I WANT TO TELL YOU

by

KATHERINE MILLER
B.F.A, Southeast Missouri State University, 2014

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Approved:

______________________________
Jon Swindler, Major Professor

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Date
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Dearest,

Even after writing 7 days in a row, I still don’t know what a love letter is, what definition I choose. Is a letter written from love a love letter, even if it isn’t about love or its adjacent parts? I’m not sure. Letters written from love and about love definitely meet the criteria though. And every time I sit down to write to you, that’s all I ever want to write about. About you, about loving you, about this thing happening between me and you...
My current creative practice describes experiences of intimacy and longing in communication through the lens of letter writing. Letters, particularly love letters, have played a significant role in my own personal experiences with intimacy and longing outside of the studio (fig 1.1). In love letters I encounter the impossible and miraculous challenge of intimate communication, reaching out towards another person across a void. Within my studio practice I make book-based objects that hint at the inherent tensions in communications of love. Rather than replicating the stamped papers that are my own heart’s couriers, I make pieces that seek to capture the nuance of longing and transmit that experience to the viewer.

In this essay, I will trace the growth of my work over my time as an MFA candidate at the University of Georgia. Working in a circle, I will begin with my current work and examine its conceptual underpinnings. After this, I will loop back to the beginning and discuss influences from my first two years in graduate school until I once again reach the present, concluding with an explanation of my body of thesis work, *I want to tell you.*
Several interests and ideas drive my current studio practice. The first is an interest in written correspondence, especially love letters, as an exemplifier of the complexities of human communication. The delays, gaps, hopes, and longings that compose all interpersonal communication (speaking, phone conversations, text messages, email, etc.) are exaggerated in letters because of their analog nature and material dissimilarity from other media. Though they are certainly familiar, handwritten letters are removed enough from the habits and technology of most contemporary relationships that they can be seen with fresh eyes. For this reason, I look to love letters to mediate a conversation about the same human desires that also emerge in other means of communication.

In his book *To The Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing*, Simon Garfield points out that “what correspondence has so alluringly, convincingly and reliably done for more than 2,000 years [is embrace] the reader with a disarming blend of confession and emotion, and... integrity.” Garfield hits on what makes letters so striking: their sincere and heartfelt vulnerability. Love letters exhibit this quality particularly well, and for this reason my work depends heavily on the tone of love letters to investigate broader human intimacy and communication. The assumed goal of the love letters which impact us is to transmit the inner heart of one lover to another with as much accuracy and as little loss as possible. We desperately hope, even assume, that the words we send will mean what we intend them to mean; and we hope and assume that the words we read were intended to mean what we perceive them to say. We want this transference to follow a straight and clear path. Yet in reality the mechanics of

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epistolary communication are full of nuance and tension that reveal a much more winding course between sender and receiver.

The primary tension of love letters that reveals the complicated nature of human communication centers around absence and distance. Love letters emerge from a heightened sense of absence/distance. The basic impetus of any letter, particularly a love letter, is that the receiver (the beloved) is not near to the sender (the lover). If the beloved and the lover were in perfect togetherness, there would be no need to write. It is the absence of the beloved that prompts the lover to communicate. Of course, this is true in all forms of communication: we call someone because they are not with us; we email them because information is needed at a distance, however small; we even have in-person conversations because their is a gap between our understanding or experience and theirs which we are seeking to close. But letters highlight a greater distance between correspondents than is often present within other communications of love. We text to ask when someone will be home for dinner. At times we may even text a lengthy paragraph summarizing our feelings on 3 inches of narrow screen. We only write a love letter when the distance between lovers (and the message being communicated) is worth the cost of a First Class stamp and 3-5 days in the mail. Letters thus call as much attention to the space between lovers as they seek to narrow the gap and bring the beloved nearer.\(^2\) As William Decker puts it in his book *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (cited in Milne 2010), “the central paradox of epistolary discourse [is that] the exchange of personally inscribed texts confirms even as it would mitigate separation.”\(^3\)

