

JUSTIN CHANCE



Depression, 2022.



thought, Maybe I could do one of those. I'm also a writer, but there's something about the authority of language that feels daunting, whereas in art there's more wiggle room.

The title of my recent show at Tara Downs gallery in New York was "Live," and I left it deliberately unclear as to whether I meant the noun or the verb. I wanted to permit the viewer/reader to take it however they want. There's something beautiful about the state of not-knowing, and I want my viewers to feel curious. I never want it to be, "I'm the artist, listen to me."

I started making my quilt works in 2013, hoping to combine my love for making with my interest in painting. I wanted to be able

to physically pick up colors and move them around. I also love learning how things work, down to the molecular level. If you're dyeing something, you have to ask, Is this a cellulose fiber or is it a protein fiber? Some pieces incorporate resist dyes using wax. Since wax is nonpolar and water is a polar molecule, the two materials don't interact.

Recently I was Duolingo-ing Norwegian, and decided to make a Norwegian-language web drama called *Svak*. I wanted to write a script in Norwegian to explore the materiality of weakness; I'm weak in that language. The project was about carving space for curiosity without utility, learning just for the sake of it. ●

My pieces begin as titles. Titles come to me when I'm washing dishes, or running, or showering. A recent example is *Aloha Sadness* (2023): I thought, That's so dumb, but also so real. Aloha means goodbye, but also hello. I asked what would *Aloha Sadness* look like? I did a little research – looked up tiki culture, watched *Lilo & Stitch*, played that song "Hawaiian Roller Coaster Ride" in the studio.

I'm driven by curiosity, and I can get interested in literally anything. I'm less interested in judging whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, than I am in asking, What is this thing? Why is this thing? Exhibitions are a helpful way of focusing my curiosity. I can point to one and say, "That's my oceanography era," or that's my how-TVs-work era.

For me, "artist" is kind of like a catchall term. Takashi Murakami's 2008 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum drew me to art. He was making mugs, pins, paintings ... I



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Justin Chance: running a sewing machine through a picture plane

by Samantha Ozer

Justin Chance utilises a material structure of dissemination to speak to broader issues of political networks and the power of language

Justin Chance loves rules. As an artist and writer, he works across many mediums — sculpture, drawing, print-making, papier-mâché, etc. However, for the past eight years, he has dedicated the bulk of his practice to quilting, exploring the bounds of running a sewing machine through a picture plane.

Technically, to qualify as a quilt and not merely a textile, blanket, or painted fabric, it requires a back, middle, and top layer, with a stitch running through all three. Within these confines, there is an entire expanse of time and history to be explored and a material and ontological language in which to stretch the rules. Working beyond the object commodity of skill, craft, and technique, Justin Chance has devised a personal system of quilt-making to reorient how we process a quilt. Materially, this is achieved by making the top layer transparent, often silk, to shroud the middle layer, all supported by a base that peeks out from the edges. The top obscures the action while elongating the field of view, so one must pass through the skin of the image to access the meat and witness the skeleton. Justin Chance exposes the often unseen internal networks within quilting that are both technical, yet signal a broader understanding of society's intersubjectivity, and the slippages and sparks that occur in these muddled, in-between places. Within the break and the blur, the moments of illegibility and miscommunication are where Chance's work is most potent.



Justin Chance, *History*, 2021-2022 Quilted wet and needle felted wool, cotton, silk, dye, dye marker 48 × 75 in / 121,9 × 190,5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Downs&Ross.

Spider (2018-2021), shown as part of his solo exhibition *Low-Life* (2021) at Smart Objects in Los Angeles, is a white line spiralling into a black background, with a web of textured veins emanating from the centre. While the web is a design device for capturing a viewer, it is also a metaphor for the structures of entrapment in society on conditions of race, class, autonomy, means, proximity, and access to power. As the title suggests, and the work signals, the piece is a spider web, a quilt enmeshed in silk, much like the silk proteins of a spider's web. The transparency of the silk operates for human viewers as the web does for insects, pulling someone in and constricting them in place. For many insects, spider webs are invisible, so they are bound by a network that they cannot see. The bioengineering of the web is a phenomenon designed to hold and even paralyse. For a viewer of Justin Chance's work, when you realise the spiral is a web, it's too late; you are already bound, trapped within the silk and pulled into the middle and back layers of cotton and wool.



