# Craig Le Blanc SHE LOVES ME. HE LOVES ME NOT.

The Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, BC May 5-September 4, 2016

dc3 Art Projects, Edmonton, AB November 10-December 10, 2016 Catalogue of the exhibition She Loves Me. He Loves Me Not. presented at:

The Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, BC

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Curated by Bruce Johnson

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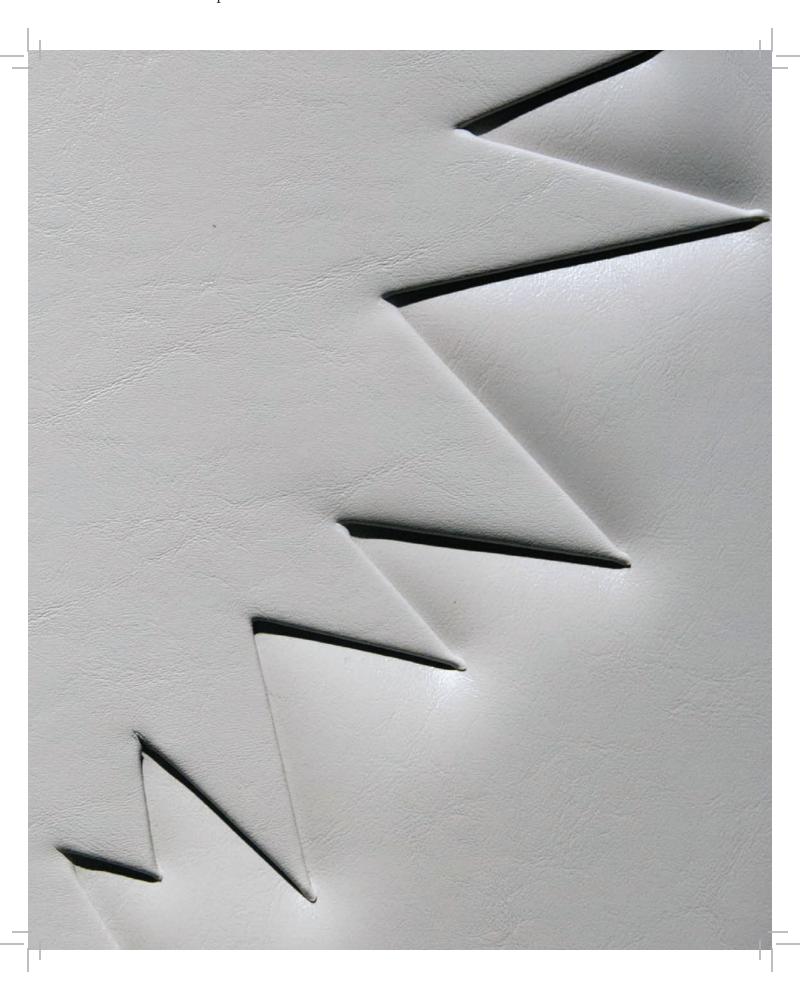




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This is not a love story.



Foreword and Acknowledgement

Craig Le Blanc's work is uncomfortable. The artist's soothing colours and cool, smooth surfaces thinly veil unsettling truths: the loss of a twin brother in childbirth and the falterings of a son/brother/husband/father. The raw candour of the sixteen new works comprising *She Loves Me. He Loves Me Not*. is not easy to digest. Male vulnerability is writ large in the gallery. Or is it?

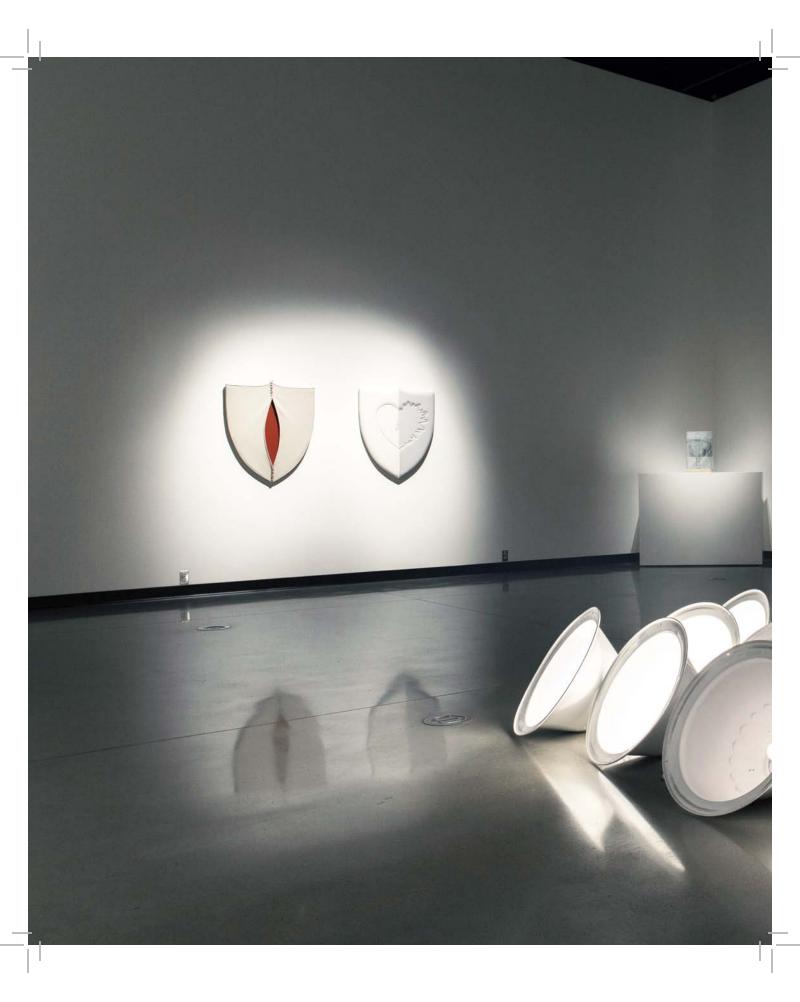
Le Blanc's beseeching statements of loss, regret, and shame are far from simple autoethnography. The exhibition is evasive; its confessions are slippery. Throughout this body of work, the artist's text-play is shadowed, reflected, barely there. The repeated use of the first-person pronoun implicates us, the viewer, in his admissions. Though seemingly forthright, Le Blanc's messages elude and entangle us at every turn. The result is one of the most delightfully enigmatic exhibitions The Reach has presented to date.

