



Biography

Los Angeles–based artist and writer Christopher Russell received his BFA from California College of the Arts and Crafts in San Francisco in 1998 and his MFA from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California, in 2004. From 2001 to 2005 Russell edited, designed, produced, and distributed the “destroy-to-enjoy” literary art zine *Bedwetter*. He has exhibited his work at Acuna Hansen, Los Angeles; White Columns, New York; Van Harrison Gallery (Gallery 1R), Chicago; and other venues. *Landscape*, a monograph on his work, was published in 2007 by Kolapsomal Press. Russell edited and wrote an essay for the catalog that accompanied his curatorial debut, *Against the Grain* at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in 2008. Additionally, he has written more than two dozen articles and reviews about art in Los Angeles. A version of this installation will appear in book form later this spring through 2nd Cannons Publications. Russell’s work is in various public collections, including the Getty Research Institute; New York University; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. This is his first solo museum exhibition.

Hammer Museum

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Above: *Untitled (The Veil Trembles and is Very Thin)*, 2005. Chromagenic print. 24 x 36 in.

Front cover: *Untitled (detail)*, 2008. Ultrachrome print scratched with Xacto Knife. 24 x 81 in. Photo by Brian Forrest.

Back cover: *Trellis (after William Morris)*, 2008. Ultrachrome print. Infinitely repeatable pattern.

Inside, left panel: *Untitled (Self Portrait)*, 2000. Chromagenic print. 5 x 7 in.

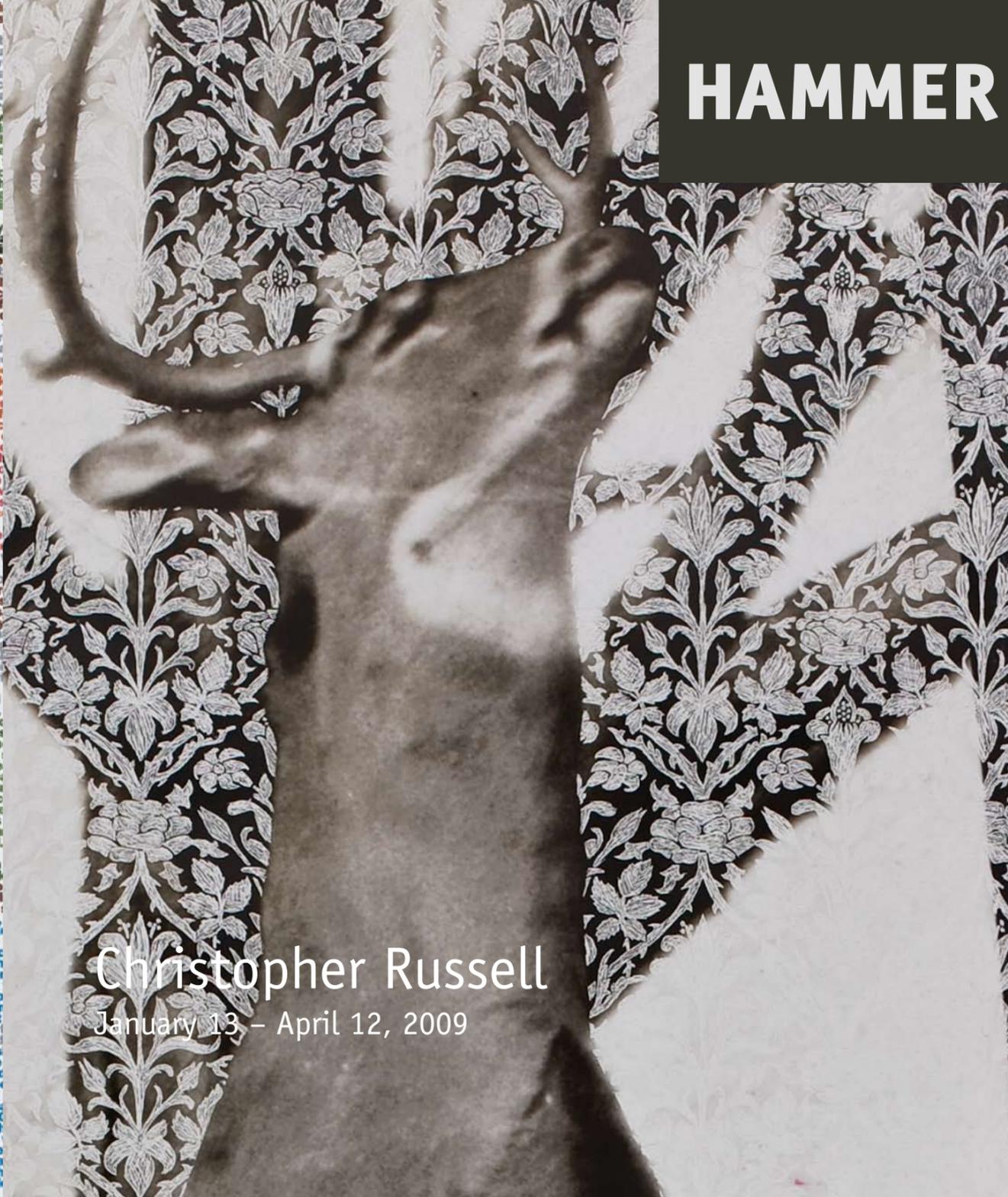
Inside, middle panel: *Untitled*, 2008. Ultrachrome print hacked with meat cleaver. 24 x 36 in. Photo by Brian Forrest.

