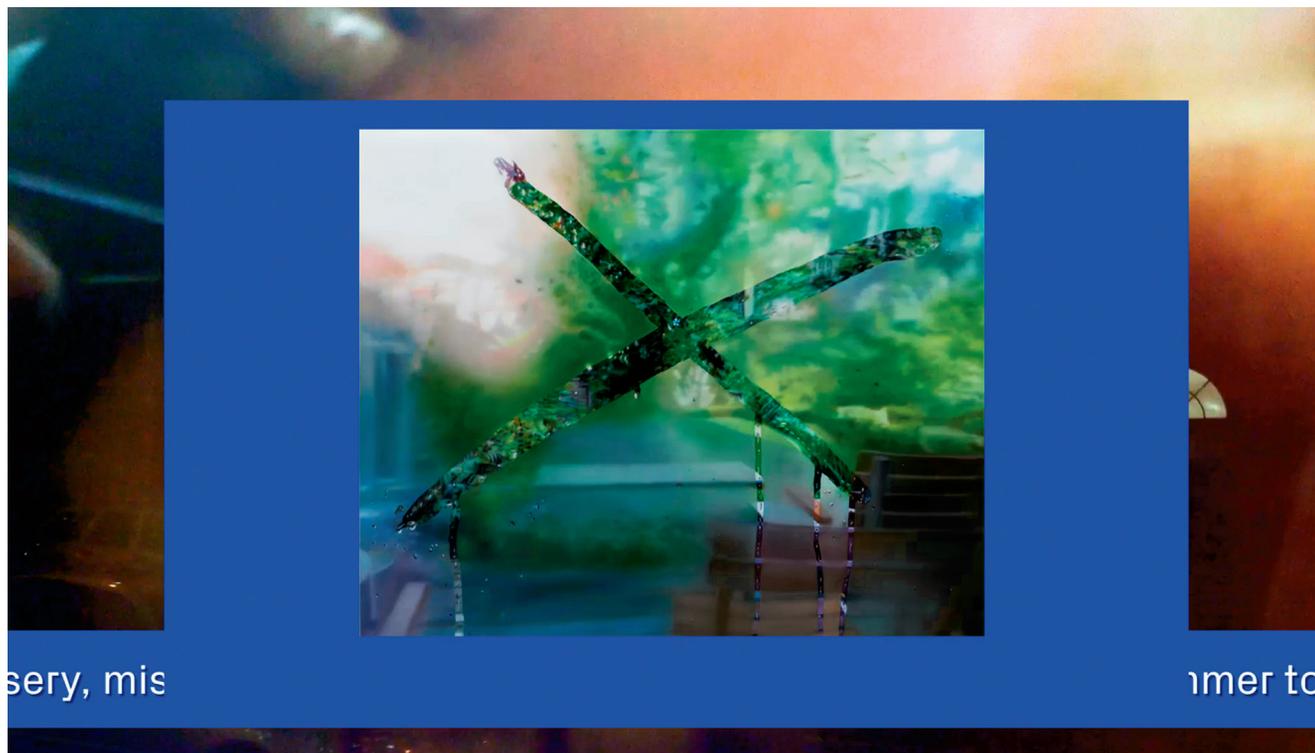


## FIRST LOOK



Sara Magenheimer:  
*Which arbitrary  
thing are you*,  
2014, video,  
7½ minutes.

# Sara Magenheimer

by William S. Smith

VEENA AND PAUL, the protagonists of Sara Magenheimer's video *Seven Signs that Mean Silence* (2013), elicit about as much empathy as disembodied computer-generated voices can. Speaking in a clipped cadence as a progression of spare geometric forms and snippets of text appear on-screen, Veena and Paul parrot phrases that Magenheimer collected from overheard conversations. The resulting dialogue mimics the mechanics of human speech, but it also careens among different modes of discourse, from philosophical inquiry to sentimental pining to stand-up comedy. At one point Paul complains about not being able to see, and Veena reminds him to blink. Elsewhere they debate the identity of an unseen object. "It looks like it's missing most of its body," says Paul. "It's definitely a piece of something," responds Veena.

Synthetic speech has been central to the videos and installations that the New York-based Magenheimer has produced since receiving her MFA from Bard College last year. Computerized vocalization displaces what Roland Barthes famously described as the "grain of the voice." Barthes was interested in the physical underpinnings of symbolic communication, "the body in the voice as it sings." Magenheimer's work suggests that the grain of the digital is no less richly encoded. Pitch, rhythm and intonation convey Veena's and Paul's origins in South Asia and the American Midwest,

respectively. More importantly, the processed grain of their speech is still a site of nonverbal expressiveness.

In Magenheimer's work, pleasure and comedy offset a sophisticated approach to appropriated language and conceptual writing, endeavors usually associated with a bone-dry aesthetic. For *Becky and Sadie* (2011-14), Magenheimer created bright still-life compositions—including novelty T-shirts, fruit and gag gifts—a practice she likens to playing with visual syntax. The soundtrack to *One Vast Focus* (2011), a video depicting a young female tuba player practicing in a park, features Magenheimer singing, through an Auto-Tune filter, the text of a letter written by Lord Byron's daughter, Ada Byron, an accomplished 19th-century mathematician.

Magenheimer spent years touring as a musician, and her work frequently blends song and speech. "This is meant to be played loud, with a lot of BASS," she instructed in an e-mail describing the optimal conditions for viewing *Mickrlys* (2012), an animated semiotic love story about Mickey and Minnie Mouse contemplating their status as cultural icons. In her characteristically wry tone, Magenheimer summarized the plot as the mice struggling to "embody new signifiers in order to reunite at the end, when they finish their dance party." ○