

SLEEK



SUMMER 2016

OLYMPIA SCARRY
Claire Barrow – Ed Fornieles – Artists as Curators
New Tendency – The SLEEK Fifty



EU 10 € CH 13 CHF DK 75 DKR UK 10 £ USA/OTHERS 15 US\$

Nº50

TRAINING LIKE AN
ATHLETE, fusing art and
nature, and curating
exhibitions about Switzerland
– it's all in a day's work for
Olympia Scarry

Running With It

Interview HANS BUSSERT
Photography BENEDICT BRINK
Production FRANK SEIDLITZ



Coat: PRADA, Top and jeans: OLYMPIA'S OWN



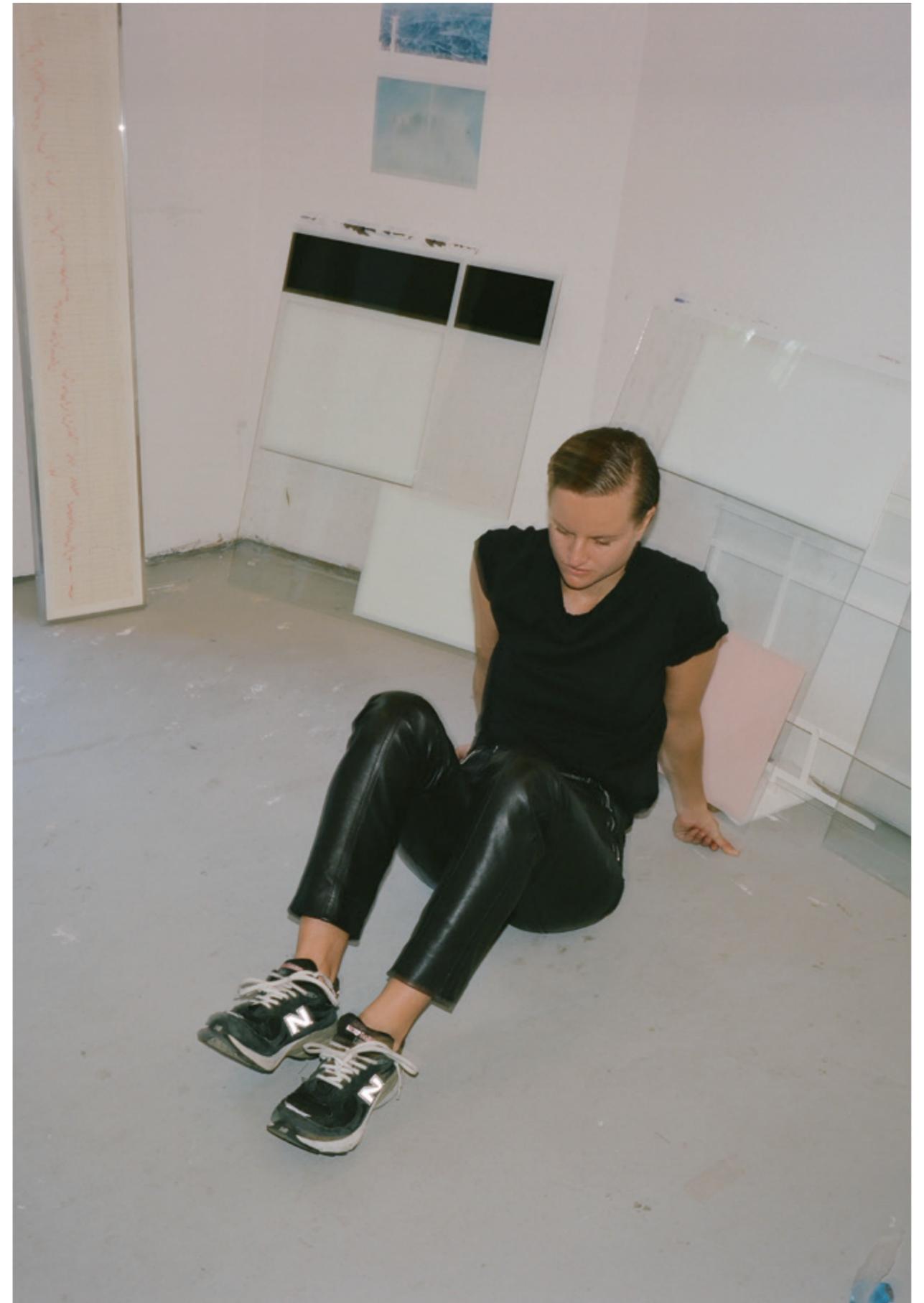
Both pages Shirt: CALVIN KLEIN, Trousers: CÉLINE



