

Written By uzomah ugwu

## An Impassioned Conversation with Ohan Breiding (formerly known as Johanna Breiding)



Photo credit: Shoghig Halajian

**Ohan Breiding** is a Swiss-American visual artist and educator. They are known for their work with photography, video, and installation that they use in their collaborations to reinterpret. They use the past in an artistic way that allows a visual connection to the present. Their work gives voice and ground to underrepresented and marginalized communities. They investigate the past in an artistic way to visually connect certain events of violence, controversy, or political upheaval to the present. Ohan is an Assistant Professor of Art at Williams College. Their work has been exhibited internationally and nationally in places such as the Oakland Museum of Art, [Egg Wimmer Gallery](#), [Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery](#), [Ochi Projects](#), [LUXART Hayman Sasoucos](#), [L.A. House N Athens](#), and many more. I had the pleasure and honor to ask Ohan a few questions about the project of theirs that has been most rewarding, what was their favorite thing someone has said about their work, and how they use art to redefine what is universally acceptable.

**UZOMAH: How do you get inspired to produce a piece of artwork?**

**OHAN:** I look to my previous projects as stepping stones for the next work, and often incorporate autobiography to ideas of queer lineage and kinship. In my recent works, I explore the notion of "landscape as a witness" to historical, political, or environmental events of injustice. Collaboration is key to my practice, as working with and learning from others inspires my making process. I always try to have a spontaneity in my approach. For instance, I pay attention to dreams as well as the images that I encounter when I am out in the world to inform what I make.

**U: What are some issues in history you want to address that you have not?**

**Q:** I am currently working on a project about my stepmother's survival of the 2004 tsunami. For survivors of environmental catastrophes, there is nothing natural about natural disasters. I am interested in historical trauma and recovery in relationship to current ecological and environmental circumstances and how they affect vulnerable bodies. The project looks to our historical and continued disregard of ecological health, and speculates on our future through multi-species (human-to-nonhuman) care-based relations.



*Magic Hour (Epitaph for Family)*—*Magic Hour (Epitaph for Family)*, 2015. 2-channel 16mm film and 3-channel video installation, sound, 33 minutes.

Participants include: Dean Spade, Calvin B. Taisha paggett, Julie Tolentino, Don Romesburg, Asha Romesburg, Rachel Cams, Darius Morrison and Samuel White

**U: Can you explain the importance of having a mentor in the early stages of your career?**

**Q:** I moved to the United States from Switzerland when I was 21 years old and ended up working closely with artists Ken Gonzales-Day and Nancy Macko. They have known me for almost half of my life now and have been integral to both my artistic and teaching practice. I received my Masters from CalArts' Photography and Media Program and worked with Kaucyia Brooke, Harry Dodge, Charles Gaines, and Allan Sekula. I was one of Allan's last students and his work has been highly influential to me in terms of thinking through the ocean as a space of knowledge and connectivity.

Following in the photographic lineage of my mentor's Ken Gonzales-Day and Allan Sekula, I contribute to the formally rigorous perspective of social realism, while exploring pressing issues within photographic and film histories, queer theory, and care. Many of my projects document underrepresented communities, stemming from the archival impulse within photography and video work.



Self-portrait with scars left elbow (Johnson, Eba) and knee (Cylan, Los Angeles) (left), Kaucyia and Mingus Dragonfly (center), Crutch (right) 2018/2019/2020. Digital c print. 14x 10.5", 14 x 17", 14x 8.5"

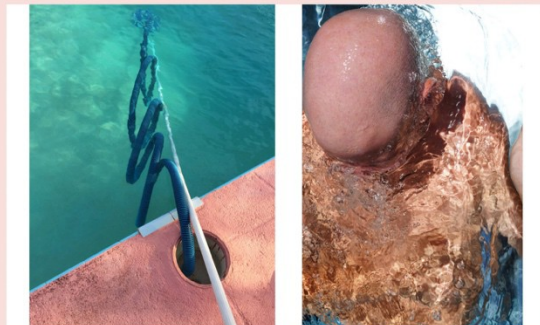
**U: What are your thoughts about being a self-promoting artist versus being an artist represented by a gallery?**

**Q:** I regularly use social media platforms to promote myself and other artists, friends, activists, and scholars whose work I find important. I joined Instagram rather late, so I am probably not the best person to give advice on promotion. I do consider it to be a helpful way to share works without the reliance on institutional validation. It allows artists to have an ongoing conversation around each other's work.

I just had a solo exhibition, *Playing Submarine*, at Ochi Projects, a Los Angeles gallery that recently started representing me. I really love working with Pauli Ochi and am excited about the new addition of gallery director Meghan Gordon. I look forward to be working with women who share similar politics and ethics of care and are supporting of my practice and future projects.

