

# THE VERGE

## How one artist's 'encrypted' paintings memorialize the concept of privacy

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Image: Hayal Pozanti/Brooklyn Academy of Music

The Brooklyn Academy of Music's *Loss for Words* exhibit is part of its annual Next Wave art festival, a celebration of visual arts, theatrical works, music, dance, and film. The theme of this year's exhibit is the emergence of visuals as the primary mode of communicating rather than the written word — or, as the exhibit's guide puts it: "a basic shift in our culture, from text-based communication to one where images are the dominant tool of expression." Going into the exhibit during its Monday night opening reception, I sort of thought it was going to be about memes or reaction GIFs or red baseball caps.

It was much dreamier. Sculpture artist Corey Escoto installed frames made of resin and LED lights around the windows of BAM's Fisher building. Inspired by night-lights — described in the exhibit guide as "a consoling beacon in the dark unknown" — the frames are inscribed with non-sequiturs like "privatize me harder," and "a portrait of Mark Zuckerberg with flowers." Siebren Versteeg, a New York-based painter and programmer, hung an enormous screen above the escalators in the academy's Peter J. Sharp building. Every day at 8AM, it pulls up the latest front page of *The New York Times*, then begins painting over it in accordance with a secret algorithm.

But Los Angeles-based, Turkey-born artist Hayal Pozanti stands out with a collection of work that deals with themes of privacy, encryption, and translation.

Pozanti has three paintings hung around the Peter J. Sharp building and one mural applied directly to an upstairs wall. Each one looks like an abstract shape, but actually has a meaning that's private to her. "I didn't want anybody to be able to decipher it," she tells me. "I wanted some sort of personal input. It's like an encryption machine." To that end, Pozanti has created her own alphabet, which she calls "Instant Paradise." It's a series of 31 shapes, each one representing either a number, a letter, or both. All of her paintings are combinations of the symbols, cast in vivid colors. So to convey a single piece of data, she'll weave together symbols that correspond to a set of numbers that add up to the value she wants to express.

The paintings Pozanti has on display at *Loss for Words* all represent isolated statistics that she considers important, and they're titled to reveal what would be untranslatable otherwise: *55 (hundreds of people with magnetic implants, worldwide)* or *1/10 (Proportion of people who check their phones during sex)*. The mural conveys, in code, the number 58, which represents the percentage of the world's wildlife that has been lost in the last 40 years.



Photo by Hayal Pozanti/Brooklyn Academy of Music

"I'm interested in conveying information and encrypting it and preserving it," she explains. "I'm picking and choosing things for future generations in my mind. Even if they're only preserved through the title, I want them to be like a stamp mark."

Previously, she's used her Instant Paradise alphabet to create paintings with titles like *13 (millions of emotions that have been recorded on the web since 2005)*, *SIXTY SEVEN (milliseconds it takes for the human brain to form a micro-expression)*, and *39 (percentage of Americans who expect that scientists will have developed the technology to teleport objects within the next 50 years)*. In her older work, the pieces of information she focused on were even more obscure: *90 (minimum percentage of ATMs worldwide that operate on Windows XP)*. Even odder: *10 (minimum number of days required by an inpatient internet-addiction program at a Pennsylvania hospital)*.

They seem utterly random, which adds another layer of human mystery to her broader project. Pozanti's fascination with encryption makes sense to me, but it saddens me, too. It's the instinct of a person who's sure that nothing is private and is probably right. The word "encryption" is like a wall. "It's encrypted" is something people say about information they want, but can't easily have.

Pozanti says that a lot of her paintings make reference to social media sites, and she's aware that they might not make sense in 10 years, let alone 50. "Maybe nobody will know it," she says, thinking of how Twitter might disappear completely. The same is true for a painting of hers that reflects the loss of forests: if the forests are all gone, what will a current percentage-lost mean to anyone? "As well as preserving some statistics or data, [the paintings] are also preserving a piece of culture," she says. "Whether it be Twitter or *forests* that might not exist in the future."

I ask Pozanti if she agrees with the basic premise of *Loss for Words*, given how literally her work replaces

text with images. Are we really losing language? “The prevalence of Twitter I think disproves that, because people are still using words” she argues. But then she backtracks. “There is a loss of words, definitely because you’re communicating in 140 characters. That also implies a loss of words. And yeah, we are relying a lot more on images and emoji, definitely. The show does reference something that’s real.”

But she doesn’t see her work as something that’s demonstrating loyalty to images over text. In contrast, her system of shapes “came from a feeling of being overwhelmed by images, or information. Information in general.”

“I wanted to make something, make a shape or find some object that didn’t reference anything online,” she says. It was a struggle to think of something that didn’t feel like more information or just another drop in the “waterfall of images” that makes up an endlessly scrolling internet feed. Coming up with her own alphabet was Pozanti’s answer to a series of questions she couldn’t stop posing to herself: “Can I invent something from scratch in an age of infinite information? Can I make something that doesn’t reference anything else? Is it possible?”

She draws each image by hand, then scans it into a computer and manipulates it in Photoshop. Then, without printing it out or projecting it, she paints it while looking at it on the screen. “I end up painting a still life from a computer,” she says.

Doing the painting by hand is important to her, though she often takes photos of her paintings mid-process so that she can look at them through a screen and evaluate how they’ll look on a computer. “There’s going to be computers making art really soon, even if it’s algorithmically,” she says. “It will start looking more and more like what a human may have made or might make. The hand brings in imperfections, unpredictability, what we now call mistakes. They’re not mistakes, they’re human nature.” As a contribution to a time capsule, they’ll be relics from a time before human creativity had to directly compete with artificial intelligence.

By encrypting these little pieces of culture and data, Pozanti’s paintings express a quiet resignation to the notion that nothing we might put in a time capsule could possibly make sense to future generations, anyway. The artist will die, and her alphanumeric code with her. She’s made something beautiful with her hands — will anyone be around to grasp it? I mean, we’re talking about a world that might not have Twitter or forests.

This futility reminds me of Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* project, a series of 612 cardboard boxes he filled and sealed in the last 13 years of his life. He died before they were shown, sold, or explained, and they’re filled with things like dirty napkins, postcards, toys, and clothes, as well as, notably, half a piece of pizza and a human foot. Seen by almost no one, the vast bulk of the boxes are kept in the archives of the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, communicating almost nothing, and reminding us of little else other than absurdity of attempting to preserve the physical traces of our existence.

But at a minimum, the indecipherability of Pozanti’s simple shapes will persist. If nothing else, they can preserve the vanishing concept of having a secret. In the future, that idea may be a relic in itself. *Loss for Words will be on display at the Brooklyn Academy of Music through December 22nd. You can see more of Hayal Pozanti’s work on her website.*