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A new style of art communication

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Gallery 400's beguiling summer group show "Whisper Down the Lane" takes its title and premise from a classic children's party game that's also known as "Telephone" and "Pass the Message." Regardless of what you call it, you've most likely played it: One person starts by whispering something in the ear of another person, who whispers it to the next one and so on. The fun lies in discovering if, and how much, the original words have changed by the time the last person in line says them out loud.

As curated by Gallery 400 director Lorelei Stewart, "Whisper" doesn't follow this formula to the letter, but the gist is the same. Stewart began by inviting local artists Dana DeGiulio, David Leggett, Christopher Meerdo and Cauleen Smith, along with San Francisco-based Stephanie Syjuco, to exhibit artworks that, for Stewart, in some way evoked the spirit of the telephone game. She also asked each to invite another artist to contribute a work or works on that theme too. Those artists could in turn select someone else, as could the artists they chose and so on, until the show had more than two dozen participants.

In the gallery, works by artists who are part of the same chain, so to speak, are placed near each another, although not necessarily in the order they were selected. (Syjuco's piece — two architectural columns wheat-pasted with black and white printouts of symbols culled from an Internet search on the terms "Aztec" and "ethnic" — is for logistical reasons located several rooms away from its offshoots.)

The resultant groupings can be thought of as constellations or even genealogies, but here, the connective tissue is the transmission and subjective interpretations of a single idea. Occasionally, the game's parameters were ignored or subtly altered. Syjuco's group, for example, which includes Emanuel Almborg from Sweden, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, based in London, the Ukrainian collective Revolutionary Experimental Space and Lena Tutunjian, an artist from Qatar residing in the United Kingdom, is the most geographically far-flung because Syjuco stipulated that the artists in her chain had to come from different countries.

Gamely, many of them responded by submitting works that enact translation processes — or in some cases, their failures. Notable among these is Revolutionary Experimental Space's video documentation of folk musicians from various parts of Europe and Asia, who in collaboration with the artists wrote and sang songs about the events taking place in numerous famous performance artworks, much like the bards of old once did for war heroes, and an exhilaratingly utopian-minded film by Almborg called "Nothing is Left to Tell" that, although 30 minutes long, is more than worth the time it takes to view it.

The film documents an experimental project launched by Almborg that involved 11 other people, all of them strangers of different ages and backgrounds. Together, they traveled to a small island off the Swedish coast with the aim of building a wooden structure. The catch was that they had to do so without any blueprints or building plans, and they weren't allowed to speak to one another or use writing to communicate. Those in the group tasked with documenting the process were also restricted to a half hour of filming per day.

So what did they build?

A playground with swings, seesaws, basketball hoops, forts and whirligigs. Almborg's venture could easily have resulted in another Tower of Babel; instead, the group created a little paradise — or it seemed that way based on the footage we see. The participants appear to rediscover and in some sense return to earlier, more childlike versions of themselves as they create musical instruments out of wood planks and string, play catch and eat meals together in companionable silence.

The works in DeGiulio's group likewise converse without words. The gentle folds in Deirdre O'Dwyer's wall hanging, which consists of two sheets of bright white cotton fabric dotted with multicolored marks and nailed to the wall at its corners and center, could, if you look at them a certain way, evoke the wings of the moth splayed across the black depths of Richard Walker's modest piece several feet away. Slightly further down the wall, the larger of DeGiulio's two-part painting shimmers, much like the wings and bodies of insects do when they're aglow with reflected light. Pressed up against it is its smaller counterpart, which offers up a few wilted yellow-orange roses, still alluring despite their exhaustion.

Telephone is a game without winners or losers; its success depends on someone getting the words wrong — the more wrong, the better. In the best circumstances, the final iteration sounds nothing like it did in the beginning. Instead, it's poetry. This is the case with Terri Kapsalis and Katie Kahn's collaborative works on paper, each created in whole or part from fragments of disaster-themed news articles, and it's also true of Judith Brotman's "The 93 Dreams of Summer," like the previous works part of Leggett's group. To engage it, you sit on a striped beach chair, don headphones and listen as Brotman relays 93 different dream scenarios, each one an exquisitely crafted work of microfiction with "you" as its protagonist.

But what should we make of Leggett's 15 framed drawings, which more than anything seem to speak to the pleasures and perils of saying exactly what you think or, alternately, in refusing to? His ink and colored pencil renderings of people of various skin tones, a number of them underscored by captions, are provocative to say the least.

"Please buy my art old white ladies," reads one, above a depiction of a grimacing man holding up a drawing and two gray-haired women I suppose we're to assume are collector types. "Everybody wants to be black until the cops come," reads another, the words printed in neat white letters across a smooth, black, chalkboard-like surface.

There are harsh truths here, but there's comedy and sarcasm too. Depending on who you are and what perspective you bring, you'll parse different things from Leggett's words, and indeed from all of the other "messages" delivered in his fellow artists' works. In the end, you are the final link in the chain, the last person in line. I've told you what I heard: Now, it's your turn.

"Whisper Down the Lane" runs through Aug. 24 at Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois at Chicago, 400 S. Peoria St., 312-996-6114, gallery400.uic.edu.

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