



*It is Dense and Bears Repetition: Notes on
Rehearsals of Asher Hartman's The Dope
Elf by Neha Choksi*

Riting



i.

I might as well as confess: to witness some things over and over is a fascinating pleasure. I like seeing rehearsals not merely because they revel in repetition, but because they necessarily incorporate change overtly and experientially for everyone present—including me, the embedded witness.

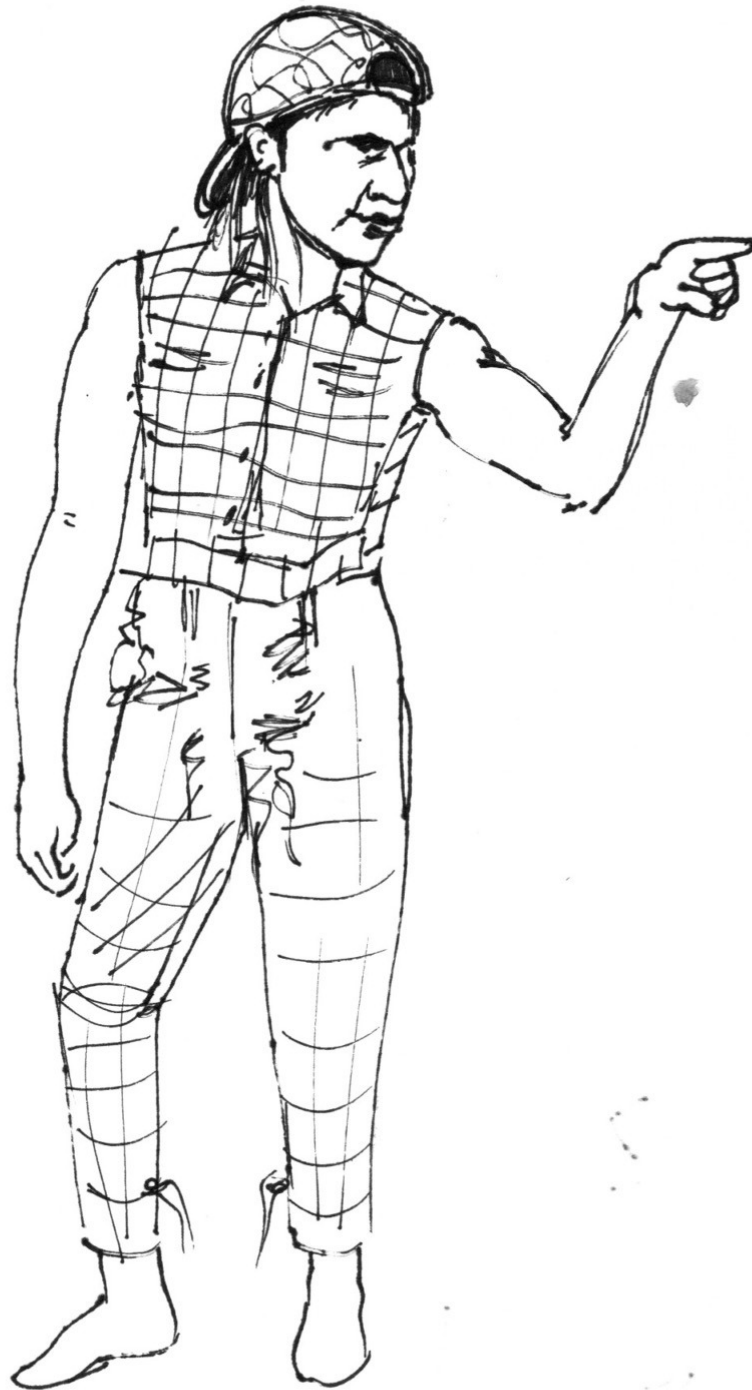
In April 2019, I started attending rehearsals for Asher Hartman's *The Dope Elf*. The piece uses characters akin to northern European mythical creatures to explore the legacy of white supremacy in the United States. The first—and because of COVID the only—showing of this work took the form of three elaborately-plotted plays, with scenes following each other according to a sometimes inscrutable logic, unfolding over three consecutive days. (There are more plays to come in later showings.) The actors lived on-site, slipping between self and role, in a

trailer-park-like installation in a cavernous space. This double use of the site—as actor accommodation and performance venue—points to the way in which Hartman sources each actor's multiple characters at least partly in each actor's own shadow self and emotional make up. One might say that he is similarly mining America's shadow self, beset as it is with the ills, aches, and pains that attend its settler-colonial DNA and live on in its trauma-bearing white supremacist structure.