Ever eager to take up a challenge, SLEEK travelled to *Dallas* to watch *Olympia Scarry* hit the tracks with four-time Olympic gold medallist *Michael Johnson*.

A few days later, the *Swiss-American* artist welcomed us to her *Harlem* studio. There we met an ambitious creative who doesn't let anything get in the way of her work. What follows is a conversation about the merits of keeping fit and retaining *focus while being constantly on the run*.

Shirt: CALVIN KLEIN, Trousers: LOUIS VUITTON





We just followed you to Dallas, where you trained with Michael Johnson, the four-time Olympic gold medallist. How did this happen?

I recently took up running. I started in September and I haven't stopped since: every day, once a day, I run a short distance. Then Nike reached out and asked if I'd be interested in training with Michael Johnson in Texas, as if I was preparing for the Rio Olympics. So I accepted, and here I am testing my potential.

And has running influenced your practice, too?

My practice is cerebral, so shifting my attention to something physical is necessary. It helps my practice in that it releases chemicals that apparently make the brain focus. Therefore it's beneficial to both my sanity and my creativity.

So would you agree that art and sport have a special relationship?

I'm definitely interested in the history of aesthetic depictions of sport. One such work is German director Leni Riefenstahl's film about the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, "Olympia". Riefenstahl was commissioned to realise it by Hitler, and after the war she was condemned as a fellow traveller of the Nazi government. Nevertheless, Olympia remains critically acclaimed for its technical brilliance, not least its depiction of the African-American athlete Jesse Owens, who won four

What's the idea behind this technique?

I wanted to explore how technology is replacing the notion of the natural sublime. When you look at how the Romantics worked, it's very different from how the concept of nature is currently mediated. Caspar David Friedrich really got into nature, whereas today there seems to be some distance in our experience of it. Despite this, digital images of nature still proliferate via the internet, and this distancing has created what I refer to as a technological sublime.

So it's both mediation and distance?

Yes. It might seem unfathomable, but a good parallel is watching the news: because there's this physical gap between you and the event you're watching or being told about, it can be hard to connect. Nonetheless, you still have a connection to it because of television; it's just not the same as being a participant or a witness – you're not directly involved. And that's how I think about the technological sublime. It's a force that at once reinforces and displaces our sense of being in the world.

Nature and technology are dominant themes in your work. Yet they appear to be absent in your recent project, "The End is The Beginning is the End the Beginning", a series of crying Madonnas.

"I want to explore how technology is replacing the notion of the natural sublime"

gold medals at the event. Despite its provenance, what I find fascinating about this film is its portrayal of the body and the diversity of its forms. Having seen it, I created works whereby I selected a collection of stills featuring athletes' hands from the film, and produced a series of ultra-violet studies that were printed on prosthetic plastic. So yes, there seems to be this connection between the two disciplines.

And in terms of art, what else are you working on?

I simultaneously work on a number of different projects. For instance, right now I'm creating video pieces using recordings of extreme elemental conditions out at sea. At the same time I'm making large scale, abstract landscapes, which I'm then printing on paper. The source material for this work is found footage from surveillance cameras in nature.

These are the works that we can see hanging on your studio wall. From afar they are quite difficult to make out, but when you get up close you can see minute details.

