

**Matt Singer**  
**Essay for *Lastre (Ballast)***

In Spanish—the second but not officially recognized language of the United States—*lastre* means “ballast.” The maritime meaning and contradictory dynamics of ballast—something that holds a ship afloat by weighing it down—inform this exhibition of new, site-specific, simultaneously discrete and interacting installations by Anna Queen and Heryk Tomassini. Figuratively, *lastre* conveys positive connotations of good sense and judgement; neutral, purely descriptive references to weight, gravel, and rubble; and the troubling worries of burden and nuisance. These nuanced understandings of *lastre* await the viewer/visitor’s exploration and discovery in this 17-by-17-foot space as transformed and activated—born anew—by Queen and Tomassini.

In their beings and in their art, Queen and Tomassini embody dualities both mutually supporting and diametrically opposed: female and male; body and mind; north and south; English-speaking and Spanish-speaking; the colonizing United States and the colonized Puerto Rico; creation and entropy; growth and atrophy. These volatile pairings are further separated by inherited socioeconomic and racial/ethnic differences and ameliorated by the shared experience of living the life and doing the work of artists. Fellow artist James Maurelle, who conceived and curated this exhibition, anticipated the coming together of Queen and Tomassini’s closely related yet dramatically differing perspectives, processes, and products as a visual and conceptual explosion.

Modernism’s longstanding engagement with the found-object is central to both Queen and Tomassini’s art. Differences in the specifics of found-objects they choose and how they use them extend and articulate into conversation the oppositions made material in Queen and Tomassini themselves and in their art.

Queen makes art that explores themes of functionality, absurdity, and perception through repetition of visual cues and materials that are observed everyday. Her work aestheticizes the

physical construction of our surroundings, exploring the shifts that can occur when we analyze the environments we traverse and the objects of which they're composed. Most recently, her work has been investigating the prominent but confounding place of sports in individual and societal life. People "turn up" to actively play sports, and turn out to passively spectate, in the hundreds and thousands and—through television and other media—millions; sports are gratifying and pleasurable, but in terms of what's produced, they "have no point" beyond health benefits for those playing. Queen's art creates and demarcates spaces that are static but conjure exertion by carefully combining gleamingly new, specialist consumer items. The material-culture of her everyday life has been dominant in Queen's practice to date. Born and raised in Virginia, she's spent her adult life in Rockland, Maine, where fishing—of lobsters, especially—drives the local economy and where even second-generation natives of the state are not considered "Mainers"—rendering Queen an outlying participant-observer in her chosen hometown.

Tomassini is Puerto Rican by birth and upbringing. While living in the U.S. "proper" (as opposed to the territory/colony of Puerto Rico) for eight years, his worldview and self-perception are strongly shaped by his and his family's experiences as Puerto Ricans and a lifetime of rigorous, scholarly, deep-diving text-based research into Puerto Rico's singular status as the world's oldest colony. Puerto Ricans are North American citizens who bear the responsibilities of that citizenship but are not represented in Congress and cannot vote in presidential and other national elections. Puerto Ricans are often "have-nots" in relation to the "haves" living in the U.S. mainland. This lack of voice, agency, and resources has been especially and tragically apparent since the all-destroying havoc wreaked in 2017 by Hurricane Maria; a recovery that has been long, slow, and remains incomplete due to the seemingly intentional disregard and lack of support from the highest-levels of U.S. government; and subsequent economic and political crises.

Tomassini finds—salvages, saves—the objects from which he builds his art-as-environment (he was trained as an architect) while going about his daily-life on foot and bicycle. What he finds is

marked, unmistakably, by age, use and, ultimately, being discarded on the street as refuse. Elegantly employed by Tomasinni, the objects in and of his art speak of deprivation and scarcity. Tomasinni holds and pursues a strong interest in “floating populations”: refugees, those forced into diaspora by economics or politics, the homeless—or students, a (typically) much-privileged floating population in which Tomassini was immersed as an MFA student at Penn and that he continues to live and work amidst.

Queen and Tomasinni are products of, and are inspired by, both their native and chosen places for living—Queen’s Virginia and Maine and Tomasinni’s Puerto Rico (overarchingly), New York, and Philadelphia. They’ve brought their places of origin to Philadelphia, creating a new shared, somewhat symbiotic, “third space” within this Old Kensington gallery. Philadelphia is an active presence in their work, which continues and builds upon a creative lineage begun by Marcel Duchamp, the inventor and pioneer of selecting found, mass-produced “readymade” consumer items and giving them new meanings by presenting them as art. A particularly iconic and iconoclastic example is his *Fountain*: a urinal rendered useless—and, thus, aesthetic—by being detached from plumbing and placed upside-down on a pedestal.

The urinal’s associations with waters human and natural, and the absence of both in Duchamp’s *Fountain*, steers us back to the maritime nature of *Lastre* and ballast. This exhibition’s layers of meaning reside in watery depths. Maine and Puerto Rico are, respectively, the northernmost and southernmost parts of the U.S., separated by nearly 2,000 miles. They are resoundingly different in climate, topography, demographics, language, culture, and more. Yet they are connected by maritime trade-routes and trade-winds, by the flow of the Atlantic along an extended section of its northeastern coast, and by hurricanes that originate in the Caribbean and continue up the East Coast. They share commerce and trade resources (Puerto Rico typically at disadvantage). In an ambiguous, partial, contentious manner, they also share a sense of separation from the rest of the U.S. that is in some ways cherished heritage and in others a challenging, burdensome, and alienating reality.

