

*Losing; Keeping*

Transcript of Artist Dialogue

by

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*Annemarie:* The format of this—we were discussing about six different formats. We're going to just do a Q&A with each other. The questions are questions that we have about each other's work, each other's sections of the work, and then just about our own work in general. They range from broad to specific. We'll go for about twenty minutes, and then questions from you lovely humans are absolutely welcome. I'm going to start with the first question.

*Luke:* You're going to ask the first question? I feel like I should ask the first question. It's a broad question, so I think it's a good introduction. So the question is: what is this work? That's really broad, but I suppose what I'm really asking is, would you consider these paintings? Would you consider them drawings? Is this artwork? Is this philosophy? Where do those things cross over? Does this have religious connotations? Are you doing science or pseudo-science? Is this some kind of embodiment of hope, or is this a gesture to something unverbalizable? I'm leading with my own question, but, what is it?

*Annemarie:* It's a methodology. Within my writings about my work I often reference a methodology of art working. The work can be defined as philosophical, it can be defined as religious. The reason why it's philosophical is because it delves into questions that are innately existential: What is this life? What is the next life? Why does it feel like there are internal things that are landscape-esque? Why does it feel like there are external things that are felt but not seen? So the work is philosophical. It's referencing continental philosophy rather than analytical philosophy. So if you think Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty. They're asking questions about the body: What becomes flesh? What is aliveness? The work is also religious. Not in the systematic

politico that is often associated with the puritanical beginnings of American religion. It's religious in the sense that it seeks the theological, the theological meaning that which is out there. So the highest limit of the thing, which I am assuming is on the outside of my body, felt but not seen. The work reaches or points towards that thing rather than the ontological, which is a very small thing, more like the molecular thing. So the work often reaches out toward something that at least references the theological or God-like. The other, the ever-present other.

So for this body of work we have created a kind of guide, an exhibition guide, and within that guide we have read-also's or see-also's. Within those we say you should reference—you should see this novel, *Lila*, by Marilynne Robinson, or you should look at the song "We Don't Eat," by James Vincent McMorrow, and Luke, I know that your work often includes music when you're doing film, or you listen to a lot of music, not as inspiration but as a way of seeing another kind of composition. Music is very narrative; novels are narrative; the work, which is personal and comes from your life, is narrative, but the work in and of itself is non-narrative. It doesn't follow kind of an illustrative beginning, plot line, climax, and an end. So how do you know from a kind of narrative knowledge base, inspiration base, and come up with something that is non-narrative?

*Luke:* That's an interesting question. I guess the distinction that I would make—I feel like I should introduce myself. I've been introduced but, hello, I'm Luke. I'm a person. I suppose the distinction that I would make between narrative and non-narrative, at least in the case of the visual work that I've been making and the way that I've been thinking about it—a narrative always involves some kind of after-the-fact reflection on an experience. So a narrative is

constructed in a way that your present, immersed experience, is not constructed in the same way. It's a direct encounter, rather than something that you're reflecting and sort of putting the pieces together. So I wouldn't really characterize music necessarily as narrative, and I wouldn't characterize the work as narrative. I think the work here responds to experience, but I hope that I'm not putting together like a story about my experience. I hope that—I think one way that I'm trying to avoid doing that in particular is by revealing the making of the work in as many cases as possible. So one way of doing that is—I mean, obviously this is not even a representational piece in any way, but still, the heavy gesso on the canvas reveals the making, the sort of clumsy stitching reveals the making. There's nothing about it that's hiding, hopefully; it's revealed making. And I hope that that pushes against—I hope that that kind of clumsiness and that kind of revelation pushes against any sort of tendency toward construction, a tendency toward trying to tidy up my own narrative and tell a story. I hope that I'm not telling a story as much as responding to an experience. As far as how that relates to music—well, you were asking more about narrative qualities in music, so I'll leave it at that.

So my next question is, why did you make this work? Why did you make this work specifically? The last question I asked you responded sort of broadly to your work as a whole, but this work in particular—are you trying to communicate something? are you making this work out of necessity or are you making this work just because you want to? I suppose what I'm asking is, why did this work have to exist?

