

The Quiet Construction of Intimacy: YoYo Lander as Artist and Emotional Architect

Good projects are born of good plans, and the makings of YoYo Lander's mid-career survey unfold like a blueprint. At its core, this blueprint reveals a grand vision—one built upon the aspiration of a global, shared sense of humanity and raw emotional expression, as seen through the artist's discerning eye. In Lander's world, feelings are a first skin, and we shake hands with our hearts.

Between the Quiet, Selected Works from 2019-2024 features a selection of figurative and abstract works that lift us above Lander's landscape of honest artistry. From this vantage, we're introduced to compositions now residing within private and public collections across the country. One such piece, *Nothing to Hide*, visually and titularly encapsulates the tension between the desire for vulnerability and the resistance of fully surrendering to it.

In this collage, our gaze rests on a woman's bare back, her skin rendered as a mosaic of earthly tones—clay, sand, granite, and stone—that root her within a natural, grounded palette. Her right shoulder dips, signaling a moment of hesitation, as though she's on the brink of turning toward us, yet holds firmly to an inner uncertainty about revealing herself fully. A partial profile of her face emerges above her shoulder: her neck slightly bent, her lips closed in quiet reserve, her lowered eyes lending her an air of introspection or retreat.

Crowning her coiled hair is a headwrap, a recurring element in Lander's work with several of her studio subjects throughout the *Time Off* series. Here, the headwrap is rendered in a striking yellow, a color resonant with the solar plexus chakra—a locus of personal power, the navigation of fears, and the complex expression of selfhood. Its presence gestures toward the strength required to face moments of fracture and uncertainty—a theme that courses through Lander's body of work. These compositions, like the artist herself, are deeply informed by stories of vulnerability, memory, and loss—stories that trace back to the origins of Lander's practice and form the connective tissue of this exhibition.

The foundation of this survey is pencil sketched, watercolor stained, and smudged—its layers tracing a memory shaped by tragedy. When Lander was just seven years old, her father was involved in a devastating car accident that irrevocably changed him, leaving him an altered version of his former physical, mental, and emotional self. A paraplegic, he became unable to walk independently and relied on a wheelchair from the age of 37.

"When he came home...because he was in rehabilitation for a long time, he could not speak," Lander recounts. "Me and my sister kind of had to teach him the things he taught us—how to read, how to speak again...so, in order to know what he needed...I always used to look in his eyes. I could tell if he was hungry...if he needed anything...and that's when I really started to think about body language."

This early, intimate education in nonverbal communication profoundly shaped Lander's approach to her studio practice. Today, as she works with her models, this ability to read the unsaid—to see beyond what is immediately visible—guides her creative process.

“I’m always interested in how people exist in their bodies,” Lander continues. “I’m always interested in how these poses we find ourselves in are universal. There are times when the models are posing for me, and I’ve seen that pose before. I’ve been in that pose before. I know what that means. I know what that translates to.”

This awareness shapes her artistic approach, becoming a gateway to a deeper inquiry. “What does it look like to capture the soul through the figurative?” she reflects. “The essence of a person? When there is no mask, no entertainment, no distractions, no crazy hairdo, no crazy makeup—just who they are in their alone time. That is what I’m looking for in the figurative.”

In Lander’s collage work, layers are both physical and conceptual, designed to support the most foundational elements of its full scope. The artist describes her process as working back to front, beginning with the most intimate layers—the moments she shares with her subjects. The soft music, the natural light streaming through the grand, industrial windows of her studio, and the warmth of the space all provide room for quiet exchanges, which then form the bedrock of the work. The process unfolds from there, with Lander building upon these emotional and physical foundations to create a holistic, layered composition.

Deep Water and Drowning Are Not the Same Thing portrays a seated woman, her body folding inward as though shielding itself from an unseen force. The lower half of her figure is swathed in a delicate sheet, while her wrapped head nestles within the crook of her elbow—a gesture that speaks to both self-protection and surrender. Her emotions ripple through the composition: held tightly within her posture yet escaping in waves, radiating outward to draw the viewer into her quiet turmoil. The piece captures the tension between withdrawal and exposure, inviting us to witness a moment of raw intensity.

According to the artist, some sessions are quick while others are more drawn out, depending upon how long it might take models to become comfortable and retrieve their most vulnerable selves for capturing. After an intentional month spent not reviewing the photographs taken, Lander then returns to the images in order to begin piecing together her favorite details of the collection.

“For example,” the artist explains, “If I photograph a model and I like her head position in one photograph, but I like her body in the other photograph, I merge the pictures together.”

Once Lander is pleased with the collaged image, she puts it aside and begins the staining process. Using large sheets of watercolor paper cut from even larger rolls, staining them repeatedly until she’s reached her desired shading. But watercolor can be tricky, and whichever path it chooses to take will inadvertently impact the final result of the art.

“You think you have this beautiful dark color, and then you come back the next day, and it’s not what I was expecting. But I go with it.”

The artist then allows all of her stained paper to dry in a separate room, returning to an assortment of sienas, reds, browns, yellows, pinks, and purples—colors inspired by the

undertones of her models. Other colors are incorporated based upon the models clothing and accessories, such as the headwraps, or the green shades worn by her models throughout the *Yesterday Was Hard* portrait series.

From here, Lander draws the entire image out on large watercolor sheets, and then begins to cut shapes to place down, beginning with the furthest back layer, perhaps the shadow of a ponytail, or neck, and build her way up through the face to the forehead and the tip of a nose. The result is a dynamic layering of emotion and form, where each piece—each section of the collage—holds a specific resonance, imbued with the model's vulnerability. Each shape, color, and texture serves as a quiet testament to the subject's internal state, reflecting moments of rawness and presence, sometimes hidden beneath external layers or quieted by time. In Lander's work, the layers of paper and paint are as much about revealing as they are about concealing—inviting the viewer to look closer, to unearth something both personal and universal.

Lander's choice of materials goes beyond representation, constructing both emotional depth and spatiality within her work. As her practice evolves from figuration to abstraction, her larger-scale compositions create more expansive physical and psychological space, allowing for deeper reflection on the human experience. *The Speck #1*, an abstract piece composed of 70 red-framed blocks of acrylic and craft sand on canvas, is nearly 4 feet high and 6 feet wide. Each block is identical, with the exception of one that contains a solitary white speck, floating in the sea of red.

"I wanted it to look like a beautiful mistake, a really nice accident," Lander shares. "What it represents is our perceived imperfections. It's the one thing you think everyone sees when they look at you. But if {the speck} weren't there, it wouldn't be an art piece. There would be nothing to inquire about."

Essentially, *The Speck #1* is a commentary on the human condition, where the slightest deviation from the norm can shape our identity, stir insecurity, or spark inquiry. The work speaks to the emotional weight of what it means to be 'seen'—holding both our desire for connection and our fears of being misunderstood or othered in the exposure of our truest selves.

As a young artist who found her way into visual art through a mechanical drawing class she once took to get her closer to a first dream of architecture, YoYo Lander has, in fact, achieved the very thing she once imagined: a blueprint, but one composed not of structures, but of emotional layers and meditative space. Through her art, Lander has not merely created images, but entire rooms—spaces in which emotions, memories, and reflections intertwine. The largest room of all, however, is the one we now inhabit together as viewers—where we, too, become part of her construction, standing in communal reflection of the work, sharing in its stillness, its power, and its quiet revelation.