

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 pierced 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.

Perkins has practised letter carving for more than 30 years. He usually makes functional objects: foundation stones, tombstones, and on occasion architectural lettering. Perkins has often worked in a classical idiom; however, he is now best known for his inscriptions of sans serif letterforms. These inscriptions are characterized by an understanding of the broad-edged pen as a design tool, a subtle waisting of the letters' stems, delicate proportions, and tight but incredibly even letter spacing. These elements contribute to the re-envisioning of letterform within an archaic aesthetic. While much contemporary fine craft emphasizes experimentation, Perkins has chosen to refine a few forms. Within the craft, he is particularly well known for his flared *O*, a subtle geometric form similar in its narrower manifestations to an upturned egg. His alphabet of 1988, in which this *O* made an early appearance, now has an iconic status within the crafts. Perkins is one of the most respected educators in his field, and *The Art of Letter Carving in Stone* presents his years of experience as a lecturer and workshop leader in a written form.

Perkins starts with a brief history of the craft during its revival of the past hundred years. This consists of short biographies of individual makers. Though he writes from an English perspective, his account also includes letter carvers from Continental Europe and the USA. This inclusion reflects the pluralism currently practised within the craft. The next three sections introduce the selection of tools and equipment, stone, and letter carving techniques. Descriptions are detailed, with supporting photographs.

The heart of this book lies in its chapters on letter design. Perkins shows in a very practical way how to draw letters and how to generate variations of these forms. He details how to space letters and words to achieve an even texture and offers guidelines for designing headstones and plaques. As an artist, Perkins values clarity. He prefers letters to have a unified appearance and definite form. His instructional method emphasizes letter proportions: their internal structure and external modelling.

In keeping with his background in Johnstonian calligraphy, this approach is informed by the use of the broad-edged pen married to an understanding of geometry. It is a structural approach analogous to academic figure drawing. Perkins wrote of this approach early in his career when he contributed a chapter on drawn lettering to *The Calligrapher's Handbook*,

published by the Society of Scribes and Illuminators in 1985. Here he expands on those step-by-step instructions for drawing Roman capitals to include lowercase and italic letters in their serif and sans serif forms. In light of current pedagogical methods practised within the fine crafts, this step-by-step approach could be considered prescriptive; however, the clear instructions provide one way to gain an appreciation for the multiple nuances that inform a classical letter design.

Perhaps the most valuable section within this book is the seven-page chapter on designing letter variations. Perkins proposes that the key to designing an alphabet lies in the letters *O* and *I*: the *O* determines the design of the curved parts of a letter, the *I* the treatment of serifs. This concise statement of letter design principles deserves publication as a book in its own right.

The Art of Letter Carving in Stone offers a snapshot of the craft in its current state of development and includes many illustrations of Perkins' work. The author has also actively sought to include the work of other makers. These works pepper the text as illustrations, and as vignettes in which individual letter carvers discuss how they approached a particular piece or problem. The English post-war taste for centrally laid out inscriptions, with letterforms characterized by an almost typographic stillness, appears to be giving way to a more lively, dynamic and eclectic approach.

Finally, a comment should be made about the book's design. It appears that the integrity and fitness-to-purpose that characterizes the work of its author was not practised by the publisher's designer. Many of the illustrations are small, the pages often feel cramped, and the use of typographic hierarchies within the double-column layout sometimes leads to confusion. These qualities detract from the book's content; a redesign would be in order for a second edition. If you choose to use this book, please look beyond these design faults. I hope *The Art of Letter Carving in Stone* becomes what it is intended to be: a reference work and workbench manual of depth.

Own a Piece of the Magic, a May 21 Vancouver fundraiser, showcases art by Canadian children's book illustrators. Proceeds benefit the Canadian Children's Book Centre and the B.C. Coalition for School Libraries. For more info and to purchase tickets, contact bc@bookcentre.ca.