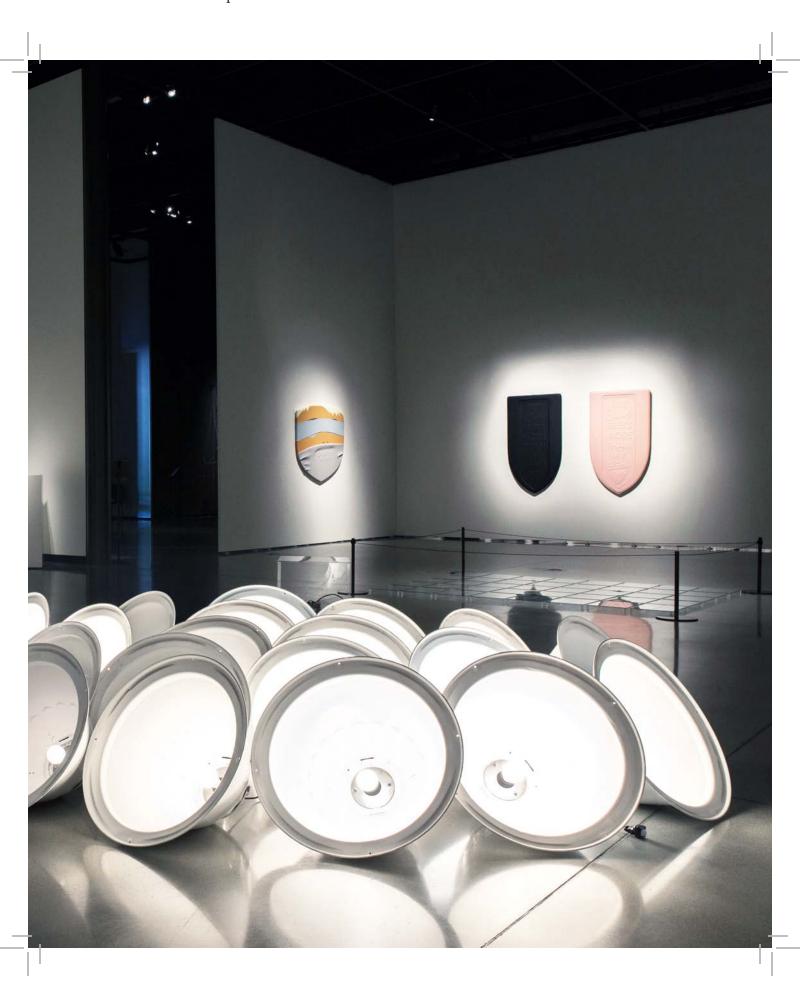
This publication examines the complexities of Le Blanc's recent body of work. In his curatorial essay, Bruce Johnson contextualizes the exhibition within the artist's larger oeuvre, which has consistently dealt with notions of masculinity and the social construction of identity. Suzanne Zelazo's rigorous psychoanalytic examination of the work unpacks the artist's simultaneous assertions and denials of subjectivity.

Previous page: Love Story, 2016, vinyl upholstery on wooden armature, 30 x 35 1/4 x 1/4 in.

The Reach Gallery Museum is grateful to the artist for the opportunity to premiere *She Loves Me. He Loves Me Not.* I would like to extend my appreciation to Bruce Johnson, Guest Curator for this exhibition, who worked seamlessly, though mostly from afar, with the artist and The Reach staff. Thanks also to Suzanne Zelazo whose exacting analysis of the exhibition provides an insightful perspective from which to consider the works. We are grateful to dc<sub>3</sub> Art Projects for their support of the artist and for financial consideration which has assisted the production of this publication. As always, thanks to the staff at The Reach for their commitment to all aspects of the exhibition and publication, and to the City of Abbotsford for their ongoing financial support of our exhibition program.

