



**REAL**  
**ART WAYS**

**Alex Dolores Salerno**  
*Greenness*

March 21, 2024 - May 19, 2024

## About the Exhibit

In Naoki Higashida's bestselling book "The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism" Higashida answers the question, "Would you give us an example of something people with autism really enjoy?" by explaining "we do take pleasure in one thing that you probably won't be able to guess, namely, making friends with nature." He elaborates that "the greenness of nature is the lives of plants and trees. Green is life". In addition to being the lives of plants and trees, greenness is also another word for gullibleness, naivety, lack of experience, and other concepts that are often used against autistic people who are perceived and pathologized as childlike and incapable. *Greenness*, however, grounds itself in autistic and neurodivergent sensibilities through its focus on sensory regulation and sensory exploration.

Spanning installation, soft sculpture, video, and photography, Alex Dolores Salerno's first solo exhibition, *Greenness*, draws from the artist's own autistic experience of nature, and the sense of "access intimacy" (as coined by Mia Mingus) that they feel through the work of disabled ancestor Mel Baggs (sie/hir pronouns). Salerno dedicates the exhibition to Baggs and incorporates hir language and wisdom in multiple works. In addition to hir extensive autism and disability advocacy, Baggs also wrote about hir connection to and engagement with the earth as affirmation of hir existence and place in this world. While being in relationship with nature can be particularly supportive for many autistic people, the artist argues that it is an access need for everyone, just as ramps, ASL interpretation, audio description and other accessibility practices are necessary for us all to live together in community.

Salerno further explores greenness through their use of the color "OSHA safety green" throughout the gallery. Utilizing this federal standard color that indicates the location of safety equipment or information, the concept of safe working conditions is expanded to include environments and bodymind experiences that might otherwise be overlooked or disregarded. Rejecting socially constructed and restrictive ways of engaging in art contexts, our workplaces and our environments, *Greenness* invites touch, stimming, rest, and slowness. By intertwining these actions and ways of being with the concept of workplace safety, the exhibition makes apparent how capitalism and its destructive demand for continuous productivity, production, and increasingly fast paced consumerism estranges us from both the earth and our needs.

*For purchase inquiries, please contact:  
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**Touch the exhibition freely.  
Leave the objects as you  
found them when you're done.  
Touch with care and let them  
care for you.**

## **About the Artist**

Alex Dolores Salerno (b. 1994, homeland of the Nacotchtank, Anacostan and Piscataway people colonially known as Washington D.C.) is an interdisciplinary artist based in Lenapehoking, colonially known as Brooklyn, NY. Informed by queer-crip experience, community, and culture, they work to critique standards of productivity, 24/7 society, notions of normative embodiment, and the commodification of rest. Salerno received their MFA from Parsons School of Design and their BS from Skidmore College. They have exhibited at the Museum für Moderne Kunst (Frankfurt), Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo de Castellón (Castellón), ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts (Brussels), Art Windsor-Essex (Windsor), The 8th Floor, the Ford Foundation Gallery (NYC), among others. They have been awarded a Wynn Newhouse Award (2022) and an Art Matters Foundation Artist2Artist Fellowship (2023). Recent publications include *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* and *Art in America*. Salerno has been an artist in residence at Art Beyond Sight's Art & Disability Residency (2019-2020), the Artist Studios Program at the Museum of Arts and Design (2021), the Visual Artist AIRspace Residency at Abrons Arts Center (2022-2023), and they are currently in residence at BRIClab: Contemporary Art Residency Program at BRIC (2023-2024).

## **About the Real Art Awards**

The Real Art Awards is an annual opportunity for emerging artists living in New England, New Jersey, or New York. The open call, offered with no entry fees to artists, attracts hundreds of applicants each year, of which 6 artists are chosen. Selected artists receive a solo exhibition, with a commissioned essay, professional documentation, and a cash prize of \$2,500. The 2023 Real Art Awards was juried by artist/educator Aki Sasamoto, artist/writer/curator Devin Kenny, and Real Art Ways Executive Director Will K. Wilkins. The 2023 Real Art Awards is supported in part by awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Edward C. & Ann T. Roberts Foundation.



