

Artist talk with Gabrielle Paré : “Choosing My Words”, at RAM Galleri, 2022.

Jeanne: For those who don't know you, can you talk to us a little bit more about yourself, where you're from, who you are? It's a tough question I know!

Gabrielle: Sure. It's also kind of connected to the exhibition, this act of choosing your words. Now I'm choosing the words that I want you to build your understanding of me from. And then you'll also decide your relationship to me based on those words. I feel like it's a very perilous thing to do, but I'll try.

I was born in Amiskwacîwâskahikan. That's the Cree name for the place I grew up calling the city of Edmonton, in Canada. Today there is a practice of acknowledging the names of places in Canada, from before the arrival of settlers. I emphasize this now, both as a way of practicing that acknowledgement when I say where I'm from, but also as something relevant to the subject of this show, which is about the consequences of a choice of words. I'm a visual artist, and I came to Norway to continue down that path with an MFA at Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo.

Jeanne: Can you tell how you got interested in arts and how you got this will of creating?

Gabrielle: I guess I've always been interested in communication, and I've always been interested in ideas. I thought about becoming a journalist at some point, but I've always loved material culture too: books, printing, drawing – material forms of communication. The trajectory of becoming an artist felt less predictable, less clear, and at some point, I think was more interested in what that adventure might hold.

Jeanne: Can you tell us a bit about this exhibition “Choosing My Words”? You started to talk a bit about the title, did it come right away? Was it an obvious title to give to this exhibition?

Gabrielle: It wasn't. I mean, I love text and I love words, but I think the act of naming anything is kind of scary. You're setting the audience down an irreversible trajectory with those words. Naming something creates the frame for meaning. And that's exactly what I'm exploring in this exhibition. Intervening in different systems of language.

In the example of bureaucratic language: what happens when you start to fill out your forms at NAV? Defining yourself as this or that limits what you can do, what you have access to. The CAN on my passport, the zero in my personal number, these say something about what I have access to in the public sphere. And also, what I don't have access to.

I've been working with documents and the authority of the printed word on paper. We rely on our birth certificates, our passports. These are our tokens to play in society. But it's just ink on a piece of paper. They're so fragile and yet they have so much power over us.

What's interesting about language is that it's always under development. There's always a movement to challenge the borders of things. I'm exploring a lot with the word *mestiza*. A mestiza has a mix of White (historically Spanish) and native Filipino descent. The Philippines was colonized by Spain for a period of 300 years. In that time, this mixed ethnic group emerged. A woman is referred to as *mestiza*, or *mestizo* if you're a man. This language is gendered, but a third word has emerged, *mestizx*, which is a way to address a group without resorting to gender-normative language. In any case, these words are my inheritance because of my mixed heritage as half Filipino, half Canadian. My grandfather called me “mestiza.”

Jeanne: I see, it makes me think about your wall-based work with “mestiza” written on it. Could you talk to us a bit more about this work? It almost looks like a code. What does it say?



LANGUAGE PROBLEMS:

I: The illusion of shared understanding (after M. A.)

II: Bad signs (the need for a Third Space)

III: speaking from the heart with someone else's tongue

site-specific wall drawing, graphite and mdf

2022

Gabrielle: Maybe I'll start with the title of this work, *LANGUAGE PROBLEMS*. I decided to treat this wall drawing as kind of three-part diagram trying to work out the challenges of language as I see it. The first diagram is called *The illusion of shared understanding*. The second diagram is called *Bad signs (the need for a Third Space)*. And the third diagram is called *Speaking from the heart with someone else's tongue*.

Integrated into each one of these diagrams is a specific shape, which I call "third space" shapes. They are the in-between space of two opposite facing brackets. Brackets are containers for ideas in text. I'm interested in what's in the space in between. And for me, it's a personal symbol because of my own kind of blended identity, of being between two worlds, two cultures, multiple languages and sort of not feeling quite at home in either one of them, but sort of existing in this in between space.

The illusion of shared understanding is inspired by Margaret Atwood, and her description of the act of writing which is: as a writer, you are communicating to a page. There's this illusion that we have sometimes as artists or writers that we are communicating directly to an audience. But we're not. We're communicating to a page through text. And the reader is consuming that page or consuming that text. It is not a direct line. And there's no guarantee that meaning is transmitted and interpreted the exact same way. *Bad signs (the need for a Third Space)* is about creating a whole other context, an "in-between" context for what slips between containers of meaning. And *Speaking from the heart with someone else's tongue* is just me trying to sort of open up the text of the word *mestiza*.

