

Fluencies
Joy Xiang

During my visit to the group exhibition *What we know to be true*, I'm shown into the courtyard of Hamilton Artists Inc. where three distinct wheat-pasted forms, in gray and shades of gold, stand in large, solidly-coloured figurations over the existing graffiti on one black wall. I learn that in her ongoing series *How the Curve Fits Inside the Square* (2018-ongoing), Arshia Salesi employs abstracted Farsi script, along with a knowledge of Iranian Modernist and Western Minimalist painting that is evident in her forms. She deconstructs and layers language, and by implication cultures, as she does the same to the "language" of art historical styles beyond Eurocentric and English-speaking worlds. Moreso, I feel her forms in my body not as passive objects, but as characters asserting a collage of differences without their own alienation.

Salesi's brazen, fleshy lines — reaching inside and outside the gallery — contour a way to think through the exhibition in terms of tangible and intangible navigations of difference. Together, the works of Salesi, Yasmeen Nematt Alla and Zahra Baseri give formal expression to invisible flows of language, material economy, and power. They challenge "what we think we know," with the "we" a pluralized body implying different modes of privilege and oppression between and within nations that allow "us" to not know, or keep us unknowing.

Nematt Alla's works, like Salesi's, are concerned with language, but from a position of revealing social relations. Her experiences as an Arabic translator for refugees inform her efforts at unveiling the power dynamics of "fluency." She reinscribes stories decidedly unlike rescue narratives in which refugees always have to be effusively grateful in order to be justified humanity or support. Inside the gallery, Nematt Alla's *Scold's Bridle* (2017), a vaguely threatening metal contraption meant to be worn on the head, hangs from a chain in one corner. A blue piece of fabric, recalling hijab material, drapes through the circular device. An old punishment method that originated in England and Scotland, the scold's bridle usually functioned as a muzzle for women deemed too troublesome or opinionated— those who broke the peace. The artist uses this forgotten instrument as a visual metaphor for the experience of refugees who, despite well-intentioned social workers, often encounter certain things they are not allowed to express. In the "Not Allowed" category: the desire to return to a missing or lost place of origin; the exhaustion and frustration at learning a new way to speak.

On the opposite wall, Baseri borrows from the form of Persian miniature paintings to imagine finely detailed “oilatures.” In *Persian Oilature* series (2017-2019), crude oil is presented as an allegory for the maintenance of restrictive binaries and the amalgamation of different means of power — economic, religious and political. In Iran, like in other Middle Eastern economies, oil represents the country’s main source of income. Baseri effectively employs Persian and Islamic decorative and architectural motifs to shape oil’s movement into dark masses or curling forms that normalize its place in everyday life. Rendered in sombre black and white ink and gouache with sparse colour highlights, the oil erupts out of the earth in the shapes of clouds, or forms an intricate system of pipes that metaphorically link a woman and man. By visualizing this material as the connection between polar categories, Baseri entangles boundaries between traditional gender roles, the historical and contemporary, the rich and poor, the West and East, and the sacred and profane. Within the exhibition, the shapeshifting presence of oil operates like language — socially, as a material that structures power relations, and physically, as a visual form that resembles the flow of Salesi’s letters in space. The oil’s “fluency”, its ease of motion emerges as a conduit for maintaining the powers-that-be.

It’s hard not to immediately notice the bright orange of Nematt Alla’s *Shock Blankets* (2017), hung like cloaks on another wall. Embroidered with black text, they declare, “I don’t want to learn how to speak again,” “It’s so tiring to be alive here,” “It would take too much out of me to tell you.” Referencing the warm, heavy blankets that first responders use to help injured people in shock, the artist makes visible the unspoken trauma of displacement under forced circumstances. Visitors are invited to touch and drape the blankets around themselves, something I find myself doing gingerly, as I handle the cloth. As an art piece, thin and unlike their heavy counterparts, the blankets feel delicate and intimate, as if they were someone’s personal item. In capitalized letters, the phrases recall techniques like Jenny Holzer’s *Truisms* (begun in the 1970s) which hold intimate declarations in public space.¹ These are words passed to Nematt Alla, as the translator, beyond the hold of the scold’s bridle, from a person unable to say it to the receiver at the other end. The artist allows us to become the receivers, and so too in a small book work *14 Things* (2017), where she illustrates with simple line drawings exclamations, wishes and confessions that refugee women did not want translated to their social workers. “It wasn’t a choice, it was an ultimatum.” “Is that BACON?” “He just had another seizure.” Nematt Alla’s position as translator-turned-confidant seems to illuminate the role of an ally between languages and the secrecy of non-Anglocentric fluency.

¹ On Jenny Holzer, see Leah Pires, “Issues and Commentary: Truisms & Lies,” *Art in America*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/issues-commentary-truisms-lies>.

As the artists in *What we know to be true* spill the unseen dynamics of language and power across physical and artistic space, I think of how “translation” comes from the latin word for to cross or traverse.² Translation is only necessary when movement, across borders, boundaries, and nations is implied. It is the boundary between foreign and familiar. Translation is about survival, too, a mapping between two points, an act of continuance in a new place — all of which is a familiar experience for diasporic peoples. While to be fluent is to grasp with ease, *What we know to be true* dismantles assumptions of what we should become fluent *in* and who is Othered for not assimilating to the point of fluency. As Nematt Alla expresses, there is a gap between “what we know and what we wish to understand.”³ The works of Baseri, Nematt Alla and Salesi begin to create new modes of thinking from within this gap.

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This essay is published on the occasion of the group exhibition *What we know to be true*, on view in Hamilton Artists Inc.’s James Gallery from March 30 - May 11, 2019.

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² Nehal El-Hadi, “Women of Colour and Digital Media” presentation, *Unsettling Space Through Translation*, Technoscience and Research Unit, Toronto, ON, February 26, 2016.

³ Yasmeen Nematt Alla, artist statement for *What we know to be true*, Hamilton Artists Inc., 2019.