

REVIEW

Alphabet

By Julie Maas (Editions Gerald
& Maas, 2007, \$30)

Reviewed by Phyllis Reeve

Julie Maas and John Bart Gerald honed their artistic and literary skills during the heady days of American civil rights and anti-war activism in the 1960s and '70s. As the mainstream journals and publishers that had carried their works became less receptive to their political messages, they founded their own press, Gerald & Maas, in New York City in 1978. Under this imprint they issued writings and artwork by themselves and other "suppressed" authors and artists.

Moving to Canada in 1995, they set up an atelier in Ottawa, a strategic place to learn about and involve themselves in the politics of their adopted country, especially as these related to human rights and war. Gerald continues to write essays, fiction and poetry, partnered with Maas's visual art—drawings, paintings and etchings.

As the computer became an accepted tool in the production of handcrafted books and etchings, they opened their electronic branch, the night's lantern Web site, www.nightslantern.ca, offering online works by themselves and kindred spirits such as Daniel Berrigan, Kahen-tinetha Horn and Michael Mandel. (The site takes its name from a poem fragment by Gerard Manley Hopkins: "night's lantern / pointed with piercèd lights and breaks of rays.") One can download books as PDF files for a small fee, order a paper copy of the same book, or order a folio of the original etchings from one of the listed works. Or one can simply enjoy the site itself, webmastered by Gerald and vivid with Maas's art.

In the case of *Alphabet*, Maas redefines body language. In her typography, nude human bodies bend and curve themselves into the letters of the Roman alphabet. The 26 colour ink-jet prints included follow from two hand-coloured etchings, *alphabet a-l* and *alphabet m-z*, originally issued in 1983.

Although Maas calls *Alphabet* politically incorrect and not a children's book, she shocks us with gentle, mischievous touches. The human figures express themselves as voluntary letters, giving no appearance of contortion or discomfort. Although *K* looks about to spring and *X*

is fearful or defensive, most of the forms are serene and in charge of themselves.

A muses. *E* curves and recurves her limbs. *I* kneels and *T* stands, both with hands behind their backs, unprotected and vulnerable, not afraid or submissive but honestly naked and female, modestly sans serif. *K* crouches, aggressive chin between aggressive breasts. *Q*'s hair puns into a queue. *R*, hand on hip, steps deliberately forward.

Only one letter, *D*, is male, distinguishable by an obvious gender-specific attribute—his moustache. His fingertips do not quite meet at the upper corner of the page, relating to the preceding letter, whose hands, necessarily open, seem to want to close and make *C* into "circle."

Z kneels with hair blown forward, body slanted back, prepared to cool her heels or to spring to her toes. She leaves us an alphabet in action.

Julie Maas's letters do not stand for anything—*A* is not "for apple," *B* is not "for book." The only words in *Alphabet* are the title, author's name and publication data. The font speaks for itself.

REVIEW

The Art of Letter Carving in Stone

By Tom Perkins (Crowood Press, 2007, £25)

Reviewed by Owen Williams

In 1903 the artist Eric Gill abandoned his career as an ecclesiastical architect to become a stone carver. Originally working within the ethos of the English Arts and Crafts movement, Gill proposed to design and make inscriptions by hand. In a process which paralleled developments in the private press movement, Gill adapted the light open letters of the early Renaissance to the requirements of stone carving. The results proved lively, delicate and, after the mid-Victorian taste for elaboration and complexity, refreshingly plain.

Through repeated use over many years these letters would become increasingly regular and refined. *Amphora* readers may know their typographic cousins: Gill's typefaces Joanna, Perpetua and Gill Sans. During his lifetime, Gill had an ambition to establish a vernacular tradition of letter carving. Although this did not occur, the precedent he set did provide a model for letter carving to develop as a studio craft. It is this definition of letter carving, in which a maker arrives at a personal interpretation of the alphabet, that informs the work of Tom Perkins.