## Sensory Bag (green and gold)

2024

*Plush and Satin Polyester Fabrics, Painted Utility Hooks, Ear Defenders, Sun Glasses, Hand Sanitizer, Rocks, Chamomile, and Various Stim Toys*

*Sensory Bag (green and gold)* is a plush bag made of soft and silky fabric and uses the colors green and gold as a way to connote and question concepts of nature and value. The bag functions as both an art object and as a sensory tool for viewers to rummage through and use however they like. Salerno fills *Sensory Bag (green and gold)* with items that one might expect to find in a sensory bag or in a sensory room such as ear defenders and stim toys, as well as other objects that pertain to the exhibition. Arts venues and organizations have been slow to consider and implement this form of access despite it being a relatively small investment. By providing venues with a sensory bag as an artwork Salerno aims to prioritize touch, invite dialogue on autistic and neurodivergent aesthetics and wisdom, and educate venues that sensory access can support and welcome many.



## Sensory Basket (burls)

2024

*Metal Basket and Pieces of Maple Burl Wood*

*Sensory Basket (burls)* derives formally and conceptually from sensory bags. The work however reconsiders what is typically thought of as a sensory tool. Rather than mass produced objects such as stim toys, small pieces of textured burl wood are placed in a green metal basket to be picked up and used as a stim toy, fidget tool or however the viewer chooses. The combination of the wood and metal encourages a sensory relationship with nature while expanding the concept of nature to include humans and our creations.



## **Lap Pad (rocks turn into sand in the ocean)**

2024

Polar Fleece, Embroidery Floss, Polyester Batting,  
Zipper and Part of echo's Weighted Blanket

## **Lap Pad (disconnection is an illusion)**

2024

Polar Fleece, Embroidery Floss, Polyester Batting,  
Zipper and Part of echo's Weighted Blanket

*Lap Pad (rocks turn into sand in the ocean)* and *Lap Pad (disconnection is an illusion)* are lap pads made with printed and embroidered fleece. A lap pad is a tool for sensory and emotional regulation and is essentially a small weighted blanket for your lap. Each lap pad has one side printed with a photograph taken by the artist and the other side is meticulously hand embroidered with text from disability advocate, artist, and blogger Mel Baggs as a way to honor and study hir work, and be in conversation with Baggs through sensory experiences after hir passing. *Lap Pad (rocks turn into sand in the ocean)* features a photograph of the artist stacking rocks on top of their leg at Jacob Riis Beach. This image is paired with text that describes Baggs also stacking rocks on hir body and how rocks affirmed hir place in this world despite the people who denied hir humanity as a nonspeaking multiply disabled person. *Lap Pad (disconnection is an illusion)* features two mushrooms found unrooted, revealing their connection at the base of their stems, that the artist spotted while on a walk in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, NY. The reverse side details the unbreakable bond we have to the earth as humans even when we are made to feel disconnected.





## Rocks for Mel (Autispeak)

2024

*Fleece, Polyester Fiber Filling, Glass Beads, Bench, Rolling Metal Tray, Dirt from Right Outside, Blue Marbles, Rocks, Hand Sanitizer, Audio Recording of the Artist Reading Mel Baggs' Poem "To My Friend Who Is Hurting" and a Printed Transcript on an Acrylic Stand*

*Rocks for Mel (Autispeak)* is an installation as well as an imagined conversation and rock exchange between the artist and the late disability advocate, artist, and blogger Mel Baggs that prioritizes connection through sensory experiences. A photograph of small rocks that the artist placed one by one in a pile at Jacob Riis Beach is printed on fleece and made into a large pillow with soft and heavy weighted blanket filling. The rock pillow sits on a bench and is accompanied by a poem by Baggs via headphones, spoken by the artist. A printed transcript is placed on a rolling metal tray that holds dirt from outside the gallery along with objects arranged in the dirt. The poem titled "To My Friend Who Is Hurting" narrates the connection between two autistic people without the use of language (spoken, typed or otherwise) but instead through the exchange of and interaction with rocks.



