

## **Vicki Essig, Heather Gordon, Paul Rousso, and Merrill Shatzman: Word Maps**

**February 3 – April 1, 2012**

*Word Maps* presents four artists who incorporate words and letters in their works to reveal relationships between printed texts and our contemporary visual environment. Vicki Essig's woven constructions, Heather Gordon's drawings, paintings, and installations, Paul Rousso's monumental collages and Merrill Shatzman's woodcuts, silkscreens and artist books all create new pictorial spaces from letterforms and texts. Words and letters may be read as language but are simultaneously seen as image and artifact evoking associations with maps, charts and nature. The artists selected for *Word Maps* present viewers with four different approaches to the use of printed texts, a practice that has been used in contemporary art from the Dadaists on. At a moment when the printed book, as the most widely used vehicle and support for printed texts is diminishing, all three artists examine the evolving relationship between text and image and demonstrate artists' continuing interest in associating the visual with the textual.

Vicki Essig's intimate hand-woven assemblage works are often the size of a small book page. The artist's use of fragile natural materials attached to a matrix of semi-transparent silk into which individual lines of text cut from pages of old books, including 19th century memoirs, poems, and novels are interwoven, all contribute to a sense of the ephemeral in her work. Omissions in sentences find their visual correspondence in an empty line of silk webbing. In one work tiny chambers of box-shaped open work surround an abandoned honeycomb, while in another strands of horse hair slink past the perfect curves of three snake vertebrae. Sentence fragments take on new meaning through poetic association in the delicate warp and weft of words and objects evoking the roots of the term "text" as "a thing woven," from the Latin "*texere*" to weave.

Heather Gordon's drawings and paintings investigate the evolving dominance of digital platforms for texts and information by creating systems for translating language into visual images which are based on binary codes. Works such as "8 bit classics" and the recent "Sound Bites" make visible the processes of codification that generally pass unperceived in our contemporary media environment. In Gordon's "Comparatives" works, three texts in a related cultural domain are

translated into a sequence of hand stamped ink squares on graph paper. By transcribing the texts into a common visual denominator, the artist allows the viewer to make visual associations between the texts revealing links and oppositions and the influence cultural contexts on meaning. Gordon's use of old graph papers reminiscent of another era, suggests the historicity of digital technology, while washes of white paint in "Patriotic Verse" suggest the pervasive ebb and flow of data as well as a flag's movement in the wind.

Paul Rousso's large multi-media wall works initially read as painterly abstractions yet are made of collaged pages from different corpuses. In certain works the numeration of the pages is the organizing principle as in *Webster's Popular Illustrated Dictionary* (2010) in which the fading red edging of individual pages creates a repetitive pattern of rectangular motifs, which appear as pages as the viewer approaches the work. This process produces an entirely different result in *New York Business to Business Yellow Pages* (2007), dividing the work into two colored zones punctuated by the dark marks of subject sections which organize the whole into an elegant ensemble. In other works pages are shaped into discreet looping lines that either meander across a savanna of text or are intertwined into a multicolored eddies as in *Flowafication* (2011). In Rousso's most recent works thousands of pieces of paper are handled like brushstrokes in fluctuating densities of text and color as in the expanding particles of *Quantum View* (2011). Rousso's use of acrylic medium to weave and bind paper fiber is also a method for preserving in a time capsule, what the artist sees as a rapidly disappearing cultural object.

Merrill Shatzman's combined silk screen and wood block prints, woodcut constructions and artist books evoke the rich history of calligraphy and letterforms. In the brilliant series entitled *Alphabetic Excursions Illuminated Manuscripts* (2011) Shatzman reinterprets letterforms utilizing wood cut and digital processes and transcribes them into abstract "glyphs" which compose the multiple rich surface planes of each work. The development of these forms from hand-cut blocks to digitally redrawn glyphs may be seen in the large digital print *18 Hours, 1420 Miles, 500 Tiles* (2011). Shatzman's personal alphabets not only reference the history of art but also contemporary writing practices such as "wild style" graffiti as in *Graffiti Glyphs* (2011) in which fibers in the rice paper of one layer in the construction have been meticulously cut out to create exuberant wayward strands. The layering processes that have led Shatzman to expand the picture plane find a new outlet in the series of *Cryptic Writing Books* the artist is

exhibiting for the first time, in which strata of pages and intricate hand-cut openwork letterforms are combined in three-dimensions.

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