

WE COLLECT ANSWERS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

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ABSTRACT

We Collect Answers is an investigation of language, religion, translation, community participation, and ritual and poetry. This written statement is presented alongside an exhibition of paintings and ceramic works structured around a ritual of exchange encouraging social participation. The work argues for a greater understanding of social relationships that occur within social structures such as language and religion, and aims to employ the manifestations of these structures, such as poetry and ritual, towards this end. The questions are presented within a visual experience, also asking how art mediates these inquiries, and the function of art objects as surrogates for linguistic and social connection.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Erika Germain was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 1996. She completed her undergraduate degree, a Bachelor of Fine Arts, from Emily Carr University of Art and

Design in Vancouver, BC, Canada in 2018. She relocated to Ithaca, New York to attend Cornell University in 2020, and receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in May

2022.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

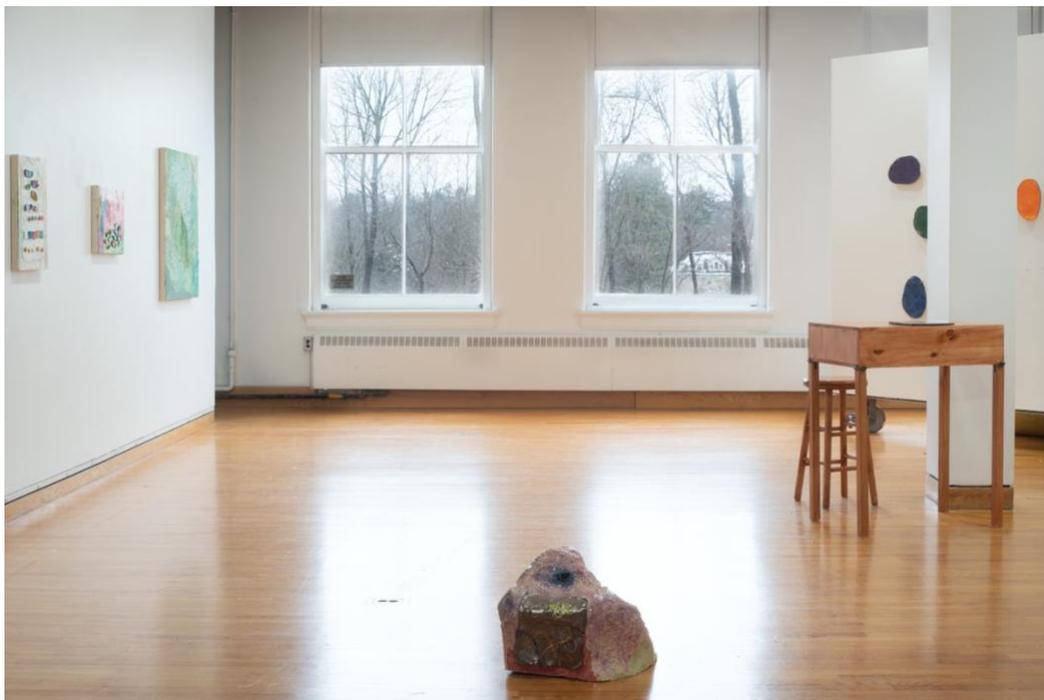
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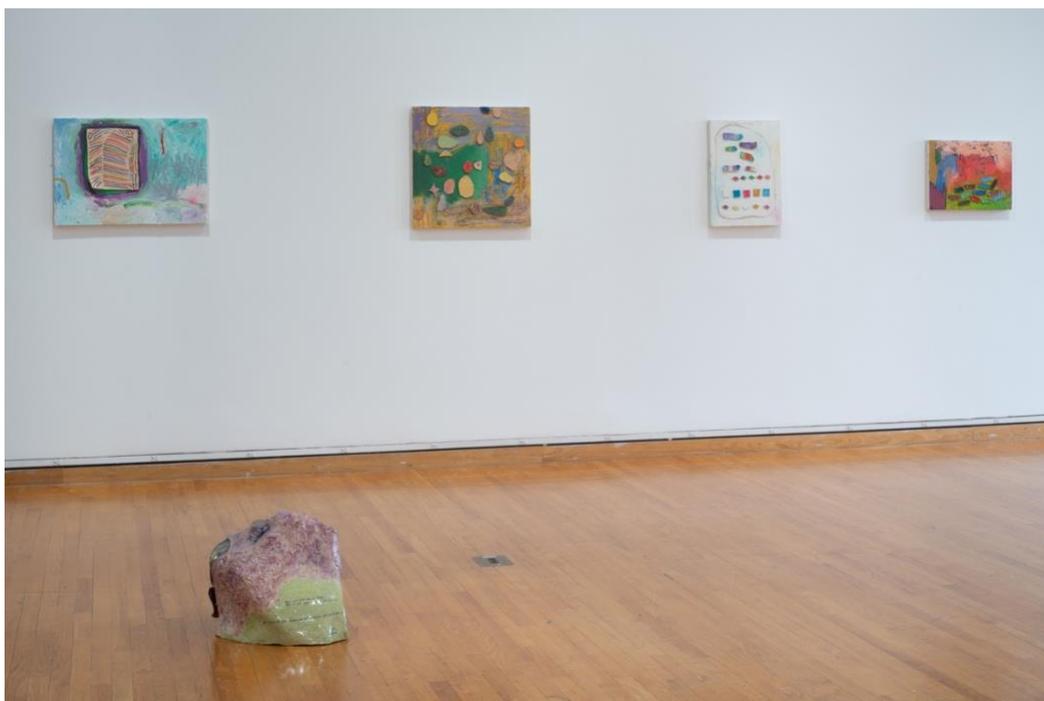
We Collect Answers

