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Art review: 'Words and Letters' at the Athenaeum

By **Michael O'Sullivan**, Published: May 22, 2014

A group exhibition at the **Athenaeum** puts its own spin on philosopher Marshall McLuhan's mantra "The medium is the message." For the 12 artists in "**Words and Letters**" — each of whom uses language, or in some cases merely jumbled letters — the role of the written symbol varies widely. A few works contain snatches of actual poetry and are meant to be read. For many others, the building blocks of language have been put into a blender and spread around like paint.

Call it text as texture.

Considering this deconstruction of language, the collaborative abstractions of Langley Spurlock and John Martin Tarrat are relatively straightforward and didactic. Spurlock, a chemist turned visual artist, and Tarrat, an ad man turned poet, have partnered on "Secrets of the Elements," a series of portraits inspired by the periodic table. Three works from that series are included here, pairing verse and image. "Element #62: Samarium," for example, includes a witty haiku about a radioactive isotope that is used in cancer treatment, has its origins in Russia and boasts a half-life of 106 billion years:

Cara Ober also uses what might be called poetry, but of a very different kind. Along with representational imagery (a girl wearing bangs, for instance) and other abstract design elements, the Baltimore painter liberally sprinkles her canvases with fragments of found, almost Dadaistic text. Printed dictionary definitions float alongside scraps of handwriting — "i fold you into the silence of myself" — creating a stew of seemingly random, collagelike signifiers, none of which submits to easy interpretation.

Ober has several stylistic cousins here. Lynn Schmidt, Marty Ittner, Robert Cwiok and Billy Colbert also rely heavy on collage. Old photos, canceled stamps, sewing patterns, W.W. Denslow's "Wizard of Oz" illustrations and other graphic material appear with scraps of text. As with Ober, the aim of these artists is to stir up memory and associations, both conscious and unconscious. The trick works for the most part, though each viewer may "read" their work differently.

Text, for Lori Anne Boocks, is deliberately illegible. In her largest and most dramatic of three pieces, “Velocity (Watching Hours),” an angry scribble of charcoal handwriting storms across the center of the abstract painting. I’d call it graffiti, but it’s more like verbal diarrhea.

Paradoxically, this explosion of inarticulate emotion is strangely eloquent. For Boocks, the painting’s strength isn’t calligraphic but gestural. It’s as nonverbal as dance, but just as communicative.

Other artists also mask their words. For Pat Autenrieth, it’s by hiding in plain sight. Although the quiltmaker’s “Grasping at Straws” prominently features the word “Mama,” it’s almost impossible to read. That’s because, at nearly five feet tall, the work’s billboard-size letters come across as pattern, not as text. Jim Burkholder, for his part, breaks language down to alphabet soup. His digital photo illustration “Man in a Suit” features a faceless bureaucrat wearing a necktie patterned with tiny, random letters. It’s an effective metaphor for Washington, a city that runs on hot air.

As much as this show mumbles, “Words and Letters” does deliver a message: Being read is less empowering than having written.

The Story Behind the Work

One of the most powerful works in the Athenaeum show is “Wordfall,” by Francie Hester and Lisa Hill. Constructed from more than 60,000 interconnected paper clips — each of which has been wrapped with small strips of printed paper and hung in strings, like a beaded curtain — the sculpture forms a kind of torrent of printed text.

Its origins lie in two earlier artworks, each of which was conceived as a memorial. The first, designed to honor magazine writer Diane Granat Yalowitz, who died of brain cancer in 2004, consists of strips of Washingtonian magazine, where she worked as an editor and writer for many years.

The second basis for “Wordfall” honors Brendan Ogg, a friend of Yalowitz’s son who died in 2010, also of brain cancer, at age 20. The aspiring poet is memorialized here with strips of paper containing verse from his posthumously published chapbook, “Summer Becomes Absurd.”

Few individual words in “Wordfall” are legible. But that’s not the point. Its message is that in the writing we leave behind, we live forever.

— **Michael O'Sullivan**