



Text, Image, and Disruption

in Sheilah ReStack's *Control is Cassandra*

BY ANNICK MACASKILL



Sheilah ReStack, *Control is Cassandra*, Installation view, 2022.
Image courtesy of The Blue Building Gallery. Photo: Ryan Josey



Sheilah ReStack, *May you choose your own recognition (for SE)*, 2022.
Angle iron, polaroids, gold leaf. Image courtesy of The Blue Building Gallery. Photo: Ryan Josey

Given their shared interest in articulating the ineffable, it is not a surprise that poets and visual artists often collaborate or respond to each other's works. Sheilah ReStack's exhibition *Control is Cassandra* is one such response, an answer to a lecture by one of Canada's most prominent contemporary poets.

Originally presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2008, where it was accompanied by images of the works of American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, Anne Carson's three-part

lecture "Cassandra Float Can" was more recently published as one of the twenty-three chapbooks that make up her collection *Float* (McClelland & Stewart, 2016). At the heart of this essay, the award-winning poet and translator reflects on her decision to preserve the onomatopoeic Ancient Greek utterance emitted by Cassandra at the start of a prophetic speech pronounced in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In lieu of selecting a colloquial English equivalent, Carson transcribes the original expression



Sheilah ReStack, (left) *If this then yes*, 2022. (right) *Saddle as Material*, 2021.
Image courtesy of The Blue Building Gallery. Photo: Ryan Josey



Sheilah ReStack, (left) *Reversal of Affect*, 2022. (right) *Dani and Rose; to dismantle and create*, 2021.
Image courtesy of The Blue Building Gallery.
Photo: Ryan Josey

phonetically: “OTOTOTOI POPOI DA!” In addition to faithfully rendering this sound (a scream that, Carson points out, is “untranslatable, yet not meaningless”), this textual interruption seems to reflect Carson’s own practice as a translator: “Whenever I am engaged on a translation project I experience continually, offside my vision, a sensation of veils flying up.”

This seemingly insignificant decision harkens to a centuries-old question in translation theory—should a translation be more faithful to the source language (the language of the original text) or the target language (the language of the translation)? In opting for the former, Carson creates a moment of confusion for the non-Greek-reading audience; Cassandra’s scream is likely to be understood, given the passage’s context, but not without some work or discomfort, a veil flying up to momentarily disrupt our reading. Other translators, Carson notes, have translated this scream as “Alas!” or another familiar English equivalent. And while literary theorists such as Walter Benjamin have occasionally argued for respecting the source language’s idiom, even when the result is awkward, Carson’s transliteration sticks out in an otherwise fluid English-language passage.

ReStack’s multimedia exhibition *Control is Cassandra* foregrounds a similar interest in disruptions, and, indeed,

the lack of control that comes with them. Displayed at the Blue Building Gallery in Halifax from May 7 to July 2, the exhibition features pieces by the artist as well as works made in collaboration with her partner, Dani ReStack. Even before I entered the space of the gallery, I noted that the awkward syntax of the exhibition’s title echoes Carson’s “Cassandra Float Can,” not to mention the grammar of Ancient Greek, an inflected language with a higher tolerance for word order variation than English.

The exhibition takes the form of 174 gold-leafed Polaroids; eleven felt photo “blankets,” all of which feature other media; and an eight-minute video playing on a loop. Each altered/edited image features (several kinds of) visual disruptions. The Polaroids, some of which appear to have been overexposed, are all layered or partially layered in gold leaf, and this surface is scratched, revealing some of the original image underneath. Pressed between plexiglass and balanced on concrete blocks, the “blankets” display photos digitally printed on pieces of felt. These works are double-sided, jutting out from the wall at about a 45-degree angle, allowing only a partial glimpse of the rear images. Finally, the video montage includes bright, obscured shots that also suggest overexposure. In addition to these most obvious alterations, the artist has incorporated lines



Sheilah ReStack, *Rose looks out window in kitchen*, 2022.

Felt photo blanket, plexi, concrete, copper pins, fibre walking print, photo paper, thread, photo from Barbara and Rob, concrete, graphite. Image courtesy of The Blue Building Gallery. Photo: Ryan Josey

of poetry on some of the felt photo blankets. These bits of text are difficult to read, either obscured by other media or on the backs of the images, almost all of them handwritten in pencil lead or ballpoint pen scrawl. Similarly, some of the sound in the video is distorted.

The pieces in the exhibition are united in their deconstructed representation of the artist's domestic everyday. The Polaroids contain images of ReStack's foster child (which are almost entirely obscured, partly for legal reasons), while the photo blankets offer glimpses of the artist's partner and non-foster child, as well as a mix of other materials (including fur, pieces of clothes, paint, and dried goldenrod). Running on a television tucked in the corner of the gallery, "The Sky's In There" presents a series of clips from the artist's life in Ohio. Images of horses, teeth-brushing, and flirtatious lovemaking with her partner bleed together. The montage slows down somewhat as we hear the artist and her partner discussing gender fluidity. Just as their conversation deepens, the two are interrupted by their child—a reflection on how domestic

banality interrupts philosophy and art? Perhaps, but in a gesture that thwarts easy interpretation, the video continues with shots of stalagmites against a background of electronic music ("The Troublemakerz" by Boris Brejcha) and the child's indistinct babble, a kind of dreamy elevation that suggests the artist's delight in this and other disruptions. ■

Annick MacAskill is the author of three full-length poetry collections, including Shadow Blight, which was published by Gaspereau Press in the spring of 2022. Her poems have appeared in journals across Canada and abroad and in the Best Canadian Poetry anthology series. She has been selected as a finalist for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award, the CBC Poetry Prize, the Arc Poem of the Year Award, and an Atlantic Book Award, among other honours. MacAskill also recently served as Arc's 2021-2022 Poet-in-Residence. She lives in Kjiptuk (Halifax), on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. annickmacaskill.com