

MILANO CHOW + MARTINE SYMS =

MARTINE: How do you describe your work in applications?

MILANO: Oh god, terribly. Every artist I talk to has a hard time verbalizing his or her process or ideas without relying on press release language. "I am interested in the intersection of ____ and ____."

MARTINE: It's difficult to use plain language. The Rema Hort Mann Foundation grant application has the question: "What is your art about?" It's mean. So, what is your art about?

MILANO: I would say...it is about playing with rules of representation to undermine people's expectations of a picture. But that is very loaded and maybe a little arrogant.

MARTINE: A bit of arrogance is necessary for survival.

MILANO: How do you usually answer it? When you look at other people's work, how important is their explanation?

MARTINE: I say something like, "My work examines the myths of contemporary American culture." Ugh.

MILANO: I think that's a good one, though.

MARTINE: When I look at another artist, it's important to me that he or she is able to talk about the work, but also that he or she understands when there isn't a lot to say about the work. Like, I have very little patience for an hour-long treatise about a blank canvas.

MILANO: I blame school. Okay, that's a scapegoat...but there are all these institutional apparatuses that create this language we are talking about. Maybe we become anxious about our work entering that system and being eclipsed by it.

MARTINE: We want to participate, so we adopt a similar language—even though we can't use it with a straight face. I think we both have an instinctive resistance to the dominant art world. That's how I got into publishing.

I interned at Ooga Booga the year before I moved to Chicago, and again the summer before my senior year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I liked the idea of circulating art through a familiar retail model. I opened

Golden Age with Marco Braunschweiler the month after we graduated in 2007. I was working at a gallery and I hated the way that you had to learn how to operate by a secret code.

Everyone understands a shop. Everyone understands books. We both wanted our space to be accessible. Now I think about it a different way. I'm paraphrasing Andy Fenchel from Lampo—my projects are not for everyone, but they are for anyone. Anyones like us.

We started publishing because it was a natural progression from distributing small press titles and showing work from emerging artists. We wanted to contextualize the work we exhibited and give the shows another life. We were strictly against catalogues (among other things) and wanted each book to exist on its own.

How did you start Oso Press?

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MILANO: I started Oso Press when I moved back to LA in 2011. I wanted to start with a clean slate from Medium Rare, an imprint I started at Barnard through an entrepreneurial grant program, which I believe ended with the financial crash. I made Xerox 'zines, but beyond that had no experience with publishing and figured I would learn by doing. I was assisting at Columbia's printmaking studio and was influenced by this romantic ideal of working with artists and actualizing their ideas without realizing my limitations in skill and money. It was all trial and error, and I made so many embarrassing mistakes like misprinting, overspending, and not having streamlined distribution, despite help from generous friends. I started worrying more about breaking even than the actual projects, which felt absurd since independent publishing was meant to feel free, although looking back that attitude is naive.

With Oso Press, production is nearly all in-house, hopefully without sacrificing craft. I'll go to a copy shop for things like coil binding, otherwise I print, bind, and cut everything myself with a desktop laser printer and basic bookbinding tools. The design is minimal, and I always ask the artists and writers for their input, and they receive half the edition. There's been a more literary slant to Oso Press compared to Medium Rare. I felt alienated or exhausted by art and careerism when I returned to LA, so I was turning to music and history for respite and the choice in editions reflect that, like a reprinted Studs Terkel interview. It's also important that the projects are gender-balanced. ▶

MARTINE: Do you consider your publishing to be a part of your practice?

MILANO: No, it's really anonymous. My name doesn't appear on the website and I don't publish my own material under Oso Press. I like the mystique that publishing and websites can enable. My drawing practice is solitary, so publishing is the only time I ever collaborate. Do you consider Dominica to be part of your practice? What do you think of the term "art practice"?

MARTINE: I think "art practice" is a useful term. It's connected to the "professionalizing" of art, but I don't mind that. I like elements of corporate culture. I think of Dominica as my business.

I started it on January 1, 2012. It was very symbolic for me—a new phase! I registered as an LLC because it's primarily a studio for hire. I do client work and use a percentage of that money to do publishing projects. My favorite part of Golden Age was helping people realize new work.