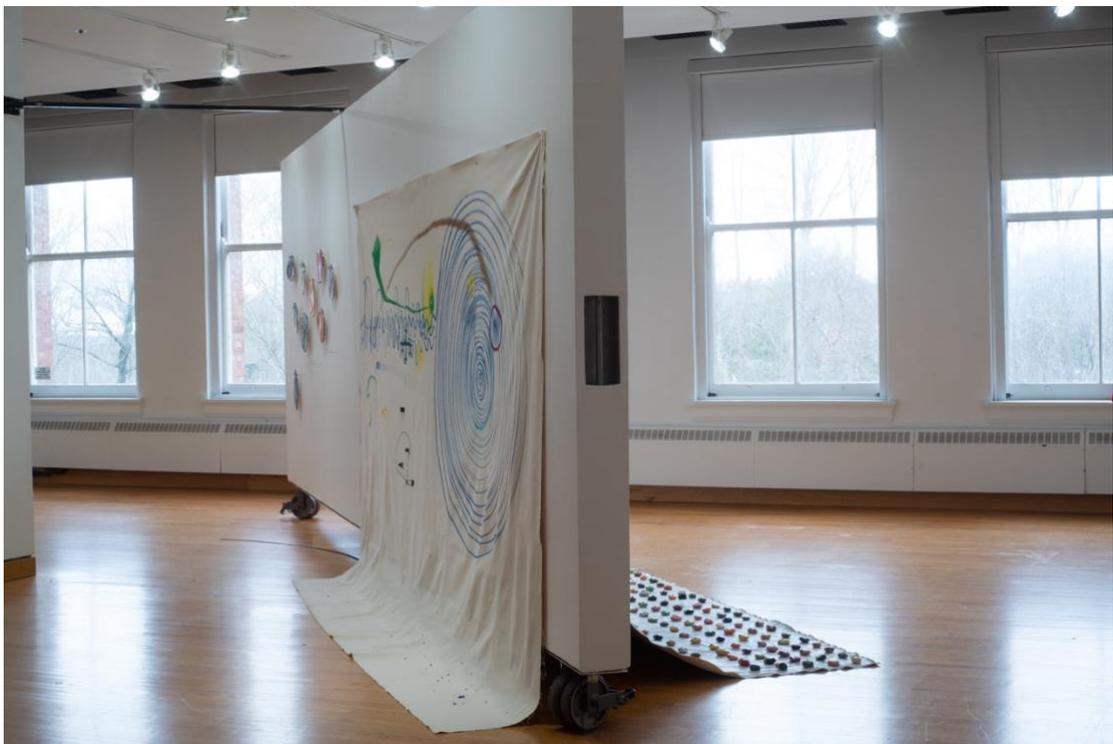
We collect answers when we can. Ways to say what we really mean. What I really mean to say is that I'm looking for all of the same things that you're looking for. What I really mean to say is that I continue to hope we might be able to genuinely understand one another. What I mean is to propose the idea that we are not really alone, after all.