Inside, right panel: *Untitled (Together)* (detail), 2007. Ultrachrome Print scratched with Xacto Knife. 8 x 10 in.

... leaving the exterior walls **difficult to tell** which houses had **ere was a pervasive aesthetic** **semble. A missing door didn't** **ken. Broken down, broken in,** **king the skeleton of a hollow** **s might live behind thin walls,** **an aluminum mesh over the** **ed resources fed habits and** **ed a miniscule mortgage taken** **at meager inheritance. Dreams** **a cheap.** **bit from abandoned is a matter** **After people leave, the walls** **ds don't start the destruction;** **ut I understand that a house is a** **junk of its guts gets traded for** **... clothes are packed into the bed** **er flashlight and moonlight, the** **The neighbors' friendly waving** **desperado's violent grasp:** **ter, pulling out wire. Wad it up,** **c housing melts away leaving** **n its place. Maybe 80 cents a** **... ps, faucets and drawer pulls** **ements for something broken,** **occasion. Poverty is navigated** **f porcelain and pull-chains.** **tial value, trash to trade in a** **... e, windows break. It's an** **gression, breaking a familial** **e distance. The duration of a** **h space allows plausible** **arped reflection of total** **... new values: loves and hates,** **cs for feelings, gypsum dust** **... rbies. Square haircuts and ink** **me the taste of tongue and** **croch and jerky breath. Coke** **ans, black label bottles among** **cting addiction is a private** **remior must be convincing,** **arning tolerance, but still, no** **... junkyards and back yards were** **held forgotten fruit trees,** **ce by a depression era mother,** **ll, withered. Only one was** **Debris piled around trees, the** **home improvement. A rusty** **o tackle the weeds that grow** **. A useless red wagon, leaning** **ed body rinsed with rust. The** **aged filigree mapping an** **onments, traffic and neglec** **th to a patch of lawn covered** **iches of found carpet, quilted** **play on. It wasn't the useful** **red sport, but the shape of** **r of cartoons, encroached by** **ditch. On the porch, dozens of** **terra-cotta, potted landscape** **o leaky swamp cooking** **ow. Kitten's Ear, Spider Plant,** **ing from neglect, but still a** **on.** **ard sat a Chevy Citation, red** **er grey, a white hood and no** **claimed by winters' mud. A** **ing its top, sat under a cover** **cab, full of rain, dirt and rotting** **... es of miscellanea, clothes and** **er seals and romance novels,** **no mags all mingled in molding** **l from the large tree, the one** **st total neglect. Mulberries** **iriveway, smeared under the** **sitors. A grotesque brown film** **and an alcoholic smell invaded** **a slop over the mess of pup;** **dy ever tried to clean it up;** **the mess away.** **was divided by a ramshackle** **zed hideout, built over the** **. Three cars lined the flaccid** **to the sagging sliding garage** **ed to resemble order: an impa** **ras a smashed black cavity** **Corval missing a transmission,** **floor missing a door. Dresser** **condition, collected. For** **buck off an allegedly meager** **task machinery. They rested under** **n trees, among leaves piled** **weeds that weren't already** **ge of oil and battery acid.** **garage, adult playroom or fire** **ge unused space of yard,** **ce grown there, harvested and** **holes. Door splashed with car** **brushed in place with whiteout,** **worried for** **feelings he wanted to understand** **enough to** **... The backyard was off limits. The patriarch** **sagging shingle and leaving the exterior walls** **built his skull and bones, his degenerate** **clubhouse, a grown-up fort made with scraps** **culled from construction site dumpsters. Blue** **tarp roof, no windows, total privacy, secrecy** **within the patchwork of plywood. Stained, dusty** **wooden crates lined the walls, filled with the** **protected only by an aluminum mesh over the** **collection of screws, nuts and bolts, a rolling** **metal chest of tools: grinders, buffers, Sanders,** **spray cans, sockets and wrenches. Cans of** **glossy paint, half empty, labels lined with residual** **drips. The pile of blankets in the corner where the** **dog slept and pussy was traded for crank. Pin-ups** **cluttered a corner of wall, feathered hair and** **hairy bush. A random beauty covered a gap in the** **wall, bisected by a ray of light, a wet stain from** **the crack she covered. An aggressive look from** **submissive position—something he understood** **too well.** **The front door, sloppy cuts forced an** **awkward fit, an ornate replacement for a flat** **panel that had been kicked in. Behind the door,** **kitchen and living room shared a space that was** **divided by appliances. The TV backed to the stove.** **The refrigerator sat awkwardly out from the wall,** **fueled by an orange cord held above the doorway** **by nails. The kitchen window looked out onto a** **neighboring yard filled with American muscle** **cars. The sight provoked a bitter envy; some of** **the neighbor's cars were in operational condition.