

Sohier

Hilliard:

OUR PARENTS

OURSELVES

Sohier Hilliard:

Our Parents, Ourselves

Fitchburg Art Museum

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Director's Foreword

Over the last thirty years, the Fitchburg Art Museum has amassed a truly impressive collection of over 2,000 photographs. These range from nineteenth-century daguerreotypes to large-scale color digital prints of the twenty-first century. And, in 2013, FAM launched a major exhibition program devoted to the works of contemporary New England artists. This show, **Sohier/Hilliard: Our Parents, Ourselves**, directly reflects both of these curatorial priorities, while also highlighting the work of two immensely important photographers who significantly expand upon the traditions of narrative and portraiture. Many thanks to the artists, and to FAM Curator Lisa Crossman for bringing them together in such an elegant and thought-provoking manner. Thanks also to Professor Rob Carr's Fall 2019 Document Design class at Fitchburg State University for designing this beautiful exhibition catalogue.

Nick Capasso, Director
Fitchburg Art Museum

Parental Ties that Bind: Identity and Intimacy in Sage Sohier and David Hilliard

Placed together in one gallery, Sage Sohier's and David Hilliard's photographs of a same-sex parent seemingly stage parallel worlds. Sohier's photographs of her mother, Wendy Burden Morgan, and Hilliard's of his father, Ray Hilliard, are similar in their efforts to capture complex parental subjects but were conceived independently of each other. Their connection is instead the product of Lisa Crossman's curatorial project that highlights the shared themes between Hilliard's and Sohier's series, in addition to each photographer's individual vision. In *Sohier/Hilliard: Our Parents, Ourselves*, lines between photographers, subjects, parents, and children are heightened and blurred. Crossman, Sohier, and Hilliard devised the exhibition and its title with this tension between confluence and divergence in mind, so that entanglement is underscored as the central force at work.

More than documentation of each parental subject in daily routines, Sohier and Hilliard manufacture electric environments that make visible something completely intangible yet universal: the fraught landscape of intimacy between a parent and an adult child. An interrogation of this landscape unfolds across these bodies of work, as the photographers probe the nature of identity and its link to the deep bonds we share with those closest to us. For Sohier, Wendy's position as a former fashion model and as part of a generation of women before second-wave feminism forces a chasm between them. Similarly for Hilliard, Ray's ex-military brusqueness and stereotypically masculine habits like bad shirts, cigars, and Playboy¹ makes the two of them ostensible opposites. However, both photographers use their images to mine these gaps for deeper understanding and connection with a parent and with themselves.





David Hilliard has photographed his father intermittently since the early 1990s, alongside evocative possessions, family members, pets, and environments. Sage Sohier photographed her mother Wendy between 2000 and 2014 (with one outlier in 1994) to explore transformations caused by aging and shifting family dynamics. The use of photography over time is a loaded choice in these cases, inherently invoking centuries-old traditions of portraiture and documentation. The photographic family portrait has its roots in the earliest days of photography itself. Queen Victoria—who is largely credited as the first to harness and popularize the new technology of photography in the mid-nineteenth century—used the medium to craft a specific royal image for herself as queen and for the royal family as it grew and changed.² Photography's ties to objectivity and to truthful representation (however dubious now) made it an indispensable tool for royals and commoners alike to record themselves, loved ones, and significant moments across centuries. The photograph, more than any other visual medium, provides a sense of true-to-life representation and trusted preservation.

Sohier, **Mum and Laine in front of family portrait, Washington, D.C., 2011**







With Sohier and Hilliard, however, the family portrait is expanded and enhanced in order to reveal different motivations for capturing loved ones in photographs. These portraits are not just about Sohier's mom or Hilliard's dad and their lives and personalities. By nature of the child-photographing-parent dynamic, Sohier's and Hilliard's complicated relationships to the lives and personalities of Wendy and Ray are always in play. In some images, like Hilliard's **Rock Bottom** and Sohier's **Mum in her bathtub, Washington, D.C.**, the relationship is presented overtly, with Sohier and Hilliard themselves appearing in the compositions to quietly orbit the respective parent. These two images in particular highlight the simultaneous closeness and distance that exists between parent and child. In Hilliard's **Rock Bottom**, the connection created by the figures' matching tattoos is fractured by the expanse of empty landscape that divides them. In Sohier's **Mum in her bathtub**, mother and daughter share the intimate space of a bath, but their gazes do not meet. The optical trick of the mirror extends the separation between photographer and subject infinitely into the background.

