

Theorem

A COLLABORATION BY ELIZABETH BRADFIELD AND ANTONIA CONTRO

By Kirsten Andersen

Theorem, the collaborative project from poet Elizabeth Bradfield and visual artist Antonia Contro, handcrafted and published by Chicago-based enterprise Candor Arts, announces itself with weight and beauty: heavy, cloth-covered, and just over a square foot in size, *Theorem* commands attention from the outset. Its liturgical presentation is redolent with physicality: in fact, you must clear a space to open it. Once you do, you're moved to great concentration, the book bound in a rust red colored cloth, sealed with a hidden magnet, encased in an archival box.



And what's inside? Entering the pages of *Theorem*, its risky business of collaboration, where the lyrical reaches of language alternate with the curious powers of visual art, one delights (and delights, and delights) in the book's mystery and control; its structure and freedom; an extended, five-section exercise in restraint, simplicity, and the open-ended investigation of the self. On *Theorem*'s first page, a pair of watery vessels from Contro, gesturing toward their own fluidity and eventual erasure. On the second turn, the first lines of Bradfield's poetry:

At 13, I fell in love with the tidy solutions of geometry.

Neat in my notebooks, they made architecture of chaos,
denoted all I could not allow myself to say—

contained it in measurable forms.

With these first occurrences of visual shape and self-origination, the mission of *Theorem* is activated, sweeping readers into the investigative space of the book itself, encouraging the mind to be nimble. There is breathtakingly delicate color work and line from Contro here, a series of objects and forms that include sets of hands, a lone black glove, color-driven whorls of energy, each piece one part of a book-long, fluid gesture toward the evocation and containment of that most slippery of substances: memory.

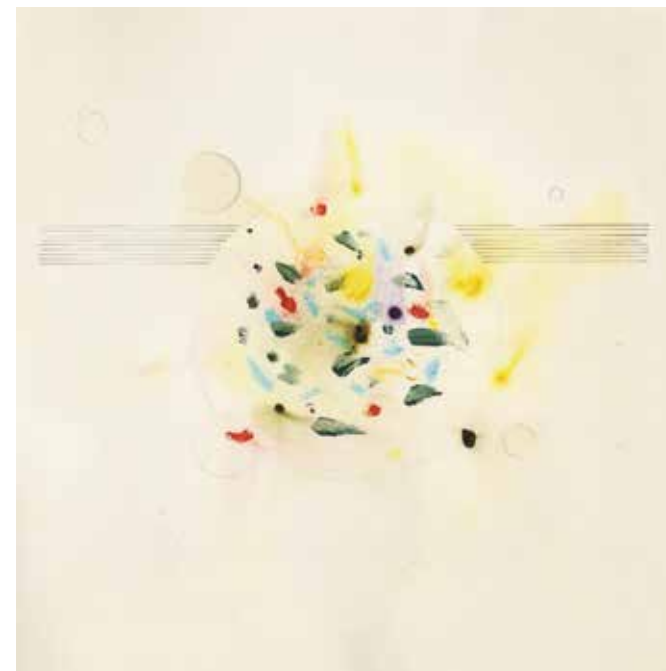
Theorem's collaboration bridges language and images with organic links; the poet and the artist do more than take turns contributing to the same story. In fact, they're not telling the same story at all. Rather, Bradfield and Contro mine the strengths of cross-disciplinary parallel construction: *Theorem* holds the language and the visual together and apart, its essential power rooted in a created space, buzzy with suggestions that move forward and backward in time.

But not all's up for grabs: Bradfield's poetry of the self, the formative body and mind, the secrets and traumas of childhood, is a specific narrative, built and communicated in a linear fashion:

We lived on the wet side of western mountains yet
I don't really remember rain.

I was very good at forgetting. I still am.

In this lyrical world, something has happened, the speaker is wrestling with it, and page by page, this important story takes substantive visual pauses. Bradfield's voice continues to sound in Contro's work, as if the poet were speaking her words into a series of receptive canyons, the visual world a force field of pure resonance and psychological multiplicities.



What else have I erased?

How can I know?

(This is the only way I can write about it.)

(The only way I will.)

(I promise.)

Bradfield and Contro, longtime friends and first-time collaborators, worked for two years on this project, exchanging lines and images. Bradfield is an award-winning poet regarded for her crystalline, illuminative poems on place and the natural world. Contro's multi-disciplinary work—included in the permanent collections of the American Philosophical Society Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the New York Public Library, and elsewhere—explores time and the acquisition of knowledge.

The yield of their respective powers is on display in *Theorem*. The book breathes. It grows hands, pokes holes, and winnows in size. This written story of personal history and particular devastations expands and contracts with its visual language; a drawn mouth, a leaf, a bleeding map, a broken circle—the individual voice unfurls within the contents of its built universe.

Hand-bound, letterpressed, and with original hand working of each book, *Theorem* is a limited edition of 30 fine art books published by Candor Arts in 2019 and a trade edition by Poetry Northwest in 2020.

Yet something pulsed

Formulas and proofs were fingers caged around a bright,
quick thing trapped but not bruited. Not even close. But
bruisable. A sort of bird.

This is a story of a secret. Of secrets.

Of becoming from and alongside them.



What was created in its chaos, light, dust, shadow
for me, for my sisters, for us all?

I am still trying to map it.

I am still trying to calculate what can be traced
to its redshifted source.

In these closing lines, *Theorem*'s pages have shrunk to a quarter of their original size. The visual world skews to red, spotted with deeper color, and the reader's mind deepens as well, flush with revelations regarding the hold of trauma, the crucial work of self-reconciliation, and the consolations of time. 📖

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