

# LOST IN TRANSLATION

By

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## Statement

### Lost in Translation

*Lost in Translation* addresses the issues that trauma can create in communication; whether that be a physical trauma that damages ability to speak, think, or understand language, or mental and emotional trauma that significantly effects abilities to process, connect, and manage interpersonal relationships. My work is my voice, and a way to help others connect, to feel heard, and to even help them begin to communicate.

On and off over the past 15 years I have worked off and on as an educator, writer, and translator in English / Spanish. Part of that job is not to simply convert each word one-to-one, but to interpret ideas, meaning, concepts and a hundred different aspects of communication outside of simple word definitions. Language is not simply words and grammar but idioms, tone, cultural concepts and dialect. False cognates (*embarazada* does not mean embarrassed), dialectic shifts (in Spain one can *coger el autobús*, but in México this has wildly different connotations), or vocabulary gaps can implode a conversation. Communication is a never-ending mine field of missteps and missed connections.

In *Lost in Translation* neon lights— culturally tied to the OPEN and NO / VACANCY signs at bars and roadside motels— display text in multiple languages, surrounded by abstracted porcelain objects. It's doubtful any audience member speaks every language. The objects— thistles, pointe shoes, prairie sunflowers, lilies, skulls, and face masks, have been dipped in liquid clay and fired out, leaving only ashes inside their ceramic shells behind as evidence. In this work, I want the audience to feel the frustration that myself and others feel as we try to relate through the tangles and thorns of disability and PTSD— something that has been made infinitely harder during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Acknowledgements

This work was made for all the “squeaky wheels,” the whistleblowers, so-called “troublemakers,” and others who refused to be silent in the face of adversity. To those who said I couldn’t, I shouldn’t, I was too much or not enough– it’s been fun to keep proving you wrong.

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To the researchers and healthcare professionals who made the COVID-19 vaccine possible, to Dr Katalin Karikó and Dr Kizzy Corbett, thank you for giving me a chance to finish this work and be a person who leaves the house again.

To Noche, for fourteen years of love and companionship. I miss you.

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“I wish for a world that views disability, mental or physical, not as a hindrance but as unique attributes that can be seen as powerful assets if given the right opportunities.”

— Oliver Sacks, MD

“I no longer wish to be considered disabled, instead I would like to be considered a threat.”

— Imani Barbarin, Disability Activist

“How can we ever be us?

Wondering who we can trust

Ooh, survival hurts

But I'm not giving in, I'm alive

I'm not fine

I don't know if I will be alright

But I have to try

I know you're with me, so what if we do fall apart?

Give into all that we are

And let all the broken pieces shine.”

— Amy Lee (lyrics for “Broken Pieces Shine,” Evanescence)

## Introduction

*Language is the source of misunderstandings. | Le langage est source de malentendus.*

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*

*Más vale una palabra a tiempo que cien a destiempo. | One word at the right time is worth more than a hundred words at the wrong time.*

– Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

I use my own history of trauma, abuse, and disability to create objects that are at once culturally recognizable and highly personal; it is my hope that each viewer will recognize the overarching themes and identify them within their own experiences, thus encountering a moment of reflection, empathy, or even catharsis. My work is meant to be uncomfortable, to evoke a sense of anxiety or disquiet. Trauma is a disruption, so my work is created to be eerily beautiful, delicate, and fine porcelain and glass formed into shapes with unsettling evocations. Society may prefer we not address this, but only by confronting and addressing them can we move forward.

Long before humans began to form what we call civilizations, they began forming shared communication systems. Language, of one type or another, is essential to creating community. In Dennis Villeneuve's alien-encounter film *Arrival*, linguist Louise Banks (Amy Adams) declares, "language is the foundation of civilization. It is a glue that holds people together, and it is the first weapon drawn in a conflict." As soon as humans began communicating, they began miscommunicating as well. Communication is subjective; we all rely on our own interpretation of not just words, but tone, facial and body cues, phrasing, cultural concepts, tone, as well as our own perceptions and biases.

This premise, that by its nature communication is flawed, is at the core of *Lost in Translation*. Trauma, whether it results in a physical disruption of speaking, hearing, or understanding, or an emotional barrier to effective communication, causes further collapse in transmission of ideas and thoughts from person to person. In this work I've utilized various languages written primarily in neon light, framed with porcelain elements, to explore the concept of disrupted communication, miscommunication, and misinterpretation caused by trauma. These words are selected from meaningful moments in my own life, with the intention that the concepts contained within are universally relatable. If not, well, perhaps they've been lost in translation.