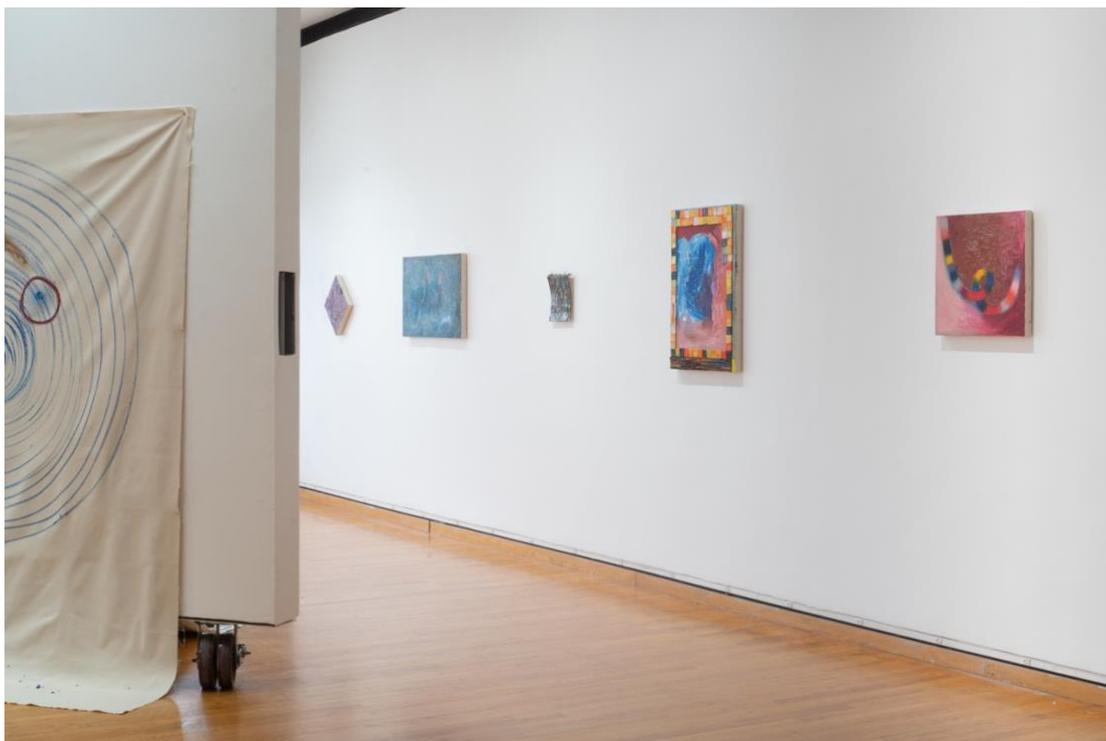
The story begins with genuine hands building moments of hopeful words. This is the story, beginning with empty earth void of sounds and words and thoughts and love. I'm imagining the path that we take
It starts in between the start
It ends here, like always.

This is the story, this is where you find yourself now. A hungry person built stones out of clay and made a story to tell you. How much of this labour means that you are saved.





This is the story. The labor that an ocean might have spent was met with palms instead, a genuine sincerity engraved consonants and vowels to be held inside of hands.

