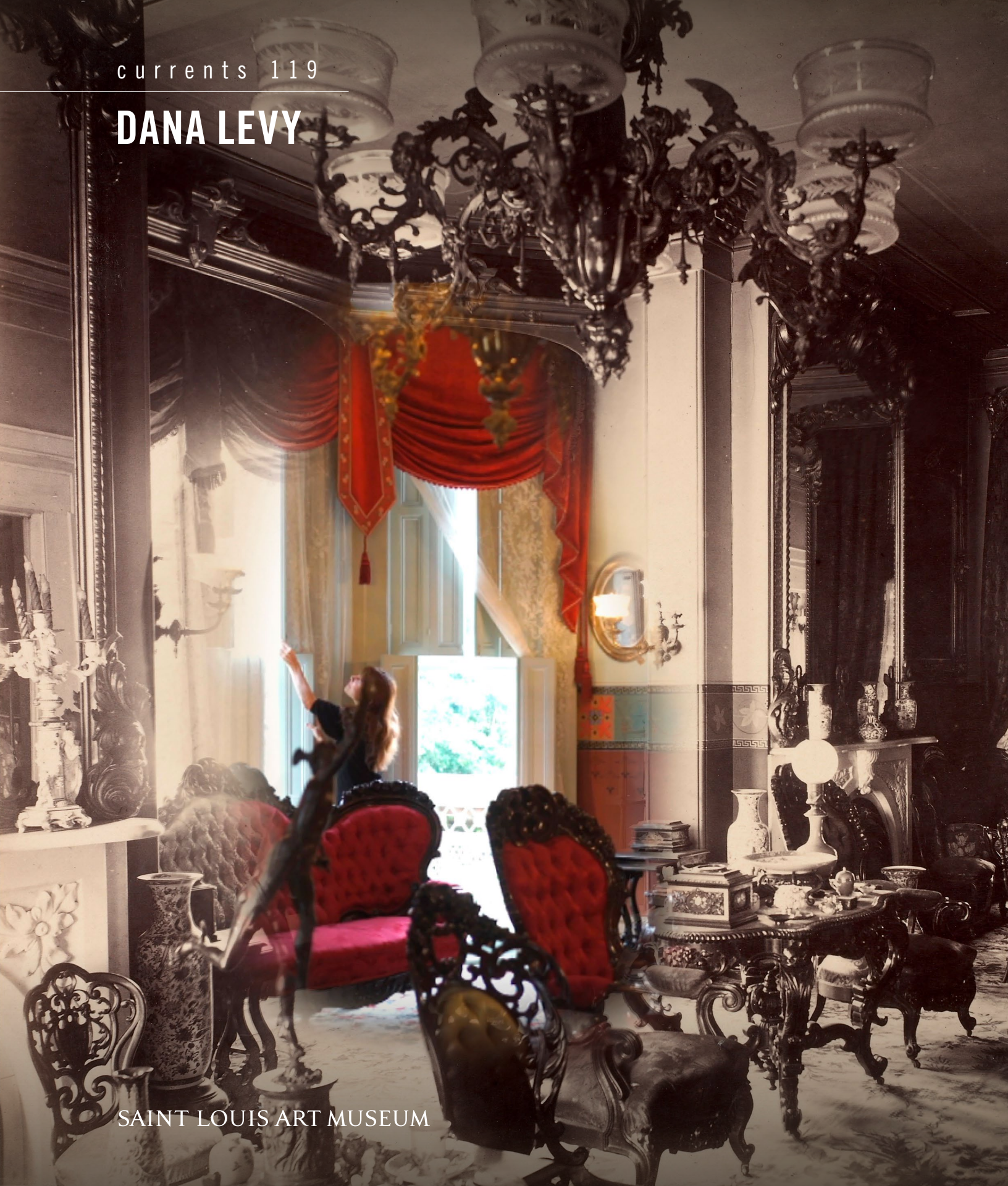


currents 119

# DANA LEVY

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM



Israeli-born, New York-based artist Dana Levy is known for poetic video, sculpture, and print installations that explore place, displacement, and migration by exposing tensions between architecture, nature, the environment, and human history. In her works, Levy captures myriad perspectives on the contingencies and temporality of home and belonging. For example, in past videos such as *This Was Home*, 2016, Levy turned to her own history and biography, focusing on the stories of her maternal grandfather, who survived Auschwitz concentration camp, her father, who immigrated as a child to Israel from Cairo, Egypt, and her own experience of moving from Israel to Atlanta and back again. Throughout her dreamy, surreal videos, Levy examines how the past resides in the present and how the choices we make—what to keep and what is destroyed—hold important implications. Her multifaceted practice considers how historic architecture and sites embody lived experiences and change context over time. She often begins her projects with specific buildings, local people, and archives, creating works that delve into unique cultural histories and connect to overarching themes of place in her practice.

