

*Curated by
Michele Hardy and
Jenelle Pasiechnik*



HEATHER LEIER

Practice Pinny

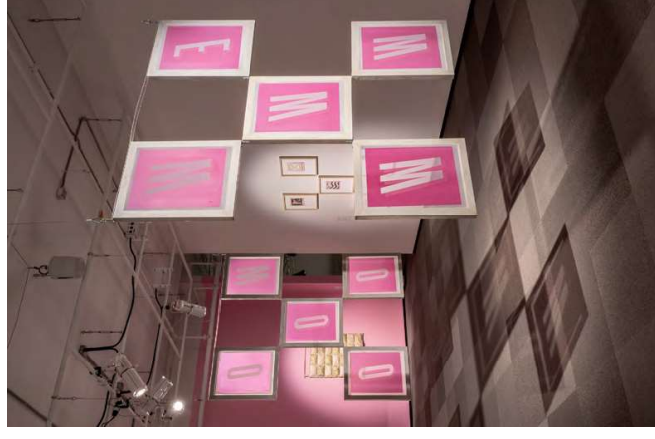
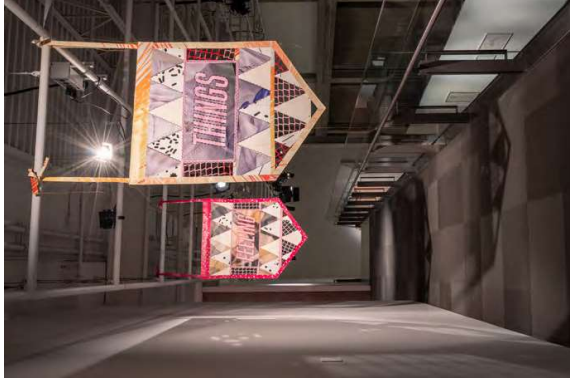
Mezzanine Gallery
Nickle Galleries | University of Calgary
February 6 - April 30, 2026

As a printmaker, Heather Leier is deeply attuned to embodied knowledge—the physical instincts and repeated actions that shape studio practice. The way one braces to pull a print, the gestures and tools involved, and the rituals that accompany the process all accumulate through repetition. Her practice pinny becomes a metaphor for this “costume of preparation,” echoing the apron worn in the print studio.

Repetition runs through the quilt-like prints, textile patterns, patchwork squares, and soft sculptures. It becomes a soothing, regulating practice—one that builds habits and coping mechanisms to support the body and emotions amid daily anxieties. These anxieties stem from ordinary experiences as well as the dissonance between what is presented and what is real. The quilt motif introduces a female-centered practice that repurposes scraps and waste materials into objects of use, honouring histories of feminine and often invisible labour while centering and signifying care.

Humour and play also recur throughout the work, underscoring their essential role in the rhythms of daily practice. Leier highlights the masked and performative nature of institutional care through a printed pickleball court installed at the gallery's center. The piece complicates the space, pointing to the absurdity of corporate wellness initiatives while still inviting play.

Across this body of work, Leier exposes and elevates both labour and creative practice, emphasizing their value while cautioning against their commodification. Interwoven throughout are themes of care—care for the body, for artistic labour, for coping amid everyday forms of violence, and for navigating institutional structures.



Practice Pinny

written by Tracy Wormsbecker

Sports and Embodied Engagement with Material Labour

If you are familiar with Heather Leier's previous bodies of work, you will be familiar with recurring themes of distress, coping, and care, which she examines through her own embodied experiences and presents through various methods of print media. Each aspect of Leier's artistic practice validates ways of knowing that are "not only intellectual but felt: adaptive, passed between hands, bodies, and materials, living in muscles and breath [and] in our capacity to brace."¹ This somatic description of embodied knowledge, which is implicit in Leier's previous work, is the explicit thematic core of *Practice Pinny*.² By framing the exhibition within athletic practice as a relatable analogy for embodied labour/coping, Leier leads the viewer to consider bold and layered artworks that materialize labour itself—both physical and emotional—as a necessary generative modality of learning, care, and intelligence.

