

The Nature of Words

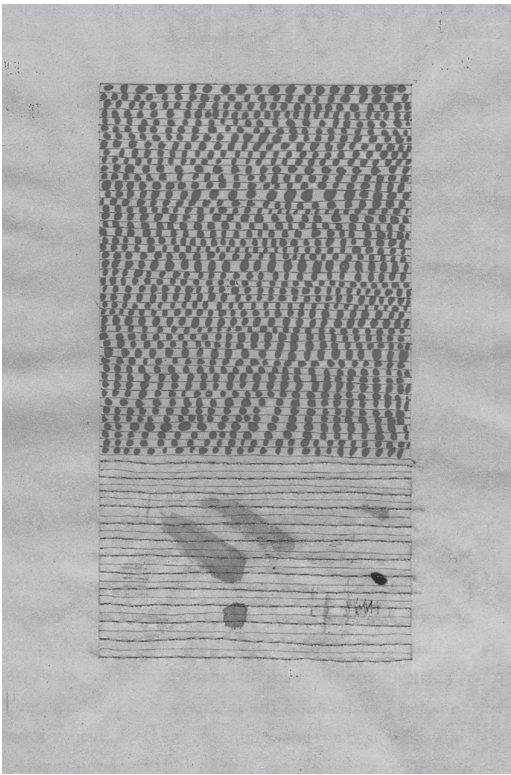
MARGARET LOCK introduces an exhibition of books, broadsides, banners and book objects by herself and Reg Beatty, Sigrid Blohm, Wendy Cain, Mira Coviensky, Will Rueter and Don Taylor.

THIS EXHIBITION WAS MY IDEA. Why did I volunteer so many hours of work organizing it? Partly, it was to increase awareness of book arts in southern Ontario. The book arts, located in the grey area between art and craft, struggle for recognition in both camps. I knew a group of hard-working and intelligent book artists whose work I admired and thought should be better known. I wanted each artist to be able to show several works. This allows viewers to understand the ideas, attitudes and thought processes of the artists, and therefore better appreciate their work. The calligraphic theme was sufficiently broad to encourage idiosyncratic and unusual work, but specific enough to create a coherent exhibition.

The exhibition explores two aspects of the nature of words. The first is the nature of words in the aggregate—an examination of what makes a text, how we recognize that what is in front of us is a text, how texts are presented, and how readers read texts. These considerations impinge on the work of all the exhibitors, but particularly Reg Beatty and Sigrid Blohm. The second theme is a dissection of the components of words—letters. These book artists have a love of hand-drawn letters and handwritten texts. The computer-set text which surrounds us in books, newspapers and computer screens, and the necessity to read or scan text quickly for information, can numb readers to the potential beauty of letters. We appreciate these modern typesetting technologies and some of the type styles available through the magic of computing. One of the exhibitors, Mira Coviensky, uses digital, laser-printed founts. But we are particularly drawn to hand-produced letters, their inherent individual and expressive qualities, and that is what this exhibition presents.

As I expected, in an exhibition where there was no curator, and each participant decided what he or she would contribute, each had their own interpretation of these themes. In some cases, the work was a surprise even to their fellow exhibitors, either because they had been unaware of their colleagues' achievements in this field, or because these artists were developing new interests. Within this diversity of approach, media, format and text, astute viewers can identify affinities. In several cases, artists produced work that could, almost, be taken as being by someone else in the group. (At the opening at the *New* Gallery, friends of the artists were busy exclaiming at this.) The unity of the exhibition was helped by a common medium: most of the artists used paper as the material support.

When book artists think of words, they inevitably think of the letters that make up words. The more they examine them, the stranger and more wonderful these symbols appear. We have a Roman alphabet, whose letters imperfectly render the sounds in our English language. The letters can be written in many styles, each bringing associations which affect the interpretations of the words. Will Rueter's rendering of a *Quote from Spinoza* exemplifies traditional calligraphy based on Roman lettering: beautiful, dignified, elegant uncials. The style gives authority to the words. He also writes an assured italic hand, based on the style revived by Renaissance Italian humanists and modified by 20th-century calligraphers. His *Peace Tower* combines several variants of italic, adjusted to fit the space provided by each box. The writing looks effortless, but is the result of a lifetime of practice. In my own piece, *Heavenward*, the lettering is drawn in



Left: Sigrid Blohm, *Red River, Smudged Notes*, 2010. Natural dye, gouache, pigment pen, cotton thread on Japanese handmade paper (Kurotani letter paper). 11¼ inches high.

Below: Reg Beatty, *Steamboat Willie Gets Political*, 2010. Gouache on Japanese handmade paper (Mura Udaban B). 16 inches high.

