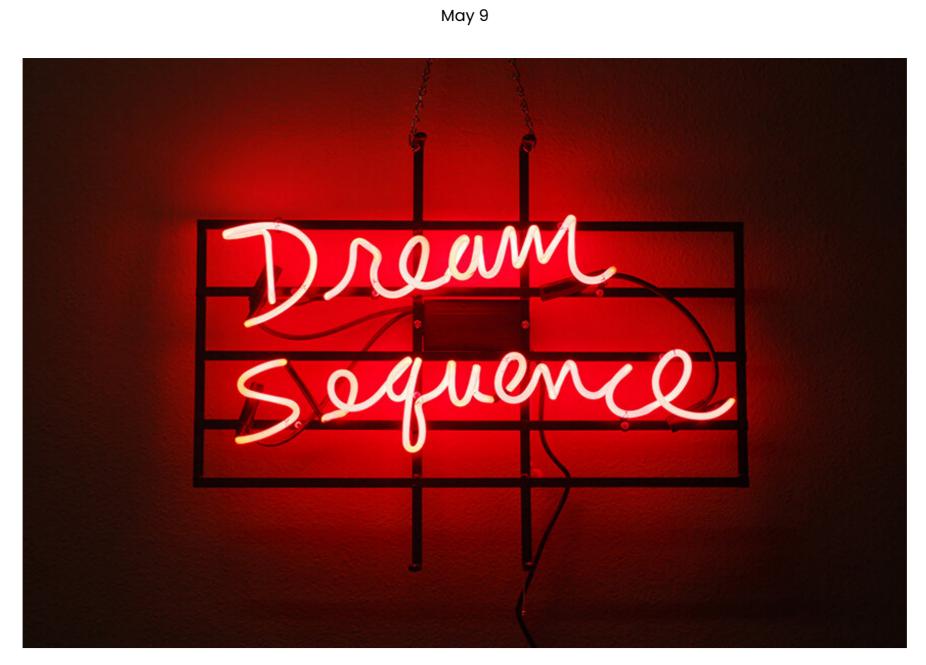
Allison Wiese with HereIn



Plot Devices: Dream Sequence, 2020, neon sign with flasher, 21 x 28 x 4.5 in.

[Image description: A red neon sign glowing in a dark room. It reads, "Dream Sequence."]

Artist Allison Wiese makes wide-ranging work in sculpture, installation, performance, and unexpected interventions in social and architectural space. With a subtle wit, her practice plays with the complexity underlying the seemingly banal vernacular culture that surrounds us. She talks with HereIn about the qualities of her work that so successfully bemuse and provoke the viewer.

HereIn: You did a piece in 2015 called *Mortgage Lifter*. That's the name of a particular tomato plant, one of which you relocated and planted on the beach. It seems to me that this word "lifting" is really at the core of your practice.

Allison Wiese: *Mortgage Lifter* was installed on Fiesta Island for an exhibition with beachgoing mobile gallery SPF15. Local lore says that the island's use as a dump for San Diego's solid waste eventually lead to a lot of volunteer tomato plants. There's a tradition of cute names for tomatoes: plants in general, but I feel like edible garden plants' names maybe have a folksier cleverness than rose or orchid-naming conventions produce. The implication of "Mortgage Lifter" is of course that it is going to remove an onerous economic weight. I guess you're going to produce so many tomatoes, it's going to make, or save you, that much money. There's a curious attempt at sympathetic magic in both the name and in my work. Maybe I want to believe that a tomato plant can be so productive that it changes your household economy. To speak about "lifting" more generally, Lane Reyea once told me that there was something weirdly redemptive about my work. I hope so. Redemption is a financial term in some uses, as well as a religious concept. I love things that hover at the boundary of the literal and the metaphoric – that can vibrate back and forth between being banal and important in some way.



Mortgage Lifter, 2015, relocated tomato plant, 9 x 9.5 in. [Image description: A photograph of a tomato plant growing out of a patch of sand.]

Some of the fundamental qualities of my work— that are clearer to me as I make more art and think more about what I'm doing— are tonal and some are structural. One recurring issue is the presence of history in the present. This interest rides alongside my work and predates it. It would have been an interest whether I was an artist, a librarian, or a farmer.

