

ENGAGING THE PAGE

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It is about more than the text.

For a long time I have been making paintings and drawings on paper and canvas in which the size and shape of the stretchers and paper have been calculated to within 1/16 inch to provide a customized space for the text, primarily from a design or composition perspective. The space where the text resided was neutral and accommodated the length and shape of the text. For example, if the text was represented as single line, as in, say, *TIDBIT*, the canvas was narrow. If the text was stacked, as in *AUNT BEA*, the canvas or paper conformed to it.

Conversely, in the wall paintings the text is planned to fit the defined space of a given wall or other support. The scale and orientation of, say, *WANDERFUL!* at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld (*For the Time Being: Wall paintings-Painted Walls*, 2013) is different from the installation in *I Was a Double* at the Tang Museum (2014), due to the specifications of the walls. In the elastically sized paintings and drawings the space has conformed to the text, whereas in the wall paintings the text has conformed to the space. One or the other, space or text, is advantaged.

When I made *MAROONED*, the first work in the series called *BLINGO*, I left generous space around the word to reinforce its isolation in the center of the page. At that point I did not realize that in the following works the space would continue a dialogue with the text or that it would locate the text by providing a sense of place. The text and support have become more conceptually integrated and their graphic and semantic relationship is more balanced than in the past. Each work begins with the space of standard deckled-edged sheet of rough watercolor paper, 22-5 inches x 30.25 inches, which sets up the parameters for the text and predetermines the proportions of the canvases and walls. However fixed the dimensions are, they are not limitations, but opportunities for a range of textual occupation. As simple architectural, bodily, or territorial surrogates, the paper's horizontal, vertical, and diagonal orientation, its height and width, as well as its corners and edges set the stage, but the textual occupant fills in the details and activates it. The support is purposely left white, a blank space of indeterminate function until

it is joined by the painted text. Like any empty vessel, it takes on meaning from its usage and context.

The rectangular space that frames *RUST COLORED BELT* would be nothing more than an armature without the text which, in tandem with the support, depicts a belt buckled around an ample waist. Cued by the middle word “colored” and reinforced by color, a rust belt landscape is transformed into a fashion accessory. But the text would be a disembodied message without the girth of the paper to span. The position of the text across the middle of the paper potentially forms a landscape as well, comprised of a sky and a foreground divided by a horizon line of obsolete, decaying steel industry detritus from edge to edge. In both scenarios, torso and terrain, the text depends on the rectangular paper and the paper depends on the text for their mutual fulfillment. The dimensions of the paper make the graphic rules, but neither the space nor the text can boast of its authority. Like a chicken-egg scenario, it is difficult to determine which came first.

The canvas containing *STEPS* would appear generic as well if not for its interaction with the text. But Fred Astaire’s painted red name divided into stair steps and descending diagonally from point F in the upper left corner through point A to point E at lower right, identifies the space as an architectural one. Perhaps a movie or theater set. Mathematically, the division of a two-word proper name into five planes (F, RED, A, STAIR, E) and the multiplication of the same two words into four (FRED, ASTAIRE, RED, STAIR), create a single image conjuring a memory of Fred Astaire elegantly dancing, with a slightly uneven stride and rhythm due to the unequal lengths of RED and STAIR, down his namesake. The performative aspects of the work are helped along by the divided multi-level text which resists cognitive reading at one glance. The halting procession of letters at a 45° angle from top to bottom, rather than linearly from left to right, slows down reading, requiring the viewer to decipher and follow the language as it descends, possibly creating a time-based mini performance of short duration.

There is a performative aspect to *BACKTRACK* as well, but on the part of the text rather than the viewer. The letters are the actors in this scenario whose script is spelled out in the title. Upon spelling the word B-A-C-K-T-R-A-C-K, the letters turn around and retrace their steps back to the

beginning, spelling the word going in the opposite direction, obscuring each letter as they back over their tracks, and fulfilling the meaning. The action is already completed by the time the viewer comes along. The viewer is not complicit in the completion of the work because reading is not an option. She comes in after the fact and is locked out by an indecipherable line of letters except for the T. Because there is an uneven number of letters and the T is the middle one in both BACKTRACK and KCARTKCAB, it is the only letter that remains legible.

The horizontal space of the paper provides a sympathetic framework for a word traveling back and forth along a linear pathway. The space is not specific because the word is not specific. The word names a process, not an object. BACKTRACK could represent a mental, verbal, or physical act. Painted as it is in dusty brown, I picture a sandy earth, an archeological site perhaps, where footprints, like letters, are obliterated.

SPOKE, *LOL*, and *ECHO* are visual representations of vocal concepts - speech, laughter, echos. The words draw on the features of their letterforms - the horizontal bars of A and H, the vertical symmetry of S, and the vertical and horizontal symmetry of O and H to emulate laughing, echoing, and speaking. The horizontal bars of A and H are not on the same plane, but when they are manually aligned in *LOL*, the A's are lifted off the baseline, so that HA HA HA HA HA looks like it is moving up and down and shaking or laughing. The laughter does not breach its middle ground on the page, but it does erupt within the modulated distance of the cap height and the baseline of the text. The versatility and symmetry of O and H allow *ECHO* to reflect and intersect itself horizontally and vertically four times over, creating a graphic reverberation. S in *SPOKE* reads the same way upside down or right side up. Between the two SPOKES, S functions like a hinge allowing the word to flip and be read both ways as well. Whether the words suggest the instability of speech or the radial rotation of a wheel, *SPOKE*, like *LOL* and *ECHO*, impossibly desires to be audible, but settles for imitating the gestures of sound instead.

