

maake

Maake is an independent, artist-run print publication and project space featuring contemporary artists and artist-run projects



We Police this by Ourselves, 2021. Woodcut & screenprint. 26 x 37 inches. Edition of 15.

Christa Carleton and Tonja Torgerson

BIO

Tonja Torgerson received her BFA from the University of Minnesota and MFA in Printmaking at Syracuse University. Her artwork is regularly exhibited nationally and internationally and is in several museum collections, such as the Weisman Art Museum and the Minnesota Museum of American Art. Torgerson has been a resident artist at West Virginia Wesleyan College, the Lawrence Arts Center, Fogo Island, Artist Image

Resource of Pittsburgh, and New York Mills, Minnesota. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Printmaking at Indiana University.

Christa Carleton received her BFA from Western Colorado University and MFA in Printmaking from Montana State University. Christa works regularly in screenprint and woodcut, but letterpress is where her loyalties lie. She is currently a screenprint technician at a textile printing business and pursues her artistic practice on top of her full time job. While being an artist is a huge part of her identity it isn't her only love. Christa enjoys cooking vegetarian food, gardening, hiking with her dog, and listening to podcasts.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Christa Carleton and Tonja Torgerson have been collaborating on a group of work entitled "Body Politic" since 2020. Emailing and mailing screenprints, woodcuts, and letterpress prints back and forth from Indiana to Montana, the artists are responding to one another and their topics layer by layer, building a dialogue across the country and within each print.

We source our subject matter from lived experiences that are personal and authentic, as we are confronted with the consequences of our bodies daily. Our prints resist outdated mindsets about performing femininity and question widespread notions about the role and standing of female-expressing people. This exhibition pushes against western dominant society that pits us against each other and opposes the pernicious mentality that the primary function of our bodies is to please others. With our collaborative project 'Body Politic', we contribute our perspectives to a vast commentary set forth by our predecessors in intersectional feminism, and raise our voices in support of inclusive change.

Interview with Christa Carleton and Tonja Torgerson



Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you became interested in becoming an artist?

Christa: My Dad was in the air force which meant that my family and I moved all over the nation and abroad throughout my childhood. I don't identify with being from anywhere but I have lived in Montana for the past 15 years now. As a young person I remember being praised by my parents, teachers, and peers for my drawings and at the time felt like it was the only thing I was good at. When I decided to pursue a bachelor's degree I was pretty naive, listless, and apathetic at 17 years old. I didn't feel like I had a clear direction and was kinda just like "okay an art degree seems good enough". I think that was an early sign that my gut intuitions about my path through life are usually right—but it took most of my twenties (which were awful) to figure that out about myself.

Tonja: I grew up in a very rural area of Northern Minnesota with limited art exposure, but my parents raised me to be very independent and I always had an interest in art. When I was sixteen, I moved down to the Twin Cities to attend a highschool focused on the arts. That was my first big step towards becoming an artist.

Can you tell us about some of your most memorable early influences?

Tonja: My mother was a sign painter, and I spent a lot of time watching her hand-letter signs and pinstripe vehicles when I was young. That experience definitely influenced my interest in art.

Christa: Like Tonja, my Mom is an artist and crafter and she covered our house in things she had made. She studied at Montana State University and received a degree in Interior Design—which is where I would later study Printmaking for my MFA. My Mom was always a fabulous cheerleader of my creativity. Likewise my High School art teacher in Wildwood, MO was letting me submit full body nude self portraits for assignments when I was only sixteen. She had me sneak my paintings in before the school was open. One of those paintings was massive, like 3'x5', so my Mom drove me with that painting so I could drop it off under the cover of dawn. I felt like such a rebel! In that moment I learned art could be controversial and that seed has always stayed with me. I still have that painting and it isn't even that risqué. However, when I reflect on what I was painting in public school (in Missouri) I see now that it was probably pretty risky for my teacher. Major shout out to Mrs. Senti for letting me make what I wanted to! Because of early positive experiences like that, making nude figurative work has always felt incredibly normal and easy to me.

Where are you currently based and what brought you there? Are there any aspects of this specific location or community that have inspired your work?

Tonja: I live in Bloomington, Indiana. It was the opportunity to become a faculty member at Indiana University that brought me to Bloomington. Indiana is an extremely conservative state, it was the first state to pass a nearly total abortion ban after the Dobbs decision. Living in Indiana and the many ways this state oppresses bodies was one of the motivating factors of making this series for me.

Christa: Since 2018 I've been in Missoula, Montana after bouncing around the state a bit. In my opinion this place has the best contemporary art scene in MT. We have the Missoula Arts Museum (which is free), first Friday art walks, and a community print shop at the Zootown Arts Community Center. I live here for access to the outdoors and the small town vibes. I'm definitely not a fan of all the upcoming legislation that's trying to strip Montanan's access to fundamental rights. I think Tonja and I used a lot of the disappointment we felt coming from our homes and funneled it into Body Politic.



Still Self Censoring, 2021. Woodcut & screenprint. 28 x 22. Edition of 15.