Justin Chance, *Spider*, 2018–2021 Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, gold tea, marker 71 x 57 in.

Currently based in his home city, New York, Justin Chance's research began with a class on quilting while undertaking a BA in Visual & Critical Studies and a BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The pedagogy of quilting is laborious but also poetic and intuitive. With the wet felting technique, the maker must agitate the fibres through rolling and stripping, shaking the lanolin, a natural wax in wool, to bind the fibres as they expand and constrict. The fibres lock into each other through movement and heat, free of any glue or adhesive. With the needle felting process, the maker stabs the fibres with a stitching needle and increasingly adds more pieces of felt. Employing both these methods, Justin Chance also dyes his own fibres, a methodical process that draws upon a nuanced language of how fibres receive and adapt to various pigments. Through an unfolding process of friction, the fibres cross-pollinate pigments and settle in varied forms. Justin Chance

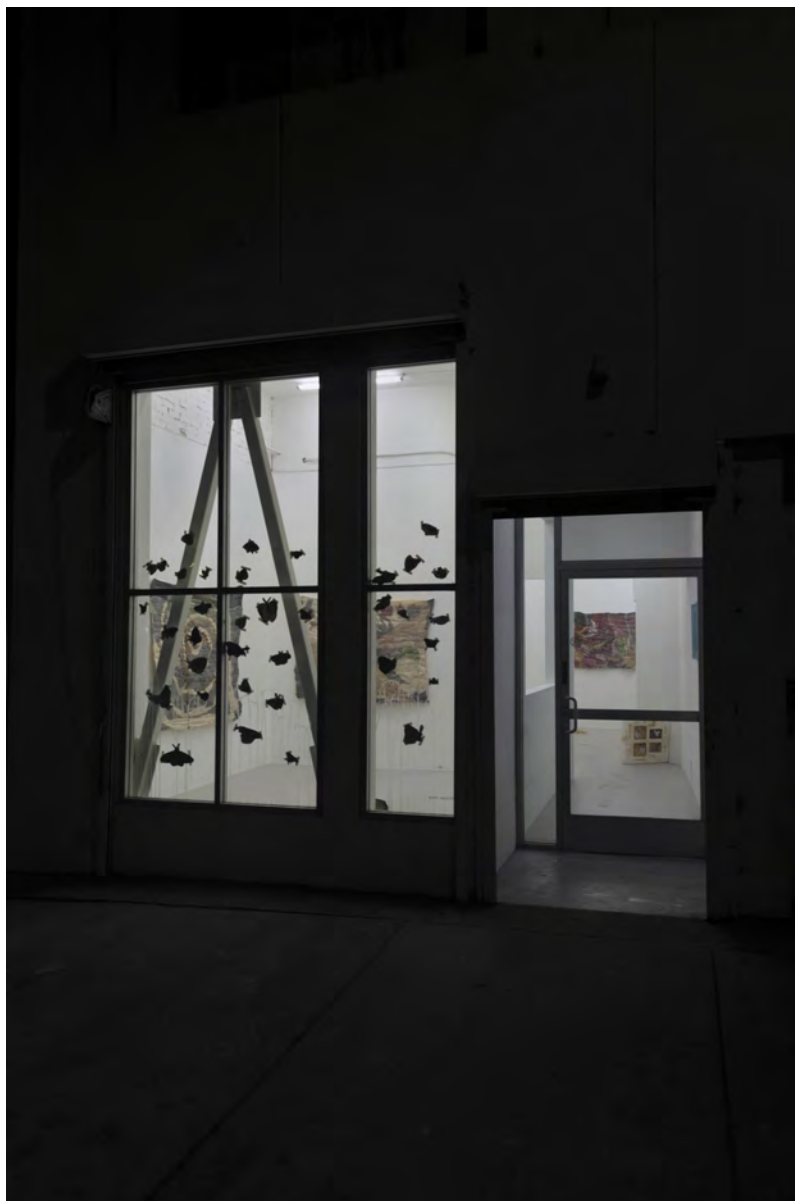
utilises this material structure of dissemination to speak to broader issues of political networks and the power of language.



