

MUTABLE MEANS:
AN EXPLORATION OF COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY
THROUGH VISUAL AND VERBAL DECONSTRUCTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly defined by my status as a Nonimmigrant Alien, I have lived longer in the United States than in my native Venezuela. Knowing my stay in this country will be temporary, I examine feelings of uncertainty about my future by deconstructing communication—both visual and verbal. Through ambiguity I express anxieties on my personal circumstances and retain objectivity in regard to my process through intellectual inquiry. I layer words, images, and sound to mirror my frustrations, and project the conflict of my internal dialogue.

For my parents, Hugo and Isabel.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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INTRODUCTION

At the start of my graduate career I struggled to generate my own creative work. Coming from a commercial arts background, I felt strange not having to fulfill a work brief or to achieve a preconceived goal set by someone else. Throughout my earlier educational and professional experiences, I grew confident with the formal aspects of my image making, knowing exactly what kind of illustration style would work for a client or what combination of typefaces would be best for a poster design. The decisions I made were straightforward because they were only as complicated as the tasks that I agreed to undertake.

This kind of thinking and art-making offered no room for conscious assessment of why I make images and what my career lacked in personal and intellectual fulfillment within the commercial application of visual arts. This discontent led me to pursue graduate studies. During my time as an MFA candidate, I realized that I needed to question everything. By carefully observing and analyzing my working process as an artist, I have carved a space for myself within the fine arts discourse.

In my thesis body of work, I explore ideas of identity, communication, and alienation through video art, readymades, and works on paper. These works evolve from conflicts in my personal experiences—a past I am disconnected from, a present that remains foreign, and a future that is uncertain. It is in those spaces that I seek comfort.

DISCUSSION OF WORK

Impression Series: The Catalyst

I have always felt a distance between myself as the artist and the product that is my art. To establish a personal connection to my work, I began to experiment with the image of my mother, Isabel, whom I lost 11 years prior to the making of the artwork. Up to this point, I had never made art that was personal in content. This was the most opportune time because I had been given a suite of photographs of my mother at 27 years of age—the same age I was when I began the body of work. I set for myself the task to observe, analyze, and evaluate all the steps I took in the process of making images. Drawing a parallel between my working process and the deconstruction of my mother's image was challenging because of the unsettling nature of the results.



Figure 1: By Author, *Impression series (Blue and Red)*, 2014, 13" x 8"

The initial approach I chose was to utilize the image of my mother to allow the process to determine the final result of the work, and to pay close attention to why the steps I took were conceptually significant. I manipulated images through a myriad of experimental works including paper sculptures, installation, and my first videos. The significance of my process became apparent as I confronted personal realities.

I purposefully chose images of my mother from the time before I was born to make connections to a past I never experienced. These images helped me decipher a person I could not have known. My *Impression* series consisted of watercolor renderings based on family photographs of my mother as a toddler through my parents' wedding a few years before I was born. This series of improvised watercolors loosely replicated the content of the photographs they were based upon.

To further better understand photographs, I turned to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. His notions on photography helped me understand why I fragmented my family photographs. Barthes states that photographs may possess two qualities: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the "application to a thing, taste for someone; a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity" (Barthes 26). The *studium* is embedded in every element occurring in the photograph—figures, places, actions—that hold no other purpose than to represent a specific moment in time and history. On the other hand, the *punctum* is an "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes 26). The *punctum* makes a connection with the viewer—whether by a gesture or small detail—that transcends the formal or cultural aspects presented by the *studium*.

Working loosely with Barthes' definitions, I attempted to distinguish the *punctum* from the *studium* within my family photographs. I sought a simplified depiction of people through photographs. My layering of washes and mark making was meant to imply depth and form, but not to convey a precise sense of who the people were, what the situations were, or what places were represented.