For *Currents 119*, the artist consulted with members of the St. Louis community, from city residents to historians and cultural institutions, to make three new works. This exhibition explores how humans interact with historic architecture and perceive the traces of the past within buildings. It highlights disparities between what we expect of architecture and urban planning and the real, nuanced histories of the built environment. While the artworks in the exhibition start with St. Louis and its history, the city stands as an archetype for American urban centers. From there, the exhibition examines broader trends in social, political, and economic structures that affect architecture's preservation or deterioration. Ultimately, the project draws attention to the duality of absence and presence in how we understand our environment.

In the video installation *Campbell House Project*, Levy focused on the histories embedded in domestic space. The Campbell House was the residence of St. Louis fur trader and entrepreneur Robert Campbell. Built in 1851, it was the first house constructed in the exclusive, downtown Lucas Place, St. Louis' first private community. To entice wealthy residents to build houses in the neighborhood, each plot included a 30-year deed restriction prohibiting the construction of commercial buildings or multi-family housing, requiring paved sidewalks and plumbing for the neighborhood, and stipulating the employment of a private watchman. Such deed restrictions became common practice in the early 20th century and were often utilized as a tool for exclusionary and discriminatory practices by property developers, real estate agents, and homeowners.

By 1883, the deed restrictions on the neighborhood had expired. The city expanded, and Lucas Place was no longer seen as one of the most desirable areas of the city. It transitioned into an industrial zone as warehouses, factories, and boarding houses replaced single-family homes. Upon the deaths of Robert Campbell and his wife, Virginia, the house passed to their three children. Hazlett Campbell was the last to

die in 1938. The family had preserved the house, including the decor, for over 50 years, making it a unique remnant of the Victorian era. The Campbell House became a museum in 1943 and is the last single-family home standing from Lucas Place.

For *Campbell House Project*, Levy used two 1885 photographs of the home's interior—the parlor and Robert Campbell's bedroom. Discovered in a garbage bin in 1973, these images allowed the museum to restore the rooms to their exact former appearance. In Levy's multimedia work, videos are projected onto prints made from the photographs. The artist printed the photograph of Robert Campbell's bedroom at an intimate scale and had it framed as if it was hanging in a domestic setting. The photograph of the parlor was printed at near life-size and installed as a wallpaper.

In the videos projected onto the prints, Levy herself inhabits the same bedroom and parlor currently preserved in the house museum. She fades in and out of the spaces as she moves around the rooms and interacts with the furnishings. With the permission and supervision of museum staff, Levy sat on the furniture, touched the wallpaper, lamps, and curtains, and lay on Robert Campbell's bed. The underlying prints show that the objects she engages with in the present-day video are in the same places as in 1885. The unusually fastidious preservation of the Campbell House—due to the efforts of committed St. Louis residents in the 1940s—is an important aspect of the work. As her ghostlike presence moves in the space 134 years after the photographs were taken, viewers see how architecture can be activated through both the presence and absence of humans.

Levy visualized the evolution of another environment in the wake of human vacancy in *Mississippians*, a surreal examination of architecture, urban planning, and impending ecological change. In this video, animals roam the streets, yards, and buildings of the Old North St. Louis neighborhood. Greenery spills out of windows, and sky is visible through deteriorating structures as the urban fabric appears to be overtaken by nature. The work's title refers to the early Native American civilization that built the large mound city of Cahokia east of the Mississippi River around 950. Cahokia was a religious and ceremonial center for Mississippian culture and ceased to exist around 1350. The exact causes for its decline remain unknown. Levy is interested in the stratification of its society and the collapse of Cahokia as a metaphor for contemporary America. Through the title, Levy suggests the layered history of place in the United States and how St. Louis was not the first city around this site. The empty streets and decaying buildings of *Mississippians* also reflect the social and political history of disinvestment in Black neighborhoods in American cities and the societal consequences of ecological change. Through symbolic imagery, Levy created a haunting meditation on displacement, memory, and the passage of time.

Old North St. Louis was founded in 1816 as a village north of the boundaries of the city. In the second half of the 19th century, it became a destination for Irish, German, and other European immigrants.



