SHADOW OF A DOUBT

MICHELLE LOPEZ
January 15–
April 19, 2026

Michelle Lopez: Shadow of a Doubt
January 15–April 19, 2026
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Shadow of a Doubt ...
a meditation on drawing

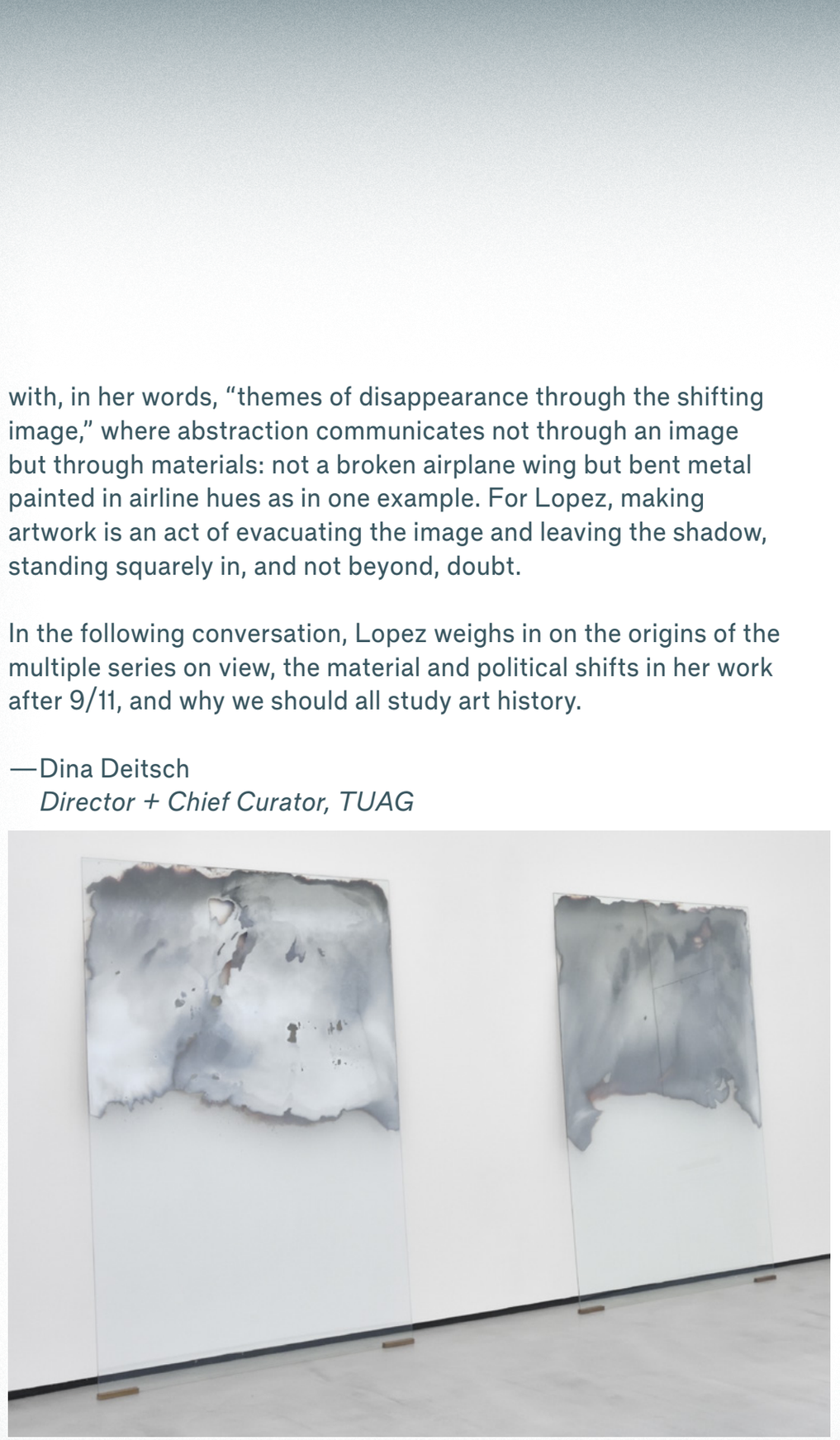
In Smoke Clouds*, I explored themes of disappearance through the shifting image within the material of silver nitrate (mirroring solution) poured onto large-scale architectural glass. My mirrored smoke clouds suspend an explosion—the residue of violence after a moment of destruction. This process, like all my work, originated from the drawing gesture of my body and also requires blind intuition, as I move the clear liquid of silver nitrate gesturally with an air pressure wand onto the large glass to form a cloud.*
—Michelle Lopez

TWO LEANING SHEETS of hazily mirrored glass, *Smoke Cloud VIII*, open the exhibition *Michelle Lopez: Shadow of a Doubt*, setting the stage for an unfolding of Michelle Lopez's practice over the past twenty years. She is best known for her large-scale sculptures of abstracted industrial materials—aluminum poles, architectural glass, steel sheets, metal scaffolding, and galvanized cable—which are crumpled, precariously balanced, and generally made vulnerable in surprising ways. In these works, Lopez has developed a visual lexicon forged from the history of minimalist sculpture that she has made anew through her own physical gestures—a bend, a lean, a pour—that echo the fragility and failures of systemic infrastructures that are meant to support us. For Lopez, these gestures—her body's own interaction with materials, be it sheet metal or even the invisible silver nitrate of *Smoke Cloud*—are acts of drawing, which she holds at the center of her practice.

