

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Matt Keegan

Lengua

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David Berezin: How should we start this?

Matt Keegan: I think the best way to preface it is that I recently went to your studio and that it was clear that there's an affinity between our work, even though the work is quite different. Both have an interest in language and also specifically within language, familiar phrases. My interest in familiar phrases, and for this particular exhibition as filtered through my mother's ESL work, her flash cards, made me think that we were working from a familiar starting point, specifically in the context of America. In your work it seems like you are working from a place where there's a kind of foundation of references as filtered through television and contemporary popular cinema.

Right. You know it's funny when I write about my work I often include the phrase: stock imagery and stock cultural practices. I think your attitude about language in that work is rubbing up against the idea of the stock, in a way, but it isn't stock footage or stock photographs, but... the last show you had in New York it also had to do with this idea of stock... it wasn't stock imagery, because you took all the pictures, but it somehow uses the idea of stock communication.

Well, I'm super interested in the vernacular of stock photography and I think it is relevant to both of our work, specifically because it is something that is supposed to be an empty vessel, which is obviously an impossibility, but its intention is within stock photography. There is a bank of images that could be activated by a spectrum of text, and advertorial copy that could promote a vast number of products. I hope it isn't excessively cheesy to quote myself, but I am going through this article I wrote in the beginning of the year about my mother's flash cards and I said that...

Was it the Map [magazine] text? I just read it before we got on the phone?

So I said, "This way of indexing images is in line with the functionality of stock photography: a genre that determines categories even before the shutter is released. So companies that purchase stock photographs enliven them with this specific context. The marketing copy that accompanies an advertisement helps to frame the stock image, whether it is a stage family, couple, or styled objects. Interestingly, my mother removed the text that accompanied her carefully selected advertorial photos. Her word application determined the scenario. She was both art director and copy editor." So I think that there's something within your work, that you are using these familiar tropes of the expectation of credits, the expectation of a title sequence, and it is so familiar that without even showing the body of the TV show or film, that you get a sense of it just from the closing music of the title credit, and the kind of graphic treatment of both.

Right. Do you think that the same can be said for your text pieces? Do you think your text pieces of simple phrases trigger a commonly understood experience or attitude? Do you feel like your phrases are... I guess how much do you care about the

specific in choosing those phrases?

They're specific in how vague they are. For example, some of the phrases that will be in the show are "it goes without saying" or "he said she said" or "it's not you it's me" or "nothing to declare", so they're...

I feel like "nothing to declare" is the one where we cross over...

But I also feel like "it's not you it's me" or "he said she said", are both so belabored and they're both indicative of a kind of impasse where subjectivity is immediately addressed but to no clear end. It's not pointing to something conclusive, it's already posited as being based on one perspective or another, so I feel like there is something interesting or relevant in terms of the language where there's something in motion, but in the case of "it's not you it's me" or "he said she said", it's almost like an endless loop, like your videos, because its not pointing to something finite, nor is it pointing to something specific, but something that, well, I shouldn't say not specific for your videos, because everything is quiet specific.

But it uses the generic and it uses the fact that you can describe it without having seen it, or if you hear a description without having seen it, you can understand. If one imagines the title sequence from a cop show with this text on it, and the variety of ways you can make that... I guess there are specifics to how I did it, but my goal was to create a believable title, to create my own stock or stand-in.

Right, and I also feel with my mother's flash cards, there's over 400 double-sided cards, so almost 800 images that she generated over the course of an approximately fifteen year period, and so much of them are taken from magazines and so much of them are images used in catalogs or where something is being sold, and I think that the space of those images and the fact that they're very anchored in a middle class aesthetic and they immediately point to a particular time period is also super relevant to your video work. Both, and funnily enough, are also very 90's or specific to the image and audio or music and image of that time period. I don't think the text pieces in my show are the copy for the images, but there's something open ended and reminiscent of advertorial copy in a phrase like "it goes without saying," or something that has a vagueness to it. So it can include a lot of different things.

