

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Raymond Boisjoly: The Explanatory Void

March 25–July 24, 2022

Reference Gallery

Raymond Boisjoly’s works with texts, photographs, and images explore how language, culture, and ideas are mediated, and reveal the productive character of misrecognition or misunderstanding.

Cambridge, MA—March 8, 2022—This spring, the MIT List Visual Arts Center presents a solo exhibition of new works by Raymond Boisjoly. A Vancouver-based artist of Haida and Quebécois descent, Boisjoly expands on the Post-Conceptual photography of the Vancouver School while attending to complex negotiations of Indigeneity in the context of colonialism. His works often interrogate their own place in the realm of fine art by engaging vernacular conventions in photography and fabrication, and by using readily available materials (such as nylon tarp, commercial vinyl, office paper, or beer cans) as printing mediums. Boisjoly is also interested in the ways that both images and language can break or fail, and he often fosters misperception and miscomprehension by deliberately impairing legibility. “If we disorient our vision,” he contends, and “if we seek to misunderstand that which is being viewed or recorded, then another type of understanding can emerge, one that only comes through detour or obstacle.”

One of the works included is a photographic diptych on vinyl titled *Parasite (After Michel Serres)* (2021), which references the French philosopher’s theory of communication, in which noise is an inevitable obstacle—a parasite in all verbal and written exchanges. Playing with a figure–ground relationship and a stark contrast of legibility, Boisjoly cast a warped band of his own enlarged words (drafted in image-editing software) across two adjacent vinyl panels, whose colored grounds are dense with scanned texts from book pages. Both the larger phrase and scanned pages were shot on computer screens through an analog process of multiple exposures.

In a related piece on view, *Clinamen (After Lucretius)* (2021), Boisjoly also embeds and registers a certain kind of inheritance or influence, referencing thinking that has informed Boisjoly’s own. In this work as well as *Parasite*, each exposure modifies the previous, and together, they become one image. With this interfacing, Boisjoly also deliberately obscures what is cited by generating a kind of noise. In his work, photography is a tool not for indexing the world with fidelity but for thinking through displacement, mediation, and distancing. “When you don’t have direct and immediate access,” he has said, “it ultimately changes your knowledge of the content and how you might proceed to speak to others about it. There is a productive character to misrecognition or misunderstanding.”

A new suite of eight works printed on vinyl uses a similar process of analog-photography double exposure, capturing text Boisjoly composed in image-editing software to further reflect on these themes. “We are somehow what we know ... / ... and we are what we do not yet know,” reads a palimpsest of wavy, distorted words in two of these panels. These works, like the others on view, challenge us to see, and to read, two texts simultaneously. They also reflect on knowledge, language, and experience in a way that offers a link to the exhibition’s title, *The Explanatory Void*. While the spectral presences of words hang like shadows and echoes in these artworks, the gulf they make visible represents a chasm between language and experience, or language and understanding.



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In all of these pieces, Boisjoly seeks to expose what he calls the “peculiar” limits of writing in relation to a dominant culture. In what is perhaps the most challenging pair of artworks to decipher, the overlaid texts read: “Language is bound by experience, and yet it is never quite fully our own to use.” Knowledge production is undeniably political, Boisjoly’s work reminds us, and it, too, is continually subject to dynamics of power and the assumption of language as a shared infrastructure. In Boisjoly’s pieces, however, language does not have a guaranteed legibility. Rather, it creates noise, and emerges from noise.

A tension between legibility and distortion is also given form in a large, site-specific wall drawing, in which Boisjoly renders undulating, barely decipherable text directly onto the wall with a beer can. The graphite-like quality of the rubbed aluminum recalls silverpoint drawing, while his unconventional tool also references a harmful stereotype—one that negatively associates alcohol with people of Indigenous heritage. However, the artist’s overtly political beer can use seeks to neutralize this stereotype. “I’m trying to find ways to articulate that it doesn’t have to hold that power,” he asserts. In so doing, Boisjoly distorts expectations and tenders the possibility that a can of beer may also be a tool for creative production. In the context of his practice, this particular work speaks to layered misperceptions and the wide-open possibilities of language, expression, and understanding that exist at the margins of legibility.

Raymond Boisjoly (b. 1981, Langley, British Columbia) lives and works in Vancouver, where he is Assistant Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. He has had solo exhibitions at the Polygon Gallery, North Vancouver (2020); VOX, Montreal, Koffler Centre of the Arts, Toronto (2016); Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, PLATFORM Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Urban Shaman, Winnipeg (2014); Simon Fraser University Galleries, Burnaby (2013); and Forest City Gallery, London, ON (2012), among others. He has been featured in international biennials, including: Honolulu Biennial (2019); Les Ateliers de Rennes—biennale d’art contemporain (2018); Montreal Biennial and SITElines Santa Fe (2014). His work has also been included in exhibitions at Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University (2021); Remai Modern, Saskatoon (2020, 2018); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle (2017); Oakville Galleries (2016); Vancouver Art Gallery (2016, 2012); Logan Center, University of Chicago (2015); Triangle France, Marseille, Camera Austria, Vienna (2014); and the Power Plant, Toronto (2012). Boisjoly received a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art and Design (2006) and an MFA from the University of British Columbia (2008).

Raymond Boisjoly: The Explanatory Void is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator.

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