Shadow of a Doubt presents three main bodies of work—*Blue Angels* (2011–12), *Rope Prop Reversal* (2019–25), and *Ghost Tresses* (2008/2023)—alongside works on paper and a new wall drawing, all showcasing her formal drawing practice for the first time. In doing so, the exhibition explores how Lopez engages with, in her words, "themes of disappearance through the shifting image," where abstraction communicates not through an image but through materials: not a broken airplane wing but bent metal painted in airline hues as in one example. For Lopez, making artwork is an act of evacuating the image and leaving the shadow, standing squarely in, and not beyond, doubt.

In the following conversation, Lopez weighs in on the origins of the multiple series on view, the material and political shifts in her work after 9/11, and why we should all study art history.

—Dina Deitsch
Director + Chief Curator, TUAG



Smoke Cloud VIII, 2016. Tempered architectural glass, ultraviolet light, tin, silver nitrate, varnish, and wood, 80 × 96 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Christophe Gaillard

DINA DEITSCH: Let's begin with drawing.

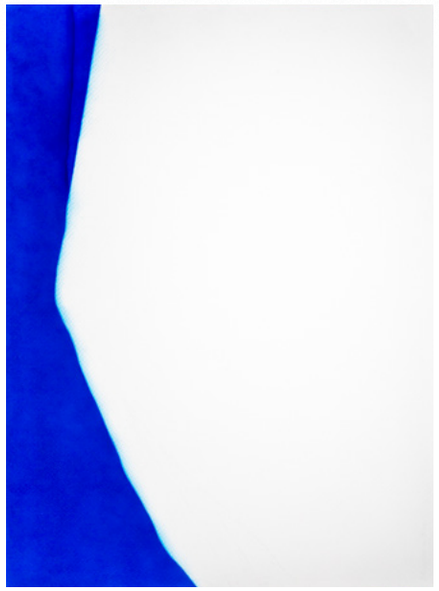
MICHELLE LOPEZ: I've always been attached to drawing as a haptic medium to connect to myself intuitively. But after making sculpture for a while, I was feeling that the gestural quality of the drawing—the movement—was getting lost with the shape of the fixed object. Before, I would sculpt objects out of clay and add found parts, molding and casting them. And then feeling the results were static. I was craving more flexibility in relationship to the process. So, drawing with my body very much runs through all of the work, even through *Blue Angels*, the rope pieces (*Rope Prop Reversal*), and also the *Smoke Cloud* pieces.

DD: The way you describe drawing as being centered in your body and gesture, both here and in your description of *Smoke Clouds*, reminds me of its connection to dance. In 2011, Helen Molesworth pulled these themes together in *Dance/Draw*, a fantastic exhibition at the ICA/Boston. In her opening text, she describes the dancer Trisha Brown's drawings as "an intelligence that emanates from her body," and goes on to note that both dance and drawing have a "privileged relationship to the body," in that they both come from the body's movement, and "offer a kind of intimacy between the maker and the final product." [1]

While I find this comparison incredibly accurate, especially in your work, the sculptures that you describe as emanating from this gestural act of drawing do not, at first, read as intimate. *Blue Angels*, for instance, are ten-foot-high folded sheets of metal, partially powder-coated, slumped against the wall. Intimate isn't the first word that comes to mind when you see them, but I think they are. Can you say more about that?

1 Helen Molesworth, "Dance/Draw: An Introduction," in *Dance/Draw* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2011), 11–12.