Jeanne: That's very interesting! And you pointed out the fact that the understanding between individuals is not that obvious since somehow we all belong to different cultures due to our own prism, our own story, where we're from, who we meet in life. Would you say that it's still possible to get a complete understanding between each other or not?

Gabrielle: This is my personal belief, but I think not. I think that's a big relief to know that there are some parts of you that will always be opaque even to the one who you're most intimate with. It would be arrogant to think that you could know everything about another person, let alone a whole other culture. There is this writer, Edouard Glissant, and he writes about this concept of opacity, that it's actually really important to sort of allow our subjectivities or allow our individual experiences to be our own. Not everything needs to be made accessible to another. There's something that the identity can kind of hook onto in these opaque spaces.

Jeanne: This is questioning the entire sociology field that tries to understand every group, comparing and trying to explain every relationship. Indeed it seems completely impossible. But then, let's talk about other works of yours. The artwork *The White Question* contains a question that we can see through according to the light and when we get closer. Can you tell us about it?



The White Question

Engraving on acrylic

39 x 27 cm

2022

Gabrielle: *The White Question* is an engraving on white acrylic. This work is part of a series of paper documents and pages that I interpreted as sculptures. The engraving on the surface of the acrylic is invisible initially. It's not until the viewer gets up close and the glare of the light catches on the lines that the work is revealed. This "page" is engraved with a kind of inverted question: "Who would ever think you're not white?" I think people have met this work in extremely different ways. I have my own personal relationship with that question. But I also got the comment, "an institution needs to acquire this." Which I understood as a way to criticize the whiteness of Western institutions and the sometimes tokenized and superficial attempts at trying to bring better diversity into a board or be more inclusive in hiring. For myself it's the question of the word "white" and not knowing how to relate to it and sort of waiting for other people to tell me if I'm white or not.

Jeanne: Did you hear this question from someone?

Gabrielle: Yes. It was a question that I got while I was trying to understand my own whiteness and my position in relation to Filipino culture, my mother's culture. It was a time when I was trying to understand where the line is drawn between participation in a culture, and cultural appropriation. I felt that this question was put to me with surprise and impatience, "Who would ever think you're not white?"

Joakim: That is a very strong work. For some people, probably more than for others, and I think I can relate a lot to your experience also being this descent myself, although from another former Spanish colony. It is a question, or a statement rather, that is thrown in your face in a way, and often as a compliment, which is even more absurd somehow – that you're supposed to feel flattered. Because it is often said to you in countries like the Philippines, where you have roots, or in South America, where I come from, as a form of praise.. But also here in Europe it can be put to you by someone of the majority culture as a way of saying, "well, you're not so strange after all", as a way of saying: "you fit in here, you're more integrated, you're not so bad, you could almost be one of us. A South European or something like that." It is a form of evaluation. But I don't know if anyone ever take it as a compliment truly because it is always said to someone that is an outsider. You know, when you are sort of in between cultures, as mestizo or mixed race, you're not quite one thing and not quite the other. You are in this sort of limbo.

And a statement like that becomes like saying "You're almost there, but not quite." You are sort of passing as white. And that is also, I think, a term that many people use sometimes almost cynically, because it is as suggesting that ethnicity is a choice that can be enacted somehow.

Gabrielle: Right. It's another kind of privilege to be "white passing."

Jeanne: Would you say that performance is also part of your work?

Gabrielle: Yes, it has been. I think that I struggle a bit in using myself in my work. I mean, we spent some time talking about my biography. I feel like I haven't done performance in quite a while because I've been trying to figure out what's the right amount of distance I should keep between my lived experiences and what it is I want to say. In a lot of ways, the Me is irrelevant. What I am questioning is not unique to me. But that said, I'm in the work. It's my hand, it's my face, and everything is still done in relation to my body.

Jeanne: Maybe there is this ability of like dispossessing oneself in order to serve the purpose you want to show, the idea you want to share. I don't know if that's possible, it may be idealistic. And what about the hand you were mentioning?



