ARTFORUM

Patricia Treib



Patricia Treib, Pieces, 2020, oil on canvas, 74 × 56 in.

Kindred but differentiated glyphs, flat and of varying sizes, repeat over time and across space in Patricia Treib’s recent paintings. Her quasi-alphabetic forms are abstract even as they resemble sundry objects: a pitcher, a cornice, a stylus, a bone, and a ribbon. But these figures have other referents, too, known only to Treib and to those familiar with her eccentric lexicon. And in some instances, the artist references the negative spaces between objects that she sets up in her studio. Treib’s paintings bespeak a private asemic language, rendered in a manner reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts, repeating stylized handwrought ciphers across surfaces vaguely resembling outsize paper grounds, yellowed by time. A writer as much as an imagemaker, she also works on flat surfaces with soft brushes ordinarily used for ink painting to create washy, rhythmic expanses of nestled shapes and rich colors.

If Treib’s forms do make up a kind of language, it is a bud on the linguistic tree, based on other forms of communication, including Treib’s own handwriting. The artist’s new monograph, published at the time of her solo exhibition here, includes a sequence of two dozen plates, all preceded by a title list that Treib made out by hand. The letters are neat and evenly spaced, the strokes fluid and confident. Because of certain repetitions—several titles include roman numerals—the reader might

be encouraged to compare various iterations of the same letter to see how they differ. For instance, the strokes of the D in Delft Icon meet only at the bottom of the letter, but in Device they touch only at the top. Other forebears of Treib's glyphs could include Hebrew script—as art historian Joanna Fiduccia notes in the publication's opening essay—or, as an exclusively visual predecessor, Matisse's cutouts.

The life span of a private language depends in part on whether or not it can be remembered or shared—on questions of repetition and retention. In this show, each composition appeared twice in the main gallery, with contrasting color schemes and other differentiations but for the most part following the same arrangement of forms. To look from one piece to the other—the siblings were hung on facing walls—was to map and measure the forms and to try to understand the artist's idiosyncratic tongue. Think of comparing two cursive F's written by the same hand. This was in fact one of the letterforms I thought I recognized in a pair of canvases, Gyre and Pieces, both 2020, though in the latter, the character subtly morphs into something resembling a cursive T or an arrow pointing upward. Both characters were rendered in shaggy brown strokes and surrounded by a field of scumbly staccato marks. The letter F holds a distinctive place within the evolution of language; some linguists believe this and other fricative sounds (the term refers to the way the air moves through the lips) were incorporated into speech only after early humans transitioned from tough hunter-gatherer diets to gentler agricultural diets, the change altering the structures of their jaws and teeth. Treib's letters might serve to remind us of how the shape of a body can determine the shape of a word.

"Arm Measures," the title of the exhibition, also alluded to this notion. Although Treib's individual glyphs were uniform in color, they were rendered in distinct, forceful strokes—they looked like magnified samples of handwriting. Given the forms' scale, the eye did not rest but instead traced the painted marks as Treib's arm had before, locating where the wrist turned to drag the brush down and away. One felt Treib in the room, rehearsing each move, mouthing each syllable. One felt compelled to mouth her mysterious language in return.

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