

Curatorial Essay by Bopha Chhay

They Lift the Sky^{III} brings together the work of Andrew Hoon Yong Lee, Miko Revereza, and Reyhan Yazdani, who engage distinct methods of writing and publishing to explore and negotiate the material limits of language and translation. This exhibition is part of Libby Leshgold Gallery's Summer School for Artists' Publishing, an annual program that considers an expanded approach to artists' publishing practices. Likewise, through installation, workshops, screenings and discussion, this exhibition offers alternative forms to reimagine and think through different modes of artists' writing and publishing.

They Lift the Sky specifically considers the process of translation between texts—language, material, and media. The show is informed by the artists' personal and ongoing negotiations between borders, migration, diasporic histories, and how these aspects of experience shape their work. As a curator, I was interested in the way research and writing processes can form the structural foundations of artworks, and how these processes might not necessarily be visible in the artworks' public presentations. I've been referring to these processes as 'adjacent writing' practices—writing that takes the form of liner notes, playlists, compiled footnotes, marginalia brought to the fore, or desktop folders of uncontextualized images, amongst other research materials. What does it mean to make these processes visible, to reveal ideas and writing in process, and the possibility of re-writing and re-framing contingent on the immediacy the works reception?

Within Yazdani's work, that which remains untranslatable is central to her material explorations. The glazed ceramics, whilst recognizable as characters from the Farsi or Arabic writing system, effectively remain illegible in *Untitled: Voiceless Words* (2024). Rendered without the specificity of easily legible marks, the visual resemblance of language is evident but without phonetic correspondence. Removing the ability to read, to sound out, or to utter creates a kind of silencing around *Untitled: Voiceless Words*, mimicking the function of language without fulfilling our desire for legibility. The apparent incompleteness of inscriptions, the distance or proximity between them, suggest an unruliness, permitting a level of freedom from the usual functional expectations of language in aid of meaning.

Researching Iranian cultural objects via the online collections of major museums has led Yazdani to inquire into the way these works are translated and interpreted, and what it means to encounter these works at a material remove. Such encounters are framed by access points structured around the logic of the museum, concerning cultural objects acquired and classified according to Eurocentric (read: imperialist) policies (theft, insensitive cultural practices.)

Produced on a recent trip to visit family in Iran, *She Who Observes* (2024) (نظاره گر) becomes a record of time spent at Yazdani's family home. In proximity to the family library, the garden, birdsong, cutouts from books, soil from the garden, thread and plant fibre have found their way into this body of work. Amidst the discrete inclusion of various materials, the handmade paper, dried under the sun, foregrounds a more sensorial reading experience. Having set itself loose from the bounded format of a book, *She Who Observes* (نظاره گر) takes the form of an expanded publication. Composed of a series of handmade pieces of paper, loosely stacked on top of one another, the work refuses clear linearity: image, text, paper are subject to a logic that defies a singular narrative.

Central to this body of work was the Farsi translation of the title *Iranian Textiles* (2010) by Jennifer Mary Wearden and Patricia L. Baker, that details Iranian textiles and rugs held within the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK. The encounter begins with the book having been

translated to Farsi from English, of works that were acquired, classified and held within the collection of the V&A. These objects are also made available to view on the museum's website, via photographic documentation. Yazdani mentioned that the distances framing such encounters were 'geographic, spatial, generational, resembling that of the diaspora.' In questioning points of cultural access, geopolitical relationships begin to emerge through a sketch that traces the history of an object and how it was acquired into a collection far from its cultural origin of production. Yazdani raises questions of authorship: who is permitted to be an authoritative voice of certain histories, and how are stories or histories shaped beyond their initial context of production?

Yazdani's process of soaking the paper from various texts^[2] obscures any of the original content. Glimpses of characters reveal themselves, but they are imperceptible, their context having been entirely subsumed within the mulch. The reconstituted paper is given over to a wholly new context. Framed by a painted wall treatment of fugitive commas, and fragments of text in Farsi, are a combination of segments from *Iranian Textiles*, and Yazdani's personal journals, an interweaving of where cultural traditions and collective practice meets the personal.

There's a particular note I keep returning to that reads 'DO NOT WRITE ABOUT THE EVENT/ WRITE ABOUT THE HOLES WHICH YOU CANNOT REMEMBER'.

The photocopy of a page from a notebook provides a glimpse into the working process of Miko Revereza. Revereza's installation *Notes on Nowhere Near* offers a diagrammatic sketch of his film *Nowhere Near* (2023). There's the suggestion of how adopting a somewhat oblique viewpoint, from a distance, can provide portals to other stories. In our desire for a more nuanced comprehension of a narrative we're required to read more discerningly, to seek the gaps and spaces between memories, official histories and stories.^[3]

While *Nowhere Near* traces Revereza's seemingly final departure from the United States due to the multiple challenges faced from his undocumented experience, the film is also a stark reminder of the US preoccupation with enforcing and policing its national borders. Through Revereza's personal relationship to place, via the United States, the Philippines, and Mexico, what begins to emerge is the long-standing history of US imperialism within the Pacific, and how this shapes personal relationships to family, community and the subsequent ways that one then defines home and belonging.

