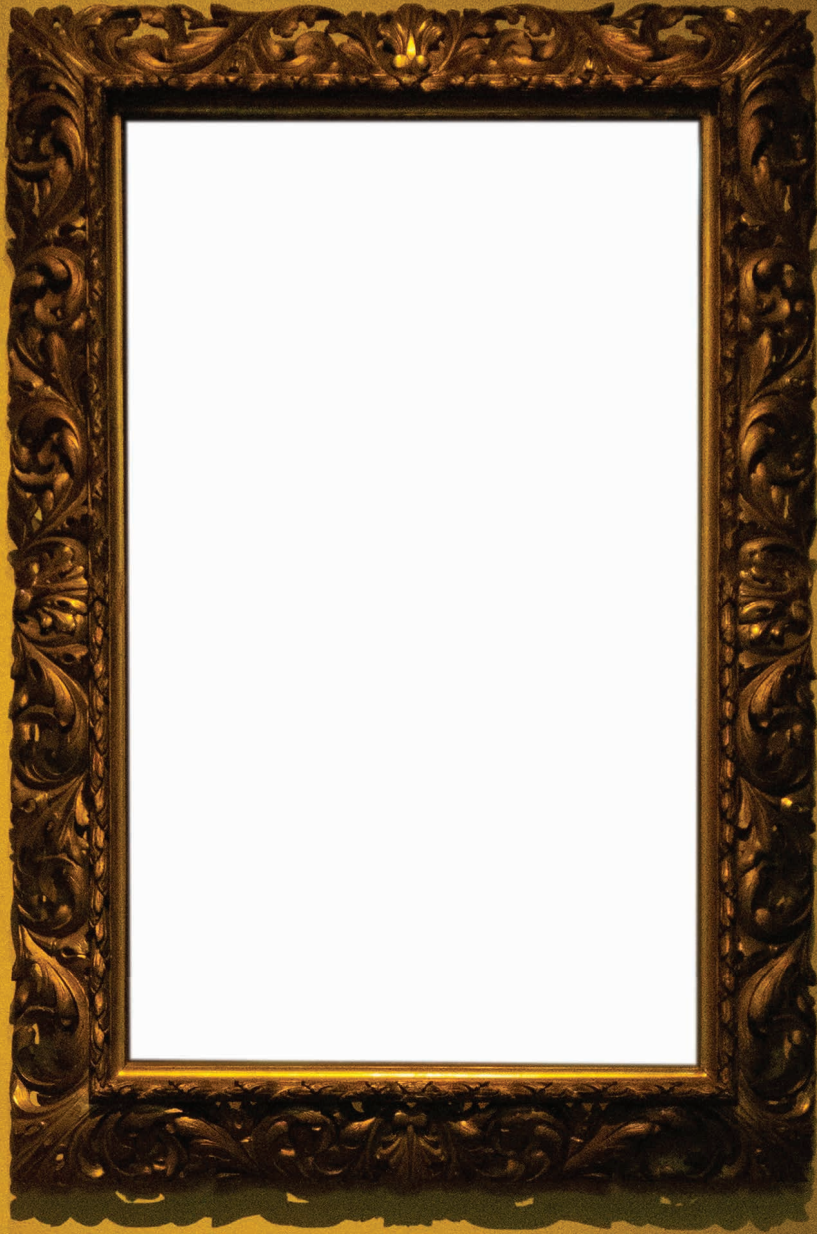


# ON/OFF

APRIL 2024



THE MUSICIAN ISSUE

creatives on  
the seen and unseen at  
**ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO**