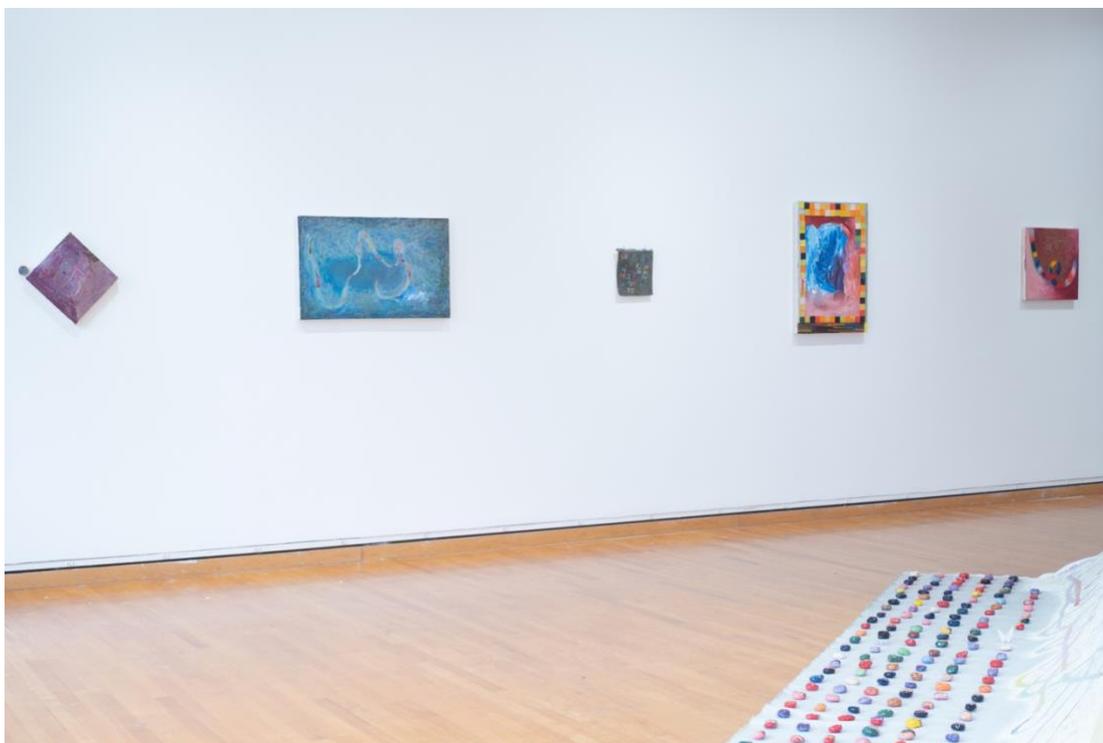


This is the story.

You've known this the entire time; that there has been a knot in your throat for years and years. It never goes away, it never fades or settles, it never changes size, it never swells, it never shrinks. When you were young you compared it to a grade school diorama and found that it was the size of Jupiter. You know that it is not hollow. It never changes shape, except to sometimes feel immensely sharp, and at other times turn into a fluid pocket that estimates a violent burst. You've ignored it for long periods of time. You've tried to get it out, with compulsive fingers and miscellaneous paraphernalia, the string from your jacket zipper, the hook of a coat

hanger, the glass from that shattered lightbulb. Sometimes you become violent with yourself not knowing how to manage the presence of it. Every time you try to explain what you mean the lump aches and asks you the questions that you really mean to ask. You ask to be understood, for answers, for love, for some time to understand, for the hope of a conversation. That we might stay

and talk for a little
while.



I imagined that the lump could be everything. I told you all my guesses. This is the same lump that I have. It's made out of everything, it's made out of language, it's made out of love, it's made out of god, it's made out of sincerity, it's made out of clay, it's made out of flesh. It's made out of friends and family and lovers and strangers, it's

made out of everything that has ever been said, it's made out of everything still
unsaid.



It's made maybe out
of one single word one single answer
that could be found and
collected and known. That
maybe could be found if we could only
understand one another.

I thought that if it were made out of one single word I could find it out for you.
I made a list of every possible word that could be the knot in your throat that aches
when you can't speak or smile or know or understand.

I thought

At the beginning that it could be something big



It could be Love
It could be God
It could be Language
It could be Poetry
It could be Religion
It could be Ritual, Sincerity, Kindness
It could be Everything
It could be Infinity
It could be Art
It could be Beauty
It could be Magic
It could be Abyss
It could be Epiphany
Or Humility
Or Sanity
Empathy
Imperfection
Pain
Sorrow
Grief
Silence

And then at other times I thought that it was something small and messy

That it could be Hell
Or that it could be Heaven
Or Purgatory

Or Shame

Or Sin

Or Forgiveness

Or Yesterday or Today

Or You or Me.



But I don't think that I could ever guess right even though it must be made of either something or everything. Like Borges and his library, we could never pull the right book off the shelf. Either way I gave you all my guesses, and you said let's keep talking, so that we might stumble upon near-answers somewhere in the dark together. I gathered clay and made stones of every guess for when you need to feel like we are still searching.







In the fall I collected poems, and the names of loved ones, and meaningful objects, coins and cigarettes, empty spaces, and painted gestures. I wrote something out of the words that you left me to give back to you. I translated it into colour and I turned it into two hundred stones.

This is what I said back to you:

You convince yourself of a cardboard nightmare, houses collapsing in the evening.

The problem always circles death, fingers flickering at a tired family, living alone, waking up on old carpets, the empty color

Aching feet cauterize long days.

Everything feels bright - red - black - honey - blue - green -

We collect answers when we can, sift through them with uncomfortable smiles, happier teeth

We collect answers, ways of saying these things that are impossible to say. Living next to great lakes, submerging ourselves with the fear of tides and planets and wonder and tomorrow.

