

Speech

Thesis speech

I want to start off by saying thank you all for coming, I know it's pretty late in the day. But hopefully you all have been enjoying the show. I am really excited to present to you my thesis project and explain more about the process and share my story.

For those of you who know me, hello and for those who don't, my name is Nico Bakh and I am a graphic design major here.

This installation encompasses more than just a final project, but a narrative that illustrates how Bakhchin; an ornamental display typeface I designed explores my identity as a second-generation American and the process of deconstructing typography to enhance experiences. Originally this project was to create a "simple" typeface, but it became a larger endeavor. From the beginning my inspiration to construct Bakhchin started from a core memory of creating memorial ribbons for my mom's floral company. At 15 years old, I was tasked to do these ribbons by deconstructing gold letterforms of the roman alphabet to create Cyrillic letters. These letters would then be adhered with staples to a ribbon which in turn would be attached to a flower arrangement. Bakhchin aims to fulfill my goal which speaks on my identity through an installation featuring newsprint, embroidery, projected patterns and floral motifs that highlight my personal experiences.

Seeking refuge, my family fled from Tbilisi, Georgia to the United States in 1996. It was hard to make sense of my culture or my identity here. Was I Russian? Armenian? Georgian? Was I American enough? I grew up hearing the Georgian language—one that never was taught to me. Occasionally I would hear words and phrases here and there. My grandma would whisper "Gachumde" which translates to "shut up".

As graphic designers, we are trained to consider how a brand's identity interacts with its audience and environment. I approached my process in much the same way.

Some of my research focused on how designers experiment with letterforms in unconventional ways. London-based designer Eikou Zhang, for instance, documents the creation of his display typeface Nodoo, which blends analog and digital techniques inspired by the traditional craft of knotting. His approach honors the cultural significance of hand-tying knots and how this meticulous process can inform contemporary type design—and, by extension, my own installation.

I also draw inspiration from figures like Herb Lubalin, known for his experimental use of typography in editorial design, and modernist designer and architect Massimo Vignelli. I've always been drawn to architecture, though I was discouraged from pursuing it at a young age—told it was "too hard" and "too mathematical." That fascination, however, never left me. It continues to inform my appreciation for classical architecture and modernist design, more conceptually, my understanding of typography—one that relates to architectural principles of space, scale, grid, balance, etc.

Before I began to work on my typeface, I was "gently forced" to sit down with my mentor Salvador to create "Inga lines" (print photo of this) as he called them—an exercise in calligraphy. [I was sweating towards the end yay] This is a simple exercise that involves a repetitious process of drawing vertical, horizontal and curved lines. The goal was to be as consistent as possible and without moving your wrist. I jokingly mention my mentor forcing me, This tedious process informed me to appreciate the craft and its simple letterform designs that we take for granted nowadays.[If you want a carpal tunnel—I highly recommend Inga lines yay!]

Half way into my process, I began to explore narratives that speak on

my experiences. Deconstruction was the means in which the project developed and ironically, this very much mimicked my identity in the United States

My last name for example: Bakhchinyan, an Armenian last name—which translates to descendant of a gardener. Not the easiest name to go around with. [Too hard to spell, too hard to pronounce.] I guess as gardeners we have habits we can't stop; planting, growing, cutting; and so we repeat the cycle. As immigrants; planting, growing, cutting parts of ourselves.. From Bakhchinyan down to 4 characters; Bakh. Simple, straightforward, just the way everyone hoped.

When growing up, masculinity was always paramount in Russian culture. Words and objects must also have masculine and feminine distinctions. Fear of acting a certain way was not only reinforced by our cultural environment, but around language and identity. When my mother would have customers in tears mourning the loss of a male figure, it was always a simple and straightforward conversation. "I would recommend looking at these masculine flowers"— She would add. Calla lilies covered in a simple and sophisticated pedal; like white cloth wrapped around the body.. It didn't ask to be seen, it would blend in with the background.

I started this project by distilling the identity of calla lilies. looking at the ways the flower is shaped and its notable characteristics—how it feels, how it is structured. Little flourishes on the end tips of the flower highlighted the delicate nature that would be the foundation of each letterform I was to create.

