

Nina Papaconstantinou's Bookcase

By Claire Gilman

Nina Papaconstantinou's drawings offer a novel take on the use of language in art a practice that, although now commonplace, has its roots in an unexpected linguistic turn c. 1960 as artists sought to recover a direct, sensory experience of the world outside of symbol and representation. Paradoxically perhaps, language became a favored tool in this effort with artists like Dan Graham, Carl Andre, Sol Le Witt and Lawrence Weiner submitting the written text to verbal and visual manipulation in an effort to evacuate predictable meaning and uncover the materiality of language as a system of signs. In Papaconstantinou's drawings, however, language is not something to be broken down, taken apart, moved around and rebuilt; or at least not primarily. It is above all something painstakingly rendered.

The results are less textual analyses and re-configurations in the manner of Concrete Poetry or Carl Andre's typewriter poems, than effulgent surfaces that only reveal their linguistic basis on close inspection or through titular clues. From a distance, *Bookcase* (ongoing since 2002) consists of a grid of densely worked monochromes; forty drawings executed in a chromatic range of light to bright to deep dark blue hung floor-to-ceiling on the wall. Sustained viewing reveals that these drawings are actually renderings of words—indeed, entire books—transcribed onto single sheets of paper via carbon copy ink. Dylan Thomas's *Under Milkwood*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, and M. Karagatsis's *Lost Island*—to name a few of the texts that comprise Papaconstantinou's shifting installation—mingle like interchangeable fields divorced from narrative intention.

In the process, Papaconstantinou reveals both the materiality of language and the opacity at its core. Scratchings, absences, fade-outs, left-over traces, these are the marks that constitute Papaconstantinou's gestural lexicon here and in related works using correction pen, pin pricks, and inkless pen as their method of transcription. The now standard notion that

language is grounded in absence, made familiar through decades of structuralist and poststructuralist thought, is aptly demonstrated by a work like *Diary of a Young Girl* (2010), in which Papaconstantinou copied the first twenty-eight days of Anne Frank's diary on very thin paper, so that the finished work consists of the traces of ink left on the paper beneath. But it is also rendered palpable in the bookcase drawings in which, no matter how visually dense, the written word exists less as a positive entity than as a removal from fullness (as represented by the unmolested carbon paper). Confirming the notion that language resides as much in what cannot be said as in what it renders sensible, Papaconstantinou's illegible plenums physicalize Blanchot's definition of writing as "itself only the appearance of what has disappeared."¹

But if Papaconstantinou's drawings reveal something about writing, her written texts also inflect upon the specificity of visual form. Indeed, the immersive all-at-onceness of her color fields, as well as their appeal to symbolic immediacy [in many of her carbon copy drawings Papaconstantinou has selected ink color based on thematic associations—red for *Little Red Riding Hood* (2001) and Stendhal's *Vittoria Accoraboni*; blue for *The Fisherman's Wife* (2003); white for Kafka's unread *Letter to his Father* (2006)], is undercut by the linguistic murmuring beneath. There is in these scripted surfaces, in other words, a communicative intention that gives the lie to the very notion of expressive immediacy, an incessant stuttering that refuses to be quieted in a totalizing visual presentation: red = passion; white = absence. In fact, one might argue that Papaconstantinou's subject is less the essential *nature* of writing (or drawing), less *what* any particular medium communicates, than *how* they communicate. For by reading one medium through another, Papaconstantinou allows the viewer to perceive the way in which each operates—that is, the work that they literally do. By physicalizing the written gesture through drawing, on the one hand, and by revealing the narrative intention of mark-making on the other, Papaconstantinou focuses attention on the labor/desire for expression at their core.²

It is not accidental that Papaconstantinou's medium of choice is carbon copy paper, a material that is associated not with the lofty realm of the visual arts but with the mundane

¹ Maurice Blanchot,

² Giorgio Agamben

world of business documents and paid labor. Nor is this pragmatic association incompatible with her stated identification with monastic transcription considered in its own day a kind of manual labor albeit of the highest sort. The analogy is apt for, much like her own work, the value of monastic manuscript production was understood to lie as much in the dedication to the task at hand as in the finished product or the content of the text being rendered. It is this effort that Papaconstantinou consistently foregrounds both in the carbon copy drawings and, perhaps more concretely, in a series of works that render language and image through sewing, embroidery and weaving. An early example is *Hansel and Gretel* (2001) in which the artist wrote the fairytale four times beginning each time from a different side of the square of paper so that the drawing has a dense woven texture. *Six Swans* (2007) goes even further. Here, the artist transcribed the Brothers Grimm tale six times, cut up the paper on which the story was written, and wove the pieces together at random in six different ways. The resultant works hover between drawing and craft object providing evidence, in Papaconstantinou's words, of the time-consuming nature of her endeavor. Appropriately, the Brothers Grimm story itself thematizes an act of self-denying labor as the girl protagonist is forced to keep silent while knitting shirts that will restore her swan brothers' human forms. The idea here is that the girl must slow down what is normally automatic—communication through speech—by concretizing her effort to reach out into the world and have an impact. It is the same with Papaconstantinou's gesture, which, slowed down and rendered physical through weaving and sewing, positions drawing as a just such an act of self-extension. In other words, it is this drive for communication rather than any specific content that is her true subject.

Hence the artist's predilection for fairytales and diaries as source material. In fairytales, any particular story exists as a pretext of sorts for the expression of universal fears and desires. And, in this context, the motif of the quest is paramount. Regarding the latter, although the diarist's story is built upon an assertion of individuality, the form itself conveys a universal longing for self-recognition that, by its very nature, it is fated to achieve only incompletely. Papaconstantinou's diary projects are manifold. They include, among others, the aforementioned *Diary of a Young Girl* (2010); *Sylvia Plath: The Missing Journal* (2008) in which the artist copied excerpts from the writer's journals in a pen without ink and sewed the pages

together like a scroll; and *Diary (Robinson Crusoe)* (2008) which uses needle and thread to record the days Crusoe spent on the island much as he tracked time passing on a piece of wood. For the latter, Papaconstantinou created a bound book each page of which contains one line of variously sized sewn lines. In this way, the artist likens the diaristic impulse not to the expression of selfhood but to the simple gesture of marking oneself out in time, an act that is endless and irresolvable. Left behind are the holes, the tears in the paper that the thread valiantly attempts to stitch together.

Significantly, during the last year, Papaconstantinou created her own diary project. Entitled *Self-Portrait Diary* (2010-2011), the work consists of twenty-eight drawings based on photographs taken by the artist of herself writing in her journal over a period of twenty-eight days. Papaconstantinou manipulated the photos in Photoshop, printed them, and positioned each image above a piece of drawing paper placed on top of a piece of cork. She then traced the lines of the printed image so that the resultant portrait appears in hazy, inkless relief. Much as with *Diary (Robinson Crusoe)*, Papaconstantinou defines identity here not by who she is, or what she has to say (indeed, we are not privy to the content of Papaconstantinou's private reflections), but by what she does—via pen, pencil, pins, strips of paper, needle and thread, and language. In fact, one might argue that all of Papaconstantinou's work is a self-portrait of sorts. Grouped together in *Bookcase*, for example, the carbon copy drawings become a portrait of the artist through the texts that influence her. And if these texts define her, then her recording of them constitutes her projection into the world in an ongoing process of reception and transmission. This ceaseless back-and-forth is the condition of language and, as figured by Nina's attentive hand, it is the condition of mark-making as such.

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