

*KISSING
THROUGH
A
CURTAIN*

MASS MoCA

“Whatever has been lost in translation in the long journey
of my thoughts through the maze of civilization to your mind,
I think you do understand me, and you think you do understand me.
Our minds managed to touch, if but briefly and imperfectly...
We live for such miracles.”

— Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie*¹

“Traduttore, traditore” (“Translator, traitor”)

— Italian proverb

The poet Kwame Dawes tells a story about listening to a discussion on poetry and translation. A writer vents her frustration about how Russian verse falls flat when translated into English: taken out of its original context, its rhyming and meter seem stilted. “How,” she asks, ‘would you like to be kissed through a curtain?’ Someone quips, ‘Better than not kissing at all.’”

The act of translation is mediated and imperfect. It implies an attempt to cross a border—between languages, between people who speak the same tongue, between different times, media, nations, and cultures. We often say that things are lost in translation, but things are gained too: each new context adheres to the text, idea, or person, adding the grit of new meanings and associations.

The works in this exhibition by Nasser Alzayani, Ash Çavuşoğlu, Kim Faler, Justin Favela, Osman Khan, Christine Sun Kim, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Jimena Sarno, Clarissa Tossin, and Jessica Vaughn address timely, urgent questions about who has access to which ideas, spaces, and histories. These ten artists approach attempts to communicate across perceived divides with skepticism, humor, rage, and hope.

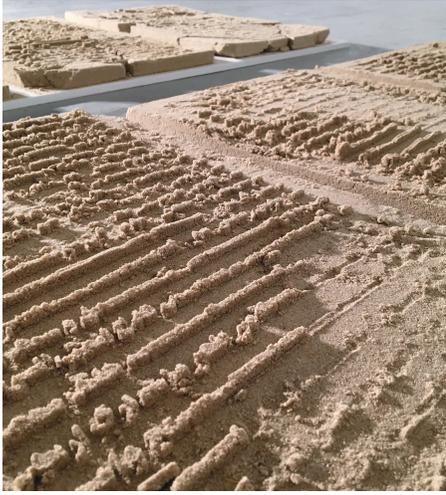
If communication from one context to another is necessarily mediated, why do we attempt it at all?

Is translation a method of reaching across borders and forging connection, or is it an act of appropriation and colonization?

In a moment when isolationism, nationalism, and even xenophobia are on the rise across the globe, what place does translation—or, indeed, any attempt to communicate—hold today?

— *Alexandra Foradas, Curator*

¹ Ken Liu, preface, *The Paper Menagerie* (New York: Saga Press, 2016), viii.



Nasser Alzayani, *Watering the distant, deserting the near*, 2020. Sand, sodium silicate, carbon dioxide, memories, collected recordings, works on paper.

NASSER ALZAYANI

Nasser Alzayani remembers visiting a water spring, Adhari, near his family's home in Bahrain when he was young. His parents are not so sure, however, and the water has since dried up. Alzayani's *Watering the distant, deserting the near* began with his uncertainty about his own memories, and ultimately expanded into a research project, sound work, and installation. He investigates the processes by which memories are transmitted from person to person—how over time they become solidified into history, or disintegrate, as the tablets will do over the course of the exhibition.

nasseralzayani.com



Asli Çavuşoğlu, *A Few Hours After the Revolution*, 2011. Neon.

ASLI ÇAVUŞOĞLU

Asli Çavuşoğlu's exhibition-within-an-exhibition is titled *With Just the Push of a Voice*. The installation brings together three new commissions and several existing works. *ANNEX* incorporates Çavuşoğlu's typeface based on revolutionary graffiti in Istanbul, the letters of which are rendered illegible, geometric forms by those with opposing political views. *The Mourning Herald* focuses on the use of blacked-out profile pictures in social media newsfeeds to mourn tragedies on both local and international scales. New English-language additions to *Eğit Değildir (Not Equal To)* pair words and phrases that are supposedly synonymous, but which have disparate political and ideological associations: for example, "illegal ≠ undocumented" or "Merry Christmas ≠ Happy Holidays."

aslicavusoglu.info



Kim Faler, *Double Bubble*, 2020. Metal, gypsum, glass, wax, sound.

KIM FALER

The suspended sculptures that make up Kim Faler's *Double Bubble* are based on chewed wads of bubble gum. Rendered in a wide range of materials, including cast iron and brass, transparent glass, gypsum, and wax, the sculptures hang at approximately the height and scale of a standing adult's head. Sound elements inserted into the hollow forms allow the work to breathe alongside the viewer. Faler's shifts in material and scale allow the intimate forms of chewed gum to harness our attention, making the familiar action of chewing something over — words, sustenance, thoughts — visible on an enlarged scale.

kimfaler.com



Justin Favela, *Valle de México desde el Cerro de Santa Isabel*, after José María Velasco, 2016. Tissue paper, glue on board.

