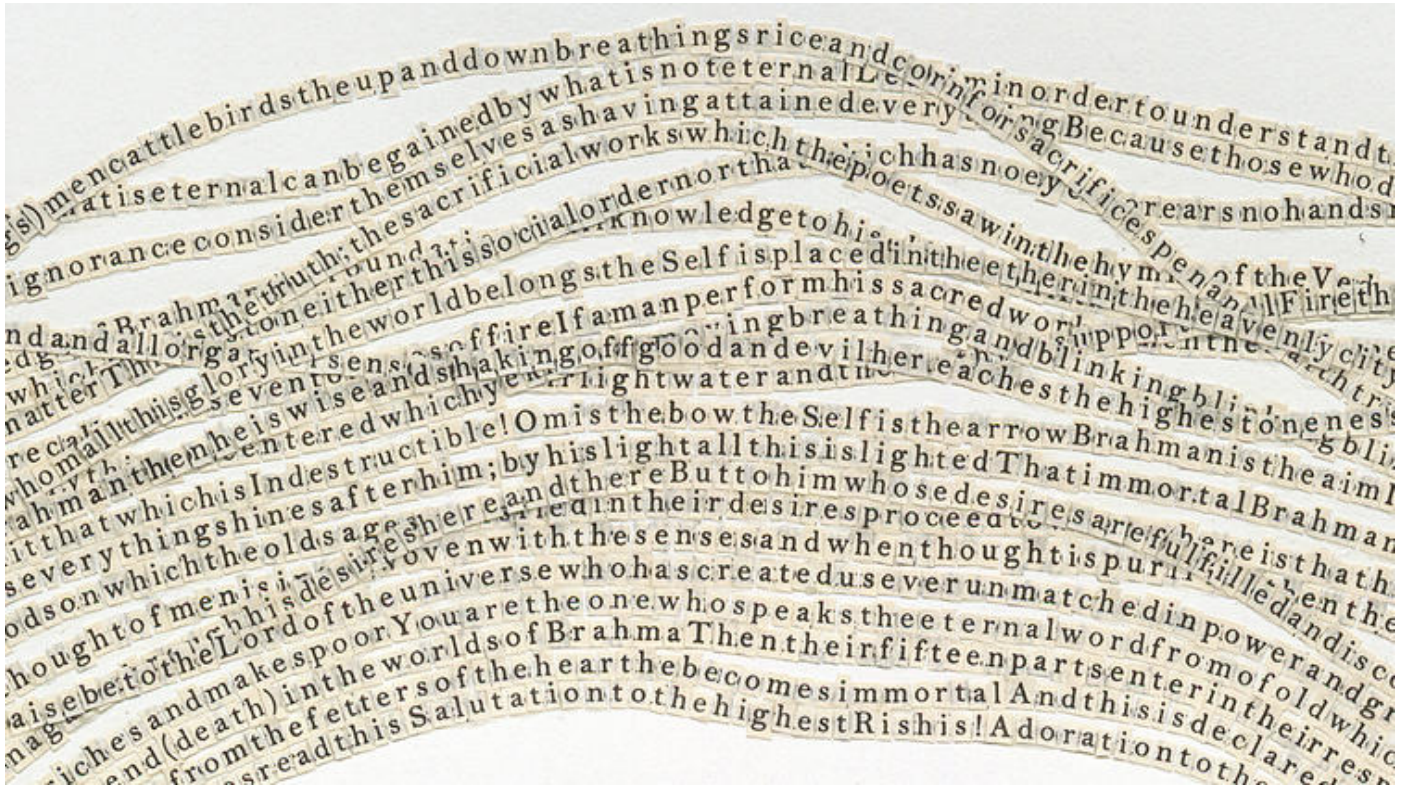


Great Scott: Two very different shows put together by Randall Scott



Meg Hitchcock cuts letters from texts—mostly the Bible and the Quran, but also Petronius' "Satyricon"—and uses them to form other, often illegible texts. (Courtesy of RandallScottProjects)

By **Rebekah Kirkman and Baynard Woods**
City Paper

FEBRUARY 3, 2015, 11:17 AM

Meg Hitchcock's work at RandallScottProjects is as visually beautiful as it is conceptually fascinating—and potentially controversial. She's certainly someone you wouldn't want to get into an X-Acto fight with.

Hitchcock cuts letters from texts—mostly the Bible and the Quran, but also Petronius' "Satyricon"—and uses them to form other texts, in patterned, often illegible sentences. She turns letters cut from what the works list describes as an old German Bible into the Buddhist Bodhisattva vow. But the letters, glued side by side so that they stick off of the paper like books on a shelf, are not legible and appear as a single line going across the page. In other cases, she creates patterns out of the passages, which are legible. Two recent works spell out "I Can't Breathe," the phrase Eric Garner repeated again and again as a New York City police officer choked him to death. In one, the letters form a layered square, like a labyrinth around an empty center, and in the other, a sunlike mandala reminiscent of the Zuni cross. 'Gitmo: The Prisoners at Guantanamo Bay' uses the Bible and the Quran to spell out the names of the men who are being held in the U.S. prison.

Other pieces offer the critique with a bit more humor. One can only imagine the outrage of a fundamentalist who realizes that in ‘Lingashtakam: a Prayer to the Shivalingam’ letters of the Bible are used to spell out a prayer to the penis of the god Shiva. But each of the works possesses this same danger and frisson. The Abrahamic religions generally find the desecration of their sacred books to be a great profanation and in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacres, it’s impossible not to be aware of this sensitivity.