Justin Chance, *Hamlet*, 2021-2022, detail. Quilted wet and needle felted wool, cotton, silk, dye 48 × 60 in / 121,9 × 152,4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Downs&Ross, New York.

The prevalence of English, the most spoken language in the world, is largely due to the colonialism and imperialism of the British Empire, a small island nation whose networks transformed global communication. Among the many legacies of British colonial rule is the existence of the Commonwealth of Nations, a political association of 54 member states, almost all of which are former territories of the British Empire. Featured in the same 2021 exhibition at Smart Objects was the work *Commonwealth* (2020/2021-ongoing), a series of drawn butterflies that, in their material and delicate lightness, carry the symbolic weight of representing the nations of the commonwealth. When speaking about the Americas in a recent interview, Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar reiterated

an ongoing concern in his work that “language is not innocent. Language represents a geopolitical reality.” (1) Language has the power to dominate — to shift an ideology and control a narrative.



Justine Chance, *Commonwealth*, 2020 – ongoing. Installation of woven crayon and pastel on paper, UV varnish. Featured in exhibition: *Low-Life @ Smart Objects*, Los Angeles CA.

In a recent phone call with Justin Chance, we spoke about the narrative of butterflies, about their character. Ultimately, their story is a metamorphosis from a cocoon to a butterfly, from containment to flight. Though, little is discussed about what happens after the climactic transformation. What about the butterflies who encounter a web? What is the subplot? In the context of the commonwealth and former colonies, many of which are also small island nations, the question is what happened after independence from colonial rule? What was and continues to be the process of decolonization? While the butterfly is a symbol of new beginnings and migration, what are other routes and

methods of communication for understanding the nuanced arc of empire?



Justin Chance, Vista, 2021-2022. Quilted wet and needle felted wool, cotton, silk, dye 43 × 75 in / 109,2 × 190,5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Downs&Ross, New York.

As a writer, Justin Chance is acutely aware of the potential and shortcomings of language. He is quick to note that if an idea is best expressed written, he will write, and for those thoughts that can't translate, it is the place for art. While words often carry an authoritarian weight, or at the very least a directive, the image offers more points for entry and escape. In the exhibition text for Long Distance (2018) at Smart Objects, he binds language with land, invoking an ecological read on the legacies of colonial communication. He writes:

Exploring distance, the way The English Language did....when it lunged itself from its tiny- island sitting-position across the world. It was such a strain, in fact, this stretching, that it sweat into the Atlantic, into the Pacific, the Indian and eventually the Arctic (watering the algae, which the fish ate, who were eaten by bigger fish ate, who were then eaten by people, who were then eaten by the ground, which was then eaten by the sea and so on and so forth...)

Exploring distance the way that black and brown people did——when they were borrowed from their homes and respective continents to garden elsewhere. Exploring distance, the way The English Language

explored distance over these Black and Brown people— into their synapses, over their tongues, through the tiny spaces between their tiny teeth and also their children's...



Justin Chance, *Hamlet*, 2021-2022. Quilted wet and needle felted wool, cotton, silk, dye 48 × 60 in / 121,9 × 152,4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Downs&Ross, New York.

Over great distances, English operated as the guiding structure for enacting violence against people and the earth. Justin Chance's research on the intersection between language and the environment is most explicitly explored through his work on The Collaborative Centre for Storm Space and Seismic Research, a non-profit publishing and research centre that he co-founded with Hunter Foster in 2018. The main output for the project is an annual calendar that centres around specific ecological themes. While the project is currently on pause, the first three issues of their calendars, "2019," "Doomsday," and "Beast," showcased artist projects alongside dates signifying moments and events related to the animal, death, as well as scientific and interspecies concerns. Here, the word and image are interconnected with issues relating to the earth. While the word is control, there is always a slippage, a gap, and an obstruction — this is the space Justin Chance squeezes into.

