

## Stefana McClure, *Tactile Translations*

Carmen Hermo



Stefana McClure. *Sucking Stones (for Molloy)* (2011). Sixteen text-wrapped stones. Courtesy of the artist and private collection, New York.

*During a 2011 studio visit with Stefana McClure, ongoing construction on the soon-to-open Barclays Center in Brooklyn clattered ominously in the near distance, and floorboards rumbled with the persistent pulses of the mechanized labors of change. Within the walls of her home and studio, a firm and unflinching quiet carved out its own oppositional space: one where close reading and close looking coalesce into works on paper—or works made with paper—that form a synesthesiac bridge between experience and meaning. In her series *Films on Paper*, for example, McClure utilizes the readymade scale of the laptop screen as the circumscribed field for abstracted forms accumulated through her meticulous re-tracing of film*

*subtitles, executed according to their intimate scale and precise placement on the screen. Through this durational action, McClure occupies the act of translation—at times erroneous, prone to slippage of meaning—and provides it with visual stability, the resultant drawings a luminous surface of minimal form that displace the specifics of the film's dialogue with an intuitive sensation. Much of her work shares a similar durational genesis and transformed resolution, as in McClure's winding of entire tomes like *The Little Prince* or compendiums of maps into satisfyingly compact spheres of paper, or knitting paper tapestries that reconfigure iconic comic strips into textural snippets of raucous color, or transforming damning documents on Bush-era torture practices into monochrome evocations of censorship.*

*McClure has since decamped to Newburgh, New York, and continues to mine language and literature for the raw material of her artworks. Extending a series of sculptural poems comprised of small stones wrapped with words by Baudelaire, Beckett, and Rilke, McClure has shifted away from iconic texts to instead approach fundamental social issues, wrapping dictionary definitions of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance around the rocks as compact protests against Brexit and the vitriolic verbiage of contemporary politics. At the core of her work is a crossing between text and form, her handiwork with word and paper creating a unified, if arrestingly abstracted, expression of language and understanding.*

**I am struck by the peace and regularity of your work—from woven comic strips to spheres of cut novellas to transcribed film subtitles, your gestures seem to come from a place of meditation, extreme focus, and repetition. The resulting objects feel measured, visually balanced, and nearly seamless. Is this reflected in your process? Is the seamlessness important to you?**

The work has a self-structuring methodology: visual form being determined by the process by which it is made. Repetition plays a part, slowing time and establishing a meditative rhythm, ultimately creating intense focus. Seamlessness is definitely a goal, although it is not always attainable.

**One of the exceptions to this rule is the series of poems you've transposed onto rocks, as in "Les Roses: Poems by Rilke" (2013). The roughness of the rock seems to push through the text, a kind of rock-versus-paper rematch. Why do you pair poetry with these stones? And is there any hope that the words or poems can gain literal weight, or even the anticipation of action and violence, from their support?**

Interesting that you mention the potential for violence lurking in the stones, as the first pieces I made, based on Seamus Heaney's anthology *North*, first published in 1975, where he addresses the theme of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland, were protest stones, taking the form of pairs of text-wrapped stones, one for each pocket, ready to be thrown.

For Rilke's *Les Roses*, I used rose rocks collected by my partner's mother after heavy rain and sent to me from Oklahoma in USPS flat rate boxes. Rose rocks also proved to be the perfect bearers of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. *Rime Petrose* (stony rhymes), field stones wrapped with Dante's powerful lyrics about the mysterious *Donna Pietra*, a woman as beautiful and hard as a precious stone, is another work in the series.

**Describe the differences in process between a work like *The Little Prince—Japanese Translation and Sucking Stones* (for Molloy). Knowing your voracious love for letter, you select texts that you can spend time inside of, that you can enjoy as you unravel them in time. But are you re-reading them in their moment of deconstruction or in their moment of regeneration?**

