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CARLOS VIELMA

**AN INFINITE
PICNIC**

Cecily E. Horton Gallery
February 27 – May 3, 2025





Installation image by Sol Diaz-Peña

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— Sator Square, AD 60

The earliest example of the Sator Square—a mysterious, palindromic acrostic word square found across the Roman Empire’s influence—dates to pre-CE 62, found in the ruins of Pompeii.

Ultimately, the Sator Square is a math-y bit of language which was fairly ubiquitous during its time, finding its way into medical codices and architectural stone alike. Like the incantatory “abracadabra” of the 2nd century CE onward, these were words of deeply mystical, magical symbolism and significant early medical import. The language arrangements bear poetic resonance; to recite them aloud is deeply pleasurable and—quite literally—spellbinding.

From contemporary eyes, the Sator Square is succinct, minimal, compact, and very, very puzzling. It says a great deal about what happens to more abstract texts upon the closure of a civilization: this 25 letter arrangement—which is only about 2000 years old—has been debated for years, with no consensus over its meaning or its origins.

These ancient spells are proof that mystery is a form of poetry and that poetry is a form of mystery. In this vein, there are myriad poetic mysteries involved throughout Vielma’s exhibition, *An Infinite Picnic*. These mysteries are found within a perimeter of wall-mounted cases containing discards-as-artifacts and a centrally-located video viewing booth.

The video within (“My battery is low and it’s getting dark”) is a portrayal of the end of a civilization amid an inhospitable desert landscape. Based on (and borrowing text from) Ray Bradbury’s short story “The Million Year Picnic” (collected in *The Martian Chronicles*), the environs are bereft of humans but rife with the evidence of their having existed there.

The video is paced by a computer’s text-to-speech narration of sections lifted from Bradbury’s short story: “How far are we going dad? / A million years kids.”

The video also evokes the aforementioned artifacts of concrete poetics at its halfway point, wherein the viewer encounters a linguistic/semiotic puzzle: in the shadow of a distinctive desert mesa, a mysterious gold-colored plate rests on a wall in a desert ghost town, engraved with Roman-script letters arranged in cryptic 45° triangles.

This seemingly-abandoned desert site in the Mexican state of Coahuila is “Marte” (translation: “Mars”), as marked on a road sign and rocks on the mesa spray-painted white: “MARTE.” This identification both orients and disorients: Mars? Here? Further, it urges the viewer to consider: “What happened here? Where are we? Who was here? Who are we? WHAT are we?”

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In the latter half of the twentieth century, humans have made great efforts to attempt to communicate across predicted cultural, linguistic, and even perceptual bounds of the anticipated future. These communication strategies are applied to radioactive waste sites, interstellar space probes, and the various “knowledge arks” embedded within Svalbard. They are a form of “defensive design,” levied against the probability of present civilization’s closure, with an optimism that *anyone* may be around in the far future.

The communication strategies utilized within such sites, signage, and future artifacts are intended for scales which both contain and extend past the next 10,000 years. As such, they utilize redundancy and a combination of hostile architecture, pictograms, written language, and audio.

Vielma’s plate—his Sator Square—reads as one such object; it contains anatomical diagrams found on the “Pioneer plaques,” a precursor to the much more well-known “golden record” of the Voyager missions.

Sidebar: NASA’s metal sheets are currently estimated to be over 100 AU (10 billion miles) from our Sun; Vielma’s “Marte” plate is slightly over 500 miles away from Houston.

or is it?

Despite not being physically displayed in the gallery, this golden plate is central to the exhibition. It feels as though it is the axis upon which the entire show rotates, or as the unseen “director” of this filmic sci-fi narrative. The objects which *are* on display are framed items of Marte residents’ debris (“trash”) arrayed on the walls around the curtained video (which features several of the displayed artifacts).

For every Rosetta Stone type of artifact, there are thousands of Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls were artifacts preserved only by merit of their being ritualized trash. Because the scrolls (like many “worn-out” Hebrew texts), contained the name of G-d, they could not be thrown away; instead, they were buried/placed in Genizot, sites of ritualized discard.

Trash is a teacher: our reconstructions and understandings of ancient histories do not come solely from the material circumstances of things-etched-in-stone (e.g. government proclamations, architecture, monolith, stelae, etc).rather, to discover our past we ultimately have always had to search through detritus, piles, and the trash heap.

This process entails—among other things—the meticulous excavation and cataloguing of midden by archaeology. The refuse of our consumption and quotidian existence has proved to speak volumes, more than any monolith or stelae. Permanence, after all, was clearly not possible to a culture which has been lost.

These archaeological techniques are on display in Vielma's show. The trash is "elevated," not only to the status of art object but literally from horizontal to vertical, taken off the ground and onto the wall.

The arrangements within these cases-as-frames function as a form of cipher which invites the viewer to decipher their groupings and configuration, which suggest a portrait of individuals within an absent-but familiar-civilization. An uncanny (poetic) mystery, to be sure.

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The entirety of this show's contents come from Vielma's reconstruction of "Marte." They are—in other words—his "Martian Chronicles."

The word "martian" has fallen out of vogue, but it was Bradbury's word in 1959, and it was certainly poet Jack Spicer's. Of the same generation as Bradbury, Spicer's (whose not-famous-enough last words were "my vocabulary did this to me") "martians" referred to forces which provided "transmissions" which he—as poet—"dictated" from "The Outside." In other words, Spicer conceptualized the successful creative act not as authored by an auteur's agency, but as the product of constant interfacing and listening.

Vielma, too, listens to Martians: the works contained within "An Infinite Picnic" are ultimately messages of humanity from Mars, translated through Vielma's mind and hand. They are "transmissions" from the missing residents of Marte, and perhaps from Spicer's "Martians" as well. These are objects of poetry, of mystery, and of mysterious poetry: the kind engendered by objects whose full meaning is lost to time.

an essay by Lauren Klotzman





Installation image by Sol Díaz-Peña

Carlos Vielma is a Mexican visual artist with a background in architecture. His work in painting, video, and installation investigates longing, landscape, monuments, and the US-Mexico border. He has participated in many residency programs such as Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine; Casa Wabi in Puerto Escondido, Mexico; The National University of Colombia in Bogotá; and The Banff Center for the Arts and Creativity in Canada. Recently, the Mexican state honored him with a membership in the National System of Art Creators (SNCA) and he is a 2024-2025 fellow of The Core Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Lauren Klotzman (they/them) is an interdisciplinary art practitioner based primarily in Texas. A recent MFA graduate from Yale Painting, Klotzman has previously studied at Sarah Lawrence College, Naropa's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, and Bard College. Klotzman conceptualizes their studio as a complex feedback system containing a practice which functions across textiles, installation, sculpture, and lensless analog video generation. Current research topics include historical computing hardware, perception and consciousness, non-human intelligence, and "nostalgia of the future." They consider their works as acts of expanded painting, and have exhibited internationally. As a writer, their work has been published by Hyperallergic, TROLLTHREAD, Baest, The Operating System, and Boston Art Review, among others.



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