*Annemarie:* So, I'll start more from the personal at this point. My life is one that engages with distance and transience more than it does with close—settling, on the land. I did my undergraduate work in Ohio; I'm from Maryland; I'm doing my graduate work in Georgia, coming from Ohio. What I found through that was that my body and my emotions and my psyche respond heavily and violently to land. Different lands effect emotions differently, in ways that are overwhelming and violent to the point that—I don't know—there's something happening inside of me that I can't actually verbalize. One way to resolve that, probably, is talking it out with a friend or writing about it. But there's something completely nonverbal and something completely unexplainable, so rather than words or rather than kind of just dealing with it, what I have found is rewarding and also presses into other areas of life is to create art about it. To create metaphors and poetic mediators that deal with this nonverbal thing, and then what expands from that are philosophical questions and religious questions. So the work responds to distance, the work responds to memory, the work responds to imaginative remembering, which is a concept from Walter Brueggemann which creates to the mythology that was developed in the Old Testament, in Old Testament writing. They are creating these mythologies and these stories and these God stories and these Yahweh stories in an effort to remember what has happened before in a way that points to the future and a way that is very present. So that's what this work is for me. There's also a distance from people like Luke. When I moved from Ohio to here, I was leaving a person that was one of the only humans that, when I said something like, "The horizon line feels like it's aching," he's like, "No, but I get it." So distance from that kind of access to language prompted something—prompted the creation of something that was books and paintings and kind of little sculptures because when you're separated—and it's like a—I don't want it to sound

Hallmark-y, but when you're separated from that kind of friendship and that kind of access to that part of your life, there's a way that you have to—it's almost a desperation, that you have to remember it. And so it came out of that, but it kind of wiggled its way into my studio and latched itself onto my studio practice and I was like, "Well, it's there." So I accepted it at that point.

Again within the guide—no, not within the guide, within the statement—two new phrases it uses, one is "poetic signifier" and the other one is "poetic mediator." Signifier is not the same as mediator, but both use poetic. "Poetic mediator" is the term that I use within my writing. Luke uses "poetic signifier." Can you explain what the signifier is?

*Luke:* My next question was going to be about what the mediator is, so that's appropriate. We'll just go back and forth on this. The poetic signifier—I was taking a class last year on literary theory and we were talking about semiotics, which is something that I wasn't really familiar with before. I knew a little bit about Wittgenstein, some of his theories of language, but I think the useful thing about semiotics for me was that it included this notion of the sign. And for anybody who doesn't know about semiotics, the sign, as a part of language, has two components: the signifier and the signified. So the signifier, as part of the sign, is—like, when I say "tree," the word "tree" is the signifier and the signified is the idea of the tree in your mind, the concept of the tree that appears in your thoughts. But the interesting thing about the sign to me is that there's this third element that isn't part of the sign but is part of the world, which is the concrete referent, which is the actual tree. So I say "tree" and you think of an imaginary tree, but you're not really thinking of the actual tree that I'm talking about, this tree here; you're thinking of an idea of a

tree in your head. And by doing that, there's at least the potential that you are overlooking the real tree, the tree itself, the concrete referent that is the actual tree, and you're replacing it mentally with a sort of imaginary tree. The only reason I care about this—I mean, it doesn't matter when you're talking about trees, that much; I like trees, but they're not—but it matters a lot more when you're talking about people, when you're talking about human beings. If I'm thinking about you and we're having a conversation about Kaitlyn over here, and Annemarie says "Kaitlyn" and I'm thinking of some construct I have in my head about Kaitlyn and I'm not actually attentive to the real person that Kaitlyn is, that's problematic. I think that leads to a lack of compassion, a lack of awareness of the people that I'm interacting with, and I suppose that it's centrally important to me to be attentive to others and to care about others. So when I'm using the idea of the poetic signifier, my thinking in that term—that's sort of a shorthand for what I would call a "non-arbitrary gesture of signification." So the first problem with the signifier—the first problem with the sign is that the signifier and the signified—it's an arbitrary connection. The word "tree" has no actual connection to the tree itself. It's just a random series of sounds that we've constructed to refer to the tree. In making, my hope is that I'll be making things that, rather than functioning as language, function as metaphor. So instead of this referring to a referent—I'm sorry, referring to a signified, instead of this being a signifier referring to a signified, it is a signifier with no signified. There's no specific concept that it references. And by being gestural in that way, and being non-arbitrary in the sense that it doesn't have an arbitrary connection to some specific concept, and then by being gestural, becoming a non-arbitrary gesture of signification, it can point to something that you maybe don't have the kind of direct access that you would have conceptually if we were using specific language, like "tree," but

through close phenomenological observation of an object like this, you have the capacity—I think it at least invites a greater attentiveness to the thing itself. Whatever this is gesturing toward may be something that isn't captured very well in specific language, but it's something that may be accessible in another way, through the kind of epistemology of the direct encounter. So that's a clumsy meander through what I'm thinking about when I say "poetic signifier." Poetic is a shorthand for non-arbitrary gesture of signification.