*The Little Prince—Japanese Translation* is from a series of sculptural drawings that deconstruct books, reconfiguring them as continuous balls of string. For this body of work, I have always been drawn to material so compelling that it constitutes a complete world unto itself. Reviewing *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* in *The Washington Post*, Marie Arana describes the novel as being "as tightly wound as a Dashiell Hammett mystery," rendering it irresistible. Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* was another natural candidate. To make these sculptures, I take the book apart, page by page, and cut it into even strips, the width of which is determined by the scale of the text. It is a laborious, time-consuming process and I often find myself re-reading the text, if only to keep track of my progress. I will usually have decided in advance the information I would like to appear on the outside of the ball—typically identifying characteristics such as ISBN, title, author's name, copyright, date of publication, publisher's information, and maybe a prototypical passage or significant illustration—and I will put these pages aside before slicing up everything else, sticking it all back together again as a continuous length of string, and beginning to wind. To keep the paper cuts at a minimum, I wear gloves for this part, and wrap the paper tightly. Once the ball is almost complete, I cut up the pages I have

reserved for the outside and add them, finishing by hammering in a couple of pins to keep the paper ribbons in place.

“I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking stones,” Molloy’s monologue begins. And I took advantage of being in Dublin for *Dublin Contemporary 2011: Terrible Beauty—Art, Crisis, Change & The Office of Non-Compliance* to collect the sixteen stones for *Sucking Stones (for Molloy)* on Malahide beach, just north of the city. Each stone was chosen for its feel in the mouth and then wrapped with the monologue from Beckett’s early novel *Molloy*, in which a man collects sixteen pebbles and becomes obsessed with the challenge of sucking them “turn and turn about” in “impeccable succession.” (It’s fascinating to consider that a text so unquestionably Irish was originally written in French.) To make this work, I cut the text into strips and then used a neutral pH adhesive to attach the text to the stones. The wrapped stones were ultimately roughed up and polished on the walls of my studio to give them a seasoned appearance.

**Your material always seems to pull from something very tactile, or accessible—books undone; movie titles at a small scale; shopping for the color blind; comic book sewing. Your translations of these materials into conceptual reconfigurations of their words, their duration, their color and form—it feels very egalitarian to me, unencumbering the works from their literal meanings and allowing for those who cannot (due to language or cultural barriers) understand them literally to experience them in a different way. In your work, translation liberates the text or source. Is this democratizing intentional? I think of this in particular with your *Films on Paper*, where the original and translated languages are both broken away by form.**

I love the idea of the work transcending the original information source while at the same time going to great lengths to faithfully embody it. The *Films on Paper* methodically remove all of a film’s subtitles, inter-titles, or closed captions from a rich monochromatic ground, taking care to ensure that the information removed is formatted exactly as it appeared on the monitor on which the film was originally viewed. Superimposed, concentrated, and concealed in two shimmering bands at the bottom of otherwise uninterrupted monochromatic fields, letters, in their original typeface and screen placement, are relentlessly accumulated and stacked upon themselves, coalescing in a super-condensed version of each film’s dialogue. Characterized by the distillation of time and the obliteration and reconstruction of information, these abstractions are tangible manifestations of film.

Another recent conceptual reconfiguration was a *Mini Market (Colorblind Market, 2015)*, highlighting the predicament of the colorblind shopper. A comment on corporate blindness to colorblindness—many manufacturers doggedly continue to rely on color-coding to differentiate their products, often employing red and green, despite the fact that red-green colorblindness is the most prevalent form, effectively hiding their message from 8% of the population—the work took the form of supermarket shelving stacked with color-coded packages. Swiss Muesli, Apple Jacks, Froot Loops, Miracle-Gro, Tide liquid laundry detergent, Dixie everyday and heavy duty plates, classic red Coca-Cola cans and their eco green “healthy” Coca-Cola Life counterparts containing 35% fewer calories, and various potted plants, including small Bird’s Nest Ferns and a six-foot Weeping Fig, were riddled with thousands of holes, a pointillist pattern of circular dots based on the iconic form of Ishihara colorblind tests.

**You spent two years studying papermaking at Japan’s Kyoto Seika University. Given the way your work re-uses existing paper—sometimes as cheap and reproducible as newsprint—how has your background in its creation impacted the way you use the medium?**

I set up a small paper-making studio when I moved to the US from Japan but soon discovered that I could save a lot of time by working on Arches or Lanaquarelle. Really understanding paper, though, has been a huge advantage in the work, allowing me to work with delicate transfer papers and to knit and weave fragile vintage newspapers and comics—quite a feat given my extremely basic knitting skills. (I still have to run to YouTube when I am ready to cast off.) It is also heartening to know that, when a project calls for a very specific paper, say one with a lot of clay in it, I can make it myself. The twelve years I spent in Japan as a postgraduate student at Kyoto Seika University, and later working as a translator and interpreter, had a huge impact on my work.