Rehearsals had begun in early 2019, four months earlier, and I continued attending intermittently over the course of the next four months. I wanted to see how Asher's thickly-worded, joyously-crafted works came to be within a community of actors. The actors were Zut Lorz, Philip Littell, Joe Seely, Paul Outlaw, Michael Bonnabel, and Jacqueline Wright as the Dope Elf. I was interested in Hartman's rehearsal process, but I was equally interested in what it might mean for me to revisit something again and again. I was then repeating kindergarten, attending school daily as a kindergartener for my own lived performance project, and I was interested in repetition as a productive space, generating surplus meaning and unfolding thoughts.



Riting



ii.

Riting



Rehearsal-as-work is itself a knotty concept: the repetition is simultaneously labor, process and product/ion. Think of Ragnar Kjartansson's *Bliss* at REDCAT last year, in which a three-minute excerpt of the finale from the *Marriage of Figaro*—the part where the philandering Count successfully pleads forgiveness from the Countess—is sung by the cast repeatedly for twelve hours. That “Contessa Perdonò” finale is well-known and thus it was not difficult to take the whole in. The nuances and differences in each serial repetition and its sheer duration made the piece work. But take a typical Asher Hartman play—erudite, wordy, noisy, and well-jointed—and I would have to say: the labor, process, and production are all dense and bear repetition.

I attended at least ten rehearsals, two fund-raising performances, and a tech meeting. The rehearsals had been in progress for several months by the time I joined, and took place either at Asher's studio or at another location which had space for scenes with extensive movement. Some of the scenes that I saw rehearsed again and again were etched in my brain, but largely the onslaught of language and prowess of the actors overtook any attempt I might make to disentangle the narrative threads. The language was fiendishly intricate and the actors enrapturing. The most important takeaway for me was how the experiential onslaught of an Asher Hartman play doesn't diminish upon repeats. It grows into something more powerful, the way poetry learned by heart does, at least for me. Because I purposefully never read the play script, and because I saw bits out of sequence, I remain to this day largely puzzled about the storylines, if one can even call them that; however, my sense of the texture of the characters and the power in each word they uttered increased with each repetition—even within a single rehearsal session. Here is a one section of Asher's text that I heard over and over and faintly understood to be about a tussle between rival interests for control of a place called Bodysnatch Lane. Here the Princes of Undeath, who is also an American bore, is excavated nightly, in a recursive bit that alludes to American hauntings and mimics my own labor of repeated rehearsal viewings.

@ Riting



THE DOPE ELF ON BODY SNATCH LANE

OLD WOMAN

"They have to dig up all the bodies nightly and put them back"

THE DOPE ELF

--says the old woman with the white spots at the bus stop, and she knows.

THE DOPE ELF

It is her world to excavate Un-death, who has become so popular these days among the Cronut Slobs, kin to the Forced Copulators and the Coupon Pose, who make sure to lock their doors at night.

JOE MICHAEL PHILIP move together as THE GIFT OF GABS with O faces. During the following, they turn together, move back away from THE DOPE ELF make "O" face.

THE DOPE ELF

Three kings, white faces with ceremonial closed eyes, are the most feared of monarchs. The Gift of Gabs, they're called. If you happen along Bodysnatch Lane after three, you are in their territory. There, Late Night Sorrow once got hacked to pieces by Don't Look, Just Go, in a joust of pain and no-time-to-feel.

THE GIFT OF GABS are still. MICHAEL, UNDEATH stares at THE DOPE ELF

THE DOPE ELF

Un-death, the prince, rises nightly thanks to The Old Lady, aka Skank Ho. She herself has to claw him out and he's so big, he sinks right back down.

THE DOPE ELF

She is obliged to yank him upright where he sits startled, night after night. Is this the world? his O mouth seems to whistle. Is this what it's all about? Oh no!

MICHAEL lip sync or say "Oh no!"

THE DOPE ELF

And the three Kings, whistles.

GIFT OF GABS

High pitched throat sound.

