

University Galleries of Illinois State University is pleased to present *Love Letters* from July 17 through October 3, 2026. All events are free and open to the public.



*Love Letters*, an exhibition of works from University Galleries' permanent collection, features six photographs and lithographs by **Bethany Collins, Jason Lazarus, and Rafael Soldi**. The works include a variety of handwritten expressions of care, each composed for a different audience or purpose. The exhibition title not only refers to the correspondence that one may traditionally think of as a *love letter* but also plays with the idea of appreciating language: literally loving *letters* and what their combinations can convey.

Photographs from Rafael Soldi's *Sentiment* series, in his words, "chronicle the loss of the first man I loved and stand as a testament to the enduring impact relationships have in the forming of queer identity." These personal photographs include *A step towards something I have yet to figure out*, in which a crumpled note written in capital letters begins to burn within a silver dish on a reflective wooden table. The words are quickly devoured by dramatic orange flames and surrounded by swirling plumes of white smoke but have not yet fallen into ashes. In his self-portrait *Bajo tu manto*, the artist closes his eyes and covers most of his face with a back-turned devotional card. The encouraging message was written to Soldi in 2002 by the chaplain of his school in Lima shortly after the artist learned that his family would be immigrating from Peru to the United States. He found the card again seven years later while undergoing significant transitions (graduating college, moving to New York City, and unexpectedly ending his first gay relationship) and cites it as "a bit of archival evidence of the boy I was before it all changed." The card also shows marks from handling, a hole from being pinned, and printed information from his school's often-sung hymn to the Immaculate Virgin.

For her three lithographs, Bethany Collins pulls the "love language" from historical songs connected to national identity. This project continues her research of the patriotic hymn "My Country 'Tis of Thee," which was written by Samuel F. Smith to a tune that has at least 100 different versions of lyrics. "All hearts beneath the sun" is excerpted from "Let War's Tempests Cease," a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow that is often added as a verse to the song, while "And love all hearts entwine" is a lyric from a version titled "God Bless Our Sunday School." Collins selects, extracts, writes, fractures, and repeats the words, then partially obscures them with gestural smudges, creating constellations of letters and embodied marks. She cites a "faith in language for its capacity to connect us."

Jason Lazarus's large-scale photograph *Untitled* (from the series *2004-Present*) features a handwritten note in a thrifted *Family of Man* exhibition catalogue (published by the Museum of Modern Art). The affectionate message—neatly penned and clearly planned to fit within the confines of the gifted book's opening page—encourages hopefulness, perspective, and peace for its recipient. Within this one photograph of a found object, Lazarus presents a collision of writing styles: the personal note from Leslie to Chris; Leslie's quotations from poet and playwright William Shakespeare and author John Fowles; the dust jacket's typed exhibition summary, written as a letter about "essential oneness" from curator Edward Steichen to all readers of the publication; and a reproduction of Steichen's signature, seeming to personalize the note about his record-breaking but controversial photography exhibition. Traces of the book's age and handling are evident in its yellowed edges, varied stains, frayed cover, adhered sticker, and Leslie's postscript mention of cut-out pages.

The selected works demonstrate a range of artistic strategies that incorporate handwriting—whether written by the artist or someone else. Soldi performs for the camera, stages a still-life, and both shares and conceals intimate details from his own life. Collins researches, selects, and abstracts phrases from multiple historical lyricists. Lazarus makes a photographic portrait of a book that documents a massive international photography exhibition. Rather than featuring the cover or the images within, he focuses on one person's earnest statement about the exhibition's impact and a desire to share it with someone else. Together these works reveal some of the ways that we communicate, transmit, lose, or remember love.

*Love Letters* is curated by Kendra Paitz, director and chief curator. Exhibition programming is supported by the Alice and Fannie Fell Trust and the Lori Baum and Aaron Henkelman University Galleries Community Fund.

### **Artist biographies**

Each of the artists has been featured in a solo exhibition at University Galleries. Jason Lazarus's first survey exhibition, *Your Time Is Gonna Come*, co-curated by Barry Blinderman and Kendra Paitz, was on view in 2011 and accompanied by a monograph. Bethany Collins's first survey exhibition, *A Pattern or Practice*, curated by Kendra Paitz, was on view in 2019 and accompanied by a monograph. Rafael Soldi's solo exhibition, *A moon, a peephole, an explosion, or a flashing memory*, curated by Kendra Paitz, was on view in 2024.

**Bethany Collins** is a Chicago-based artist whose "conceptually driven work is fueled by a critical exploration of how race and language interact. Centering language—its biases, contradictions, and ability to simultaneously forge connections and foster violence—her works illuminate America's past and offer insight into the development of racial and national identities." Collins's work has been exhibited at Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Seattle Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. [Link to artist's website.](#)

**Jason Lazarus** is a Tampa-based artist "exploring vision and visibility. His work includes a range of fluid methodologies: photography, found and appropriated images, text-as-image, photo-derived sculptures made individually and collaboratively with the public, live archives, film, video, LED light images, and public submission repositories, among others." Lazarus's work has been exhibited at MASS MoCA; Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco; Queens Museum of Art, New York; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. [Link to artist's website.](#)

**Rafael Soldi** is a Seattle-based artist and independent curator. He uses video, photography, installation, text, and performance to, in his words, "reflect on masculinity, language, immigration, violence, and memory, informed by his queer Peruvian identity." Soldi's work has been exhibited at Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; Frye Art Museum, Seattle; CLAMP, New York; Frost Art Museum, Miami; The Print Center, Philadelphia; Museum MATE, Lima; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the American Embassy in Barbados as part of the Art in Embassies Program. [Link to artist's website.](#)

### **Events**

All events and exhibitions are free and open to the public.

- **Reception**  
Friday, August 14, from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m.
- **Independent drawing hours**  
Spend time looking closely at artworks in the exhibition and drawing at your own pace. Materials are provided.
  - Friday, August 28, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m.
  - Friday, September 18, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m.
  - Saturday, October 3, from noon to 4:00 p.m.
- **All-ages art-making workshop**  
All materials and instructions provided. Registration is required.  
Saturday, August 29, from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. [Registration link.](#)
- **Artist lecture by Jason Lazarus**  
Wednesday, September 2 at noon

- **Drop-in poetry writing**

Spend time writing poetry in response to artworks on view. Materials provided, including poetry templates.

- Friday, September 4, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m.
  - Friday, September 25, from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m.
- Field trip program, curator-led tours, and workshops available by appointment throughout the exhibition. Stipends are available for K-12 schools or community organizations to offset the costs of transportation. Please contact University Galleries at [gallery@ilstu.edu](mailto:gallery@ilstu.edu) or (309) 438-5487 to schedule an appointment.

University Galleries, a unit in the Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts, is located at 11 Uptown Circle, Suite 103, at the corner of Beaufort and Broadway streets. Parking is available in the Uptown Station parking deck located directly above University Galleries—the first hour is free, as well as any time after 5:01 p.m.

You can find [University Galleries](#) on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [X](#), and sign up to receive email updates through the [newsletter](#). Please contact [gallery@illinoisState.edu](mailto:gallery@illinoisState.edu) or call (309) 438-5487 if you need to arrange an accommodation to participate in any events related to these exhibitions.