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States of Being

Adria Mirabelli and Yana Verba

June 24 – August 12, 2016

States of Being; An Act of Wayfinding

In *States of Being*, contemporary artists Adria Mirabelli and Yana Verba look to the colours and patterns of the past to situate themselves in an ever shifting present. Working with themes of memory and nostalgia each of these artists locates personal history through various means, manipulating culturally encoded patterns as an act of wayfinding, an open call between the present and the past. The title of the exhibition, *States of Being*, gives us some clues as to how we might decode Verba and Mirabelli's collaboration. States are simultaneously fixed and fluid, always moments away from their next incarnation.

The act of looking backwards varies for both artists, but for both Mirabelli and Verba it is idiosyncratic, ideological, and deeply personal.

Originally inspired by the shop windows of 1980s and 1990s Russia, the forlorn visual displays of a collapsing Soviet Union, Verba and Mirabelli's site-specific window installation is designed to be viewed through glass. Bridging the gap between contemporary installation and commercial display, both artists acknowledge that what separates the present from the past is the act of looking.

Mirabelli's large-scale, translucent, draped and suspended textiles alter the tone

and shape of all that lies beyond them, providing us with intricate monochromatic lenses through which to view Verba's work, and *States of Being* as a whole. In her practice, Mirabelli actively assembles an inexhaustible archive of patterns and photographs. Most of her visual archive is taken from the textures and shapes of her proverbial ancestral home, a small Italian enclave in North York, a bastion of all that is quintessentially Italian-Canadian.

Alternatively, Verba roots her work in the geometric abstractions of modernist painter and designer Sonia Delaunay. Separated by a century and an ocean, Verba and Delaunay are joined by an obsession with design, pattern and colour.

Both Verba and Delaunay were born in the Ukraine. Like Delaunay, Verba has been displaced many times throughout her life. According to Verba, these movements across time and space produced a feeling of isolation, which pressed her to seek out a visual home in Delaunay's designs and paintings, to anchor herself in the language of both abstraction and Ukrainian folk culture. In her bright, spacious home studio in Los Angeles, Verba is alone. In a new country, in a new city, she paints vibrant colours onto large muslin panels. Tapes out geometric patterns. Revels in the audacity of pigment.

For both Verba and Mirabelli, their work is an act of wayfinding, of tracing backwards.

While Verba seizes colour, the consciousness of brush strokes, and the deliberateness of pigment, Mirabelli zeroes in on shape, line, and repetition.

Mirabelli leans into her work. In a shared industrial space in Toronto, during one of our studio visits, I watch her perched on a small chair, surrounded by pieces of paper. Tacked to every surface are scans of manipulated textiles. Swirling crochet tablecloths. Rippling floral curtains. I can almost smell the rooms packed with

Tiffany lamps, plastic sofa covers, floral mattresses, and religious memorabilia that have become a treasure trove for Mirabelli. Her grandparents' home, the birthplace of her Canadian-Italian roots. To understand her place as a contemporary artist she paces these rooms. Snaps photos. Collects fabrics.

Mirabelli works organically. After scanning physical materials and manipulating them with her hands, her work transitions into the realm of the digital and she begins to draw. She zeroes in on a single corner of a single pattern. The lilt of a leaf, or the curve of a line. From these details she expands and repeats, building an intricate hand drawn digital world, which she later rematerializes onto silk. For Mirabelli, the transition from the material to the digital is seamless, an essential element in the layering of her work. She is a product of her generation: embracing technology for its generative properties, not guarding against it.

In her studio, Verba works steadily. Imperfection is an important part of her work. She does not seek to replicate Delaunay, and to prove this she allows for leaks and digressions. In the smudges and specks of paint at the edges of Verba's geometric parcels of colour, she reveals herself. She is not in turn of the century Paris pioneering the colourful modernist movement of *simultanéisme*. She paints in a trepidatious present. One that is notoriously messy. It leaks. It bleeds and smudges. Modernism is no longer a promise for the future; it's poem of the past. In the process of painting Verba uses only one piece of tape to keep her colours in line, to build her rhythmic patterns. Through the leaks she winks at us. She knows the rebellious pigments will give her away. The totality of modernism is dead. And this contemporary world in which we find ourselves is overwhelmingly messy.

Wayfinding relies on others.

Verba's painted muslin panels and Mirabelli's hand-drawn digital patterns on silk exist in such close proximity they cannot be witnessed without the visual

influence of each other. This is significant because Verba and Mirabelli are working 4,000 kilometers apart. Verba is now based in Los Angeles, and will never see the work installed in person.

In various ways both artists collapse time and space in an attempt to reimagine, re-encode and re-pattern the past through the lens of an unpredictable present. In life, states of being are understood by their fixity, but they are always a moment away from the next gesture, the next instance of looking backward, or forward, or toward one another. Together Verba and Mirabelli expose the fragility of collaboration and the intimacy of shared space. Cumulatively, *States of Being* transforms into a hybrid present that bears witness to both artists and the act of looking simultaneously.

-- Victoria Mohr-Blakeney