

Sofia Leiby: *Freeze Tag*
Levy Delval, Brussels
April 23–May 23, 2015

It plugs into the wall with a 4-foot cord that wiggles along the ground to make a path between the legs, the crumples, the splooges. The cord is blistered with random colors, fraying in places, taped in one color and then taped over again. Its soundproof plastic shell holds in a mess of parts: copper, aluminum, various hues of plastic, rubber rollers, stained passageways, extendable trays for sorting and stacking, flipping, punching, stapling. When running, it kind of snorts through its operations. “Clack, clack, clack” goes a paper ream over and over through its elliptical paths. Users stand in front of this ridiculous piece of shit watching it jiggle and masticate. Shamelessly figuring pathways and layers, moving by way of mechanism and memory, but sometimes by way of impulse.

There is an orange clip that comes loose over and over, causing pages to jam through the rollers. What’s produced is an oil-stained, ruffled fan of letter size – it’s a sort of “mutant job.” It prefers certain media: toners that produce a melted crayon of waste, a kind of gooey cloud that stains the hand and can be used as a new mark-making tool; specific paper weights and colors and grains. Images appear in the tray with a repeated streak along the same longitude, every single page. This machine is always breaking. The workers stand around and laugh, and cry, and kick their clogs into its side. It shouldn’t be this hard to make a simple print!! The halls echo with this mutinous cry.

One starts to get the sense that we are dealing with a complex and highly responsive automaton. Imagine Sofia as this ornery copier, selectively choosing which sources to accept, to reproduce, to siphon through her finicky inner-architecture, licking each new document with the history of the ones that came before. Decision-making happens on the spot, through this roller, folded in this way, pulled, printed, grayed out, darkened.

But where did the plate for this self-perpetuating machine originate? This question is how I got here. The first thing I ever said to Sofia was that I thought she seemed smart but I didn’t like her work. Shitty, I know. But I just don’t trust abstract expressionist painting, especially in many of its contemporary incarnations. This incompatibility is the basis of our ongoing dialogue and friendship. She’s obsessed with discourse, politics, arguing, talking, sharing, critiquing, being a feminist and yet the history of the medium she chooses, in my perception, is taciturn, male, presumptive. She’s been working on changing my mind.

For one thing, she resists presenting her work as “hers” (as a body, as a mark-maker, as an ingénue). Instead, it’s more of this giddy, tape-recorded, rewound, jungle gym, gameplay of a person who I realize experiences in the world as a reporter. She arrives at gestures, colors, and shapes by borrowing, tagging in different sensibilities, putting others in timeout. She looks for evidence of social mark-making that covers a spectrum of visibilities and values. It’s not about feeling & selfness styled by the mark, but about

externalism & transference: her grandfather's doodling, pen test sheets at the art supply store, amazing things her friends say in studio visits, amazing things her favorite artist said in an interview. And then she takes it all in the crook of her arm and marches back to the studio, where she closes the door, puts her cellphone on an unreachable shelf, and begins the work. What happens in this space is something tender and frenetic, a sort of private celebration that consists of siphoning the pus-filled sore of culture into a formed surface. We talk a lot about our day jobs. We often talk while sitting at our day jobs. I wonder if Sofia has noticed that she's been making newspapers. The drawings in this show are front pages, of course. We see the stories from last week's paper continued; new headlines emerge from the repeated gray and black blocks. Images attempt to shock but often can't move our tired, deadened cultural eyes. Thousands of words from different writers assemble into their marching orders. Do events in our lives compete with themselves for this front-page real estate? Are newspapers tombstones? Civilization running wild in the front yard until someone screams "FREEZE."

I think, though we've probably swapped thousands of words about her work, Sofia describes her practice best when, at the beginning of a tomb-like Google Doc of thoughts and references she shared with me to help write this essay, she instructs me to "take all of this or leave it." A short declarative statement that proves – for me – that to Sofia, some is never enough. Like a good reporter, she must "take all" and leave nothing in the shadows. What are produced are her own hubs of data, a sort of pedometer of her walk through this Sisyphean "all-ness." One might also call them drawings.

–Erin Jane Nelson, April 2015