The actual traumatic moments and events themselves remain outside of the gallery walls; what is seen are the results of trauma. This is a show about aftereffects, the difficulties retained after the mess has been cleaned up, bruises faded and wounds bandaged. Trauma is the impetus



for these miscommunications, but it may not be visible to the naked eye. What you are seeing is the result, the lingering echos and ripples of a trauma unknown, but that effects every connection and conversation hereafter. It touches each relationship, colors every exchange, invades every corner of life much like every object touched by light leaves a corresponding shadow. It is an inevitability of life's progress, and in attempting to communicate with each other, we all must recognize its impact.

## Background

*La traducción destroza el espíritu del lenguaje.* | Translation destroys the spirit of language.

– Federico García Lorca

This was not my originally intended thesis exhibition. That work, though similar in theme, was intended to engage public interaction and participation, but was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Instead of creating space for participants to write words that have impacted them, I elected to focus on my own experiences with language. Learning neon-bending had been something I intended to do before the pandemic hit; this then became an opportunity to pursue that technique alongside my usual vocabulary of porcelain objects. Neon has long been associated with language, both literally and indexically, as literal signs. This has allowed me to translate my original theme through semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation) of neon signs, text, language, and porcelain.

Language has always been a huge part of my life. I was a voracious reader as a child. I always imagined I would learn to speak multiple languages so I could read more books, travel the world, and talk to people from across the world. I ended up choosing the major would allow me to not only study Spanish, but also linguistics, literature, poetry, theatre, art, and film, I was all in. I became fascinated with etymology and the evolution of modern Spanish from Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, and Indigenous American languages. I started working as a translator and interpreter and decided to continue on to a master's degree in the field. I learned not only Spanish, but also French, to read Latin, Italian, and Portuguese, studied early Hispanic poetry in Mozarabe (a Spanish-Hebrew-Arabic creole), Nahuatl, Maya, and Quechua. I spent months living in Spain and France, thrilled that I was able to communicate with people in their own language. This ability to communicate was amazing. When I started an art practice after graduate school, this love of language translated into my art; from the very start I have used text

consistently as visual and contextual element. Of note, each language used in this exhibition is one I either speak or have studied to some extent.

## Neon

*American culture is one that is so easily in denial. We have such a strange dichotomy, so hypocritical. The truth can be blaring in neon letters but our culture will find a reason not to hear what the truth is.* – RuPaul

*Sacrifice and neon lights*

*Slaveships don't wait*

*Love many, trust few*

*And don't be late.*

– Tom Morello (lyrics from “The Nightwatchman”)



Figure 1, Golden Nugget and the Vegas Strip, c 1950, unknown photographer

The art of neon began in 1675 with French astronomer Jean Picard, who observed a glow in a mercury barometer exposed to static electricity. Centuries later, using a Geissler tube, French engineer and chemist Georges Claude created the first neon lamp. He found that if he sent a voltage through electrodes attached to a sealed glass tube containing the rare Noble gas, NE,

the tube would give off a “radiant glow.” His first display was in 1910 at the Paris Motor Show, and by 1919 Claude Neon was producing signs across Europe. Between 1923 through the 1950s, the United States exploded with neon signs, lighting up such spaces as Times Square and Broadway, Las Vegas, and Hollywood, right down to the “open” signs in just about every mom-and-pop grocery store. Hotels and motels glared “Vacancy” or “No Vacancy,” and bars hosted signs for dozens of beer brands.

While neon was the original gas used and gave the industry its name, it’s mostly responsible for colors in the red/orange range. Argon, with a drop of mercury and using phosphorescent coated glass, can be used to create an entire spectrum of color, and artists have

also experimented with Krypton and Xenon for creating different effects. The neon sign industry dipped in the 1940s and 50s due to safety concerns (the original glass tubes contained lead), and recently has been suffering a downturn thanks to cheaply made LED signs. Fewer manufacturers are selling equipment and materials, and many shops have closed their doors forever. Neon has become a marker of nostalgia, an element of the past, rarer than even the gas used to fill the tubes.

## Porcelain

Words can never fully say what we want them to say, for they fumble, stammer, and break the best porcelain. – Margaret Weis

*Guardei para você, num verso de porcelana, as flores da manhã.*

I saved the morning flowers for you, in a porcelain verse.