While vivid (even neon) colour and celebratory motifs regularly enter Leier's work, their presence usually punctuates an otherwise quiet aesthetic that elicits introspective stillness. Her pieces are delicately rendered and expertly printed on specialty archival papers, reflecting the precision of and adherence to printmaking traditions. *Practice Pinny*, in seemingly stark aesthetic contrast, begins by luring viewers to an almost glowing stop-you-in-your-tracks neon pink plastic pickleball court resting on the floor of the gallery.³ Hanging nearby are four giant quilted pennants with bold, corporeal textures of goosebumps and sweat that are hand-printed on industrial billboard vinyl. Stitched upon each pennant is an individual silver celebratory balloon-like letter, and all are strung together to shout "P", "N", "N".⁴ Notably, the backs of these imposing triangular forms are made up of stitched Japanese Okawara paper, printed with subtle textures in soft hues. Nestled in the far corner of the gallery, behind the court, is a body-sized silver plush pillow-form with "wellness snacks" scrawled across the surface in cursive letters. The text itself is composed of hand-printed close-up images including prescription medication capsules, bubble wrap, and indiscriminate sharp/shattered textures.⁵

This dramatic introduction to the exhibition is intentionally jarring, performative, and absurd. It evokes reactions that may range from apprehension to glee upon encountering this visually loud installation situated within a traditionally reserved atmosphere; it entices the viewer to playfully and/or cautiously approach. Contradictions in materiality and meaning coax the viewer to look closer—to decipher what they are seeing and feeling. *Body Pillow*, for example, is at once comforting and disarming, and the emotionally-laden word "me," which is often colloquially used as a superficial reassurance to mask underlying anxieties, is "yelling" at the viewer

in all-caps. And, the presentation of industrial vinyl substrates used in commercial settings signifies a cheeky discordance with what is historically considered proper printmaking in fine art arenas. This may also provoke confusion, and/or unease. Leier is intentionally eliciting an emotional and physical (or, embodied) viewer response. In fact, a handy guide accompanies this exhibition, outlining which pieces are meant to be physically touched and interacted with. Symbolizing Leier's approach to her embodied art practice, *Practice Pinny* and the themes therein are meant to be felt.

As the exhibition title implies, this initial spectacle of sporting arenas and half-time cheers serves as a primer, or "warm up," from which Leier is inviting us to consider the entirety of *Practice Pinny*. Viewers find themselves situated within a large-scaled installation representing bodily practice in sport. From our own participation in athletic activities—be it physical education, rec leagues, competitive sport, or even perhaps, through occupational wellness initiatives—we begin to imagine how physical embodiments of practice unfold. Within athletic groups, and through guidance from a coach, instructor, or peer, we mirror each other's movements, learn to handle specialized equipment, and navigate our bodies in particular ways. With feedback, our technique is repeated, failed, and adjusted—over and over. We anticipate outcomes, prepare for pressure, and hold our breath as we brace for impact. Miststeps are inevitable, and through trial and error, we feel emotions ranging from frustration, deetermination, and (hopefully) eventual celebration. If we keep at it, precision, muscle memory, and a deeper understanding of the sport and our relation to it are developed—over time.

Here, Leier presents the embodied labour of practice through an athletic context that is widely relatable and understood. In sport, we accept and value this type of physically taxing work as a necessary precursor to skill attainment. We are aware that it can involve an (often intense) emotional investment, and that it is fostered when practiced within a supportive community. Further, the "practice pinny," metaphor serves to represent that the labour of practice is not the main event that audiences attend; it is the unseen strenuous and preparatory scrimmage-labour that is carried out before it is presented on public display.

Pivoting away from the pink court are two delicate medium-sized pennants that are suspended side-by-side from the ceiling, and centered along a pink wall. Each is quilted using repurposed screenprint and photo-etching trial proofs. The banner on the left reads, "inaccurate"; the banner on the right reads "games".⁶ From here, the exhibition's narrative begins to shift: sport becomes analogous to creative practices of making and manifestations of material labour more broadly.

Beyond, the gallery widens and you are met with more word-play: individual letters, each burned into separate silkscreens, are strung in two floating grids to exclaim "W-O-O-O-O" and "E-W-W-W-W" like a celebratory/taunting sporting chant held by or

6 Heather Leier, *Girl Boss*, 2024, *Girl Boss Computation*, 2025, screenprint, photo-etching, sewing, paper stuffing, (2) 16 x 38 x 0.5 in., *Practice Pinny*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.

