

Intro:

Hello everyone! Thank you all so much for taking the time to be here today.

My name is Benita Blue, I am a painting major, but beyond painting I have a multidisciplinary practice that also includes printmaking and design.

I have taken the skills and tools I have acquired in the past five years and combined them in this thesis which I have titled “Translation[s]”

I am excited finally to share this body of work that I have spent the last semester creating and hope that you all can find something here that resonates with you.

Please consult the pamphlet you found on your chair for further object information and I encourage you to take some time after my presentation to take a closer look at some of the pieces. Feel free to pick up and handle the books and if you feel so inclined take a postcard from the stack.

Introduce the conceptual basis of “translations” and explain my relationship with translating:

“Translation” is a noun, defined as:

A: an act, process, or instance of translating: such as a rendering from one language into another also : the product of such a rendering

b: a change to a different substance, form, or appearance : a conversion

c(1): a transformation of coordinates in which the new axes are parallel to the old ones

(2): uniform motion of a body in a straight line

In whatever instance of translation, the product of those processes is never the same as the original before the translation. There is both precision and approximation when translating, and a good translation will not only try to faithfully reproduce the words but also the feeling of the words, which is often why an electronically translated text can seem stilted and strange as opposed to one translated by a human expert who knows the in's and outs of the language.

As an artist, I am always making approximations in an effort to preserve the feeling or experience of the original, knowing that there can never be an exact translation of something in this way. In that approximation one begins to know the original better, through numerous comparisons and

editing, the truth of both things can be revealed in the uncovering of their common meaning.

This body of work is also titled “translation[s]” because I feel that the way I have created the work is a form of translation. I began each of these sets with the printed text, a poem or poems that hold some sort of significance for me or my life in a way that makes me feel something or draws me to create. From that beginning text, I take the things that I feel stick out to me; something like how it made me feel the first time I read it, my relationship with the writer, or the historical relevance of it that roots me in the present and simultaneously connects me to others in the past. These are strong yet abstract concepts to begin grappling with- things that don't necessarily come easily with words, but can at least be translated through making art.

These translations are also to some degree up for interpretation, because of the nature of visual art it simply will not work for me to tell you what each individual piece means because different things resonate individually for each viewer. In some way, that makes you all- the people looking at this work- translators in your own right.

Now that you have an understanding of what I'm doing here I'd like to examine some of the individual works, and illustrate how they came together.

Le Sommeil- process of iteration and finding the message/ question of the piece

The first set is inspired by the poem “femmes damnées”, or “damned women”, written by Charles Baudelaire., This is one of the poems from his volume “Fleur de Mal” or “Flowers of Evil” published in 1857. This poem and a few others were banned from publication however because they were deemed an affront to good morals and were not able to be published in France until around 1949. The homosexual nature of the content was quite scandalous because of the moral panic around homosexuality at that time in France. The poem is not a perfect representation of lesbian love as it was written by a man and has a twinge of moral judgement baked into the writing, which is also apparent in the variety of translations of the poem.

This poem is partially accredited to inspiring a painting by Courbet titled “Le Sommeil” which I have also titled this painting.

This work came about in a backwards sort of way; I had originally imagined using this more drawing style of paint handling to semi-faithfully reproduce the Courbet piece. However, I went through a lot of sketches trying to copy the painting and each one was just not quite what I wanted. This perfectionist streak was heightened by the material as well, because this work is on unprimed canvas, there isn't any way to wipe off or erase anything I didn't like so I felt a lot of pressure to perfect the idea before I attempted it on the final substrate.

I began to think about just what I wanted the function of the image to be and I realized that there could be a stronger statement made with a different approach. I wanted to stretch myself and I was interested in making a painting that didn't look like any of the paintings I've made before. So I began asking myself what the most important part of the painting was, what drew me to it in the first place?

Obviously the overt homosexual content of Courbet's painting is the first thing that I noticed, as it was quite unusual to have two women represented in such a way. And to that point I learned that this painting was created for a private collector which allowed it to bypass the censorship of the salon, unlike the poem that may have inspired it. But beyond it being an unusual painting, realism of this piece is what attracted me to it ultimately; there is a certain level of comfort here, the bodies aren't posed uncomfortably on display but are relaxed into each other, resting.