**U: What have been some of your favorite responses from people who see your work?**

**Q:** Maggie Nelson wrote a list about one of my exhibitions, *Epitaph for Family*. She writes "The love and loss exceed any dyad of the normative and the queer" and this response has stayed very close to my heart. I greatly value the responses I get from my collaborators and friends, especially my oldest friends who are not professionally involved in the art world. I often share my work with my students too, in order to be vulnerable with them just like they are during their crits in class, and because I value how they approach the work from such a different perspective, as people who are growing up in a world that feels so different from the one I grew up in.



Imago (left), Crown (right)—*Imago* (left), *Crown* (right), 2018/2020. Digital c print. 16" x 12"

**U: How have any projects you planned before the pandemic been changed or delayed? How did you work around it?**

**Q:** Last summer, my partner and collaborator Shoghig Halajian and I were supposed to travel to Japan with my stepmother to start working on a new project that takes her survival of a tsunami as a starting point. This was, of course, put on hold due to Covid travel restrictions. So instead, I started taking portraits of my friends submerged in water. I also created 60 ceramic vessels of hybrid objects that combine pigmented human body parts and subaquatic, crustacean creatures. Teetering between figuration and abstraction, the works explore the interconnections between human and nonhuman organic species and play with the possibilities of intro-active companionship and interment. I am typing these answers from Venice, Italy now, where I have been invited to continue this initial research for an upcoming project through the support of TB&2—Ocean Space.

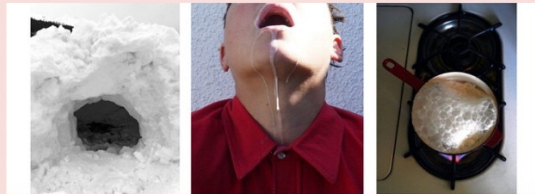
that combine fragmented human body parts and subaquatic, crustacean creatures. Teetering between figuration and abstraction, the works explore the interconnections between human and nonhuman organic species and play with the possibilities of intra-active companionship and interment. I am typing these answers from Venice, Italy now, where I have been invited to continue this initial research for an upcoming project through the support of TBA21—Ocean Space.



The Rebel Body—*The Rebel Body*, 2019. HD video, sound, 29:44 minutes. The video is made in collaboration with Shoghig Halajian, Silvia Federici (author of *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*) and Glarus residents

**U: What project that you have done has been the most rewarding for you?**

**Q:** One of my most recent projects, *The Rebel Body* (2019), a video installation that explores the story of Anna Göldi, the last documented European “witch” to be executed (1782) in Glarus Switzerland. This injustice occurred very close to where I grew up, and so I returned home to explore her story as well as how the town residents recount this history today, thereby continuing to animate her life through their words. The project considers the ramifications of hearsay and storytelling in the history of the European witch-hunts and explores the role of the witness through the landscapes that contain—and subtly recount—buried histories of injustices. The video is made in collaboration with Shoghig Halajian, Silvia Federici (author of *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*). This was also a very rewarding project for me as I was able to circulate widely through screenings in the U.S, Europe, and the Middle East. The single-channel narrative-driven format allowed a wider circulation, which now informs how I am thinking of my next work.



Shelter (left), *Between tongue and taste* (center), *Morning milk* (right)—*Shelter* (left), *Between tongue and taste* (center), *Morning milk* (right), 2017/2020/2021. Digital c print. 14x11"

**U: What type of equipment have you used the longest and why?**

**Q:** I have kept sketch-books for half of my life now. I have over 50 black leather-bound books with drawings, photographs, and notes that are an extremely important archive to me. Some are in my father's basement in Switzerland, some in my partner's mother's house in California, some in my studio in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and some with me here in Italy. I bought my first camera after graduating from College at BSH in NYC. It was a used Hasselblad Medium format camera. It's still my favorite camera to this day and I often think of how this model was the first machine to depict the earth from outer-space, in a way the first documentation of environmental art, the first apparatus to depict the landscape as witness, and a future warning.

**U: How do you use art to redefine what is universally considered acceptable?**

**Q:** I create art that challenges binary-thinking and oppressive norms determining who we are and what we should be. As a queer and gender-nonconforming person, I try to complicate polarized notions of female/ male, presence/ absence, past/ future and explore social-being and practices of healing through a process of experimentation and not-knowing. This is why collaboration is so important to me, as it forces me to sit with the unknown and allow others to contribute to the determination of the final work. It is a process that comes out of wanting to challenge established dyads and approach each other through a piece of vulnerability and care.

For more information about Chan's work please visit their [website](#).