– Eolo Yberê Libera

I will be brief on my discussion of the history of porcelain, as it is better known than neon. Porcelain is a ceramic material, best known for its translucence and strength even when extremely thin. Porcelain was originally developed in China during the Han dynasty 25-200 CE, spreading through East Asia and exporting to the Islamic empire. Reaching Europe first through the Silk Road (on which the name “porcelain” came from the Italian “porcellana,” a white cowry

shell), and later exported on ships, porcelain was held in great esteem, leading to a push for Europe to develop their own form. White tin-glazed red clay “majolica” wares served as European “mock porcelain” for many years, until in 1708, alchemist and chemist Johann Friedrich Böttger would be the one to develop the first “white gold” in Meissen for King Augustus II of Poland. This soft-paste porcelain would also be created in France at first Rouen, culminating in the royal manufactory established at Vincennes, later moving to the famous Sèvres. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, every major European power boasted their own royal porcelain manufactory— Germany (Saxony-



Figure 4, Sèvres Porcelain Centerpiece in Gilt Bronze mount, 1771, courtesy 1stDibs.com

Meissen, Austria- Vienna Porcelain Manufactory), Denmark (Royal Copenhagen), France (Saint-Cloud, Rouen, Chantilly, Mennecey, Sèvres, Limoges, Haviland, Revol), Spain (Real Fábrica del Buen Retiro), Italy (Florence- Doccia, Naples-Capodimonte, Venice- Vezzi, Cozzi, Le Nove), England (Spode, Wedgwood, Royal Worcester, Royal Crown Derby), and Russia (Imperial Porcelain Factory of Saint Petersburg).

In contemporary art, porcelain retains most of its revered status, as it is still the clay of highest purity and value. Still translucent, with the ability to maintain strength while thin and seemingly delicate, porcelain has also come through history tarnished with a legacy of colonialism, white supremacy, cultural appropriation, and a symbol of the wealth and power of an elite ruling class.

## Trauma

*I am Frustration. I am Memory-Lost. Sometimes I read a line a dozen times before it sticks.*

*My creative force has slipped. I type slower, speak slower, think at a snail's pace. I'm*

*Life shapeshifted by Post Traumatic Stress, bastardized by Fate.*

— Chila Woychik, *On Being a Rat and Other Observations*

Trauma is a huge barrier to smooth communication— physical, emotional, psychological. Trauma comes in so many different forms, and every individual reacts in a unique way. For these purposes, I will be considering disability as trauma. Very few, if any, individuals with disability have not experienced trauma, by the nature of society and medicine. Trauma can directly and physically disrupt our ability to communicate in hundreds of ways— from hearing or vision loss, damage to speech production or auditory comprehension (aphasia, dysphasia, auditory processing disorders), reading disorders like dyslexia or dyscalculia. Autism Spectrum Disorder causes many people to find it difficult to read facial and body cues. ADHD and ADD sufferers may have an inability to concentrate on the conversation. Speech impediments such as lisps, stutters, and other physical barrier can be debilitating. These can often be inherited or life-long impairments; they can also be the result of traumatic brain injury, degenerative disease, a spontaneous onset, or the result of a severe infection.

Another factor in communication is non-physical. Emotional and psychological trauma, resulting in PTSD or C-PTSD, can be exceptionally disruptive in communication. Survivors of trauma often have difficulty not only expressing themselves but listening and comprehending what is being said to them. It's not uncommon for survivors who are hyperaware of their surroundings to lose focus and disassociate from the present. Their concentration is divided

between this survival instinct and engaging in conversation or listening. Many survivors have trouble absorbing information, which can make having longer and intellectual conversations a challenge. Many will avoid most conversation altogether to avoid triggering and exhausting topics; others cannot seem to discuss anything else, extensively. Triggers are broad, but can include words, topics, facial expressions or body cues, sounds, a too-familiar face or gesture, seemingly anything, which can lead to a fight, flight, flee, freeze, or fawn reaction. These can be incredibly uncomfortable for others.

Survivors of trauma can lose the ability to trust others, reacting in unexpected and seemingly over-dramatic ways, known as emotional dysregulation. They then feel shame, and will often retreat, making communication even more difficult. Other common reactions to trauma, such as fatigue, anxiety, depression, and unhealthy coping mechanisms (such as alcohol) can further impair communication and interpersonal relations. Somatization— the development of physical symptoms to express emotional distress— may lead to some of the physical impediments to communication discussed previously.

The aftermath of trauma can lead to issues that are temporary— acute— or chronic, lasting for years or even a lifetime. Often, the fallout is gradual and can appear over time, rendering treatment difficult. The resulting effects on the survivor’s ability to relate to others can be numerous, and each individual has their own coping mechanisms, responses, and triggers. This all too human factor, at the heart of all communication, can be the most difficult hurdle to overcome in relationships, communication, and connection.

