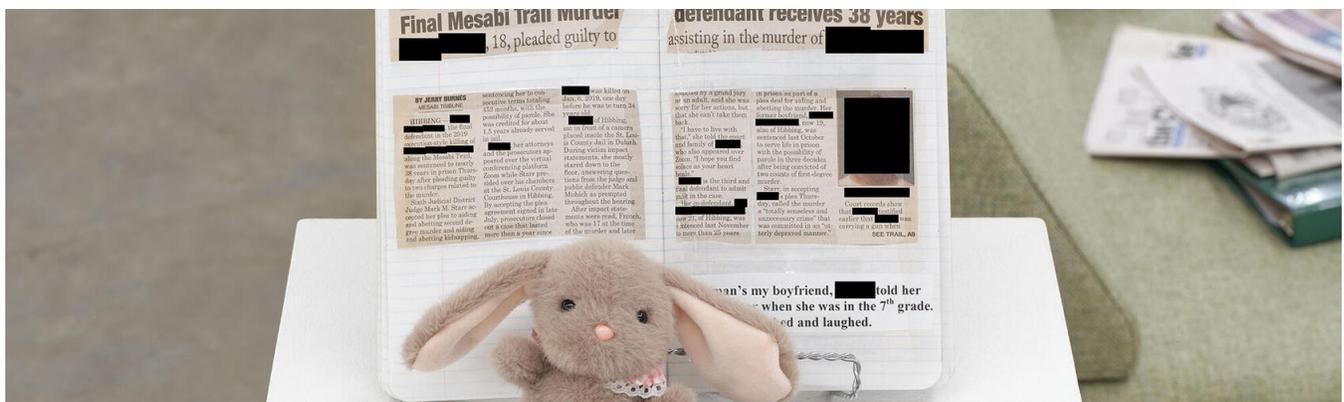


FRIEZE

The Investigative Strategies of Juliana Halpert and Chris Kraus

A show at Bel Ami, Los Angeles, makes detectives of viewers by inundating them with documentation

Jessica Simmons-Reid | August 22, 2025



In 'Civil Commitment' at Bel Ami, Los Angeles, artist and writer Juliana Halpert and writer Chris Kraus use the physical trappings of investigative work – annotated documents, photographs, newspaper clippings, archive boxes – to draw out connections between their respective research. This project marks their first collaboration since forming a friendship in 2018 at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California, where Kraus was Halpert's professor.

Interweaving personal narratives with broader ruminations on authorship and subjectivity, Halpert and Kraus plumb the socio-economic disparities that plague two predominantly white rural communities: Montpelier, Vermont (Halpert's home town) and Harding, Minnesota (the setting of Kraus's forthcoming novel, *The Four Spent the Day Together*, 2025). Halpert's photographs and Kraus's aggregated papers – which include handwritten drafts, timelines



Juliana Halpert and Chris Kraus with Luis Baez, 'Civil Commitment', 2025, exhibition view.
Courtesy: Bel Ami, Los Angeles

and interviews – appear in seemingly haphazard arrangements throughout the gallery, now reminiscent of a cluttered office space. Also on view are small drawings by artist Luis Baez, a friend of Kraus's who was inspired by her early manuscripts. The exhibition not only parses notions of work (invoked here as both a noun and a verb) but also characterizes autofiction – the narrative blurring of autobiographical and fictional experiences – as a dual creative and investigative strategy.

Halpert's photographs, which include chromogenic prints and digital picture frames, examine her mother's work as a public defender for the Vermont Office of the Defender General, a role from which she recently retired. The images position the indices of her mother's labour – the filing cabinets peppering her office, the case notes scrawled on her whiteboard – as impetus for her own creative examinations. We can read these photographs as imagistic odes to a parent's life of public service, a tender act of familial intimacy at odds with the criminal justice system's clinical bureaucracy. In another sense, they evidence the artist's own techniques of inquiry, as if Halpert were excavating narratives hidden within the remnants of her mother's work. In *Northern State Correctional Facility* (2025), for example, 16 small, identical photographs of her



Juliana Halpert, Northern State Correctional Facility, 2025, digital chromogenic prints, artist frame, 86 × 66 cm. Courtesy: Bel Ami, Los Angeles

mother populate a single large frame, prompting the viewer to scour these repeating images for visual difference – acts of careful decipherment that echo the endeavours of an investigator.

Channelling the probative methods of artists like Sophie Calle, Kraus's files similarly foreground the unseen and often obsessive labour inherent in the pursuit of a specialized objective (in this case, a novel). The papers, presented here as a single, untitled archive, encompass the author's research for her book, which revolves around a murder in Harding, a mining town blighted by poverty, crime and methamphetamine addiction. Melding fiction, autobiography and true crime writing, the novel draws on Kraus's own divorce and childhood as well as a 2019 kidnapping and homicide perpetrated by three local teenagers, translating these real-life occurrences into a three-part fictitious narrative. By presenting her raw research materials alongside wide-ranging ephemera from her own life, including childhood mementos and screenshots of negative tweets about her, Kraus inundates viewers with paperwork – a



Materials from the archive of Chris Kraus, assembled during the writing of *The Four Spent the Day Together*, in Juliana Halpert and Chris Kraus with Luis Baez, 'Civil Commitment', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Bel Ami, Los Angeles

tactic of withholding information through overexposure that muddies the waters between truth and myth. Here, a messy and convoluted visual experience betrays a rich, conceptual one, positioning the act of viewing (and reading) as necessarily active work. By presenting us with an accumulation of documentation that circumvents easily digestible assertions, Halpert and Kraus's exhibition suggests that the delineation between fact and fiction – whether in court or through narration – is a subjective act of arbitration that is wholly contingent on the form and tenor of its presentation.

'Civil Commitment' is on view at Bel Ami, Los Angeles until 11 October

Main image: Materials from the archive of Chris Kraus, assembled during the writing of *The Four Spent the Day Together*, in Juliana Halpert and Chris Kraus with Luis Baez, 'Civil Commitment', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Bel Ami, Los Angeles