



Tender Resistance

Ryan Josey's subtle queering of nautical language

JULIA MCMILLAN



Ryan Josey, installation views of *November, November*, 2017. Image courtesy the Khyber Centre for the Arts. Photo: Katherine Nakaska

(N is for no or November. It's a negation, identifiable by its straightforward checkered pattern. It's blue and white, usually)*

Poet Suzanne Buffman describes Margaret Atwood as “a philosopher of the parenthetical” in her 1998 introduction to Atwood’s *The Circle Game*. Halifax-based artist Ryan Josey might rightly earn that title, too. An artist who deals in what writer Karin Cope has called “dimensional poetry,” Josey uses visual and performative codes to detail the poetic interlinking of queerness, place, belonging and lineage.

*(*except for when it's blue and white and floral)*

Josey’s recent installation, *November, November*, developed during the Khyber Centre for the Arts’ KREAM residency, is made up of a series of nautical flags depicting the letter ‘N’. The traditional navy blue and white checkered patterns are replaced, subtly and at a second glance, by a gentle blue fabric covered in tiny blue flowers.

The fabric, a small disruption, is a visual citation of a quilt Josey’s grandmother made for him when he was a child. Merging digital technology with the traditional and handmade, Josey

digitally reproduced the fabric from his grandmother's quilt and printed the design onto the same dense canvas sails are made of.

Together with renowned Halifax sail maker Michele Stevens, who famously crafted the sails for the Blue Nose II, Josey designed several flags that flew outside the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic during Nocturne 2017. One enormous flag hung inside the Khyber, sprawling out onto its floor. Behind it hung Josey's grandmother's quilt (*The quilt is hand-stitched. There is a sun spot in the lower right-hand corner where discolouration softens the deep blue edges that line each square*).

The flags, and their coded message of impasse, offer a protest sewn by loving, intergenerational hands: a protest of prescribed identities, of colonial language, of oppressive tourism, of gendered labour. In a gesture not dissimilar to his 2016 Nocturne piece, *Take Cover, November, November* is an invitation disguised as a directive. (*Imagine the tenderness of choosing blue flowers. Imagine the tenderness of acknowledging difference*).

November, November, plays with the parenthetical by cycling back to some of Josey's earliest work, where he initially developed an interest in queering the use of nautical codes. While much of Josey's work in recent years has used nautical language as a means of exploring queerness and visibility, he traces the origin of this practice back to a drawing he made as a student at NSCAD, in which the word "faggot" is covertly spelled out in nautical flags. The flags are quietly placed over the nude bodies of boys by the sea, inspired by paintings by Henry Scott Tuke.

At the time, Josey was reading *The Circle Game*, and took cues

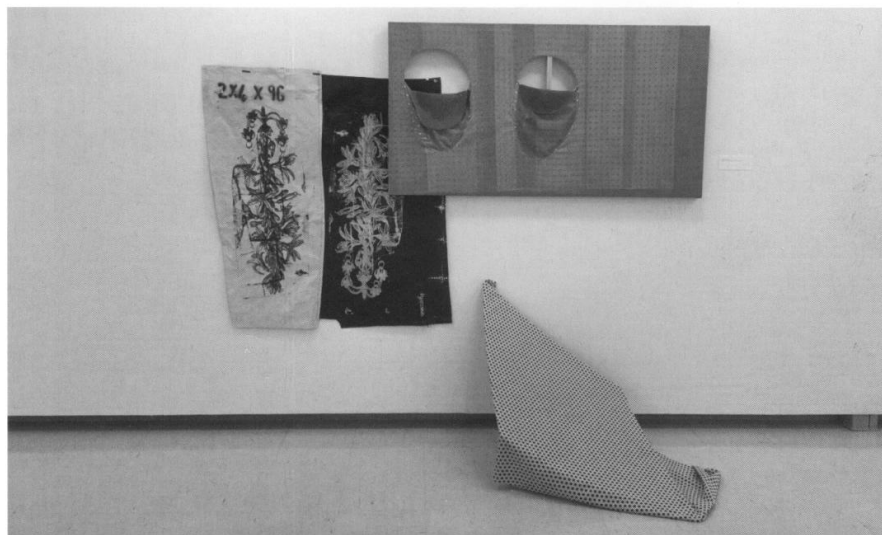
from Atwood's early explorations with punctuation as tools for twisting otherwise straightforward readings. He states that they instilled in him an interest in language that speaks in "whispers, codes, and alterations." The parenthetical cycles in Atwood's poems open literal and metaphorical dimensions of meaning, acting like hidden languages or semiotic signposts to be either embraced and followed, or ignored.

The nautical flags in Josey's work function in the same way: they refuse a simple translation and act as directional markers that may or may not point the way. Josey's flags' use of nautical language subverts the blunt, militaristic and colonial commands they were created for, while offering soft linguistic alternatives. They create, in Cope's understanding of the term, dimension—a dimensionality that, through its translation as installation, is at once spatial, physical, and palpable, while remaining entirely figurative and affective.

(*Think of where the flag flies. Think of where it doesn't. Wonder who is responsible for that, wonder what this flag might replace*).

An insistence on the importance and predominance of poetic translation underscores each iteration of Josey's practice. For Josey, translation—especially translation that lives in the parentheses (literal, figurative, spatial or dimensional)—is an act of tender resistance, and a way of understanding others, of understanding ourselves, of understanding place and space. ■

Julia McMillan is a writer, curator, and cultural worker based in K'ijiputuk (Halifax, NS), where she is currently the Artistic Director at Eyelevel.



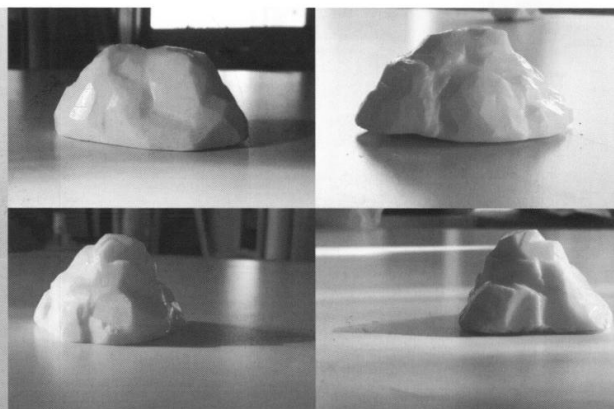
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