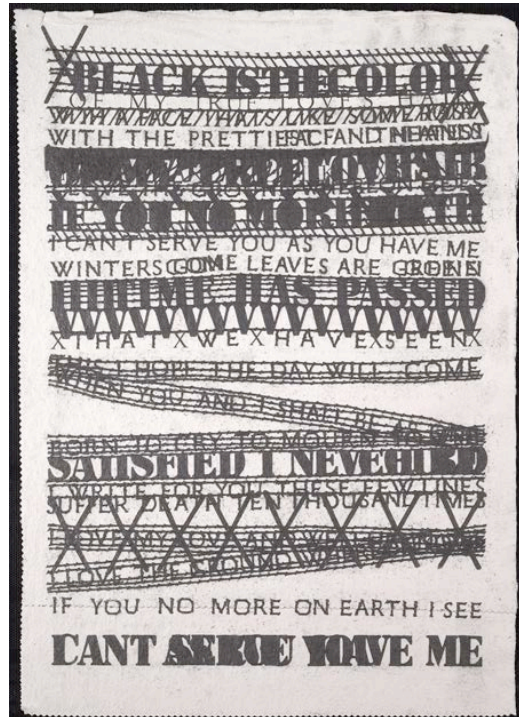


Alyssa Pheobus
Black is the Color

May 2009

BLACK IS THE COLOR is an eerie traditional song with roots in the history of British ballad craft. For over a century it has circulated through the American folk canon, eventually finding its way into the hands of gifted interpreters like Nina Simone and Pete Seeger. However, to this day, the performance that moves me most belongs to a young, little-known folk singer from rural Virginia named Elizabeth LaPrelle. Hers is a strident, high lonesome voice that exposes the anxiety submerged in this archaic love ballad.

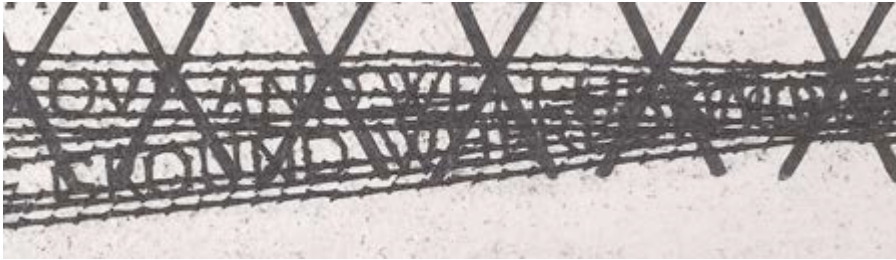
Like a musician covering songs that have been handed down, I interpret music, stories and language. Silently, with the humble materials of pencil and paper, I transform texts into image-inscriptions that accumulate at the intersections of listening, reading, looking, writing, and drawing. The physical scale of my work is often large, thrusting intimate narratives of desire, violence, entrapment, inadequacy, and abandonment into the looming, upright space of another form of public address.



Alyssa Pheobus, *Black is the Color* (2009) and details
Graphite on paper



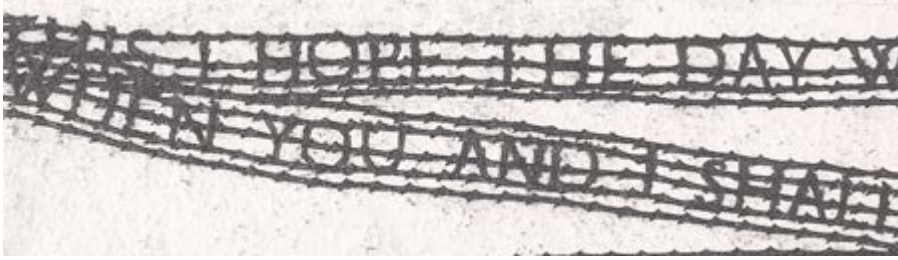
The premonition of loss that haunts performance after performance of BLACK IS THE COLOR springs as much from the conflicted nature of the lyrics as the mournful melody associated with the song. Throughout the text, the cloying sweetness in the description of a lover seems to poetically foreshadow the coming disaster of their departure or their demise. Most explicitly, the black of the lover's hair becomes the black of mourning. The language is boiled down and fragmentary, archaic and nostalgic for a past that never was: even as it describes the foreknowledge of loss, it is, in and of itself, an artifact of the natural processes of loss.