Sohier, **Mum in her bathtub, Washington, D.C.**, 2002

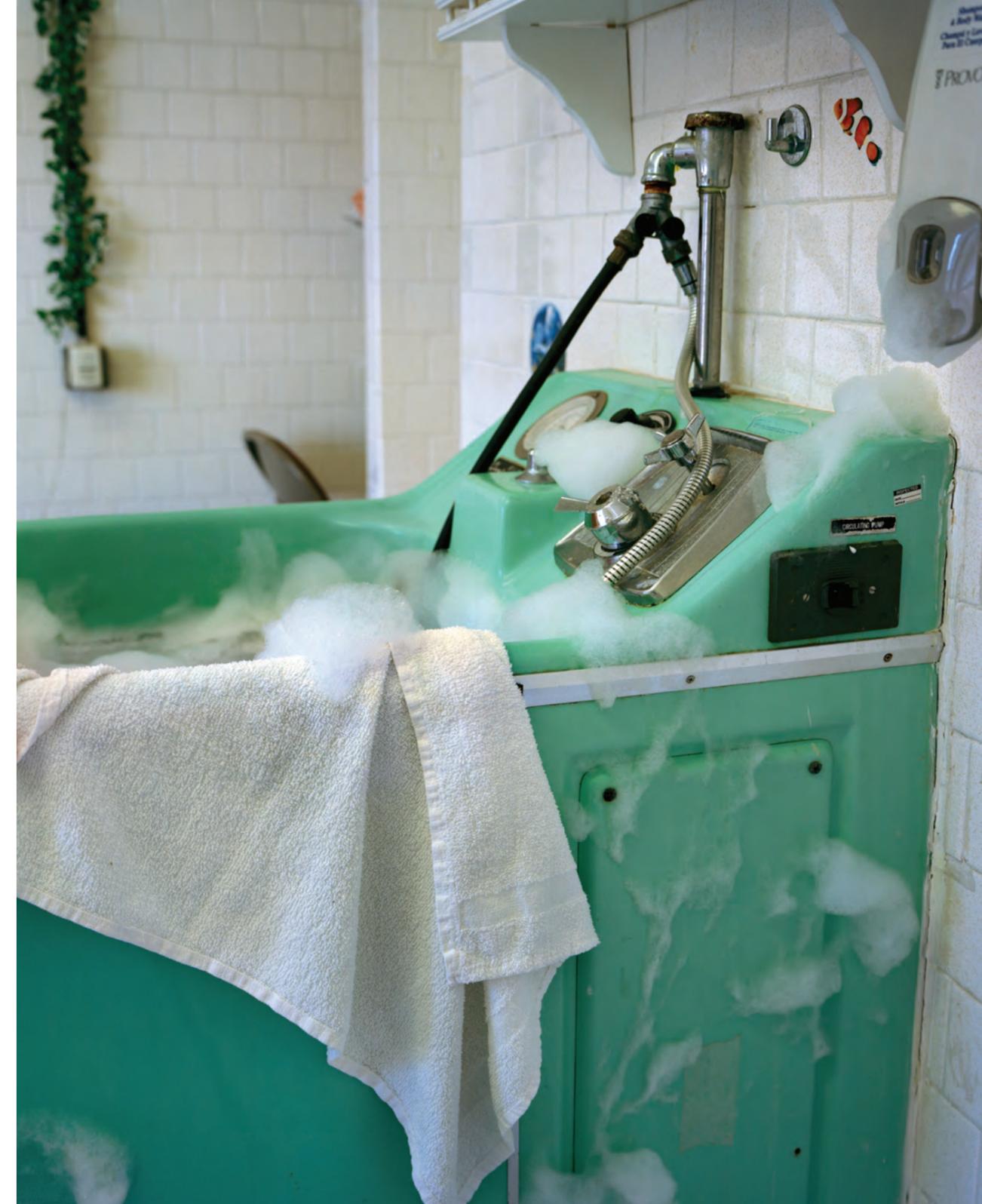
Even when the photographers themselves are not pictured, their presence is implied as integral to the scenes. There is an undeniable sense that Ray's comically unamused gaze in **Bubble** or the glint in Wendy's eye in **Back together with Robert, at Laine's 63rd birthday dinner, Sebastopol, CA** were both fostered by and aimed at Hilliard or Sohier, respectively; we, the viewers, just happen to be standing in the way. Sohier's title for her series, **Witness to Beauty**, highlights the integral role that she plays in the images. The word "witness" gives equal weight to both her mother's commanding presence and to Sohier's observation of and relation to it. These views of Wendy and Ray are crafted literally through the lenses of each parent's child, making Sohier and Hilliard integral to their understanding. On her process for composing the images with her mother and sister, Sohier has explained: "Many of the situations we photographed were based on memories I had from childhood of things we'd done together. Before we took a picture, we'd discuss what each of us was going to do."³ This collaborative process not only breathes life into these images—you can almost hear the lively off-camera