I think that vagueness is the tie to stock, like you said, the meaning is predetermined before the image is made. Same as the phrase "it goes without saying," you understand when that phrase comes up, its use is already determined. I see a lot of the text work as a kind of a wink to a larger picture.

When we had our studio visit you asked if your work was very West Coast, but I think that larger than that representation, our work is very American and its reading is linked to a particular cultural reference, but also a slang, a shorthand of sorts. I think that is interesting. For this particular work with my mother's ESL images, it is relevant to a type of acculturated reading and the idea of not only teaching, but that the system of language learning is imbedded within an image system that speaks to American consumerism, a particular class standing, and the implications of all of that imbedded in this system that has an interesting use.

The language or the vocabulary necessary to the work is not always an art historical vocabulary, but also an American Pop

vocabulary as well.

That's true, but I also was kind of shocked going through the images by how incredibly artful they are, and how they made me think of work by the Pictures Generation, and made me think of a particular aesthetic that is found in early Richard Prince work, and then different Pictures Generation practitioners; that there is a nuanced way of making these images. The artfulness would never be relevant to my mother. She would never even be interested in it. She doesn't, to this day, she doesn't even understand why I'm interested in the work. Whereas when I show the cards to friends, they are so surprised at how much there is an aesthetic overlap within my mother's work and in my work.

In your practice! That is super funny! Is she baffled by it?

She's borderline baffled by it.

That is really funny, that's great, it almost makes it even better.

If she framed the work as her own art practice, if there was a precision in which she made these decisions in removing the text and making in what a lot of ways are these very beautiful collages, if she thought of it in art terms I would need to address them and work with them in a different way. Because they are exclusively understood as these utilitarian images that she keeps in a closet in her apartment with other teaching aids, she makes no distinction between them and some type of textbook.

Or even some chalk. Which is why it is so cool that they work, that they are chalk, they are an artifact of American literacy. The cards are a classroom tool.

But that being said, the thing that makes them really interesting is that the vast majority don't point to a particular word or phrase. It would be utterly impossible to engage them as a language learning set of cards. There's something so confusing about them in that regard, but also endlessly evocative of so many other things. I've spent so much time with them at this point, I've been looking at them for a year, and every time I revisit them, a new image stands out and her decisions of assembling something new appears.

It's funny how you also had the nice opportunity to look in for the project instead of looking out. It is in your family, it is in your home, and in some way this is the person who taught you to speak.

Yeah! In part, I had a very nice exchange recently with friends that are recent moms, who shared stories of their son's or daughter's first words. Not to go into that for too long, but it is interesting to hear stories about the way that language gets formulated in the home.

Maybe the mother's role as a teacher might show in the flashcards as well...

I was just reading this article about language in relationship to photography and how it is impossible to separate the visual from language. The example that the photographer and writer give is the idea that there's no universal tree, and every time you photograph a tree it is the tree that is in front of you. It doesn't become a tree that overshadows everything. [Laughs] And while that example isn't particularly interesting, to think of in your

work of the idea of remembering a show as filtered through the song, or as filtered through the intro, how hearing a particular song, or a song that is akin to *Full House* or something, how evocative that is. I feel that in both of our work there is an interest in how little you can provide in order to have a trigger that creates that type of evocative response. And that to me is really interesting to consider: how much can one image trigger, how much can one phrase trigger, how much can one verse of a song trigger?

Which goes back to stock photography. My favorite kind of stock image tries to make an image that only does one thing: an image with singular content. Like to find the perfect red apple... Which subsequently is an image that you used in your last show in New York...

I know that we briefly discussed the language that stock agencies use when making their call for entries, the type of image that they look for, the styling or prop components of the images. All that stuff is super interesting to see it mapped out: what makes a malleable image, what type of grouping of people or locations or objects are the most desirable. Which grouping has the biggest ability to camouflage itself to become a life insurance ad or a car ad or something.

It also reminds me of a crossover in both of our work, which is the assembling of different objects. In my case collaging stock photographs to create a new composition. In your case putting together these pieces of ephemera or photographs that can create a place, creating recognition in the combination more than the one-off picture. Can you talk about the book that you made for your most recent show?