## A note from the editor...

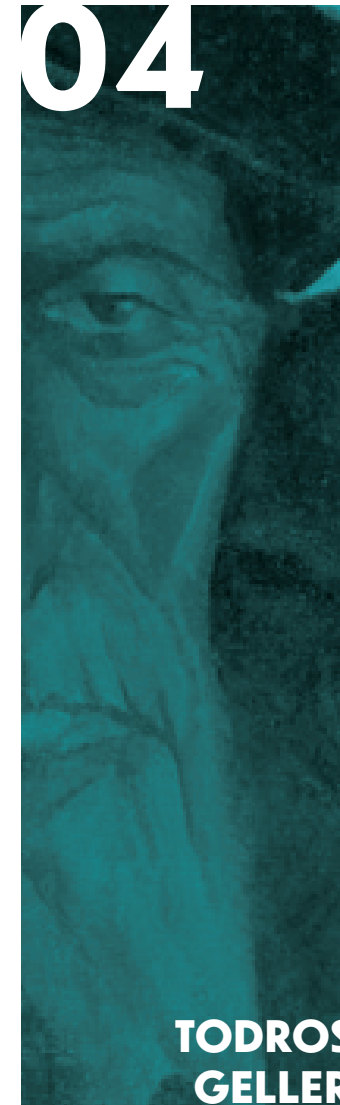


The booming rhythms of the Chicago Bucket Boys just outside the Michigan Avenue entrance. The echoes of footsteps and conversations in the lobby. The headphone solitude of an audio tour. The bubbling and splashing water mixed with laughter and the clink of silverware and glasses around the Fountain of the Tritons in McKinlock Court in the summer. The Art Institute has many ambient sounds to take in and in this edition of *On/Off*, some talented musicians have some things to say about the creative vibrations rattling around within the frames of some of our most beloved pieces.



