

# ≡ BROOKLYN RAIL

## Painting As Translation: Elise Ansel, James Hyde, and Alexis Ralaivao

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We invariably associate translation with language, with saying in one what has been said in another. But the word “translation” is fraught. Often, we privilege the source text with authority and imagine its translation, however accomplished, as a derivative approximation in another language. Yet, as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the oldest surviving Latin book on rhetoric, has it, the term *translatio* simply describes metaphor-making: “Metaphor (*translatio*) occurs when a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity seems to justify this transference.” *Translatio* as a concept is metaphoricity. Translation is an asymptotic affair, or, put differently, a curved bridge between two axes that gets tantalizingly close to each unto infinity and therefore is forever incomplete.

In *Las versiones homéricas* (1932), Jorge Luis Borges wonders why there are so many translations of Homer into English, from George Chapman’s in the seventeenth century to T.E. Lawrence’s in the twentieth. Borges argues that the composition of a so-called “original” text, once all mystification is set aside, is very much an act of translation in which the “translators” often surreptitiously hide their sources—their prior readings for example. He concludes that every book is potentially an infinite number of books, that translation can occur even in the same language, because readers arrive at their version of a text’s meaning by translating it through the prism of their own experience.

Translation, informed by indeterminacy as it always is, also takes place in the visual arts, in painting specifically, calling into question “originality”: an idea troubling all forms of artistic expression since nineteenth-century Romanticism. According to Borges, translation appears to lack originality because its source antecedes it (its source is there for all to see), yet, all the same, it is a new creation. Three painters who practice what we might call visual translation provide grist to grind for Borges’s theory: Elise Ansel, James Hyde, and Alexis Ralaivao.



Elise Ansel, *Woman Reading XIII*, 2024, Oil on linen, 15 x 12 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York.



James Hyde, *CHASING (BRIL)*, 2025, Acrylic, glass bead, colored grit on stretched canvas, archival pigment print, 36 3/4 x 54 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Both Ansel and Hyde are deeply reliant on the history of art; both acknowledge freely their relationship to the art of the past, yet both manage to create work whose originality is indisputable. While their results are strikingly different, both artists roughly employ the same modus operandi: each fixates on a painting from the past, probably for reasons neither can explain. Each photographs that work, isolating some piece of it. Each transforms that fragment into something new by painting a version of it. My account is of course reductive of their practice, as each works in a singular style, but this is, in essence, how Ansel and Hyde approach creation.

Here, then, is a multi-phased process involving more than one medium but inevitably ending with paint and brushes. The point of departure is a fragment torn from an “original,” removed from all context, and used as a first step. There is no blank canvas for Ansel or Hyde. As Ansel puts it in her artist statement:

I create by translating Old Master paintings into a contemporary pictorial language. Using an idiom of energetic gestural abstraction, I mine art historical imagery for color and narrative structure. I use abstraction to interrupt representational content in order to excavate and transform meanings and messages embedded in the works from which my paintings spring. I examine the impact of authorial agency and address the myriad subtle ways the gender, identity and belief systems of the artist are reflected in the art.

Where Ansel deliberately disrupts her models, Hyde works in a different way. In a series of paintings based on the work of Alessandro Magnasco (1667–1749), Hyde first photographed details and had them enlarged to billboard size. He then edited by cutting them down and painting over their surface, adding textural material. The result bears no resemblance to Magnasco. When he turned to Paul Bril (1554–1626), he retained ghostly vestiges of Bril’s figures, so the abstraction of the “original” was only partial. Both Ansel and Hyde “read” the work of the past and destroy it (or translate it) to reconstitute it in their own painterly idiom. Again, as in Borges, the act of reading is itself both translation and creation.

Alexis Ralaivao's method is different. He called his recent show at Kasmin Gallery *Éloge de l'ombre (In Praise of Shadows)*. Ralaivao is a French artist inspired by the translated title of an essay by the Japanese novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki published in 1933. Whatever Tanizaki may have meant in his article about a long-vanished Japan is irrelevant to Ralaivao's intent. Ralaivao simply uses the translated title as a point of departure. Here, again, is Borgesian reading as creation, something new that isn't verbal: a series of black-and-white paintings.



Alexis Ralaivao, *Dernier à Table*, 2024, Oil on canvas,  
66 7/8 x 78 3/4 inches.

© Alexis Ralaivao. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York.

Ralaivao's work dramatically enacts the metaphoric nature of translation (*translatio*). His point of departure is language, a translation into French of a Japanese essay. He then re-translates the translation by creating paintings he supposes derive from the original essay. What would Tanizaki, who died in 1965, make of these paintings? Impossible to say, but Ralaivao's visual interpretation is a universe away from a Japanese author's grumbling musings.

Ansel, Hyde, and Ralaivao prove that painting is far from dead. It is the medium whereby these artists can at once escape subjectivity by immersing themselves in the work of others while recovering subjectivity through the generation of a unique style.