But rather than profaning these texts, Hitchcock’s nearly monastic practice actually resacralizes them. According to Scott, she doesn’t cut up a text and collect piles of As and Bs and Cs, etc. Instead, as she needs each letter, she finds it in the sacred text she is “defacing” and with her X-Acto cuts out the letter and glues it into place.

‘Shema: Deuteronomy 6:4,’ created by letters cut from the Quran, is the most visually complicated piece, as the letters create a deft circular pattern with looping lines coming off the bottom like unwinding thread. And though ‘Long Life Prayer for His Holiness the Dalai Lama,’ a tangle of intertwined lines of text, looks messy, it is insanely intricate and one can only imagine how difficult it was to assemble.

‘Trimalchio’s Feast: The Declaration of Independence’ is perhaps the most intellectually moving piece. The declaration, spelled out with letters cut from Petronius’ “Satyricon,” are displayed on a table in a glass case with table settings—dishes, silverware, and wine glasses filled with small pieces of paper. Looking at it, it’s hard not to recall that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s original title for “The Great Gatsby” was “Trimalchio in West Egg.” Something about Hitchcock’s arrangement seemed to capture the entire American experiment from Jefferson’s exalted declaration to Gatsby’s empty funeral, while also connecting them with ancient Rome, another empire that overreached and ultimately crumbled.

More generally, Hitchcock’s work shows the connections between texts and the ways they always feed off and morph into one another. (Baynard Woods)

There’s a constant low whirring sound keeping you a little anxious as you walk around the gallery in School 33’s group show “Sometimes a Great Notion,” curated by Randall Scott. The sound seems to be coming from the nook that houses Sondheim prize-winner Neil Feather’s three experimental instruments. Small labels that say “THIS” are affixed next to buttons and switches on amps or the instruments themselves, indicating that you need not worry about all the old metal parts and strings and doodads, but simply decide which button on which sculpture you want to press first. And then the cacophony starts. Each piece plays a different type of sound—one strums, another sounds more like an organ, the third maybe something xylophone-ish—and they all give a creepy circus vibe. As you go back and forth pressing buttons and flipping switches, you start feeling like a crazy conductor, and there’s a surprising satisfaction in having that control.

There’s a careful balance of disorder and control in these and the works by the four other artists in the show. From Feather’s Rube Goldbergian experimental music machines to Kung Chee Keong’s calamitous paintings of abstract shapes, each of the five artists in the show use materials and processes that seem to leave a lot up to chance.

Like the sounds that come from Feather’s instruments, Hazard’s paper and wood sculptures employ rhythm in the form of printed words. In ‘Field’ Hazard makes dreamy, landscaped structures out of torn strips of rag paper. In the foregrounding strips of paper the word “enter” is repeatedly stamped, which in the next few strips changes to “entertain” and “terrain,” then “field,” and “terrain” again. The skeleton of each sculpture is a series of light wooden frames, which

in the case of ‘Field’ and ‘Focus’ form tunnels that contain these ethereal word worlds. His clean craftsmanship, spare materials, and idyllic depiction of nature seem almost spiritual, commanding us to slow down and drink it in.

When you get close to Hannah Hiaasen’s (who, full disclosure, is one of my roommates) typewritten poems on silk, pinned by their top corners to the wall, a slight exhale will send them aflutter. The letters and characters in each small piece make abstract images that are funny, poetic, and poignant all at once. In one piece titled ‘LOL,’ a composition of four stacked rectangles, comprised of the letter O repeated many times, sits among a field of L’s. Another, slightly longer in dimension, spells out “vast” using a field of those letters spaced out in an alternating polka-dot pattern. The lightly frayed edges and vaguely uneven lines of text in each piece balance out the order and rhythm of the repeating, undulating characters.

Creating a bridge between sculpture and painting, Atsuko Chirikjian’s small, wall-mounted pieces address the surface of the canvas itself, with these monochrome, gaping “wounds” cut into the surfaces. These wounds are either circles or rectangles, with pieces of wire and string that vary in size and weave together to echo the fabric’s structure. As Chirikjian deconstructs these canvas surfaces, she creates a new system that highlights the tension of these materials, their warp and weft.

All of the work here so far relates to hand-making or hand-destroying, but Kung Chee Keong’s paintings are a tactile departure from the rest of the work in the show. Architectural planes (linear or painted in pastel colors) collide and overlap with washy and scribbled clouds of ink and clusters of tiny brushstrokes that look like a pile of debris and at other times resemble a distant flock of birds. It’s hard to look at these and not see Julie Mehretu, as they both use similar shapes and complicated but fluid compositions that draw your eye across the canvas.

The structure and deconstruction that underlie each of these artists’ processes remind us that for most of our lives, we grapple with regaining control over things that can wreck us. The artists reconcile the disorder and variables of their materials, making them work together—an exercise that mirrors how we deal with the disorder of our world. (Rebekah Kirkman)

Copyright © 2019, Baltimore City Paper, a Baltimore Sun Media Group publication | Privacy Policy

Missing comments? We’ve turned off comments across Baltimore City Paper while we review our commenting platform and consider ways to improve the system. If you purchased points through the Solid Opinion platform and would like a refund, please let us know at circsupport@tronc.com.