Video still from *Mississippians*, 2021, two-channel, high-definition video

Following the Civil War, African Americans settled in the area, fleeing violence in the South and seeking employment opportunities. In 1916, the City of St. Louis passed a zoning ordinance barring African Americans from buying homes on blocks with more than 75% White residents. While this ordinance was struck down by the United States Supreme Court one year later, race-restrictive agreements and deed covenants came to dictate segregation across the city and St. Louis County, effectively restricting African Americans to certain neighborhoods, including in the north side of St. Louis. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, local governments often designated historically Black neighborhoods as blighted areas, enabling them to be demolished or purchased under eminent domain for renewal projects that often never manifested. Since the 1950s, the north side has suffered population and revenue loss due to these failed urban renewal initiatives, the construction of interstate highways that bisected communities, and suburbanization. Disinvestment and displacement continue to affect the north side to this day.

To create the effect of a post-human world overtaken by nature, Levy brought live reptiles, birds of prey, and exotic flowers to houses and a church in present-day Old North St. Louis. The specific birds were selected for their symbolism: the bald eagle as an emblem of the United States; and hawks and owls as messengers. This film's soundtrack, built from sparse recordings of musicians edited together with field recordings of the neighborhood, gives the impression of a space devoid of human habitation. Levy's vision of human erasure draws attention to the history of exclusion, structural racism, and displacement in Old North St. Louis, and many American cities, through symbolic means.

Levy worked closely with community members from Old North St. Louis and local historians of architecture, urban planning, and the history of Cahokia and its collapse. Adjacent to the projection of *Mississippians*, Levy presents the work's second channel that incorporates their

narratives of the social history of the north side. It features scrolling text, architectural drawings, and maps complemented by interviews with historians, professors, a poet, and a hip-hop artist. These individuals share oral histories describing the area, their relationships to it, and how it has altered over the years. They discuss buildings that were important to them or their families that are now abandoned or demolished. They tell stories, both personal and historical, of how systemic racism, redlining, and disinvestment—orchestrated by those in power—has led to the current conditions in the north side of St. Louis. They also look at the environmental implications of this history and what the future might bring, from nature growing uncultivated on vacant city lots to the possibilities of urban farming and what renewal might look like.

*Mississippians* forces viewers to grapple with how our choices could lead to a world beyond human society, where architecture becomes a habitat for animals to roam. Humanity's complicated relationship with nature is also examined in a multimedia sculpture hanging on the wall adjacent to *Mississippians*. *Drowned World* examines the impacts of ecological change on civilization. Footage of reptiles, insects, and plants in a watery landscape plays on a monitor installed behind a stained-glass window, a characteristic element of early-20th century St. Louis architecture. The use of the architectural fragment gives the impression that the world outside the window has been flooded. The title is borrowed from a 1962 novel by J.G. Ballard in which global warming has caused the world to become almost uninhabitable. In the book, a group of scientists roam the flooded and abandoned city of London, trying to plan for what the future might be. Like Ballard in 1962, Levy projects into an uncertain future. Yet, the three works in this exhibition examine the possible failure and past tragedies of human society, not through one event but cumulative small occurrences and seemingly banal decisions, indicating that the possibility still exists to reverse the present course.

**DANA LEVY**

born Tel Aviv, Israel  
MA, Electronic Imaging, University of Dundee, Scotland  
BA, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

**Works in the Exhibition****Currents 119: Dana Levy**

Gallery 250 (East Building)  
*Mississippians*, 2021  
two-channel, high-definition video

*Drowned World*, 2020

antique window, flat-screen monitor, high-definition video, color, and sound, monitor, measured on diagonal: 32 in., antique window: 23 3/4 x 30 x 1 3/4 in.

*Campbell House Project*, 2021

ink on paper, ink on vinyl, high-definition video, color, and sound, print: 20 1/2 x 25 15/16 in., wallpaper: 12 ft. 7 in. x 16 ft.

**New Media Series: Dana Levy**

Gallery 301 (Main Building)  
*The Weight of Things*, 2015–2019  
single-channel, high-definition video, duration: 2 minutes, 30 seconds, looped

All works courtesy of the artist and Braverman Gallery

**Selected Solo Exhibitions and Screenings**

2019

*The Weight of Things*, Fridman Gallery, New York, NY

2015

*Literature of Storms*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

2014–15

*Impermanent Display*, Petach Tikva Museum of Art, Israel

2013

*The Wake*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH

2012

*World Order*, Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

*The Fountain/The Wake*, Ron Mandos Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands

2010

*Wild Thing*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, NY

**Selected Group Exhibitions and Screenings**

2021

*Videonale 18*, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany (upcoming)