When rendering these works, I questioned whether drawing the perfect angle or an exact mannerism could capture my mother's essence. And, if I chose the right sequence of photographs, could I convey with just a few strokes who my mother was or what her life was like? What could I discover by the exploration of her image? Would anyone else know or care? These questions highlighted bigger issues within my work that I did not understand. To extract from the photographs what I personally considered the *punctum*, I created formally appealing images that functioned as *studium* for the viewer. I concluded that seeking answers in a past from which I was disconnected did not lead anywhere, so I decided to focus on myself in an act of self-reflection.

3:59 (Static Noise), Chair (Standing Still), 12 Chairs: The Perspective

Seeking immediate answers through my process, I approached my status as an immigrant lacking permanent status as subject for my work. As a bilingual artist, I began to approach language as a lens through which to look. Language became a point of view and contributed content and context to the artwork. It became an important tool.



Figure 2: By Kay Rosen, *9/10*, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993

Because of my background in graphic design, I had always been interested in the potential of language as a visual element. Early on I was inspired by Kay Rosen's use of repetition in language and how it could be visually manipulated in relation to its meaning. In Rosen's work, the repetition of words, punctuation, and letterforms suggest sound and speech. Although at this point I was not ready to create sound artworks, I was inspired by its potential through the use of the written word.

Fragmenting language through concrete poetry allowed me to directly respond to my circumstances. The malleability of the written word led me to brevity and to my exploration of systems and thought patterns. My use of letter boards as readymades taught me the value of simplicity in a message. My introspective means of rationalization became tangible and public.

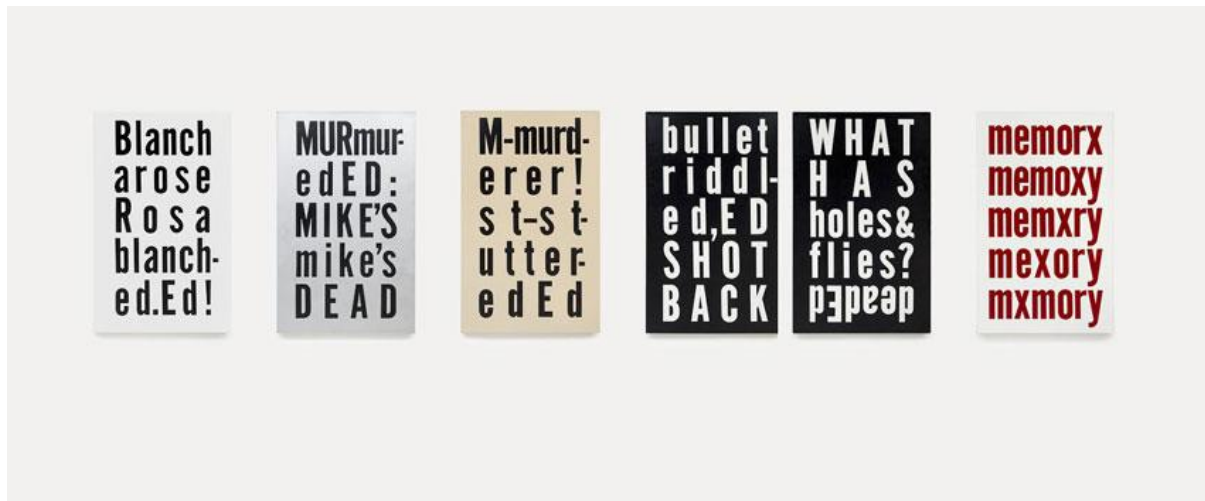


Figure 3: By Kay Rosen, *The Ed Paintings* ("Surprise," "Technical Difficulties," "Spit-it It Out," "Blanks," "ExEd"), 1988, each panel 32" x 20"



Figure 4: By Author, 3:59 (*Static Noise*), 2015, 36" x 72"

In 3:59 (*Static Noise*), I set opposites against each other. Because of my fascination with video and sound as concepts, I wanted to interpret the word *static* and its opposite meanings. Static refers to the lack of movement as well as to the sound and visual qualities of a malfunctioning radio or television. Both meanings also characterize agitation in my thoughts and perceptions. The triptych format speaks to the idea of rhythms, both in form and content. Immediacy is invoked by the word sequences within the letter board composition consisting of repeating sounds and word combinations. Word choices referring to markers of time allude to motion. Words dissolve into (visual) sounds and, ultimately, into single letters. Although no actual sound component is present in the piece, my intent was for the viewer to perceive sound through the different visual rhythms in the composition.