I ask you why you always say it like that
A bird twisting around your shoulders,
A telescope in the question
A spine that hurts itself,
holding up the landscape like an atlas
Reminds me of a shadow I once saw,
cast by clouds onto the horizon
Shaped like the shape of your sympathy.

feels about right.

A root that settles in, feels like something bigger, a revolution, a dark sea,
something passes by after all of these months

A strange moon that we saw in a dream once.

You convince yourself

That it aches not to speak

You convince yourself: this is a poem, this is a dragon, this is a ship, this is
bittersweet,

problem. This is the

It takes 1 million years to make yourself believe.

You convince yourself

That it will hurt either way.



A Note on Translation

“Metaphysical silence happens inside words themselves.

And its intentions are harder to define.

Every translator knows the point where one language

cannot be rendered into another.” - Anne Carson

A few years ago, I began translating poems and other texts into paintings. In the beginning I would do this by writing out poems—my own poems that I’d written—onto small pieces of unstretched canvas. Then I would paint over every letter A with a mark of cadmium red light. Then I would paint over every letter B with

naples yellow, every letter C with olive green, every letter D with ultramarine, every E with cobalt blue, every F with viridian, every G with ivory black, every H with raw sienna, every I with hansa yellow deep, every J with dioxazine violet, every K with burnt umber, every L with emerald, every M with quinacridone magenta, every N with cadmium orange, every O with yellow ochre, every P with cobalt violet, every Q with titanium white, every R with manganese blue, every S with phthalo blue, every T with phthalo green, every U with alizarin crimson, every V with naphthol red, every W with cerulean, every X with indian yellow, every Y with terre verte and every Z with cadmium lemon.