Blue Angel (Delta), 2012. Mirrored stainless steel, automative paint, and powder-coated aluminum, 120 × 36 × 24 in. Courtesy of the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photo: Heather Rasmussen



BLUE ANGEL study. Gouache and pencil on paper, 30 × 22 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Caitlin Lent

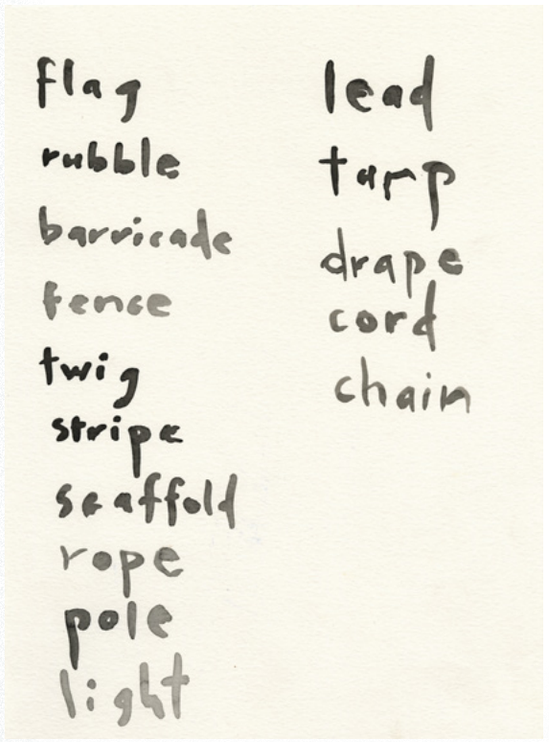
BLUE ANGEL study. Gouache and pencil on paper, 24 × 18 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Caitlin Lent

ML: The *Blue Angels* are made by me imprinting my body, dancing, and drawing onto the material itself when I fold, crumple, and bend the metal. When I was making those *Blue Angel* gouache drawings, I wasn't only thinking in relationship to the architecture but also using my body to make that line to find a bodily gesture. It's a similar thing when working with metal. Those gestures are kind of athletic and quick, and if I think too much about them, they become overwrought. If I physically overwork them, they lose the spirit. I wanted to see if I could get that shape in the same gesture at larger scale through sculptural means, with lightning-bolt directness through the body. So, intimacy within the work has been about me listening to what the piece wants and working with the material in order to express a kind of vulnerability.

DD: We often associate drawing with image-making. Maybe not something perfect, although there is plenty of hyperrealist graphite work out there or just basic life drawing, but even in the act of sketching, laying out an idea, giving first form to something in our heads. In many ways drawing is close to language, naming something observed.

Your drawings, like your sculptures, are effectively abstract, but not truly. Your sculptures have things from the world in them—a rope or flag or specific event—and the drawings, for the most part, are sketches for these sculptures. There's always a very clear link to something physical or *real*, if we can still use that term. In many ways, your mark-making feels linguistic—pointing to a thing or shared experience.

ML: I usually start thinking about my work through language. I create word lists of objects that are a part of a larger cultural landscape. I unpack the associations connected to those images. And then I start drawing with ink to find enough legibility in the line—when one bumps up with another in a series of relationships, political or otherwise, particularly with



Word List, 2019. Ink on paper, 9 × 12 in. Courtesy of the artist

Continuous Line, 2019. Powder-coated metal and pure lead, 135.5 × 55 × 84 in. Courtesy of the artist and ICA Philadelphia. Photo: Eric Sucar

House of Cards and *Ballast & Barricades*, and that extends to *Continuous Line*. It was really important that in each drawn line there'd be some quality in the line or a cultural register of a police barricade or a flag. So, yes, I spatialize my thoughts through drawing to see if they visually have any agency.

I think over time I've been contending with the problem of the image, and the title *Shadow of a Doubt* grounds the show in my suspicion of "the image" as a visual language. I've been trying to make the image more and more invisible, and have the content of the image be felt through the viewer's body. I mean, I start with my body manipulating the material, and then hope that alchemy is felt through the viewer's body.

Ghost Tresses are much older image-based pieces. They came from an older idea from 2005, but I went back to them recently because I felt I hadn't fully realized the idea of de-figuring a body with the scalped remains of hair.

As an undergrad at Barnard, I was a double major in English and Art History. So, I was steeped in narrative structure and character development. The way a character is revealed through language is deeply part of my sculptures—how the body language of a piece suggests meaning. In the hair pieces, it was the aftermath of an implicit violence.

Semiotics was a backdrop at the time [1990s]. A part of my process has absorbed that by really looking at language. With any symbols or objects I use, I try to deconstruct them as words and look into their cultural and political associations.

DD: I love that—the noun version of Richard Serra's verb list. Before we delve into Serra and how you've rethought his legacy, I want to stay with *Blue Angels* and their connection to image,

GHOST TRESSES IV (AKIRA FLOOR), 2023. Bronze and chrome, 3.5 × 16 × 14 in. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. Photo: Elon Schoenholz

Adventures in the Skin Trade, Deitch Projects, New York, September 22–October 27, 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects; Commonwealth and Council

or more so, to life events. While finished several years later, the series was a direct response to 9/11—a time when both of us were in New York and even in the same SoHo area. You were installing your show at Deitch Projects, which ultimately opened on September 22, 2001. Let's talk about that time, the shift it had on your practice and how *Blue Angels* emerged.