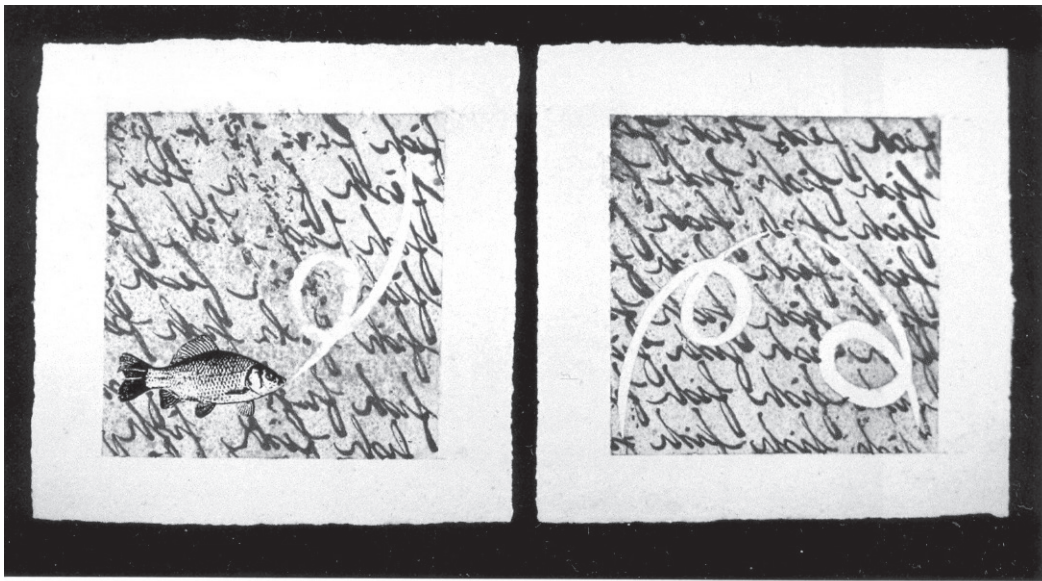
pencil crayon, based on well-known modern sans serif typefaces, such as Helvetica and Optima.

Wendy Cain uses a flowing script based on copperplate writing, once taught in penmanship classes in grades four to eight. However, instead of pen and ink, she uses fluid paper pulp. In the *Fish Tales Obscured* series, her lettering is mirror image, and therefore initially hard to decipher—yet the word “fish” states the obvious. Viewers, of course, have already identified the species from the picture. Sometimes the fish swims through the text as though through water, as in *Fish Tales Obscured #5*. Sometimes it seems mutely to question the text. Over the course of 14 spreads, we come to know and love this fish, whose life is so much more than the mere word “fish.”

Mira Coviensky sometimes uses laser-set text, sometimes handwriting. In *Honey and Gall*, the seemingly casual handwritten maxim contrasts with the image above. What the words say is fraught with meaning and significance: life is not all sweet, nor all bitter, but indeed a very fruitful mixture of the two. This is a piece of wisdom to be pondered in the light of the numinous angel

(with an admonishing finger) above it, in its halo of pins. In *Connecting with nature in downtown Toronto in the dead of winter without leaving my studio*, the text is neutral and mechanical. The typewriter font brings associations of scientific records and manuals. The position of these texts, on small flaps folding down from the illustration, perhaps reminds viewers of an open bird book on the windowsill. The text is clear; nature itself is obscured by the window screen. The head of the robin is ambiguous: is it startled and fearful of a human presence? Or on the alert for worms and insects? The artist records both roles. Zoologists such as Audubon killed birds in order to draw them accurately, and humans have certainly reduced the populations of birds by eliminating their habitat. Yet birds are themselves predators.

Two other exhibitors examine the look of less familiar lettering. Don Taylor has developed an interest in classical texts and how this written heritage now appears, namely, as archeological artifacts with incomplete, fragmented text. He also enjoys investigating specialist scripts in the Western European tradition of calligraphy. In



Wendy Cain, *Fish Tales Obscured #5*, 2010. Handmade paper, spray pulp, stencil, collaged screen print. 20 inches high.

Court Hand #2, he has composed what looks like a scribe's practise sheet of various unusual characters used in medieval and Renaissance legal documents. He is also fascinated by Middle Eastern and Asian scripts. Some pieces exhibit marks with the characteristics of Arabic letterforms, such as extreme contrasts of thick and thin strokes, and a decorative (rather than legible) arrangement of letters. *Quasi-calligraphy* consists of an imaginary text, in an imaginary alphabet, written with bold gestures into a background of dark paste.