That restful, affectionate quality felt like that thing that I wanted to preserve originally through reproducing the image, but I felt that I could somehow preserve it more by taking it out of the painting. Through my removal of the sleepers, a viewer could connect to it each time differently- some may recognize it and know what the original looks like or others may not have that art historical touch point and be intrigued by that negative space.

Once I had finalized the last sketch, the whole piece came together almost instantly. I was able to take my paint stick and begin the image

making process with confidence. I had drawn so many iterations of the image that this final draft of it on the canvas felt satisfying. Peeling off the masking tape and stepping back to look at the piece after I had finished it, I felt a sense of contentment having fully executed the vision I had in my head.

I'm not supposed to pick favorites, but this painting is certainly in that top spot, particularly because of the ways it draws in and keeps the viewer's attention, telling a story and asking you to draw a conclusion.

There are enough visual hints to convey bodies on a bed: the domestic setting, sheets in disarray, and a few masked shapes that resemble feet poking out from the geometric mass of raw canvas that takes up the center of the composition.

This center piece confronts you with that space and forces you to place information in like a puzzle. This feels like that approximation present in translation that I've been thinking about, and in this way pictorial representation allows a unique opportunity to completely remove information to make it more relatable.

And now I'd like to turn your attention to this publication over here.

“How to Make Love in an Apocalypse”

This piece is the only collaborative part of my thesis, and it was a really unique experience. The genesis of this idea to collaborate with a poet actually came from my advisor, Michelle, who I had been doing an independent study with. At that time, I had just produced the Baudelaire booklet and she suggested to me that I collaborate with a poet who was actually alive.

I really only had one person who came to mind.

Beatrice Barrar is a wonderful poet and excellent friend- I jumped at the chance to ask her to collaborate with me on this book which would begin this particular set of translations. Luckily when I asked her if she'd be interested, she said yes, and I became not only a designer and printer but also kind of publisher,

which was certainly a different type of experience than taking work that has already been published and just giving it a different shape. I had an opportunity here to take work that I believed in and give it a physical form.

I worked with Beatrice on the layout and design of the chapbook, listening to her inspiration, taking that, and making a couple of drafts. Each one getting closer and closer to what we envisioned.

This again was a process of translation, I was taking one set of information, which was the rather abstract and imaginative space of the poetry, and the poet's vision; and processing it into the technical and concrete realm of typesetting; printing; and binding.

There is a lot to consider when producing an edition like this, especially using a Risograph, which are historically mercurial machines known for their finicky nature.

I have to say that working with these machines makes me feel like I'm taming some horse in one of those early 2000's horse movies, like Flicka or something. No quick movements and absolutely no loud noises.

There is a sort of partnership between me and my mechanical tools, from the printer to the folder machine I have to know each quirk,

what setting will produce the desired effect, how to fix random jams and error codes. You also learn to make extras of everything, there is so much room for error in this process- both human and machine.

I had the mechanics of the making down, but now I had to learn how to understand the language of poetry better. This was something I had been easing my way into for a while, but I hadn't ever really been a big reader of poetry. I relied a lot on Beatrice for this, she read through the poems with me and we talked about what they meant to her. I really wanted to understand what I was working with so I spent a lot of time with the poems: reading them, stacking them on top of each other, copy-and-pasting them from document to document. As I did this, I was imagining what order I might like to read them in, the weight and color of the paper, what I might like on the cover, how I might add little flourishes.

I think the endnotes were probably the most difficult part but also is a large part of what makes this book unique. A real treat for nerds, there is a long set of endnotes which contain the literary and historical references present in the poems. Some poems do not have them and some do, but I think we both felt they added another dimension to the experience. A

reader could go and find through-lines that connect the collection or go and read the referenced texts; regardless of how the reader chooses to use the endnotes.

Another element that was challenging was the binding. Each one of these books is hand bound, I used a hand punch to bind them with the brass eyelets, which took hours and hours to finish but is a testament to executing a vision. I had no interest in taking a shortcut, I wanted the end product to be exactly what I wanted and not making a compromise just because it maybe seemed a little crazy to punch and press 225 individual eyelets by hand; with nothing more than a glorified hole punch and fancy pliers. It mattered to me to make this chapbook attractive and striking. I was given this opportunity to publish these poems and wanted to make something that people were inclined to pick up; something that makes you want to see what's inside.

The most satisfying part of this whole edition though is the end product, a truly unique object that blends classical style with a nod to sexuality- which is quite similar to how I might describe the poetry inside it.