I've done nine editions. They are all newly commissioned work from visual artists. I have a fantasy of being a one-man Creative Time. I've worked with Lauren Anderson, David Hartt, James Goggin, Cat Roif, Marco Braunschweiler, and Diamond Stingily, and I use it to distribute my own work. I also say that Dominica publishes books about blackness, but it's kind of a joke. I publish whatever I want, and because I'm black it becomes black.

Dominica Publishing is chill. Dominica LLC is hectic.

MILANO: I've seen you describe yourself as an entrepreneur. How did you get interested in that culture?

MARTINE: I describe myself as a "conceptual entrepreneur," which Bart Ryan at the Walker Art Center said was a title made of two "bad words." I love impropriety. Fred Moten talks about blackness and the improper better than I can, but I'm consciously invoking bad taste.

I took the business class at SAIC in my junior year because I knew I wanted to start a small business—Golden Age. I attempted to read every business book at the Harold Washington Library because we wanted to apply for an SBA loan.

I graduated in 2007, just before the recession hit. I had this shitty nonprofit job, and I quit when they cut my hours. I couldn't find a job again for five years. I learned to work for myself.

Initially, my entrepreneurship was driven by a need for money. More recently, I've realized that my fascination with business is also about ideology and power in American culture.

MILANO: Oh, my god! 2007 to 2009ish were the peak recession years. I graduated and would read obsessively about bad job prospects.

MARTINE: It was terrible.

MILANO: Do you think there are any parallels between art language and business language? Both can be very abstract.

MARTINE: Art speak and business jargon are tools of power that are used to exclude people. There's a very direct connection between the business world and the art world. They're called art collectors. Carlos Slim, richest man in the world from 2010 to 2013, owns telecoms, media, real estate, mines, and more. Eli Broad ran two Fortune 500 companies, and Dakis Joannou is a construction magnate. I could go on and on and on and on.

There's also a relationship between this abstraction called "value," which circulates through art and commerce. Think about ArtRank, née Sell You Later—the model that "quantifies the emerging art market." People with power attempt to naturalize their power. They make it seem like nothing could ever be any other way.

MILANO: The structures for both gain power from being opaque, which goes back to your point about power being naturalized. The operation of galleries and museums is mysterious to outsiders. Or even to artists and those involved. My brother, who's an historian, asked me why an artist couldn't walk into MoMA and submit their work. He was half-joking, but it was a blunt way to ask how artists get recognized. I tried explaining all these specialized professions like curators, but I was too inexperienced to really answer him. I try to stay ignorant of art market news and speculation gossip, especially after working at a gallery—it just feels toxic for a young artist. Do you still think about MBA programs?

MARTINE: One time my brother asked how artists got paid. I started explaining the gallery system to him. Once he figured it out he was like, "How do you get gallery representation? Seems like it would be hard." Uh, yeah! That's why I like the David Hammons route. You have more control.

It was a blessing that I was rejected from business school. I have no interest in getting an MBA.

I still think constantly about business ideas. I'm finding alternative ways to meet investors who would give me money for some of these ideas. Reading Fred Wilson's blog (avc.com) for the past few years has kept me thinking about the possibilities of a VC model.

I want to talk about value and how it's created and distributed. Those conversations aren't really happening at b-school.

MILANO: Where do you think the conversation is happening?

MARTINE: I don't think it's happening much at all. Maybe academia? I've read a few good books on the subject—William Leach's *Land of Desire* and Ewen and Ewen's *Channels of Desire*, to name two with the word "desire" in the title.

David Robbins talks about this in *High Entertainment*. Using his formulation, I'm a "refinement-seeking mind." This is how I found myself in the art world. Whether I'll stay here is a question of the audience I want.

I want to make things that are "for heads, by heads." I don't know where the heads are exactly, but I think they'll find me.

MILANO: Yes, I trust in the work coming first and the audience after. For a long time I was incredibly insecure about

LEFT TO RIGHT: Talya Cooper, *So Off You're On*, Oso Press, 2011. Annie Dants, *Confessions*, Oso Press, 2014. Meggie Kelley, *Dark Alcoves, Hidden Niches, and Cozy Corners*, Oso Press, 2012.

my work being dismissed as empty labor or illustration, but I learned to believe in the drawing technique as a thinking process. I'm still ambivalent about showing work, but for now participating in gallery shows makes sense. I prefer the drawings in a home, so I've given a lot of artwork to friends. I also do commercial illustration, but it's a much faster process and I don't have complete control over the authorship. I'm such a stubborn loner, and making art allows for that.