Within Revereza's installation *Notes on Nowhere Near* (2024), the viewer's gaze is not permitted to land anywhere for too long. At 16 x 9 ft the scale of the diagram is all encompassing. Non-sequential arrows direct and create intersecting connections between key structural themes, sounds, personal reflections and experiences, and historical narratives to offer anchor points in which to image the film. Your eyes will lead you on a different flow each time, revealing a new story or perspective with each glance. For instance, one pathway leads you from 'fictional citizen' → 'financial linguistic spiritual debts' → 'bolero' → 'rooftop atmos' → 'D.R.E.A.M. Act' → 'distant wind chimes' → 'the war and the pacific'.

The animation component of *Notes on Nowhere Near* offers a further distancing, another level of estrangement that resembles an airport x-ray machine. Rendered via SketchUp, the structural and clinical appearance and simplicity of lines offers a schematic of the editing sequence – where a 'dissolve', or 'cut' occurs – interspersed with Revereza's personal reflections. The intersecting and entangled elements of the schematic diagrams are underpinned by Revereza's proposition of 'The mangrove as conceptual framework'. The environment of the mangrove provides a very specific ecology in which to consider stories and histories in flux, under constant negotiation, contingent upon

external and internal factors. This forms the crux of the work. One iteration of the diagram included the reflection *“Roots without soil that exist off-land where seawater meets river ... the closest homeland is the mud if passing sediments, and out of the mud grows thick indecipherable flows... like an editing bin full of tangled 16mm filmstrips...timelines overlapping in a backward, twisted, vent, a folded heap of directionalities...”*

Andrew Yong Hoon Lee’s work creates its own energy field. There’s a charge to the work that is difficult to pinpoint. Drawing a direct line from the 26 ft ceiling, two pairs of cables (with a charge of 120 volts) suspend two axe heads above a stone tiled platform. Whilst there’s a material levity to the work, the cables together with the platform chart out a horizontal x-axis and vertical y-axis that creates an elemental tension between the two planes. Demarcating two distinct points in the space between the ceiling and the floor, there’s a charge (argon) that runs through the floating axe heads where the handle would usually appear. Slightly off centre, recessed into the tiled platform, sit two spring reverb. Their functionality suggests an element of sound, although the low frequency remains indecipherable to the human ear. There’s a duality or a binary that is alluded to within the work. The pair of axe heads, the pair of cables it is suspended by, and the pair of recessed spring reverbs.

Often the title of the work offers a framing as to how to read a work. Lee offers distinct terms of engagement for the work. However, it is the pursuit for further information that creates the possibility for another reading of the work. To obtain more information about the work, the viewer is required to engage with the gallery monitor working in the gallery; RE: ‘[Title available upon request. Please see gallery attendant for more information].’ Through this interaction, the viewer is introduced to an audio track, to be listened to on headphones. The audio composition provides a reframing of the work, as do the images on the lock screen.

In our discussion of processes of translation between language and materials, Lee recalled the parable of the floating axe head. Believing the origin of this parable to be of Korean origin, Lee was surprised to find that the story was in fact well known across many texts, notably the Bible and Aesop’s fables. Within the installation, Lee’s work traces the contours of the parable as the viewer is required to reorient more towards a sensory experience of the work. In consideration of the way a story is retold, relayed, and shared, Lee’s foregrounding of a more sensorial experience of the work attempts to locate the work of translation as more embodied, an engagement where meaning becomes co-produced. Pointing to the way stories and histories are carried individually and collectively, Lee’s audio track offers a different temporal register that highlights spaces of disjuncture where elements may remain untranslatable between culture and material. The porosity alluded to within Lee’s composition places emphasis on the contingent aspects of a story’s reception – the specificity of place, the continuities, and the distinctive differences between versions dictated by one’s subjectivity.

Lee, Revereza, and Yazdani’s works reflect that it is not possible to land on meaning without acknowledging how narratives have been collectively carried, shared, or inherited. A singular mode of authorship here appears elusive, only existing across a plurality of contextual and embodied transformations.

[1] ‘They Lift the Sky’ is a line borrowed from Etel Adnan’s book *Shifting the Silence* (2020). This line rang as a refrain long after I had finished the book. Who was ‘They’? The movement between personal and wider societal experiences of grief, climate crisis, and perpetual war invited multiple interpretations of this third-person pronoun. As her mediations

refused to centre the individual, subjectivities multiplied as the 'I' became subsumed within negotiations beyond human, non-human, and wider cosmic systems.

[2] *How to Overcome Grief?*, *On top of each mountain, I saw God* (which was a storybook for kids), and *Histories of Religions* by a famous Iranian thinker Ali Shariati, amongst others.

[3] The adjacent plinth case offers a glimpse into Revereza's notebooks. Photocopies of personal documents, passport pages, pages from notebooks, fortune cookie slips. Sat atop the plinth a series of photobooks taking the form of an analog printed animation.