The Old Woman is like:

THE OLD WOMAN

"Wow, you know this is load of work for me to bring you back night after night and you say the same thing."

Undeath was like:

PRINCES OF UNDEATH

"Just numb me up old woman, just inject me please."

THE DOPE ELF

And lo, she did. Lo, night after night. Don't get me wrong, he really is a prince, sweet, simple, but he's kind of an American bore, don't you think?

MICHAEL makes face, shifts. GIFT OF GABS move off.

The more I saw this scene rehearsed, the more I knew it to function through the language, consciously playing with the listener's bewilderment. And yet the resurrection mingled with the deadening injection conjured the haunting numbness around meaning that repetition can produce. When I first tried to write a draft for this report on the rehearsals, it came out something like this:

It is dense and bears repetition.

It is tightly packed and could be repeated.

It wants to be dense and enjoys reiteration.

It was fitted like a Rubik's cube and could be manipulated ad infinitum.

It can be opaque and will bear repeated viewings.

It was fluid and vast like an ocean and allowed for continuous indefinable waves to wash over me.

It was impenetrable and welcomed the battering ram of persistence.

It is self-referential and needs recurrence to be communal.

It will be dense and will bear re-enactment.

It was my experience in a nutshell. Novelist Tom McCarthy points to something similar in reference to Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*: though Winnie says she is going to perform the exact same action of removing her mirror from her handbag the next day, it is not actually possible for a repetition to be exact—the memory of the earlier action changes the perception of the later one. It is not a repetition so much as a re-enactment of an action that is first tested and then re-enacted; and then there is a re-enacting of the re-enactment. What happens to one's experience of time when faced with these recurring enactments? It becomes potentially endless. You become committed to reviewing the material, regardless of whether the time embedded in the material itself is slight or vast. The act of revisiting the rehearsals and the actors' own repeated endeavors conjured the feeling that this could go on forever, this honing, this shaping, this readjusting.

iii.

Asher's skill shone in building on the actors' proclivities and input to craft each character's behavior and inner life. If the actor's personal tastes and tendencies, known to Asher from prior collaborations and extensive unpacking while first working on this piece, were fundamental to writing the characters, they remained essential during rehearsals. Characters' unknown histories, unconscious drives, unrevealed passions and clarified micro-aggressions were all attended to, heightened, or left to simmer and bubble into the work. The crux of it, at least as I felt it presented in the words of the piece, was that all the characters—and thus we humans—are needy in some way or another. Those pushes and pulls of the actor's and character's needs were key in how I saw Asher tend to the work, the larger purpose of which is seemed to be a deep illumination of the needs and psychic pains inflicted by the demands of the white supremacist superstructure. As a director, he was always reassuring and relentlessly positive, sticking to the principle of "Yes, and..." (which the improv world recognizes as a way to build on each past action, constantly relaying the baton).

By the time I was in attendance, there was not much improvisation in rehearsal. However, the actors had a lot of leeway within the structure the language provided. Asher was open and supportive, and refrained from giving too many stage directions. He was compassionately engaged, listening, noticing; he attended to the slightest shifts in tone, mood, and body positions. Feedback did not happen at every rehearsal. It was only after multiple rehearsals that there might be a roundtable to go over his notes. The result was a seemingly non-hierarchically-motivated, mostly supportive, and non-critique-heavy space.

Still, each actor had a different relationship to Asher and his work. There were outbursts of: "The writing is so fucking good!" and "I am not a good enough actor..." There was a sense that: "It's [the script] so spare, we don't need an extra layer of Beckett." And: "There is no theater space in LA for this... it is really Asher's imagination!" This attitude asserted the primacy of the director, and Asher didn't really try to mitigate that sense. It was his work in the end.

iv.

Rehearsal was work, no two ways about it. It was an act of refining what would be many scenes over multiple days for a public performance, with Asher trying to pin down the tenor of each section like a slippery wrestling opponent. Horseplay was limited to what could benefit the work. Rehearsals were calm and organized. Each day's agenda was decided roughly the week prior and revised as-needed.