MARTINE: I could go into television. I think it's the foundation of mainstream American commercial culture. It's an artifact resulting from the unique combination of market value, cultural meaning, narrative convention, and shared experience. Plus, I love watching it.

MILANO: What is the most popular TV show now?

MARTINE: I'm not sure. It used to be *Monday Night Football*. The highest rated shows these days are all sports events.

MILANO: One of the few things you still can't pirate. When you watch TV do you take it in as a viewer or are you analyzing things?

MARTINE: I watch TV for pleasure. I'm conscious of the structure and I often think about that. But when I'm watching *Scandal* I'm mostly just thinking about the characters and plot.

MILANO: Do you ever think, "I'm really being manipulated right now"?

MARTINE: For sure! Especially with *Scandal*. I definitely imagine the writers' room. I consider which plots or subplots have the most yield from the perspective of the writer. Like, if they kill the president, the show is over, so they'll keep dragging him through.

MILANO: I think that way about pop music and being in stores.

MARTINE: In a way it's all shopping. In *Comic Visions*, David Marc writes "The main business of television is not so much the selling of specific products as the selling of an existing order."

MILANO: Yes, they're all very passive ways of consuming.

MARTINE: On our hike you mentioned shop windows as an influence.

MILANO: I love shop windows. It's all artifice. Very seductive.

MARTINE: Can you talk more about that? *Land of Desire* made me realize how much of my taste was determined by commercial culture. I love glass, light, and color.

MILANO: My favorite shop window is this interior store on Melrose near Western. It has all these suspended mantelpieces and corners with wallpaper backdrops. It's like an accidental art installation, but way better.

MARTINE: There was a great one at a Chicago hardware store. Everything was hung salon style on pegboard in the front windows.

MILANO: That sounds really good. I also love Gene Moore's work; he was a window dresser for Tiffany's and made these dramatic displays with floating mannequin hands and fruit and really charged objects. There's one with diamonds, a noose, and tax forms. The department store window is also tied into the history of urban design, which was linked to this new way of experiencing a city through looking. In art history classes we'd always talk about Haussmann and Paris.

MARTINE: Do you reference the arrangement of shop windows in your drawings?

MILANO: The most literal connection is a very shallow space that's occupied with objects and the pseudo-narrative that occurs through formal compositions, but also through what is being represented. The objects are usually pretty banal—flowers, utensils, candles. Picking the objects is like window-shopping. I often find source material online.

MARTINE: Where do you look?

MILANO: eBay and 1stdibs. I am obsessed with 1stdibs. It's an online shop for collectible furniture and antiques. All the objects are photographed thoroughly from different angles, almost like character studies.

MARTINE: Can you describe your interest in shelves, frames, etc., and the boundaries of the image? We were talking about the shopping window, which led us to the browser window, and then your drawings are often enclosed, or employ framing devices.

MILANO: In regards to the browser window, yes, that's definitely relevant. Interfaces are still designed to have drop shadows and other markers of recessed space, and I use similar cues in the drawings. But the parallel isn't conscious—if anything I try to avoid explicit references to contemporary life, especially screens. To me it's just another aspect of my daily life that gets internalized and finds its way into the image. I've also been accused of being nostalgic, so maybe I'm in denial, too.

I have a traditional-art training background. I learned figure drawing, anatomy, proportions, two-point perspective. It was tied into this valuation of drawing based on skill and realism. My recent drawings move away from that and embrace a flat pictorial space.

I had artist's block and didn't make work for at least a year after school. I can't remember a specific instance, but these shelf/frame devices provided a means to make a new work. Instead of having anxiety about making a new piece and "developing," I would just make another window drawing. It was almost like a found composition and I just had to fill it in. It took a lot of pressure off.

MARTINE: It's systematic, or has a structure.

MILANO: Yeah! But it came from an emotional space, not a conceptual framework.

MARTINE: Emotional Structuralist.

MILANO: I like that. Expressive Materialist. The drawing starts with a basic structure. Like, measuring out and lightly drawing the outline of a door or window. Sometimes I'll also collage on top to figure out the composition. I'll make decisions as I'm rendering things. It's tedious and boring.

MARTINE: What made you continue to work with graphite even as you became more interested in flatness?

