

Mills Gallery

In the Words, In the Bones

Curated by
Magdalena Moskalewicz

May 23–July 21, 2019



Nyugen E. Smith, *Letter Home (Hoping to Reach You Soon) Partial Poem Sculpture*, 2015. Rubber, found enamel bowl, plastic and wood. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



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Artists: Marina Leybishkis, Nyugen E. Smith, Zsuzsanna Varga-Szegedi

Nyugen E. Smith, *Trauma (on site/sight)*, 2016. Glazed porcelain, found sculpture, textile, foam-board tiles. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Cecil McDonald

Stories of origin cannot exist without a language to tell them in, without a tongue to carry the words. This exhibition addresses inherited identities as grounded in language and in the body, and considers them from the perspective of postcolonial and postcommunist subjectivities. Three artists featured here: Marina Leybishkis, Nyugen E. Smith and Zsuzsanna Varga-Szegedi reflect on the words that get passed down through generations, and the bones of the body one receives. Speaking from their positions as US-based artists with roots in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean, the artists investigate the contentious heritage of the colonial era and postcommunist ruptures and absences in order to address the individual, bodily effects of collective cultural traumas.

In his artistic practice, **Nyugen E. Smith** critically analyzes the impact of colonialism on the black diaspora. Seeking new models for a truly decolonized knowledge, the artist revisits traditional African systems of spirituality and aesthetics, bringing them into the discussion about the contemporary black subject. Such is the case with the *Spirit Carriers*: floating, almost weightless sculptures made with found materials whose shape was dictated by the shape of the crowns worn by the Yoruba chiefs of West Africa. The head pieces with elaborate, beaded veils that inspired the artist had a double function: they covered the face of the monarch shielding his semblance from the public, while also protecting the people from the king's power. Similarly charged, each of Smith's *Carriers* is intended to embrace and care for a spirit of a deceased person—specifically, an unarmed person of color killed by police—before it can leave this world.

Cultural identity as grounded in language is tackled in a multi-part series *Masta My Language*. The series has at its center a poem the Smith wrote as a reflection on his disconnection from his Haitian ancestry; the artist never learned Haitian Creole. Smith meticulously cut the poem, letter by letter, in rubber with a knife, creating *Letter Home (Hoping to Reach You Soon) Partial Poem Sculpture*, a poem that can be physically held. He then used the cut-out spaces as visual signs in a newly developed system of signification, creating eight collages that transform those spaces of absence into an abstract alphabet. The visual message, compiled into pages and chapters, has no verbal equivalent, but can serve as a basis for musical notation: *Page 4* and *Page 5* in *Chapter 1* were translated into music in collaboration with William Reese, who performed the pieces on saxophone. An attempt at impossible communication, *Masta My Language* offers an investigation into the acquisition of language: the learning and un-learning; the latter being at the center of decolonized knowledge.



Nyugen E. Smith, *Masta My Language Chapter 1, Page 1*, 2015. Rubber, gesso, graphite, colored pencil, oil pastel, Zambian soil on paper. 30" x 24". Courtesy of the artist.

Yet another reflection on language—in this case, its power to uphold the colonizing grip of an empire—served as inspiration for *Trauma (on site)*. In a preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about the European colonizers' strategy to transform the young local elite by "branding them...with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouth full with high-sounding phrases, grand gluttonous words that stuck to teeth." Smith takes this metaphor of words stuck to teeth and transforms it into a visual sign of decay, a brownish glaze that simulates rotting. A decaying set of porcelain teeth is in his installation, mixed up with rococo-style figurines depicting the French youth.

Zsuzsanna Varga-Szegedi works with the memory of Communism in her native Hungary, and elsewhere in the former Eastern Europe. The artist is preoccupied with the notions of absence and erasure in relation to the Communist history of the region and its postcommunist, often nationalistic present. "What language or format to use," she asks, "where official narratives override and erase the histories of the individual?"

It is no coincidence that the three-dimensional scans of the body used in her work resemble maps. Varga-Szegedi uses individual bodies as the measure of scale for geopolitical conflicts; she illustrates the social ruptures through a corporal engagement. The cartographic shape in the *Site-Specific Self-Portrait*, which includes a cut-out from an existing gallery wall, is based on the artist's own body. The artist walked through the streets of Budapest taking panorama photographs and later focused on the parts of the image broken up by the photo-sensing algorithm—the fractured part of a photograph dictated the shapes of the installation's elements.



In a sense, Varga-Szegedi's own body worked as a receptor, an apparatus that, just like a camera, witnesses, records and archives the environments. Digital calibration as such became a metaphor of a body's phenomenological relationship to the surrounding space.

Absence in the postcommunist urban spaces is also at the center of the works thematizing the removed monument of György Lukács. A statue of the Marxist philosopher and influential literary theorist was removed in 2017 from the Szent Istvan park, on the grounds of the former ghetto, where it had been installed in 1985. It was one of the many attempts of the current Hungarian government to erase the country's Communist past, entangled with the nationalist sentiments grounded in anti-Semitism. Lukács' archive was closed to the public a year earlier, allegedly for the cataloguing and digitization—another form of control. Varga-Szegedi brings back the statue in Boston, not so much in a direct reconstruction, but as a personal reaction. She creates 3D scans for a printed head modeled after photographs of the Lukács' monument combined with her own gestures, with data undergoing a series of digital and manual mediation. The artist also projects the image of the Hungarian statue on the façade of Boston Center for the Arts, offering Lukács' ghost-like presence in a very different urban public space. New technologies give Zsuzanna Varga-Szegedi the power to symbolically fight the erasure. What interests her is identity beyond the nationalistic calibration of belonging.