What is your studio space like? What makes your space unique to you?

Tonja: I have a studio/office right off the Printmaking Studio at IU, which is one of my favorite things at my work. My studio is always changing, but its biggest feature is a 3 by 4' light table which I use in my drawings and films for printmaking.

Christa: I have a space in my house where I brainstorm, draw, and carve my woodcuts. I work on my Mom's wood drafting table that she used in college and it's a very special piece of equipment to me! I love being able to tilt the table while I carve since I find carving on a totally flat surface uncomfortable. My printmaking studio is in my garage and I have all my letterpress type and printing presses out there. If I want to screenprint I use my employer's setup, which is so kind that they let me make my artwork with their equipment.

While working on Body Politic with Tonja I went to her studio in the summer of 2021 and 2022 to work in person. That printshop is one of the best I've ever worked in and most of the prints in our collaboration were made in that studio.



Revoked, 2022. Screenprint. 28 x 22 inches. Edition of 15.

What is a typical day like? If you don't have a typical day, what is an ideal day?

Tonja: My average day focuses on teaching. In addition to teaching, I have service and work-related meetings. But besides my teaching schedule, I am able to shape my schedule to work for me. I slot in studio time wherever I can, but a lot of my making happens on nights and weekends, because that is when I have the most uninterrupted time.

Christa: An ideal day for me would consist of no pressing obligations. Start with a nice coffee, knit or sew for a little while, take my dog, Cokie, for a vitamin-D filled walk, and then settle into a project that I complete the same day. I love the feeling of ticking off a project from a long-ago-created to-do-list.

What gets you in a creative groove or flow? Is there anything that interrupts your creative energy?

Tonja: I listen to a lot of audiobooks and podcasts, which helps occupy a part of my mind so I can focus on the task at hand. Having cleared off my task list for the day before settling into a studio project is really helpful, because I can work on it without worrying about the other things that need to get done.

Christa: When I'm in the brainstorming phase of my practice I need quiet to focus. I cannot formulate or picture within my mind's eye what I want something to look like and say if there is music, conversation, etc. I can't make decisions when those distractions are present. However, once I have a composition and a solid plan I love listening to podcasts and audiobooks while my hands are busy drawing, carving, or printing. Right now I'm listening to Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* while working on a multi-block woodcut. I think printmaking is my chosen medium because once the plan is made I rarely have to make additional decisions, which is the most stressful/time consuming part of art making for me.

How do you maintain momentum in your practice?

Tonja: Deadlines and projects really help me stay on task- I have never been great at just making for the sake of making. I prefer to put together projects (like this one!) or seek out opportunities and then make with those potential outcomes in mind.

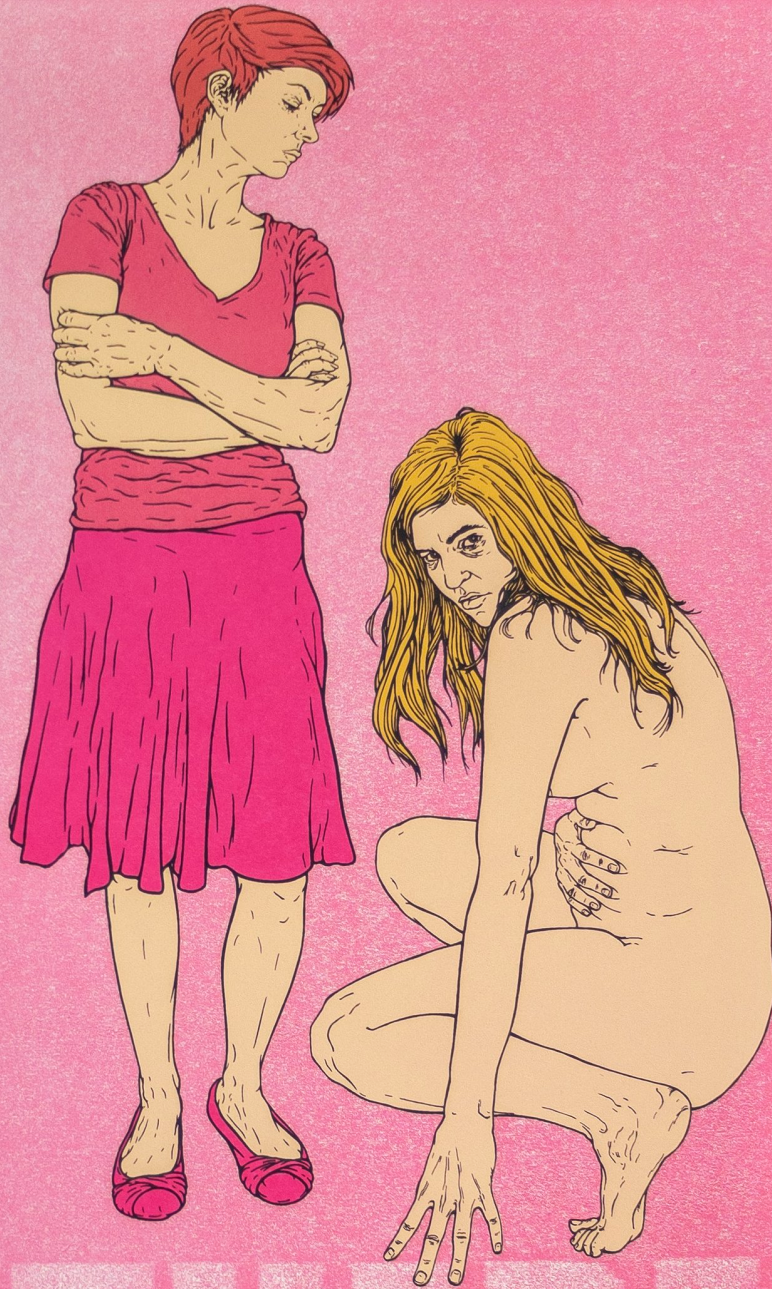
Christa: I'll echo Tonja's sentiments here and also add that I embrace that I don't make that many pieces of artwork in a year. I have a slower practice than I perceive of other artists. For me it's what works right now.