This confirmed and mitigated separation between lovers, whether purely geographical or also relational, is most perfectly realized in the delay between sending and receiving a letter. The inherent lag in letter writing is easily apparent because of its extremity. As mentioned, there is


\(^3\) Ibid., 52.
usually a space of several days between raising the red flag on a mailbox and the delivery of a letter at the receiver’s home. This far exceeds the delay in most other media of communication—text messages, email, phone conversations—which deliver an outgoing message almost instantly. In these other forms of communication, any noticeable delay is between receiving and replying, due to human or circumstantial obstacles rather than an inherent limitation of the medium. Letter writing and its delivery system have a built-in delay. With normal postage rates, there are several unavoidable days for longing, desire and impatience to grow. These feelings add to the context in which the love letter acts, enriching and highlighting the emotional and physical distance between lovers.

In addition to the limbo of postal delay, letters as physical objects also bear another quality that confirms/mitigates distance: they attempt to embody the sender to the receiver. Letters are given to the beloved as a stand-in for the lover. Esther Milne notes that this metonymic function is possible because of a letter’s physical proximity to and contact with its author.\textsuperscript{4} Because love letters exist as objects in space not abstract bytes of digital information, there are telltale marks of the sender in handwritten correspondence—namely the lover’s handwriting, but also occasionally other evidence of contact like smudges and scents. The distant beloved can imagine the lover scribing their crooked handwriting, touching the very paper the beloved now possesses, kissing the sealed envelope before entrusting it to the post office. These imaginings are communicated in material form and serve to embody the sender across literal distance. Imagined embodiment creates a sense of immediacy in epistolary correspondence that seems to mark a narrowing gap between sender and receiver.\textsuperscript{5} In reality, the geographic distance is as great as ever, but the materiality of a love letter promises nearness.

\textsuperscript{4} Milne, 53.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 60-61.
Here again we see the complex position of love letters: mitigating and confirming separation simultaneously, this time through material embodiment.

Again, the tensions that love letters exemplify are present in other contemporary communications of love. I choose to examine love letters because their format, though familiar, is unique enough for contemporary viewers to make observations that may otherwise be hidden by ubiquity. The inherent tensions within communications of love are most revealed when removed from their normal (now mostly digital) contexts. We are jarred awake by an unexpected sight.
At their most basic, communications of love are the transference of ideas and feelings from lover to beloved. I have already explained how epistolary correspondence highlights some interesting tensions in an amplified way. These tensions deal with the conditions of the medium. I am also interested in the message that the medium communicates. What is actually being transferred from lover to beloved?

A key concept within my understanding of communicating information is the idea of exformation. Coined by Danish science writer Tor Nørretranders in his 1991 book The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size, the term exformation refers to “explicitly discarded information.” Exformation is the knowledge, feelings, anecdotes, and context that we draw on when communicating but do not explicitly include in the information of a message. It is the text not included in an infographic, the details there aren’t time for in a narrative, and the emotions that drive our actions. It is everything we do not say but that is a crucial ingredient in our communications of love. Nørretranders explains that the content of a correspondence (information) is meaningful precisely because it refers to other information which is not literally present (exformation). If the words of our communication did not refer to and draw on other information, a history of relationship, or a depth of feeling, they would not be so full of meaning.

The challenge of communication is transferring exformation via information. Nørretranders is quick to ponder the difficulty of this conundrum. “How can we refer, in some information that we pass on, to a quantity of information that we discard?... [This] is made no less remarkable by the fact that others have to be able to use this chart in order to picture the

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7 Ibid., 92.
terrain for themselves.” Put another way, the words we say are meant to provide everything needed for the recipient to accurately unpack our desires, hopes, frustrations and fears. We discard information, yet hope that that discarded information will be brought to mind by what we choose to express. Communicating exformation seems like either an impossibility or a miracle.