## Exhibition

*Lost in Translation* was installed at the University Center Gallery at the University of Montana from September 3 – September 24, 2021. The title is both indicative of the various languages which are present in the exhibition and a reference to the aspect of miscommunication. I chose to install the show title as a neon sign itself to both complement the exhibition as well as draw traffic to the gallery, which had been closed for 18 months previous to my show due to the pandemic. I reversed the text of “Translation” as an added element, making the sign partly legible from both the interior and exterior of the gallery, and

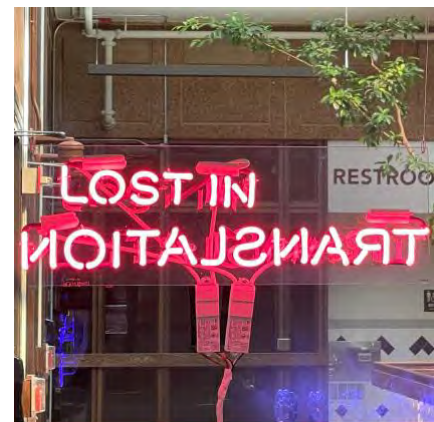


Figure 7, *Lost in Translation*

making it a part of the exhibition itself. The sign is a bubblegum pink phosphor-coated glass, pumped with neon gas, creating a vivid hot-pink glow that I hoped would attract viewers to the gallery. Many mornings, I opened the doors to find a handprint or two on the glass outside that window, a sign of someone who had been lured by the light and stopped to get a peek inside.

*Trauma* is the Greek word for *wound*; medically it can refer to an injury to any tissue- a bruise or a stubbed toe is a “soft tissue trauma.” More commonly we use it in a psychological capacity, as an emotional response to a generally negative event or experience- a wound to the brain. PTSD patients actually show lasting change in their pre-frontal cortexes; their brains are scarred by their traumas. Importantly, the pre-frontal cortex has been linked to executive functions, planning, decision making, short-term memory, personality expression, moderating social behavior, and controlling certain aspects of speech and language, such as speech production, language comprehension, and response planning before speaking. Damage to this area can be catastrophic to a person’s ability to communicate.

Not all trauma will generate PTSD; only about one in ten will develop chronic issues, but trauma will affect us all as we pass through life. There is no pain scale for trauma; every individual reacts uniquely due to genetic, environmental, and cultural factors. Trauma is a death; the death of who we were before, of the life and beliefs and sense of security we had. Events like this can happen to anyone, at any time, and there is no going back to how it was before. There is no resetting to way the world was before 9/11, no returning to how you viewed the world before the passing of a loved one, no returning to a feeling of security before your body was violated. How you process the world has changed, and this can impact how you connect and communicate with those around you.

I primarily utilize the preciousness, the fragility, and the translucent nature of porcelain; its suggestion of both glass and bone, its historical relationship to wealth, power, privilege, and royalty, to convey certain aspects of trauma. Pieces are broken, with sharp edges and shattered forms, evoking fragility, violence, pain, and other concepts using the inherent preciousness of porcelain to disrupt the viewer. I take the beautiful and twist it to make it uncomfortable, place the viewer in a position in between preciousness and grotesque.



Figure 10, *Tlamanalistli* (detail)

My choice of process in this installation was intentional. The flowers, ballet slippers, masks and thistles are dipped in porcelain and fired out; they've literally died and been lost to create the work. Each has become ashes, cremated inside its own porcelain sarcophagus, forever preserved but also gone. The mask is no longer a mask, but a simulacrum, something our brain reads as a mask, but that cannot function to protect us from bacteria or viruses. The reality of the object has been lost in its translation from cloth to clay.

Neon is normally very clear in communication; people are accustomed to seeing text in neon that is unambiguous in meaning: "OPEN," "vacancy," "topless dancers." In this show, by creating neon text in multiple languages, a majority English-speaking audience was confronted with a disruption in this usually accessible medium. With the meanings obfuscated, viewers were forced to explore the pieces more fully, looking to the color, shape, small detail in the porcelain and glass elements, and the wall text to achieve their Rosetta Stone moment of comprehension. This element of using "foreign" languages to very literally represent miscommunication was central to the idea of miscommunication.

Neon and porcelain are two highly contrasting materials; they are generally directed towards two very different audiences and, while glass and ceramic have a similar base chemical makeup, physically they are near opposites. One emits light, the other appears to absorb it. Neon is most frequently encountered in "low" spaces- bars, strip clubs, casinos, and take-out restaurants. In the rare instance neon can be found in a home, it's often located in "man caves" and basement lounges. Meanwhile, porcelain resides in museums and china cabinets, designated as "high" art with price tags to match. One doesn't frequently stumble upon porcelain in the shape of Playboy bunnies or an animated cowboy who tips his hat (though porcelain has its own history of bawdy material, it's not as universally well-known). It's this contradiction in materials I am utilizing, contemporary vs historical, high vs low, bright blazing colors vs pristine white, camp vs class, to highlight the concept of missed communication. The light of the neon is blocked by the cast porcelain shapes, creating shadows and recesses, trapping words in tangles of impassible thistles. The delicate elegance of the porcelain objects should be absurd when paired with the brash colors of neon, but instead somehow the two mediums blend in an ethereal, almost painful beauty. Pain becomes a type of pleasure, the result of trauma a sublime display of resilience.