**MARGO  
HOFF**

**FAR AWAY AND  
UP CLOSE**  
by  
Leslie Feist



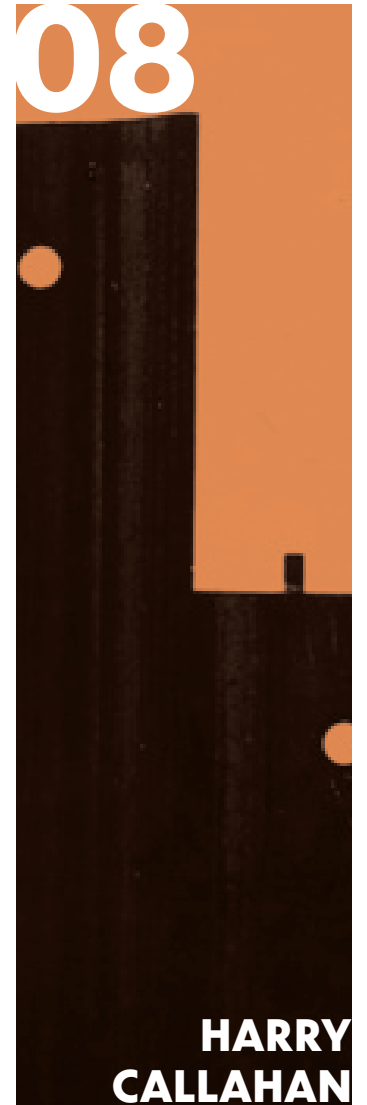
**TODROS  
GELLER**

**JUST LOOK AT THAT  
FACE**  
by  
Nick Lowe



**GERTRUDE  
ABERCROMBIE**

**THE RIGHT AMOUNT  
OF NOT RIGHT**  
by  
Courtney Barnett



**HARRY  
CALLAHAN**

**THE SPACE BETWEEN  
SPACE**  
by  
Questlove

## ON VIEW

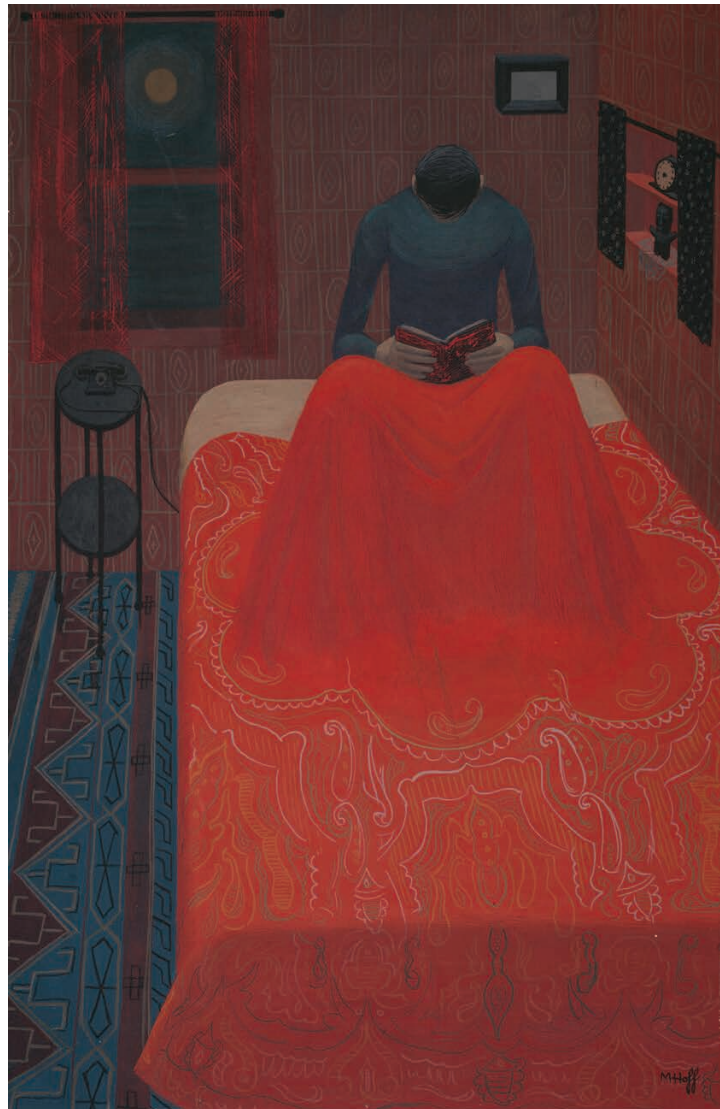
### MARGO HOFF

Arts of the Americas  
Gallery 263

#### FAR AWAY AND UP CLOSE

by LESLIE FEIST

Those blood red sheets. So striking. This part of the composition was the first thing that caught my eye when entering the gallery. From afar, assumed it was an abstract painting. That's part of its genius



Murder Mystery, 1945

for me. The image flipped the script on how I normally look at a painting. It's not like Monet's waterlilies where you take in the whole warm fuzziness of a defined subject, then see how the creative sausage was made by closely inspecting the canvas. He's abstract up close, formalist far away. But here, with Murder Mystery, the Hoff experience is more like a slow camera-lens focus from something you think is simple and defined into strange complexity underneath.

Something is coming for this person from under the bed. The monster is real. Is the tiny statue under the clock on the bedside shelf some sort of totem to keep the bad spirits away. Does this person know something is coming for them? Is it a murder mystery novel, or perhaps a journal that features a confession? The painting and the title feel pretty straight forward, but I love how Hoff fills it with subtle danger. Just like what may or not be under that blood red sheet.

When one of the curator pointed out to me that the painting's frame of Hoff's Magic Bubbles is marked by a variety of circular stains that seem mysteriously deliberate. It's as if bubbles had broken the fourth wall of the painting, entered into our collective "living space," then disappeared on contact with the "window" between different worlds.

I couldn't help but think about how paintings, images, photographs, songs, etc. emerge from some ephemeral burst of inspiration and creation, then suddenly they have a whole living life of their own. They detach themselves from their creator and the tools that helped them to manifest.

This piece is full of a lot of curious contradictions. It's playful but also a bit still and cold. It's a pretty universal memory most of us have, but seems completely particular to the children in the painting. It has a very light, pastel color palette, but is rendered in an empty, gray space. Are these creepy children in some horror film about a mad scientist doing toxic bubble experimentation on his own children? Perhaps. Is it just a recollection of a mother. I can't quite put my finger on how I feel when I look at this painting and that give me a jolt. It's an equally



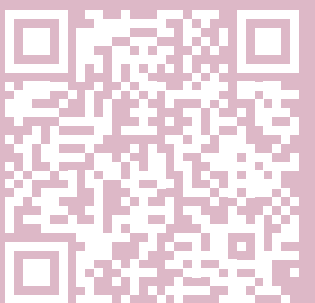
Magic Bubbles, about 1947

haunting and comforting image. That's why this image floats into my mind from time to time.