Carl Weber once described his first visit to a Berliner Ensemble rehearsal for Brecht's *Urfaust* in a way that made work and relaxation seem identical:

I walked into the rehearsal and it was obvious that they were taking a break. Brecht was sitting in a chair smoking a cigar. The director of the production, Egon Monk, and two or three assistants were sitting with him, some of the actors were on stage and some were standing around Brecht, joking, making funny movements and laughing about them. Then one actor went up on the stage and tried about 30 different ways of falling from a table. They talked a little about the *Urfaust*-scene 'In Auerbachs Keller' [...]. Another actor tried the table, the results were compared, with a lot of laughing and a lot more of horse-play. This went on and on, and someone ate a sandwich, and I thought, my god this is a long break. So I sat naively and waited, and just before Monk said, 'Well, now we are finished, let's go home,' I realized that this was rehearsal.

The loose method of the Berliner Ensemble was generative for Brecht, but at this point in the process, Asher's rehearsals involved not so much trying thirty different ways of doing one thing, as much as honing the one thing that Asher's language had established. With each repetition, the company digs deeper into what is already there. Asher and the actors never treated the rehearsal as a break, nor the breaks as potential spaces for tackling rehearsal questions. The non-work-related breaks were short ones. At one rehearsal space, this meant fueling up on the much-favored licorice and other snacks. The second space forbade eating of any kind and the breaks were just solo and chitchat time. The only other "breaks" from being on the floor with the text were either discussion of matters pertaining to racial context, mythological sources, character background, or feedback notes. And, of course, warm ups.

Here are two of the warm-ups Asher led on "Movement Mondays":

1. Imagine legs with magnets that go down to the start of time through layers of rock.
2. Imagine heads beaming into infinity.
3. Now let's do some body rolls and exercises to move the body.
4. Now let's do energy readings of each other. Feel the energy field.

(Here I tell AH, "I don't know if I get it." Trying to reassure me, AH says, "Most people can't visualize it." I say, "I'd rather be touching." "Imagine that as a bumper sticker," is the joke reply. So, I imagine cars touching or crashing.)

And:

1. Pick someone to follow without letting them know you are following. Don't indicate to them or to anyone else. If you are being followed, lose your follower.
2. Get connected, or get paranoid.
3. Don't lose sight. Concentrate on a part of someone else's body, follow it, then join it, that is, attach to that part somehow.
4. Unfold out of the conjoined position slowly.

Asher's method was to let the actors show off, go big, and play, and then rein them in and slow them down. There were injunctions to remember gestures from last rehearsal. A few times, when Asher referred to a narrative thread or story development, the actors looked confused. Asher had to explain that he hasn't written that part yet; he was considering it. Things were in flux in Asher's head, for sure. Although individual lines were not undergoing much revision, entire sections were being added or dropped. Sometimes lines were cut because of something an actor did inadvertently that worked. Asher was open to that.

The discursive space around the work seemed vital to everyone. During a snack break, Joe said that having conversations with Asher felt like being a kid on grandpa's knee. Philip talked about what it meant to have Asher channel Philip's own real-life drives into a character. "I wanted to scare people, to confront infirmity and death," he said. "And I am always up for an anguished argument with my sexual life." Joe added, "I wanted to experience love, but Asher subverts [that desire]. He starts at A and ends at 17." In working on the piece, he felt challenged to "own my own gravitas which I often negate." Zut said that the work challenged her ability to take up space, on the one hand—"and then I become the void."

v.

Here are some of Asher's interjections to the actors culled from multiple days of rehearsal:

"Hold it, don't speak."
 "Let it go."
 "Stop right there."
 "If you feel like it."

"Find the gesture"
The Old Woman Character says: "I am not there yet. You want me to find it."



"Yes."
"Hold it."
"Release that."
"Just go really still, Joe, and use your voice."
"That's good."
"That's a great note."
"Decide whether you are going to inject him."

Riting



"Really slow it down. Register gestures if you want; I won't orchestrate it."

"Lets slow it down... 3...(trails off), just in short phrases."

"So slow it down, pause and allow him to reveal how he feels."

"Assign each person a color."

"Take the fluidity and naturalism out; replace it with slow tics and stares."

"Are you creating this scene or observing it? You can never be a part of it."

"Use angles, not arabesques. Open, not clumps."

"She has a full fridge and pays her internet bills, as background."

"These two might eat in the same restaurant together."

"Repetition is making you rush. But there is no need to rush. This script needs space, pauses, multiple speeds."