**It is verging on cliché to describe an artist as working “across mediums.” While you certainly do so, in a literal sense, there seems to be a more purposeful “crossing” in your work, between the visual and literary arts in particular, and from purportedly “low” culture to conceptual art. Part of the mysticism of your images stems from an almost universalizing impulse to cloud understanding, to collect language in such a way that it becomes unusable as language, and transcends its use, becoming raw material or accumulating into a single frame of visual impact. It can be destabilizing, however, to know that a delicately knit mass of paper like *Redacted* (Enhanced Techniques) buries a narrative of U.S.-sanctioned torture, or that the charming suite of comic book drawings includes some jingoistic Captain America battles, or racist Tintin hijinks. With such loaded material, do you worry that factual import or even accountability gets lost in the transformation into an artwork? With a work like *Redacted*, I am torn between understanding your act as repetition and punishment, or, conversely, as a kind of tenderness or penance. Is there space for both interpretations in this work?**

I would say that there is definitely space for both interpretations. I am not American, but I choose to live here, so am implicated when the US government violates both international and domestic prohibitions on torture in the name of fighting terrorism—something that has happened repeatedly in the years since 9/11. The redacted drawings set out to draw attention to the so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques,” including the “waterboarding” of terrorism suspects held in CIA custody. I liked the idea of taking these deeply disturbing torture documents and slipping them under the radar in the guise of hand-knit swatches.

**How does working in series impact the flexibility of your translations? How are *Wonder Woman* and, say, *Peanuts*, united in your series of tapestries?**

My love of comics and comic books was bolstered by the years I spent in manga-obsessed Japan. I often work in series, although I’m not sure how this predilection impacts the quality of my translations. *Wonder Woman*, the most popular female super hero of all time, is a great favorite. The dialogue is great and the comic titles—*The Siege of the Flying Mermaids*, *Flaming Fury*, *The Battle of Desires*—are fantastic. I am also a big fan of the Sunday funnies of which *Peanuts* by Schulz is one of the most popular examples. United with *Spider-man*, *Captain America*, *Tintin*, *Astérix* and *Obélix*, *Gasoline Alley*, *Donald Duck*, *Krazy Kat*, *Dragon Ball* and *Astro Boy* in my comic strip drawings, each work remains distinct, largely because of differences in layout and coloring but also because of the very different qualities of paper.

**I'm curious: with the texts that you deconstruct and reform, are you using existing copies—perhaps long-worn and on a beloved shelf, or stained by a summer on the beach—or do you start fresh with a new copy? The tactility and construction of memory of a text can be so strongly associated with a particular object.**

The first of the deconstructed/reformed sculptures I made was Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, for which I used the copy I had had as a child and that had travelled the world with me. The tactile quality of the paper is, indeed, very important for these works, so I always want to hold the book in my hands and feel the weight of the paper before making the decision to work with it. My *Map of the World* series (a series of globes each made from a world atlas) always uses the same edition of the Rand McNally *Reader's Digest Atlas of the World*, but once I found the first one at Stand I was able to order additional copies on the Internet. An ongoing project called *Kurt's Kerouacs* deconstructs and reconfigures my friend Kurt's Jack Kerouac library.

**In our hyperactive, hyper-connected world, it can feel as if quantity—of works, of images, of ideas—is preferred to quality, to deep thought. Your work is characterized by a painstakingly considered and executed concept and action. Do you expect a similar dedication of attention from your viewers? Is there an elision between looking at and reading your work that extends mental engagement between art and literature?**

It is considered almost subversive to spend so much time making something and some people get angry when they realize how the work is made. I love when people spend time with it, though, as it definitely benefits from a closer reading. ~

**Url:** <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/visual/stefana-mcclure-tactile-translations/>

**Date:** October 2016, Online