Dalí and Magritte get all the surrealist limelight, but female visionaries like Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, and Margo Hoff deserve to be mentioned in the same breath. I'm so glad I dug a bit deeper into the AIC collection and found more of Hoff's work. While she came from Oklahoma, her aesthetic is pure Chicago. Bold and so very powerful.

## OFF VIEW

explore more from this artist



## ON VIEW

### TODROS GELLER

Arts of the Americas  
Gallery 263

#### JUST LOOK AT THAT FACE

by NICK LOWE

Art isn't always for you. Well, that's not totally true. It's all a matter of timing. Right time, right place sort of thing. I'm sure if I had looked upon this Todros Geller painting during some school trip as a silly young lad, I would've just shrugged indifferently, then snuck off to a corner to eat a chocolate bar I

had smuggled into the museum. But now that I've got some year on me, the face on that canvas that's staring out at me holds my attention. Those eyes hold my attention. It's the right time and the right place for me to see this.

When I first came to America, I was so familiar with its music and movies and television and culture, it felt a bit familiar. Like England on steroids with less old men wearing bowler hats. I can't even imagine how "stranger in a strange land" the chap in this painting felt.

I see that face and wonder what that man is thinking. He's navigating the new world he resides in, but feels like he lives in the shadows. The mad bustle of 1920s America is bathed in optimistic sunshine in the background, but a shadow hangs over this man. Literally and figuratively. I can only relate a tiny bit to that alienating experience. And I want to know more about this fellow. It's the right time for me.

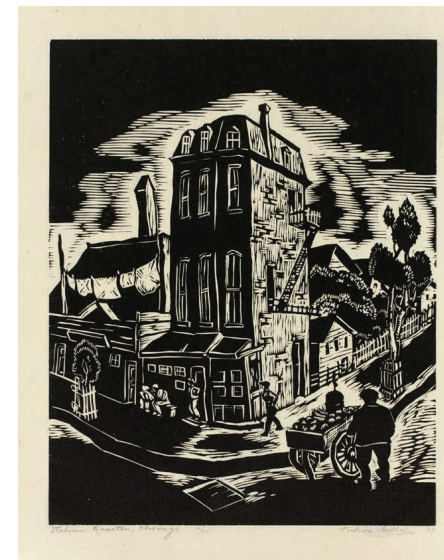


Strange Worlds, 1928

Years ago on a particularly dreary day, I found myself wandering the galleries of The National Gallery listening to an audio tour. When I was standing in front of one Van Gogh's sunflowers, the audio guide was explaining how the impressionists and post-impressionists (like Van Gogh) were obsessed with all the Japanese prints that were all the rage. Those bold shapes no doubt influenced his brushwork and thick shapes.

When I saw these linocut prints done by Geller in the 1930s, my art brain drew a straight back to that audio tour and I saw how past generations pass down their process and the later generations do their own version. You see the Japanese wood block influence. You see that big of Van Gogh sense of framing and perspective. Throw in a bit of Geller's Russia by way of Ukraine sense of folk art and you've got something unique.

If I may be so bold as to speak for all artists from my own songwriter and producer perspective...we're all just trying to do something simple and direct. I've found that the complexity and the nuance seems to happen after the fact and almost by accident. All that history and detail and gravitas is hardwired inside the creator whether they know it or not. If they're being



Italian Quarters, Chicago, 1935



Chicago Towers, 1937

honest with themselves and their work, it just comes out naturally as almost a byproduct of the nuts and bolts work of it.

Geller made some amazing black and white images of his time and place for his time and place, but look closely and you'll see a bit of everything and everyone that came before him.

## OFF VIEW

explore more from this artist



## ON VIEW

### GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE

Arts of the Americas  
Gallery 263

#### THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF NOT RIGHT

by COURTNEY BARNETT

I spend most of my time in hotel rooms. When you first begin touring and everything single experience is shiny and new and everything is novel. I think it hit me sooner than most, but after my first two months on the road, everything began to look the same, no matter where I was.