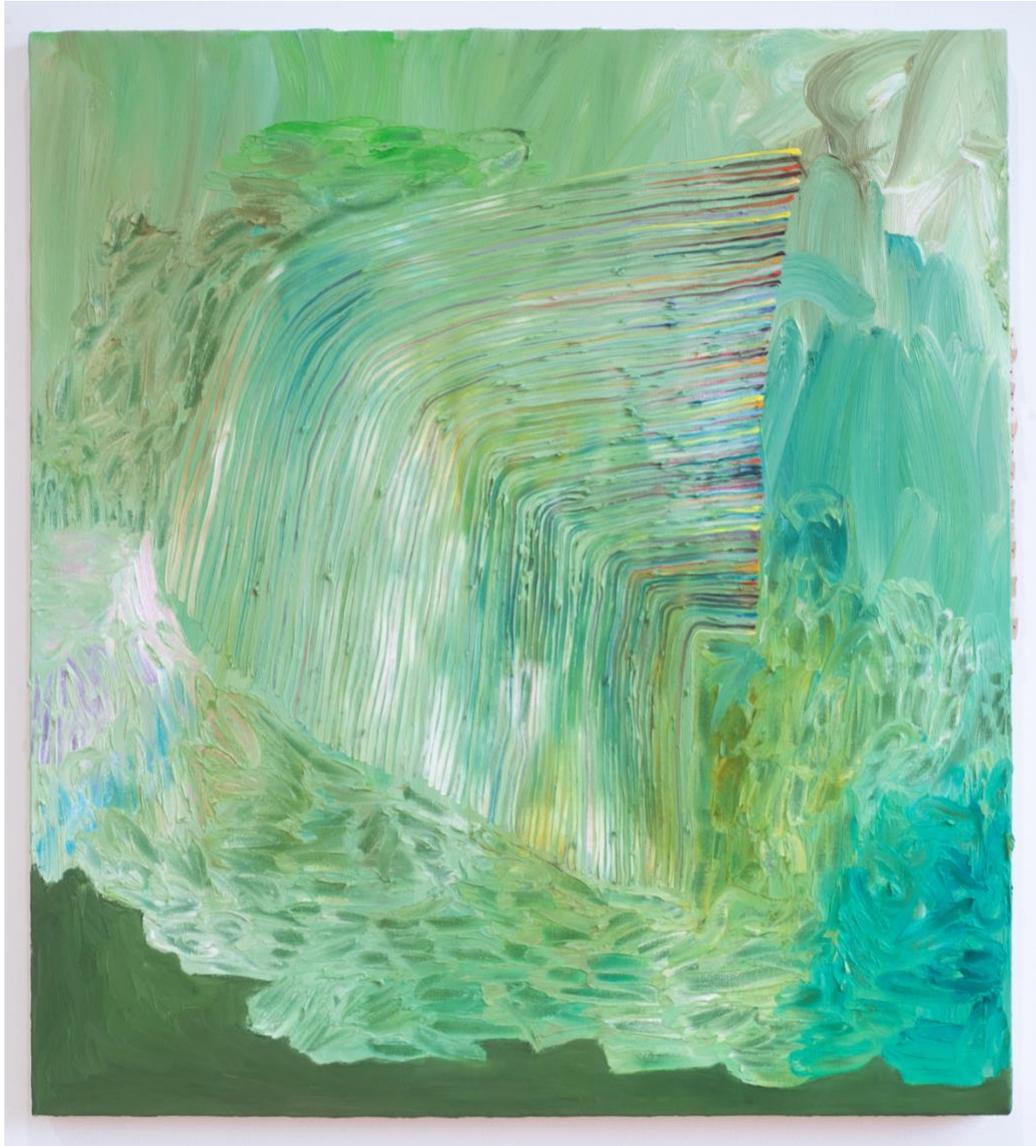


Over time the translations have become more complex. The systems became carefully mixed colors choreographed to the frequency of letters in a text to manipulate the painted surface, while the marks pressed over written letters have elaborated to linear gestures, stripes and grids, and an exploration of any painted mark

that could play the role of a symbol through colour. The grounds for these painted marks become the setting for unfolding narratives of systems. A context and a home to build around new languages invented to recite poetry in a way that might not have been heard or seen before.

The texts that I've translated have cycled through my own poetry and writing, well known published poems and texts, and then my own again. I began creating works that asked viewers to leave behind poems and their own writing in exchange for mine, and then translating the texts collected from the exchange into new paintings. And then I translated my own writing again, alongside theirs, and alongside new rituals of exchange.