Laura Schneider, Executive Director & Curator The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford







This story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework of all literature. Northrop Frye

...language is never innocent. Roland Barthes

Craig Le Blanc has become a private detective in the most literal sense: his client is himself. He is investigating the mystery of his own identity, delving into his past and tracking his steps as he continues through the world. On the surface, this may sound like a self-indulgent act. It isn't. Our detective is not self-obsessed. Rather, he accepts the risk of exploring very personal narratives and motifs as a means of engaging us in a broader conversation.

Le Blanc's previous work often focused on an iconography of the male self and as such could be loosely considered self-portraiture. In *She Loves Me. He Loves Me Not.*, Le Blanc eliminates any degree of separation, directly (and somewhat vulnerably) placing himself squarely as subject.

Throughout his career, Le Blanc has consistently offered astute interrogations of subjects that include the social construction of masculinity, the workings of desire, and the illusion of personal control in light of shared social anxieties. He employed a signature strategy of

remaking common, emblematic objects with a perfection of craft and technical mastery that essentially dissolved the hand of the artist.

Past sculpture includes a full-scale representation of the side of a Trans Am body mounted to the wall (Shell, 2013), a massive flesh-toned revolver (Piece, 2007), and monumental joysticks linked by umbilical-like cords (One on One, 2011). The sculpture On Guard (2007), a six-foot-long athletic protective cup, epitomizes this technique. Offering a mix of personal, sexual and national identities, the sculpture reflects Le Blanc's predilection for mixing the rigor of serious self-examination with self-effacing humour. As Suzanne Zelazo has remarked, "Le Blanc's larger-than-life sculptural proportions reverberate with his presence precisely because his hand is nowhere to be seen."

In contrast to Le Blanc's painstakingly slow and labour-intensive working process, the installations in this exhibition have been conceived and created in a faster, more immediate timeframe. Their subjects, although not altogether different from previous projects, have been approached more obliquely and intuitively. This is partially Le Blanc's reaction to years of deliberately plotted and extended processes, but it is also due to his desire to engage with new ideas and explorations. Simply put, this new body of work is grittier and less "packaged." Considering what the artist calls "the space between things," these artworks travel a more nuanced and messy terrain within the boundaries of desire/estrangement, weakness/ virility, loss/control.

Process, materials, and visual signs are the substance of art. Together, in context, they combine in the mind of the viewer and an artwork is completed. Le Blanc's studio process begins with language, with the playing and plying of words. Language defines our sense of self as well as our understanding of reality. Language can also speak of the non-existent and the destroyed.

Le Blanc's materials are the stuff of automobiles and industry, of things made with machines, from places traditionally associated with men. Plate glass, mirrors, industrial lights, and car upholstery are reworked and transformed by the artist, while maintaining their original associations as a subtext. These materials become the ground for written language, for Le Blanc's linguistic fragments and adages. His phrases run the spectrum of human missives, from confession to lament to prayer. They are boldly stated, or barely whispered.

Of the many visual signs throughout this show, a repeated form is that of the shield; known as an escutcheon in heraldry. Historically, the escutcheon standards of a family or a regiment framed and displayed the loyalties of knights and noblemen. Derived from combat armour, a motto was often inscribed below the shield as a rallying cry or a statement of fidelity and endurance. Le Blanc's shield-forms offer more doubt and anxiety than the certainty and bravado of their historic counterparts. Their maxims are confessional:



I am not a bad man but I am not good.

My Hurt Seeks More Than My Lies
I've Spent My Whole Life Trying To Impress You.

I've Told You Too Much is a work of laser-cut steel, powder coated antique white. The title text bleeds through a latticework of square crosses, or plus signs, that spiral out from the shield's heart. They radiate a shape reminiscent of Buddhist mandalas (a form representing the self) or the medieval filigree of both Islam and Christianity.

Another work in this series, *Wounded*, inverts the sense of security and power associated with shields. Here, armour becomes the body it was designed to protect. Bearing a bright human wound slicing the industrial fabric, it is a defense in need of sutures.

Across the gallery and isolated, *It Won't Always Hurt.* appears to be a haphazard collection of industrial debris: metal, wire, and glass. On closer approach, the scene resolves as an abandoned pile of industrial lights, the type that may have once lit a factory. The installation is more than it seems. It senses your approach. As you get close the lights begin to glow and respond with the sound of whimpering.

I Once Was Blind, But Now I See. begins another series of text-based works, wherein phrases written in the first-person are etched onto 48 sheets of plate glass. Examples include I am not fragile. and I cannot be broken. Human words are frozen in a form that is both incredibly stable and exceedingly fragile.