I think about the relationship between the individual and the institution. A lot of my work has to do with how much, how legitimately, and how sincerely we can be part of a communal *anything*. At an upper limit, this is as big as thinking about language itself. I use text; I appropriate text and sometimes I write text. But the larger question is about the proposition of shared language – how we communicate with each other and how much understanding we can really have, who we can organize with, and who we can be in community with. This is something that comes up again and again, in different ways, for me.

If "lifting" can be taken as a redemptive act visited on the shards of material (tomato plant, or text) that I use in my work, it can also refer to the act of taking and reusing or rearranging.



Reading to Strangers: The Best of All Possible Worlds, 2015-Present, 3.5 hr. performance, Cabrillo Point National Monument, San Diego

[Image description: A view of a crowd gathered at an overlook point with a view onto the ocean. A tall white statue of a figure stands to the image's right. Two people sit together in the photograph's foreground, one looking at an open book in her hands.]

HereIn: Much of it has to do with our relationship to language in the vernacular form it takes in the public sphere. What is your process for selecting texts to include in your work?

Wiese: I sometimes wish it was more of an organized process than it is. I often settle on text that has double entendre potential. That's been an attraction. I'm pulling from country song lyrics, historical accounts, non-fiction narratives, and literary texts— I've done some durational performances where I read an entire novel to an incidental audience. I cast about, but then I do have some criteria. There's a specific series of sign works that advertises narrative tropes, the literary or filmic devices that guide, form and deform our understanding of our experiences, and those are therefore bound by that category. Choices for site-specific works are often really driven by the qualities and characteristics of a site that I'm most interested in.

I'm working on a project for the Candlewood Arts Festival in Borrego Springs that will suspend two pieces of text in ranch sign arches over the desert. One of the texts is the Spanish version of something that also exists pretty literally in English: "Un diálogo, dos conversaciones" or, "One Dialogue, Two Conversations." The phrase names a film trope in which the characters believe they're talking about the same subject matter, but they're in fact talking at cross purposes because they're each framing the conversation differently in their own head. And, of course, hilarity ensues, at least in a situation comedy context. The real life consequences of related phenomena are often sadder in day-to-day kinds of ways. The other sign will say, "Article of Attraction," which is a much looser device that is a subset of the kind of McGuffin (an object, or sometimes event, that drives a plot) that can – nearly arbitrarily – animate a film. The Maltese Falcon is an article of attraction but Borrego Springs offers a tangle of competing possibilities for this form that I'd love those who visit or live there to consider.

Both of these texts have some currency in popular culture. But I tend to pick things that work even if they're not immediately familiar. Or that work in a different way depending on whether or not you recognize their source. I do like the texts to be able to stand alone. So that's a criterion. As an early example, I attached a neon sign to an Art Deco facade in Houston that said, "An injury to one is an injury to all." It's a famous early- to mid-century labor slogan. It works if you don't recognize it, though you can't easily peel it away from its origin. But I think it's probably close enough to its initial purpose, clear enough to people who read it without a lot of history. It still asks you the same question, right?



Welcome, 2013, vinyl sheeting on aluminum, 8 ft. x 4.75 ft.

[Image description: A vertically oriented flat, rectangular object, leaning up against a white wall in a gallery space. It is royal blue with white trim. Toward the end resting on the floor is a painted image of three yellow flowers with green stems.]

HereIn: Across your work there is a flux between abstraction and specificity. How do you navigate that? I think of the California welcome sign, from which you've removed the text.

Wiese: I wouldn't use the term abstraction, though specificity fits for me. I'm almost always interested in relocating, sampling, or borrowing existing stuff. Sometime I'm fabricating it. My road signs, for example, are produced exactly as standard road signs are fabricated for CalTrans. But the results are, it turns out, a lot more mutable than you'd think. Because when contractors are hired to make one, they sometimes get a really blobby old pdf file with the design and they interpret it. So choices can get kind of funny, when you're trying to be specific. I think I'm almost always interested in finding a solution that is closer to the specific. In other words, it may become mysterious, detached, or distanced— maybe I prefer these terms to "abstract"— from its source, but I want it to still be recognizable as a potential piece of our world, if an order removed.

I've gravitated towards not making an image, but creating a situation or relocation. Making, in some ways, a dumb literalism. But it never is, I hope, only literal. The way I work, almost nothing is. When I do make an image there's got to be a way into its artificiality. I'm not interested in people not seeing it for what it is.