Tomassini brings flowing water to *Lastre*—a newborn fountain erupting from and contained within a small, inexpensive, plastic baby-pool. This fountain echoes with Tomassini's artistic lodestars in ways specific to Philadelphia. Almost 50 years ago, the pioneering Puerto Rico-born, New York-based conceptual-artist Rafael Ferrer (born 1933) deployed *Deflected Fountain 1970, for Marcel Duchamp* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This intervention included just two elements: (1) the monumental fountain with an octagonal basin in the center of the museum's East Courtyard, atop the unintentionally famed, attention-stealing "Rocky Steps," and (2) Ferrer's own body—his buttocks, specifically—which Ferrer positioned over the fountain's nozzle to deflect its stream. This could be viewed through a window in the gallery containing the museum's unparalleled collection of Duchamp's works—including his fountain. Tomassini's unassuming baby-pool is surprisingly fraught with social commentary and controversy. Pools like it are a common site in Puerto Rico's public-housing projects, whose residents have been criticized for their "extravagance" in buying the pools and filling them with water while receiving public assistance.

Tomassini brings ideas that began with Duchamp and continued with Ferrer further up to the moment with a super-sized photo-mural shot by Tomassini from the vantage point of the Art Museum's fountain, looking toward the skyline of Philadelphia's business-district and extending in all directions toward neighborhoods characteristically composed of block after block of red-brick rowhomes. In the photo is tragedy and humor: a homeless person and a man with arms uplifted in triumph a la Rocky. Clothes hang from a line extending from the fountain, conjuring a sight that's common in under-resourced neighborhoods and considered unsightly elsewhere. An arrangement of banana-tree leaves connects the present with the ancient Greco-Roman origins of European (and, thus, American) civilization. As placed by Tomassini, they echo the elaborate capitals of Corinthian columns. In ancient Corinth's Temple of Aphrodite, thousands of priestess-prostitutes fulfilled the spiritual and/or sexual needs of Greeks from elsewhere, wealthy Athenians, in particular. Tomassini suggests parallels between Corinth as a pleasure-palace destination for ancient elites and Puerto Rico as a destination for wealthy Americans

seeking pleasure, luxury, and escape as provided by the island's natural beauty and the ministrations of thousands of Puerto Ricans working in the tourism industry.

In keeping with her interest in physicality and action—in regard to the human body and the natural and human-built environment—Queen's installation runs around and through Tomassini's. Its elements are locally sourced—she found them in a marine-supply store just one block from her home in Rockland. They speak to what's central to life in her adopted hometown—fishing—and how she, a non-"Mainer" who doesn't fish, observes the activity of those who are and do.

Queen's "readymade" marine supplies are not just bright shinningly new but glow in fluorescent colors that are easily visible in water and, in the context of *Lastre*, evoke the role of ballast in electrical lighting (further discussed in the following paragraph). Queen uses sailing rope and tubing to "draw" in three dimensions on the floor, on the walls, in space, and in combinations of all three: an elegantly twisting expanse of rope is tethered to floor and wall by flat-bottomed, bright-yellow plastic half-domes. Spiraling tubing is held in place by gravel—ballast. Queen explores how objects placed together can form a new, stable construction, and—connected only by gravity, without the use of nails, screws, glue, or mortar—how precarious the resulting construct is. Squeeze-clamps resting on the floor hold aloft fluorescent-pink lobster-trap parts proclaiming "Made in Maine" that, in turn, lean against the wall, creating mini-monuments that can be toppled by contact with a human shoe. Buoys out of water and set in place nonetheless remind us of their intended function and reality: tide-tossed, ever-moving "landmarks" on the surface of a body of water that bring attention to what's submerged and, thus, hidden below.

In a lesser-known sense relating to light and lighting, ballast is the element that steadies the flow of electricity into a bulb, preventing it from flaring up and blowing out. Maurelle held this meaning in mind as well, envisioning "catching lightning in a bottle" and enabling it to radiate and illuminate over time rather than in one brief flash. The twin lights of intense thought and

artistic creativity illumine the themes present in *Lastre* and show the way to a multiplicity of meaning and interpretation. Rather than a standard statement in prose, Maurelle composed a poem to orient Queen and Tomassini to notions of lastre and ballast and the tides that embrace Puerto Rico, Maine, and all points in between and beyond—our one, water-immersed world.

How calm,  
As if the sea lay waste at the horizon, it is calm themselves  
How irregularly calm  
Two shores further ocean  
The wane a blanket gray pearl, is yet beholden  
Sudden water on its side, degrees uneven and toil  
Nor adornment, nor boast, nor reconciliation, or consolation  
Ah, for this day to be undone, the trail, destruction in its wake.

James Maurelle, "Statement for Lastre," 2019