The Curiosity of Con, Petrified Breath, and an Accident known as Blue.

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The Curiosity of Con, Petrified Breath, and an Accident known as Blue.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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ABSTRACT

The Curiosity of Con, Petrified Breath, and an Accident known as Blue.

By Steven Randall, MFA

My thesis installation emerged from an interest in visualizing breath. The resulting work came to exist at the intersection between art, biology, and performance.

The unicorn tapestries were used as a generative point of departure to explore the preservation and transformation of images through time, by time, and with time. Reproductions of the six tapestries were each etched into paper and then submerged into solutions of Phenol Red dye, Ferric Ferrocyanide (also known as Prussian Blue), and various forms of sodium chloride. Exhaled breath was used to encrust these images of the tapestries into physical objects which gradually crystallized and changed colors in response to viewers within the surrounding space. An invasive plant species native to Richmond, Virginia was utilized as a catalyst to re-absorb carbonic acid from exhaled breath and convert the objects back to their original (or not so original) states. The final piece became the active remnants from an inquiry which quickly snowballed into so much more than I had initially planned.

The following text is written as a supplemental reading to trace some of my influences at the periphery of the piece while mapping my thought processes.

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fig. 1 *The Curiosity of Con, Petrified Breath, and an Accident known as Blue.*
Ferric ferrocyanide (Prussian Blue), salt, water, Elodea plants, Phenol Red (pH indicator), etched paper, rope, milled polystyrene, cast polyurethane, steel, cast silicone, Plexiglas, plastic buckets, metal cart, steel work tables, aluminum pots, and burners
fig. 2a-2h *The Curiosity of Con, Petrified Breath, and an Accident known as Blue.* (details)
Ferric ferrocyanide (Prussian Blue), salt, water, Elodea plants, Phenol Red (pH indicator), etched paper, rope, milled polystyrene, cast polyurethane, steel, cast silicone, Plexiglas, plastic buckets, metal shop cart, steel work tables, aluminum pots, and burners.
If I were you (and some days I really wish I were) I would begin by locating a hole in the wall. Scan for seams or splinters on the surface. Perhaps it’s a small hole (left no doubt by a nail by way of the force of the hammer), or a crack (typical of all things old), maybe even a window (which I suppose is a hole – just quite large and quite engineered). If it is indeed a window, try to look at it. (Not through it.) A surface on a surface reflecting. Everything in the reflection is always backwards.

Back worlds and back words. Backlash and backdrop. Blur your eyes.

Forget the wall. The wall was just a prop. Here’s a better backdrop and backprop.

Prussian Blue was discovered entirely by accident (twice). Its coincidental creation was cultivated by way of chance contamination. Originally intended to be red, the mishap color mistakenly emerged using the shells of the cochineal beetle. Google says this particular beetle is unique in its hefty production of carminic acid which is utilized to produce brilliant shades of crimson and scarlet dyes. But as chance would have it (and chance did have it) an unforeseen extraneous impurity (salt) caused the red to become blue. And so red came before blue. Chance always has it.

Blue was the successor of red not just in its making but also in its naming. As with most things it went unseen until it was named. Or maybe it wasn’t quite that it was unseen – maybe it was just overseen (if there is such a version of perception). Blue may have just been so ubiquitous, that to name it would have been down right redundant. Nonetheless there is a gap of several thousand years when blue did not exist until it did. Sometimes (maybe to feel less alive or maybe more alive) I try to imagine a time before there were words and before there were names. It is here that I would ask - Does the sky outweigh the ocean or does the ocean outweigh the sky?

I suppose naming proposes to offer a solution through distinction. But nonetheless is it:

conveying a matter of density? Or concisely convening a density of matter?

Surely vey and vene are close relatives but they are connected and contradicted by the murky slipperiness inherent in their foremost con.

(If you are a quiet person, you always run the risk of being suspected of a shiftiness just like con.)

10:16

Blue masses concaving and mass blues convexing into constrictive black holes and concealing blue eyes, blackened. Always confiscating, confining, and contracting into condensed concretized containers concocted either to condemn or to condone. A condition of constantly consuming the convictions of a contrived consensus.

One can get a concussion just conceding to such conventions. And I confess I’ve contracted more concussions than I can conceivably count. Not by way of conflicting confrontations but rather through constructions of conformance and confluence. It’s easy to get congested in this concurrency of conglomerated currents. Convulsing contortions and contaminations congealed in the very pulse of what I thought I once knew. (If not conceive - than conduct.) Consider consecrating the condensation of your own breath, so we could converge continually. Is it possible to conjure such foggy conduits?

11:12

Maybe it’s so slippery because “c” might just want to be “o”. Searching for that little piece it’s missing to become a full circle.

But this is all off topic.
12:14
Back to our accident – blue.

Now it has many names, but it’s still just as ubiquitous. Prussian blue for instance is used in blueprints, cyanotypes, and carbon copies (all methods of preserving, replicating, and allowing the dispersion of an image.) It’s always reproducing.

Someone at some point decided to break Prussian Blue down into smaller parts. (I think this happens to all things that propagate to fast. Reproduce and be reduced. ie. Speedbreeding).

Anyhow, it was shattered into one fraction of salt and one fraction of Hydrogen Cyanide. Blah blah blah. So what. Who cares?

Well I do because HyCy apparently plays an important factor in the origin of life. And you may be interested to know that Hi C came into existence on the planet from an asteroid collision when carbon from assteroids mixed with nitrogen in the Earth’s atmosphere. So, the accident that is Prussian Blue, the overseen color we took several thousand years to see, actually allowed us to learn more about how life came to exist. Whatever.