Wait

Archival pigment print

25.5 x 36 cm

2022

Gabrielle: You see my hand in a photograph titled *Wait*. I had the idea of making a weaving around my fingers to draw a kind of borderline. What part of you suffers to fit inside a container? Maybe you have to cut something away in order to fit.

Jeanne: More generally, I felt like the notion of interculturality was important in this exhibition. You're talking about cultural inheritance, about language and how it is a way to identify oneself personally, and also from the others... What does it mean for you, interculturality?

Gabrielle: I guess there's institutional definitions for this word as well, but I like looking at things linguistically first. *Inter-* being a prefix for the relationship between discrete entities, so in this case, the relation between cultures. I think what I like so much is this image of an in-between space where relation happens. How do you give shape to what's in between?

And I think for me it takes me to this concept of third culture. I'm an example of a third culture kid, and there's many people living in Norway who are third culture kids. It describes you who is living in an environment which has its own culture, but maybe your parents also have their own culture because they come from someplace else. So you have two forces, two contexts which shape you, but you're not quite at home in either of them. So this asks for a third space, which is your context as a hybrid person.

Jeanne: And how would you say it's influenced you as an artist this Third Space?

Gabrielle: I think that something that third culture kids have in their pocket is the ability to code switch, or the ability to sort of shift between different spaces. You have the ability to look at something from multiple worldviews and describe things in different words.

Audience: I'm interested in this piece, you talked about like Third Space but to me it isn't a space because you made it solid and given it materiality where it is. So it's like the space is actually within the container. I just wonder if you could talk about that.

Gabrielle: My attempt was to make an extension of the surface of the wall, as though the wall is projecting this shape. I was thinking about the wall as though it was a page. I think in a page of text there's tons of architecture. You have margins, you have line spacing. There's an invisible system in place.

Joakim: I just wanted to ask since we talk about that work and I mean a sort of vital element are these brackets. Would you like to say something more about them as a visual marker or symbol?

Gabrielle: The use of the bracket came up at a time when I was trying to get away from talking about my own identity. After making previous works that were more self-referential, I realized what I was really interested in is how identity is dependent on language. That language is a construct that we use to achieve meaning or to share meaning. And the bracket is a visual element that is made for containing meaning. I think the idea of being contained and trying to sort of subvert the edges of a container has always been interesting for me.

Joakim: It's a form of separation somehow, when you put something in a bracket you isolate it, but you also sort of move it outside of the sentence or the chain of thoughts. It's like something that is separated from the rest.

Gabrielle: Yes. It becomes something which is discrete... Its own entity next to another entity.

Audience: I just want to share a thought. Thanks a lot for sharing with us... And it's true that I have never received your work as something as a movement pieces in the sense that they're not actual kinetic performances. But it's kind of like depict movement in a very quiet way, because now I can see it sort of everywhere, and even like the way that the brackets or the graphics in these diagrams are also presented in sort of the skewed... from the skewed perspective. So that implies a sort of movement, a sort of shifting of identities and meanings in it and now it's sort of like it's starting to pop up everywhere. That's a beautiful thread, all the work presented here.

Joakim: I agree that there is something very performative in all your work somehow. They seem to register a movement, a body, some sort of imprint. We don't see the action happening, but it is. I mean for the audience I can say that Gabrielle was working meticulously for a week with this wall work, and not because she's slow or lazy, but I think there was a particular precision and a concentration behind it. Maybe you could have done it in a day if you wanted to but you wanted to put something more in there than just the little lines. And I think that was very unusual from my perspective as a gallery director, the whole sort of care in the installation process, I would say it was a precision and perfection that I felt was very admirable and shows your dedication. Because it reflects also on the importance of the work, that you want to give it importance. It is not loud work, it is not work that is screaming. You talked about the work in biographical terms, but unlike a lot of biographical art works that sometimes can be shocking or it look for a lot of effects that are crossing the border of intimacy or somehow trying to reach your attention. This is biographical work that is not loud at all, you have to be in the exhibition to perceive it, it takes some time and it's not easily consumed. And this is something that I felt was very stimulating, as someone that has to be in the exhibition for a long time. Somehow it gives and continues to give along the way. So yes, congratulations on that, I think it was very successful exhibition.

Gabrielle: I appreciate it.

Jeanne: Thank you for this nice talk.