The letter board is flanked by two wooden boards. On the left is a black panel that has been scratched away to expose the white underneath. Because the texture was made by a combination of the surface of the wood and the brush strokes of the gesso, it appears to be the analog version TV static. On the top left of the panel a number, 3:59, is painted in white to resemble numerals on a digital alarm clock. Tension arises in the number because it will never complete the hour. To the right of the letter board a white panel depicts four quadrilaterals composed of parallel black lines that vibrate because of their irregular widths and hand-drawn appearance. The lines contrast with those mechanically configured on the center board to hold plastic letters. The four shapes create, through their gestalt, the negative spaces of a chair—further suggesting the ideas of opposition, obfuscation, and stillness.

The chair itself became a powerful symbol within these works. First, because of its so-called back, arms, and legs, it became a stand in for a person. Furthermore, because of its fixed nature, it became a metaphor for the visual and metaphorical uncertainties in my work. In *Chair (Standing Still)*, I delved into the idea already present in *3:59 (Static Noise)*'s third panel, but this time through motion media. My video depicted an angled wooden chair whose pixelated image formed a grid 38 pixels tall and 22 pixels wide. Although the chair is stable and nothing within the frame actually moves, the inherent motion, or visual noise, generated by the filming process became visible in the enlarged pixels.

Having captured movement in something that stands still, I proceeded to seek a similar result with traditional media. In *12 Chairs*, I systematically drew the same chair from the aforementioned pieces with ink on watercolor paper. Working wet on wet, I drew the chair twelve times within 30 minutes. With my working process dictating the final result, I relied on

instinct to replicate the lines and textures before me. Because I altered the order of washes, brush strokes, and mark making, I was unable to control how the water and pigment would dry on the surface—emphasizing the unpredictability of the media and its relation to the metaphor of the chair. My use of black ink made the mark making decisions seem much more important. These drawings echo my *Impression* series, as they became proof of concept.



Figure 5: By Author, *12 Chairs*, 2015, 36" x 40"

VERB/O: The Breakthrough

One of the things I examined during my early explorations of video was how time and motion play a role in my artwork. My first video experiment with the letter boards was *FPO (Lorem Ipsum)*, named after the acronym of *For Placement Only* used in graphic design. The video starts with a white wall and a blank letter board on the right side of the frame. A few seconds into the video, I step into view and proceed to search for something off-frame. At this point it is

evident that the video has been sped up as I begin writing the first few lines of *Lorem Ipsum*, or the most common placeholder text in graphic design, on the board. The video, lasting just under three minutes, displays the actions of building the board, which took half an hour in real time. Through the monotonous pace and repetitive actions shown during the course of *FPO (Lorem Ipsum)*, the futility of writing what is technically nonsense is apparent, and the motives for filming this process are present in the act of writing rather than in the words themselves.



Figure 6: By Author, stills from *FPO (Lorem Ipsum)*, 2014

These ideas of motion and manipulation of time as content were a catalyst in creating a piece in which both the writing on the letter board and the form of the video held significant importance to the concept. *VERB/O* is a diptych of looping videos—seemingly a mirror image of each other—in which the same concrete poem, both in Spanish and its English translation, are built up and taken down in a continuous video loop. The concrete poem, originally written in Spanish, was inspired by the book *Mujeres Mirando Al Sur: Antología de Poetas Sudamericanas*

En USA, or Women Looking South: Anthology of South American Poets in the US. This writing conveyed how I felt in relation to my current immigration status. It speaks to the ideas of forming connections and belonging in a country I cannot quite call my own. The translation into English is figurative because a perfect or exact translation, particularly in the form of concrete poetry, can never be achieved. Because of this, the length and placement of the words in the board differ, degrading the synchronization of the videos.