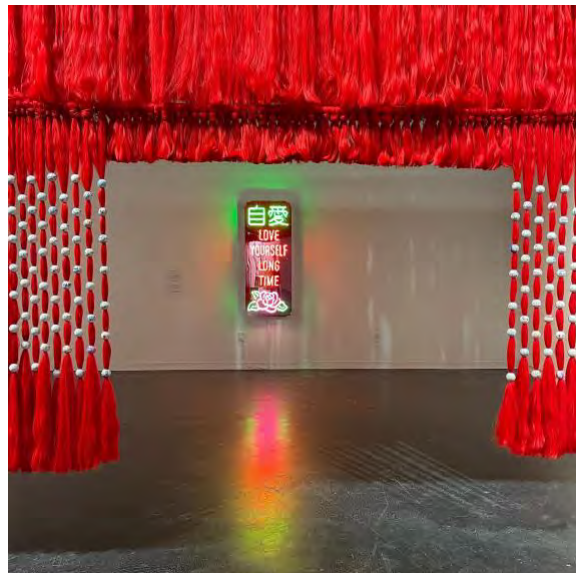
In this body of work, I found no lack of inspiration. Rachel Whiteread's sculptures casting ghostly empty spaces of everyday objects, creating a sense of permanent memory from emptiness seem an obvious reference.

Tracey Emin's highly personal multi-media work has resonated with me for years. Her off and on use of text, including neon, to reflect her inner life gave me permission to freely do the same. It was ultimately stumbling upon the work of SheBends, a collective of women working in neon, and artist Sarah Blood in particular, that



*Figure 13, Enough, Sarah Blood, 2018, photo by Reginald Charles*

convinced me to invest in neon-bending. Her work plays with materials, often opaque objects in conversation with neon. Her work is frequently very vulnerable, questioning life and loss, heartbreak and grief, light and dark. Sarah has been extremely generous with her time and knowledge as I've been working to learn neon and begin to mix neon and ceramics. In particular, her interest in perception and juxtaposing light, dark, and texture, was incredibly valuable in constructing this work. Jennifer Ling Datchuk also utilizes the long, conflicted history and precious nature of porcelain alongside neon signs paying homage to nail salons and Chinese restaurants, intertwining the two along with other mixed media in creating rather intimate work surrounding her identity, oppression, and personal trauma.



*Figure 6, Love Yourself Long Time, Jennifer Ling Datchuk, 2021, photo by artist via Instagram*



## Quiero

*Quiero vivir sin verme.... | I want to live without seeing myself.*

- Federico García Lorca, “Canción del naranjo seco” en *Canciones para terminar*



Figure 7, Quiero

Neon purple cursive text, reading *quiero*, is trapped inside a frame of white, slip-dipped thistles. The word glows out into the thorns, desire kept from freedom by sharp-edges. This piece WANTS, but pain and fear keep it caged. It's beautiful, but still cold and untouchable.

*Quiero (desire)*, Spanish, was the very first piece I imagined for this exhibit. I was out walking behind my apartment and found a huge musk thistle plant in full bloom, all bright

purples and greens and sharp, pointy spines. I recall thinking, “this is how I feel. I want to be bright and thriving and alive, but I’m in pain and afraid.” *Querer* is a nuanced verb, one that must have context to translate. It can mean “to wish, to want, to desire,” or “to feel affection for, to love, to like,” or “to have as an intention, to mean (to), to try.” *Quiero*, the first-person conjugation (I want/I desire), was of course the perfect word choice for this piece. I chose to translate it as “desire,” but there are so many other ways it can be interpreted, and so many other thoughts and feelings embedded in its thorns.

In this body of work, I do not mind if the viewer makes all the same connections between text and meaning, interpretation and content, that I had when creating the work. It is a show about the pitfalls of communication; while the exact translation of each piece of text is provided, the viewer is left to more or less decipher the meaning based on their own reasoning. This unique experience, based on one’s own subjective experience, is in a way a confirmation of the thesis. Clearly these are all words, but what they *mean* in the end is to each their own.



Figure 8, Quiero (detail)

## Beschämt

*“I am ashamed to have raised you as a daughter.” – Anne Barr*

Ashamed was the word that inspired my original thesis concept. The most deeply personal moment in this exhibition, *Beschämt* (*ashamed*) is both a commentary on a criticism from my mother on my last visit to my parents’ house, and a larger observation on the depth of shame entwined with trauma.