In Nørretrander’s theory, chances of successful transference increase the more the sender and receiver share context. When people engaged in communication share experiences and backgrounds, information is more likely to jog the same memories, thoughts and feelings. Conversely, limited shared experience makes it difficult to conjure the same exformation with a given set of information. It is therefore context which tells us how much exformation a message implies; we cannot discern that based on information alone. The shared context of people who know each other intimately facilitates a more accurate transference of exformation. We can more easily sense that our words will arouse the same associations in the mind of our recipient.

The process is never foolproof though. As any pair of lovers will attest, communication is rife with miscommunication, even with the most shared of contexts. We misunderstand and misinterpret. We don’t know what to say, let alone how to say it. We feel the distance between us and have trouble completely closing the gap. The Venn diagram of two humans’ inner selves can never be a single circle. Yet we try nonetheless to increase the overlapping area between two hearts or minds, and as we reach out in communications of love, our efforts admit deep feelings of longing.

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8 Nørretranders, 93.
9 Ibid., 93-94.
10 Ibid., 92
11 Ibid., 94.
Longing serves as the primary emotive content of my work. The challenge of transferring exformation, especially over distance, with delay, in the absence of the fully embodied person, sets the stage perfectly for longing. In moments of longing, we feel “a strong desire especially for something unattainable.” In communications of love we feel a strong desire for intimacy yet realize, to varying degrees, that achieving nearness is often difficult or even impossible. To long is to notice the gap between where we are and where we wish to be, between what we have and what we want. The word “longing” has a heartfelt, perhaps even pained, connotation to it. Longing is more intense, spans more time, and is less easily satisfied than simply wanting. Longing heightens our awareness. It holds our attention in the space of lack. As Alain de Botton puts it in his book Essays In Love, longing turns us into “a relentless hunter for clues, a romantic paranoiac, reading meaning into everything” (emphasis his). In longing, every empty mailbox, every scratched out sentence, every intimate letter closing is filled with exformation just waiting to be unpacked and send us towards joy or, if we have a flair for the dramatic, despair.

My own experiences with heartfelt longing in intimate relationship have led to the work included in my thesis. My longing manifests most tangibly in the love letters I myself write. But these letters do not carry the same meaning outside the context of my personal relationship. Without shared context, the specifics of my longing are difficult to engage with. Rather, the intangible emotions associated with a more general longing have yielded non-autobiographical work within my studio that is tangible, visible and physical.

My work about intimacy and communications of love is built on the work I made during my first 2 years of graduate school. At that time I was also interested in intimacy. Yet instead of focusing on intimacy between two people, I made work that facilitated intimacy between the viewer and the work, or even between the viewer and themselves. A defining characteristic of intimacy is its private, personal nature. Intimate moments are shared with limited participants and touch an honest, vulnerable place in the hearts or minds of those involved. Such experiences often require time and space to facilitate them. In the face of the many distractions and obligations we encounter, intimacy demands an extended period of undivided attention. In early graduate school, my work required and encouraged extended undivided attention by presenting limited points of visual focus.

Early on I explored this idea in a series of books. My first piece from graduate school, *A Shifting*, is a 10" x 10" (closed) book of woodblock prints (fig. 2.1). The book pages are a series of full page woodgrain prints in a subtle grayscale gradient pulled from the same uncarved wood matrix. Slight variations between pages are a result of my own inconsistency as a printmaker, not any difference in the matrix itself.

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The only dramatic moment in the piece is a quick transition in the middle of the book from the grayscale gradient to a slightly cooler muted gradient, separated by a single spread of white paper. Even accounting for that transition, the work offers the viewer little change, but rather the opportunity to slow down and give their full attention to something still and quiet.

Subsequent pieces continued in this vein, but moved away from grayscale towards the chromatic. *Contained Therein* is a short and wide golden clamshell box filled with folded unbound pages dyed a rich blue (fig. 2.2). *Attached to What It Is* again features grain-heavy woodblock prints, this time printed in light blues with a vibrant yellow peeking through in the folds (fig. 2.3). Letterpress printing the woodblock in this piece allowed for even less variation between pages and a more steady sense of repetition and extended time.
Wake is the largest work in this series, 16” x 20” when open, and is made of blue tinted Tyvek bound between two clear acrylic covers (fig. 2.4 and 2.5). The fibrous nature of the Tyvek yields a different “image” on each page, but the same blue gradient is present throughout. The overall effect of the 40 pages in sequence is a continuous churning of water.

