

CARE Writing Competition Submission

“Take Heed You Who Have Eyes”¹

Words, letters, and text. Culture creates them, shoves them before us, and demands us: Read! We have no choice but to follow. As the intermediary for our thoughts and ideas, text has become so utilitarian, quotidian, and commonplace that we hardly think twice about reading. Rarely do we stop to consider the history of text, why letters are shaped the way they are, or why certain characters makes certain sounds. Only when text becomes illegible do we take a second look and realize the power of symbolism it holds.

In this gallery here, we have such illegibility exemplified – at least for those of us who do not read Hebrew, Chinese, etc. But even further, most of these illegible markings are only the fragments that make up our words: letters. Here we see text after it has put through the mind, body, and spirit of the artist; letters have here been isolated, extenuated, cut up, enlarged, deconstructed, reconstructed, surrounded, painted, enlivened. Legibility does not matter here. Symbolism matters; associations matter; context matters; shape, color, size, and placement all matter; the surrounding environment matters; spirit matters.

Most of us do not have the ability to read even these letters. So what do they symbolize for those of us illiterate to these foreign characters? At the risk of generalizing the varied artists’ widely differing intentions, I believe these texts symbolize, above all else, culture. As a synecdoche, text not only stands for an entire language, but also for the people who created, create, and use the language on a regular basis. Individual letters bring into this very gallery the people that use and used them as carriers of meaning.

¹ Mir Mu’izzi, quoted by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Religion, Art, & Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader, edited by S. Brent Plate, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 114.

These texts symbolize not only entire groups of people, but also the individual artists as they speak their stories through illegible text. Yet they speak not only through foreign characters, but also through Roman letters and English words in the side panels. Without these, we would never understand how personal these painted or pasted texts are to these local artists. Their formative, childhood years, the years when grammar is taught, come to the surface. As they reflect, we reflect, too, and also become like children – ignorant and uninitiated to the culture of the artist. In this gallery, the artists and curator give us lessons on how to read – not the text itself – but rather how to read a facet of our global human culture, and perhaps more specifically, how to read ourselves in the midst of all this.

But the artworks, themselves, matter, too. Context is crucial, but shape, color, size, and placement of forms transform these texts from utilitarian message-carriers into obvious art images. The artists have brilliantly highlighted and isolated the extraordinary within the everyday ordinary. Doing away with text's banality, the artists reshape it, isolate it, enlarge it, and more. Instead of serving to just carry messages, the texts serve other more unusual purposes. In Wosene Worke Kosrof's Mother & Child, text constructs another image. In Sharon Siskin's Children of Abraham series, text acts to mirror another text. Mimicking the qualities of a vine, the text in Salma Arastu's four works encroaches on its borders. All these characteristics enhance the inherent life of text, again highlighting its own extraordinary properties that we so often overlook.

Environment matters. Surrounding these artworks, the artists' stories further help point to the religious themes – something so often ineffable, yet ironically expressed here with eloquence through imagery. In other panels, questions in differing-sized fonts encourage us to think deeper about the text we see on a daily basis, as well as to consider the association with spirituality.

Taking a step back, we notice these artworks placed within a gallery dedicated to displaying *religious* art. This is the Pacific School of *Religion*, after all – situated within the Graduate *Theological* Union. This location cannot be ignored, nor should it. As the gallery, itself, embraces its religious surroundings, so too, by default, do these artworks associate with the divine. The art displayed here, when taken out of context, may not at first appear religious, *per se*, but if we take the time to absorb and breathe in these images, we can immediately apprehend the religious flavor.

Spirit matters. The image constructed in Mother & Child could very well be titled “The Madonna and Christ Child.” Siskin’s constructed images are obvious references to healing that must take place between warring Abrahamic faith-groups in the Middle East. Igaël Gurin-Malous’s art speaks of a childhood spent learning sacred Jewish scriptures. The works of three of these artists here display a text automatically linked with a specific culture and religion: Hebrew with Judaism and Arabic with Islam. It is easy to immediately identify the religious melody within *these* works, but even in the others, it is clear that the artists have been moved by something *more*.

But we must also remember the Badè artifacts, for their placement makes them integral to discerning the overall theme of *Picturing the Word*. What does it mean when two objects from the Badè collection waltz on over into the Doug Adams Gallery? Has a purity of art “type” been breached? The Doug Adams Gallery is known for displaying *contemporary* art – art created by artists usually still living and breathing today. But now, two old objects (perhaps one old and one ancient) seem to have infiltrated the space, situated here neatly within a vitrine. Instead of overlooking these works as a gallery speed bump, we must attend to them in their unique position and juxtaposition. Within one vitrine are two *historical* objects: one is a display of two

pages from the Nuremburg Chronicle, the other, a cuneiform tablet from Ur. We do not normally think of these as great works of *art*, but rather as important artifacts meant for careful historical study. To approach them as art objects would be to glance over their cultural historical import.

But now, their surroundings demand we pay a different kind of attention to them – we must approach them as art. These artworks then beckon us to look differently at the surrounding *contemporary* works. They give the art on the walls great historic and cultural significance. The vitrine-enclosed artifacts catalyze the dialogue between the two sides of this room that is so often ignored. One side may seem to scream out “HISTORY” and the other “ART,” but are not both sides historically important, contemporarily relevant, and artistically inspiring?

There is something mysterious about how highly we value text as a vehicle for communication, but all too often we forget to look at the text, itself. We look through the text and miss something magical about this tool. Text, though it may seem static on the pages we read, is far from it. Here, in this exhibit, we find artists who have acknowledged text’s power, not only as a building block for constructing words and meaning, but also as a vehicle for carrying *religious* meaning. Mir Mu’izzi, a twelfth-century Muslim poet, once said, “Inscribed upon the pages of the earth and sky/ The line: Therefore take heed, you who have eyes.”² To echo, I say, take heed, and look to the text before you as more than a tool. Look to text as a work of art.

² Ibid.