

Light Blue

Abigail Accettura

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I saw Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work for the first time in the Spring of 2013 at the Art Institute of Chicago. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* sat heaped in a corner of the gallery—a pile of candies, individually wrapped in colored foil, slanting down onto the floor. A spotlight fixed to the ceiling trained itself on the mound, making the candies seem living and luminous, blinking in ten thousand colors at the room.

The sign posted next to the piece read “take one,” but I couldn't bring myself to touch it.

It seemed wrong, sacrilegious. This piece was a temple. I shut my eyes, shifting between respect and discomfort until I finally turned away.

Navy Blue

Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) 1991 is an allegorical representation of the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness on January 24th, 1991. The installation is comprised of 175 pounds of candy, corresponding to Ross's ideal body weight. Viewers are encouraged to take a piece of candy, and the diminishing amount parallels Ross's weight loss and suffering prior to his death. Gonzalez-Torres stipulated that the pile should be continuously replenished, thus metaphorically granting perpetual life (Art Institute of Chicago, Contemporary Wing).

Denim

Exactly fourteen months before Ross's death, writer David McGonigal published a reflection on the fall of the Berlin Wall entitled “Chipping at the Past” in *The Advertiser* magazine: *The Berlin Wall is one of mankind's most bizarre creations. . . . Now it's possible to climb through holes in the wall that have been made by ordinary Berliners. Everyone does so to take photos looking back through. The guards on the East German side spend their days talking to curious tourists through the gaps.*

Thousands flocked to Berlin that year to play a physical role in the wall's destruction. Pieces of the Berlin Wall were the world's most popular souvenir.

Prussian Blue

Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter coined the term “creative destruction” in 1942 to describe the free market's way of delivering progress.

The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop to such concerns as U.S. Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism, said Schumpeter.

W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm elaborate on the inherently paradoxical nature of this concept in their online encyclopedia of economics. It is a similar contradiction to that of Felix's work, that creation can only come after destruction.

Herein lies the paradox of progress. A society cannot reap the rewards of creative destruction without accepting that some individuals might be worse off, not just in the short term, but perhaps forever.

Indigo

Here is what I know about the AIDS virus.

The acronym stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is acquired by sharing bodily fluids through hypodermic needles, contaminated blood transfusions, or unprotected sex. It can also be transmitted from mother to child during a pregnancy. AIDS is the final stage of the HIV disease (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), a disease that directly attacks your immune system.

I know that there is a stigma linking AIDS to the homosexual community, which has led to extremely widespread bigotry and discrimination. I know that AIDS is considered an epidemic in Africa. I know that in the 80 and 90s there was an entire generation of beat poetry, art and music that revolved around the emergence of AIDS into popular culture.

I am an openly lesbian woman with four or five sex education classes under my belt, not to mention one or two biology classes. And yet the extent of my knowledge of the AIDS virus is contained in less than a paragraph.

Less than a paragraph, but I can imagine the complete lack of control that comes with a disease that literally shuts down all your defenses.

Periwinkle

Felix Gonzalez-Torres wrote a portrait of himself, which is posted on his foundation's website. The portrait is a stream-of-consciousness piece that includes a series of dates with a brief description behind each one. The dates are not in order. For example, the period surrounding Ross's death reads:

1991 Ross died of AIDS, Dad died three weeks later, a hundred small yellow envelopes of my lover's ashes—his last will 1991 Jorge stopped talking to me, I'm lost—Claudio and Miami Beach saved me 1992 Jeff died of AIDS 1990 silver ocean in San Francisco 1992 President Clinton—hope, twelve years of trickle-down economics came to an end 1990 moved to L.A. with Ross (already very sick) . . . went back to Madrid after almost twenty years—sweet revenge 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Egyptian Blue

<http://www.nbcnews.com/slideshow/news/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-33587033>

This is a photograph of the Berlin Wall, taken on November 10th, 1989 by photojournalist Peter Turnley.

I'm struck by the color in this photo. The wall wasn't just a mass of concrete. In places, it was as bright as the candies that would form Felix's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross)* two years later. It was art in the hands of the people who broke away pieces and brought them home.

Light Blue

The first glance I took at *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* was interrupted by a text message from the girl I'd started dating about two weeks earlier.

I don't remember the message, but I remember other things.

I remember seeing her hometown; standing with her on the top floor of a parking garage, red cinderblock and grey-blue night sky and snowflakes caught in the gold of the street lamps beneath us. I remember waking up to her arm curled over my hipbone and her nose pushed into my shoulder, staring for hours at the light blue of her basement wall while I tried to fall back asleep, not wanting to move. I remember her laughing in a cafe, caramel brown coffee in a white china mug and the burgundy of the sunset reflecting off the hardwood floor. A thousand different colors, each wrapped around one of Felix's candies while I read her message on my phone.