During this period, I was looking at a lot of images of blue mosaics in Islamic mosques. The expansiveness of these surfaces seemed like an ideal circumstance for demanding and allowing undivided attention. The vastness and repetition of these spaces captured my heart, though my early book work is quite different than the mosaics’ tessellating tiles. While Islamic mosaics are highly intricate, my books resemble endless open landscapes. The subtle gradients conjure the mood of foggy early mornings, pale skies and deep waters. In each piece, non-pictorial wells of color and tone present the viewer with an opportunity to spend time in a space that asks for their attention but very little activity.
Fig. 2.4, *Wake*, handbound book with tinted Tyvek, acrylic, thread, 16” x 20”, 2015. Images by the artist.
The book format also encouraged this kind of extended, focused experience. One-on-one interaction with the work is most natural and best because of the book structure and the typical way we view (read) books. Standing alone in front of the work, each viewer must perform the repeated action of turning the page again and again, setting their own pace. Each repeated act reveals a page spread very similar to the ones before and after it. Because of the kinetic and visual repetition, viewers have the time and space to intimately experience the work one-on-one without any demand for information retention. The intimate viewing experience may lead to contemplating the work itself, or to self-reflection as the viewer sees what is already in their consciousness mirrored back at them.

Fig. 2.5, Wake (detail shot), handbound book with tinted Tyvek, acrylic, thread, 16” x 20”, 2015. Image by the artist.
In all of the aforementioned art books, the colors blue and yellow became a prominent visual theme. The more I made, the more I found myself enamored with those two colors. Blue and yellow began to embody the still, quiet moments I was seeking in the books’ vague landscapes and meditative page-turning. The work that followed began to use blue and yellow specifically as points of focus. Colors became visual moments for the viewer to hone in on during a private, personal and intimate experience.

As I refined my ideas, blue and yellow became linked to certain moments in time and space. I considered the moments in my own life that feel the most honest, intimate, and calm. Early morning, when the cool pre-dawn sky changes to bright yellow day; and evening, when the vibrant golden hour shifts to the blue of night – both were times of suspended animation for me. Some excerpts from my artist statements at that time describe this relationship in the guise of poetry:

*Things I am thinking.*

1. About color and light (the immaterial)
2. That blue and yellow are bookends of the day
3. That blue and yellow fill the air but never stay
4. That color is an illusion, but one to be wholeheartedly bought
5. About the desire to have and to hold, the urge to keep a color always
6. That containment is a form of holding

...
I am holding on to things. I am keeping things I cannot let go of. I have a pile of paper blues and yellows that deserve to be put in little packets, safe.

I am giving myself to the blue and yellow.

I am trying to have the time, the space, the permission, the requirement to focus on only one thing at once.

those wind chimes in the yard on Dearing Street
my body in space
a scrap of watery blue

When I think of these things, I am daydreaming of slowing down. I daydream of breathing.

putting my phone on airplane mode
waking up in the early morning
imagining standing in a Robert Irwin piece
the outside

The blues give the time, the space, the permission, the opportunity to slowly focus on only one thing at once. They reward those who look.

Amidst the many distractions bombarding my daily experiences, blue and yellow (and their link to times of day) ushered me into private, personal moments. The initial pieces that ensued celebrated these colors in larger quantities through color fields or with indications of meditative repetition, similar to my previous book work (fig. 3.1 and 3.2).