In *Set aside*, Reg Beatty has been influenced by late Roman inscriptions, whose capital letters were elongated to squeeze the maximum of text into a minimum of stone monument without losing legibility and monumentality. Reg omits word breaks (as in Greek inscriptions) and writes as though the four strips were continuous, breaking words wherever necessary. The letters are white. This may refer to the way chiseled inscriptions are sometimes prepared to be photographed: powdered chalk is sprinkled into the lines, then the surface of the stone wiped clean. As readers

are more used to black letters on white, these white letters have a ghostly effect. Reg is also interested in modern graffiti. *Steamboat Willie Gets Political* is written in bulbous, hollow lettering, reminiscent of the puff-ball clouds of smoke coming out of funnels in comic books. The letters hover in the air like balloons, creating an ambiguous depth. The overlapping forms, an arbitrary mix of upper and lower case, and lack of word spacing make the words difficult to read. These outline forms, developed to be drawn quickly with spray cans on exterior walls, are here interpreted with brush and gouache on handmade Japanese paper, and displayed in a different public context. Reg characterizes this graffiti as a flamboyant cakewalk, swooping and parading along, seemingly so pleased with itself. Others may find this new alphabet alienating, associating it with outsider art, street people, urban visual pollution, and mental illness.

The methods of presentation are as various as the forms of the letters. There are the traditional, straightforward ways: in books and broadsides. For Samuel Daniel's poem *Ulysses and the Syren*, I

considered reproducing early 17th-century handwriting to match that of the author (the poem was first published in 1605). Instead, I opted for a simple style, almost the print forms of early primary school, for the sake of legibility. Each verse has its own page. The illustrations below each verse indicate the speaker. Other exhibitors play with our expectations of the text block.

In *Red River, Smudged Notes*, Sigrid Blohm arranges her marks as though composing a paragraph, yet the lines, dashes and stitches do not say words. They form beautiful patterns. Sometimes flecks of colour ornament these fields of non-text; sometimes there are holes punched in it, or marks left by burning the paper (as in *Ancient Text*), or from stitching it with silk and cotton thread. Sigrid explores the visual parallels between the even weave of textiles, and the regular loops and lines of line after line of writing. The graceful marks of pen and brush transport us to a Platonic idea of text—if only all text were as beautiful and restful.

Several larger works challenge viewers' preconceptions of how certain kinds of text should be presented. At 24 inches high, Will's accordion-fold book, Pablo Neruda's *Ode to Typography*, is larger than most books: a big book for a big subject. Inspired by the work of the Dutch printer Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman, Will produced a series of prints from wooden display type; 15 years later, he found the right text to go with them. These large types were used for posters in the 19th and early 20th century. The letters are reduced to shapes, printed in many colours, and often overlap.

Reg Beatty's *Cords* is written on tall strips of Japanese paper, 56 inches long. These two banners have four lines of text; the reader starts at the top and reads down, then at the bottom and reads up, and again at the top, etc. The different format, the lack of word breaks, and the lack of space between the lines make readers slow their reading. These words, once part of a closely argued exposition in a book, designed to be read by an individual in private, are now hung on a wall, to be read (or ignored) by the public.

In my piece *Heavenward*, the texts are pasted to long banners held on a metal support. Each pair of banners forms a double-page spread of

eight panels; each panel presents a text or related group of texts. The various arrangements of the words are designed to bring out their meaning, emphasize certain aspects of the message, or just provide sufficient variety to keep the reader's interest. Hanging them together encourages comparisons between the texts. In each double spread, there are highly positive texts, promising heaven as a reward. These are undercut by the decidedly negative ones: the impossible conditions to be met by those who wish to achieve this end. I present both sorts of texts as equally self-contained and authoritative. Viewers ponder the texts: to ask themselves whether, in the light of the earthly suffering required to get to heaven, this is a reasonable goal, and to assess their own progress on the heavenward path.

The Nature of Words is a group exhibition. The artists not only produced work specifically for it, but all of them have contributed time and money to the mechanics of the exhibition. I was able to book six venues, some with good wall space and few display cases; and some with many display cases and no wall space. Due to these physical constraints, the exhibition looks slightly different at each venue. The Nature of Words was first shown at the *New* Gallery on Queen Street West in Toronto September 15–26, 2010, where several pieces sold. As a result, three of Don Taylor's works listed in the catalogue are no longer in the exhibition here in Kingston. However, others have been substituted. After its stay at Queen's University Library, the exhibition will go to venues in Belleville, Grimsby, Ottawa and Dundas in 2011 (see www.nofwords.ca for further details).

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~ Margaret Lock is a Kingston, Ontario, book artist. This is an edited version of the address she gave at the opening reception of The Nature of Words at the W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library, Queen's University, Kingston, on October 13, 2010. A 48-page (plus cover) colour catalogue designed by Reg Beatty is available for \$15 plus \$4 postage and packing from Margaret Lock, 231 Johnson St., Kingston, ON K7L 1Y2.