A related wall work, *Shame*, continues Le Blanc's tactic of collapsing the separation between subjective, private experience, and detached, public discourse. It is a poem, revealing a litany of personal "shames." We see a sequence of 15 glazed frames, empty aside from the white mats that might otherwise hold a portrait. Placed onto each glass, above the imageless space, is a line of the poem:

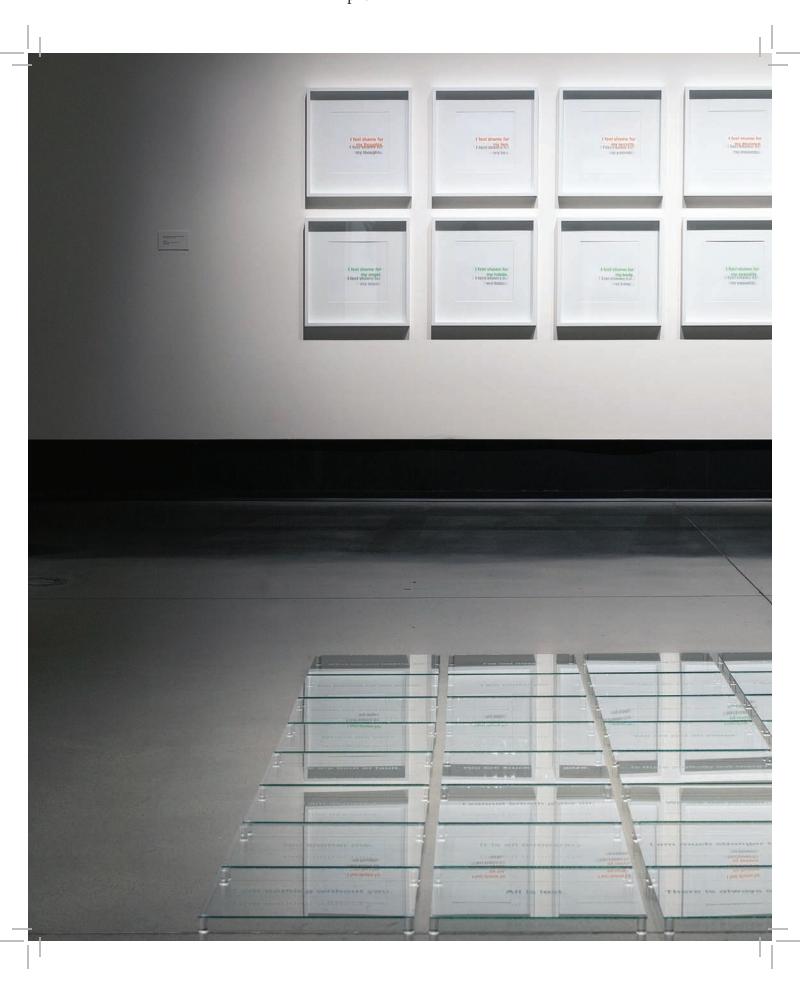
I feel shame for my thoughts.
I feel shame for my lies.
I feel shame for my secrets.
I feel shame for my deviance.
I feel shame for my vanity.
I feel shame for my gender.
I feel shame for my shame.
I feel shame for my anger.
I feel shame for my habits.
I feel shame for my body.
I feel shame for my sexuality.
I feel shame for my inadequacies.
I feel shame for my passivity.
I feel shame for my aloneness.
I take comfort in my shame.

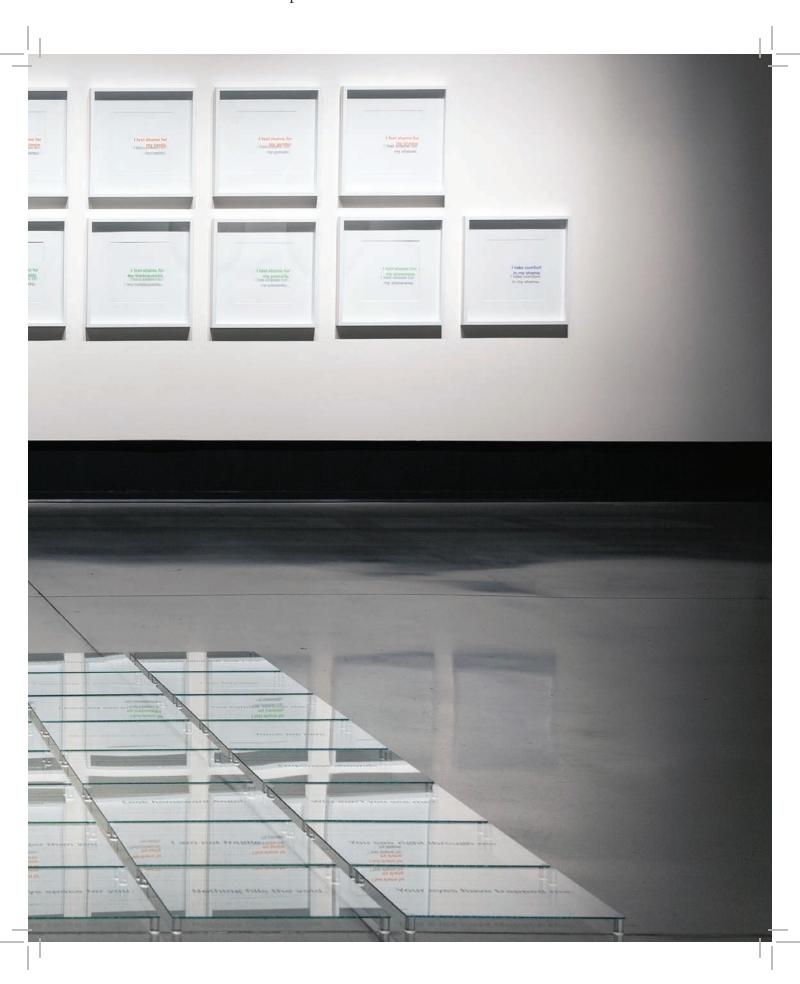
"I carry my awareness of defeat like a banner of victory," wrote the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. The words appear in *The Book of Disquiet*,

a series of collected fragments that he called his "factless autobiography." Craig Le Blanc does not offer us a testament of defeat, but like Pessoa, he understands that self is a protean thing, remaking itself continually, aware of its limits and imperfections.