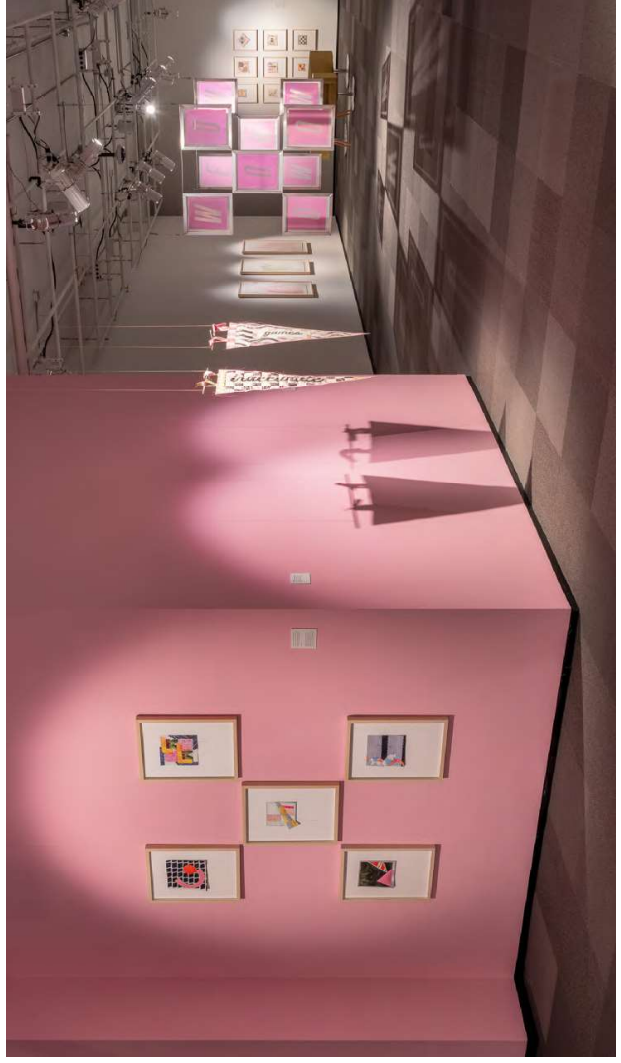
1 Heather Leier, shared Google Drive document, November 17, 2025.

2 Heather Leier, *Practice Pinny*, February 5 - April 30, 2026, Nickle Galleries, Mezzanine Gallery, Calgary.

3 Heather Leier, *Courting*, 2026, screenprint on sport court tiles, 78 x 130 in., *Practice Pinny*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.

4 Heather Leier, *Discipline(d)*, 2025, screenprint on recycled vinyl and Okawara Paper, recycled packaging stuffing, sewing, (3) 60 x 90 x 4 in., *Practice Pinny*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.

5 Heather Leier, *Body Pillow*, 2025, recycled vinyl, screenprint, sewing, pillows, shredded foam stuffing, 25 x 15 x 8 in., *Practice Pinny*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.



printed on spectators in a crowd.⁷ Although somewhat ethereal due to the lightweight aluminum frames and delicate translucent mesh, this displaced industrial presence within the refined gallery space commands attention. Past the silkscreen grids, Leier presents her "practice pinnie" as the apron: the uniform that is ubiquitously worn in artist studios and other places of embodied technical making such as printshops and kitchens. On one side of the gallery are three delicate monoprints of well-worn aprons that were each notably gifted to Leier by influential family members.⁸ The prints, which she dedicates to mentors and colleagues, were created with great care by inking these personal garments with large-hand-held rollers before running them through a printing press, imprinting their bodily shapes and storied surface textures onto paper. Hanging on the opposite wall, are three physical representations of aprons made from stitched Gampi paper (a satin-like handmade Japanese paper known for being incredibly thin yet durable) that are screen printed with images of clustered masking tape and shop towels—the discarded evidence of precise studio labour.⁹ Together, these pieces reveal a tension between gallery and studio contexts—between the place of pristine presentation, and the unseen preparatory spaces of arduous labour and creative care.

As with athletics, the material labour of a visual arts practice is at once physical, interrelational, and emotional. Printmaking in particular is known for its physically demanding techniques that are cultivated within shared studio contexts of interrelational feedback, community, and encouragement. *Practice Pinnie* honours these "unseen gestures—warm-ups, failed prints, recalibrations, breaths—that accumulate into relational understanding."¹⁰ Like in sport, printmaking also involves anticipation, preparation, and tension while bracing for impact. This occurs mentally in devising mechanical strategies to translate concept into image; physically through cranking flywheels, graining stones, and pulling sequences; and emotionally as paper is pulled back and screens are lifted to discover the success (or fumble) of the printed outcome. It is process-driven, physically taxing, and involves trial and error—and time. Unlike sporting events however, where audiences view labouring bodies, artistic presentations tend to show only the most carefully selected (successful) final products for public consideration. *Practice Pinnie* urges viewers to acknowledge, consider, and feel the physical and emotional care, vulnerability, and bracing that is done through artistic practice that precedes exhibition displays.

