

THE FOUR SPENT THE DAY TOGETHER

A CONVERSATION
WITH CHRIS KRAUS, JULIANA HALPERT,
LUIS BAEZ AND NABIL KASHYAP

● At the start of the summer, Bel Ami gallery director Lee Foley invited artist and writer Juliana Halpert and writer Chris Kraus to produce a two-person exhibition loosely inspired by Kraus' new novel *The Four Spent the Day Together*. The book ends with an account of a senseless kidnapping and murder committed by three teenagers on the Iron Range of northern Minnesota. Halpert went back to her hometown in Vermont to produce a new series of photographs, and Kraus moved her research archive into the gallery. But there was also a third body of work: Mexico City-based artist and writer Luis Bauz made a series of drawings and watercolours while reading the novel. The resulting exhibition *Civil Commitment* was displayed at Bel Ami's Los Angeles gallery (19 July – 11 October 2025). In August, Kraus, Halpert and Bauz joined poet and writer Nabil Kashyap to talk about the ideas in the show and subliminal collaboration.

NABIL Let's start with this: how did the show come together? Luis and Chris, I know you've been informally collaborating since the

late 1990s, but how did this configuration come about? What were you envisioning?

LUIS We never planned on doing these drawings. Chris asked me to read the novel while she was writing and to give my opinion. She began with her parents' relationship. I found it sweet, so I made some drawings of them. And I added a couple of bubbles to another passage, like in a graphic novel or something. Chris said she loved them – she wanted to buy them but I said no no no, I'll give them to you.

As I kept reading the book, more scenes kept touching me. In the past I've made drawings from different novels for no special reason, around passages that really grabbed me. With Chris' book there were some passages that really got me. But at the same time, I wanted to experiment with different textures. I was using coloured pencils a lot and I thought, hey – why not do watercolours?

I remember one watercolour both of us love, where she was talking about fireflies. That made her so happy – and her reaction inspired me to create more. I took

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a long time to finish the book because I was drawing my way through it.

CHRIS Luis' reading of the book was really important to me. I'd never written about my family before. I'd tried a couple of times but it was hard, it's all so weird and embarrassing. So I felt very vulnerable about it, and his response with the drawings literally carried me the rest of the way through the book.

Juliana and I have a history too. We've known each other since 2018 and we've done a few little projects before, just in the spirit of fun, so we thought it would be cool to do something together. But I think Lee Foley, the director of Bel Ami Gallery, was the initial instigator.

JULIANA Yeah, Lee invited us to make an exhibition together – she gave us the prompt and the venue. She loves Chris' writing and knew that there was a new novel in the works. About a year ago, Lee texted me out of the blue and asked if I could come by the gallery to discuss something. I had no idea what to expect! But I obliged, of course.

We sat on the second-floor balcony of the Chinatown plaza where the gallery is located, and Lee asked pretty outright if I'd be interested in putting together another two-person show, this time with Chris. She was curious about the true-crime aspects of Chris' new book, and her research and writing processes. She knew Chris and I were friends, and that Chris had been my teacher, and she identified a similarly investigative, perspectival approach in *my* work. I was quite touched. I had walked in thinking she was going to ask me for some favour! Instead, she offered something that was a little beyond my dreams, frankly.

I brought the idea up with Chris, who generously agreed. I think we both knew rather immediately what the show could orbit around...

CHRIS Our earliest affinity came from our connections to these rural areas in the United States. So much of *The Four* focuses on these small, downtrodden yet bucolic towns in Minnesota. I had been living partly up there, and heard about the Nagamo Trail murder around the time I met Juliana. Not

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only was Juliana from a similar type of small town in Vermont, but her mother was a public defender in the state's tiny state capital for over thirty years.

JULIANA Chris had very kindly been sending me pages of the book, long before the show was even on the horizon. Her descriptions of these towns in Minnesota, how they're bifurcated between little liberal idylls and down-and-out, meth-y tracts where the Walmart parking lot acts as the sole social square – god, they were so familiar to me. And her retelling of the case – the four kids who have next to nothing besides quick tempers and drug habits and easy access to a stepdad's gun – it was like every case and every client I ever saw my mum take on.

NABIL How did you all come to know each other?

LUIS I lived in LA for 25 years until 2007. When Chris and I met I was working at Amok Books in Los Feliz and she came in with some flyers for a reading of Cookie Mueller's work – one of my favourite writers! We started a conversation and we became friends after that.

CHRIS And you introduced me to Reynaldo [Rivera]. Do you remember the shoot the three of us did in Piru for *I Love Dick*?

And then we all worked on *The Chance Event* (1996) after that.

LUIS The most beautiful part of this was, for me, we never had to hire anybody. Everything came with friendship, affection and a lot of fun.

CHRIS And then Juliana and I met at ArtCenter. We both turned out to be hikers and we shared the rural Americana slash criminal justice interests as well.

NABIL I feel like this is a great segue. I'm wondering how exactly this collaboration worked? What was the story of this particular configuration, and the way you envisioned working together?

JULIANA There was definitely a 'discovery' period in the beginning. Lee and I went to Chris' house and she let us paw through the many boxes of documents and ephemera that she assembled for the book. She also showed us Luis' drawings, which enthralled us both. The boxes bore an epiphany of sorts – they reminded me of the dozens and dozens of file boxes that lined the walls of the public defenders' offices in Vermont. It dawned on me that writing a novel is rather similar to building a case; both require crafting a narrative out of an absolute blizzard of information. All loose threads need to be followed and eventually

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tied up. Causality must seem convincing enough. Readers and jurors are not unlike.