Shame is a self-conscious emotion that occurs when you judge yourself in a negative light. Individuals who view themselves (often due to social and cultural conditioning) as worthless, weak, bad, or useless. Victims of abuse, particularly sexual assault, often feel a great deal of shame, as can those with speech impediments. Shame can lead to avoidance and / or defensiveness, which both interfere with the ability to communicate clearly, calmly, and effectively.

In this piece, I gave it the form of a lemon, with the text spelled out in a sickly shade of yellow (argon and mercury in a phosphor-coated tube). Black thistles nestle and twist around slipcast roadside prairie sunflowers, lemons, and Baroque-inspired peeling lemons. It directly references the classical representations of *vanitas*: the fragile nature of life, the black and white motif evoking life and death, good and evil, referencing struggles with mental illness and toxic relationships.

The lemon has a secondary, layered meaning: when you are disabled, a lot of people will spout cute aphorisms at you, in particular favoring, “when life hands you lemons, make

lemonade!” thinking this “silver lining” attitude will be helpful or inspiring. To be referred to as the idiom “a lemon” (buy a lemon, life hands you lemons...), meaning “something that is worthless, broken, unsatisfactory, disappointing,” is worse than an insult. What seems quaint, even cute, is literally dark and full of thorns, piled and heaped into a baroque cornucopia of excess, complicating and obfuscating meaning, souring relationships. The wall text accompanying this piece



Figure 9, *Beschämt*



Figure 10, *Beschämt* (detail)

certainly gave it a specific type of impact on viewers, but everyone, with perhaps the exception of true psychopaths, has their own history and memories of shame and embarrassment. It can propel some to lie, others to obscure the truth, and yet others to lash out in anger and pain, creating greater disconnect and discord.

## Misericordia

*“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery.”*

– Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*

*Then each went to his own house, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.*

*Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he bent down and wrote on the ground.*

*And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more.”*

- John 8: 1-11, New American Bible



Figure 10, *Misericordia*

before that, *μῖσος*. Misery and mercy, wretched and compassionate, originating from the same source is poetic.

Saint Augustine commented more than once on the story from the Gospel of John of a woman caught in adultery, whose stoning was halted by Jesus. His phrase, *misera et misericordia*, used to describe when only the woman and Jesus remained alone, a word-play on “the pitiful and Pity itself.” In 2016, Pope Francis chose to revive this phrase in an Apostolic Letter giving priests the ability to grant forgiveness for abortion, while maintaining that abortion remains a grave sin. The location of the Holy See in Vatican City led me to create this piece in Italian (though the word is the same in Latin and Spanish).

I have such complex feelings on the Church, men’s decisions about women’s bodies, what is forgivable, doctrines and the impact of the Church on women, much less marginalized populations, over the centuries. The garland shape references all the pomp and circumstance I grew up loving about church, Baroque flourishes and bountiful decorations. The everpresent lilies in spring, “He is Risen,” an overpowering floral scent as you gazed upon the altar. Pointe shoes, once worn down to where they no longer support a dancer, become “dead.” These shoes

*Misericordia* (mercy) is a piece about the church, femininity, and pain. “Misericordia” is a word that has always fascinated me. Many students mistake it for “misery,” though it translates to “mercy.” In many ways, I love this kind of false cognate as a sort of linguistic puzzle. Etymologically, both words share the same Latin root, *maereō*, and Ancient Greek

have been resurrected into a grotesque second life, as eerily beautiful in their ceramic tombs as they once were lifting their wearer into arabesques and pas de Bourrées. Underneath a dancers' shoes, though, are often mangled toes and painful feet. The messaging of the church to young women about their bodies, the spaces they're allowed to occupy, and their worth, is similarly damaging. This damage often, as with my mother, gets



Figure 11, *Misericordia* (detail)

adapted, reworded, and transliterated down to the next generation. Misericordia becomes misera, misery mistaken for mercy, onward and onward. The original message has been lost in the interpretations. The result may appear pure and beautiful, pomp and circumstance but in truth it is agony, as with the dancer's feet.

This piece has additionally been soda fired, giving the porcelain a blue-gray cast that tips off into deep charcoal where the soda and flame have hit hardest. It gives the ceramic portion a further dimension, proof of the fires, of the process. It certainly adds an extra layer of contrast in the material, and communicates another echo of pain into the composition.

It perhaps only needs to be said for posterity, but the amount of miscommunication and misinterpretation that surrounds us in the world due to religious extremism- right wing terrorism, Q-cult, anti-vaxxing- is immense, and incredibly unfortunate.

## Consent

*No man is good enough to govern any woman without her consent.* –Susan B Anthony

*I just don't believe that 'no' is always a final answer- unless we're talking about consent.*

– Tarana Burke, founder #MeToo

*Consent is a "yes." Anything else is just a guess.* – Cambridge University Educational Campaign



Figure 162, Consent

*Consent* is the only piece in English, because even without translation issues, we seem to have difficulty understanding this one.