2020

*36th International Short Film Festival* Berlin, Germany

2019

*Rock, Paper, Scissors*, C24 Gallery, New York, NY

*Museum Without Building: A Project by Yona Friedman*, EFA Project Space, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, NY

**SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM**

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2018

*The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*, Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL  
*Recent Video Works from Israel*, Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris, France

*Macro Asilo*, Macro—Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome, Italy

2017

*Screen City Biennial: Migrating Stories*, Stavanger, Norway

*Lives Between*, Kadist, San Francisco, CA

2016

*Residual Historical Haunting*, Johannes Vogt Gallery, New York, NY

*Coup de Ville*, WARP, Sint-Niklaas, Belgium

2015

*Enchanted Space: Anna K.E., Dana Levy, Marilyn Minter*, Fridman Gallery, New York, NY

2014

*Auto Body*, Art Basel Miami Beach, FL

*Recapturing the Scenic Wilds*, Glyndor Gallery, Wave Hill, New York, NY

*Art, Technology, and the Natural World*, Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL

*International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena De Indias*, Colombia

2013

*The Compromised Land: Recent Photography and Video from Israel*, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY

*International Film Festival Rotterdam*, Netherlands

*International Short Film Festival Oberhausen*, Germany

2012

*Unnatural*, Bass Museum of Art, Miami, FL

2011–12

*Magic Lantern: Recent Acquisitions in Contemporary Art*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

2011, 2012, 2015

*Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin/Madrid*

2010

*LUSH LIFE*, Invisible-Exports, New York, NY

*Trembling Time: Recent Video from Israel*, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom

2009

*Hugging and Wrestling: Contemporary Israeli Photography and Video*, MOCA Cleveland, OH

2008

*Open Plan Living*, Helena Rubinstein Pavilion, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel

2003

*The Promise, The Land*, O.K. Center for Contemporary Art, Linz, Austria

**Selected Awards**

2020

NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellow in Digital/Electronic Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, NY

2017

City of Budapest Talent Award and guest of honor, Art Market Budapest, Hungary

2013

Beatrice Kolliner Prize for a Young Israeli Artist, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

2008

Young Israeli Artist Award, Ministry of Culture and Sport, Israel

**Selected Residencies**

2014

Artist in Residence in Everglades, Everglades National Park, FL

2014

Wave Hill Winter Workspace, New York, NY

2012–13

Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace, New York, NY

2011

Art Omi Residency, Ghent, NY

2009–10

Triangle Arts Association Residency, New York, NY

2003

O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Residency, Linz, Austria

*Currents 119: Dana Levy* is curated by Hannah Klemm, associate curator of modern and contemporary art and Molly Moog, research assistant. Dana Levy, Hannah Klemm, and Molly Moog would like to thank the following for their support and assistance with this project: Brent Benjamin, David Burnett, Ann Burroughs, Carmon Colangelo, Jon Cournoyer, Jeanette Fausz, Kaitlyn Garbarino, Stephen Greathouse, Deanna Griffin, Katie Joyce, Simon Kelly, Ben Klein, Brian Koelz, Sabrina Lovett, Eric Lutz, Diane Mallow, Courtney McCarty, Gerard McFarland, Christopher Moreland, Patricia Olynyk, Johnny Pelhank, Ella Rothgangel, Tim Skornia, Amanda Thompson Rundahl, and the people who contributed to *Mississippians*: Michael Allen, Cheeraz Gormon, Chris Hill, Gwen Moore, and Christopher J. Otto. Dana Levy would like to thank the World Bird Sanctuary. The Red-tailed Hawk, Barn Owl, Eagle Owl, and Bald eagle are all rescued birds that cannot survive on their own in the wild. All of these species are negatively affected by rodent poison. The Barn Owl is the most threatened owl in the Midwest due to rodenticide. Please help these birds by using alternative traps when dealing with rodents. The Museum would like to thank Michael Freund for his continuing support of this collaboration between Washington University in St. Louis and the Saint Louis Art Museum.

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Individuals featured in *Mississippians*: Michael Allen (building, landscape and urban historian), Cheeraz Gormon (cross-genre writer and storyteller), Chris Hill (Christian hip hop artist/filmmaker), Gwen Moore (Curator of Urban Landscape and Community Identity at the Missouri Historical Society), and Christopher J. Otto (Professor of English at Jefferson College)

**Front Cover:** *Campbell House Project*, 2021, ink on paper, ink on vinyl, high-definition video, color, and sound, 12 ft. 7 in. x 16 ft.