His ruminations on self offer an interesting challenge in a time saturated with unending Facebook updates, reality show confessionals, and the endless sharing of selfies online. He is not offering identity as personal brand, or searching for a sense personhood validated by followers' hits and likes. On the contrary, by dusting off tools forged by feminist forebears and others, Le Blanc has matched self-consideration with a means to make the personal matter, both publicly and politically. These are works that engage the empathy of their audience, art that seeks conversation rather than a fleeting glance.

Bruce Johnson Halifax











"DOUBLE SENSE DELUDED": Ghosting Language, Love, and Lies

"The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell."

-Paul Auster, City of Glass

The story of Craig Le Blanc's *She Loves Me*. *He Loves Me Not.*, evolves in circumlocution, not simply by walking around the gallery space, but in dodging, traversing and eliding the shards of his fragmented mirroring as he takes viewers through the slippages in language—through the reflective, refractive, distorted iterations of self in the 16 works that comprise the show. Stories, Le Blanc reminds us, the ones we create, re-write, and mis-remember about ourselves in the continuous construction of subjectivity, are contingent on the inherent variability and multiplicity of language—its Miltonic "double sense deluding."

Extending the direction of his earlier work, which probes masculine subjectivity, particularly its socially constructed archetypes, this new material prioritizes the linguistic in a Lacanian entanglement with the mirror and the utterance. Central to Le Blanc's semiotic query is the tragic biographical revelation that he was an identical twin and that his brother was stillborn, his umbilical cord having been compressed. Although the disclosure is made obliquely (though most prominently

in I've Been Waiting for You, But You're Not Coming.), that it is as much confession as a traumatic incident endured, is explicit in each of the works emphasizing guilt, shame, and self-loathing. At its core, however, She Loves Me. He Loves Me Not. underscores a universal longing for witness, for validation and approval and, more primordially, for proof of existence.

Le Blanc's text-based works in glass, upholstery, and steel, assert the psychoanalytic insistence that romantic love is rooted in mistaken identity and that twining further problematizes the transference, projection, and confusion of relationality. The dyad of primary caregiver and baby becomes fractured by necessity in the case of twins both pre- and post-natally, thus the show's title offers a circuitous play on the rerouting of desire from the maternal to the fraternal to the (in this case) heteronormative romantic. The artist's twin is present in the show as an absent companion whose portentous end is projected, re-imagined, and embodied as a kind of phantom limb.

What this psychic and emotional projection reveals, however, is the need in all of us for an imagined potentiality. What is life, after all, but a continuous navigation between what is and what could be? Yet, the perpetuity of possibility is an endless deferral. This powerful duality is at the centre of *She Loves Me. He Loves Me Not*. In winning you lose. In surviving, you kill your twin. These are the myths of guilt and fear that become the latticework of identity Le Blanc reveals, as iterations of self slip through the porous shield of his and the viewers' various defenses.

Indeed, shields of armour and masculinity have long been paired and, as a brother in arms, the artist's 11 shield-forms disclose that from which they seek to protect. Each one offers a précis of the tenuous construction of subjectivity. The escutcheons invert their typical connotations insisting instead on their antithesis—fragility, vulnerability, and shame. Take, for example, the upholstered companion pieces, the matte black, My Lies Hurt More than My Secrets and the ballet pink, My Hurt Seeks More than My Lies. The raised text on both is subtle, not being offset in a different colour, not, as it were, inscribed as much as swelling to the surface from the inside as if ready to burst. Surface tension is another anchor to the show, recalling Andy Warhol's famous quip, "I am a deeply superficial person." While the lines of text on vinyl emerge more like an apparition than a proclamation, the depth of the past reveals its constancy.

Like the ghosts of our pasts, language is itself shape-shifting and phantasmic. A confrontation of the word is like a confrontation with the mirror: what it means depends on the intersubjective connotations we bring to it. Despite the size, weight, and meticulousness of the shields, they conjure the saccharine flippancy of the iconic Valentine's Day candy hearts—those Sweetheart Candies known as "conversation hearts"—mass produced messages of endearment inscribed on each one such as "Luv U" or "Kiss Me."

Although more chocolatey-wafer than candy heart, but just as deceptive in its sweetness, is the deep brown upholstered shield, *I am not a bad man but I am not good*. Materially, the text appears understated, yet its right-







justification underscores the artist's message—as if confession engenders permissibility. There is no remorse, per se, in the ghosted script, simply a statement of fact. Yet the joke is on the viewer, who might expect to see or apprehend something of an apology with those words—but doesn't.

