RID THE SUN FROM THE SKY. BUT THEN IT WAS ALARMING TO SEE THE SKY SO EMPTY, AS IF IT WERE PINNED BY ITS FOUR CORNERS TO THE FACE OF GOD. IF YOU LOOK LONG ENOUGH, EVERY BLUE HAS MANY BLUES INSIDE IT. THE BLUE THAT MAKES A SULLEN NOISE LIKE THE MOAN OF A DUST FLOWER IN A DESERT WIND. THE MOTTLED BLUE LIKE A RASH OF JOY. THE BLUES HAPPEN ALL AT ONCE. SO REALLY THE EMPTY SKY WAS FULL TO THE BRIM WITH BLUES, VARIEGATED, ARID. WE FELT SO CORNERED BY BLUE. WE WANTED IT TO STAND STILL AND SPEAK. MAYBE IF WE STARED AT THE SKY LONG ENOUGH A NEW WORLD COULD SEEM POSSIBLE. PERHAPS THAT WAS THE SPELL. THE SKY EMPTY OF SUN AND A DOOR OPENING IN THE MIDDLE OF THAT PERPETUAL BLUE. AS IF TO MAKE A NEW WORLD SEEM POSSIBLE INSIDE OF THE OLD ONE. BOTH HAPPENING AT THE SAME TIME. BLUE INSIDE BLUE AND THE BLUE INSIDE THAT ONE. IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE BREATH. BECAUSE WHAT WOULD THE WORD BE WITH NO ONE TO SPEAK IT. IN THE BEGINNING WAS A SPELL AS LUSH AS A RAINFOREST SO A RAINFOREST WAS BORN RIGHT INSIDE THE DESERT. LIKE A LION LYING WITH A LAMB. LIKE PLOUGHSARES BEAT INTO SWORDS. APOCALYPSE IS HAPPENING AT THE SAME TIME AS WE'RE STANDING HERE, LOOKING INTO THE BLUEST SKY IMAGINABLE. HOLDING A THOUGHT IN YOUR MIND WHILE AT THE SAME TIME HOLDING ITS OPPOSITE. IT'S BEEN VIEWED AS A SIGN OF HIGHER INTELLIGENCE. BUT THEN IT WAS ALARMING TO PRACTICE NOT BREATHING. AS SOON AS THE RAINFOREST APPEARED THE FIRES WERE PLACED AT EVERY BORDER TO HEM IT IN. THEN THE SMOKE FROM THE FIRES LIFTING LIKE CURTAINS IN AN OPEN WINDOW. WE STILL HAD WORK TO DO. WE MIXED THE BLUE WITH A SPELL OF ORANGE. MADE A BURNT SIENNA SO BURNT IT FELT LIKE A SECOND SUN. THE HUSK AND THE TOMB WEED THRIVED, LIGNIFIED TO THE BONE. A COARSE DUST THE SMOKE PICKED UP LIKE CATTLE IN A TORNADO. THE RISK OF ANY SPELL IS THAT IT DEFIES ITS OWN ACTION. A BARREN EDGE MAKING A LANDSCAPE, FOR EXAMPLE. A LONG-ENOUGH MATCH TO STRIKE THE STOVE. IT'S NOT THAT EDEN WAS CANONICAL. IT'S THAT ANY BEAUTY IS ALSO A MEASURE OF WHAT BEAUTY WASTES. THE SAME TIME, HAPPENING ALL AT ONCE. EDEN AFLAME AND THE DELIRIOUS IRISES. CHOKE CHERRIES FAT AS PLUMS AND THE SANDS INTO WHICH THEY DROP. NEXT TO THE RAINFOREST, THE DESERT TREES LOOKED LIKE LOOSE FISTS OF BUZZED HORSEHAIR. AND NEXT TO THE DESERT, THE RAINFOREST PALMS SEEMED STUCK BEHIND A PLEXI TINT. WE CAN'T TELL WHERE THE MIRAGE BEGAN AND THE DESERT ENDS, EVEN IF WE SQUINT. TAKE ONE LAST LOOK BEFORE THE SKY GETS DEVoured. THE PINECONE SHRUB, THE BLISTERED OCHRE. THE VERY CENTER OF THE YUCCA. EVERY SPELL COMES TO A POINT IT CAN'T RECOVER FROM. THE DOOR WE WANTED OPENED WAS CLOSED. WHAT AIR WAS LEFT TO BREATHE WE BREATHED. WE STOOD TALL AT THE VERY END.





Artwork

- pp. 7, 8, 11, 12, **21**, 29, 40     ***Curtains on Fire***, 2023. Chiffon, thread, steel, copper balls, 3'x14' each
- pp. 5, 6, 16, **22**, 31     ***Witch III***, 2023. Flashe, colored pencil and pastel on canvas, 8"x8"
- pp. 15, **23**, 25, 26, 30     ***Red Me Red You***, 2023. Flashe, colored pencil and pastel on shaped wood, 9"x6"x2"
- pp. 15, **24**, 27, 28, 30     ***Fluttering***, 2023. Flashe on canvas, 24"x24"
- pp. 15, 19, 20, 30, **33**, 35, 36     ***Metamorphosis of Medusa***, 2023. Flashe and acrylic on EPS foam, 24"x24"x7"
- pp. 16, 32, **34**     ***Green Thumb***, 2023. Flashe on canvas, 22"x26"
- pp. 8, 21, **37**     ***Reaching Out***, 2023. Flashe, colored pencil and pastel on canvas, 8"x8"
- pp. 1, 2, 15, 30, 35, **38**     ***Witch I***, 2023. Flashe, colored pencil and pastel on canvas, 8"x8"
- pp. 7, 40, **41**     ***A Cave Full of Echoes***, 2023. Flashe and oil on canvas, 22"x26"
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- pp. 16, 31, **47**     ***Day and Night***, 2023. Flashe, colored pencil and pastel on canvas, 8"x8"
- pp. 3, 4, 8, 21, 29, **48**     ***Witch II***, 2023. Flashe, colored pencil and pastel on canvas, 8"x8"

Blah Blah  
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Essay pp. 9-18 © Todd Stong

Works Cited:

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Poem p. 45 © Robert Whitehead

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Listen to the song *Seeing Red* by Samuel Garigliano played during the exhibition







**LIBBY ROSA** (b. 1993, Pittsburgh, PA) is an artist, curator and teacher working in Philadelphia, PA. Rosa's paintings and installations explore concepts of control and transformation. She received her BFA from University of Wisconsin-Madison (2015) and her MFA from Cornell University (2019). She has been featured in Artblog, David Zwirner's Platform Gallerist Interview: One Day, New American Paintings: Issue #141, Maake Magazine: Artist-Run Interview, and Inertia: Studio Visit and Interview. She participated in a two-person exhibition at SPRING/BREAK Art Show in 2022 and been included in group shows at Pilot Projects (Epilogue), Safe Gallery (Or High Water), Signal Gallery (Big Snack), Marquee Projects (Oil, Acrylic, Clay) and Proto Gallery (Soft Reboot). Rosa has attended residencies at Tongue River Residency in Dayton, WY, Trestle Art Space in NYC, ASMBLY Session #1 in NYC and VCU (SSP, 2015) in Richmond, VA. She is the founder of Peep Projects, a project/gallery space in North Philadelphia. She is currently teaching at Fordham University.