ML: I think 9/11 was that moment where I saw the break, where we drastically entered a different kind of reality both artistically and globally as a culture. Previously in art, I was steeped in the finish-fetish moment. I really was looking to Los Angeles artists like Charles Ray and John McCracken, where it felt like there was a certain kind of stability of the image. 9/11 was so traumatic for me. I didn't make work for a couple years and just started gravitating towards looking at debris and things that were broken. I wasn't interested in this perfect, clean object anymore. Work that I made prior to 9/11, like *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, consisted of self-contained, quaint sculptures that I spent a lot of time sanding and getting the finish just right. And none of that seemed to matter after 9/11, especially conceptually. It felt like more of an inward show. So, in a sense, the work naturally became more political because I just became more politicized.

World Trade Center Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, photograph. Archives of Michelle Lopez

Smoke Clouds attempts to translate 9/11 as this phenomenal, beautiful, and horrific sculptural moment in the sky. It was so epic. The experience of it was so in your face. I was installing the *Adventures in the Skin Trade* show in SoHo then, and I lived in Williamsburg at the time. Before I even knew what was happening, I actually went on the roof of my loft and took photos of the World Trade Center smoking, me being in full denial. And then I biked across the Williamsburg Bridge, and that's when I was like, holy shit.

DD: Politics have driven much of your work since that point. Trump's first election, for instance, yielded your rope work—very precarious shapes made out of thick metal or twine twisted into forms that seem to magically balance in space. They are very much lines in space, with an art-historical twist. *Three Rope Prop* [not in this show, but now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art] is a direct reference to Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969)—a floor work made out of very heavy leaning steel panels. You literally removed the weight—from the title and form—and left an outline of the panels in rope form. There is so much at play in this work. Can you unpack it for us?

ML: I've always tried to engage the sculptural conversation in relationship to monumentality and minimalism and abstraction, as a woman sculptor in a predominantly male field, although there were several women artists who I look up to: Beverly Pepper and Jackie Winsor, and of course I'm thinking about Eva Hesse. I wanted to respond differently from Hesse's post-minimalist approach with translucent resin and instead use

THREE ROPE PROP, 2023. Steel, 69 × 71 × 81 in. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. Photo: Nick Missel. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

the materiality of steel and lead, more industrial materials, in unexpected ways.

But when I started making *House of Cards*, the 2016 presidential election had just happened. I was really interested in creating a system on the verge of collapse, and it led to other projects like my *Ballast & Barricades* (2019) installation. In 2022, when I started going back to making these singular objects, I decided to lean more into Serra's *One Ton Prop* (*House of Cards*) and riff off the actual dimensions [four-feet square] and critique its crushing weight by working with the opposite of Corten steel and use the outlines of rope to create the same form. I wanted to make the sculpture the opposite of heavy and monumental and have flocked steel rope assemble magically into a familiar rising form. Defying gravity was important for me in sculpture.

I wanted the work to defy this crushing global moment through my bodily intervention of twisting metal rope and stacking them as ghosts to give the illusion of a monumental system.

I also had made some glass rope chandeliers in 2016 as I had wanted to invoke the invisible bodies of victims of violence in the United States, specifically doing research on lynching trees in the South. And the materiality of rope was part of that history. If I could renegotiate rope by reversing its function as something that resists like an underdog, I could offer agency in this whole other way that could give the illusion of redeeming our situation.

DD: Let's now go back to visibility—the shadows—and how you move around it as a visual artist. One consistent strategy in your practice involves sound, which you often use to replace an object. *Halyard*, which we installed as a twenty-foot aluminum pole in our sculpture court, sets us up to experience a huge flag—the pole, the rope, the halyard, and of course the rumbling and growing sound of the wind whipping a huge piece of fabric. But we never see it and are left with the feeling of the flag—and the enormous, overwhelming state of nationalism it implies. The *Blue Angels* even imply sound—the screech of those show planes is unmistakable. How did you think about sound as a sculptor?

ML: Sound is such a great way to take up space. Sound for me has always been about creating this ominous, invisible form of power through the landscape. I loved your reference to the Blue Angels rushing sonically through the sky. A lot of my sound pieces pierce the space with a kind of insistent, oppressive knocking.

DD: Oppressive knocking, I like that. The way that sound becomes physical in our bodies through a material echo and a constant reverberation. Much like minimalist sculpture but more so as a warning… something is coming and we better be prepared.

ML: Yes, like a ticking time bomb.

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Michelle Lopez (b. 1970, Bridgeport; lives and works in New York and Philadelphia) is an interdisciplinary sculptor and installation artist. As a builder, conceptualist, and manipulator of materials, Lopez inventively explores cultural phenomena, stretching to their limits the industrial processes that craft consumerism in its many forms. Lopez received an MFA from School of Visual Arts, New York (1994) and a BA from Barnard College, Columbia University (1992). She is an Associate Professor in Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania and head of the sculpture program.

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