So, then, when you're talking about the poetic mediator, you're talking about something a little bit different. What are you talking about?

*Annemarie:* That was a good—that was a great explanation. When I talk about the mediator, I am referencing something that is embedded within Hinduism. Which the—any kind of god symbol, any kind of religious symbol, the way that the temples are built, the way that Sanskrit is written, is constantly acknowledging both a cosmos within the human and referencing a cosmos within the earth and also the earth itself. So it's constantly trying to orient the humans by saying, "You are significant; you have life within you. Now also use this kind of metaphor, symbol to use the life that is on the outside of you." And they're also referencing that kind of theological presence. It doesn't have to be God. For them it comes in the many different instances. Art, for myself, has always been something that has addressed the kind of cognitive dissonance that I feel in the world. There are just things I don't have names for, emotions that I don't think that we've correctly addressed. There's a non-empiricism that I think is so beautiful and so right and so radiant. And empirical language doesn't give me the tools to address it. And that non-empirical is



haunting to me; I'm obsessed with it. So I'm constantly trying to reconcile myself with this non-empirical presence within an empirical world, and the way—the center point for that is decidedly art making. So the mediator is something that stands in between me and kind of the rest of the world. It stands in between me and eye contact that says about sixteen different things. It stands between me and sunsets that feel all at once quaint and all at once apocalyptic. It's ways of understand that—whether or not that's needed in the world or whether or not that's—it can become academic; it has become academic—I'm in a graduate program. I think it addresses lots of things that happen within philosophy and religion and with anthropology. But for me, personally, it stands between me and the rest of the world.

Can you speak about—there's a severity in your work. Everything's kind of like, sewn in, ripped apart, and like scratched on, and the candles are melted and drawers are pulled out, so there's kind of like a severity that's occurring. This is severe. Can you just talk about, what is that severity pushing against, and then, is there anything within the work that kind of pushes against the severity?

*Luke:* I think that what you're identifying as severity—hopefully, as you're saying, there's something that pushes back against that or something that's pushing against. Hopefully it's not exclusively severe or violent. I think there is violence in some of these things, or maybe all of them. I think that's definitely true. I think for me that begins as a compositional choice rather than—I'm not trying to represent violence in the work or something; I'm not particularly interested in representing in that way, at all. So I think it begins as a compositional decision, that

I want to make sure—and also, I guess, a decision about my own thinking—I want to make sure that I’m not sort of getting really comfortable with this one conclusion. You know Kay Ryan—I don’t know if the rest of you know Kay Ryan, but maybe Kay Ryan’s a really good way to talk about this. So the poet Kay Ryan writes these really wonderful poems, and I think they’re pretty accessible as well, so you should go get them and read them. But she’ll write a poem and she’ll describe an idea and let you get sort of comfortable with this thing she’s describing—this isn’t every poem, but this is a lot of poems. She let’s you get comfortable with whatever it is that she’s describing, and then at the end of the poem, the turn of the poem is something really subtle. It’s some subtle problem with, some subtle problematization of this thing that she has been describing to you. It’s a way of flipping it over and saying, “Okay, I was saying that it was this way, and you were thinking, ‘Yeah, of course, it is that way,’ but it’s actually also this other way that’s almost exactly the opposite of what you were just thinking.” This would be way better if I had a Kay Ryan poem that I was reading to you right now. So that turn, I think, is what I’m looking for in the work. I’m looking for the work to be somewhat conflicted—anything that I make. This isn’t exclusively these pieces; I think anything that I make, I want to make sure that it’s in some amount of conflict with itself. Because I just don’t think many things in the world are one way. I think many things are both. There’s something quiet about—this is a quiet piece, it’s like white on canvas with a little bit of red stitching, and the stitching is little tiny, which could be saccharine in a way, it could be grossly sweet, and it’s like a tiny little—but I hope the violent mark making at least is something that resists that sweetness. So I think—there’s a lot of feathers in these pieces, and the feathers are like the end of *Forrest Gump* or something when the feather floats away and it looks really computer generated from the nineties or something. So I