You might think we would value such a precious material. Expansively Existential should equate to Exponentially expensive. But on the contrary - Prussian Blue went into mass production as a cheap replacement to the much more expensive ULTRAmarine blue made from lapis lazuli.

(*note crystal chart below)

Phoushan Blue is also used as laundry “bluing” to optically trick the eye into perceiving aged or yellowing fabrics as slightly whiter than they truly are. (Now we just use bleach.) Maybe bluing should be called newing when it reverses the effects of time. Cheap tricks. And it can also be used as a catalyst to crystallize salt. (Salt being another precious commodity. Overseen. There’s salt in the cracks of our hands and the crevices of our bones. Humans have always built their communities around sources of salt or sources of water.)

One can only hope to crystalize.

3:22
I’m at the kind of store that sells crystals.
Tapestries / carved effigies / unmelted candles / fragrance fumes / incense plumes

I’ve been visiting this particular shop for over a year now. I suppose you could think of it as a kind of research or field investigation. I drive here to use its sales displays as a hypothetical cross section of trends prevalent within the social fabric. (Or at least I tell myself that). This store has some salt crystals but it’s probably more reputable for the kind of crystals used to heal.

To the left of the store there is a wall made up of small clear plastic cubbies. Each mini vitrine containing a pile of crystals. Glistening glossy, shiny smooth, precious, polished, pretty, metallic, opulent, austere, colorful, striated, translucent, jagged, dry and downright ugly. The full spectrum of crystal species. Adhered to the front of each clear container is a partially peeling piece of clear tape, underneath which is a name for the inhabitant crystal. Along with each name, there is a corresponding short description of what types of powers the crystal (supposedly) has.

AMETHYST to develop intuition and awareness AMETRINE to bring dreams to reality AGATE to enhance courage, confidence, strength AMAZONITE to increase will power and communication skills AVENTURINE to balance erratic emotions AQUAMARINE to reduce fears and mental tension APHOPOLYTE to facilitate attunement to with body APATITE to increase kindness, helpfulness, and friendliness AVENTURINE GREEN to increase perception and foresight CARNELIAN to enhance creativity and sexuality CITRINE to raise self-esteem and bring good luck in business endeavors CRYSTAL to provide clarity of mind and thought CALCITE to amplify energy DIAMOND to purify and amplify feelings EMERALD to open and activate heart FLOWRITE to enhance memory, intellect, and concentration (which is odd because ingesting flouride will actually impair memory and damage your brain) FUCHSITE to provide self-reflection and self-healing GARNET to raise internal fire and creativity BLUE HOWLITE to calm anger HEMATITE to seal the auric field against negativity JADE to induce ambition BLUE KIANITE to calm and bring psychic awareness LABRADORITE to protect the aura and prevent energy leaks LAPUS LAZULI to deepen wisdom and intuition (*)I guess Prussian Blue provides a cheaper version of this wisdom and intuition) MOONSTONE to balance MUSCOVITE to diminish anger and anxiety MALACHITE to release suppressed emotions BLACK OBSIDIAN to understand and face deep fears OPAL to amplify emotion, insight and spontaneity PEARL to purify the mind and heart PYRITE to shield from negative energies PERIDOT to release tension and initiate physical healing TURQUOISE to uplift unconditional love RHODINITE to attract love, heal the heart, and catalyze a fulfillment of life purpose ROSE QUARTZ to open the heart for love and friendship RUTILATED QUARTZ to stabilize relationships SODALITE to awaken and increase intuitive knowledge SELENITE to stimulate brain activity, expand awareness, and develop telepathy SMOKY QUARTZ to enhance sexuality and fertility TIGER’S EYE to bring order, stability and integrity PINK TOURMALINE to create joy and enthusiasm for life BLACK TOURMALINE to focus and strengthen the body and spirit.
3:36
Every time I go I like to people watch. Sometimes I’ll scour the bookshelves pretending to leaf through pages of obscure books on mysticism while I secretly eavesdrop on everyone within earshot.

3:49
“Hey, so and so, did you go to that thing where they did stuff? (Proper noun, verb verbing, noun verb noning).
“No. I was verbing adjective.”
“Oh really? Did you know that Proper Noun (Insert crystal here) is good for feeling adjective.”

3:58
This community is not built around a source of salt or water. It is built around a source of searching (maybe like c).

Coincidentally (or not) RHODONITE and ROSE QUARTZ are always in highest demand.

5:00
The last thing I remember was when you tucked a piece of waxy blue carbon paper in your pants pocket. The flimsy paper crinkled whenever you moved, smearing heavy with the impressed traces of your motion. Replicate remnants. Wrinkled residues. Repeat. Rub. Redo.

That’s one way to reproduce.
(20% of our body mass is composed of carbon anyhow.)

I looked down between where legs should have been.
What exactly is the difference between petrification and preservation anyway?

7:18
I envision preservation to be sleek and glassy like AVENTURINE GREEN (*note crystal chart above) whereas petrification might be decrepit, jagged, and hardened more akin to SODALITE (*again note crystal chart above).

Preservation is an active process. On going, mediated maintenance. Whereas petrification is past tense. Compressed fragility in a state of stasis.

Without a clock, we can only really rely on carbon. If you’re alive and you’ve eaten a thing that's eaten a thing that’s eaten a plant (or maybe you just eat plants – either way) you’re consuming traces of carbon dioxide (and unlike us that shit just doesn’t die).

Everything is always stealing carbon because it casts such long shadows. I want my carbon to preserve something good. That’s why I’m breathing hot and heavy on things I like.

If I can’t preserve it – I’ll at least petrify it.