Centered on the far wall between the apron artworks, is a grid of cut and reassembled prints that are stitched together into patchwork pieces, elucidating the recurring quilting theme that references historically domestic female-centred ways of making and knowing.¹¹ Their construction mirrors the repetitive process-driven embodied labour of printmaking, and their presentation intentionally highlights the indices of work that are usually hidden or refined: they contain visible signs of mending, and their loose threads of unfinished seams imply a state of being *in process*. Their materiality is emphasized and on full display, allowing for subtle movement of thread and paper as viewers circulate the space. Viewers

who are familiar with Leier's past work will recognize the imagery stitched within them. These *Patchwork* pieces (and other quilted works throughout the exhibition) contain actual printed ephemera from Leier's previous bodies of work, drawn from countless trial proofs from past series that are here revisited, reprocessed, and their initial meaning(s) expanded upon. This represents a reflective form of inquiry whereby physical manipulation of materials is combined with mental/emotional labour to investigate concepts and ascertain meaning. Leier is demonstrating that material labour and artistic practice are acts toward generative knowing, intellect, and care.

'Body' of Work and Capacity to Brace

Upon first glance, *Practice Pinnie* may seem like a deviation from Leier's lengthy artistic practice, which quietly examines the implications of anxieties and crises of living in the world today. In past series, Leier investigates imposing systemic contexts by reflecting on how she responds to the distress they elicit through employing coping strategies that use "repetition, regulation, and care as forms of embodied knowledge."¹² At its essence, and as seen here in *Practice Pinnie*, Leier's practice is one that relies on and is of the body—physically, emotionally, and generatively; it is a way of "processing difficult experiences into something."¹³

This is demonstrated in past work that references, for example, emotionally-heavy, relational stimuli such as gender-based violence and systems of harm, as seen in her series *Looking Down*, and *Averi*.¹⁴ Leier examines her embodied response to these stressors that manifest as trauma and distress, and notes her transformative coping strategies, such as looking down, or carefully documenting the many ways that she positions her body in hypermasculine public spaces. Leier reflects on the complexity and interrelation of these distress/coping feedback loops, and then uses print-based techniques to translate her findings into visual representations that interpret and challenge the overarching systems in which these experiences occur.

Through *Practice Pinnie* however, Leier zooms out, so to speak, recognizing that the act of making (namely printmaking) is itself a primary modality of coping and care for her. Leier describes that in the same way engaging in a sport allows her to clear her mind of anxieties by focusing on a single activity, printmaking's physicality and processes of repetition become an intentional form of personal regulation and grounding.¹⁵ When considering that Leier's artistic practice examines distress/coping feedback loops to process difficult experiences and interpret the systems in which they occur, *Practice Pinnie* becomes particularly complex. Leier's printmaking practice is essential to all of her work—as in both her works of art, and her vocation as a practicing artist and Professor in the Faculty of Arts. Through *Practice Pinnie* then, Leier reflects on her embodied printmaking practice as a simultaneous source of occupational stress and responsive coping modality to examine social, institutional, and economic systems that concern art/work, and skill-based labour more generally.

This perhaps informs the layered and often dual-meanings embedded throughout the text, materiality, and motifs that are presented in *Practice Pinnie*. "Fine," for example, can refer to a state of wellness or artistic refinement, and "WOOOO-EEEEW" when



verbalized, playfully evokes both excitement and repulsion. The Gampi paper used in the three *Practice Pinnie* artworks represents simultaneous strength and vulnerability. And, within the newest artworks included in this exhibition, Leier introduces a repeating spiral (or, spring) motif to represent the concept of "bracing." As Leier describes when discussing *Practice Pinnie*: "Bracing is anticipation—a readiness to meet force, to ground and compose oneself before impact."¹⁶ For Leier, the spring, which holds potential energy when compressed, represents an anticipation and prevention of daily anxieties; it represents the constant physical and emotional bracing required for living in the world today.¹⁷

Throughout *Practice Pinnie*, Leier is examining the anxieties, distress, and implications of navigating labour and livelihood within interlacing systems concerned with gender, economics, and shifts toward relying on Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. With respect to gender imbalances, both printmaking/fine art and academic pedagogy are historically male-dominated, and occupational gender biases persist in these spheres. Reflecting on her own experiences in these spaces, Leier playfully employs "girly" pink hues, confetti shapes, and celebratory banner forms, which play into gender expectations, while juxtaposing them with unsettling subtext. The word "fine" is repeated almost relentlessly in a variety of pieces throughout the exhibition, and the banner spelling out "inaccurate", and its companion piece, "games", is aptly titled *Girl Boss*. Leier is encouraging viewers to recognize the implications of identity stereotypes in workplaces, and the mental and emotional labour required to navigate them.