## effleurage

2024

*Maple Burl Wood and Hardware*

*effleurage* is an installation of burl wood that has been prepared for touch. A burl is an irregular growth on a tree caused by injury or infection, but because of its unique grain patterns it's highly valued for its beauty. In this way, burl wood can be understood as a representation of the joy, beauty and value of disability. The burls have been sanded to remove sharp spikes to invite touch. Rather than discarding or reducing the bumpy outside caps of the burls, as is often done for woodworking, this textural quality of the wood is highlighted. The title, *effleurage*, comes from the name of a massage technique which in French means "to touch lightly on". Effleurage consists of soothing stroking motions often used to warm up the muscles and offers direction for how to interact with the wood. Through the reference to touch and the body in both the title and materiality of the burl wood, *effleurage* encourages strengthening and embracing the connections between our bodies and the land through touch- one of the most overlooked and often restricted senses in fine art contexts.



## Crash Pad (OSHA Safety Green)

2024

*Bedframe, Mattress Toppers, Sherpa Fleece, Paint, Bed Rail, Baskets including echo's Watermelon Basket, the Artist's Mother's Collected and Dried Leaves, and Robin's Garden*

*Crash Pad (OSHA Safety Green)* is an installation that originates from the artist's experience at home, specifically their enjoyment and sensory experience of spending time on the floor and their experience of unrelenting fatigue. The artist places a memory foam mattress topper on top of their bed frame brought from home, and a second topper is placed right next to it on the ground. The bed frame is painted in the color "OSHA safety green", a federal standard color that indicates safety equipment or information. The beginning of the title, *Crash Pad*, references large padded mats typically aimed at kids with sensory needs as well as a crash in the context of chronic illness, a period of heightened inability or exacerbated symptoms often after over-exertion. Despite being necessary for many, spaces of rest, particularly comfortable ones, are often hard to find in arts venues as well as in work spaces. In addition to rest, the bed frame extends an invitation to touch. The mattress toppers are covered in fuzzy green sherpa fleece, and on top of the bed is an iPad playing *Robin's Garden* depicting a garden scene. A bed rail is attached to the bed frame and built into its base are storage cubbies which contain baskets of dried leaves collected and gifted to the artist by their mother. Through proposing rest, softness and connecting to the earth on a sensory level as necessary for a holistic sense of safety, Salerno prompts us to dream what work might look like in a world that doesn't fleece us of our time.

## Robin's Garden

2024

*Video (6 minutes 33 seconds),  
Ipad, Memory Foam Ipad Stand and Sherpa Fleece*



*Robin's Garden* is a video that embraces slowness as a way to deepen relationships with our environment and reclaim rest time. The video shows a scene of a backyard garden crammed between Brooklyn apartment buildings yet thriving. The artist spent 2023 watching the small but lively garden as it was cared for by a loved one. On top of the wind, birds and city noise is a verbal description of the scene that serves as both accessibility and aesthetics. Spoken slowly in a whisper, the description blends together with the soundscape creating an effect reminiscent of ASMR videos intended to induce sleep. Similarly to how these ASMR videos may be experienced on a laptop or phone screen in one's bed, *Robin's Garden* is displayed on an iPad on a pillow-like stand to be watched wherever the viewer chooses. Through slow pacing and extended time spent with the same seemingly uneventful scene, the artist draws attention to ways that access to nature, space and time have become a luxury to many.

Photography credit: Francisco echo Eraso



***Real Art Ways* is a contemporary arts organization with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.**



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