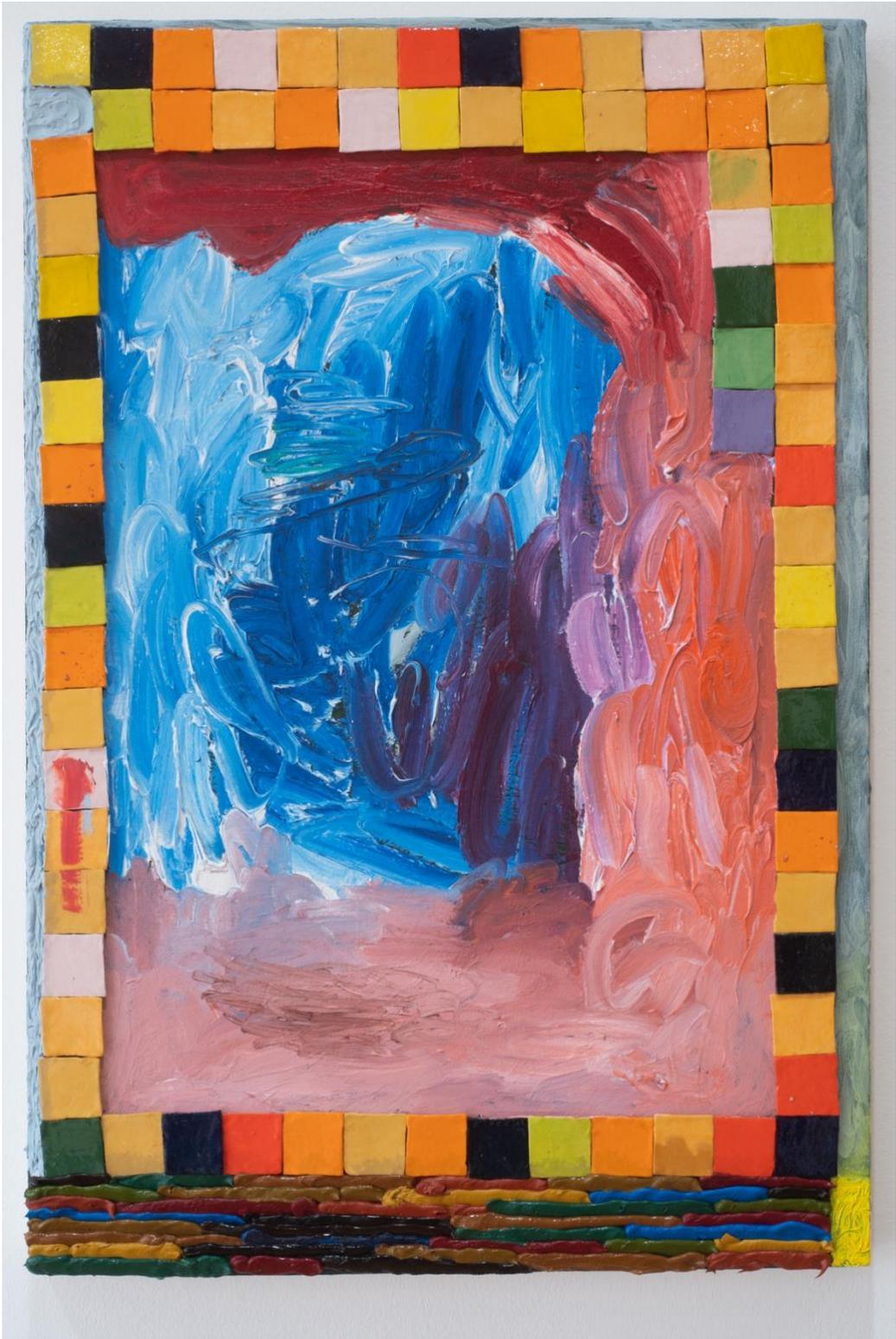




My relationship with language has been at times on the cliff of two questions; what can't I say in words that I can say in color; and what can I not say with color that I can say with words. This precipice might be discovered to be secretly very formal. The gravity that pulls me past these concerns is the real question: what are the things that I can't seem to be able to say at all.

This is the question that feels expansive and intimate, steers me from language to religion, and drives me to think of things that are as trivial and profound as sincerity and love.







Translation is important because it settles in between all of this. It presses a hand against the surface of space where we find hidden both the things that we can say, and the things that we mean to and hope to say. Inside of this there also are the things that we might not be able to say at all: unknowable, unspeakable, pre-linguistic truths. They might be cosmic and divine and they might be only our innermost thoughts and feelings, too intimate for even our own eyes.

Translation has always been religious. The word comes from the Latin noun *translatio*, which had meant to transfer and to carry over and was used to describe the movement of holy relics between communities. It was a way to bridge communities, to share faiths, to exchange rituals.

There is a kind of meaning that exists inside of language as a material, and language as a structure of symbols. Translation is a hand reaching into the unseen

seam of the curtain. Hopeful translators peek behind and say “This is the best I can get toward the truth”.

If I build this fire out of everything I find beautiful, wouldn't it be incredible to discover what comes out at the end, which things might not be capable of burning? Anne Carson says “There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable, about a word that goes silent in transit.”

Somewhere between poetry and color, the answers don't add up, but the question leads us on after all the endings. We keep on going in this way, moving things from place to place, putting meaning inside of sounds inside of images inside of objects inside of moments, making up symbols for ourselves and for each other, and then believing in them.



I Collect Answers

Language is our shared ritual, an accumulation of prayers said, fires lit, words whispered, love made. We use language to construct and permeate everything we know: philosophy, poetry, fiction, painting, art, emotion, experience. The curved needle that punctures itself, piercing holes that punctuate our lives.