Lithograph print:

This is probably the most unique addition to this body of work for a few reasons. Most importantly though it is the only place I've inserted my likeness into so literally. It's a collection of photobooth pictures of my girlfriend and I which we keep in a little acrylic frame hung on our bedroom wall. I stare at it all the time and remember the times and places those images were taken. There is a lot of joy and love that I feel from them, and when I was searching for something of myself to include these came to mind.

I wanted to pair these with Adrienne Rich's Twenty-One Love Poems because I felt like these photographs are love poems in their own right, expressing that joy in being with somebody that you want to capture somehow. I chose to title it "did I ever walk the morning streets at twenty,/my limbs streaming with a purer joy?"-which is a line from the third poem in this collection- because when I first read these poems I felt for the first time that this kind of love would be something I could hope for.

I think that younger version of me would be incredibly happy to see where I am now.

The image on the plate is the product of a flash photograph taken of the acrylic frame, the reflection of the light on the material creating the scrubbed out portion of the print. I was interested in creating this effect because the masked painting was fresh on my mind. I was curious about the effects of redaction, how it was able to create attention value through creative omissions of information.

There is a lot of technical translation happening here too. The photos were first taken, processed, and printed by one machine, then I used another machine to take the photograph, I used yet another to process that photograph into something I could expose on a plate, the next machine printed the film for exposing the plate, and then the last mechanical element is the Mailander offset press which I used to make the print. All of this and I still ended up with an incredibly human product. I have been thinking a lot about machines and mechanical tools throughout this thesis, I have made work such as this print which would not have been possible without the machine tools and I have also made work where no machines were necessary, such as the painting I spoke about earlier. The

commonality between the two is my hand, the decision making that goes into making, and ultimately the abstraction of the image. Abstraction, and the decision making process therein, is something that I believe is incredibly human.

There is also something about abstraction which can be protective, a removal of information that requires the viewer to study the image and form their own conclusions of the content. In this case, the image processing and abstraction makes the image less discernable upon a closer inspection of the print, instead the viewer must step back to get a clearer picture. This has the effect of creating distance between the viewer and the subject, the abstraction creating a protective barrier which allows the image to exist safely.

You might be wondering then, if I'm going through the trouble to change the image so much why include it at all? This is a fair question of course and I did debate its inclusion quite a bit, but ultimately it came down to vulnerability- allowing there to be a direct representation of me in this thesis despite my own inclination to hide behind the work. I felt that it was important to me to have a self portrait in this collection of work

because ultimately this work is about my connection to the concepts I am attempting to translate, my point of view and experiences is inextricable from the work.

Conclusion, what I have learned:

This work has also been difficult to make, the first draft is never the right one of course but I spent so much of my time drafting and re-drafting, searching for the puzzle pieces that would fall into place with each piece. Making nine finished pieces with a complex process of development was not easy, but in that difficulty there is exactitude, and I would not have wanted it any other way.

Through these sets of translations, I've been working out a sort of blueprint for myself as an artist. It felt productive to spend my time this semester working out a living system for working, making art and being an artist doesn't end after thesis and I want to have something I can build upon in a studio practice outside an institution. I have found many useful ways of thinking and working through this process, and I think one of the most useful things I have honed is the skill of iteration, especially focused iteration. Through this process I really had the time to focus my energy on

one thing, to have time available to me to iterate and rethink multiple pieces of work, the timeline of the thesis being much longer than an assignment for a class. Some of my favorite pieces have been generated from that focused iteration and I find value in that building process.

This body of work has been a big point of development for me, as an artist and as a person. I have through this process really begun to excavate a language for a part of myself that I have always had some difficulty articulating. There is a freedom in this kind of expression and command of a language and process that has given me a level of confidence for my future as an artist. I look forward to having the opportunity to really grow into my practice and find an artistic home.

I would like to thank some of the people who have made this possible: First, my mentor, Bradshaw, who has been patiently supporting and guiding me through this process, I would not have had the same depth in this work without their thoughtful questions and guiding conversation.

I would also like to thank my friends who were so patient with me throughout all this, giving me good feedback and needed critique on all of these pieces.

My family has also been very supportive of all of the work that I do, not asking too many questions but always there to lend a helping hand.

I am so grateful to be here today and thank you again to everyone who came out to support me and see the work.