Fig. 3.1, *Extraordinary Color Can Wake the Dead* (double-sided), letterpress print, digital print, 15” x 22”, 2016. Images by the artist.
Fig. 3.2, *The Real Color of the Universe*, digital prints, nails, 7.75” x 11.75”, 2016. Image by the artist.
Quickly though my love for blue and yellow began to shift (or perhaps complicate) in both its metaphoric significance and physical presence within my work. What had begun as a time-based, light-related chromatic representation of stillness became attached in ambiguous ways to human emotions like longing, loneliness and love. *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson was a critical source for me in this period. The book charts a brief and incomplete history of the color blue in philosophy, anthropology, literature, art and other subjects. More importantly, it also chronicles Nelson’s love for blue and the complicated feelings blue inspires (or is inspired by) within her. To Nelson, blue is not merely a symbol with specific culturally defined meanings, but also a hazy analog for emotion. As she says,

“When I talk about color and hope, or color and despair, I am not talking about the red of a stoplight, a periwinkle line on the white felt oval of a pregnancy test, or a black sail strung from a ship’s mast. I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning.”

For example, she talks about a “blue rush” that began when she met a lover (for which she no longer holds them responsible). Blue is something she cannot let go of that is intimately linked to intimacy itself.

Fueled by Nelson’s lyric essay, I compulsively sought to contain collected blues, mostly printed paper scraps from the previous book works, in the safehouses of envelopes and packages. In this work, handmade envelopes of transparent mylar or printed paper house individual blue scraps often with a yellow counterpoint (fig. 3.3 and 3.4). These I displayed with specimen-like cleanness. The envelopes are containers, protectors, and a means of collection. They reference the practice of keeping important things (a house key, money, family photos) in envelopes for safekeeping. The blues and occasional yellows inside were invaluable moments.

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16 Ibid., 31.
which gave me the time, space, permission, and requirement to focus on one thing at once, and thus deserve to be collected and protected.

Ultimately, this work was unsuccessful in its exhibited state. Its lack of a clear and relatable referent gave viewers no point of entry, since they did not share my private and personal relationship with the blue scraps I so lovingly protected. What did prove significant though was the implications of the envelope and my distinct preference for object over image. These themes carried over into my current thesis work which explores intimacy with more specificity and purpose.
Fig. 3.4, *Forgetting* (L) and *This Time* (R), digital print, linen thread, 3” x 5” each, 2016. Images by the artist.
During my year of blue, I was simultaneously developing a sensitivity to environment, space, and context as integral parts of the art viewing experience. This happened through a collaborative installation with UGA Jewelry + Metals graduate candidate Alexis Spina, and through a research trip to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas.

In late fall 2015, Alexis and I began a year and a half long project that included an off-campus installation and succeeding exhibition. The original 9,000 square foot installation highlighted 2,041 individual objects left behind after the closure of a 20th century textile mill in the Boulevard neighborhood of Athens, Georgia after nearly a century of operation. Over 5 months, Alexis and I collected discarded objects of industry, infrastructure, production, and human presence from the neglected buildings and property of the mill site. We brought the collected items into one of the mill’s empty warehouses and intuitively arranged the objects into grid on the floor, covering the entire area of the room (fig. 4.1).

As we surreptitiously worked in a privately-owned space, we were forced to trust that the site itself would facilitate the collecting and placing of objects. Responding to the space, we let the daylight, weather, and proprietors’ schedule determine our working hours. We let the warehouse’s measurements set the grid’s layout. Operating under unpredictable circumstances, the finished piece existed with unknown longevity and unmonitored visitors.

17 As of January 2017, the Southern Mill site will soon house a new beer production facility for Creature Comforts Brewing Company.
Fig. 4.1, 355 (original installation), found objects, 120’ x 75’ x 25’, 2015-2016. Images by Bradley Phillips.
In January 2017 Alexis and I had an exhibition of the project, titled 355 after the street address of the original location, at the Dodd Galleries at the Lamar Dodd School of Art (fig. 4.2 and 4.3). The exhibition contained around 500 selected objects from the original installation arranged in a grid that traversed the floor and back wall of the gallery. A 5 volume edition of handbound books with photographs of the original 2,041 objects and a sound piece of ambient field recordings from the mill were also included in the exhibition, both with contributions by Stephen Parks.