Interview by Ella Slater

Justin Chance

Born *1993*

© Corinne Weir, 2020/2021 - ongoing, Pencil, crayon on tracing and mixed media paper, woven







Aloha Sadness, 2022–2023, Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, dye, 66 1/2 x 85 1/2 in / 168,9 x 217,2 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs, New York. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle





Aloha Sudness, 2022–2023 (detail), Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, dye, 66 1/2 x 85 1/2 in / 168,9 x 217,2 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs, New York. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle



Pentecost (White tea, black tea, green tea, gold tea), 2021

Black tea, gold tea, green tea, white tea, plaster, shipping styrofoam, sealing wax, stickers, 24 x 22 x 3.5 in.

Featured in exhibition: Low-Life @ Smart Objects, Los Angeles, CA



Monday. 2020-2021. Piled, burned and wet-felted wool, cigarette smoke, Hot Toddy, duct tape, box fan, 20.5 x 20.5 x 4.5 in. Featured In exhibition: Low-Life

You're an artist and a writer. Does your writing practice inform your material practice?

What can art do that language can't? I title first, most often, since the work can take so long. I think: is this better off as just a paragraph, or more interesting as a body of work? Is the title great enough; does it have legs? Could it be a whole show? Or is it just a piece of text? Art happens in lieu of language. Art offers so many different ways to dodge, and hint, and suggest, and propose; you don't have

Rather than the traditional Fine Art, you studied Visual & Critical Studies. Tell me more about that.

I went to school at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago], where they let you do a dual degree; you get one degree in visual and critical studies, and another degree in art. It blew my mind! I took a shit-ton of anthropology classes, just because there was this one professor—ride or die. That's how I approach my writing practice, and my art practice— I use it as



Textbook, 2022–2023, Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, dye, 63 x 87 1/2 in / 160 x 222,3 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs, New York. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle

to make a firm statement. The viewer has as much participation as the maker does.

What came first, art or writing?

Books and language were always super important to me. I really wanted to be a writer, maybe a curator. I was looking at those programmes that started popping up in the mid-2000s, these hybrid programmes, so I could write but also do art... I wanted to be a novelist; a Great American Writer.

an excuse to really go in; pursue my curiosities.

How do you generate ideas? Do you fixate on something, and delve into it?

For the current show I'm working on [at Downs & Ross Gallery, New York], the title is 'Live', so it's either live [a-live] or live [o-live]. It could be either, or both. Conceptually, there's something in that; what is in that in-between space? When something is not something, or kind of both, or either. When I had that framework as a

title, it helped guide the rest of the work.

Green Screen (2022-23) depicts a media or production technique, and also alludes to the texture of leaves. A lot of your work uses nature—in particular—life cycles, as a tool to communicate other issues.

Green screens are two things. Green screens are physical objects; they are literally green screens. They're also surfaces which can become anything. It's the beauty of the fact; the beauty of the everyday, and truth experienced over and over again. I think there's such a strength to the arbitrary.

Tell me more about the beauty of the everyday.

There's a quilt in the show, Textbook (2022-23), which depicts a clock, some butterflies, a caterpillar, and browning leaves. Metamorphosis is fascinating—it's a phenomenon, but it's also banal. It happens all the time, similarly to the changing of leaves. It's a truth. Death is a truth. Time passing is a truth. If I say my interests are life and death and time, it's like, yeah bitch, whose isn't? But in terms of narrative, it's kind of crazy how everything exists within that. Take the English language. There are only 26 letters, but within those parameters you unlock a whole universe of ambiguity.

There's an interesting juxtaposition between the time-intensive nature of quilting and the found objects you use, such as the series of calendars you're presenting in 'LIVE'. Is that juxtaposition something that you consciously try to achieve?

I'm conscious of it. There has to be a dynamism to it. Just like a good writer trains the reader, I'm really just trying to train the viewer to ask not what, but why.