conversations that produced hilarious images like **Bleaching ritual, Washington, D.C.**—but also points to the multifaceted aims of these projects. These images are just as much about Sohier's mother and Hilliard's father as they are about Sohier and Hilliard themselves.

David Hilliard's use of the multi-panel format reveals his interest in pushing photography beyond its conventionalized status as an instantaneous medium. He has noted the way that people "unfold"⁴ over the course of being photographed and how his compositions show "moments rubbing up against other moments."⁵ These sentiments and formal choices indicate that the passage of time is paramount to Hilliard's work, as he seeks not just to document his subjects as they are but to also excavate and discover the ways that they shift over time. In turning this lens on his father across decades, Hilliard set out to explore the contradictions of Ray's character with the aim of understanding: how could Ray be simultaneously "the best and worst of things,"⁶ as Hilliard has phrased it, and how does one engage with this paradox, particularly when directly implicated as his son?







Hilliard has said that his photographs are always autobiographical, even and especially when he is not pictured,⁷ but categorizes the work with his father as the most intimate of all of his photographs.⁸ The continuous desire to return to this subject variously over decades stresses how integral Hilliard's relationship with Ray is to his own identity and proves his own assessment that it is difficult to talk about his photographs "without it turning into therapy."⁹

One of the most entangled and layered themes in these images of Wendy and Ray is gender. Mother-daughter and father-son dynamics necessarily spur conversations on generational shifts in gender roles and stereotypes, but Sohier and Hilliard overtly stoke these flames. Sohier contrasts Wendy's concern for her physical beauty with her daughters' ostensible lack thereof, but without passing judgement on either outlook. Instead, Sohier's **Witness to Beauty** presents the concept of femininity as one in constant flux and in need of vigilant questioning. Wendy's comfort in front of the camera stems from her former career as a fashion model and does not extend to her daughter—who clearly prefers

her opposite position behind the camera. By the end of the series, however, Sohier recognized a kindred interest in physical beauty and image making in herself: "Finally I can appreciate this way of life and mourn its end. [...] I have merely shifted my aim, trying to fill other realms with beauty and meaning."¹⁰

In addition to parent-child differences, showing Sohier's and Hilliard's series together sheds light on the disparity between the gendered expectations placed on aging men and women. While Hilliard continues to photograph Ray today, Sohier respected Wendy's wish to end the series before advanced aging could affect the images and the process. This is a practical decision, but it also speaks to the greater pressure for idealized representations of women. What's more, the images defy easy, stereotypical readings of Ray's masculinity and Wendy's femininity. Hilliard puts equal emphasis on Ray enjoying a stack of Playboy magazines in **The Lone Wolf** as he does on Ray's framed portrait of Henry David Thoreau and stack of poetry books in **Shortest Day**. Sohier shows Wendy at her most done-up and performative, as in **Mum and Laine in front of family portrait, Wahsington, D.C.**, and at her most stripped-down and

blissful, as in **Mum exercising in her pool, Washington, D.C.**

Slipping between Sohier and Hilliard, parent and child, masculine and feminine, photographer and subject, past and present, the images in **Sohier/Hilliard: Our Parents, Ourselves** are captivating precisely because of their slipperiness. At times, it is easy to think that the photographs were captured specifically for their pairing in this exhibition. Sohier's **Mum applying make-up, Washington, D.C.** and Hilliard's **The Lone Wolf**, for example, operate like a split-screen movie effect: Ray beholds the pin-up feminine ideal displayed in a bygone era of Playboy, while Wendy gazes at her own visage in contemplation of those same ideals. In his observation of the way that people and passing moments are always "rubbing shoulders with the previous one and the next [one], moments rubbing up against other moments," Hilliard touches on the inherently entangled nature of our experiences and identities. Rather than photographic documents of a parent or child, Sohier and Hilliard offer viewers entrance into immensely complex and highly relatable landscapes of intimacy.