Riting



A.H. "Are you afraid of her?"
 Are you repulsed by her?"
 Little Man "She's out of line."

vi.

The manner in which rehearsals are conducted says something about the director's conception of society in which this theater is made. Asher made a generous space with room for intuitive reflections. Even my position as an observer became the subject of discussion. Nothing was recorded; everything was left to be reviewed in the director's head and the actor's somatic memory. Only the text was not improvised but pre-written and pre-memorized.

The rehearsal world always mirrors the larger world's concerns, whether intentionally or not, and the language-trauma embedded in the text allowed the actors at times to ask larger questions that took a distinctly political turn. Asher explained that in conceiving this play he was thinking about white supremacy through Viking/Nordic/Teutonic lineages. The mythic past he conjures in the text leaks into the world as it is today, and into the plays-to-come. He urged actors to remember that, in the world of the *Dope Elf*, "There is no morality—there are no limits, no codes, not even like the Mafia, since the Mafia has a code. Here if you don't kill, you will be killed." At the same time, "The relation between gods and ordinary people is close."

Conversation slipped back and forth between the world of the play and our world. "What the whites have done is pretty mind blowing. Think of Haiti," Asher said. Racist behaviors and habits, he insisted, are embedded in our culture: "Everything keeps repeating again and again."

Jaqueline responded that she wanted no part in that repetition.

Asher turns the conversation to violence. One way to deal with violence, he says, "is to move toward it." Another way is to insist that you "won't be cornered."

In that situation, he said, "the dance changes, and it can work."

Riting



vii.

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Let me focus on one scene. It is about John and Alfred, a couple who have been together 30 to 35 years, but who now are unhoused and making do on the streets. The scene focuses on Alfred's attachment to and concern for a bird that used to always visit him and has since gone missing; it touches on the resentments that this attachment draws out from John. The menace isn't far from the love.

Asher. *(to Michael, who plays Alfred)* Is there anything [present in your exchange with John] in terms of your desire for him?

Michael. This scene made me realize it is fluid. I do have feelings [for him] but this sex is just to get him off since I have no place [else] to go.

Asher. Do you have any skills?

Michael. No. The actor does. [The character, Alfred, is also an actor.]

Asher. When did he [last] work?

Michael. He does odd jobs. He used to be good at decorating and keeping house but has lost the patience for it. He was probably a florist.

Asher. Is he cooking?

Michael. He cooked more [before].

Asher. Making the house nice?

Michael. Yes.

Asher. Is he home most of the day?

Michael. Yes.

Asher. TV? Gardening?

Michael. No and yes.

Asher. What are you reading primarily?

Michael. Biographies, so he has knowledge and taste, but he has lost interest [in the world]. He is just surviving.

Asher. Who is this Bird?

Michael. My baby. I watch it every day. Always the same place, same branch every day. Bird brings me joy, but I envy its happiness, its energy, its flight. Bird represents something out there.

Asher. *(to Philip, who plays John)* You have headphones and exploit opportunities to use them so that you don't have to listen to him. Who controls the relationship?

Philip. [There are] Two controls. I was the sparkly star but I lost my nerve. I control my helplessness. Helplessness [was] a catalyst for [our] eventual homelessness. I am in charge of keeping it light.

(Pause)

I lost my nerve 10 years ago.

Asher. What happened?

Phillip. I lost my work.

Asher. What [work] do you do? How [did you lose it]? Helping?

Philip. [I was] helping people with parties, going through stuff, discarding estate sales, [addressing] people's needs, [like a] flea market assistant.

(Pause.)

I am good value. I haven't made good friends and the sexcapade market has declined. But at home I am the upper hand guy.

Asher. *(to Michael)* Do you fear him?

Michael. I used to but not now.

Asher. Do you have any contempt?

Michael. A great deal, for losing himself. He is caught in the undertow and cannot get to shore.

Asher. *(new subject)* What is the time of day?

Michael. Evening, early evening.

Asher. What time does the Bird come?

Michael. In the morning, and then [it] comes and goes all day. It's not come today or [for] a few days. It's scary.

Philip. I remember 10 years ago he had a bird in the apartment. Not sure. We are living in the same neighborhood [as when we had a home, even though now we are homeless and on the streets]. Trying to be vigilant. One of us has to be vigilant otherwise we will lose all our stuff. We've probably moved a few times to get away from someone, like "O, he pitched a tent here."

