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SHOTGUN REVIEWS

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Fiamma Montezemolo: The Secret at Kadist, San Francisco

Shotgun Reviews are an open forum where we invite the international art community to contribute timely, short-format responses to an exhibition or event. If you are interested in submitting a Shotgun Review, please click [this link](#) for more information. In this Shotgun Review, Leila Easa reviews Fiamma Montezemolo: The Secret at Kadist in San Francisco.



Fiamma Montezemolo. *Neon Afterwords*, 2016; LED lights and text; installation view, *The Secret*. Courtesy of the Artist and Kadist, San Francisco. Photo: Jeff Warrin.

Like many other fascinating thought exercises, artist and anthropologist Fiamma Montezemolo's *The Secret* at Kadist in San Francisco begins with Jorge Luis Borges. The title refers to the climax of Borges' 1969 story "The Anthropologist,"[1] which chronicles American academic Fred Murdock's attempts to document a Native American tribe's "secret." Murdock eventually assimilates into the culture of his "other" enough to dream in a new language, both literal and symbolic, and thus receives the secret. Returning to academia, Murdoch refuses to divulge this very information; once he has lived outside of his culture, he no longer values its priorities. Knowing the secret is predicated on becoming it.

Montezemolo replicates Murdock's displacement visually, conceptually, and spatially. *Neon Afterwords* (2016) represents this disrupted world with its starkly gorgeous display of three hanging copies of Borges books, casting shadows as serious and architectural as church windows. Displaying the text of the story, the books are displaced onto walls and interrupted by tape blocking key phrases: "it has one character," "he came to dream in a language," and "the teacher taught him the secret" have been obfuscated.

In an adjoining room, Montezemolo reimagines these phrases in hanging, body-height LED lights. The reader must literally walk among the displaced phrases. The letterscape's Twitter-blue color scheme seems chosen not for aesthetics but for the alien glow it casts on its audience as the viewers themselves become displaced into the landscape of language.

Once there, they face the impossibility of translation. Just as the hanging books display both the Spanish version and original English translation of Borges' text on facing pages, so are the hanging words separated from their missing cousins, themselves translations and variations: "it has one character" becomes "a single protagonist," and "he came to dream in a language" becomes "came to dream in a language that was not of his father's"—the only full sentence in the room and one that unites both blocked text with visible text.

If Murdock won't translate his secret, neither will Montezemolo; instead she creates a somatic experience of the limits of translation. *The Three Ecologies* (2015), a textured exploration in contrast in the final room, created by the layered elements of a Kilim rug, cacti, mulch, and the gallery itself, makes clear Montezemolo's disinterest in reconciliation. The ecologies exist in careful tension; the languages will always maintain distance; the viewed will always—must be—displaced by the viewer. But for a moment Montezemolo invites viewers to inhabit Murdock's journey, wandering in awe in an alien world, in a haze of alien blue.

Fiamma Montezemolo: *The Secret* will be on view at Kadist in San Francisco through October 1, 2016, featuring an artist talk on October 1 at 5 p.m.

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1. Jorge Luis Borges. *In Praise of Darkness: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974), 46–51. (Note: The title of Borges' story has been translated in English as both "The Anthropologist" and "The Ethnographer" in different translations.)