Plot Devices: Weather Saves the Day, 2020, neon sign, 28 x 28 x 4.5 in. [Image description: A yellow neon sign glowing in a dark room. It says, "Weather Saves The Day."]

HereIn: Sometimes you have pieces professionally fabricated and sometimes you make things yourself. How would you describe your relationship to material?

Wiese: Like a lot of contemporary artists who work at the scale I do, or who are coming from a background in sculpture in its most expansive forms, if I can do it better and cheaper, I'll do it. If an expert can do it better and cheaper— considering time, as well then I'll have them do it. The series of neon signs I've produced has always depended on people who actually have that craft. They're often second or third generation neon benders. Besides their technical expertise, I revere their knowledge of history and the changing conventions of the material world. I can ask the folks I've worked with, "Well, what would the switch on a beer sign for a barroom have been like decades ago?" or, "How are highway signs' corners typically shaped?" I choose conventions carefully, with this great guidance when I work with fabricators. If the work is produced using vernacular carpentry methods, well then I often do that.





Paradise Prototype, 2018, cast sugar and lumber, 6.5 x 10 x 4 ft. Photos: Philipp Scholz Rittermann

[Image descriptions: Left: An L-shaped, pink structure in a gallery space. Much of it is made of solid bricks, while a band at the top is made of blocks with a geometric pattern cut into them. Right: A view of the structure from behind. The solid bricks have a plywood backing, with two-by-fours, anchored by sand bags, acting as supports.]

There are material processes that I really love working with. They're often the more perverse things that I can't have somebody else do, like casting mid-century breeze blocks out of sugar. Hand-painting some of the signage I've produced? That actually matters to me. I don't have to do it all myself, but it needs to be hand-produced. Sometimes I have an assistant working with me. Strangely, if it's repetitive, I love doing it.



Untitled, ongoing, stolen wooden door stops, dimensions variable

[Image description: A pile of wooden doorstops on a gray floor.]

I'm most invested in figurative language that uses material stuff that already exists. I've been stealing wooden doorstoppers for fifteen years or so. So when you ask about "lifting" as a theme in my work, interestingly, the ever-growing pile of doorstoppers fits on several levels. "Lifting" is also a semi-tactful term for the most concrete kinds of stealing. (The work was in fact part of a great show of artworks made through direct theft, *Lifting*, organized by Atopia Projects.)

I think about that piece often because it's ongoing and part of the routine of my life, but also because it's so satisfying to me, for several reasons: it's doing a lot with a little; it's produced through removal; the piece sort of exists everywhere; and it's growing over time through accretion. This is a good model for my material interests and methods. It's really mundane, but... not. The doorstops are trophies documenting individual acts carried out in relationship to institutions over a really big space, and time.



We All Have to Swim in the Same Water, 2007, arrow signs and professional stunt sign-spinners

[Image description: Two people stand on a sidewalk in front of a glass and stone building. They have light skin and wear sports jersey-style shirts in red. The each hold an arrow-shaped sign with black text. The sign on the left says, "We all have to swim," and the sign on the right says, "in the same water."]

HereIn: A number of your works take place in public. I'm particularly thinking of the piece with the sign-spinners. What does it mean to you to use public space versus a gallery or museum?

Wiese: Both kinds of space offer audiences I love and both offer rich opportunities to celebrate, interfere with, or amplify our understandings of the past, and our relationships with each other and the institutions we navigate. While I've produced work (often site-specific) that knits itself into its location in a museum in a way very similar to how I operate in public spaces, the more singular objects I've shown in traditional gallery contexts often look, quite intentionally, as if they are just passing through on their way to the outside world. The road signs are just sort of leaned against the gallery wall, for instance.

The first time I used sign-spinners was at the height of the pre-2008 housing bubble. The development of acrobatic sign-spinning, which was pioneered in North County San Diego, was driven, to a large extent, by a real estate market that was at the height of a bubble- and willing to pay for the behavior in order to direct potential buyers to new downtown condos and suburban developments with Mediterranean-sounding names. I hired sign-spinners to advertise an ambiguous quote from Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown*. Work like this speaks immediately to a situation, place, and audience in a manner that's really not possible in a gallery (unless it's to a secondary audience for documentation). I continue to be driven to work in public spaces by the scale and efficiency it can provide, and by a desire for audiences broader than those that most art institutions have traditionally counted on.

This conversation has been edited by HereIn and the artist for length and clarity.

Sofia Gonzalez with HereIn