

# PW-MAGAZINE

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Refusal to Spell Correctly  
By Robin Waart



SoiL Thornton, *merry christmas splintered bouquet (IS, MS., MR.)*, 2023. VINTAGE 1950S PLYWOOD LARGE MERRY CHRISTMAS CUTOUT LETTERS YARD DOOR DECORATION, livestock ear tags and hardware, wood screw-in supports constructed and painted hunter green (as mandated by The City of New York's Local Law No. 47 of 2013) by Secession install team. Dimensions variable.

*Avoiding clear-cut readings, SoiL Thornton's exhibition "Choosing Suitor" at Secession is an invitation to doubt, a proposal for new concepts and the words and names that go with them.*

The fourth typo on the fluffy and brightly pink plush toys sprawling the main floor of SoiL Thornton's *Choosing Suitor* at the Vienna Secession is not rectum, printed under the I Heart Guts® logo on one side of the labels that are attached to each of them (where it might have replaced recto, the other side). These cute, puppet-like creatures in the new version of *Untitled Political Aliens*, mashing together this year's fifty most popular girl's and boy's names, with what appear to be arms, legs and something of a tail are really rectums, made by a company producing feel-good, post-op intestinal plushies<sup>1</sup> as a kind of contemporary body awareness merchandise. The toy's protrusions then are the rectum's four chambers, connected on the one end to the bowel, and on the other, via the smaller appendix with the label and care instructions, to the anus. While one of the 'arms' on each has applied to it, with dental floss, an embroidered baby pink and blue name tag combining a now popular male and female identified name – the typos that the work's title highlights turn out to be I/L-mixups: AVAELLIAH (AvaElijah), LSABELLALEO (IsabellaLeo), LRISMILES (IrisMiles), LYVJULIAN (IvyJulian). And this is what these recombinations are about, as they bite the tail of one thing and productively glue it onto another.

Because why would you take all of this for granted? That given name, this gender assigned to you by your (predominantly) heterosexual parents, the continuation and reproduction of a structure, mostly Western, very white, not so cute. So, contrary to my own expectation, today's mothers and fathers seem shy of diversity, do not choose gender-neutral names, keep a distance from ethnic or religious references (except Muhammad): their children are not identifiably 'other.' Saying nothing specific, yet surprisingly still saying a lot, the rankings<sup>2</sup> almost entirely neutralize these babies' backgrounds. *Chode*, also from 2023, the work in the exhibition with the shortest title, picks up against the listless diversity the fifty paired names expose, itself a chipboard graffiti print on canvas with a screenshot of the online search results for Chode, a name, more in use for girls than boys, of Indian origin, my own search tells me.

Other works in *Choosing Suitor* stand in the way of single, simple readings, but differently: the *Husband Chair (VS)*, a seat for the husband to wait comfortably while their partner makes purchases – that blocks the entrance to the Secession's main hall – is a huge dark brown inflatable cushion made to fit the space's and curator's dimensions, sitting there like a wall of misunderstanding and



SoiL Thornton, *Choosing Suitor*, Secession, Vienna, Austria, 2023. Installation view; SoiL Thornton, *Spot your rectum versus mine, untitled Political aliens (top fifty US babies 2023 gender mashed to make my new)(with four typos from embroidery name tag producer)*, 2023. Plush toys, embroidered name tags and dental floss. Dimensions variable.

inaccessibility.<sup>3</sup> The space is not exactly closed off but can be entered only via the back door emergency exit. On the floor again, *merry christmas splintered bouquet (IS, MS., MR.)*, 2023, is a bundle of oversized leftover letters, purchased on eBay or at auction, the six titular ones standing upright fastened to the preexisting wall mounts on the ground: making a possible sentence, question, abbreviation or denomination. The others are tossed together in a kind of snowball, flat on the floor with numbered, lime green ear tags, the ones known for cattle, screwed onto them like decorations of an eerie kind. Amid the exhibition's palette of brown, green, pinks (almost neon in the rectum toys and softer on the labels and box with the chair's blower) and blues (baby and iMessage blue) that, the publication's equally blue, pink and green segments repeat – this lime green contrast the legislative hunter green wooden pieces, less a 'bouquet' but still 'splinters' of official New York scaffolding, partially studded with disco ball mirror squares to find oneself in, looking at yourself looking at art.<sup>4</sup> Existing as a screen color only, the pantone 802 chromakey green that is Thornton's trademark becomes a way out, another, non-binary option: on the exhibition invite, the publication cover/interior and 39 part piece, painted by the artist, but signed in nail polish by 19 friends and colleagues, some of them hardly unrecognizable and popular or successful in a sense very different from America's most wanted, *Name that Grisaille* (2018–2023).<sup>5</sup> It is the colors' different artificialities, linguistic or not-natural, that are repeatedly alluded to and adjusted here.