*Consent* is a mirror because the viewer must reflect on what it means to them, and how they consider it when communicating with others. *Consent* isn't only about sex—though it's not NOT about sex. It's about all the boundaries we place on our relationships with others, in every aspect of life. "Can I hug you?" "Is this a good time?" "Do you

have emotional space for me to unpack something?" "Is this okay?" "I don't want to discuss that right now." "I need a break." "Please don't." All the way to informed medical consent— and who gets to make those decisions. *Consent* is something that needs *more* communication, but frequently suffers when someone chooses not to listen.

This piece has no porcelain component, no extraneous content for interpretation to divert from the text itself. The individual holds all the power for self-reflection. It's the piece that most directly relates to where neon is generally found— the bars and strip clubs where unfortunately, the concept of consent is tossed aside in favor of impulse, desire, and displays of power and control. *Consent*, or our society's consistent confusion surrounding it, is a topic that has to be confronted starkly, in a straightforward manner without filter and without distraction. It's a piece designed to exist in simplicity, because consent is often so over complicated by society. It needs no other barriers.

## a•l•o•n•e

*I don't know that hearing people have ever felt that experience of truly being left out.*

*They have easy communication, while deaf people can't join in.*

*It takes more time to communicate with us.*

–Millicent Simmonds (actress, *A Quiet Place*)

Alone is neither ceramic nor neon; this work is kilncast glass lit from beneath with LED. The other pieces are text of spoken languages, but this piece stands apart (literally and metaphorically) in American Sign Language (finger spelling). It is the first piece encountered in the gallery, before entering the main space with the neon and ceramic works.

Each of the five hands represents a letter,

standing on their own separate LED pedestal. It feels cut off from the rest, an odd decision that maybe doesn't quite fit. This was entirely intentional. The feelings of isolation, of being alone with your thoughts, the frustration of being unable to connect and relate to others, that accompanies trauma, can be exponential. Compounding depression and anxiety, shame, and bullying further interfere with forming and maintaining relationships. One can feel frozen, trapped. I chose ASL for this piece in particular because speech and hearing impairment are the most physically isolating, creating very real disconnect in the ability to communicate with most people.



Figure 13, Alone

The Deaf community have their own culture, social beliefs and practices, history, values, and shared institutions apart from the majority hearing world for a reason. In a show about trauma and miscommunication, I wanted this piece to really showcase the isolation that disability can create. I have a few friends who have lost their hearing, either over time or suddenly, and that feeling is something that has come up often in discussion. Accessibility for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people is not common. It can be a struggle to convince venues that they need to provide interpreters. For all that the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) has been discussed quite a bit recently, the protections included are *incredibly* hard to enforce.

## Merde

Shit. Shit is one of the first words I try to learn in any new language. What do you say when you stub your toe, or realize you left your phone on top of your car? It's an incredibly universal concept, and a very difficult one to translate, because it's as much an emotion as a word. Shit happens. This is a piece about all the things in life that just *happen*.



Figure 14, Merde

Roadkill, sitting on thistles, broken bones, Freudian slips, words said in anger but never intended. This piece is intended to add a moment of dry humor at the conclusion of an otherwise weighty exhibition, while it is composed of skulls and thistles, its more diminutive size, abstract shape, and flippancy hope to inject a sense of levity.

## Tlamanalistli

On onellelacic quexquich nic ya ittoa  
antocnihuan ayiaue noconnenemititica  
noyollon tlalticpac y noconycuilotica, ay  
niyuh can tinemi ahuian yeccan, ay  
cemellecan in tenahuac y, ah nonnohuicallan  
in quenon amican ohuaya.

It is a bitter grief to see so many of you, dear  
friends not walking with me in spirit on the  
earth, and written down with me; that no more  
do I walk in company to the joyful and  
pleasant spots; that nevermore in union with  
you do I journey to the same place.

– from “The Reign of Tezozomocli” (c.1390, canto XVI), translated by Daniel Brinton  
attributed to King Nezahualcoyotl

*Tlamanalistli* (or *tlamanalitzli*) is Nahuatl, an Aztec language, for “the act of making an offering or sacrifice.” So many lives, literally and metaphorically as we endure quarantines, have been sacrificed these past few years; to capitalism and greed, ableism, racism, bigotry, hate, and misogyny. Many people are unwilling to make the simple sacrifice of wearing a piece of cloth over their face, but have asked the high-risk population to give up our lives so they can go back to normal. This piece is not only about miscommunication, but also trauma from communication.





im willing to sacrifice old fat and disabled people for a return to normalcy.