The word "Dorogomy" is one of the most recurring phrases that would start my process in creating memorial ribbons. translates to "My Dearest". Gentle in nature felt ironic to pierce through with staples unto the memorial ribbons. This word has been used throughout this installation notably in my newsprint, takeaways and projected onto these ribbons in the center , this word almost felt like at times I was talking to myself, as if everything will be alright. That word has tremendous comfort that motivated me at times throughout this project and in some ways to complete my degree here at PNCA. Gologbui was another word that was thrown around which translates to "light blue" in its literal sense. But used as a derogatory term to define a gay man. Growing up, difficulties with expressing my sexuality have always been challenging. Can I wear this, can I do this? As gay man, we become so accustomed to altering who we are by others' perception of us to fit into society. My goal is to use Words as part of this project by reclaiming identity by recontextualizing type as image. In an interior spread titled "You Are So (light blue)" speaks on the ways language color and image both enhance this dichotomy.

By confronting and reflecting on these cultural stereotypes and their embedded language, I found cyanotype paper to be the perfect medium for this project. Through the process, shapes began to emerge within deep blue silhouettes—revealing the first letter of BAKHCHIN: the letter A (or Ah in Russian). Using transparent paper, I placed the letter A alongside a calla lily, allowing the interplay between image and form to unfold naturally.

My goal was to evoke the delicacy of a flower through contrasting thick and thin strokes, paired with a hybrid serif that mirrors the calla lily's simple elegance—its slender stem and pointed petal tips. Each letter was carefully constructed with the A as a reference point. Over time, the digital process became almost meditative; cutting each form in Illustrator echoed my earlier, hands-on experience of deconstructing the Roman alphabet with scissors.

For the installation, I wanted to create a space where Bakhchin could both function and enrich a narrative. Almost instinctively, I knew that a sanctuary-like, church-inspired space would be ideal—drawing from

my own religious upbringing and the environment where my ribbons would exist. Initially, I imagined an intimate space with natural light, but as the project developed, I realized that light itself could serve as a material to project images.

Behind me, projected onto the wall is a few videos of the construction of the letterforms. Taken from the embroidery process itself.

I want to mention the importance of the letter A in particular. highlighting its central role in the development process. While experimenting with different projected images in this space, it was difficult to determine what felt most fitting. I wanted to use scale to evoke strong emotions—at times I felt overwhelmed or even intimidated in the space. My aim was for the audience to interact with these letters and reflect on their own relationship to its scale.

On one wall, I wanted to explore pattern-making, so I chose to engrave designs from a single letter of my typeface for each pattern. Together, the triptych spelled out my last name in Russian and, upon closer inspection, these patterns not only felt like church lancet windows but also began to resemble garden paths or topographic landscapes.

The projected letters on the ribbons reveal not only the aesthetic qualities of the letterforms but also emphasize the technical process behind the cyanotype prints of lilies. The low-fidelity texture of the projection further invites viewers to look closely, encouraging them to interpret the shapes, letters, and symbols.

The surrounding blue light envelops both audience and objects, creating an immersive, sanctuary-like environment—one where you are completely encompassed by. In April of this year, I visited Hopscoth. An immersive/interactive and collaborative installation space and was impressed by the work of artist Seth Nehil—a sound artist and professor at PNCA here . His work is titled "Chromesthesia". Visitors would enter one of the three neon colored rooms. Each room fully immersed in one color, either red, green or blue, with sounds that enhanced the space. Upon entering the room, moods shift as each and everyone experiences a totally subjective association with the color.

While I've never created an installation to show my work in this way before, it was insightful to begin looking at space as a part of the work, curating emotions and interactions to inform audiences.

Back in October, our class visited the Lumber Room gallery to see The Wondering Womb, an exhibition featuring works by Louise Bourgeois and Isabelle Albuquerque. The show explored how both artists use materials, experiences, and memory in their practice. The curation, along with the recurring floral motifs, directly influenced the way I approached my installation here.

As a child, I often watched my mother create simple tropical flower arrangements, and there was something meditative about those moments. Where you have to really pause and think more of the simplicity of the flower and its relative composition. At the front, you can see the piece she created for this show and how flowers engage throughout the space.

