

# On Now >> Matt Donovan and Hallie Siegel @ Olga Korper Gallery



by Heather White



Words are tricky to do originally. They're a public resource. Like celebrities, they belong to the world. Like cities, they're an infrastructure allowing hordes of people to co-exist. With words, myriad strangers are perpetually explaining, questioning, or fighting; reading novels, directions, advertisements; writing lists, letters, texts; hearing songs, secrets, broadcasts. At the level of material, writers are like graffiti artists (who, in fact, call themselves writers, because they express themselves through written language). They transform something that was never theirs, and the component parts are always getting reclaimed.

Of the world's first known graffiti, the philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote: "the animals painted on the [cave] walls of Lascaux are not there in same way as are the fissures and the limestone formations. Nor are they *elsewhere*..." Being hard to place is a feature that the theorist uses to distinguish images from objects. Written words, of course, are a particular kind of image, as



difficult to place as they are impossible to own. Alongside those who use text conceptually, many fine artists embrace the readymade formal identities of words, as do concrete poets (whose poems attend to the patterns the words make on the page), graphic novelists (whose visual positioning of text functions compositionally), and graffiti writers, among others.

Matt Donovan and Hallie Siegel too take words as readymades. And whole sequences thereof: their current show at Olga Korper presents an excerpt from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and three poems the artists commissioned from contemporary poets Gregory Betts, Vanessa Place, and Christian Bok. The Steinbeck looms the largest, installed three-dimensionally in the space, with groupings of words staggered to reveal constellations otherwise glossed by the narrative flow of the original text. Different vantages impede the paragraph's coherence more and less; from front and centre, the text scans almost perfectly in its original form; from obliquer points of view, it swims in the way it might if you were trying to read it before passing out. Approaching the installation, clusters of words seem to fly by in a way that evokes digital design, redistributing into the 'tag clouds' we find on blogs, or the animated title sequences of a movie.



Yet what's exciting about this work is that its movement doesn't just occur in our minds; its depth isn't an illusion. The words take up real space. They are *there*, the opposite of elusive, constituting a place; the installation is named *Landscape*. Each cluster of words is an object. And it doesn't stop with premise; each object is exquisitely crafted. The fact that this is almost impossible to tell from reproductions underscores how important physicality is to the experience. Only up close can you tell that the letters of *Landscape* are carved from wood and that paths between serifs and loops are laid with clear acyclic. The shapes aren't immaterial patterns, but built structures that withstand gravity. Each one hangs suspended below the gallery's diamond-trussed rafters with such meticulous architectural precision that it's hard not to think of the work as site-specific.

The artists' attention to form is not at the expense of content; Donovan and Siegel cluster the existing text into new formations with striking poetic sensibility. If the creative power of writers is to combine known terms into surprising new meanings, they have harnessed it: in Steinbeck's paragraph they find 'little earth'; 'protect around doors'; 'An emulsion of old'. It turns out that the pair's sensitivity to physical balance, depth, and texture works marvelously on words. I'd argue that, like the passages they've appropriated, these qualities of objects — shape; weight; compositional tension — were already there. Donovan and Siegel work on these words like revisionist historians whose revisions occur at the level of material.

This sensibility carries partly through the three smaller pieces that complement *Landscape*; three 'portraits' that each consists of a print of a poem alongside a roller embossed with the same lines. Schematically, the roller is the object to the print's image; it could also be considered the process to the print's product, the past to print's present. But if it's a past, it perseveres, and its display calls attention to the shape in the text's genesis. The effect is best with Christian Bok's poem, *March of the Nucleotides*. The poem is laid out in a column that uses the pattern of the breaks between words to draw chevrons that point right. The rhythmic pattern of the word breaks make the poem move so propulsively that it feels, indeed, like it rolls; the object feels right as the poem's engine.

This series of three printmaking projects ushers poetry into the realm of painting with its gestural strokes, or into cinema, with its implication of a single long take. I would have appreciated more nuance on the sculptural side of things, for each text to have its own unique mechanism. Of course, that demand only makes sense within the logic that Donovan and Siegel have unfolded here so beautifully, about the shape and solidity in words.

Petits Genre runs at Olga Korper Gallery until September 29.

Images are from [austinmann.com](http://austinmann.com), [lascaux.culture.fr](http://lascaux.culture.fr), and [olgakorpergallery.com](http://olgakorpergallery.com).