Two weeks after I visited the Art Institute, she left me.

It was sunny that day, but I kept the curtains closed so the inside of my room stayed grey.

Alice Blue

Perhaps Felix Gonzalez-Torres' most recognizable work was a series of AIDS-awareness billboards that were posted throughout New York in 1991. There were twenty-four of them; Ross died on the 24th of January. The billboards contain no written text. They are simple photographs, blown to enormous size, of an empty bed. They are printed in black-and-white.

Maya Blue

My mother has a chunk of the Berlin Wall that she keeps in a bookshelf in our home. When I was very young I asked her where she got it. "Oh, it was a gift from an old boyfriend," she said.

One side of the chunk is ornate in its color. The other side is grey.

This is how I feel about the memories I have of my ex. Colored on one side, grey on the other.

Is that how Felix felt about Ross's death?

I wonder what the backside of the billboard posters looked like. Or the insides of the candy wrappers.

Iris

Bruce MacEvoy, founder of the online encyclopedia of watercolor painting *Handprint Watercolors*, explains the personal nature of color in relationship to color theory.

Visual color literally does not exist outside individual consciousness. There is an enormous body of evidence to show that color experience is remarkably personal: it varies significantly across individuals, for a variety of reasons (genetics, age, experience). In addition, the same radiant color can appear as very different visual colors, depending on the intensity of the light and the context in which it is viewed.

As it turns out, all colors are imagined. Which begs the questions—if I'm seeing one thing, what is everyone else seeing?

Silver Lake Blue

<http://x-traonline.org/article/critical-identity-politics/>

This is what the billboards looked like.

The sheets are wrinkled and the pillows are clearly indented, as if the bed has been left in a rush. But the sheet has been pulled up too high to be unintentional, and the wrinkles look almost cemented in place. No one has touched this since the last inhabitants left; it's been alone, immovable. A tribute.

On one hand, it looks peaceful. On the other, it looks completely empty. Permanently so.

French Blue

I've never handled rejection well.

Air Force Blue

There was no other consideration involved except that I wanted to make artwork that could disappear, that never existed. And it was a metaphor for when Ross was dying, so it was a metaphor that I would abandon this work before this work abandoned me. I'm going to destroy it before it destroys me. That was my little amount of power when it came to this work. I didn't want it to last, because then it couldn't hurt me. From the very beginning it was

not even there—I made something that doesn't exist. I control the pain. That's really what it is (Gonzales-Torres).

This quote was given in reference to *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, which was only one of many “candy-spill” art pieces that Felix made during Ross’s struggle with AIDS.

Sapphire

Nowhere in his autobiographical portrait did Felix note his own AIDS diagnosis.

Ultramarine

There was a book review in the *L.A. Times* on the date of Ross’s death entitled “Two Headed Dragon Has its Good Sides, Bad Sides.”

I’m starting to think there are “Two Headed Dragons” everywhere.

The bed in Felix’s billboards.

My mother’s chunk of the Berlin wall.

Art that must be destroyed in order to be eternal.

Light Blue

The first time I met her she was wearing black and red all over, from her black fedora to her red patent leather heels. To be honest, I can’t remember much past the color scheme. I got stuck on her hair. Red, curly and absolutely everywhere. Brushing over freckles, falling over bright blue eyes, sweeping across black-and-red shoulders. She was all color.

Felix told *BOMB* magazine in an interview that he knew he needed to be in love in order to create.

How can you be feeling if you’re not in love? You need that space, you need that lifting up, you need that traveling in your mind that love brings, transgressing the limits of your body and your imagination. Total transgression, he said.

I think it’s possible that you need to be in love to see color.

Although that interview was conducted in 1995, four years after Ross’s death. So maybe you need to have your heart broken before you can really see it.

For me if a beautiful memory could have a color that color would be light blue
(Gonzalez-Torres).

Abby creates a lot of free time that she doesn't have in order to see as many movies as she can in as many different movie theaters as she can get to. She particularly likes the old ones that are mostly falling down and smell like the ghost of popcorn past on account of them having "character." She loves large bodies of water, trying different kinds of food, and a ridiculous range of music. She watches nature documentaries to relax and consequently has National Geographic's *Ice Planet* memorized. Also, she writes a lot, but rarely submits anything for publication due to being buried in twenty-something insecurity. She is thoroughly pleased to have had her work accepted to *A Common Thread* anyway.

