

Paper Trails

Can you enjoy these works on paper without already knowing the artists?

Works on Paper

Beaver College Art Gallery,
Easton and Church Rds.,
Glenside, PA, through April 22,
225-6245

In a talk at the opening of Beaver College's *Works on Paper*, juror Bill Arning used the oddly appropriate phrase "pushing the envelope" to describe his preferred curatorial stance. From a field of 229 area artists, Arning, director of White Columns in New York, selected 31 who are showing a total of 37 works.

Today the likelihood of words being a big part of art on paper is obvious. Ten years ago it would not have been. Over a third of the pieces in this show include words. One high point is a funny video by Jessie Jane Lewis, *Stick to Black*, an illustrated lecture (of sorts) in which we see a hand writing words on paper, changing the letters which make up the word "stick" until it becomes the word "black."

Arning has mostly chosen work that is conceptual and spare. Like *Stick to Black*, many pieces incorporate language, but in most, the words themselves are metonymic, in the sense that they stand for communication or types of communication or information rather than embodying particular communications in a meaningful way. A perfect example is Kocot + Hatton's *Innocent Victims #2*. This skull shape torn from a page of a

telephone book flutters with poignant fragility on a pin. It doesn't matter whose names are on the page; all are potential innocent victims.

Aaron Igler's *The Princess and the Pea* is undeniably clever. Triangular self-reflecting mirrors are placed in a corner at about head height ("Mirror, mirror on the wall..."). On the floor below is a pile of triangular paper printed with the words "perfection" and "knot" overlapping. A knot of white nylon rope is placed, pea-like, between the layers of paper. Is *Princess* more than clever? I couldn't decide. Raquel Higgins' *Lines on water* is concerned with the dictionary meaning of specific words. Pronouns in Spanish and English ("I, yo, I, yo..." and "she, ella, she, ella...") literally and metaphorically delineate two cultures, two selves in a single skin of fragile translucent paper.

Though a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish is necessary to "get" Higgins' piece, it is effective without knowledge of a unique context. That's true of other items in the show, but not the case with much of the work. Gabriel Martinez, for example, is showing a framed family photograph of himself, his partner Lee and their dog Patches. The formulaic middle-America Sears origin of the pyramidal color grouping on a dark ground is obvious. One must be familiar with Martinez' body of work to appreciate this photograph

for what it is: a fairly complex commentary on art, class and social norms which is not entirely tongue in cheek. (In fact, Patches has been immortalized licking his jowls rather charmingly.)

Similarly, one needs to know Quentin Morris' years of dedication to layered black paintings to fully appreciate his work. Arning says, "In contemporary art writing or contemporary art there's nothing that exists out of a context." He went on to say that his personal knowledge of the work of particular Philadelphia artists whose work he has shown at White Columns (Gabe Martinez, Virgil Marti, Stuart Netsky and Mary Murphy) enabled him to select it for the show. Otherwise, he feels, he might have rejected it as too strange or possibly naive.

Arning's comments raise issues of access as well as context. It makes me wonder whether our increased interest in art which depends on knowledge of very particular contexts is becoming excessively narrow.

Works at Beaver which did not include language ranged from the starkly non-objective (Michael Willse, Andrea Cooper) to Richard Harrod's *A Lamp Also Lit*, printed on a grid of yellow legal paper. Janet Samuel's *Torso*, a bold drawing of a fleshy t-shirt-like shape with large breasts and plenty of black chest hair is interestingly confrontational. David Wickland's tall, thin *Handsome Puppet*, a carefully cut-out coffee spill articulated with brass pins, is attached to long wood-

en handles, like a Javanese shadow puppet. There is something crazily humorous about this work, whose meaning is invaded by its title. Handsome, eh?

By a surprising coincidence, six of the artists in the show are with Larry Becker, the *only* gallery named in the catalogue. Arning says, "Success in the art world is when a consensus develops." Now we know where to look for it.