To be sure, humour accompanies tragedy throughout the show. Consider Wounded, a beige escutcheon, its vinyl "skin" cut down the middle revealing an inner pink layer (the epidermis?) and then a red background. Wounded is both a personification (the medium becomes the artist) and a play on textual inscription. Duality is furthered by the obvious vaginal implications of the piece and the trauma of birth it suggests. The black stitching also functions doubly—is the wound being sutured or the stitches ripping further apart? Yet the materials are anything but foreboding, they are instead clean, shiny, and light and the effect of this gap is deeply funny. The shield I am a Runaway Train, could decorate a nursery with its baby blue cuteness (a delicate cloud of smoke trailing behind the "i" of "train" like Thomas the Tank Engine), and yet the text chugs the weight of the artist (and connotations of excess and addiction) into the horizon.

But language is also performative, its meaning contingent on the varying contexts of insistence, tone and voice (whether visual, acoustic or tactile). The performative aspect of the utterance is examined in the mixed media installation *It Won't Always Hurt*. This dynamic, synaesthetic work consists of 20 industrial lights piled languidly, despairingly, in a heap. The lights are linked electronically to a sound recording which is triggered when viewers approach, sounding a loop of recorded cries. The resulting mournful

Opposite: It Won't Always Hurt. (detail), multimedia installation, size variable, 20 industrial lights (each 12 x 24 in.) Previous: (l) Secrets (detail), vinyl upholstery on wooden armature, 30" x  $54\frac{7}{8}$  x  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in. (r) Lies (detail), vinyl upholstery on wooden armature, 30" x  $54\frac{7}{8}$  x  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.



echo whimpers as the lights do themselves, fading through various levels of brightness. Just as overblown as the sweetheart candy, *It Won't Always Hurt*. reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously—the despair in the recorded cries at once haunting and humourous—humourous because it is so canned. Here, the non-semantic utterance has cracked the looking glass and like Humpty Dumpty, it can't be put back together again.

Another work which depends on illumination is the hanging steel text piece, *This Is Not Who I am*, *But It Is Who I Was*. At almost 100 inches in length, the piece suggests a rolled out scroll (if a drooping one, rife, like the whimpering lights, with the implication of impotence) the contents of which becomes clear, paradoxically, in shadow. By shining light on the excised text, Le Blanc inverts normative reading practices. Lit from above, the shadow of the sagging text straightens out on the floor beneath it. The inscription is itself a fascinating inversion. What does it mean, after all, to renounce or defer in time, an aspect of self? Is subjectivity not a continuum? Here again we are confronted with potentiality—the script of becoming other in order to become oneself, the continuous slippage between erasure and emergence.

As referred to above, the linchpin in the show is the glass paneled visual novella *I've Been Waiting for You*, *But You're Not Coming*. Continuing the play with surface and depth, reflection and refraction of perception and ontology, the piece consists of five glass panes inserted in a wooden base like a layered flap book (think illustrated anatomy book mimicking human dissection). Each layer displays a digital print revealing



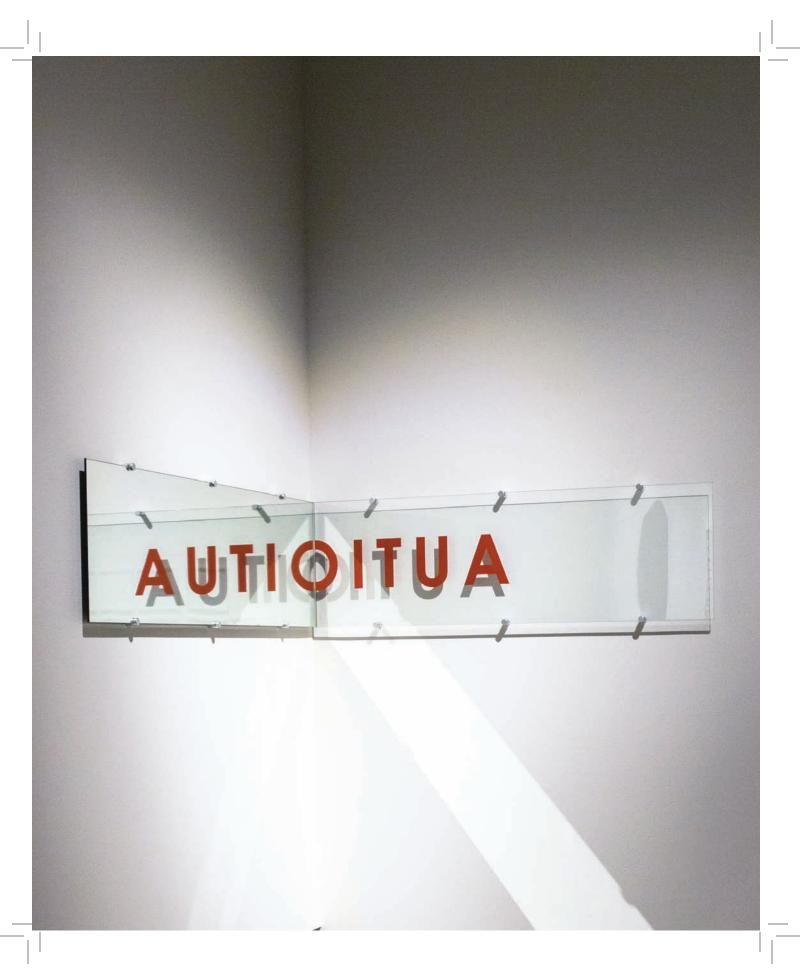




progressively more of the artist's origin, contextualized with the first layer on which is inscribed, in block text, the lyrics of Damian Rice's song, "My Favourite Faded Fantasy." Included here as both a love song and originary hymn, lines such as "You could have been my favourite fantasy/ I've hung my happiness upon what it all could be" are doubly-deluded.