More broadly, *Practice Pinnie* urges that viewers consider underlying lengthy processes of material labour (and the skilled purchases, and consumed. Leier encourages us to question the implications for skill—and knowledge—development (and for labouring bodies) when working within economic systems that idealize unyielding pressures toward efficiency and profit. What do we lose when working under overarching pressures that reward speed over process? And also: What effect does removing interpersonal ways of being physically in community with colleagues, mentors, and peers have on embodied labour practices, working people, and their individual and collective wellness?

When considering embodied learning specifically as a modality toward knowledge acquisition and intellect, this exhibition elicits important commentary about the importance of embodied practice in pedagogy and learning institutions. With widespread economic pressures to reduce labour costs and shift toward more "efficient" tools such as AI, what are the consequences for individual and widespread skill development and knowledge? Is AI, capable of embodied knowledge/intelligence if it is by definition separated from the body? What is the unseen labour (not to mention material energy consumption) behind AI tools? What knowledge or intellect is lost when embodied practice is not cultivated?

These and other weighty questions surround us daily and can easily make us feel overwhelmed and consumed. Through *Practice Pinnie*, Leier invites us into her own embodied practice, which allows her to brace against these systems, to enact slow repetitive acts of making and care to stabilize her engagement with these pressures, and to resist the structures that impose them.

16 Heather Leier, shared Google Drive document, November 17, 2025.

17 Heather Leier, Studio Visit, University of Calgary, November 28, 2025.

12 Heather Leier, shared Google Drive document, November 17, 2025.

13 Heather Leier, Studio Visit, University of Calgary, November 28, 2025.

14 Heather Leier, "Heather Leier, Work," <https://www.heatherleier.com/work.html>.

15 Heather Leier, Zoom conversation, January 5, 2026.

7 Heather Leier, *ROFL*, 2025, screenshot screens (photo-emulsion), (CA) 60 x 72 x 3 in., *Practice Pinnie*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.

8 Heather Leier, *For Marge, For Barb, For Yvonne*, 2025, monoprints, each 30 x 44 in., *Practice Pinnie*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.

9 Heather Leier, *Practice Pinnie 1*, *Practice Pinnie 2*, *Practice Pinnie 3*, 2025, screenshot on Gampi, sewing, each 32 x 36 in., *Practice Pinnie*, Nickle Galleries, Calgary, February 5 - April 30, 2026.

10 Heather Leier, shared Google Drive document, November 17, 2025.

11 Heather Leier, "Heather Leier, Work," <https://www.heatherleier.com/work.html>.

HEATHER LEIER is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Calgary in Treaty 7 region in southern Alberta, Canada. Through her art practice, she employs research-creation approaches to examine embodied trauma and problematize shared assumptions of socially constructed life-phases and identities. This work ranges from the production of printed ephemera to life-size site-specific print installations all of which draw attention to negotiations of space and endurance with violence. Leier has exhibited her work widely both nationally and internationally including exhibitions in Spain, China, USA, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Russia, Japan, Poland, Egypt, Mexico, and Taiwan. Leier has curated a number of contemporary art projects and was the 2020 recipient of the University of Calgary Sustainability Teaching Award. When she isn't teaching or working on various print projects, she is likely tending to her plant cohabitants. Leier is a white settler and her pronouns are she/her.

COVER

Girl Boss, Girl Boss Companion, Screenprint, photo-intaglio, photolithography, relief, handmade recycled paper, sewing, paper stuffing, recycled vinyl, Somerset Satin, Gampi, Kozo Very Lightweight antique, Tatami, Mingeishi, Kozo vegetable paper, 2025.

PAGE 2

Tough and Tender, Hard and Soft, Recycled vinyl, screenprint, mechanically cut Somerset Satin, sewing, Mingeishi, 2026.

PAGE 3

Installation view *Practice Pinny.*
Body Pillow, 2025.

Sound Pillow, Discipline(d), Body Pillow, 2025-2026, installation view *Practice Pinny.*
Installation view *Practice Pinny.*

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Installation view *Practice Pinny.*
Installation view *Practice Pinny.*

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For Margie, For Barb, For Yvonne, monotype, 2025, installation view *Practice Pinny.*

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Practice Pinny, screen-print on Gampi paper, sewing, 2025, installation view *Practice Pinny.*



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