Hotel rooms are filled with familiar things set up in a familiar way to give you a calm, familiar feeling. I appreciate the effort that goes into creating these kinds of spaces. I learned to the deal with the exhaustion of

mentally switching my “home” night after night by trying to be genuinely curious about each environment I was in. Coffee maker by the bathroom sink. Plastic laundry bags clipped to hangers in the closet. Mini bar fridge. Ice bucket and plastic cups. Hotel stationary and pen.

With Abercrombie’s *The Past and the Present*, I get the impression that she sometimes felt like a traveler in her own life and past. I can relate. Sometimes I catch myself and ask “am I in the moment or am I an observer?” Any hotel room can feel surreal, but so can the spaces that you know and inhabit for years. Even your own memories. That’s a rather strange thought, but I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one. When I return home from a tour, I know I should feel comfortable. But sometimes after that time and distance away from my place, it looks as unfamiliar as new hotel room.



The Past and the Present, 1945

Salvador Dalí painted a burning giraffe. That’s pretty bold stuff. But in my heart of hearts I know that unless I’m dreaming or on some bad drug trip, a fire and a giraffe are two things I don’t expect to see mixing in front of my eyeballs anytime soon. With Abercrombie’s *Leaves and Shell*, I run into leaves, shells, pins, and caterpillars on the regular. Maybe not caterpillars so much, but enough. All these things are normal, unsurprising, everyday things. And yet somehow in this context, in this composition, with these colors, they all look like I’m looking through a telescope at the surface an alien planet.

The flesh tones of the table are rather odd and delightfully unsettling. It reminds me of the very 1960s color palette of my gran’s bathroom back in the suburbs of Sydney. I’m sure it’s a pretty universal experience to look at the house of a relative and be astounded by not only all the time they’ve spent there, but by all the time of the previous owners. So this painting takes me back on a very personal place.

There’s also a very children’s book feel to this work that I like a whole lot. Like a dark Disney film from an alternate universe. These painting give me that feeling of looking at the world through a child’s



Leaves and Shell, 1957

eyes. Everything is new and strange and exciting. There have been a ton of works of art that make me see things from a new perspective, but few that have given me that felt sense that I’m a kid again trying to make sense of the world.

I’ve read that Abercrombie was a true eccentric who walked about in witches hats and hung out with jazz musicians. She not only wanted to paint things in a different way, she wanted to live a different way. Her work guides my eye to now see everything that seems so familiar in a slightly different way.

## OFF VIEW

explore more from this artist



## ON VIEW

# HARRY CALLAHAN

Photography  
and Media  
Gallery 1

## THE SPACE BETWEEN SPACE

by QUESTLOVE

There's a tired old jazz saying that "all the meaning is *between* the notes." Yes, it's the kind of thing that makes you roll your eyes. But every cliché is just a universal truth that's taken on a collective boredom.

So let's tie that jazz saying to Harry Callahan's *Lakefront Fence*. It's very sparse. It's very abstract. If it wasn't for the

title, one wouldn't be wrong in thinking that they were just looking at a city skyline with very square pigeons perching on a practically invisible telephone line. But if you give it a moment, you'll find all the meaning is in the negative space and things "between the notes."

That darkness and the negative space at play are extraordinary. They can put you in the literal space of the lakefront, take you somewhere inside, or take you to a whole new adventure very far away. It's a rich and a blank canvas at the same time.

That "meaning between the notes" is the true art that's happening. This photograph is a static, constant thing, but all the change and creation and energy that's going on is all in the heart of the viewer.



Lakefront Fence, c. 1947

And now we go from lots of space to almost no space at all. *Collage* is so dense and jam-packed full of ideas, it becomes overwhelming. Personally, my eyes dart around the whole image, looking for clues that'd indicate a theme beyond the "exploration of the anatomy of the face." Then, after a minute or two I succumb to art critic eye fatigue and the whole thing becomes one of those magic eye posters.

And that's when it gets interesting. My eyes begin to play tricks on me. The color photographs within the composition begin to gel into a single shape and start a dialogue with the black and white images. It's a beautiful mess of a conversation.