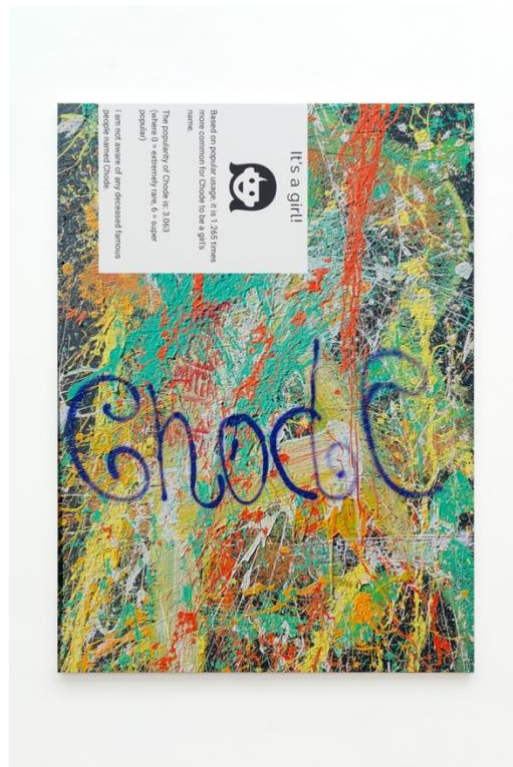
This oscillation between naming and titling, where the title of SoiL Thornton's works only slowly turns out helpful to gain an understanding of the pieces (and vice versa)<sup>6</sup> is not distraction but procedure: the mysterious opacity of the titles inviting you to

doubt and debate any clear-cut readings our everyday names might imply. The exhibition is replete with these: (first) names, labels, brands, tags, signatures, designations. But is SoiL itself a name?



SoiL Thornton, *Husband Chair (VS)*, 2023. Vinyl stitched, velcro, blower, insulated wood quiet box constructed and painted pink by Secession install team, 2574 x 163 x 163 cm.

Not really an adjustment (like Andrew Warhola, the old spelling still pronouncedly Eastern European), a semi (stanley broun, all smallcaps) or full pseudonym (Lutz Bacher, morphing into a male German artist), a branded collective (Bernadette Corporation, Claire Fontaine), nor political action (Janez Janša adopting a Slovene rightist politician's name).<sup>7</sup> A rejection or replacement of the first but not of the family name, SoiL Thornton's rename comes closest to a change of gender. In retrospect, the first appearance of the word (but not yet a name), [soil] in Thornton's work was as an empty space, a vacuum, in the press release for their 2018 show *Sir Veil's Faux Outing* at Jeffrey Stark in New York, prefiguring<sup>8</sup> the stepping shift from person to persona, with a question mark:



SoiL Thornton, *Chode*, 2023. Nail polish on archival inkjet print on canvas, 194 x 142 x 3 cm.

A.

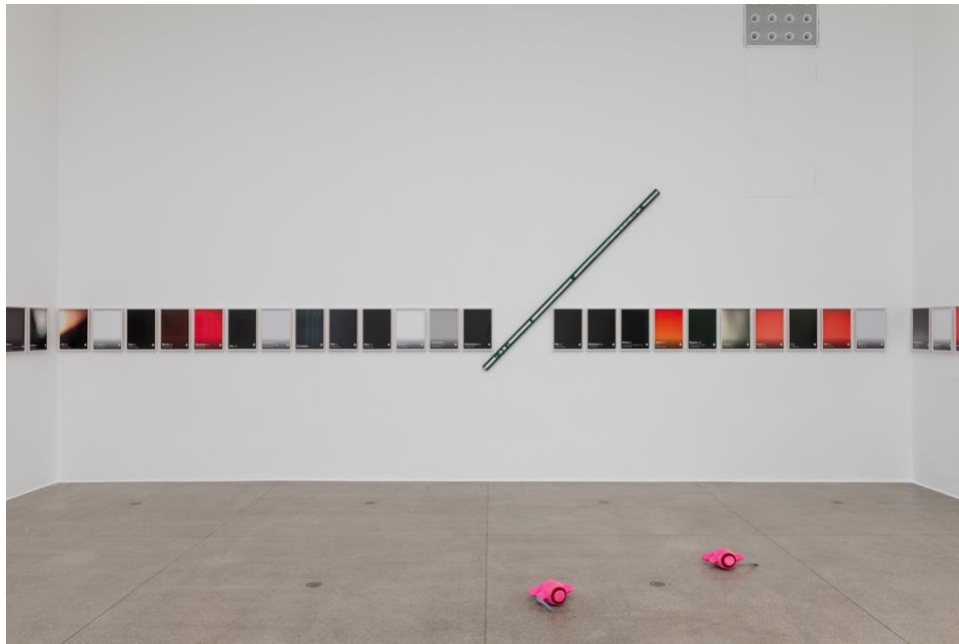
\*Ground (noun)

1. the solid surface of the earth.