JUSTIN FAVELA

In his series *After José María Velasco*, Justin Favela revisits paintings by one of Mexico's best-known academically trained landscape artists. Favela believes that "There's no better way to translate [Velasco's] paintings than by using another medium, which is piñata art." The history of piñatas' transmission around the world testifies to a legacy of conquest: they were supposedly brought from China to Spain by Marco Polo, and then to Mexico by Catholic missionaries. Using glue and strips of paper in saturated tones, Favela investigates the relationship between visual art and national and personal identity.

justinfavela.com



Osman Khan, *The sounds weight in anticipation of their song, hum tum tanana nana, nana nana ray*, 2020. Polyurethane foam, wood, fiberglass, taxidermy peacocks, PA speakers, microphones, guitar amp, effects pedals, mixer, speakers, Shruti box, Radel Taalmala Digi-108, Boss DR-202 Dr. Groove, Korg Monologue, Korg Volca FM, Korg Volca Keys, Moog Minitaur, Behringer Model D, vinyl, rugs, par lights, LED bar lights, dmx controller, computer, custom software.

OSMAN KHAN

Osman Khan's installation is based on the legendary Peacock Throne, from which Mughal emperors ruled. Khan puns on the power dynamics embedded in the use of "master" and "slave" in electronics, whereby one device (the "master," an electronic tabla) controls others (the "slaves," drum machines and synthesizers), acting as the hub for processing and dispensing information. For the installation, Khan composed electronic dance music rooted in Indian raga and taals (rather than derived from the Western canon, as is much popular music in the U.S.). Reflecting the tradition of raga, in which compositions have particular associations with time, season, and mood, the sound element of Khan's installation activates only at particular, pre-appointed times of day.

osmankhan.com



Still from Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015, with captioning by Ariel Baker-Gibbs. 4-channel video.

CHRISTINE SUN KIM

Christine Sun Kim's *Close Readings* is a 4-channel video installation for which Kim invited four Deaf and Hard of Hearing friends to collaborate: Ariel Baker-Gibbs, Jeffrey Mansfield, Alison O'Daniel, and Lauren Ridloff. Kim selected a series of scenes from five films in which sound, sign language, or the spoken word play important roles. With the top portion of the screen blurred to encourage viewers to become readers, the collaborators add their own text tracks to the clips, each providing commentary with varying degrees of exegetic critique, poetry, and humor.

christinesunkim.com



Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *most of the slow*, 2020. Archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.



Jimena Sarno, *taracatá trabaja*, 2018. Custom steel structure holding 34 hand thrown porcelain plates, hand inscribed with a music score and drawings of the hornero bird.

KAMEELAH JANAN RASHEED

Like Nasser Alzayani, Kameelah Janan Rasheed is interested in memory. In her current series of installations, Rasheed uses a Xerox machine—often the medium of reproducing archival materials—to investigate the multiplicity of histories of Black and Muslim people in America. Rasheed scatters fragments of texts throughout the gallery, encouraging visitors to draw their own playful, poetic connections. She explains, “I am interested in inviting visitors to think about reading as a bodily experience, almost a choreography as they dart from corner to corner building new ecosystems of meaning.”

kameelahr.com

JIMENA SARNO

Jimena Sarno’s *taracatá trabaja* recalls the shape of a billboard, advertising commercial goods and services. Instead, Sarno’s billboard contains five shelves, like the lines on a music staff, on which 34 hand-thrown porcelain plates rest. Each is the “container of a musical movement,” the artist explains. The composition, created in collaboration with Axel Krieger, is based on an Argentinian folk song, “Malambo del Hornerito.” The song “is an ode to the Argentinian national bird—the serially procreating, monogamous, and hardworking hornero who builds his home from spit and dirt.” The onomatopoeic words *taracatá* and *chapalea* refer to the sounds of working and moving through mud.

jimenasarno.com



Still from Clarissa Tossin, *Ch'u Mayaa*, 2017. HD single-channel digital video, color, sound.

CLARISSA TOSSIN

Drawing on a source material including Amazon boxes, NASA's images of space, archival audio, architecture, and a map of Earth's sub-oceanic internet cables, Clarissa Tossin's works point to the entangled relationship between globalized trade and individuals' attempts to communicate and create. Tossin's weavings recall hanging classroom maps and satellite dishes—modes of transmitting and gathering information. In *You Got to Make Your Own Worlds (for when Siri is long gone)*, Tossin stages a conversation between Siri, Apple's iOS digital assistant, and author Octavia Butler, imagining an interplanetary future. In *Ch'u Mayaa*, indigenous bodies occupy Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House—which appropriates Mayan architectural forms—with dance and song.

clarissatossin.net



Jessica Vaughn, *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #011*, 2020 (detail). 18 individual pairs of used machine fabricated public transit train seats (Chicago Transit Authority 1998–2011).

JESSICA VAUGHN

Jessica Vaughn's *After Willis #011* incorporates seats from the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), combining the visual language of minimalism with the index of the human body. In Chicago, one of the country's most segregated cities, the "L"—the city's public transit train system—connects communities of vastly disparate levels of privilege. The train's seats are a site of mediated contact between people from groups that might otherwise remain separate. Vaughn's work connects the strange intimacy of public transportation to the impersonality and reproducibility of the seats on which passengers sit.

jessvaughn.com

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KISSING THROUGH A CURTAIN

On view beginning March 21, 2020

Cover: Kim Faler, *Double Bubble* (detail), 2020. Metal, gypsum, glass, wax, sound.

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