** **The walls of the room were more or less yellow,** **altered by years of smoke and grease, spackle** **and violence. The floors were soft wood,** **occasionally mopped but never sealed, stained** **with rot near the sink, crusted with glue and** **occasional chunks of linoleum. Thick mounds of** **dog hair lined the perimeter.** **The living room was defined by the dining** **table, a proud, sturdy structure, with surface** **scratches and black bits of dried food stuck in** **decorative grooves. The chairs were** **thick-spindled Windsors, though only three** **remained for the family of four. A metal folding** **chair filled in the gap. There wasn't room for a** **recliner, so homemade pillows with their wavy** **edges and frayed tassels slumped about the** **floor, threadbare comfort accompanied daytime** **TV.** **The first room down the unit hall was the** **eldest child's space, a daughter. Sheet for a door.** **The room was a yellow box with painted yellow** **floors. Sunshine in pigment. A white bed frame** **spotted with rust, yellow flowered sheets. The** **box spring and bedrails were strata, layers of** **metal and shimmering polyester. A dainty table** **once held stuffed animals, lion filled with** **perfumes, make-up jewelry, studded leather** **bands and silver skulls. Dandelions and Holly** **Hobby gave way to metal magazine pin-ups: Lars,** **Vince, Axel, Tommy and Slash. Ratted hair, devil** **worshippers, flipping the bird with the ring** **finger—the wrong finger, sanitized rebellion from** **teenage fan magazines.** **Milk crates filled with old Barbies and plastic** **horses, covered by clothes, sitting behind the** **threshold of the closet. Thrift store** **dresses cascaded over boxes. Dirty dishes piled** **by the bed. Holes kicked, punched into the walls.** **A doll dressed in purple satin with a bulb** **extending from its broken head illuminated piles** **of wet towels and tattered jeans.** **Next-door was the bathroom, orange vinyl** **tiles embossed with gold accents. The smells of** **shit and mildew, chalky white spots on a yellow** **shower curtain, black corners around the tub. The** **septic tank could no longer handle toilet paper, so** **a trash can was used instead. Hot water required** **a vice grip.** **In the parent's room, a bent, dented and** **tarnished brass bed, unmade, piled with filthy** **blankets, an orgy of Navajo pattern and giant** **chrysanthemums. The smells: dirt, feet, sex,** **grease and dog. The mother's space was a lowboy** **piled with dusty colognes, inherited jewelry** **boxes, clothes, books, keepsakes, papers,** **sundries and a small black and white cat. The** **father's highboy piled with collapsing boxes of** **clothes that came from nowhere, that he had no** **intention of wearing, rock-n-roll eight tracks,** **songs that embarrassed his wife, the porn that** **she feared. Magazines dropped behind the bed,** **having served their instructional purpose.** **The hallway terminated at the son's room, the** **youngest child, the end of the family line. His** **room began pink, with crudely varnished pine** **floor, Star Wars curtains, sheets, and a paper** **car. In nighttime condition, collected for** **restoration, a quick buck off an allegedly meager** **task. Poor investment machinery. They rested under** **the canopy of pecan trees, among leaves piled** **thick, stifling the weeds that weren't already** **stunted by the seepage of oil and battery acid.** **Behind the shop, garage, adult playroom or fire** **hazard, was a large unused space of yard.** **Raspberries were once grown there, harvested and** **sold at the local market. But the bushes were burnt,** **and that part of the yard was left fallow.** **Overgrown, green became yellow during summer** **months. The backyard was off limits. The patriarch** **sagging shingle and leaving the exterior walls** **built his skull and bones, his degenerate** **clubhouse, a grown-up fort made with scraps** **culled from construction site dumpsters. Blue** **tarp roof, no windows, total privacy, secrecy** **within the patchwork of plywood. Stained, dusty** **wooden crates lined the walls, filled with the** **protected only by an aluminum mesh over the** **collection of screws, nuts and bolts, a rolling** **metal chest of tools: grinder, buffers, Sanders,** **spray cans, sockets and wrenches. Cans of** **glossy paint, half empty, labels lined with residual** **drips. The pile of blankets in the dog slept and pussy was traded** **cluttered a corner of wall, feathered hair and** **hairy bush. A random beauty covered a gap in the** **wall, bisected by a ray of light, a wet stain from** **the crack she covered. An aggressive look from** **submissive position—something he understood** **too well.** **The front door, sloppy** **awkward fit, an ornate replacement for a flat** **panel that had been kicked in. Behind the door,** **kitchen and living room share** **divided by appliances. 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HAMMER