Born and raised in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic in Central Asia, **Marina Leybishkis** speaks as a simultaneously post-Soviet and postcolonial subject. (Inhabited predominantly by ethnically Turkic and religiously Muslim population, Uzbekistan was incorporated into the Russian empire in the 19th century). The artist, however, is not Uzbek. In a country where nationality is

inherited from the father, Leybiskis is considered Jewish—her father was Jewish, while her mother’s family came from a Gulag. This complexity of her ancestry makes Leybiskis examine the very concept of modern family as an idealistic and romantic construct. The inaccessibility of her own cultural inheritance—from the unreachable family members to the unmarked graves of the Gulag—informs the artist’s practice, which is guided by the question: “How does one claim one’s own territory?” Leybiskis is inspired by archeology, the practice of accessing the lost past through excavation, but also, as she sees it, the science of staring into the blank.

Black Album contains a hundred sheets of family photographs that Leybiskis digitally burned into paper. The faces of relatives that this process brings forth are equally unfamiliar to the artist as they are to the viewer: the original set of photographs was shared by a distant and unknown relative when Leybiskis was an adult. In *Album*, thin white sheets of porcelain, some cracked and incomplete, hold traces of family photographs that the artist dipped in porcelain and burnt in kiln; the images are only revealed when illuminated. Devoid of emotional connection, what was once a cherished family album is treated by the artist as an archeological specimen; an object carrying lost knowledge that can no longer be accessed. Repeating after Gabriel Garcia Marquez that “you only have roots if you bury someone,” Leybiskis creates an installation that functions as a symbolic graveyard.

In all of the works exhibited here, bodies serve as carriers of histories. The colonial and communist narratives Smith, Varga-Szegedi, and Leybiskis inherited are marked with political conflicts and personal loss, but their own gestures are constitutive in nature. Through the use of invented languages, recovered historical records and reconstructed cultural artifacts, the artists create new, empowering narratives of reclamation, revival and growth.

Top: Zsuzsanna Varga-Szegedi, *Lukacs in Boston*, 2019. Site-specific digital projection on the facade of Boston Center for the Arts. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Zsuzsanna Varga-Szegedi, *Site-Specific Self-Portrait*, 2019. Site-specific installation: wood, plexiglass, custom electronics, painted graphite. Courtesy of the artist. (Visualization)



BIOGRAPHIES

Nyugen E. Smith (1976) is a first generation Caribbean-American interdisciplinary artist and educator living and working in Jersey City, NJ. Responding to the legacy of European colonial rule in the African diaspora, Smith's work considers imperialist practices of oppression, violence and intergenerational trauma. He is interested in ritual and sacred practice rooted in African spiritual systems and how they are employed as coping mechanisms and tools for collective empowerment. He holds a BA from Seton Hall University and an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Nyugen E. Smith has conducted public programs, visiting artist lectures and panel discussions at institutions including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA. He was awarded the 2016 Leonore Annenberg Performing and Visual Arts Fund, the 2018 Franklin Furnace Fund, and the 2018 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant.

www.nyugensmith.com

Zsuzsanna Varga-Szegedi (1976) is a Boston-based interdisciplinary artist born in Hungary. Szegedi's art is influenced by her experience of living through the transition from socialism to post-communist capitalism. She is interested in the conceptual matrix of geo- and chronopolitics concerning issues of identity, place and the construction of narratives. Her works address the critical space of the liminal; positions of change that respond to global concerns of belonging. Embracing sites of transition, Szegedi combines traditional and emerging technologies, integrating video, painting, photography, as well as performance. Szegedi's research interests include the power of absence and the possibility of reparative histories; she explores these topics through the intersection of absentology, decolonial and posthuman theories and digital humanities. Her recent research travels to the former Eastern bloc examined how absence can produce empowering paradigm shifts. Zsuzsanna Szegedi holds a BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has exhibited at sübSamsøn and St Botolph Club, Boston, MA; Montserrat Galleries, Beverly, MA; Modern Museum, Debrecen, and Knoll Galéria, Budapest, Hungary.

www.zsuzsanna.com

Marina Leybiskis (1980) is a New York-based multimedia artist who was born and raised in Uzbekistan. Through her use of video, photography, archives, archeology and text, Leybiskis analyzes the instability of meaning, the construction of visual narratives as locations of self-formation as well as the implications of such narratives onto perceptions of identity. In her work, the image becomes a fraught site for examining geopolitical concepts of nationality, cultural memory and the social body. Through her installations, Leybiskis transforms memory into materiality, challenging her viewers to inhabit histories in all their complexity. Marina Leybiskis holds a BA in Justice and Humanities Studies from The City University of New York and MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and is currently a Fulbright scholarship recipient in Greece.

404thepagecannotbefound.com

Magdalena Moskalewicz (1984) is an art historian, curator and editor specializing in art from (the former) Eastern Europe. She is based in Chicago, where she teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Top and bottom: Marina Leybiskis, *Album*, 2017, detail. Porcelain, steel, led lights, plexiglass. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

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