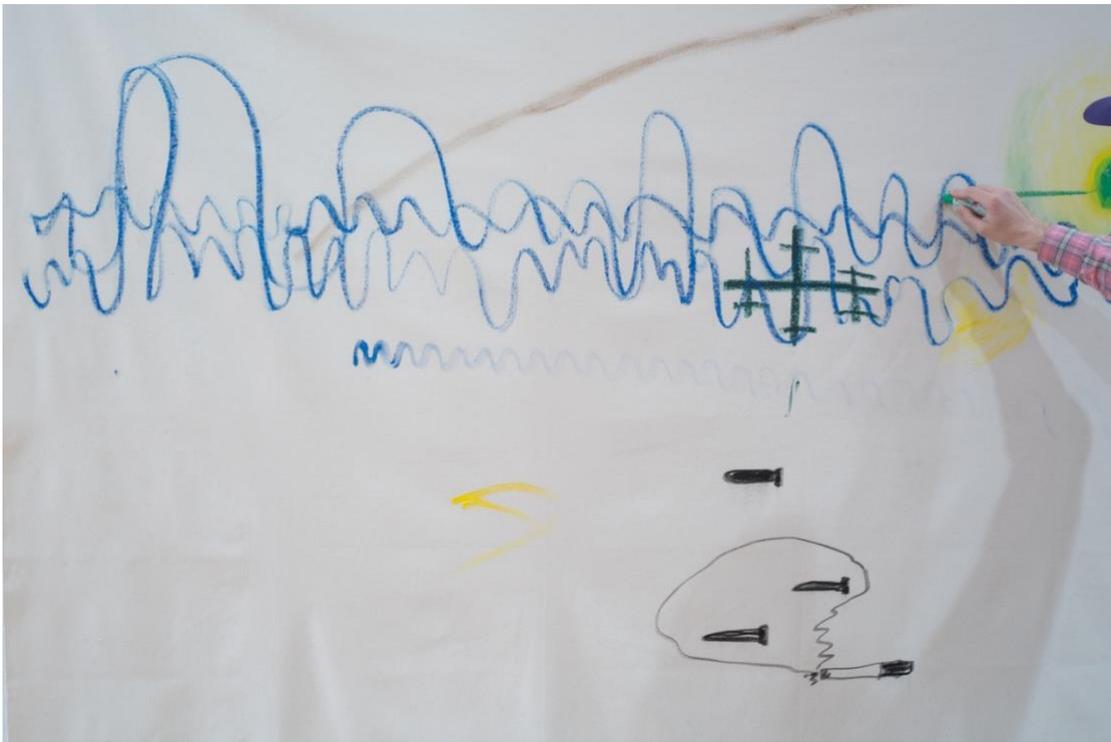
There are ways that we make and share meaning. Language, art, religion, love. We repeat the systems and the structure that we have built around us, we repeat the words until they mean something.

I want to make and share meaning with you—to create experiences that are rituals, to create language as an object that can be felt and held. Can we share this intimacy with one another, participating in a collective ritual, exploring together the maze of language as it recites its poetry to us?

We build communal structures around ourselves from the materials of religion and language. Enveloped in the parameters of these experiences, we try to speak to each other and understand each other. Art objects act as the surrogates for the phrases of conversations between strangers and friends, the linguistic rituals that choreograph moments of genuine connection and sincerity.

How could we ever understand one another

Family, friends, strangers, lovers,





The things that I wish I could talk about that I might not be able to explain yet:

Immobilizing loneliness

The selfishness of it

The unkindness of loved ones

The fear of loss the fear of grief

Self isolation

Sacrifice sin ritual religion language poetry love labour sacrifice

If I'm alone it's because it's what I need

If I'm alone right now it's because it's good for me

If I'm alone it's because it's what I deserve

The slope slips

It's always easier to believe a downhill lie

If I'm alone it's because I'm the kind of person who is supposed to be alone.

If I'm alone. If I ask anyone, friends and family, they might tell me: Of course not,
look I'm here.

If I asked you, you might say: Yes, it looks like it.

The slope slips.

Like curtains we draw lips

A smile in exchange for a moment of time, or a kind word, or a smile

I would give you anything you asked for

We prod at possible words to offer in exchange for other words

The generosity of a conversation

The generosity of the time it takes to speak to one another

Language licks at our shared rituals, fingertips fill with feeling-caused-calluses and graze against a hope to understand and be understood.

Just any small moment we could take, to talk to one another, in the peripheral vision of all the lonely aching. I would give you anything you wanted in exchange. I would tell you any lie, I would give any amount of time, if you only just stayed, and talked with me for a little while.

You could experience love at the speed of thought if you decided that you wanted to. Instead you have conversations with yourself, finding loopholes that permeate the surfaces of touch. When you reach a hand out to the darkness like an agreement with the unknown question, the bargain struck feels uncertain still, the deal falls short. You never get what you asked for.

It started like this. Even now it's still there and you can't ever help it. The lump in the throat that's been building up since before the beginning, that swells with silence and burns the roof of your mouth when you try to speak. We get at least a thousand guesses of what it could be.

This is where you'll enter, and I'll try to say something that could reach you, but you'll only ever hear the carving edge of your own voice, distracted by the hope to fall on anything but an empty room.

Labour is exchanged, and bargains are struck, and we leave behind the objects that say more than we ever could ourselves.

But this is where we meet. A sometimes-empty room.

In exchange for your time, I'll give you a poem, only the poem is a rock, and made of clay, and is really a painting of the thing that I wish I could really say to you. Symbols are dreamt of and we decide to speak, and have conversations together, imagining all possible love.

And all of these long words

That continue to fall short

Still lead us somewhere

Hinting at the right direction

That there could be a way to go

from here.

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