

Reconstructing Sacred Text



AN INTERVIEW WITH MEG HITCHCOCK

by John Shorb

I met Meg Hitchcock in her Brooklyn studio on a hot August afternoon to discuss her ongoing work using sacred texts to make works on paper. She takes individual pages from sacred texts and cuts out individual letters from each page. She then reconstructs these letters into sentences from a different sacred text. For her piece Tower, she cut out letters from the Rig Veda, an ancient Hindu text, and then used those letters to write out the story of the Tower of Babel (this piece is featured on the cover of this journal). Hitchcock received her B.F.A. in painting from the San Francisco Art Institute, and studied classical painting in Florence. Hitchcock's work has been reviewed in Art in America, The New Criterion, and Hyperallergic. Her work was included in "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now" at Crystal Bridges Museum in Arkansas, and most recently, she has shown work at MASS MoCA and San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

Your work pulls from a wide range of sacred texts. How do you determine what texts to use?

I read a lot of sacred texts, so when I find something that I like, I'll remember it, and then come back to it. At any given point I may have about eight to ten pieces that I want to do, waiting in the wings. But I still have to figure out what text to use with it, so it's this beautiful play back and forth. Then I have to find the book to cut the letters from. I may not have it, especially some of the more obscure books. The beauty of the work, for me, is in how I select the two passages that come together.

You cut all the pieces individually. No paper cutter.

Yes, I cut them all myself. That's what I like about the process. Each letter is cut out from a page, and then two horizontal

Oh, I see, you're not just cutting up a bunch of letters in advance.

Definitely not. People have told me that I should hire someone to cut the letters.

Then you would have a little box of all the As, all the Bs.

Yeah, that would be like paying someone else to meditate for me. Why would I do that?

It makes sense that you wouldn't be interested in that because the process is part of the work.

It is. And there are certainly times when that could work. But I would wonder if I'm doing that, then why am I making art? That's just not the reason I'm an artist.

I'm interested in how you determine the designs. Sometimes the designs are appropriated.

Sometimes. And then sometimes the text has its own way of meandering around. Sometimes it's geometric. Right now, I'm interested in creating the illusion of fabric. I love the way the fabric of the niqabs flow. And I love the metaphor of "the lingering veils of delusion." This idea of the veil that's kind of shimmering, but we really don't know what's behind it. We get glimpses.

I wanted to talk about this series, in particular Niqab No. 5.

Yes, that piece uses letters cut from the Qur'an to create "A Hymn to Tara," who is a Hindu goddess. I wanted this contrast of an empowered goddess with the niqab, which can be a symbol of oppressing women.

What do you think of the perspective of women who find the niqab a symbol of empowerment?

I'm glad you brought that up. It's really a matter of choice to me. The empowerment is about women being able to make that choice to wear a niqab or not. The first three *Niqabs* that I did were a triptych. The work sold to a Muslim woman who is part of the royal family of Saud. She bought it as a wedding gift. The piece was a chapter from the Qur'an called "Women" and all the pieces of the triptych spell out the chapter. And the letters are cut from feminist texts.

Some might ask who are you to take on this work about a culture that you're not a part of?

My concern is about fundamentalism. I have my own experience with Christian fundamentalism. And I see it present in all these other religions, including Islam.

It's about freedom in a way?

I would love everyone who grew up inside a belief system to have the option of being free of that. Fundamentalist believers are caught in a trap that they can't see. That's my story. Now that I have left fundamentalist Christianity, I look back and find myself so fortunate to have gotten out of it. But anyone who's in it, there's no way to see the box. There's a psychological violence to this

many other things that flow out of this. The niqab series is definitely about fundamentalism, but it's also about the representation of women and about feminism.

I'm interested in your earlier statement of the importance of making all the work yourself, and about why you are an artist. You cut all the letters. What is it that keeps you going?

It is the process. I'm working something out. This is my path. And I'm not sure exactly where it's leading me. Maybe it will come to an end one day. I doubt it because I don't really know what I would do if I wasn't doing this. What the process offers is a certain form of transcendence. It's sort of like meditation in that it's not always blissful; a lot of times when I'm working, it's agonizing. But in the big picture, what this is bringing me to is a type of transcendence.

It's a transcendence through this cutting and pasting of sacred text.

The rote process of cutting creates a rhythm that can be ecstatic at times. And then there's the fact that I'm deconstructing the word of God, and reconstructing it within another belief system. I'm literally taking the literalness out of it.

Yes, they are often hard to read, to see where the words or sentences begin or end.

And that's on purpose. The point is not to read the actual text. I'm making a literal reading impossible.

The pieces become more lyrical.

Right, it's more of the essence of the word of God. When you decontextualize the word of God, you end up walking on sacred ground that is more catholic or universal. In that sense, I'm really comfortable with sacred texts.

You made a piece, Credo, that addresses Christianity directly. You chose the Nicene Creed in this piece.