What medium/media are you working in right now? What draws you to this particular material or method?

Christa/Tonja: For *Body Politic*, we worked primarily in woodcut, screenprint and relief printmaking. We both have training as printmakers, and it tends to be our primary mode of making art. We wanted to use printmaking because of its historical significance as a political medium (like the history of broadsides). The flexibility of the multiple, how it can function differently and is more democratic than a drawing or painting, was something we wanted to utilize in this project.

Can you walk us through your overall process in making your current work? Does drawing play a role in your process?

Christa/Tonja: Our process was very much a call-and-response method, especially in the beginning stages of an idea. One of us would draw a figure, and then the other would pair that figure with an idea or phrase, then the composition would begin to be developed. We always worked together to finalize compositions, usually from afar via Zoom calls. Once the design was complete, we would decide who would print the final edition, or if it was the summer, we would print it together.



THERE
IS SO MUCH TO
UNLEARN

There is So Much to Unlearn, 2022. Pressure print and screenprint. 36 x 19 inches. Edition of 15.

What is exciting about your process currently?

Christa/Tonja: We are both really excited about the collaborative process, and how freeing it has been to work to create ideas and images. There is something liberating about working together, where we don't feel weighed down by previous methods and subjects from our individual practices. It was also refreshing how much trust we had with one another in this series. We knew when to reject bad ideas and also when to let the other person run wild with an idea.

Can you share some of your recent influences? Are there specific works—from visual art, literature, film, or music—that are important to you?

Christa/Tonja: Books like *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller, *Missoula* by Jon Krakauer, *White Feminism* by Koa Beck, *Hood Feminism* by Mikki Kendall, *My Body* by Emily Ratajkowski, *Pretty Bitches* by Lizzie Skurnick, and *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* by Caroline Criado Perez reflected our own experiences and informed a lot of the critical thinking in our series. We pulled design inspiration from vintage horror movie posters, letterpress broadsides, and woodtype.

Who are some contemporary artists you're excited about? What are the best exhibitions you've seen in recent memory and why do they stand out?

Christa/Tonja: While working together in Indiana we both saw the *Positive Fragmentation* exhibition at the Eskenazi Museum. It was an excellent representation of how female-identifying artists are reflecting on the body and identity in a wide-range of approaches within contemporary art.



She's Just Crazy, 2022. Woodcut. 22 x 15 inches (each). Triptych each editioned at 15.

What are you working on in the studio right now? What's coming up next for you?

Tonja: I just got back from a big project in Lubbock, TX, so I am bit between projects at the moment. I had a very busy past six months, so I am okay with slowing down for a bit. This summer, I will be teaching screenprint at Frogman's Printmaking Workshops in Iowa City, so that is exciting.

Christa: I'm currently working on two designs for an upcoming residency at MATRIX Press at the University of Montana. MATRIX Press was founded in 1998 and brings in nationally and internationally known artists to produce limited edition prints in collaboration with students and printmaking faculty. This is the second time that Professor James Bailey has invited me to work with MATRIX—I guess we all had such a good time back in 2019 that it's time for round two! One of the designs I'm making is a large color woodcut titled Tattletale Tells Tales that comments on the believability of women coming forward with their stories and lived experiences. The subject is personal to me but after hearing the Christine Blasey Ford testimony and then learning about Antia Kent's same experience, I knew I wanted to make a print about it. I'm excited to sling some ink with other printmakers and get some prints editioned.

Christa/Tonja: We have been talking about adding to Body Politic for upcoming exhibitions, so that is brewing between us. Body Politic will be at The Whitney Center for the Arts in Sheridan, WY, The Missoula Art Museum in Missoula, MT, and The Lawrence Arts Center in Lawrence, KS. So if you want to see the work in person, those shows are coming up in 2024!

To find out more about the duo check out [Christa's Instagram](#), [Tonja's Instagram](#), and the [site for this series](#).