Fig. 4.2, 355 (exhibition), found objects, 35’ x 38’ x 15’, 2015-2016. Image by Mo Costello.

The issues and questions that 355 and the original installation touched on expanded during the course of the project. Initially begun as a way to discuss architectural and object value in the context of environmentally ethical reuse, the project also revealed connections to physical
labor, local history, legal vs. emotional ownership, and the human impulse to organize. Though the original installation has been dismantled by the new property owners, the experience was crucial in developing my sensitivity to physical space and environment when viewing art.

Fig. 4.3, 355 (detail shots), found objects, variable dimensions, 2015-2016. Images by Mo Costello.
Also during the year of blue, I was awarded a Graduate Research Award by the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts. This grant funded a trip to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. Founded in 1979 by American artist Donald Judd, Chinati exhibits a permanent collection of works by 13 artists, including Judd himself, Dan Flavin, and Robert Irwin, among others. In the exhibition of each work, there is an intense consideration of the relationship between the work and its surroundings. Each artist’s work is installed in its own building or outdoor space so that it may be considered without distraction from adjacent work. Throughout Chinati, art, architecture, and landscape are all intentional elements in the viewer’s experience (fig. 4.4).

Fig. 4.4, 100 untitled works in mill aluminum, mill aluminum, 41” x 51” x 72” each, 1982-1986. Image downloaded from https://chinati.org/collection/donaldjudd

19 Ibid., 12.
My quest in making the 2,742 mile round trip to and from Marfa was to examine how viewing the work in person would affect my understanding of it: how my body’s proximity to the work, how sound within the repurposed military architecture, how the vast Texas landscape with its flat yellow earth and blue domed sky would contribute to my knowledge and interpretation of the physical sculpture. My goal was to conduct this empirical research and incorporate my findings into my own artistic practice.

Viewing the work at Chinati in person was dramatically different from conducting photo-based research before my visit. In a way that was only compatible with a physical spatial encounter with the work, I experienced a strange double-mindedness at Chinati. When viewing, I was focused on the artwork in my field of vision and simultaneously felt a keen self-awareness. My body’s changing relationship to the work as I moved throughout the space, and the conditions of my own perception, were also objects of my attention. This simultaneous view of the work and view of viewing the work was an unexpected part of experiencing Chinati.

Upon returning to my studio in Athens, I did not begin making work that resembled the work at Chinati in concept or content. But I did have a more developed sensitivity to the relationship between the body and an artwork. In particular, the issue of scale became important in my practice. I began thinking more intently about the physical proportional relationships between viewer and artwork, artwork and environment, and viewer and environment. How does the scale of my work imply the viewer’s relationship to it? How does the space surrounding my work affect its effectiveness?
These various influences combine to comprise my current practice. My body of work examines intimacy, longing and communication through book-based works. These works reference written correspondence, specifically love letters, to call to mind tensions of presence/absence, distance/nearness, embodiment/disembodiment, and information/exformation.

I use several recurring motifs in this body of work to reference love letters in a direct way. The first is the envelope form. The envelope stuck around after my year of blue and now recalls the object we receive in our mailboxes. *Months* is a wall-bound sculpture of envelopes made from handmade abaca paper (fig. 5.1). The envelopes’ contents (or lack thereof) are not discernable, but the accumulated horizontal stack indicates repeated and consistent communication, either before or after sending. *Who’s Counting* also features a stack of envelopes, this time vertical and made of folded mylar (fig. 5.2). The transparent mylar reveals a small handwritten fragment at the base of the stack, but the layers of material make visibility difficult at most angles. The viewer must quietly lean down to see what is kept inside. Here also, the amassment of envelopes suggests intimate communication over time.
Fig. 5.1, *Months*, handmade paper, 6” x 4” x 6”, 2017. Image by the artist.
Fig. 5.2, Who’s Counting, mylar, letterpress print, ink, thread, 6” x 4” x 4”, 2017. Image by the artist.
Handwritten text is the second major way I explicitly reference written love letters. Handwriting is evidence of a unique human presence, a means of imagined embodiment. Especially when it has a cursive or script quality, rather than print, handwriting indicates that the intended reader is intimately familiar with the sender’s hand and thus able to read it. Most of the works in *I want to tell you* feature my own handwriting, which conjures feelings of intimacy even if the viewer is not familiar with my specific script.