A layer of lattice design such as found on confessionals, separates the song and the components of a digitized photograph of the artist as a baby. Each subsequent layer inserts a player in the ghosted family portrait: first the artist as a one year old, contemplating a not uncomplicated flight of stairs on the family's front porch. Gleeful at his undertaking, the child is blissfully unaware of the phantasmic replica of his bodily outline—the twin as absent presence looming behind him in the penultimate pane. The final pane features the original black and white photograph in which there is no twin brother, just the artist and his mother, her arm outstretched, guiding him to the stairs. Once again, what could have been fills the page, is in effect the story's last words and reverberates with Rice's lines from page one, "You could hold the secrets that save/ Me from myself...You could be my poison, my cross/ My razor blade/ I could love you more than life/ If I wasn't so afraid/ Of what it all could be."

As a linguistic twin, a substantive palindrome unites the component parts of the show. Acting as a literal and figurative hinge to the body of work, the silkscreened mirror and glass depiction of the Finnish word "Autiotua," mounted on a corner of the gallery wall effects the intermingling of language, image, perception and subjectivity. Yet



the sculptor's polished precision here highlights the symmetry of companionship explored through its absence elsewhere in the show, just as it accentuates the materiality of language—its non-lexical, non-linguistic characteristics. Although the word appears to suggest the autonomy of self, the Finnish word means "to become deserted." With only half the word silkscreened on the glass pane, it becomes completed in mirroring. Furthermore, its definition magnifies as the reader/viewer comes to "populate" the deserted space—confronting the phantasm (of self?) as it were, and so concretizes it. In short, the viewer of the palindrome comes to embody the refractive power of language and the mirror.

I have long maintained that despite working primarily in sculpture, often industrial in size and materials, Le Blanc's practice is a fascinating and progressive form of body art. Like *Wounded*, or the interplay of personification and synaethesia encouraged in a piece like the sound-light show of *It Won't Always Hurt.*, the artist relies on somaticization—his own and his viewers'. The work, even when it whimpers, fades, or slumps, insists on a life force—one he both articulates and exploits. By processing the organic through the inorganic, Freudian Eros alongside its death-drive counterpart of Thanatos, Le Blanc's work epitomizes tension at the surface, its seeming simplicity reverberating with the tremors of a tidal wave.