Riting



Asher. Let's try the scene again but close to each other, as close and wrapped up [and intertwined] in each other. I am asking [because I want] to get [at] this enmeshed, growing on the nerves feeling. When he says, "he's my baby" about the Bird, how do you feel?

Philip. I am your baby, asshole.

Asher. If there is a discomfort in the body, use it. [How] agitated are you, Philip?

Philip. Yes, I am not listening, I am not.

Asher. Do you love the bird more than you love this man?

Michael. Love the bird more than John? No, but it represents something.

The repetition with a difference succeeds in getting John to feel more disconnected and uncaring within the embrace. Is that Asher's purpose? I can only guess.

Riting In the third run-through, as a result of the intertwining of the two actors' bodies, Michael/Alfred's intensity increases, as does his touching, tapping, nudging, pushing, and shoving of Philip/John. Halfway through, they find themselves contorted and seated back to back, but Alfred keeps turning around to look at and engage John. Alfred's words explode, his face hyper-emotional. Up and down, staccato to smooth.



This next section follows the bird discussion, and is about finding stray toothbrushes and unwanted used cans among the sleeping arrangements.

Asher. Do you enjoy it? When you find it [the toothbrush], does it feel like a victory?

Philip. [What it feels like is:] I've got you now! It is a horror, but I've got you now!

(Pause.)

This loss of love section is clinical. We have common cause, [are] traveling companions, etc. We agree the world is horrible, monstrous.

Asher. Are you trying to make this relationship work?

Michael. Yes, it is difficult and he [my character] wants to kill him [John], but [John also] wants to be the one to end it. I am trying to make it work and he is not trying.

Asher. Redo the section about the loss of love you've incurred in this relationship. [And the part about how] you want a refund).

Again, another run-through. And after:

Asher. John is very honest, almost cruel, you know? How he feels, how he reacts.

Michael. It's their comfort, in a way, to be that honest.

Philip. We still play games with each other. Pretending to know the Bird, and pretending not to listen, but to be listening, etc. Phillip can get anyone he wants, but John is a failed version of me. Vanity is very me.

What was clear through Asher's probing questions was that he was not directing the motivations or providing them in toto. Rather his trust in the actors and in the fact that not everyone knew what was in each other's minds was relied and built upon. Each repetition pushed the work of the rehearsal forward.

The questions and answers generated more awareness while also inviting a realization of how little we know about each other—and indeed of ourselves. This yearning to connect and engage, the characters' missing each other and finding each other, and that craving embedded in John and Alfred's language moved me deeply each time in rehearsals. This, maybe, is where an important facet of white supremacy enters the work. To see the other people in one's life as irritants, to resent the sense of being stuck with them—this is how the structural force of racism wears us down.

viii.

I could feel the pressure mount as pencils-down time approached. The drive to access some authentic perfection and virtuosity remained. Rehearsal periods end. So how do we distinguish between a rehearsal and a performance, aside from all the tech and scenery? Theater can succeed and fail any time. You may prepare and prepare but you are always starting over. Renegotiating the unspoken bedrock of slavery and settler colonialism that is the terrain of our American society might require some of that tenaciousness and faith. Rehearsal can be a labor of pointing towards and then dismantling something – whether white supremacy, slavery, or settler colonialism; whether on the scale of history or the scale of an individual life. I never learned how this section with Alfred and John, dislocated from the rehearsal room to a performance space in Portland, worked as a repeated mise-en-scène. It does not matter. What I experienced the first time I heard it changes in retrospect, with each new repetition, and enlarges the connections I make with the real world pressures outside. The work remains suspended in the doing, and in our awareness of its re-enactment.

Riting



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The Dope Elf is intended as a sequence of six plays. The first three plays was presented at Yale Union as part of the Portland Time Based Art Festival. The performance environment was open to the public September 14-22, with performances September 14 & 15. The fourth play in the cycle is currently being filmed to be viewable online through The Lab in San Francisco in 2021.

Asher Hartman is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in Los Angeles. His work explores personal and emotional histories in relation to ideologies that structure Western culture.



Neha Choksi is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles and Bombay.

All drawings by Neha Choksi. Photographs by Ian Byers-Gamber.

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