As in the other works, the Zelig-like supports facilitate their transformation from a generic container to one that works in tandem with the text. *LOL*'s genderless voice, not a high one nor a low one, lies astride the length of the paper, across the middle, providing room for the serial repetition of laughing. The space of *ECHO* on the other hand is an enclosure, a chamber, where sound has bounced off the left, right and top and bottom edges and landed in the center, reoriented upside down, backwards, and right side up.

SPOKE's location across the middle of the page potentially gives it enough room at the top and bottom to continue revolving, like a spinning wheel around the central hub that is the athletic S.

MONUMENTS engages the space in two directions, height and width. The space of the support is identified as *sky* by OBELISK as it soars vertically from floor to ceiling and as *figure upon a divan* by ODALISK as it stretches horizontally from left to right. The two words efficiently harmonize their occupation by intersecting and merging via the tricky and acrobatic S which plays two roles. S serves both OBELISK and ODALISK simultaneously as the same letter in both words: linguistically as the penultimate letter in OBELISK and pictorially as a reclining curvy line in ODALISK, a letter surrogate for a word surrogate for a female nude. The S resolves a technical issue as well: the orientation of the support. I could not decide if it should be vertical or horizontal. The vertical orientation would have allowed for a taller OBELISK, but a cramped ODALISK; a horizontal orientation presented problems in reverse. The solution lay in the reclining S which allowed OBELISK to be shorter and ODALISK to be longer.

Tension is further harmonized by the linguistic equality of the two words: they have five letters out of seven in common, O-L-I-S-K, a majority. The linguistic differences between the remaining letters, B-E and D-A, do not entitle one word to trump the other. Alphabetically B precedes D, but A precedes E, which results in a wash. With their linguistic parity established, other measurements of value follow suit. Vertical does not trump horizontal; nor upright, prostrate. Male does not trump female. Sculpture does not trump painting. The representation of both ODALISKS and OBELISKS throughout the history of art is equally iconic and illustrious. Any perceived hierarchy is supplied by the viewer.

The spacial framework of * *RISK*, *EN POINTE*, and *PARROT* suggests strategies of photography: a Hubble-like telescopic snapshot of an asteroid traveling through space, a telephoto zoom shot of a bird, and a close-up view of a dancer's feet. Their orientation suggests photographic framing as well. As linguistic proxies for subjects of the natural world, the texts strain to portray real life events, requiring a leap of faith by the viewer that these subjects really *are* the things they signify, not only the signifier of those things. Through coincidences of structure between their body parts (letters) and meaning they offer linguistic *evidence* that they are the thing itself. * *RISK* combines a shared root (ASTER-), two suffixes (-OID and the faux -RISK), and a typographical star-like symbol functioning in two capacities as footnote and picture (*) to create a shorthand narrative. With so many linguistic functions and choices, there are several conceptual pathways to solving the rebus, but most conclude with an imminent astronomical event. In *EN POINTE* the text's common body parts, O-E, depict two toe shoes extended when the words

are vertically oriented. The position of the letters in the words determines the *choreography*. One *foot*, SHOES, is en pointe, bearing the weight of the *body* which balances outside the frame, while the parallel word beside it, TOE, is lifted off the *floor* in alignment with its matching letters. *PARROT* emerges from the word's double R and from *PARROT*'s double role as noun and verb. To evoke parrot-as-verb, the letters are vertically arranged in two single parallel lines mirroring each other, but focus is shifted to parrot-as-noun by the surplus R's flanking the other two R's across the middle, creating a single parrot with a symmetrical wing span of four R's. Grammatical ambiguity between noun and verb prevents absolute identification.

Like *STEPS*, the text in *LANDSCAPE* traverses the page diagonally, but as a horizontal panorama. The black letters create a cascading configuration from right to left, requiring the viewer to exercise her reading dexterity by shifting it up and down, left to right, and right to left as the text, like oil, flows under and over, in front of and behind itself, or like multi-directional horizontal and vertical drilling: S-P sits precisely atop I-L, spelling SPIL; O is unnaturally added to the left of I-L but reads to the right - OIL; and S-P joins OIL from the left as well, but reads to the right - SPOIL. SPILL OIL SPOIL. The small overworked vocabulary of five letters tells the three-word story of despoliation three times. The event forms a self-generating system whose endurance and momentum seem to be limited only by the edges of the page. The repetitive message in this compressed environment suggests that in real life the lifecycle of an oil spill will reproduce endlessly. Like the game that *BLINGO* refers to, *LANDSCAPE* suggests that the verbal proxy OIL SPILL SPOIL, like the thing itself, will eventually cover all of the spaces of this game card, rather than those that merely form rows, columns, and diagonals.