A few copies of a Broadsheet Newsprint features typographic expressions with Bakhchin to illustrate a dynamic visual narrative which highlights the influence of calla lilies and cultural identity. Each spread not only highlighted the beautiful elements of a calla lily but also, how the typeface works to create a visual and cohesive system. Within the print, subtle ways of expressing a narrative was my intention, such as using Russian characters as "b" which is a Russian letter or soft sign, which makes the preceding constant soft. It does not have its own sound, but acts as an indicator to change the pronunciation of the consonant before it. And by having the word man with the following letter, re contextualizes the word and its intended meaning. The newspaper was initially influenced by type specimen publications such as Emigre, which experimented with nontraditional uses of imagery and typography. While newsprint wasn't the medium I first imagined, its ephemeral nature mimicked flowers. In the end, the layout unfolded like an architectural blueprint—a guide to the cultural and structural anatomy of Bakhchin.

Speech (Continued)

Gold is another recurring motif throughout the space. As mentioned earlier, the original Roman alphabet I referenced was created using pressed gold on paper. Gold itself carries deep historical associations with immortality, wealth, and divine authority—qualities long reserved for royalty, deities, and sacred artifacts. Often symbolizing the sun, gold’s luminous quality drew my curiosity: as a 15 year old, I always imagined or dreamed if I could just have these gold letters in Russian—could I recreate those letterforms through Bakhchin?

On the pedestal in the center are scattered, laser-cut gold letters of Bakhchin—each letter carved out and removed from a gold sheet of paper with only a stencil-like object remaining, hence the application in the cover for the newspaper and hanging on one wall in the back. I remember my excitement when I first saw how perfectly they turned out and was hugging Megan from our creative technology lab. Reflecting on the process now, it feels significant to finally have a typeface that stands on its own—without the need to deconstruct and rebuild it piece by piece.

In creating the installation, I didn’t want to simply hang or frame the stencil. Instead, I began experimenting with light and the way reflection interacted with the piece. By positioning the light at just the right angle, the letterforms were able to engage both with the light and the surrounding space, projecting onto the adjacent wall and casting dynamic shadows— Reflecting the process of light as material that shapes the core structure.

Finally, if that wasn’t enough, after deconstructing the calla lily, the pedal-like aspect felt like looking at clothing that covered the flower which informed me on contextualizing a traditional headcovering. “borrowed” from my grandma— The thin piece of fabric all invoked similar themes of identity. This thin piece of fabric was extremely difficult to embroider and quite stressful. If anyone knows, embroidery requires a backing support to lay the material onto so to prevent misalignment or curling of the fabric. By using a water soluble backing I would simply wash away the thin fabric with just the letters remaining. Traditionally, women’s head coverings in church symbolize sacredness and purity. However, by embroidering the words “golobioi” and having a small text on the wall read “gachumde,” phonetically I aimed to challenge the audience to confront how such cultural constructs have been used to reinforce silence and shame.

At one point in our semester, I remember sitting down with Kristin and my mentor Sal about what this project is doing for the world. I’m literally doing a typeface while the world is burning is how I felt. But in reality, this project has shown me how the collective experiences we all share piece by piece even if that means breaking and building up again is worth every minute. I am not just making a letter but words that shape our world. I would like to see graphic design begin to be more authentic in this way. To create identities for the excitement of something beautiful and most importantly, to connect and help others.

My thesis evolved over a few months and my process was to highlight the power of language. I plan to explore more of this type of work, where typography plays a crucial role in expressing visual identity through conceptual and embodied experiences. This project was a search for identity; to the constant act of reconstruction and adaptation, the owning of language, and the growth that emerges from our interconnected roots of culture. Bakhchin seeks to highlight the fragility and nuance of identity through the lens of typography — by proudly wearing blue.

I want to give special thanks to a few people throughout my time here who have inspired and helped me get here.

Big thanks to:

Megan McKissack (creative technology lab)
Kayelen Tran
Han
Noni

Lizy Gershenzon (Future Fonts)
Michael Ellsworth (Built by Civilization)
Mallary Wilson (PSU and PNCA)

My mom of course who made all these arrangements

And lastly I can’t forget

Kristin Rogers Brown since day one of coming back have always made me feel heard and made me a better designer even though it could be us moving type over by a .mm or geeking out about grids.

Salvador Orara
Who forced me to do Inga lines. And for pushing me to conceptualize this project, by constantly asking “but why?” I appreciate everything you have taught me and were open about all my crazy ideas.