

INCOMMENSURABILITY AND TRANSLATION

At first glance, one might not assume there is a connection between the four figurative drawings that hang together on one wall of the gallery and the two pairs of large acrylic stripe paintings that appear to mirror each other on the two remaining walls. And it would probably be even more surprising to discover that this relationship involves language. Thinking in these terms, David Hutchinson's drawings after Alberto Giacometti's portrait of the French playwright and novelist Jean Genet are transcriptions of the original. His paintings, on the other hand, represent a kind of chromatic encryption of four short passages from Genet's 1947 novel Querelle de Brest. In these paintings, the artist "translates" the texts into a series of colored stripes using the names of Liquitex paint colors as his alphabet—a simple system that allows "aquamarine" to stand for "a," for instance. But it is immediately clear that there is something else going on here. Each painting consists of two separate canvases placed one above the other; however, not only do the colors of the stripes on the bottom not correspond to those on the top, but the stripes's width and number don't correlate either.

This curious disjunction is the result of a second process of translation. Whereas the encoded colors of the top canvas spell out the words of each passage in English (which is, of course, already a translation), those on the bottom represent the original French text. And this involves yet another form of translation: because the artist uses the same color-coding system for both texts, one might say that it's an English as opposed to a French chromatic alphabet. That is, the letter "y" corresponds to the color "yellow" but does not change to "j" for "jaune"—the French name for the same color—in the bottom canvas. This suggests that the experience of color, which is usually assumed to be purely retinal, is in fact mediated by language—and, moreover, that that language is never originary or before translation. This dizzying profusion of translations appears to contrast with the simple one-to-one correspondence between Hutchinson's drawings and their source, but the disparity between these seemingly dissimilar works is somewhat misleading.

As it turns out, the drawings were not done after Giacometti's painting but after a reproduction, which was itself embedded in a text—Genet's essay "The Studio of Alberto Giacometti." Interestingly, the portrait is reproduced in the French translation of Edmund White's The Selected Writings of Jean Genet but not in the original English text (as though the image couldn't be translated into English). Hutchinson's transcription of the reproduced painting harks back to his earlier work in which he painstakingly transcribed Genet's texts, often both the original French and the English translations. The essay to which these drawings allude, which Genet wrote while sitting for his own portrait, is arguably a portrait, in turn, of Giacometti, and Hutchinson's drawings are equally inflected by both portraits. Similarly, the short phrases that Hutchinson translates into the stripe paintings could be considered a kind of portraiture, since he chooses particularly representative selections of Querelle (which was, incidentally, the only novel that Genet wrote that was not autobiographical and did not include a first person narrator named "Jean Genet"). However, all of this cross-pollination between text and image only serves to confirm our suspicion that they remain incommensurable: they don't ever really "translate" but simply continue to refer—to each other. Citing Charles Saunders Peirce's studies in linguistics around the turn of the last century, Umberto Eco uses the term "interpretent" to explain this phenomenon: "in order to establish what the interpretant of a sign is, it is necessary to name it by means of another sign which in turn has another interpretant to be named by another sign and so on."¹ For Hutchinson, it's not just a matter of acknowledging this infinite regress, but of asking whether it is ever possible for a work not to be implicated by it.

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¹Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), 68.