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She is a recent recipient of the Canada Council for the Arts Concept to Realization Grant to support her exhibition at YYZ. She has presented exhibitions internationally and is the recipient of multiple major grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the University of Michigan.

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Dibutade Comes to Visit the Portrait of her Lover,
Jeanne-Elisabeth Chaudet, 1810.

THE SHADOW OF YOUR SMILE

BY ALANNA THAIN

Desire lines are everyday traces that mark where bodies wander at will. Their pragmatic urgency might trample a grassy path that shortcuts across a park; over time they become their own contagious attractors, through repetition. But it is that first impulse to step off the path that indexes how desire is a line of flight from the ordinary. In Brynn Higgins-Stirrup's *An Index of Longing*, the impulse of desire is meticulously traced and retraced, never settling into a fixed form. Across these cartographies of attention, longing names the precision of an opening into possibility, stepping out from the expected. The more you look, the stranger and more mysterious this discrete encounter becomes. To what does the index of longing belong?

This experiment in diagramming affect has its roots in an origin story: the Roman author Pliny the Elder locates the “origin of drawing” in the gesture of a young woman, Dibutades, tracing the shadow of her departing lover on the wall as a souvenir. She herself barely registers. When this tale returned, to seize the imagination of artists across the long eighteenth century up to the first photographic records in the 1820s, they repeatedly portrayed the moment of capture, when Dibutades makes her mark, turning away from the lover and, possessively, towards his shadow. The closed circuit of the look of love cracks open, across these gazes that no longer meet. Desire lines are more capacious than we might imagine.

Collecting reams of these images of the so-called *Corinthian Maid*, Higgins-Stirrup was drawn to an outlier that steps back from the frantic action of tracing, one that allowed her to step into this scene. At the waning of the fascination for this myth, Jeanne-Élisabeth Chaudet's *Dibutade Coming to Visit Her Lover's Portrait* (1810) gives us instead the story's aftermath. A seated woman rests in profile, against a blank wall marked only with the spartan silhouette of her lover's face. This version is utterly devoid of the feverish urgency of the lover's departure, or the artistic fascination with the inspired moment of the creative gesture. Calm and composed, she gazes straight ahead. Her visible hand points

towards the ground, weighty with gravity, drawing a plumb line through the entire figure perpendicular to line of her gaze. Hand uncoupled from the eye, the scene also opens a minimal distance between the lovers, face to face. Looking across time, their gazes do not meet. Under the permissive sign of devoted love, the artist here finds respite and space to dream in the shadow's edge. In this story, the labour of creation is transposed into the opacity of imagination itself. She is here and there, then and now and in all of it, evades capture through stillness. The mystery and delicacy of her escape is the subject of Higgins-Stirrup's fabulative forensic investigations.

An index is a type of sign that testifies to presence; it has an investigatory impulse in its very nature. The 19th century philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce proposed the notion of an indexical sign as one that retains a direct trace of the object or encounter itself; it is the registration mark that persists in time and that can serve as evidence of a no longer present past. The index as, for example a footprint, a fossil, an outline—carries a historicity that makes the past present. But the index is also a deitic image, or in other words, a sign that points. It indicates: “here”, “there”, “this”, “that”. It haunts past traces with aspirations to presence. Always, the index insists. To linger with the index is to witness an ever more unruly pointing. An index is also as vivid as the body that bears it. If the fingerprint is one kind of index, Peirce offer the rolling gait of a sailor—the trace of the sea, wave upon wave rippling the smooth trajectory of walking on land—as another. Such a body testifies to how it has lived, but every reproduction is a reanimation that fails to be fully captured by or in the past. The trace loses faith, beyond representation. It loses surety.

In Higgins-Stirrup's work, the fidelity to the narrative of this love story and the origin of drawing all starts to fall apart, faced with this implacable encounter, traced and retraced across the gallery walls. Was she even sad to see him go? Does she still think of him in her visit, or does her attention wander? Is his absence a loss, or did she gain a certain

distance through the abstraction of a line? Face to face with silhouette she released from his living face, did she trace her desire for him, or for the world of imagination itself? Her own hand shadowing every gesture of what we see, Higgins-Stirrup patiently carves away at this placidity, uncover a thrilling kind of tension in her stillness. She makes a set of puzzle pieces from these disaggregated traces, each one precisely knifed out of the background through an intimate dance along etched and reprinted lines. They emerge as fossils, as cryptic codes that resist a clinical recomposition of sense. The forms rearrange themselves across the surfaces, sending out signaletic pulses that keep our gaze on the move. Balancing on pins, others cast shade on the diagrams, sprouting in a delicate dimensionality from the flatness below. In the aftermath of love and artistic fervour, something is tended to and feels alive in these small extrusions, dancing in our sightlines as we are left to wander.

In *An Index of Longing*, traces are the method for entering into the mystery of desire, The meticulous labour of love, of (un)faithful recompositions, re-orient the creative gesture. The question of when a formless feeling edges into sensible capture, and when it remains just a mark is held in suspense here. Asking the viewer to retrace with eyes, body and attention the labour of love that lifts and sketches the image's edges in a hundred variations, Higgins-Stirrup invites us to engage in shadow play across disjunctive moments and iterations. Across these indexical tracings, Higgins-Stirrup diagrams the desire lines of a body breaking apart while gaining in powers of exploration and reassembly. *An Index of Longing* grants a somatic playfulness to the passive pose of the women waiting for love, reworking the image to make it move otherwise, like an unjointed and unstrung marionette. Some of that freedom of abstraction accorded to the wandering lover is reclaimed for the artist(s)' bod(ies). If this work had a soundtrack, it would be the mid-century melancholy of the singer Astrud Gilberto (a Brazilian Neko) and her 1965 cover of “The Shadow of Your Smile”: “The shadow of your smile/ When you are gone/ Will colour all my

dreams/ And light the dawn.” In her flattened and husky tone, she sings of desire from an slight remove, skeptical and languorous, a sketch of the memory of the fullness of love. Between faithful lyrics and her detached voice a gap arises, echoed in Higgins-Stirrup's proliferative tracings. It is the same gap between the lovers' wayward gazes. A more opaque intimacy redresses the naked longing that characterizes so much of the iconography of the Corinthian Maid across Higgins-Stirrup's inscrutable and alluring maps. Through this affective cartography, she returns us to the intimacy of love, one we orient to like a flower shadowing the arc of the sun. But the other side of intimacy is discretion, traces of an origin that shade into marks, making space for other stories. This work cares for the shadow not as absence, but as opportunity. A precise opacity: “I want the openness and the questioning to feel intentional. . .these questions aren't answered for a reason.” To shadow is to follow. In seeking for indexical process behind the feminine icon of creativity condensed in the gesture of the Corinthian Maid, Higgins-Stirrup's traces abandon the fixed ancestry of the lost female genius, and point again and again not to who she is but what is she doing—tracing, gazing, dreaming, looking askew.