Yes, there are different hues and saturations, and there's also pixelation. But the pixels are quite large, almost like brushstrokes in a way. It's as visually abstract as it is specific in the title, which denotes: metres above sea level, wind speed, temperature, time and date.

It's funny you say that, because these are also found images. And actually, distance here is important, because the sculptures are by anonymous individuals, as are the photos. They all elicit a very human action – crying. Therefore, you can feel the emotion despite being removed from the event. "The End" is about history repeating itself, infinite cycles. I guess the access points are the tears, which are relevant, and a reaction to what's going on in the world today.

Some other curious objects in your oeuvre are the neck pillows cast from rubber. They're such weird objects. What's their significance?

For me, neck pillows adhere to the market of endless and mindless travel. They're an emblem of survival, a modern day prosthetic, like a sculpture for our time. I've never used one though.

Is it also a nod to the artist's lifestyle these days?

No, it seems like our society in general that is constantly travelling – a life lived in transit.

You seem to still travel a lot. How important is it to get out and about?

There's a lot to be said for an occasional geographical; it changes your ideas. When I'm at the studio I'm on my own. So it's good for me to get out and be with other people. It helps me get differ-

“It seems like our society in general is constantly travelling. It’s a life lived in transit.”

ent perspectives. That includes artists, naturally. But through my work I also have conversations with people from different fields, such as marine biologists, conservationists, police officers and writers. When you’re working with varying subjects and materials, you interact with interesting characters.

Let’s talk about “Elevation 1049”, the curatorial project that you started three years ago in Gstaad that’s happening again in 2017. When it began, it was your first time working as a curator. How’s it different to being an artist?

In a way it’s a continuation of both. The lines are blurred. They feed each other. It’s inspiring and humbling at the same time. I guess it’s the best of both worlds.

The debut show featured 33 artists, including Pamela Rosenkranz, Christian Marclay and Olaf Breuning, who are all Swiss. In a time of supranational biennales, this seems a little odd. Why this approach? And what does it mean to be Swiss in the 21st century?

Actually, one important principle that guided the first edition was the idea that the landscape directed our curatorial focus. We wanted to question what it meant to be from a certain place, and whether that still means something today. I was born in Switzerland but I didn’t grow up there, so for me, Elevation 1049 was also about trying to find an identity while discovering whether nationality is even important anymore. As such, using Switzerland as a concept to ground this exploration seemed useful, as it’s always had this reputation of being neutral. At the time I was also immersed in the work of Emma Kunz. She was a Swiss healer and artist who believed that one must nourish and treat oneself medically with elements taken from where you were born. This was in the 1950s, and I was interested to see whether her ideas were still relevant today. With Elevation we are trying to bring back this notion of site-specificity by engaging with the landscape and by taking our time

The artists at the first Elevation were invited to create such unique works in the Gstaad landscape. Are you approaching the 2017 edition in the same way?

The first exhibition was comprised mainly of site-specific installations. But this next one will focus on durational works, sound in-

stallations and performances, as the mountains lend themselves so much to sound – through echoes, refractions with the ice and also absorptions with snow.

The second part of our photo shoot takes place in and around your studio in Harlem. What’s it like to be working here as an artist?

Harlem is inspiring. I actually made a series of sculptures out of discarded chicken bones that I collected there. I cast them in bronze and gold, and named them after the streets they were found on, some which of are named after Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Marcus Garvey. I used to live in Harlem, but now I just have a studio there. In a strange way it feels like it’s still an untouched part of New York, even though it’s in Manhattan and it’s so close to it all. There are still social issues that need to be addressed, so it’s still rough but great at the same time.