I spent a fair amount of my childhood lurking around the Office of the Defender General, where my mum worked. My first job was actually as a part-time receptionist there, mostly fielding collect calls from the state prisons and angry prosecutors. After witnessing Chris' process and rereading *The Four*, I decided to spend a month back home in Vermont and see if I could gain access to the office – and, in some ways, to my mother, on the eve of her full retirement. I think my work has been making sideward glances towards my mum for some time now, so I wanted to face her head-on. That job has been her *raison d'être*. Maybe that also likens her to an artist or writer, too.

NABIL The exhibition brings so many people into the room. It seems like 'collaboration' is an insufficient word to describe this endeavour. The way your practices interweave feels like something different. I'm thinking about Luis' drawings and the way Chris' text animates them, but then the drawings themselves become a frame for the text. And there are deep connections between the drawings and Juliana's photographs and her mother's work as a public defender. It's hard to pry apart the different bodies of work, which is super interesting. What emerged from working together?

CHRIS It's funny, I feel like most of the collaboration happened prior to the exhibition. All of our histories, experiences together, conversations and influences... My first thought was, we'll just throw all this stuff together into the room and let something emerge. And that's kind of what happened, right?

JULIANA Definitely. But Chris' work and way of working led the way. I really see *The Four* as the ur-text, or scripture, for the exhibition. At some point, I overheard Chris describe the book, which is divided into three parts, as three train tracks running parallel. That attached itself to me immediately. There was no way I wasn't going to try to emulate that framework.

Soon after, I remembered that I had three old green lacquer frames sitting in my storage unit. I'd found them at St. Vincent de Paul in Lincoln Heights, ages ago, and had forgotten all about them. God, it felt so pre-ordained. They totally matched the decades-old aesthetic of the artwork at my mother's office, too. Working as a public defender is like shoveling shit against the tide. It's a cubicle job, you give your life to it and it's unglamorous, but you have a cause.

Another thing I discovered about Chris, when Lee and I were rifling through her archives: she routinely goes to Walmart and orders hundreds upon hundreds of cheap,

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digital 4x6 prints of all her phone pictures. She then sticks them into photo albums and hand-writes little notes in the margins. I knew Chris has kept journals for decades, but I had no idea she was doing this, too. I think I screamed, *Chris, you have a photography practice!* It was such a revelation.

Those prints and books really got in my head – they’re largely why I decided to make weird compositions of multiple, small prints inside the green frames, with cheap green picture mats. I needed to play around with and arrange all the pictures I shot – digitally – in Vermont, the way Chris arranged and sorted and arranged her materials. For me, it was never about the individual images, in a ‘fine-art photography’ kind of way. It’s not making art objects; it’s story-building.

NABIL Let’s talk more about this coming together in these different ways. It’s not just that your work and lives have been intertwined over the last couple of decades. There’s this other part, where you enter the exhibition and see all these other lives represented. The characters from the book in Luis’ drawings, the book group in Juliana’s photograph... How do you hold all the lives on display here?

CHRIS Writing the book, I knew that I wanted to ventriloquise people, but it was hard. I wanted to access their world, write

from their point of view, but their presence around me was so opaque. It seemed like they either felt nothing, or they felt everything all at once. I gathered dozens of interviews but the most frequent response to every question was *I don’t know* or *I don’t remember*. Finally, when the last case concluded, the police handed me a treasure trove of transcribed DMs and text messages scoured from the kids’ phones and that changed everything. There was the way they talked to each other.

LUIS When I made the drawings, I began with the characters. First, there were Catt’s parents and their relationship. And then Catt and her husband Paul going through their separation. When she got to the crimes, I started writing down the ages and descriptions of the four characters. I never looked them up online or saw the actual people. It all came out of my mind and out of the book.

NABIL Another aspect of the show that struck me, and it’s already come up, is repetition. Formally speaking, you walk into the gallery and it’s just 8.5x11 sheets of paper, 4x6 snapshots in different grids, piles and angles. And the reciprocity between the text and Luis’ drawings. And then Juliana, there’s the image of your mother in front of the prison. The idea that you have sixteen

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versions of the same image – it almost feels like there’s a breeze going through. And then of course justice or injustice repeating itself – were you aware of this, putting the work together?

JULIANA I wish I had an elegant answer for why I did that. It was very intuitive. And it happened all of a sudden late one night. I think that there’s something about repetition that shows deliberation. It’s like music.

CHRIS Making those scrapbooks of photos and writing was how I found the connection between myself and the kids. The first winter, walking around Harding, taking photos of scabby backyards, the clotheslines, the glassed-in porches reminded me so much of my childhood in Milford.

LUIS When I got to the hard and painful part of the book, I started just imagining the conversations – I couldn’t think of a particular image to make, so I opted for colouring the words. I have a cinematic imagination; I can picture passages easily when I’m reading. But the third part, about the crime, required extra effort – it was intense. The book ends with direct transcripts of text messages and Facebook DMs, so instead of creating images I had the idea to just colour the words.

NABIL With so much material, how did you actually compose the exhibition?

JULIANA Chris, I remember you said while we were installing that it felt like being backstage before a performance, where everyone’s stretching or doing their vocal warm-ups.

CHRIS Yes, the way we kept moving all these materials around, trying out different combinations...

JULIANA To me, the show sort of resembles a teenage girl’s bedroom, where the walls are covered with posters and pictures and advertisements from magazines. Incipient identity formation. Putting a few photographs on a wall doesn’t seem like much work, but there’s so much behind it. The show has started to feel like a secret world we’ve created together – me, Chris, Luis and Lee.

CHRIS The spatial relationships between things became so important. How to animate each other, without cancelling each other out, and let one thing lead to another? It was almost like contact improvisation. But wait – this is a dance journal!

NABIL Perhaps we should stop here. ●