

LET ME BE FRANK

Biddy Tran

“No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into...”

— Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow

In the following interview, Biddy Tran (an MFA candidate at California Institute of the Arts) and Frank Smith (a resident artist) discuss problems of representation and meaning as entry points into Preterition, their collaborative project in March of 2009. The work explores the political, cultural and social conflicts which arise from the certitudinal impulse to stabilize meaning through ideology and discourse.

BIDDY
TRAN Maybe we should start by talking about why we decided to collaborate on *PRETERITION* (2009). We talked a lot about the “colonial impulse” to invest in religion and utopic ideologies. My stake in the project was to somehow undermine the conventions in artistic presentation that are taken for granted and that ultimately produce a consumeristic relationship between “art” and the viewer.

FRANK
SMITH I was less interested in issues of representation in art than in the ways in which we produce meaning and the systems of oppression that result from the delusional impulse to stabilize it.

BT But don't you think that by choosing art as a platform...

FS Well all conflicts are essentially ideological power struggles. Signifiers pre-exist meaning, right? And meaning is produced to relieve anxiety, which all too often leads to power shifts between those who interpret meaning and those who accept these interpretations. I felt that the formal strategies employed in your previous installations make apparent the ways in which information is mediated, reframed and manipulated. I wanted to produce something that would plainly and unabashedly avoid or deny resolution.

BT Yeah, but the key strategy in *Preterition* was completely dependant on formal conventions in the history of art, or Western painting. We both agreed that...

FS What's interesting to me is to ask “how, and in what ways is something generative,” rather than to navigate experience through the lens of a particular history, and to define everything according to its relationship to the discourses surrounding that history. That's not productive.

BT But if you're not interested in locating these ideas in art historical discourse, why

choose “art” as a format to talk about these ideas, instead of philosophy, or something?

FS Well art is currently the only vehicle for inquiry and critical thought that is vaguely defined, if defined at all, in terms of material and function. For me, the impulse to reduce things to a point where they simply reaffirm or extend a pre-existing paradigm is imperialist. It’s a form of homogeny.

BT And it’s also the field where something can be resolutely unresolved, right? Do you think that sort of backfired on us? I mean one of the things we wanted to happen was for the affect of the installation to become completely transparent, right?

FS I think it would only be problematic if the installation were purely experiential, or phenomenological. But in fact it quickly becomes discursive. I’m not responsible for viewers looking for an “interpretive priest”.

BT But we are responsible for the recognition of that desire. That’s the point of the project!

FS (nods and shrugs)

BT Should we make it clear, for the sake of the interview, what parts we played individually on the project?

FS Why?

BT I just feel like, *Preterition* ended up presenting two separate critiques, right? I mean, I think we sort of drew an analogy between the problems in representation and power plays specific to art, and then there’s this kind of social/historical critique, that’s totally about colonialism in America. Don’t you think that with our completely different backgrounds, it’s important to talk about those two things?

FS You mean our “ethnicities”? Or our practices?

BT Both. I mean, most of the images refer to Protestantism or Puritans in the New World, and you happen to be a direct descendant of a Mayflower passenger. And you happen to share an ancestor with the Bushes... And then there was the argument we had over whether or not labor was important issue in actually drawing the entire scroll...

FS (laughs) Well you’re just better at drawing!

BT But somehow in the editing process, you chose the images that...

- FS The summer before I applied for the residency I read Thomas Pynchon's novel, Gravity's Rainbow, and was thinking a lot about the idea of the New World as a squandered opportunity, and a utopic paradise fallen to totalitarian ideology. I thought Pynchon was a perfect model for the project.
- BT But Pynchon also sees preterition as a blessing, right...?
- FS Oh you've read it!
- BT I mean you're pretty much off the hook when you're passed over. It's the ultimate freedom. By removing yourself from that binary system you no longer need an "interpretive priest." Everything's wide open, nothing's determined. There's no resolve. I mean that's what happens to Slothrop, in the end, right? He just "scatters," becomes nothing and everything simultaneously. He's like, the ultimate "Invisible Man."
- FS The ultimate Preterite.
- BT Wait. Isn't that why we decided to call the show *Preterition*?
- FS That's your call. After all, I'm just a fictional character you've created.