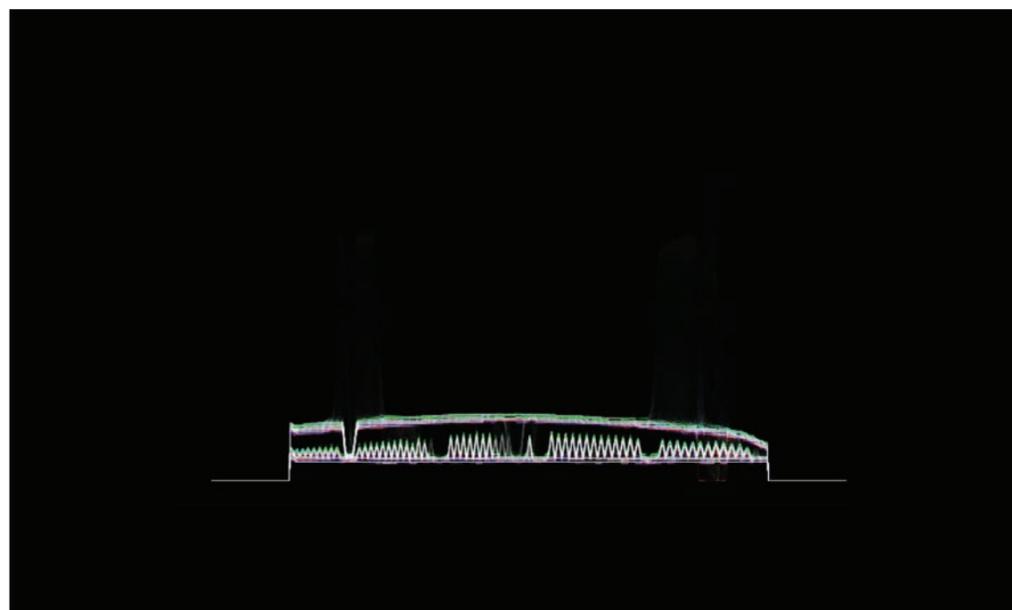
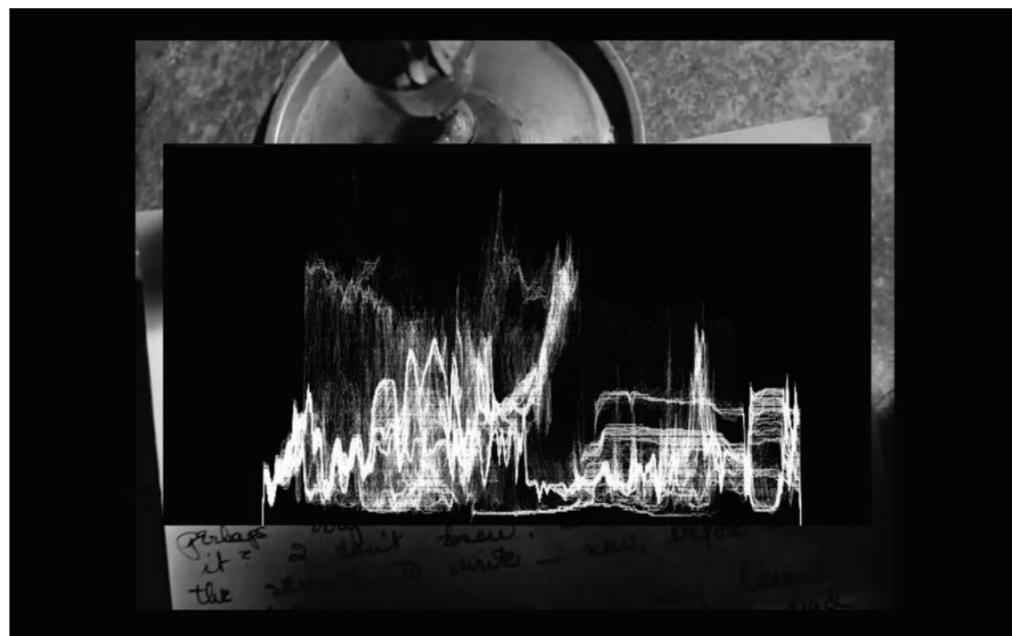


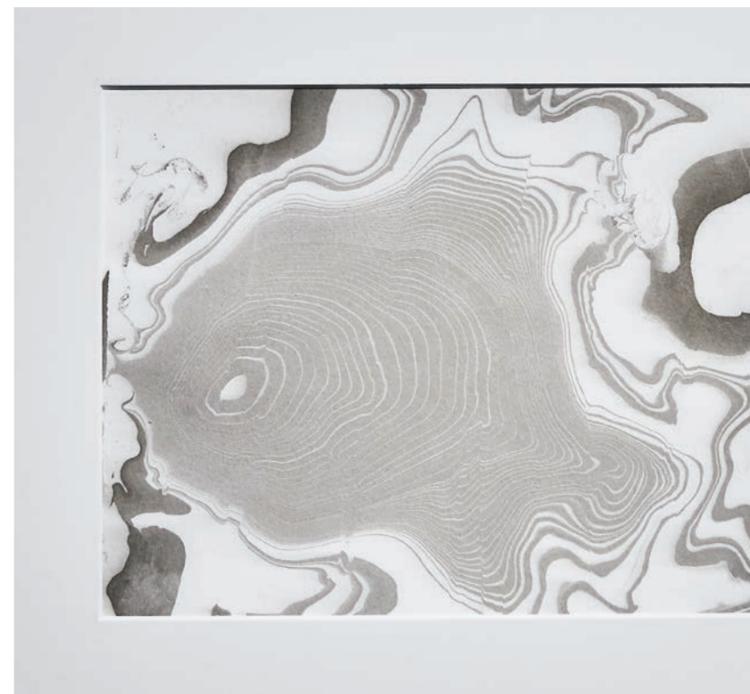
LIVES OF TEXT

For the culmination of her Alserkal residency, Mandy Merzaban, founding curator of Barjeel Art Foundation, presented *An Unknown Lover's Discourse*, a performative reading and exhibition that combined debossed texts, ink monoprints and video.