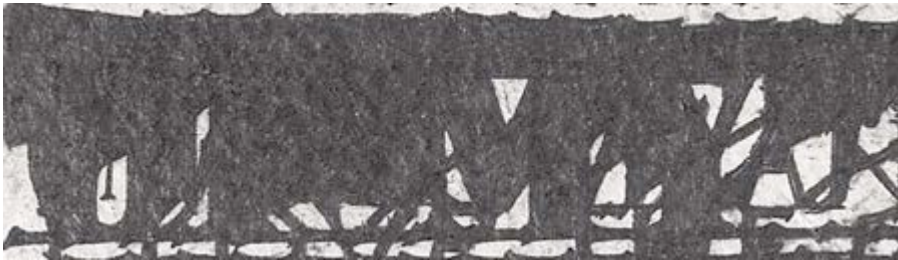
My work is deeply preoccupied with abandonment. Some of my drawings explore it narratively, while others stage it through initiating acts of slow, ambitious, labor-intensive drawing that end abruptly, leaving the scaffolding in plain view. Abandonment and betrayal are the other side of commitment, a complicated capacity that underwrites our ability to form attachments of all kinds. My work performs commitment through a labor that is simultaneously devotional and compulsive, like an act of love calling out for its own betrayal.



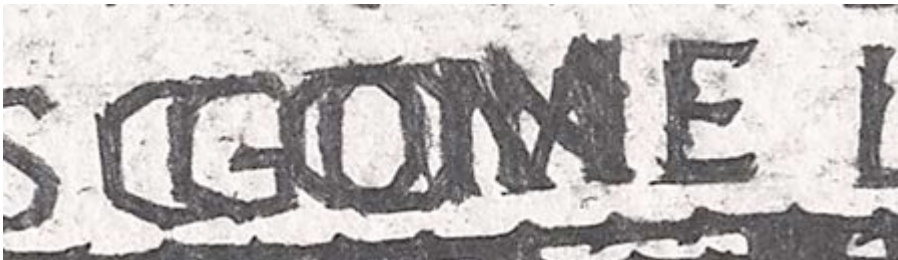
My aim in taking up BLACK IS THE COLOR is to contribute something to the history of the song—possibly a signature performance. In my rendition, words like COME and GONE obfuscate each other and accumulate into illegible silhouettes of language. The blockages that occur when lines and words nervously cross mark moments of anxiety: performative, textual refusals to contend with an uncertain turn of phrase predicting an uncertain future. My version is also a silhouette portrait of the song that is drawn from memory, incorporating lines from a handful of interpretations that have stuck with me over time. Although there are moments of graphic abandon where legibility is sacrificed to style, the drawing is committed to the fullness of the text. Like a page inscribed from top to bottom (perhaps a love note or a sheet of music), the drawing mirrors the song's essential ache for the fullness of generous and enduring love.



My work unfolds as a series of improvisations within a system of symbols and rules—a grammar. I am fascinated by the formal and linguistic relationships between language and the line, and expressions in which the two merge—a line in a poem, an actor’s lines, to read between the lines. I also invoke the metaphorical line connecting euphemisms for self-control: to walk the line; to draw a hard line; to be in line; to hold the line.



In costumes we often associate the color black with prestige, rebellion, austerity and mourning; to wear black in this way is to turn oneself into an image. To turn BLACK IS THE COLOR into an image I have relied on the sootiness of graphite, which never yields a true black. Its metallic sheen reflects light and resists union with the surface it marks—no matter how hard you draw the line.



Alyssa Pheobus is an artist based in New York. Her work was recently included in group exhibitions at Dieu Donn , Exit Art, Tracy Williams, Ltd., and Scaramouche c/o Fruit and Flower Deli. Her first solo exhibition opened at Bellwether in January 2009.

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