Christopher Russell
January 13 – April 12, 2009



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Amy Gerstler Burned Out

“I became convinced that buildings don’t just fall into ruin—something in them aspires to ruination. It’s the same with people.”¹

Christopher Russell creates “ripe ruins.”² His artworks can be seen as portraits in absentia: of individuals and families who’ve fallen through the cracks, and of their ailing environments. “I photograph the physical margins of the social pact,” he has said, “the edges of town, spaces that have been . . . abandoned.”³ Employing “intermingled layers of narrative and images,”⁴ and materials such as floral fabrics, glitter, dirt, and hacked and scratched photographs, Russell gives us sun-bleached, ripped, splattered, graffitied, murky, erotic, sullied, elegant evidence of resilience and destruction.

In his untitled installation for the Hammer Project Room, as in much of his work, Russell’s human subjects have died off, fled, or been removed. We are left with their detritus: furnishings, stained bedspreads, scribbled notes, smears, empty rooms, and interior monologues that surface in tiny, eye-testing type emanating from the wallpaper. “I’m trying to look at this white trash residence the same way that Huysmans is looking at his environment,” he comments in discussing the piece.⁵ The novels of French writer J. K. Huysmans (1848–1907) are known for lush description, strange images, obsession with decadence and decay, and litanies of darkly realistic detail.

Russell identifies with the tradition of street photography, as carried on by artists like Lee Friedlander. Expanded beyond the practices of those predecessors, Russell’s work contains not only reportage but also deliberately cultivated elements of imagination. He employs techniques of both fiction and nonfiction: “I consider myself a street photographer, even though my fiction writing, drawing, and installation seem at odds within a documentary genre. I record observed moments. However, I am not invested in strict reportage. Instead, I create installations of photographs, digital imagery, and fictional texts that make use of narratives developed while wandering. . . . Photography provides a foundation for the numerous activities that comprise my practice.”⁶

In talking about parallels between street photography and French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire’s (1821–67) habit of trolling the alleys of Paris to gather startling details for his writing, Russell



notes, “He was wandering and looking too, and it’s sort of weird to think that that applies when looking at domesticity but it’s the same sort of detached wandering room to room that I do in this piece, the same as wandering the streets of Paris, taking things in and looking at them in this real detached way.”⁷ As he has said, “Central to my work as a whole is a fond reassessment of what street photography might become.”⁸