The language I use in my work’s handwritten text also contributes to the intimate, poignant tone. Certain words reference time and delay (“it’s been ages”); distance (“even when you are far from me”); personal relationship (“I” and “you” pronouns); and statements of desire (“I want to tell you”). These words suggest a keen longing, painfully noticing the gap between where we are and where we wish to be.

The text indicates something deeply personal. Indeed, all the language I use is sourced from my own private practice of writing love letters, pulled from real letters I have sent from lover to beloved. Yet in *I want to tell you*, the text is always partially obscured. Sentences are broken into

Fig. 5.3, *That “How the hell do I fold this thing up again?” Feeling* (detail), handmade paper, trace monotype, 16” x 28” x 5”, 2017. Images by the artist.
fragments, slowly hidden behind layers of material, folded and crumpled, or displayed in reverse. Choices like these allow me to communicate an intimate tone without making the work too auto-biographical or rooted in the text’s informational content. Rather, the indication of what is unsaid or unviewable, the exformation, imbues the text with meaning. Perhaps more than any other recurring element, the text in my pieces clues the viewer into the tenderness, privacy, longing, and intimacy that drives my work (figs 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5).
Fig. 5.5, *Thought So Much* (detail), paper, letterpress prints, ink, mylar, grommets, l-hooks, 14" x 14", 2017. Image by the artist.
Structurally, this emotive content is contained within pieces I think of as books. Though I now rarely make books in the traditional sense – a series of pages bound between two covers – my work adheres to a looser definition of a book. I think of a book as a series of highly similar units comprising a single entity, one in which all units are not viewable at the same time. A traditional book fits under this umbrella: the two pages being viewed prohibit the reader from seeing the other pages, though the reader understands that the sum of all the pages makes up the book.

My pieces also meet this definition, though they do not look like traditional books. Counting the Days is a spiral-bound wall piece recalling calendars, waiting, and the passage of time marked by the turn of a page (fig. 5.6). Jacob’s Ladders is 2 pieces made of 6 square units each that are only able to be viewed from one side at a time (fig. 5.7). To view the other side, you must flip the top tile. Even That “How the hell do I fold this thing up again?” Feeling, seemingly a single piece of paper, references a folded road map which, once unfurled, extends past the boundaries of your field of vision if you’re using it properly (fig. 5.3). These and other pieces all rely on accumulated units to make up the whole book work. Because of this, their making often includes repeated systems of printing, cutting, writing, folding, gluing, etc.
Fig. 5.6, *Counting the Days*, letterpress prints, wire, 15" x 24", 2018. Image by the artist.
Fig. 5.7, *Jacob’s Ladders*, resin, handmade paper, ink, Tyvek, 2” x 12” each, 2018. Image by the artist.
Connected to their bookness is the work’s objectness and relationship to the human body. Even with the envelope and handwriting motifs, most of my works reference love letters in a less-than-complete way. I often feel like my pieces are love letters in the form of totally separate, often recognizable objects. In my work love letters take the form of the aforementioned Jacob’s Ladder toy, folded road map, and deck of cards. Epistolary references within these structures jog the viewer’s mind with implications of intimate correspondence, but the translation isn’t one-to-one. Instead, the pieces exist as 3-dimensional works made at the scale of their real-life counterparts: a map-sized map, a card-sized card. The ratio of a less literal piece like *idk* mirrors the screen ratio of an iPhone 6, concealing a crumpled handwritten message behind an analog screen (fig. 5.8). The relatable scale of my work facilitates feelings of familiarity from the viewer who intuitively understands their body’s proportional relationship with the pieces. My work also often has a kinetic implication, which suggests an imagined physical interaction between human and artwork, though the work is meant for viewing only.