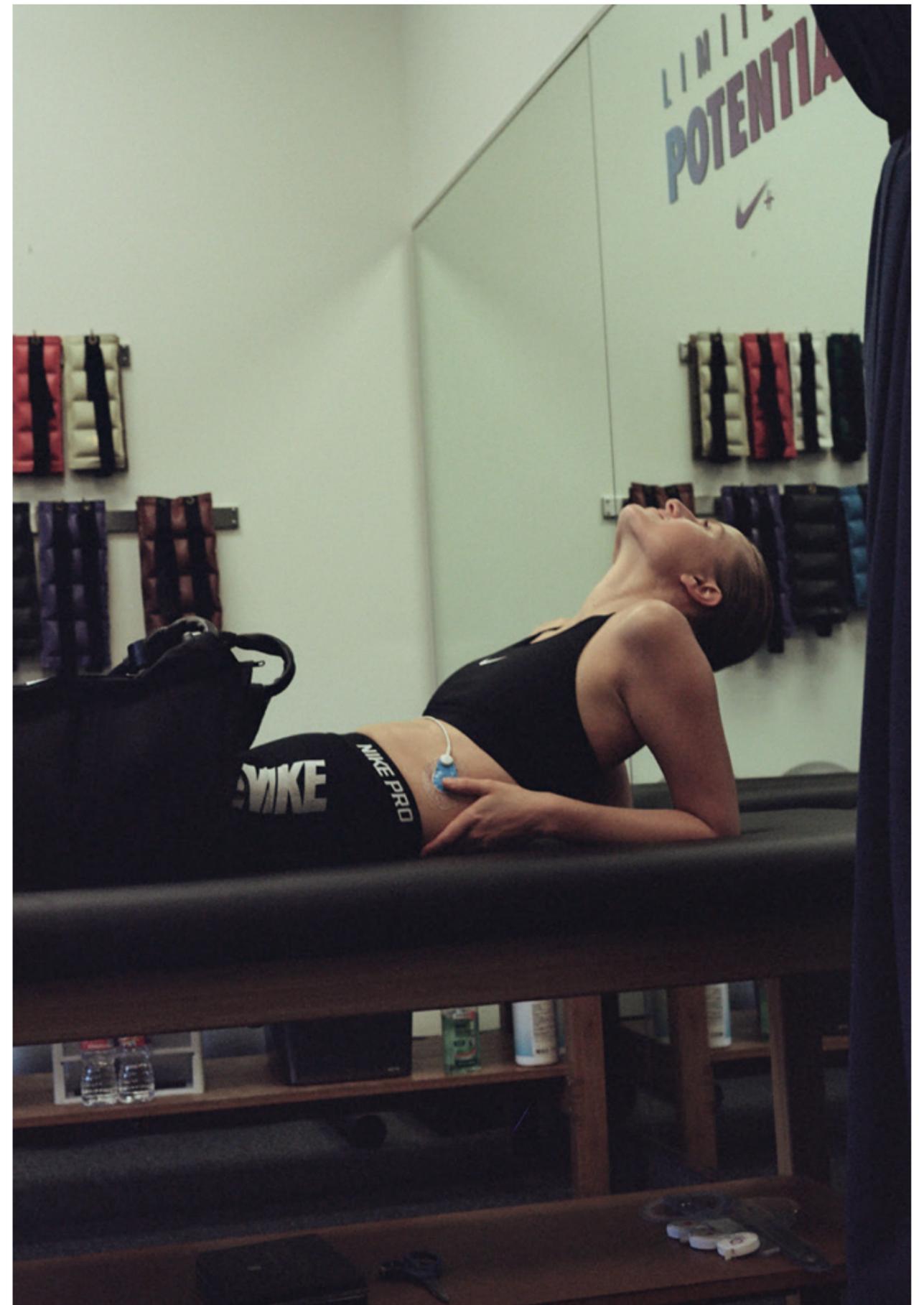
I thought former New York mayor Rudi Giuliani helped rebuild the area in the late Nineties?