MILANO: I love the tone and texture you can get from graphite.

MARTINE: There's also a familiarity to it.

MILANO: Drawing is foundational. They always make you draw shoes with graphite in school.

MARTINE: I'm really impressed by the way your work sneaks up on me. Walking into an exhibition I can discern the forms and see the contrast. As I get closer, I can tell how it is a drawing. Next, I try to understand how the objects are related.

MILANO: I like the conflict between visual readability and hidden meaning. You simultaneously know and don't know what you're looking at.

MARTINE: Yes! That's fun to me. I think it's why I like to work with specific formats. I like to play within conventions of how to read a cultural artifact.

MILANO: *Most Days* seems like a perfect example. An LP is a very distinct way to disseminate information.



Martine Syms. *Most Days*, 2014, vinyl record, 12 x 12 in.

MARTINE: I describe *Most Days* as an audio film. It's a table read of a Mundane Afrofuturist screenplay that follows a young woman named Chanel Washington on an average day in 2050. The score was done by Neil Reinalda, aka PHORK.

I came up with the idea after Sean Keenan and Michael Hunter approached me about doing an album for their label Mixed Media. Originally, they wanted me to record one of my short stories, but I didn't like that idea because I write for a reader—one person, holding a book in his or her hands. I wanted to create something that was designed for listening. I frequently deconstruct film production, so the table read felt like the perfect form. I'd also been toying with the idea of writing a screenplay. It was an opportunity to do it with low stakes.

I never thought I'd make an album! People thought I had released music. They were like, "What! You sing?"

MILANO: Confusion is good, too.

MARTINE: I like to create the opportunity for misunderstanding. It's my least marketable trait.

MILANO: I also remember you being concerned that the cover would read as sci-fi.

MARTINE: I wanted it to be narrative. It's a movie still. The "movie" is sci-fi, so it was important to me that it translated. Although, at the LA Art Book Fair, everyone thought it was Kelela—but she's sort of Afrofuturist, so I took it as a good sign.

MILANO: Do you try to anticipate the viewer's reading or try to control it? Since you have a background in design, it seems like you'd understand the connection between style and message and that would be another tool to use.

MARTINE: I always think about audience and distribution before I start a project. I went to school for film, but I've worked as a graphic designer since graduating. My process is a hybrid of the two.

I have to know how a project is going to live in the world before I start working on it because that is going to dictate how I make it. I work very linearly, through each phase, whether it's research or production. I draw a sharp distinction between making the work and presenting the work.

I use John Fiske's definition of a reader as the "maker of meanings and pleasures." I try to provoke or bear specific feelings in my work, but it's always up to the audience to complete them. With *Most Days* I was thinking a lot about work, repetition, and affect. I was thinking about this protest sign from Feel Tank's Annual International Parade of the Politically Depressed that read: depressed? it might be the economy.

I try to create a world and construct a narrative that swirls around these ideas. I felt pretty good when a white guy from North Carolina told me that he thought *Most Days* was about his life. It's about a feeling. I think all filmmakers understand this—you have to—but only talented graphic designers can accomplish affect.

MILANO: How about with *The Queen's English* at the Armory? Or other text-based projects?

MARTINE: *The Queen's English* was an exhibition and reading room inspired by the distribution of knowledge between radical, black feminists in the 1970s. I was in San Francisco and found this book called *Black Lesbians* that was an annotated bibliography of books by black lesbians or about black lesbianism. Immediately, I wanted to start collecting the books from the bibliography. When Leonardo and River from Big City Forum approached me about doing the show at the Armory, *Black Lesbians* was the only thing in my studio. I was just like: I want to work with this text.

They initially reached out because they had read *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* that I wrote for Rhizome. All of my work is text-based. Text is my material. I use biography—things I read, watch, listen to, or see. I think of myself as a reader. My writing comes from that experience.

If I'm writing an essay, I'm communicating an idea, and it's important to be clear about my position, or as clear as I can be. Sometimes I don't know or I'm uncertain. I can aestheticize that. I've been reading Suzanne Scanlon, Barry Hannah, and Alejandro Zambra. They do a good job of that. From Zambra's novel *Ways of Going Home*. "To read is to cover one's face. And to write is to show it."