The 2002 twin towers calendars, I found in a junky thrift store near my studio. It's about the mythology of New York. But 9/11 was an attack on the everyday—it wasn't a holiday, it wasn't anything, it was just a normal day. Those people were at



Planner, 2021-2023, Found Calendar, 30 x 22 in / 76.2 x 55.9 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs, New York. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle

work. So these calendars, I literally sat with them for maybe a year and a half, wondering what I could do with them. I'm trying to get more comfortable with the idea of a readymade—doing nothing to something felt so foreign. But they are, themselves, the work, and then it's just about positioning them throughout the space alongside the quilts.

You are also incorporating prints throughout the show.

In 'Live', there's a print that I made, called Me and My Dead Friend (2021-23). It's fucked up as a title, because it's kind of funny, but it's also a sad truth. I think it's funny because it's also fucked up a little bit—the whole humour and tragedy thing, it's fascinating to me. It's all about who's laughing when, or why. In 2021, an old friend of mine, Jenni Crain, passed away at 30. She was the smartest person I've ever met in my life. She was a curator, and gallery director at Miguel Abreu, and an artist. I was like, alright, cool, Jenni's



A English Rose, 2018. Piled wool, standing fan, gesso, cotton ball.

the one. We're in our 50s, I'm winning my Turner Prize, Jenni's writing my monograph, you know? The print show is the second to last time I hung out with her—actually, maybe the last time.

As well as making prints, you work in collage quite a lot. I'm thinking specifically about the Snowflake collages you're presenting at Hesse Flatow this year, or the photographic collages you showed for *Low Life* in 2021.

I never think about the *Low Life* works as collages. The photographic and papier-mâché works came about because my studio floods, and I thought that the water on the floor would be easier to deal with if it was solid—so I made a flour paste. I had a photobook about cars, which was already waterlogged, and I called the collages I made with it 'Race'. And then—full circle—I started drawing the tortoise and hare in watercolour pencil. Now I have tons in my studio.

I'm super excited about the snowflakes. I've been bidding on old high school yearbooks from auction houses, which I then cut snowflakes out of on my scrapbooking machine. Conceptually, on one hand, there's this narrative of a snowflake being unique, and on the other hand, 'snowflake'

is this conservative, alt-right slur. For me, there's a sentimentality there. That's another thing about a snowflake; they are fleeting. The people in these yearbooks only exist in that way for a brief second; it's precious but also pedestrian.

There's this same sense of juxtaposition between the precious and the mundane in your fan sculptures, which are often paired with piled wool and textile aspects— a machine commodity with a laborious craft process, something cooling made redundant by a dense mass of wool.

One of the elements of the fans which I was curious about is absence—the viewer is expecting a breeze which doesn't come. They become more aware of a blockage, and there's something about that barrier which felt interesting to me. The fan's whole job is to blow out wind, and comfort. There's also a stuffiness to them; the idea of a fan in the corner that is caked in something, like dust. I was striving for something which existed between the ornamental and the melancholy.

Are quilts now the predominant medium in which you work?

Quilts are fascinating because they can operate in the same language as painting. I started making them in 2013—oh my god, ten years ago. I figured out a way where I can constantly retain curiosity. The quilts are the ongoing foundation of my practice. And even though I have conceptual concerns, I also have very innate formal curiosities—the quilts help me pursue those too.

How were you introduced to them?

When I was at SAIC, I was very invested in the medium of painting; Peter Doig—ride or die—Charline von Heyl, that kind of stuff. But I took a lot of classes in the fibre and material studies department. In one of my first classes, they introduced felling. What was so crazy about fibre classes in general was that you realise that this thing that you handle all the time is made by a very particular process. Your



Snowflake (Babwin High School, St. Joseph, MO) Class of 2011, pp. 7-8, 2023, Yearbook page, 7 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. Framed: 12 1/2 x 11 1/4 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow



Race, Flooded basement papier-mâché, images from waterlogged photobook, marker, graphite, watercolor on paper, 32 x 19.5 in, 2020-2021.



Race, Flooded basement papier-mâché, images from waterlogged photobook, marker, graphite, watercolor on paper, 32 x 19.5 in, 2020-2021.