3:10 PM · Aug 29, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 19, Tweet @shitfarrt

Native populations, already historically decimated from smallpox and other diseases, have been hit hardest by Covid. This, ultimately, was the reason I chose to make this piece in an Indigenous language. The

Spanish conquistadors used the ideological repulsiveness of the Aztec religion's ritual sacrifice as support for the Conquista, and to this day Western culture views them as "savage" and "atrocious." Looking back at the past couple of years (and European history, Colonialism...)

hindsight would say that we don't have any room to cast judgment.

The same year Columbus set sail for the so-called "New World," Spain began the Inquisition, an operation of state-sponsored torture and executions by the Church. The pyramids at Teotihuacán ran with blood the same red as that at Wounded Knee, or Salem, or the sands of Afghanistan.

In the US, we are taught about the "ancient" Native American civilizations and ruins, as if these people lived in the same era as the

Romans and Greeks, when in reality the Mona Lisa was painted around the same time as the height of the Aztec Empire. In linguistics we were taught the influence of the Taíno, the First People Columbus and his crew made contact with, but until very recently academia believed them extinct and their language dead. False. A shocking majority of Americans also erroneously believe that Indigenous peoples are all gone, their languages dead and left unspoken and mysterious. In my first masters, we studied *all* of the influences of modern-day Spanish. This



WTVC NewsChannel 9 @newschannelnine · Apr 20  
TENNESSEE IN PROTEST: Even with the announcement to start re-opening the state's economy on May 1, Governor Bill Lee has been facing some sharp criticism for not starting the process immediately.



Dozens rally at TN capitol, call for Gov. Lee to re-open state immediat...  
Even with the announcement to start re-opening the state's economy on May 1, Governor Bill Lee has been facing some sharp criticism for ...  
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105 137 57

Figure 16, Tweet, News Channel 9 TN

included learning to read in Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, some Arawak, Maya, Nahuatl, and Quechua. Only one of these is a dead language. Making a neon sign in Nahuatl, glaringly bright, is a wake-up call to say YES THEY ARE STILL HERE! and should be recognized, respected, and heard.<sup>1</sup>

This is the most complex piece in the exhibition, consisting of the neon text behind a loose “curtain” strung with porcelain pills, roses, petals, and slip-dipped masks, cascading down onto a pyramid-shaped pile of porcelain skulls and thistles. The curtain of masks and pills is a direct reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and the very literal issues it has created with communication, as masks get in the way of clear speech and quarantine has isolated and separated us. The mask and anti-mask dialogue, and the now over 700,000 US deaths related to COVID, are further impediments to communication. Conversations become heated as tensions continue to grow, and each death is a new trauma added to the equation. Death is also referenced in the pile of skulls, a nod to both Aztec pyramids and European bone ossuary churches. Such a clearly ordered, careful pile of skulls insinuates some sort of ritual, an unsettling evocation of blood sacrifice and pain. The porcelain clearly echoes the whiteness of bone, which remains calcified inside the ceramic shell, eerie in its fragility.

The red neon evokes feelings of anxiety, fear, evoking the literal color of blood. The skulls seem to stare directly at the viewer, hollow-eyed. Death is part of the human condition, as is a fear of death. Here is the closest this show comes to the idea of trauma itself, not merely the aftermath. The shadows and literal symbols of sickness and death provoke a sense of disquiet and hopefully confront the viewer with not only their own mortality, but their impact on those around them.



Figure 1722, Tweet, @bibicosplays

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Dr. David Bowles (Nahuatlahtoh) for discussing the merits and aspects of this piece RE: cultural appropriation vs appreciation. It is always my intent to be respectful and educational in my work.



Figure 18, Tlamanalistli

## Conclusion

As the viewer moves through the exhibit, the light from each of the sign envelops them, moves with them and they become a part of the exhibit. They are unable to escape the implications and expectations of each piece as they move closer to encounter the small details, discovering all the contrasts in materials and textures, various tensions and balances, and finally reaching the translations provided by the wall text. What may have seemed a pretty piece of flowing cursive neon text and flowers bathed in light crosses over into uncomfortable meaning and perhaps less desirable botanicals, skulls, and other elements. How each of these works communicates not only with the viewer, but with each other, will ultimately depend on the viewer's own subjective set of beliefs, experiences, and knowledge. While representations of trauma do not live in the gallery, the consequences and aftermath of some of the pains of life do, and viewers are asked to translate that via their own understanding and life experiences. They are also asked, quite literally, to reflect on how they perceive and receive the concepts presented. Ultimately, I can only present my visual interpretations and the literal textual translations of the work; what they take away is theirs to clarify. I can only hope it is not actually lost in translation.

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