2. a plain surface to which decoration is applied.

Side thought: Are bodies decoration?

Good decoration, in reference to the quality of your look, or the clothes curated on your body. Good decoration in relation to how “nice” your skin looks on your figure.<sup>9</sup>



SoiL Thornton, *Choosing Suitor*, Secession, Vienna, Austria, 2023. Installation view.

Words, at least in English, are not gendered. The recapitalization of SoIL, with the large L at the end, has as its effect that what looks like a noncount word we know is also not a word anymore — different from itself — and becomes a category. This links the name-word to the textual imaginings made by the LGBT Flags Merge App for the exhibition catalogue<sup>10</sup> that accompanies *Choosing Suitor*, combined with street-style iPhone pictures Thornton has taken since 2013: “Non-conforming + Non-binary = Uingender” (p. 32), “Demisexual + Graysexual = Grayromantic” (p. 63), along with the “Failure to capture look (Pantone 802) (imaginative being)” section (pp. 144–156) which the artist book ends on. Alluding to the distinction between a riddle and an enigma (p. 160), Andrew Blackley’s essay in the publication summarizes this openness: of new combinations to create new concepts, new words to make a new world – where (hopefully) one-day life will follow art.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “Rectum Plush – Bringing Up the Rear – Plush Organ Stuffed Toy Pillow” on iheartguts.com

<sup>2</sup> The list of most popular baby names on babycenter.com is constantly shifting, as do Thornton’s painted or sculptural screenshots of them: *Spot Your Rectum Versus Mine, Untitled Political Aliens (Top Fifty Us Babies 2023 Gender Mashed To Make My New)(With Four Typos From Embroidery Name Tag Producer)*, 2023, plush toys, embroidered name tags and dental floss, dimensions variable; *Untitled Political Aliens (Top Fifty U.S. Babies 2018 Gender Mashed To Make My New)*, 2018, acrylic paint, sharpie and graphite on cardboard, 325.1 x 245.1 cm; *Untitled Political Aliens (Top Fifty Us Babies 2018 Gender Mashed To Make My New)(Charming)*, 2018, gourds, plastic, copper military I.D. dog tags, rubber silencers, galvanized steel cable, hardware, 33.02 cm x 60.96 cm x 30.48 cm.

<sup>3</sup> *Husband Chair*, too, is a work or even work series that Thornton adapts and resizes for different shows, for instance a “Husband” chair (SC) at the Sculpture Center (2021) and *Husband Chair (KB)* at Kunstverein Bielefeld (2022).

<sup>4</sup> A portraiture of the self-image that is also addressed in the only work not made specifically for the exhibition at Secession: *My Pet Tinder's Blank Stare (Voyage Vanity)*, 2019–2021 that is made up of 57 framed archival pigment prints of tinder profiles, the user's faces replaced with a black void, only leaving their names, distance (in miles) to the viewer, and sometimes other preferred information.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew/Fiona/Graham/Chandni; Julián/B/Susanne/Frank/Matthew/Jenna; Taylor/Darren/Pujan/Clara/puppies/k r .m./ ak ee m /Nancy/Fiona

<sup>6</sup> “I always want my titles to be a work in themselves but to also give indicators or clues to the way my mind works in relation to constructing each piece, or otherwise.” [Torey] Thornton and Andrew Blackley, “Material Expansion With Torey Thornton,” *Cultured Magazine*, January 11, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Mladen Dolar, “Whats in a name?,” in *Mladen Dolar, Jela Krečič, Robert Pfaller, Slavoj Žižek, Janez Janša and Beyond*. Aksioma, Ljubljana, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> “Originally, I didn't know that some works in the show would eventually have so much engagement with my personal and interior life; but some months after I produced that show, I realised my own non binary gender to a fuller capacity. That's something that's always evolving, of course.” [Torey] Thornton and Alex Bennett, “I Want For My Work To Have Several Lives,” *Modern Matter*, February 20, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *Sir Veil's Faux Outing*, Jeffrey Stark, New York (June 24 – September 9, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> *Choosing Suitor*, publication available online and in print, expanded on with new photographs and related found footage in their “Choosing Suiter Intervention Instagram.”