Figure 7: By Author, stills from *VERB/O*, 2014

Each video shows a layering of images, alternating between two to four tracks overlapping each other. Beginning with a blank board, I step onto frame at different rates and begin moving letters to construct the text. As time passes, words begin ghosting, because the placement of individual letters cannot be exact; this reveals that each video layer represents a different instance in which the poem was built or physically removed. My body motion often obscures the text, further adding to the sense of chaos and disengagement. This disparity is highlighted by the proximity of the videos as they create a chasm between them. The constant construction, obstruction, and deconstruction of the words create unique rhythms and relationships that mitigate against a perfect connection between the two texts, which renders the

meaning of the actual poems secondary. Understanding the significance of layering in the video process led me to question the effect audio could have if introduced into the work.

True Name Series: The Kinship

In order to build a stronger connection between the content of the writing and the viewer, I turned to video portraits. This decision led me to reflect on ideas of identity and assimilation through other people's points of view. Bruce Nauman's *Lip Sync (1969)* inspired me to introduce audio into my work. The video starts with an upside-down close-up of Nauman's mouth, chin, and neck. Nauman begins speaking, but no sound is heard. After a few seconds of mouth iterations, the sound track begins repeating the words "lip sync" for 57 minutes. Because of the different times at which the video and audio tracks began, they are unsynchronized—only to eventually become synchronized by accidents of cadence and speed. I adopted this audiovisual technique in my work to generate viewer frustration and alienation through repetition.

I chose five people whose migratory paths during their formative years were similar to mine to compare our shared experiences. The *True Name* series consists of five videos: *Simon*, *Laura*, *Leonardo*, *Daissy*, and *Hugo*. The videos depict each person in a white, featureless setting that blends into their clothing. Each person occupies the middle third of the frame and each is cropped just below the shoulders. Although the editing of each video varies slightly to capture the subtleties of the individual's cadence, energy, and presence, all the sitters follow a similar format when they speak.



Figure 8: By Author, still from *True Name* series (*Simon*), 2015

In *Simon*, the first half of the video consists of him repeating his name in Spanish, while a second video and sound track simultaneously repeats “My name is Simon”, the English pronunciation of his name. After the halfway mark, both video layers transition to the opposite—Simon now repeating his name in English, while repeating “Mi hombre es Simon” which is in Spanish. *Daissy* follows the same trajectory and English-to-Spanish transition format as *Simon*, but this time the sound track is turned off. Only the phrases “My name is Daissy” and “Mi nombre is Daissy”, are heard over the videos of Daissy mouthing her name again and again. This editing choice emphasizes how, even on the Spanish track, Daissy speaks both languages when reciting her Anglo-inspired name. Although the production of each video was the same, the decision to edit them differently permitted me to capture each speaker’s confidence, ambivalence, or even resignation.

These video portraits emphasize an internal monologue and its manifestation through spoken language. Because of the layering of images, faces come in and out of focus, conveying the malleability of individual identity. Rhythms arise from the repetition and overlapping of spoken phrases. The dissonance elicits unease, which arises when speakers are correcting themselves in the pronunciation of their names. Sometimes both pronunciations of the person's name fall on the same beat, creating a short moment of harmony that might anchor the viewer's attention throughout these intimate mantras. Such unexpected harmonies prove that comfort may be found in disparity.

Better view in a Galaxy on: The Conflict

It has been important to strike a balance between form and content to understand my perception of communication. At one point, I turned the lens onto myself to analyze the media and my artistic process. Questions of what gets lost in translation have always been present in my written work, but now my exploration has led me to ask how video itself contributes to what gets lost. Improvisation has been a constant in my work, particularly during my own video-making, and it enriched my exploration of sound layering.

Better view in a Galaxy on is an exploration of the parallel between the loss of fidelity in communication and loss of fidelity in the sound and video media. The piece consists of five layers of interwoven speech, video, and subtitles. The first audio track is an improvised recording of my voice, in Spanish, talking about my personal beliefs and thoughts on language and communication.

