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Mike Rollins: "Everyone (Version 3)"

Seeing in tongues

At Center Galleries, every
picture's worth its weight in
words.

by **George Tysh**
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"Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," wrote Gertrude Stein in 1913, the early morning of modernism. But "Painting is a picture is a poem is a paragraph," says *On Language: Text and Beyond*, the new show at Center Galleries which gives Stein's famous curious sentence a postmodern spin. Bringing together 22 works by 17 artists, the exhibition offers a long, contemplative look at the way art and language interface — not with a whimper but a bang, a laugh, a wink and a chill of recognition.

Whether it features stones in a river, lines of poetry on rotating dowels or notebook drawings by Merce Cunningham, one of America's greatest choreographers, this knowing selection of language art from primarily the last decade gives the impression that language is literally (and figuratively) everywhere. The empire of signs — which includes words, symbols, numbers, musical notes, drawing, printing, scratchings, labels, maps, menus, clothing styles and all varieties of design — permeates the world we call home, not letting us go till death do us part.

"To Whom It May Concern," a hospitably insightful catalog essay by gallery director Michelle Spivak, identifies the concerns that link these artists — the ways in which their individual understandings of language merge with the infinite current of meanings that we swim and drown in every moment of our lives. And a host of Detroit connections — from works by longtime residents to those who've just passed through — give *On Language* an eerie, where-have-we-met-before feel, as if to recognize that within the vast universe of definitions, there are connotations that snag Motor City citizens in particular, working like hip-hop graffiti tags to anchor us in the flow.

Among the homie contributions are two of poet Christine Monhollen's interactive poetry boxes which allow the viewer to select from multiple verse possibilities and (re)construct a text to personal satisfaction. "Burden of Eyes," with its metal keys (instead of knobs) controlling the slow rotation of the poetic lines on wooden rods, suggests alternatives among the stark images called up by the poem, although none can escape Monhollen's searing sense of language.

Former Detroiter Mike Rollins paints long, two-tone canvases (here blue and white) which read like stock market ticker tape, until we start to make out a not-so-hidden inter-text that comments on money worries, existential states and spiritual conundrums. In "Everyone (Version 3)" (pictured), he lists the usual art-world suspects in a witty catalog of aesthetic (and always financial) co-conspirators.

Just down the wall from Rollins are the thoroughly creepy lead tablets of Howard Meister's "The Ten Commandments" (pictured). On the deadly heavy-metal surface are printed condensed versions of Moses's gift to monotheism. The first five read: 1. I AM GOD/HAVE NO OTHER 2. IMAGES 3. NAME IN VAIN 4. SABBATH 5. MOTHER AND FATHER. Although each commandment seems pared down to its essential core, as if to help us remember what (not) to do, the last five go in and out of focus with a very ambiguous set of instructions: 6. MURDER 7. ADULTERY 8. STEAL 9. FALSE WITNESS 10. COVET. It's as if Beavis and Butt-head were reading every fifth word ("Uhh-h-h É he said 'steal.'"), or as if God were a sadist toying with us at some nightmare-disco.

Then there are moments in the show that jump out with lightheartedness or glow with introspection. The latter include such finely tuned, transcendental pieces as Suzanne Caporael's sumptuous "Cerulean Blue" series; Andrea Eis's "Eidolon: Helen at the Walls of Troy," in which language preserves an idea against a current of merciless decay; and Jane Lackey's "New centuries col. 2," which installs polyurethaned cross-sections of old dictionaries in a niche in the gallery wall (!)

Although much of the show involves artists renowned for their language investigations — Mel Bochner, John Cage, Hans Haacke, Duane Michals, Ed Ruscha — it's the surprises that tweak the real pleasures here: Glenn Ligon's devastating comment on slave-trade narratives and confinement; Germaine Keller's "River Score 11.03" (pictured), which transforms an image of rocks in a river (a visual rhyme with the Zen gardens of Ryoanji, Japan) into a musical score where the rocks become notes; and Kenneth Goldsmith's



Howard Meister: "The Ten Commandments."





absolutely hilarious ÓNo. 107,Ó a mad collection of French and assorted linguistic mayhem, that masturbates to the beat of the unconscious.

For those hopelessly addicted to painting, thereÓs CaporaelÓs lovely conceptual colorism, BochnerÓs naked tableaux or Joseph BernardÓs layered studies in which letters and numbers become abstract presences, as if returning to their ancient origins as marks in clay and sand. Ultimately, itÓs this sense of unending history that SpivakÓs selection expresses so well: Art and writing return here to the same matrix, the shared egg from which these twins were born.

George Tysh is the Metro Times arts editor. E-mail him at gtysh@metrotimes.com.

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