

Rehearsal for a Poem:
Tiziana La Melia in Conversation
with Jacquelyn Ross

Encountering the work of Tiziana La Melia is like coming face to face with a clever poem. Materials find improvised shapes; lines are drawn and withdrawn. In fact, there was an emergent rhythm in the intimate collection of works that made up her fall 2012 solo exhibition *Neck of Thirsty Flower* at Exercise in Vancouver. Full of spontaneity and alliteration, it was not hard to imagine it as a poem-in-progress, where abstract paintings and collages become stand-ins for suggested landscapes, and where sculptures sit around like familiar friends.



Tiziana La Melia, *Neck of Thirsty Flower*,
2012, installation view
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Tiziana La Melia, detail from *Hands of V & U, Female voice detail*, 2011, 40.6 × 40.6 × 45.7 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Strung together by a poetic logic that is at once literal and metaphorical, La Melia's diverse practice spans a variety of mediums including sculpture, painting, performance, poetry and collage. The shifting nature of language becomes a point of departure for her material-driven practice, leading to reflections on the parallels between line drawing and lines of poetry, and between lyricality and the writer's voice. I met with La Melia in September 2012 during her Vancouver exhibition to discuss the interplay between art and writing in her work, and the role that poetics play in her overall artistic process and sensibility.

JACQUELYN ROSS It seems like there has been a re-emergence of artists interested in exploring the crossover between poetry and visual art. Have you ever thought about the relationship between art and writing, and which came first for you?

TIZIANA LA MELIA I've been involved in both art and writing to various degrees for a long time. When I was studying at Emily Carr [University of Art + Design], one of the final works that I made and that I've started to think about again was called *Portrait of a Legend/Legend of a Portrait* (2007). The drawing consisted of three columns, and took on the form of a cartographic legend drawing from my research in gardens and parks on Coast Salish Territory during that time. The first column was composed of symbols: dots, slanted lines, spirals, dashes and so forth. Flanking the symbols were lines of poetry that I associated with these marks. After the initial drawing, I did translations of translations. I did this four or five times, and performed the drawing at a reading I organized with some friends at 1067 Granville Street in 2007 and 2008. I was searching for meaning in my activities, while also thinking about portraiture and a different way of approaching it through language, drawing and painting.

JR I like that you choose to use the word "legend" to describe this system of symbols, which, of course, also implies a portrait of a celebrity or some kind of popular myth. There is an act of storytelling in your approach, yet the story becomes obscured through the need for wayfinding and the use of a legend.

TL It was also a way for me to attempt to articulate the flow between portraiture and landscape by imagining a psychological interior within the portrait landscape. I wanted to

expand on the face to include place, and consciousness of that place as it moves on the surface—and how such a landscape is informed by one's own body. Maybe the project was more suited to be a film. In an interview with John Stezaker, he talks about the Makapansgat pebble, found in a burial site in South Africa, that is considered to be one of the earliest instances of symbolic thinking.¹ It is simultaneously a pebble, an appropriation and a face.

JR I am interested in how your work communicates things that are left unstated but are nevertheless expressed, much like a concrete poem. There's a spaciousness to the work: breathing room for objects to slump or lean, each expressing a kind of naked material presence. And space is very much a question of composition—pulling things into proximity or distance from each other, but always in relation. In this way, I think the intimacy of your work lends itself to the development of a kind of writerly voice.

TL A close friend and writer, Emily Fedoruk, once described the space of a page as a stage. This line stuck with me as I began to think of the wall as an area to stage compositionally. *Plot on the face of a pot* (2012) was a work generated out of a series of paintings stretched to the wall, consisting mainly of gouache on linen, though in other similar works I've applied oil paint to jute and canvas. These paintings, which I refer to as "swatches," began as studies to deal with the limitations of the painting's edge on a conventional support. As I stretched the material to the wall, I was drawn to the scalloped edge, like the edge of a mollusc's fan-shaped shell, that occurred with the particular grade of linen I was using at the time. I was simultaneously working on a play entitled *The Hands of V & U* (2010). I began to think of these "swatches" as a character study of Bibs, a character

in the play who symbolized ambivalence and had a wandering attention. I identified a parallel ambivalence in the status of the object, in how it is both a sculpture and a painting. It is also a character study through materiality, motion and gesture. The way the pigment rests on the surface signifies various modes of attention and a sense of decision while continuing to embrace the accidental. Inevitably it became a part of the performance of the character I had been thinking about. The swatches were a way to explore how employing content from one medium to another would inflect the character in the play.

JR So what is *The Hands of V & U*? What do "V" and "U" stand for?

TL It refers to a photograph I took of a figure reclining under a statue in New York. I was compelled by the form his body took—the shape of a V and a U—and the way his arms and hands propped up his body. It was the middle of a winter day and this person was catching some rays under a statue, not working, being idle. As a moment, it stood out to me in the fabric of the everyday and captivated me. Often a single image can generate a work for me. In this instance it inspired the title you mention, and also a painting that depicts that moment abstracted into the formal gesture of a V and U. The ampersand became another important motif for me, that later transformed into the motif of the mobius strip.

JR Why did you decide to take on the form of the play with *The Hands of V & U*? I have heard that you sometimes write plays about objects, and I'm curious to know what your interest is in performative objects and theatricality.

TL Ever since reading playwrights like [Tom] Stoppard, [Luigi] Pirandello, [Samuel] Beckett, [Jean] Cocteau and Marie Clements I have had the desire to write a play. These plays had a strong effect on me. But I didn't actually write a play until I visited the Banff Centre in 2010. I noticed that many of the early playbills in the archive were missing their scripts, so I had this impulse to write an imaginary script for one of them. So it just evolved out of that original moment of finding the playbill *Double Dare*, because there was no way for me to really tell what the play was about. [But] I had some information—that it was about these boys in a clubhouse on the other side of the tracks.

