

**Intimate Distances/Distant Intimacies:
Colter Jacobsen's "hour fault"**

The first work that catches my eye at *Colter Jacobsen: hour fault* is a small graphite drawing, hung without a frame, depicting an intimate gathering between several closely-huddled men. In this candid moment, I see their hands stray from the cold beers set before them and instead find them around waists and shoulders—intertwined, as though they, together, are one. Below this drawing, Jacobsen hangs the original photograph in verso, revealing both a scrawled inscription that places the gathering as an ACT UP London meeting, and dark smudges that accumulate this historical weight like dust.

As a young queer historian, I immediately think about the young ACT UP activists that took to the streets in the late 1980s, and cannot help but see their fervor echoed in our current political situation. *Silence equals death*, ACT UP activists would shout and emblazon upon their shirts and signs as they fought for recognition in the eyes of a state that refused to acknowledge the AIDS crisis. Their cry to be heard in defiance of these silences has found recent spiritual successors in direct actions by Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, the Climate Strike, and many more—magnified by the machinery of social media, which promises that even the quietest expressions can be amplified to a mass audience.

But what does it mean that this drawing, titled *Down time with Act UP*, embodies such silence—rather than combats it? The ephemeral strokes that comprise the drawing appear as though they could fade away and out of our grasp at any moment, saturating this scene of communion with a curious loneliness. Those depicted in the work fail to meet us with their gazes, hushing their already-compromised voices. In the other works in *hour fault*, Jacobsen opts for a similar sparseness. For his drawings, Jacobsen overlays flimsy, often salvaged paper with light washes and delicate marks that leave much of the substrate in reserve. Other than *Down time with Act UP*, the subjects that Jacobsen illustrates are largely unidentified and remain unexplained—repeated marks, geometric emblems, photorealistic hands, household items, and scenic vistas, whose significance is known only by few. For his forays into other forms, Jacobsen gathers littered objects, abandoned photographs, and printed fragments, but often leaves these castoffs forlorn and solitary, rather than collage them into chaotic unison.

During times of political urgency, our anxious desire for change may internalize such "down time" as a betrayal to "wokeness"—construing these silences as failures which ensure that the marginalized remain marginal. However, Jacobsen seems to find solace in silence, rather than a cold and deathly emptiness. His 2018 drawing *memory w/o words (after Dorsky)* evokes this sensibility not only in the speechlessness admitted in the title, but in the ovular shapes scattered across the faded, ocean-green backdrop. These flowering clusters seem to recall protozoan organisms, invisible to the naked eye but striving to take recognizable form. Through these inchoate, microscopic beings, Jacobsen holds out the hope that absence is not a mere lack, but something generative—a marvelous space wherein something is born, rather than destroyed. This interpretation of emptiness reflects the Buddhist tenets embedded in postwar Bay Area spiritual life, echoed also in the mandala-like figures that recur throughout the exhibition.

"Can I draw the invisible connections between us?" Jacobsen muses in the exhibition statement for *hour fault*. The ungraspable, he contends, does not preclude intimacy. In *bouquet for k* (2019), Jacobsen delicately paints a vase filled with flowers set next to

a folded envelope. The intended recipient for these gifts is listed only by an initial, as though the name were coded or erased. Although viewers have been left outside this secret exchange, the warmth contained by this dispatch still may seep through to them. Likewise, in his 2008 *To Pass...*, Jacobsen uses correction fluid to redact a page from a newspaper, halting these transmissions into sputtered murmurs—and yet, the arbitrary phrases and forsaken images left on the effaced print do not just deteriorate into static. The occasional signal reaches us, almost as if by accident. The lone phrase “*There, there*” that Jacobsen juxtaposes above a dining table with two empty seats provides a strange comfort, resonating deep within a cavernous loneliness. Through these invisible connections, I am reminded of the so-called progressive American liberal discourse surrounding the proverbial “closet,” which portrays “staying in” as repressive and “coming out” as emancipatory. As a rejoinder to this fetish for disclosure, Jacobsen offers love letters written with invisible ink. Loneliness can be deceiving.

By thwarting our capacity to know and to recognize, Jacobsen opens perception up beyond fixation. In *Walking stains*, a set of photographs picturing wet imprints made by a vanished body, Jacobsen challenges our mastery as viewers, confronting us with a sitter that has managed to slip away unbeholden. The exhibition in its entirety seems to trade in slipperiness—not only in the watercolor campaigns that flow throughout its works, but also in its very name, “hour fault,” which slides from one meaning to the next through wordplay. These works remind us that complete comprehension will always remain elusive, just as the exhibition title seems to call us out for blame. Jacobsen softens direct gazes into glances, blurring our vision like the fog that slides in from across the Golden Gate Bridge. In this interstitial space, the world becomes sheer potential—a utopia perhaps more radical than “wokeness” could ever imagine.

As I emerge from my vaporous trance and return to my body, I lament that *hour fault* is but a momentary encounter. But then, I look to the mandala figures—which Jacobsen fashions by rotating the word “now” with the O as its center—and realize that the most beautiful things are never meant to last. Maybe Jacobsen intended for the incredibly narrow two-week window during which the exhibition is on view to impart this valuable lesson. I tiptoe out of the gallery, careful not to break the silence.

Colter Jacobsen: *hour fault was on view from September 3–September 18, 2019 at Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.*