Yeah, I realize I am talking about your video work but not addressing your collages, which are just as valid. For the book, I watched this seven part PBS series called 'New York', which is by documentary filmmaker Rick Burns (who is the brother of the better known Ken Burns). In having my show at Altman Siegel in 2009 I made that documentary short 'How to document a city' where I interviewed local archivists. I wanted to make a similar video about New York, but because I grew up outside of Manhattan on Long Island and have lived in New York for 13 years, I felt like, "how the hell can I approach this city?" I was able to approach San Francisco from the space of a tourist which allowed me much more flexibility, but being a resident and having both of my parents born and raised New Yorkers, I felt like "what is a way I can address the city and create some type of parameter to work within?" And that PBS series was this perfect fit, because it set up a particular parameter with the discovery of New York to the late 90's. The final chapter was 1945 to the present, then there was a supplemental chapter about the World Trade Center and 9/11. I thought this was a perfect way because I was interested in the fact that it was circulated by PBS, that it posits itself as being a genre of filmmaking that is educational, but it also posits itself as being exhaustive. I like the idea of working with that familiar form of filmmaking that presents itself as being kind of the ultimate knowledge on said topic. I wanted to see what would happen if all of the information was translated to the space of image. So in a long winded way, what I am trying to say is that I used that as a parameter and then I made a book that is images only that maps New York from its discovery to present day using that documentary as the skeleton. I chose images of historic events, of people, of locations that were implicated in the Burns documentary, but I chose my own images, and it was important that my image resource was a public resource so 99% of the images come from the New York Public Library picture collection. I then used the Burns

documentary to follow the same chronology, highlighted the same people, places and events, and inserted a selection of images at the end that were my own choosing, that brought the documentary up to present day.

But I feel like you are creating either a narrative or a place by assembling these images, which goes back to our mutual interest in legibility, or how we let the viewer put it together. You had pages of that book that were a Jane Jacobs obituary, the trinkets. Those are in that book, right?

Yeah, that was representing the trade for Manhattan.

You are creating a way to view Manhattan by assembling images or objects in a way to create the narrative, which is exactly what I do in my collage works.

Yeah, and also making the viewer complete the cycle, so rather than having the viewer fall into this space of student, which I think that PBS style of filmmaking does. The viewer falls into this space of the receptive student. I feel like if you give the viewer these parts but it is up to them to assemble them as they see fit or as they understand... that is really generous because if you give the viewer the full puzzle then they just stare at the puzzle, but if you give them the pieces and request that they assemble them, then I think there is a more dynamic relationship.

Right, and there is always space in-between pieces or missing pieces where they can make their own connections.

For sure.

That is one of the goals I have in creating those collages. I can put a rattle snake, a glass of scotch and safe in the same image and the viewer automatically starts drawing the lines between these things, and which ways a narrative can play out. And maybe there are six possible narratives if you have three objects and you play with the sequential order. I do think that is the generous part for the viewer, which I think you do very well... that whole show at D'Amelio Terras in having the photographs of New York, with so much space in between, both physical space in the way they were displayed, but also conceptual space, really requesting the viewer to fill in their story of New York as well.

Yeah I am really happy with how that show went, and I feel like my 'Postcards & Calendars' show at Altman Siegel was definitely extremely generative for that show. I feel like it really put that 'I Apple NY' show into motion.

Right. I see that piece in the Altman Siegel show 'Sundays' like one of the super formative pieces of it.

That's interesting.

That photograph is a very non-traditional way to depict Sunday, but it makes perfect sense. It is asking the viewer to infer your movement and your activity by just titling a picture of knick knacks. I think it is a beautiful piece. One of my favorites.

Audience, Dave is fishing for a trade...

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A new artist book will accompany this exhibition: Images are words/Las imagenes son palabras, which is for sale at the gallery

See David Berezin's work on the Project Space at

<http://www.altmansiegel.com/>

or

<http://www.ughhh.org/>

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