

ARTS

Artists give visual form to our use of language in exhibit

One wonders what English philosopher John Locke would think of Jenny Holzer's contemporary artworks,

Karen Bjornland | [January 22, 2015](#)



Five-foot-long paper airplanes are seen in an art exhibit on display at Union College's Nott Memorial in Schenectady.

PHOTOGRAPHER: PATRICK DODSON

Words can't say everything.

The English philosopher John Locke wrote about this dilemma more than 300 years ago: "So difficult it is to show the various meanings and imperfections of words when we have nothing else but words to do it with."

One wonders what Locke would think of Jenny Holzer's contemporary artworks, in which gigantic words are illuminated and projected on the sides of skyscrapers and public buildings.

And now, right in our backyard, there's "Textual," an absorbing Union College exhibit that lets us think about words in a visual way as we ponder 24 works by eight artists.

"Dog Fight" (2003) by Michael Scoggins, cruises into sight before we climb the steps to the second floor of the Nott Memorial.

Three paper airplanes, each more than five feet long, dangle in the air. Instantly, we dial back to seventh grade and the boys who built these simple toys out of sheets of paper torn from a notebook. But it's the planes' markings, "USA" and "Russia," that pack the punch, as we recall Cold War weaponry or think about current threats in the age of Putin.

This winter, Union College is celebrating text and language with a visual art project called "Mot Juste."

Along with "Textual," which is curated by Julie Lohnes, Union's curator of art collections and exhibitions, you can see "Artist's Books: Where to Put the Apostrophe?" in the Schaffer Library. That exhibit runs through April and is curated by curatorial assistant Sarah Mottalini.

With college students certainly in mind, "Textual" is very 21st century.

Bang Geul Han's "Conversations" (2012) is an interactive video installation based on Twitter messages.

Using digital technology, Han gathered more than 4,000 of the most popular Tweeted words. On a large video screen, we see Han and her husband as random words pop up above their heads. Put on the headphones, and we hear their voices speaking the same words without passion or expression.

"My artwork aims to both explore and blur the coded spaces dividing understandings of fiction and non-fiction, public and private," Han says.

Sam Winston, a British artist, creates drawings that probe how words transport information.

In "Modern Gods," three Japanese paper scrolls are digitally printed with symbols of the periodic table. One of the intricate geometric designs contains the chemical elements that make up a book. It's complex, meticulous work.

Shanti Grumbine, whose text-inspired art is made of precisely cut newspaper, also has a time-consuming process.

In "Zero," a large hole appears in two facing pages of The New York Times, and at its edges, the paper is cut in a filigree that suggests a shattering or explosion.

Grumbine says traumatic events leave her speechless, and her newspaper works are "a fragile permeable symbol for objective reality."

She calls the work "Zero" because it refers to the term for getting a gun ready to fire.

Artist Cui Fei uses the calligraphy of her native China as the template for her works.

Working with tendrils and twists of grapevines, she shapes them into characters and then assembles a composition. Then she photographs the vines with a large format camera, so that the print is the final artwork.

“Chinese writing originated from nature as ideograms, and over time the characters were simplified, abstracted and separated from their original context, their origin no longer recognizable,” Fei says.

Baby boomer viewers might be amused when they see “This Disposable Day Desk Calendar Desk,” an installation by Alex Gingrow that features a mid-20th century desk, chair and black manual Underwood typewriter.

Gingrow likes to appropriate real text-laden objects, like those stand-up, quote-of-the-day calendars that turn up on office desks.

He composes his own “Disposable Day” calendar, which looks like the real thing until you move in close, and includes a personal comment that is witty or self-deprecating.

“Like the goal of all good literature, I strive to make nuanced work that is, at its core, an examination of the oddities and intricacies of the human condition,” says Gingrow.

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