

TheDeer talks to poet-translator Billie Maciunas

Billie lives in Orlando, Florida, near Sea World. She has never been to Disney World and has no plans for doing so. She has two dogs who are her spirit guides and whom, she says, have shown her the benefits of having a roof, regular meals, and companionship. Billie is counting reasons for moving to Brooklyn and has come up with about 20 so far. Her late husband, George Maciunas, is the founder of Fluxus, an international art scene, soon to be a living movie.



'Billie & George in Black and White Piece, 1978.'
photo by Hollis Melton

I would like to ask you a few questions, if that's okay? I'm a curious (and odd deer). I'm rather intrigued because you often work on translations of poetry into English. Now while that sounds a fairly straight forward proposition, given all the nuances that poets put into their work, I imagine it's very much tougher than it sounds.

Do you read lots of poems, and just pick out what you consider the best? Does a publisher guide you with their requirements? Or do you work your way through a book, one at a time?

Many of the translations grew out of my college studies at Brown University (beginning at age 34), where I majored in languages and literature. The translations of Catullus and Horace come from a Latin class; the translations of Cecelia Miereles come from a translation class.

The Florbela Espanca poems, however, come from my having lived in Portugal for two years. I heard her poems set to Fado music and fell in love with the sound. Later, at Brown, I studied Portuguese and Brazilian literature and began to read her poems. The first ones I translated were published in Gavéa Brown, their literary journal. After more than 30 years I revised these a little and began to translate more of her work. I am still in love with her after all these years.

I read quite widely (as deer go), and I've been somewhat blown away by several of your translations of poetry. You have a knack for finding phrases that are just right. I imagine that to do so you possibly try to 'play' the character of the poet, imagine them setting the scene or environment. Is that the way you do it?

I wrote a master's thesis on Florbela while at UNC-Chapel Hill. Her life touched me personally. She was the illegitimate child of a housemaid and a nondescript father who didn't acknowledge her until after her death. In the 1920s and 1930s in Catholic Portugal, she married three times and had an abortion. Her only brother, also illegitimate, died in his 20s in a plane accident, plunging into the Tagus River alone. Florbela died of an overdose of sleeping pills when she was 33. Her poems come from her grief, and not least, from going unheard her whole life by poets she loved who did not take women seriously as writers. Beyond the personal attachment to her, I use a Portuguese dictionary, an etymological dictionary, a Latin-Portuguese dictionary, and a thesaurus to try to get the most meaning out of her words.

Do you work in several languages? I've read most of your Portuguese translations. Did you learn the language in Portugal itself? I tend to find that doing that actually adds to an understanding of the culture behind the words, picking up colloquial phrases and the like.

I mostly work in Portuguese, and just Florbela these days. But I have worked in German and Latin also. I began learning Portuguese in Portugal from 1979 to 1981. This was important for getting the knack of the beautiful sibilant sounds of continental Portuguese. But I really "learned" it at Brown, UNC-Chapel Hill, and later in Brazil. I use quotation marks because I am not a fluent speaker and can translate only poetry -- nothing else that I know of.

And do you translate a poem then put it away for a while (rather like many poets do with their own works) then review it later? Or have some back up reader(s)? Or even just get it done and call it good?

I get it done with many revisions, then get some feedback from backup readers -- such as other poets like yourself and also the heads of the Portuguese Brazilian studies departments at Brown and UNC-Chapel Hill. Then I put it away for a long long time. Over the years, I may change a word or two.

Do you find that the works and phrases you translate have an impact on your own work? Does it perhaps influence phrases or maybe even lend itself to a blurring of the languages?

I have written a poem or two inspired by Florbela. Here is one:

RETURNING IS BEWILDERED MOTION

I hear the lofty geese over
the hollow hole, ghosts seeking
reedy comfort in a sometime home.

I have no body to feel the acid kiss
rooting me in transparent fire,
Womanly as Christ I touch the surface

of the mire. A lily opens
suffused in light. She floats in
the mist, indifferent...

This is based on “Nocturne” in which Florbela compares her soul to a water lily floating in the moonlight. I see the water lily also as a symbol of Woman. Florbela’s use of it, for me, makes her a modern poet, because she is aware of the divided self as Woman, a part of nature that doesn’t talk, and a woman, who talks. She was also strongly influenced by the French symbolists.

Not only do you translate, Billie, but I'm told that you are quite a good poet yourself (do NOT deny it, we have witnesses!). Have you any lofty goals for own work?

I don’t have any lofty goals for my own poetry, oddly, perhaps. I don’t like to call myself a poet or an artist. These are terms that for me imply that a person gives their whole life and soul to the pursuit of poetry or art. I did try to be a Poet once, but I found the degradation, living hand to mouth and not having a stable place to live, too hard. I don’t mind being known as a translator -- it’s more down-to-earth. Some of my poems, though, will be published at the end of a forthcoming book on my life with the artist, George Maciunas, this fall (*The Eve of Fluxus*).

You were part of a huge NY arts movement in your earlier days (Fluxhouse Co-operative, alongside George Maciunas). Did that involve poetry, maybe even in collusion with other media? Can you tell us a bit more about the movement and what happened to it? Where is it now?

I wasn’t a part of the Fluxhouse Co-operative, which was only one of George’s accomplishments. Not many people know that the Fluxhouse Co-operative was actually the

root of what became known as Soho. George renovated warehouses that weren't zoned for residence, and he paid for it with the loss of an eye and hounding by the NY attorney general. That is part of the story in *The Eve of Fluxus*. George's better-known accomplishment was the founding of Fluxus, the avant-garde art movement of the 1960s. It lives on, but for me, since George's death in 1978, the soul has gone out of it. What remains now can only be called post-Fluxus; but it is still very important means of dealing with the all-consuming global capitalism that we are faced with now.

Many thanks for indulging me, Billie.

It's my pleasure!!

Now you wouldn't happen to have seen a good grazing spot on your way here would you? Maybe with some cutesy Portuguese deer around? No? Oh well ...