Marjorie Rawle, Terrana Curatorial Fellow
Fitchburg Art Museum

Notes

¹ David Hilliard quoted in Michelle Dunn Marsh, "Decades: David Hilliard Photographs His Father," *Don't Take Pictures*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.donttakepictures.com/dtp-blog/2017/31/decades-david-hilliard-photographs-his-father>.

² "A Royal Passion: Queen Victoria and Photography," The Getty Museum, February 4–June 8, 2014, https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/victoria_photography.html.

³ Sage Sohier quoted in "Witness to Beauty—Sage Sohier Celebrates the Unfading Charm of her 89 year-old Mother," FotoRoom, <https://fotoroom.co/witness-to-beauty-sage-sohier/>.

⁴ David Hilliard, "Isn't This Grand?," interview by Pam Houston in *What Could Be* (Seattle, WA: Minor Matters Books LLC, 2014), 73.

⁵ David Hilliard, "Portrait of an Artist: David Hilliard," interview by Victoria Zhang, *The Harvard Crimson*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/9/9/david-hilliard-carpenter-center/>.

⁶ Hilliard, "Decades," 2017.

⁷ Hilliard, "Portrait of an Artist," 2014.

⁸ Hilliard, "Isn't This Grand?," 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰ Sage Sohier, "Afterword: In Beauty's Shadow," *Witness to Beauty* (Berlin: Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg, 2016), 105.













About the Artists

Sage Sohier

Sage Sohier has been photographing people in their environments for more than 30 years, after receiving her B.A. from Harvard University. She has received fellowships from the No Strings Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. Sohier's series from the 1980s, **Americans Seen**, was published in 2017 by Nazraeli Press. **Witness to Beauty**, her series about her ex-fashion-model mother, was published in 2017 by Kehrer Verlag. Other monographs include **At Home With Themselves: Same-Sex Couples in 1980s America** (2014), **About Face** (2012), and **Perfectible Worlds**, (2007). She has had solo shows at Foley Gallery in New York, Robert Klein Gallery in Boston, Carroll and Sons Gallery in Boston, Joseph Bellows Gallery in San Diego, The Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, and Blue Sky Gallery in Portland, OR. Her work has been included in group shows at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, the International Center of Photography, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and

many other venues. Sohier's work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Portland Art Museum, the Davis Museum, Wellesley College, and the Brooklyn Museum, to name a few. She has taught photography at Harvard University, Wellesley College, and the Massachusetts College of Art, and has done commissioned work for the George Gund Foundation in Cleveland, the Robert Rauschenberg Residency program in Captiva, FL, and the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, as well as editorial work for numerous publications. She is represented by Foley Gallery in New York, Robert Klein Gallery in Boston, and Joseph Bellows Gallery in San Diego.

David Hilliard

David Hilliard uses his unique, multi-paneled technique to produce expansive photographs, both figuratively and literally. His sweeping images depict subtle moments of love, family, adolescence, friendship and the nuances of masculinity, with a quiet yet powerful resonance. The multiple panels act as short films; a single work captures the passage of time. Hilliard's photography illustrates his own personal tensions, fears and desires—embroiled in his upbringing and sexuality—they remain universally evocative. Hilliard received his BFA from Massachusetts College of Art & Design before going on to complete his MFA at Yale University. He has had solo exhibitions in Paris, Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, New York, Portland, Frankfurt, Seattle, New Orleans, and Barcelona, among others. Hilliard is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as a Fulbright Grant and often participates in residencies and lectures at universities such as Dartmouth, Harvard, and Yale. His work is included in many international collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Whitney

Museum of American Art, Microsoft Art Collection, Portland Art Museum, the DeCordova Museum, the University of Salamanca, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others. He lives and works in Boston, MA.

