

It's Not What You Write, It's How You Write It

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"Beautiful writing," calligraphy, has a long history in the West. Beauty was a concern as far back as the Egyptian hieroglyph and continued its public role on the monuments of the Roman Empire. The tradition continued on a more personal scale, in hand-lettered liturgical texts. But with the advent of the printing press in the 15th century and the typewriter and word processor in the 20th, the necessity for calligraphy changed. Photography, invented around 1850, eliminated the need for skilled artists to create portraits. It took about 50 years for photography to be understood as a ticket to freedom. The press, typewriter and computer not only usurped the roles of scribes but undermined the desire for good penmanship. The result is similar. The calligrapher has been freed to explore writing as a form of expression.

This year the Washington Calligraphers Guild is celebrating its 25th anniversary with an unjuried exhibition at Strathmore Hall Arts Center. The overall quality is quite high, the span quite wide. For, when calligraphers are not using their skills to give voice to poetry or create crossover works that would be at home in painting or bookart shows, they are still making lovely letters.

Adhering most closely to the concept of beautiful writing for its own sake is Julian Waters' "Blackletter Demonstration." Written spontaneously for an artists' workshop in Japan, the black ink ornamental capital letters in this alphabet are paired with an older ghost form in light gray. The content of the piece is not literary but cultural in that it uses calligraphy and its historical precedent to create an abstract composition. The only word, "Osaka," appears at the end of the text. It is black-lettered, unechoed, today a word which tells the artist's story of bringing Western calligraphy to an Asian culture, famed for its own.

Traditionally, calligraphy has required legible content. We are familiar with the 19th century versions, written or embroidered prayers that hung on the wall. Poetry, prayers and pithy sayings still work best for wall displays -- one gets tired of reading upright after a paragraph or so and longs for a book and an easy chair. Marta Legeckis' "Prayer" draws on Gothic traditions for its calligraphic form and surrounding designs while using the familiar sampler format of a framed wall piece.

"O Great Spirit" by Karen Amelia Brown has a more contemporary feel. Each phrase of her prayer is written with a different font, size and color, all of which serve to alter your inner voice in reading it. "O Great Spirit" might be said loudly, while the next phrase, a softly colored, smaller script, is uttered quietly. The bright yellow "Hear Me" is a shouted command. Brown's calligraphy effectively alters the rhythm, the volume, the emphasis and the tone of the inwardly spoken words, rendering this simple prayer a living theater in your mind.

While many artists use calligraphy as Brown and Legeckis do to embellish readable text, the question repeatedly posed today is, is it necessary to decipher the words in order to understand the content? Or does the use of letters and words in and of themselves imply a meaning? The writing in Mike Gold's "If You Have Any Notion" is decipherable, but requires great effort to read. His fluid lettering forms an interlocking rectangular structure that climbs the center of the page like a jungle gym glowing brown and copper in the late day sun. Thin waving lines slash across heavy brushstrokes to create a delicate spandrel tracery that extends beyond the rectangular body, inviting you to come in and play. But once you do, you are caught trying to decode the text to mount to the top. There you are rewarded by the one truly legible part, the name of the surrealist artist, Joan Miro. While the meaning, the content of this work, remains a mystery, the game of decoding, of reading, is perhaps the subject.

Text is elusive as well in Jane Coatis' "Ich Lebe Mien Leben." This is a small watercolor in which swirls of pink, yellow and turquoise on a dark blue ground describe the funnels and curvatures of outer space. These novas spit out text, buffeted words controlled by inescapable gravity, sometimes clear, sometimes obscured, sometimes in English, sometimes in German. While the title and most legible words mean "I live my life," it is clear that you need not read either English or German to get the gist of the painting. The appearance and disappearance of phrases, the confusion of languages describe a state of emotional intensity or perhaps the foggy confusion of sleep: phrases pop up, slip in and out of your mind. The whole describes a condition, a turbulent life of disorientation. And disorientation is itself the message and content.

In "Sonnets to Orpheus #1" Judy Melvin takes this idea a step further, using writing to comment on language. Also portraying a tumultuous abstraction that suggests a nascent world, her dark blue triangle of thinly drawn and largely illegible words emerges from stage left to arc across the lower half of the painting. They form a stable surface, a world of people and language beneath a sky from which the words "Do you recognize my air" float down. This is a universe that exists because it has

been named, described by those with language. Calligraphy is, in the abstract, language.

Thomas Ingmire's small neat vertical canvas allows abstract calligraphy to meet calligraphic abstraction, as exemplified by painters such as Mark Tobey, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock. "By Passion the World is Bound, by Passion it is Released" consists of a washy black ground littered with spindly white and gold strokes that suggest and occasionally form letters. They are like shooting stars and constellations, floating wild and criss-crossing the night sky. A milky white upside-down triangle, its lower point truncated at the canvas' bottom edge, intrudes from the left side of the painting, increasing the sensation of peering past a fixed object into deep space. It is a finely honed composition, understated and ethereal that encourages our plunge into an active universe alive with stellar words that bespeak our smallness.