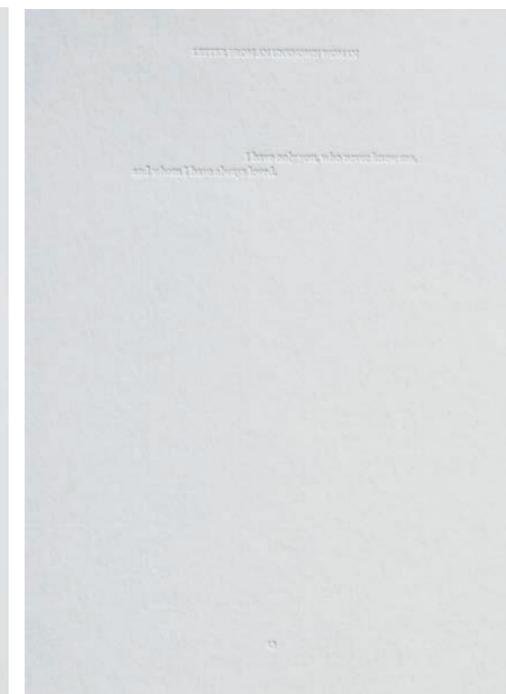
Isaac Sullivan chats with Merzaban about how it all came together in an ambitious project that spanned various levels of translation, from texts by Roland Barthes and Stefan Zweig to a 1960s Egyptian film script.



Mandy Merzaban. *An Unknown Lover's Discourse: Waveform*. Video, 40 mins 47 secs



Mandy Merzaban. *Floating Ink*. Suminagashi ink on water monoprint on paper



Mandy Merzaban. *Stefan Zweig's Letter from Unknown Woman, drained*. Debossed prints on paper. All images courtesy of the artist

There ought to be a special purgatory for singers of false consolations. “Stefan Zweig just tastes fake. He’s the Pepsi of Austrian writing,” quips literary critic Michael Hofmann. However, rather than revivifying kitsch, Mandy Merzaban has thoughtfully mined *Letter from an Unknown Woman* – a story originating in Zweig’s eponymous 1922 novella, whose permutations include films in Arabic, English and Mandarin – as an object of research, critique and now material intervention.

In *An Unknown Lover's Discourse*, her recent project referencing Roland Barthes’s *A Lover's Discourse*, Merzaban charted her relationship with the story by performing an address that begins and ends with the refrain, *all I want to do is drain the ink from the letter and set it free into a body of water*. Elsewhere within the Alserkal residency project space, this bookending was insinuated as a zero sum game between adjacent walls – one adorned with debossed novella excerpts (*Stefan Zweig's Letter from an Unknown Woman, drained*), and the other with Suminagashi ink monoprints (*Floating Ink*).

Meanwhile – as Merzaban foregrounded her aural, solely receptive relationship to Arabic (“My Arabic is like the rind of a fruit I have never eaten”) – a video (*An Unknown Lover's Discourse: Waveform*) played, both revealing scenes sampled from the 1960s Egyptian film adaptation and obscuring them with a waveform that measured the hue and luminosity of the moving images. “Since there is a lag with the screen recording, this glitch created phantom-like movements that extended beyond each scene,” Merzaban explains. Such a spectral overflow resonates with Zweig’s novella, in which the unknown woman writes a letter to her beloved – who cannot remember her, despite their

occasional trysts – to profess her love and reveal that he is the father of her now-deceased child. The letter’s arrival also announces its writer’s death – and in that sense, the “I” of the novella intimates the written “I” at large. “All communicational media have about them an aura of the uncanny and supernatural, a ghost effect which clings to them,” observes philosopher Brian Rotman. “Writing ‘I’ is making writing circle back onto the writer and in effect confronting the self with a virtual simulacrum.”

“It’s a story I now loathe more than I love,” confides Merzaban. “It hurt... to know this frantic text was written by a man mimicking what he perceived to be the voice of a woman.” Indeed, this attribute of the novella is hardly a good optic for self-effacing love; and a browse through Netflix is likely to remind us that we’re still hung-over from the tropes of 19th-century melodrama. Nevertheless, Merzaban frames the wish to “drain the ink from the letter” not only as a “gesture that would allow [her] to inflict some form of violence to the text,” but also as a desire to return the unknown woman to her pre-epistolary status.

Barthes “writes that a lover ‘cannot keep from hearing everything’ and as such experiences a cacophony,” Merzaban clarifies. “This turns the lover into a ‘monstrous receiver’ where listening becomes ‘a state of utterance’... She was... this monstrous receiver... until it leaked into language.” In that sense, the embrace of cacophony gestures toward an ecstatic inversion of ‘I’ and ‘you’. “I like the idea of listening as a state of utterance, since it is like an external voice speaking inwardly to another, more enigmatic consciousness,” adds Merzaban. “It is cacophonous because internally what resonates is unpredictable.”