Suzanne Zelazo Toronto



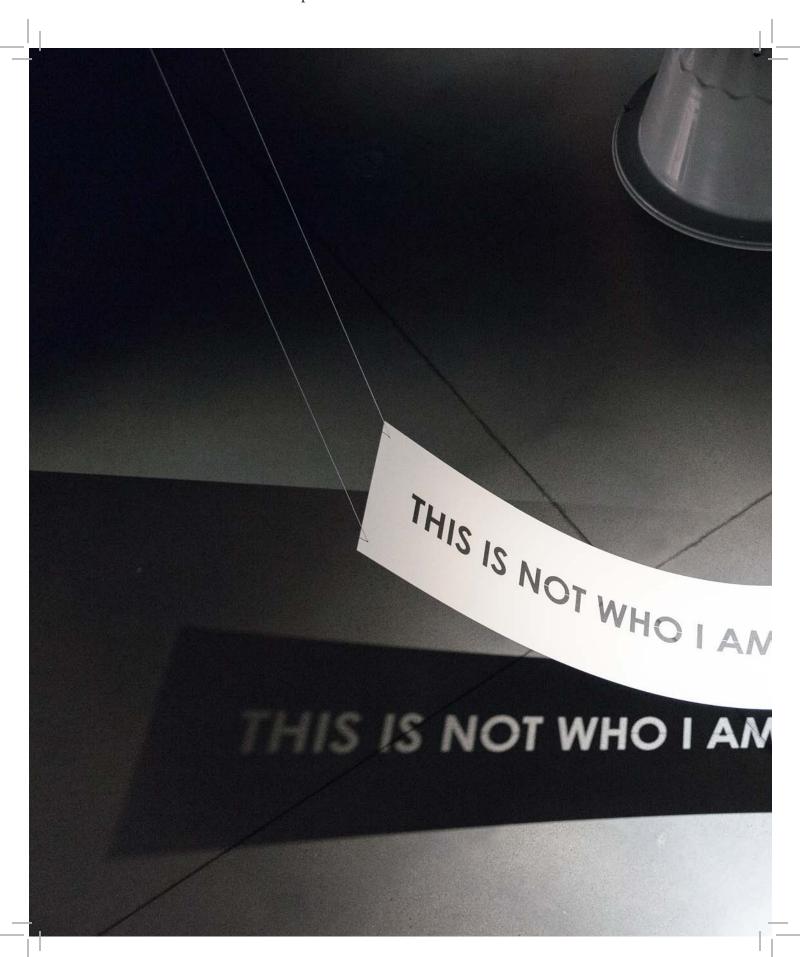
## **End Notes**

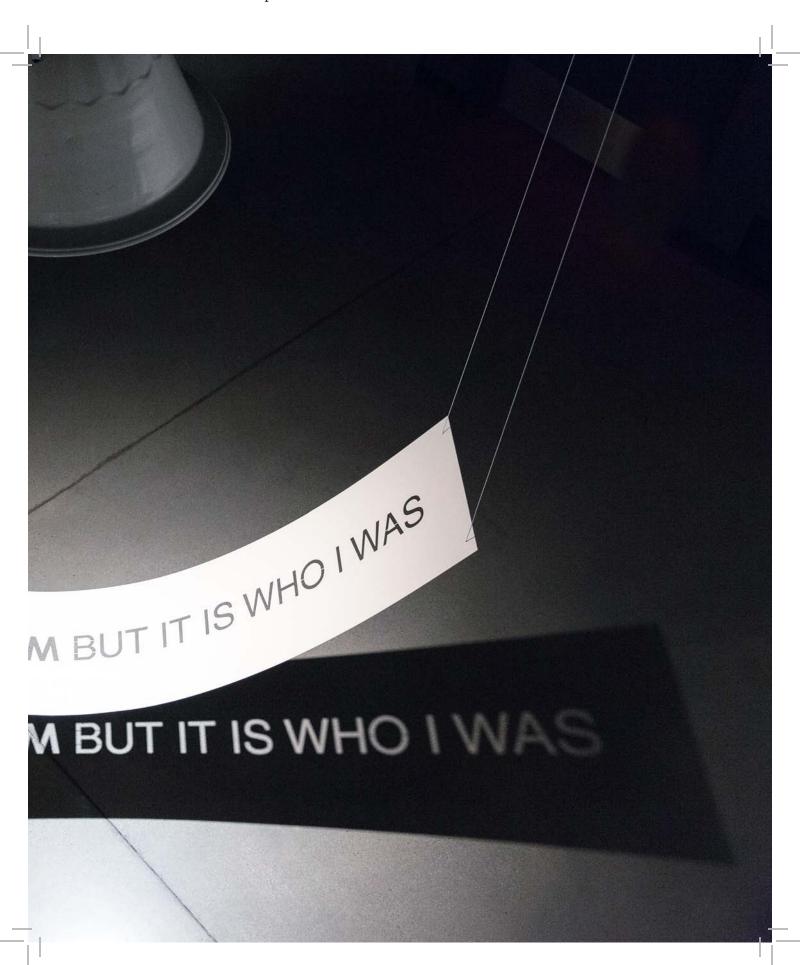
<sup>i</sup> In Book One of Milton's *Paradise Regained*, Satan's ability to obscure meaning is described by the Son as "double sense deluding":

That has been thy craft,
By mixing somewhat true to vent more lies,
But what have been thy answers, what but dark
Ambiguous and with double sense deluding,
Which they who asked have seldom understood,
And not well understood as good not know?

<sup>ii</sup> In *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis*, *Feminism*, *and the Problem of Domination*, psychoanalytic scholar Jessica Benjamin defines the "intersubjective":

"From the study of the self who suffers the lack of recognition, as well as the new perception of the active, social infant who can respond to and differentiate others, emerges what I call the intersubjective view. The intersubjective view maintains that the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects. Most important, this perspective observes that the other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right. It assumes that we are able and need to recognize the other subject as different and yet alike, as an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience." (19-20)





#### List of works

All works created in 2016

## Shields/Escutcheons

All works are vinyl upholstery on wooden armature unless otherwise noted.

Lies, 30" x 547/8 x 11/4 in.

Secrets, 30" x  $54\frac{7}{8}$  x  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.

Runaway Train, 30" x 54% x 1¼ in.

Rage, 48 x 42 x 11/4 in.

Wounded, 30 x 351/4 x 11/4 in.

Impress (mirror) 30 x 35  $\frac{1}{4}$  x  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

Love Story, 30 x 35  $\frac{1}{4}$  x  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.

Control, 30 x 39½ x 1¼ in.

Bad Man, 30 x 39  $\frac{1}{2}$  x  $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.

I've Told You Too Much (steel, vinyl) 30 x 39  $\frac{1}{2}$  x  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

#### **Glass Works**

Shame (detail), 15 frames (wood, glass, mat board), vinyl, 20 x 20 x 1¾ in. each

I Once Was Blind, But Now I See., 48 glass panes, 14 x 11 x 1/8 in. each

I've Been Waiting For You, But You're Not Coming., wood, glass, digital print on glass, 11" x 18" x 17"

Autioitua, mirror, glass, silkscreen, 96 x 15 x  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

# **Installations**

*It Won't Always Hurt.*, multimedia installation, size variable, 20 industrial lights, 12 x 24 in. each.

This Is Not Who I Am But It Is Who I Was, steel, aluminum, light fixture, 96 x 15 x 15 in.