don't want to end up in cute feather territory. And I don't think that's why I'm putting feathers on these things. So anyway, that's another rambling response. But it feels like compositionally there needs to be something that undercuts, that resists a sort of easy read of, "Oh, you have a stripe painting." It's—there's something else that comes in and pushes against that, for sure. So I think the violence is compositional first and foremost but also hopefully something that's true in the world, that there are tender parts of the work and also violent parts of the work. And I don't think—this is the last thing I'll say about it, but I don't think it sort of ends in a violent way. But I don't know; maybe it does. I'm not—I don't think I'm trying to sort of control whether it comes out violent or tender or both or neither. I think I just want to resist work that totally leans to one side. So read a Kay Ryan poem and maybe you'll know what I mean. Maybe you know already.

One last one. Is there anything else you would want to say about the actual compositional choices in the work? We have feathers, we have high contrast, we have some that are high contrast and some that are very quiet, as you were saying, there's violence in some of them, there's domestic objects like a piece of furniture here, ordinariness—is there anything you'd want to say about those compositional choices?

*Audience:* And I'd add to that, installation choices?

*Annemarie:* Compositionally, I can speak for my work, right now is the central figure, the minimal gesture, and the central figure and the minimal gesture both are reaching for presence within the work. I am looking to create more contemplative work that is serious. Reason being

that I think art posits itself within pretty much all parts of the culture. And it can posit itself at the beginning of the culture, and it can be within the middle as a kind of analysis, and it can be an end cap to a kind of cultural movement. And I think that things that begin either—or are trying to figure out the beginnings of something or the ends of something tend to be more minimal, and things that are really analyzing and responding to a cultural movement tend to be more spastic, tend to be more chaotic, very full picture plane. So I am thinking about the beginnings of myself, an internality, a contemplation, which has religious connotations, so the work tends to be very central. Text within the work is just referencing element that I don't have imagery for and then image and mark making are usually referencing a word or feeling that I don't have explanatory means for. The ordinariness—so feathers, there's shells, there's candles, this is my childhood dresser that I drove back from Maryland—so I think the ordinariness, when placed on a wall, becomes holy. If you walk into the house of somebody who is, who worships or is dedicated to somebody—to one of the gods of Hinduism—they'll have a shrine in the household. But within that shrine it's herbs which are normal and then a picture frame, they'll have a picture frame and a picture of the god, and a little—so all of it's very ordinary but its like—and it's rising up out of this domestic space, but they're trying to contact the cosmos. They're trying to—they're not thinking of like, "Oh maybe there's a spirit over there," they're trying to like—all of it. They're trying to access this like, in a little cove off the side of their kitchen. And I think there's something wonderful about that and something that I don't think is really offered within where I live, here, in the eastern parts of America. I don't know. I want to access that, I feel like I should access that. And then installation, referencing installation, do you want to talk more about that?

*Luke:* This work was made over a period of two years rather than specifically for this show, and I think we had talked about the idea a long time ago of like, could we do a show at some point as like, the prints that you made and the books that I'm making and then it sort of grew out of control and we decided to put all this stuff in and the other paintings and everything, which wasn't originally part of the thing. But I think the decision about the installation, the final decision, we talked about all kinds of different like, well, do we put in this other random work that's not conceptually in the same space but sort of visually in the same space? I think the decision was that this work is a specific response to a time and to an experience: the experience of distance between us, and then the way that that experience gestures out into experiences of distance generally and et cetera. And so I think we just ultimately said, "Let's just include the work that we made, and let's put it up in the most direct way possible." So the only space that's not sort of just a series of things hanging on the wall is this area behind us, which is just because we had all these tiny pieces and then these domestic references, and I think one thing we wanted to avoid was creating a sort of quasi-domestic space where it was like a living room with a dresser, and putting this stuff on a little table, and—I don't think we wanted to do that, and so we wanted to push against some of that kind of thing by putting the pedestals in but there still is that stuff going on. And so a lot of the decisions were resisting a kind of—we have the domestic pieces but we also wanted to resist any type of a pretend living room. So it was, this was sort of a guess and check method I suppose, but the rest of it was pretty direct, just hanging it up on the wall, sixty on center.

I think we're at the end the time; if you had questions you wanted to ask, you're welcome to do so.

*Audience:* I was wondering how you see each of your separate works informing each other. By the fact that you decided to put an exhibition together—I found, going through, at first I thought it was all by one person.