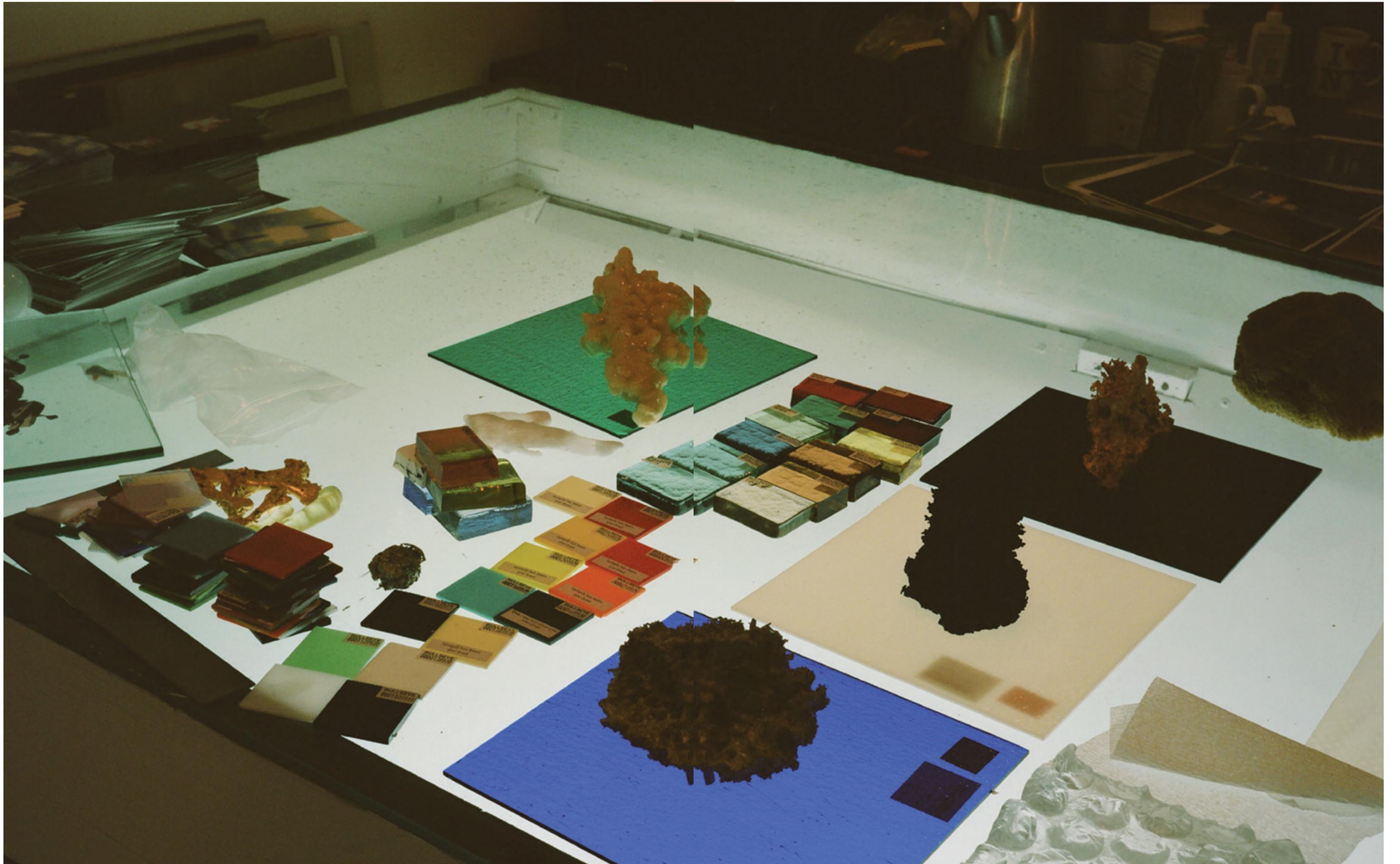
Ha! He only got as far as 125th Street, and I actually told him that when I met him! Of course, it’s better than it used to be. Marcus Garvey Park used to be extremely dangerous, apparently the most dangerous park in the city. Today it’s safer, but there is still a lot of poverty in the area.

Lastly, you seem like a natural in front of the camera. But how would you describe your everyday style?

Functional. Most days I’m in the the studio, so I wear corduroy pants, a T-shirt, sneakers and my glasses, if you must know! —

olympiascarry.com
elevation1049.org







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