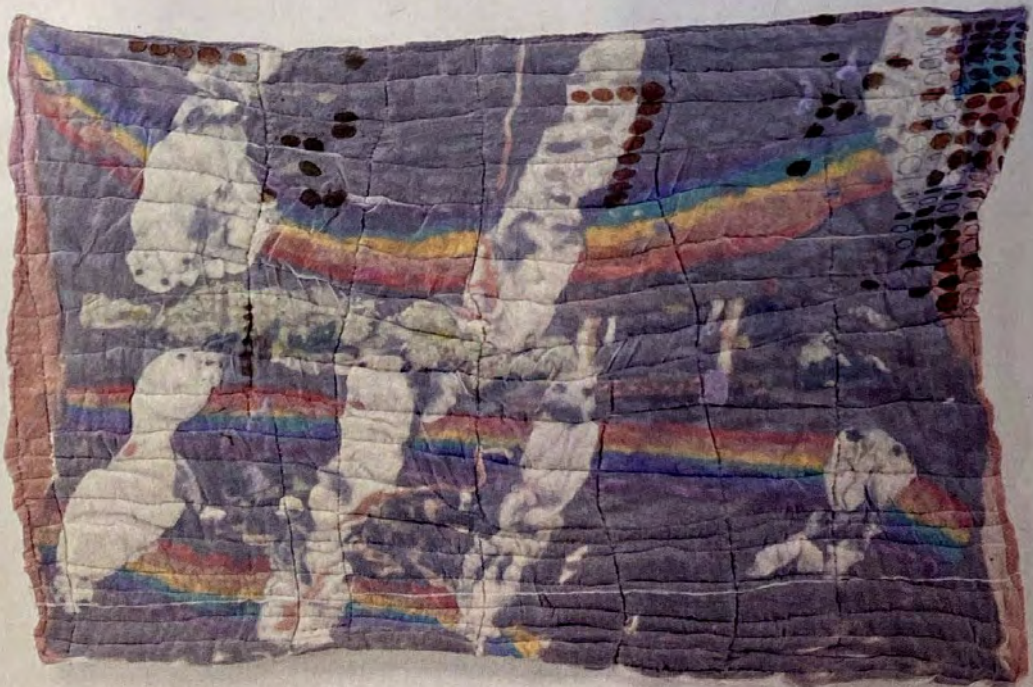








Past Duc, 2020-2022. Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, dye, 41 x 68 in



Terminal, 2021. Wet and needle felted wool, silk, dye, marker, cotton; quilted. 65.5 x 46.5 inches



Dying, 2020-2021. Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, dye, dying marker



Green Screen, 2022-2023. Quilted wet and needle felted wool, silk, cotton, dye, 68 x 77 in

T-shirt is knit! Holy shit. Fabric and fibre are so integral to our existence and our culture, they're almost invisible.

I remember being home that winter, and watching a documentary on quilting. For something to be a quilt, it has to have a back layer, middle layer, top layer, and a stitch which goes through all three. The confines of that felt so fascinating to me. I tried one out, I was like ok... this is cool... kind of. I was a really bad sewer. Then I tried another one out. And I just kept going.

Are they quilts, or wall hangings?

I see them as quilts, because linguistically that's what they are. There's some sort of unease— maybe a value thing, but they became a body of work because of their definition. They all have cotton, wool, silk; those are the confines. If there's another material I want to work with, I'll solve that in another work.

Tell me more about the formal possibilities of quilting.

I haven't got bored yet. There are constantly different ways of challenging yourself. For example, you could geek out on what wool you're using. How are you laying the felt down? If you're using one layer white, one layer black, one layer green, that's cool— but what if you dye that red? The dye particles are going to attach themselves differently to the fibres. And then, the top layer of silk— what if you dye that green? Colour theory wise, what's going to go on there?

The goal is that they work on two levels: they operate for the quick viewer, but also the deep reader. The quilts reward a longer view, they unfold. The experience gets deeper and deeper.



Kitchen, 2019. Dyed and piled wool, desk fan, aluminium, tea,
22 x 15 x 6 inches / 55,9 x 38,1 x 15,2 cm