In prints, I use quotes or I write it in another voice. Someone with similar life experiences might pull out threads that others wouldn't. My narratives are fragmented. The reader has to fill in the blanks.

For *The Queen's English* I created a series of photographs in collaboration with Cat Roif. We used one of the annotations from *Black Lesbians* as the starting point of our story. It said something like, "A woman learns to love herself through the creation of a fantasy lover." I wanted those images to be cinematic and period-specific. Each photograph is part of this narrative.

MILANO: They even had the proportions of a screen, although hung vertically.

MARTINE: I think the installation is a good format to present a collision of ideas for the viewer to put together. I used that exhibition to frame a narrative about black radical lesbians in the 1970s.

MILANO: When you talk about narratives, are you inserting yourself into them?

MARTINE: I'm forcing a connection between myself and the past. Clifford Owens describes it as imagining your own history. I look for micro-histories and give them a bit of hagiography. What about you? Do you think about a tradition?

MILANO: Maybe a loose tradition of picture-makers. Okay, this is a corny way to phrase it, but maybe reading these histories helps you locate where you are now, or helps explain why you are in this current position.

MARTINE: I don't think it's corny. History can explain the present and the future.

Black Lesbians was published by a now-defunct small press out of Florida. Many of the books that I collected were published by woman-run presses, and most of them were independently published, except for titles by Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall.

I was thinking about the way that a subculture formed around the circulation of these books. The content spoke to a particular experience, it used a vernacular that represented the reader, and more importantly it assumed a reader that was rarely ever targeted. I saw a parallel between what those women were doing and what I'm doing now.

I think about the relationship between language and identity all the time. In a way I am inserting myself into the history.

With *Golden Age*, we wanted to do the same thing. We buy a book from Baldessari and place it next to a book from Paul Cowan. It was about bringing them into conversation. Our name was a joke on that, the idea that we were declaring ourselves and our time as a "Golden Age."

MILANO: You can think of all these larger intersecting historical and social forces that have resulted in you being you. As a daughter of Chinese immigrants, I definitely think about it.

MARTINE: Yes, exactly. I'm obsessed with those forces, especially the economic forces.

In my book *Implications and Distinctions: Format, Content and Context in Contemporary Race Film*, I trace the aesthetic and stylistic markers of "black film" to a social and economic history. Black movies get a systematic short sell compared to white—excuse me—"mainstream" movies.

To give a really weird example, last year during the holiday movie season *The Best Man Holiday* opened in 2,000 theaters, while *Thor* opened in 4,000 theaters. They pulled in nearly the same amount of money. Not to mention that *The Best Man Holiday* and *The Best Man* before it were distributed to specific theaters.

I also write about my relationship to these films as a viewer, and how that is determined in some ways. Ta-Nehisi Coates has been doing incredible journalism for *The Atlantic* about the ways that race plays out in cities, with the support of racist policy. If you look at my biography, the television shows I watched, the movies I saw, and the music I listened to aren't by coincidence. I'm an anomaly in many ways, but I'm a product of the system in many more.

MILANO: It makes me wonder how much agency I actually have.

MARTINE: Do you feel like you have more or less agency?

MILANO: Generally, more, but I wonder if I am just a cog without realizing it, and all my desires have been subconsciously planted.

MARTINE: And what if they have?

It doesn't mean you don't feel them. Back to TV for a moment—it's a container for feelings. Both planted and organic. ▶

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MILANO: People get so sentimental about TV shows!

MARTINE: It's the "privately-felt public imagination," to quote Alison Landsberg. I find a lot of potential in that space.

MILANO: Projected feelings are still feelings. This is starting to get very poetic.

MARTINE: Okay, what's next for you?

MILANO: I'm working on my first solo show opening at Young Art in Los Angeles in spring 2015. It's a new experience for me—all the decisions are more conscious. There is so much ego tied up in showing work, so it's funny that we're talking about personal identity/being a subject.

MARTINE: What do you mean?

MILANO: I've been thinking about artists' work and art labor and it being so tied to a name or persona than other lines of work. It feels very vulnerable.

MARTINE: That's why I like to work under the guise of a business. I'm using my name more frequently, mostly because of economic reasons—you know, the singular artist.

MILANO: What do you have coming up?

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MILANO: Hopefully the coming apocalypse doesn't interrupt our career paths.

MARTINE: We can only hope. ==