*Luke:* This whole thing started with little feathers sewn onto a piece of paper in the mail; it didn't start out as actual pieces. And then I was making—I was just in a printmaking class; I'm not a printmaker—but I was in a printmaking class and I started making prints and I was thinking about—the feather had nothing to do with this at first, but then I was thinking, I was looking for an image; I wanted to—I had done mostly abstract paintings before that so I was looking for something that I could use as an actual image just because I felt like I should try it, because I hadn't done it much. So I was looking for something in the world that has the particular quality of being lost, maybe from the body, in this case from the body—it didn't have to be that—but something that comes from you and can never be sort of replaced in the same way but that you nevertheless try to keep. And this idea of keeping, I mean, it's part of the title as well. I think I started using the feather, after a couple of false starts with other imagery, specifically because it had those qualities. But then the feather became increasingly sort of less—it diminished in importance over the course of me making the things that I was making, and it sort of ended up just being there as an impetus for other things, and the formal qualities were more significant than the image of the feather, which doesn't do much on its own. And so I sort of made the prints

and then Annemarie said, “Well, I’m going to make books,” and I think the idea of keeping was one of the threads that ran through all of the things that we did. There was this sewing in, this holding onto, and this question of—at least for me, part of that is the question of—I mean, this is the same question that I have—maybe this is stupid, but it’s the same question that I have about picking flowers, when you’re walking in the field and you pick flowers and I’m thinking like, yeah, but you just totally killed that flower because you felt so compelled to possess that beauty. It wasn’t enough for you to just let it exist. And so that’s part of the question here. I think that, is there a kind of desperate grasping? Is the hold too tight? And so that keeping, and that question of possession or a loose hold is a constant thread through a lot of it, I think. Those are some of my answers to that question, but maybe you have a couple things to add, more about the back and forth of it.

*Annemarie:* So the feather in the mail, and then you told me that you were doing a print series. And then I think the next semester I did the muslin pieces that are out there, where I stretched a canvas with muslin and then I thought, “I could make this crazy, or I could just sew one single feather in.” And then the feather kind of led to, “What if I have this single flame imagery?” Which it simultaneously became female anatomy, referencing of my body, trying to remember what I am. And I think that I was also thinking of candles. So I think for me it was probably more of a direct lead in. The little yellow piece that says, “I don’t know the curve of my own spine,” was probably one of the first pieces that I did in my studio, first semester of graduate school. And we included that even though it wasn’t quite part of the call and response because I

was already responding to distance, I was responding to an internality, I was responding to, maybe something that somebody else knows that I don't know.

*Luke:* It might be important to observe one more time—I think we've already said this, but I don't think that either of us, with any of these pieces, probably, sat down and said, "I'm making this as a..." It wasn't trying to specifically make pieces that were about our friendship or something. It wasn't that, and I don't even think it was a—like it had to be necessarily a call and response. I think that's just what it naturally became. I was making the pieces that I was making, and looking at your work, and making things that did respond to it, sort of naturally, because of our friendship and our connection. So I think it was a fairly organic thing, rather than a sort of—any others?

*Audience:* Because you mentioned the feather and then the flame and then the candles, by doing so you're working in a tradition of iconography. And I would immediately think of the phoenix with that. I'm not sure you had that intention, but you have the feather of the bird and the bird goes in fire and is reborn, which works very nicely with your religious and spiritual—anyhow. So, I'm just going to throw that out—that's what art historians do. I'm just going to throw that out there for you.

*Annemarie:* I don't know that I would actually put that together, mainly because the—but I think that's an interesting thing to think about. It definitely becomes I think an iconography but not—it's an iconography that I think melds with so many other things. It melds with the slippage of the



painted image. It melds with different metaphors and philosophical pursuits and kind of—so that it doesn't fall out of iconography, it's just [garbled].

*Luke:* But I think that observation brings up an interesting point to me that the commonality between having a feather and a flame—it's not a direct reference to—we didn't paint a phoenix, you didn't paint a phoenix, but that connection raises a question for me of—I suppose the connection that I see, rather than a reference to the phoenix, I think the question is, where does the phoenix come from? Where does this notion of this reborn creature who's a flaming bird—the origin of that notion and the origin of this—particularly because, perhaps that's somewhere embedded in my consciousness, but I don't spend a lot of time thinking about phoenixes, so I think there's a kind of essence that those ideas may share, even if the gesture isn't a direct reference.