Exhibition Checklist

Sage Sohier



Mum in her bathub, Washington, D.C., 2002

archival pigment print, edition of 3

28" x 35" image on 35" x 42" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Bleaching ritual, Washington, D.C., 2003

archival pigment print, edition of 5

22" x 27 1/2" image on 28" x 33 3/4" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Cedar enzyme bath, Osmosis Spa, Freestone, CA, 2010

archival pigment print, edition of 3

35" x 28" image on 42" x 35" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Mum and Laine in front of family portrait, Washington, D.C., 2011

archival pigment print, edition of 5

22" x 27 1/2" image on 28" x 33 3/4" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Back together with Robert, at Laine's 63rd birthday dinner, Sebastool, CA, 2014

archival pigment paper, edition of 3

36" x 24" image on 43" x 31" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Mum applying make-up, Washington, D.C., 1994

archival pigment print, edition of 5

22" x 27 1/2" image on 28" x 33 3/4" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Mum in her garden, Washington, D.C., 2003

archival pigment print, edition of 5

28" x 35" image on 35" x 42" paper

Courtesy of the artist



Sunrise dolphin watch on eco-cruise, Baja California, 2007

archival pigment print, edition of 3

28" x 35" image on 35" x 42" paper

Courtesy of the artist

David Hilliard

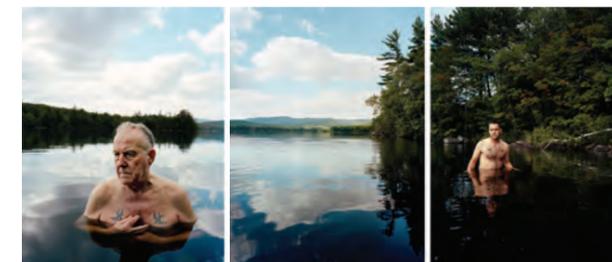


Hug, 2008

C-print, edition of 12

3 panels, each 24" x 20"; total size 24" x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston



Rock Bottom, 2008

C-print, edition of 12

3 panels, each 24" x 20"; total size 24" x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston



Furniture Walker, 2016

archival pigment print, edition of 12

3 panels, each 24" x 20"; total size 24" x 60"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston

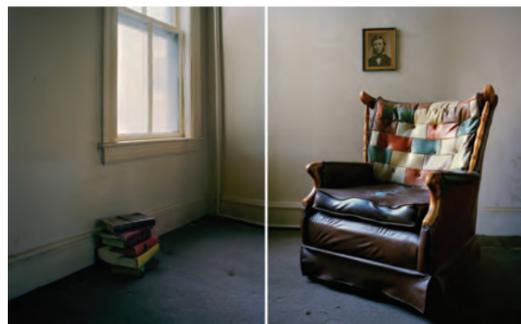


Crib Notes, 2016

archival pigment print, edition of 12

2 panels, each 24" x 20"; total size 24" x 40"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston



Shortest Day, 2016

archival pigment print, edition of 12

2 panels, each 24" x 20"; total size 24" x 40"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston



Bubble, 2017

C-print, edition 1 of 12

2 panels, each 24" x 20"; total size 24" x 40"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston



The Lone Wolf, 1993

C-print, edition 1 of 5

2 panels, each 16" x 20"; total size 32" x 20"

Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston

Acknowledgments

Sohier/Hilliard: Our Parents, Ourselves would not be possible without the stunning and multifaceted photographs of Sage Sohier and David Hilliard. And a special thanks to Sage's mother, Wendy Burden Morgan, and to David's father, Ray Hilliard, for their willing participation. I'm grateful to Sage for coming out to FAM with her catalogue and some prints from **Witness to Beauty**. I was immediately captivated by Wendy's dynamic presence and the complex musings on femininity, familial bonds, and aging that presented themselves in Sage's work. Already familiar with David's ongoing photography of his father, his photographs seemed the perfect pairing. David and Sage are superb collaborators, and I am grateful for their generosity and warm rapport. Together, their work gives us the chance to ponder the technical differences between their photographs, while sharpening our reflections on gender, class, and growing old. The photographs are eye-catching, rich documents that allow us a thoughtful look at Wendy and Ray, Sage and David, and, in turn, to contemplate by

extension our own parents in relation to ourselves. I am grateful to the entire FAM team, and, in particular, Terrana Curatorial Fellow Marjorie Rawle. While much of the organization for **Sohier/Hilliard: Our Parents, Ourselves** was complete upon her arrival, I am pleased that she's contributed this thoughtful essay to accompany the catalogue. This catalogue would not be possible if not for FAM's ongoing, productive collaboration with Professor Robert Carr and his talented students at Fitchburg State University. This marks the thirteenth semester of this partnership. Thank you to the catalogue students for your time and energy in creating this important document: Taylor Bourgeois, Dean Roussel, Klein Misiuski, Julia Spotts, Catherine Maxwell, and TJ Yadisernia.

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Julia Spotts

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Klein Misiurski

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