*“Hay algo extraño
en el proceso
de tratar de comunicarme
contigo.”*

*“There is something strange
in the process
of trying to communicate
with you.”*

Subtitles start appearing as my recording goes on, but the words appearing on the screen do not match the layered sounds, although sometimes keywords coincide. The subtitles were created by running the Spanish-voice track through a dictation application that provides English-only transcripts. Cognates and other similar words were translated properly, though most became strings of nonsensical text. Twenty seconds into the piece, a recording of my face appears in the center of the screen. The low quality of the video is apparent because the stark computer light provides the only source of illumination. In that video, I speak words that are inaudible, and the recording does not match the movements of my mouth.

*“Pero que pasa
si nuestro mensaje
aunque sea absoluto
queda perdido
entre palabras
Mi voz
y un microfono.
Mi cara
y una cámara.”*

*“But what happens when
our message,
even if absolute,
becomes lost
in between words.
My voice
and a microphone.
My face
and a camera.”*

Simultaneously, a mechanical voice speaks the text in Spanish. This voice has the distinctive quality of a computerized text-to-speech application. This software reads text in English, but because the text read is in Spanish, the mechanical voice acquires an accent. A subsequent sound layer of the mechanical voice starts to read an English version of the text.

<i>“El lenguaje es lo que se ve, lo que se escucha. El significado de las palabras. o como las interpreta la gente. Como se escribe, como se lee Como se pronuncia.”</i>	<i>“Language is what is seen, what is heard. The meaning of the words, or how people interpret them. How one writes, how one reads. How one pronounces.”</i>
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After I collected sound, video, and subtitle tracks, my editing of the word *soundbite* became decisive at the end of the video. All track lengths were determined by the cadence of each voice, requiring that all track start at different points. These syncopated layers of visuals and sounds prohibit a full understanding of the words spoken even if the viewer is bilingual. The layers evoke tension even as spoken words appear to almost match up—visually and verbally—but never precisely do. Much like *VERB/O* previously did, *Better View in a galaxy on* reiterates the impossibility of a perfect translation. Furthermore, it highlights the disparity caused by communication whose loss of fidelity in the medium affects how meaning is received.



Figure 9: By Author, stills from *Better view in a Galaxy on*, 2015

CONCLUSION

In the piece *accommodated*, an overhead projector with loose plastic letters sitting on the glass surface, I illustrate my perception to my own artistic process: it adjusts, it adapts. It is always shifting. The variety of processes within my artworks converges with my personal experiences as an immigrant: they are consistent in their ever-changing nature.



Figure 10: By Author, *accommodated*, projector, projection, and plastic letters, 2016

Throughout my time in the MFA program, I have harnessed artistic uncertainty that mirrors that of my personal life. To determine how and where communication fails, I began dissecting my own process of art-making. As my mediums and processes have shifted, my ability to employ the nuances of language has increased. Through experimentation with different media and an analytical approach to my new processes, I have learned to embrace impermanence.

**APPENDIX:
KAY ROSEN PERMISSION LETTER**

Permission to use images for thesis

Reina Castel... Hello Kay, Thank you for allowing me to use your images on my thesis paper. Have a ... 11:36 AM

Kay Rosen [kayrosen@earthlink.net]



Thursday, March 31, 2016 3:38 PM

Dear Reina,

You have my permission to use the images. Thank you for inquiring. We are about to substitute a new image for The Ed Paintings, so you may want to check back soon (hopefully this week) on the site for the update. It will look basically the same, but it's a better quality photo.

Good luck on your thesis paper!
Kay

Reina Castellanos



Actions

To: info@kayrosen.com

Sent Items

Thursday, March 31, 2016 1:03 PM

- Retention Policy: UCF Delete from Archive After 7 Years (7 Years) Expires: 3/30/2023

Hello Ms. Rosen,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Reina Castellanos and I am currently a Master in Fine Arts candidate at the University of Central Florida. I wanted to ask permission to reference two of your works in my thesis paper. The image links are below.

http://www.kayrosen.com/art/18-9_10.jpg

http://www.kayrosen.com/art/13_ed-paintings.jpg

If there are any questions or doubts, please let me know and I would be glad to answer them.

Thank you very much for your time,

Reina Castellanos

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