Russell, then, is chronicler, generator, and embellisher, distanced conduit of suppressed or lost narratives. He gains omniscient admittance to his subjects’ dwellings and consciousness via an admixture of acute observation and fictionalizing. He moves beyond facades and street scenes that his artist forebears documented, slipping indoors, sliding inside his characters/inhabitants through use of the interplay between visual and written images. Writer Italo Calvino, in an essay titled “Visibility,” observes, “We may distinguish between two types of imaginative process: the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression.”⁹ Russell’s piece at the Hammer, it seems to me, is situated where those two types of imagination interact. Indoors and outdoors encroach on each other’s territory in this work, as nature moves to repossess what we’ve tried to wall off, to

safeguard from her ravenous advances our fragile stabs at being “family,” our failed attempts to be tidy, loving, unified, civilized. Inside and outside, what we wanted to protect and what we wished to be protected from begin to leak together. They start to overwrite or colonize each other: “Thus the two spaces of inside and outside exchange their dizziness. . . . Outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility.”¹⁰ In the process, some of the hidden is revealed, or at least partly exposed to our nosy gaze.

One specific manifestation of the interpenetration of *indoors* and *outdoors*, *inside and outside* in Russell’s work is that decor and *decay* often merge or trade places. Many of his photographs are either of places that are trashed and falling apart, and/or they are themselves, as photographs, stained, dirty, damaged, hurt. Here decay becomes its own kind of decor that creeps in where humans have abandoned their habitats. Decay then begins tinkering with and partially replacing what decor remains. When this happens, an unsettling mental and physical place of boundary breakdown is created. As the literary philosopher Gaston Bachelard has written, “In this ambiguous space, the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting.”¹¹

Adverse circumstances maimed a neighborhood in the narrative that informs Russell’s work at the Hammer. Here are the opening sentences of a text that appears on wallpaper in the installation, printed using a ghosted-in antique floral pattern: “With the exception of crank labs that explode vertically, blowing a charred hole through layers of sagging shingle and leaving the exterior walls unscathed, it was difficult to tell which houses had been abandoned. There was a pervasive aesthetic of disrepair.” What passed for “family” similarly eroded the four characters evoked in the installation. Our job is to examine the debris Russell has assembled, reconstructing something of the *what*, *who*, *when*, and the *how did it happen here* as we wander through the backwash of toxic domesticity he’s created. It’s difficult to stroll through this piece without musing about how similar familial, social, and economic forces may also be consuming us. Writer Geoff Dyer, in an essay on the urban wreckage of Detroit, remarks, “Ruins don’t make you think of the past, they direct you toward the future.” In the case of Russell’s constructed, realistic/fanciful ruins, they put this viewer in mind of both what has been and what may be to come. Dyer continues: “The effect is almost prophetic. This is what the future will end up like. This is what the future has *always* ended up looking like.”¹²

Amy Gerstler’s most recent book of poetry is Ghost Girl (2004). Her work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including the New Yorker, Paris Review, American Poetry Review, and The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry. Her art writing has appeared in Artforum and other magazines and in exhibition catalogs for various museums.

Notes

1. Geoff Dyer, “The Rain Inside,” in *Yoga for People Who Can’t Be Bothered to Do It* (New York: Pantheon Books/Random House, 2003), 227.
2. This phrase from photographer, writer, and documentarian Camilo Jose Vergara is quoted by Geoff Dyer (*ibid.*, 220–21). Vergara’s work has interesting links to Russell’s, a topic that there is not enough room to discuss here. What follows is a capsule description of one relevant project Vergara dreamed up: “Vergara proposed that 12 square blocks of crumbling downtown Detroit be declared a ‘skyscraper ruins park,’ an ‘American acropolis,’ for the preservation and study of the deteriorating and empty skyscrapers. ‘We could transform the nearly 100 troubled buildings into a grand national historic park of play and wonder, an urban Monument Valley. . . . Midwestern prairie would be allowed to invade from the north. Trees, vines, and wildflowers would grow on roofs and out of windows; goats and wild animals—squirrels, possum, bats, owls, ravens, snakes and insects—would live in the empty behemoths, adding their calls, hoots and screeches to the smell of rotten leaves and animal droppings.’ (*Metropolis*, April 1995),” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camilo_Jos%C3%A9_Vergara.
3. Christopher Russell, unpublished artist’s statement, 2008.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Christopher Russell, interview with the author, 2008.
6. Russell, unpublished artist’s statement, 2008.
7. Russell, interview with the author, 2008.
8. Russell, unpublished artist’s statement, 2008.
9. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage International, 1988), 83.
10. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 217–18.
11. *Ibid.*, 218.
12. Dyer, “The Rain Inside,” 219.

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Curated by Darin Klein

