

## Michael Cuadrado: Young and Plastic



My english teacher in grade school used to collect heart shaped rocks. She had a desk lined with them all with indentations somewhere in the middle making the rock look heart-like. It's oblong shape had been reformed over years of rolling through the sand and sea, the elements slowly carving out this shape. We would bring rocks to her when we found them and I began to notice them. I still pick them up from time to time. She was a religious woman wearing long denim skirts and a delicate cross would dangle on her clavicle. For her, these rocks must have been a talisman, proof that confirmed her belief in God or love or both. To me their novelty was in finding something in the wild that looks like something man-made, resembling the artificial symbol for the beating human heart.

In Michael Cuadrado's new body of work, the artist applies a formal logic to messy emotions. The heart-shape motif is constant as an image or sign that

is never quite perfect. Made during the artist's residency at Oxbow in Michigan, the aesthetics and tools of pedagogy form the canvases' structure, color wheels, graphs, systems of symbols. Taking a page from Josef Albers color maps or Hannah Darboven's systematic counting, it's as if Cuadrado is seeking an instruction manual or perhaps proposing a new one. Looking for directions for painting, for collage, for desire. In one Facing Each Other the Other Way (all works 2020), a snippet of text pasted onto the canvas reads: "The Tread Lightly! Guide to Responsible" surrounded by images of dirt bikes, the path is unclear and treading lightly is almost impossible.

Rules of desire are murky, particularly in queer relationships. Cuadrado alludes to the rainbow flag, what has become an easily consumable symbol of LGBTQ culture, but it reads as distorted, the colors slightly darker not the typical palette. He includes stills from Marlon Riggs' documentary tongues untied depicting the lives of black gay men and the struggles they face. Cuadrado identifies himself while searching for others with similar experiences.

We are told about the orientation of power in relationships, the lines to cross and those uncrossable, strict steps are imposed more and more making the mushy center of the heart eager to spill out of its container. We look for directions in astrology, religion, logic, science or mysticism. But inside Cuadrado's wheels and arrows of color gradation, are unanswered questions, unsolvable problems, and impossible tasks. Like a logician, Cuadrado is experimenting producing equations through color and image to ask: How should we love? But the project is in vain, the heart bursts beyond the edges of the frame it's corners expanding beyond the limits of the experiment, beyond what can be contained.

- Gracie Hadland