Yes, that's a piece that's very dear to my heart. Any Christian is probably familiar with the Nicene Creed, as it's the central creed of Christianity. In making this piece, I read a great deal about its history. But it's also about my own story of being a Christian and then leaving Christianity. In fact, for me, the Nicene Creed is the very reason why I'm not a Christian.

How so?

This goes back to my deepest history. I was raised in a family that was Christian. We were Methodists, and had been for many generations in southern Vermont. At a pretty early age, my dad became an evangelical, born-again Christian. I was very impressionable, so I believed that if I didn't accept Jesus as my lord and savior that I would be going to hell. I had a hard time with it, but eventually he converted me.

In any case, that was my path for many years. After I left home, I moved to southern California where there's a huge evangelical Christian community. I became involved in Calvary Chapel. In my early 20s, that was my social life. Everything I did was church, Bible studies, singles groups, C

no longer say that I was a Christian. And in many ways, the Nicene Creed, for me, embodies what I left.

Then Credo, for you, is a way of dealing with this history.

Definitely. In the piece, you can see that the words of the Nicene Creed are in contrast in this central circle, in the very innermost part of the circle, which says "All is Brahman" and the letters are cut from the Upanishads. And the Hindu text does say that all is Brahman. There's nothing that's not Brahman. I find that such a refreshing worldview, because essentially it's saying that we're all One.

By taking on the creed, it is a sacred text, but it's an interpretation of the Bible. That choice seems more pointed. It's different than taking the Book of Daniel and combining it with another apocalyptic text from a different religion. That's a different contrast.

Yes, I wanted that contrast. It's part of my own story. In general, I find texts and passages that really speak to me. And I want to bring out different contrasts. I'm also interested in what we consider sacred texts. For example, for me, *Moby Dick* is sacred text.

What makes Moby Dick sacred text for you?

As I'm reading it, I feel like it's an inspired text about the human condition. It gives me a deeper understanding of what it is to be human.

And you recently made a piece using your grandmother's diary.

I did. My grandmother's husband died when she was 63. I never knew how much this affected her until I read her diaries after she died. She hid her emotions because she was a Vermonter and you don't show those things. I never saw her shed a tear. So she had around 25 years until she died that she was so lonely. Reading her diaries I realized how lonely she was and how she was just keeping it together day by day. She was so stoic. And I think it was the austerity of her life that was sacred for me. She was keeping it together and the way that she was keeping it together was to do things like ironing. My mother would take down our clothes that had been washed and my grandmother would do the ironing, including the sheets and the pillowcases. I always thought it was so bizarre, but now I understand that she was just trying to keep herself busy. There are a few references in her diary where she writes that she didn't have much to do that day and that it was so lonely. She kept herself busy so she didn't think too much about things.

So the piece that I did is a cloth that's folded. The text I chose was from the Kama Sutra. I wanted this contrast of the eroticism of the Kama Sutra with the austerity of my grandmother's life.

It seems like she might have had a fantasy life you might never write down but that anyone might have. The Kama Sutra brings that up for me.

It's the unfettered eroticism of the Kama Sutra that fascinates me. I think it's more geared toward the man than the woman. It's such a contrast to Protestantism. She was very much a lady of her church. She was a Congregationalist. She had that Puritan culture. She never complained. I remember the night my grandfather died and she didn't cry. No one cried. It wasn't until my 30s that I inherited [Support Us](#) found out there

I love repetition. Repetition of anything can be beautiful. Sometimes I'm doing that with the texts. So sometimes I keep things really spare. And then other times I'll create a very intricate mandala.

Repetition is crucial to the work. It has a long time-based quality.

It does. It's a journey. At some point you realize that the spiritual path that you're on isn't so different from another path. There might be different specifics. That's how I've come to see it, and my work with sacred texts is a reflection of that. It's a merging of two texts, sometimes more than two texts. I've been on this creative path for eight years, trying to express this merging of spiritual paths. St. Francis of Assisi says what you are looking for is what is looking. Every religion in its own way expresses this idea, that the path that you're on—you *are* that path.

Captions

Meg Hitchcock

Tower

2016

Letters cut from the Rig Veda, paint, 14" x 11"

Courtesy of the artist

Meg Hitchcock

Diary, 1971: Excerpts from My Grandmother's Diary (detail)

2016

Letters cut from the Kama Sutra, 30" x 22 1/2"

Courtesy of the artist

Meg Hitchcock

Diary, 1971: Excerpts from My Grandmother's Diary

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Letters cut from the Kama Sutra, 30" x 22 1/2"

Courtesy of the artist

Meg Hitchcock

Niqab No. 5: Hymn to Tara

2016

Letters cut from the Koran, 30" x 22 1/2"

Courtesy of the artist

Meg Hitchcock

Niqab No. 5: Hymn to Tara (detail)

2016

Letters cut from the Koran, 30" x 22 1/2"

Courtesy of the artist

Letters cut from the Upanishads, 38 3/4" x 29 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist

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