

Emulating
and repudiating
since 1949

ArtReview



Manuela Solano

Tourmaline *Lives of a Pollinator*

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge 1 October – 21 December

What does freedom look like? In Tourmaline's first US institutional solo show, freedom re-emerges in the spaces between joyful bodies and in the threads binding a tightly knit community. The exhibition of eight works installed across two galleries is a homecoming for the Massachusetts-born artist and author, whose work has long traced the lives of Black trans women and the queer communities that have sustained them. Freedom here is not a truck commercial or an escape from obligation to one another, but something tender, shimmering and at rest.

The show is anchored by the film *Pollinator* (2022). In a slow, meditative sequence projected on a wall, the artist demurely tends to flowers in Brooklyn Botanic Garden, cradling each bloom and returning the viewer's gaze with quiet curiosity. At other points in the film, archival footage of the artist's late father punctuates footage honouring Tourmaline's trans ancestors – most centrally the activist Marsha P. Johnson. In one scene, mourners at a memorial for Johnson scatter petals in a river. As flowers, water and sunlight recur as fellow actors rather than backdrops, the nonhuman world becomes a naturally

queer space for all kinds of radical transformation. First shown as part of a dramatic installation in the 2024 Whitney Biennial, one of the central concerns of which was transphobia in the US, the film, when presented in the Carpenter Center's intimate exhibition space, feels less like a monument to representation than an elegiac reflection. Here, it shares the gallery with an altar to Johnson decorated with flowers and a photograph from the Schlesinger Library archives of her smiling into a megaphone.

Lives of a Pollinator arrives amid renewed hostility towards trans and queer expression in public institutions and the academy. Recent events, such as the threatened exclusion of Amy Sherard's painting *Trans Forming Liberty* (2024) from a Smithsonian exhibition, which led to the show's cancellation, as well as threats to academic freedom at universities like Harvard, underscore the stakes of Tourmaline's work. At a time when queer and trans visibility oscillates between overexposure and erasure, Tourmaline's luminous films and photographs are not simply portraits, but habitats of free expression and mutual flourishing. In a queer

nod to Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–63), Tourmaline's photograph *Pour the boos around me* (2022–23) expands the frame to Tourmaline's kinship network as the artist and 15 of her friends soak up the sun on a lush Venetian lawn.

For Tourmaline, it is crucial to do more than remember, grieve or read, but to recall the words of adrienne maree brown's book *Pleasure Activism* (2019) and 'recognize pleasure as a measure for freedom'. In *It's Giving Countach* (2022), a self-portrait at the Beverly Hills Hotel, the artist invites us to watch her take pleasure in her own blossoming. In what could be mistaken for a very glamorous Instagram post, her red feathered heels echo the scarlet peonies of the adjoining hotel garden. Her portrait pays homage to the hotel's Black architect, Paul R. Williams, who was not permitted to stay there under anti-Black segregation laws. So long as pleasure is present, the exhibition suggests, any place – from a garden to a river's edge to deep within an archive – can be a site where Black and trans freedom is rehearsed and sustained. To luxuriate, to blossom in plain sight, is a kind of freedom too. *Rachel M. Tang*



Pour the boos around me, 2022–23, c-print, 46 × 46 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York