Sometimes you need everything and the kitchen sink to make a point. It's all of matter of knowing the right time and the right place to use a maximalist aesthetic to achieve maximum emotional impact. I don't know if this composition would have worked with more negative space. Or only black and white photographs. It's perfectly balanced. Ordered and random at the same time.

I mentioned in the previous section that the meaning of a piece lies somewhere in the spaces between the physical



Collage, 1956/57

work. You may not be able to see those spaces just yet in this one, but keep looking. Look at it. Take it in. Then walk away. Come back and look a little closer. Those tiny doorways are there and ready to be opened. Keep your eyes peeled and they'll reveal themselves to you. It's all part of Mr. Callahan's plan and it's a wonderful plan to follow.

## OFF VIEW

explore more from this artist



## OUR CONTRIBUTORS



**LESLIE FEIST** is a singer and songwriter from Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada. She performs as a solo artist under the name Feist and also as a member of Broken Social Scene. Her studio albums, *Let It Die*, released in 2004, and *The Reminder*, released in 2007, were critically acclaimed and commercially successful, selling over 2.5 million copies. Her sixth studio album, *Multitudes*, will be realsed on April 27th on Interscope Records.



**NICK LOWE** is an English singer-songwriter, musician and producer. A noted figure in power pop and new wave, Lowe has recorded a string of well-reviewed solo albums. He is best known for the songs “Cruel to Be Kind” (a US Top 40 single) and “I Love the Sound of Breaking Glass” (a top 10 UK hit), as well as his production work with Elvis Costello, Graham Parker, The Damned, and Wreckless Eric.



**COURTNEY BARNETT** is an Australian singer, songwriter, and musician known for her deadpan singing style and witty, rambling lyrics. Her debut album, *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*, was released in 2015 to widespread acclaim. Barnett’s latest studio album, *Things Take Time, Take Time*, was released in November 2021.



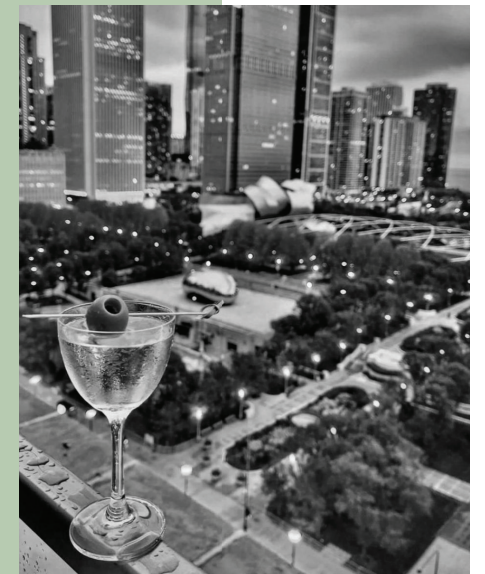
**QUESTLOVE** is an American musician, record producer, disc jockey, filmmaker, music journalist, and actor. He is the drummer and joint frontman (with Black Thought) for the hip hop band the Roots. He is the co-founder of the websites Okayplayer and OkayAfrica. Additionally, he is an adjunct professor at the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at New York University.

## ON/OFF SECOND SATURDAY TOURS

Experience the works featured in the month’s On/Off issue in-person with a bespoke tour led by one of AIC’s curators **every second Saturday from 3-5pm**. The two-hour guided journey will feature the on-view items as well as a private viewing of the off-view works exclusive to the On/Off tours.

For those interested in a post-tour discussion with your fellow tour members, companion, or date there is an option to add an artistic nightcap across the way at **Cindy’s Rooftop** atop **The Chicago Athletic Association**. This tour option includes...

- **Special reserved seating with Millenium Park view**
- **One mixologist-created cocktail inspired by the works featured on the tour**
- **One starter of your choice**



	MEMBERS	PUBLIC
<b>TOUR</b>	\$30	\$60 (includes General Admision)
<b>TOUR + CINDY’S ROOFTOP</b>	\$60	\$90

Visit [artic.edu/visit/join-a-tour](http://artic.edu/visit/join-a-tour) for more information

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OCTOBER ..... PAINTERS  
NOVEMBER ..... SCULPTORS  
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