JR So what did your play look like? What happened in the play?

TL At the time I was thinking about the structure of a Greek chorus as a way of organizing and eventually performing the text. The piece doesn't have a specific plot. It's structured around these voices: six different characters, each searching for what to do and who to be and how to assemble the parts of themselves.

JR So would you say that the play never really finds a resolution?

TL The characters are all hanging out as a group, but there's a sense of each of them being quite separate from one another. And when I think





Tiziana La Melia, *Script for Three Voices*, 2010, Performance
Documentation, Zach, Kayla, Laura, memory foam, fabric,
construction paper, hats, dimensions variable
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Tiziana La Melia, *The memory of a man reclined, lying on one elbow waiting*, 2010, oil on panel, 91.4 × 91.4cm
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Tiziana La Melia, *The Shadowmaker*, 2011, ladder, cotton, hat, and oil on cardboard,
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Tiziana La Melia, *Character Study of Bibs*, 2011, detail, gouache, linen, burlap, dimensions variable
 PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED;
 IMAGE COURTESY OF DIAZ CONTEMPORARY

back on this piece it feels more like a meta-narrative for my practice at the time, where I was trying to think about all of these different parts and how they might hold within a work. Some of the text I wrote was appropriated from other pieces of writing. For example, when one character says to the other, “I’m thinking of myself as a faun,” and the other responds, “Think of yourself as a barrel,” the fragments come from Yvonne Rainer’s *The Mind is a Muscle* (1968) where one of her dancers is practising and this exchange happens (Rainer being the one telling him to act like a barrel). At that time I was thinking about the tension in my work between the lyrical and the utilitarian, and those different impulses and tendencies. The play is quite fragmentary, which is why I think of it as more of a poem that is structured as a play. The first time me and a friend performed the play together was at the Butterfly Garden in Banff; the second time was at the University of Guelph, this time using actors, to try something new. I called it *Script for Three Voices*, because I reduced it to three voices, even though it read for six. The three actors were standing back to back on a piece of memory foam, wearing provisional costumes, and they rotated clockwise, following the image of a clock and a gesture of an arm pointing to an hour. The play ends when the actors take off their costumes. They’re wearing their regular clothes underneath, and the stripped costumes become a sculpture on the ground, evidence of a performance.

JR As a viewer, you’re not entirely sure whether you’ve just missed the performance, or the performance is about to begin—a quality that I think carries into your current exhibition as well.

TL This exhibition, *Neck of Thirsty Flower*, is pretty indicative of the way that I’ve worked for the past two years, which has been a very studio-based approach. This work is different in that it didn’t germinate out of a particular image. I wanted to lose myself in the performance of the studio, rather than write a performance for the exhibition. So I began to think of how the titles could function as voices for the works that echo past works. They always hint at something that I might want to work on in the future, and I think both the works and the titles are improvisational and contingent. The ambiguity you mention is a necessary intonation in the work, that speaks to the difficulty of talking about a starting point. Perhaps the movement of the clock that I choreographed in *Script for Three Voices* really speaks to the fact that in my process and works, there is no real beginning or end.

JR I read a poem that you wrote for the Kootenay School of Writing’s *W Magazine*, called “Story about Making a Line” (2010). Speaking of titles, I was thinking that this title perfectly summed up what I felt I understood about your practice. Do you believe that all lines have stories?

TL I think that the word “tangent” is a more accurate word to describe my process. Someone once wrote that “When you release a dog into a field, it never goes in a straight line.” When

a person goes on a tangent, it often sounds more like a description of consciousness that is driven by the quilt of the unconscious. So for me the lines that you see are better described as poetic threads being woven into a “text.” In *Character Study of Bibs* (2011), sculptural lines are placed within an ensemble of paintings to create a symbolic choreography. The lines in this context function less as a story and more as a rhythm.

JR Throughout this exhibition, you use wire as a line too, which becomes a kind of framing device in your work and a way of stringing things together. Loose threads become functional, and even necessary, aspects of the work.

TL This holding up of things is important to me, both metaphorically and literally. In *Curly roads...* (2012), for example, I was thinking about how the structure is very much a prop, a support. I came about it in a very digressive way. I knew that I wanted to make a book-like form, and I was interested in how it also looked like someone sitting with their legs open. The form acts as a prop for the paintings that drape over it, that are themselves in need of some emotional support and must be propped up by the sculpture. That’s something I discovered through making these works: there is a kind of recurring, overly elaborate propping up of the work that places it somewhere between sculpture and support.

JR I like the connection you’ve found between the book and the activity of sitting with your legs open. You have a very intuitive way of drawing parallels between the things around you, and exploiting the ambiguities of language and materials.

TL I grew up in a bilingual home, and as a child I noticed the slippage of language that occurs in playful puns or inventive sentences that were ultimately formed out of linguistic limitations. I witnessed failures in understanding, due to rhythm, pronunciation or articulation. The frustration I may have felt in the past with the imprecision and contamination that occurs in the translation of experiences through languages is now what sustains my interest in both art and writing. I don’t think you can escape language in an encounter with a mute object, but I do think that a mute artwork can speak through its materiality in a way not unlike the possibilities offered by poetry. ×

BIO

Tiziana La Melia is an artist who lives and works in Vancouver. Jacquelyn Ross is an artist, writer and independent curator, who is also based in Vancouver.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Mark Coetzee, “Denying Total Observation in the Work of John Stezaker,” in *John Stezaker*, by Mark Coetzee, Barry Schwabsky and John Stezaker (Miami, FL: RFC, 2007), 82.

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