*Fig. 5.8, idk, handbound book with paper, ink, mylar, 5.5” x 7.75” x 1.5”, 2018. Image by the artist.*
Within these book structures, I combine materials that feel both dramatically natural and synthetic. Pieces that incorporate handmade paper such as Months and That “How the hell...?” Feeling exude an inherent honesty. Though I have refined and molded the material, I do not seek to hide the paper’s naturally deckled edges or slightly irregular surface. I even soften the use of commercial papers by printing natural woodgrain on one side.

By contrast, mylar and cast resin are also featured in this body of work. Their transparency (and mylar’s flexibility, for it clearly isn’t glass) gives them a synthetic quality. Mylar and resin are clearly products of relatively modern technology and would not have been featured in artwork in the days of yore. For visual purposes, I utilize these materials because they allow for layering but grow in opacity with accumulation. This allows me to selectively conceal/reveal visual information, like in idk, Thought So Much, and Jacob’s Ladders.

From a conceptual angle, synthetic materials are integral to my work because they materially complicate a conversation that I believe is truly nuanced. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, I reference love letters because they reveal the tensions and longings that are present in other forms of intimate communication. I am not attempting to establish a dichotomy between letter writing (as an ideal) and other, mainly contemporary, means of communication (as the antithesis). Love letters are not the opposite of text message, email, or Snapchat. Rather, love letters contain to a greater or more obvious degree qualities that reveal the same human longings that can motivate a Facebook message. Incorporating synthetic materials like mylar and resin with natural paper, like in Jacob’s Ladders, materially reflects the nuanced conversation I wish to have.
The work exhibited at the MFA group thesis exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art is a selection from this larger body of work, *I want to tell you*. These pieces do not represent the sum of my experience with longing, nor do they provide solutions to fill the gaps between us. Instead, through the art of making, I have expressed the tensions of intimate communication, through works that are vulnerable and subdued, that reward the patient and curious viewer.
...I hope it doesn’t get redundant, me always reaching for you so intently in letter form. I feel like I can’t help it, or I don’t want to help it! I love writing to you. Thank you for receiving these letters. I’m not always ready and able to say all these words in the right order, and I am so thankful for how you accept and keep my letters. I hope you know that this stuff I write to you is true, is coursing through me when I’m with you, I just can’t figure out the words until later sometimes. I guess I’m not in love with anybody else but you. I can’t wait to write to you again.

I love you. I mean it.

Yours,

Katherine
Bibliography


Mosaic from the Shrine of Shah Yousuf Gardez in Multan, Pakistan. Image downloaded from @BeautyPakistan on Twitter (https://twitter.com/BeautyPakistan/status/92190679586565536) in April, 2018.
Photograph constructed and taken at Big Bend National Park on a research trip to Marfa, Texas, funded by the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts. Taken in November, 2016.
Collection of blues saved on my computer. Images are sourced from my own photographs and the work of other artists. Folder from September, 2016.
Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees by Lawrence Weschler. Image downloaded from https://www.amazon.com/Seeing-Forgetting-Name-Thing-Sees/dp/0520256093 in April, 2018.

Research trip to the Chinati Foundation in November, 2016 funded by the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts. 


YouTube video by Ze Frank summarizing Tor Nørretranders' concept of exformation from *The User Illusion*. The video was my first introduction to Nørretrander's ideas at its upload in June, 2012. Video viewable at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9zfCMp99-A.
Pieces from the Mysterious Letters Project by Lenka Clayton and Michael Crowe, in which the artists attempt to hand-write (or type) a letter to every household in the world. Each letter is unique and, where possible, personally addressed. Images downloaded from lenkaclayton.com in April, 2018.
iPhone album of (almost) every letter I have sent since June 4, 2017. Screen capture taken in April, 2018.