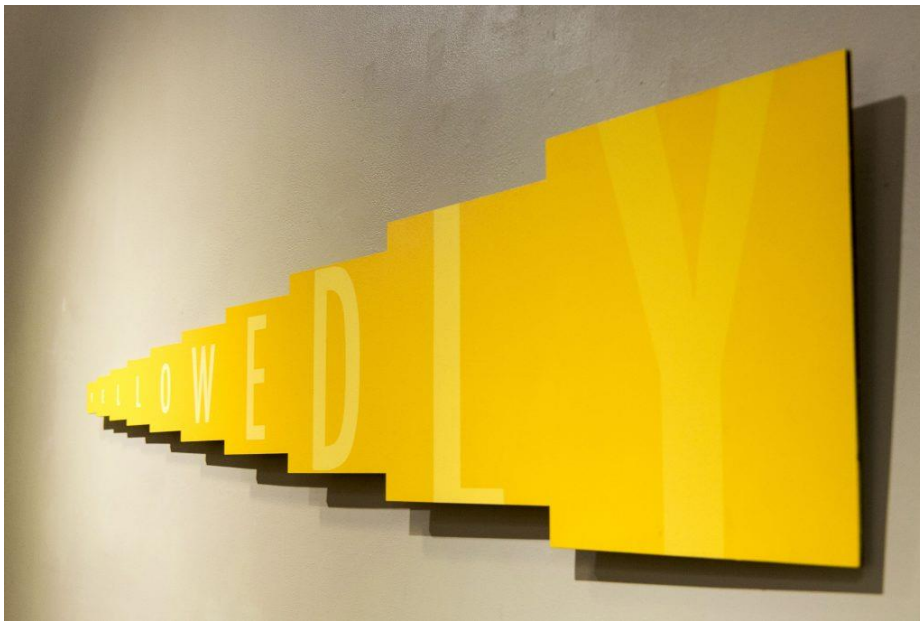


'Tell Me': SPA explores the language of art

Visual Art Review

Mary Gow | May 26, 2018 – *The Times Argus*

By MARY GOW
ARTS CORRESPONDENT



Walter Kopek: "Screamer" (2011), paint on Sintra. (Josh Kuckens / Staff Photo)

"One of my strong desires was to have a Tower of Babel in the gallery, because I think the story is so compelling. And we got two towers, both of which are amazingly cool, I think," said Janet Van Fleet, curator of the exhibition "Tell Me" at Studio Place Arts in Barre.



James Teuscher: "Tower of Babel" 2018, steel, plaster. (Josh Kuckens / Staff Photo)

The two distinctive towers stand in SPA's Main Floor Gallery. One is a fragile structure of windows and words, the other a rocket-like tower with iron letters and symbols.

This week, three new exhibitions opened at SPA. "Tell Me" features artwork by 19 artists exploring language and communication. Connecting to that theme, in the Second Floor Gallery, is "Beyond Words: Artworks by the Book Arts Guild of Vermont." "Jack Rowell: Cultural Documentarian" in the Third Floor Gallery features photographs, mostly portraits, by the Braintree photographer.

"Tell Me" came about through one of SPA's Gallery Committee brainstorming sessions.

"We felt that letterforms and new ways of communicating would make an engaging show," van Fleet said. "For me, personally, I like using and seeing text in artwork, but a friend who is Japanese once said to me, 'You know, when you write something on your painting in English, you are limiting your audience to people who can decode what you've said.' This made an impression on me, and made me more aware of the ramifications of using text."

There's a rich, thought provoking variety in the exhibition, with the artists' use of text, letters and symbols, starting with Joe Cariati's "Surface Study Letter A" at the entrance and continuing to the Towers of Babel.



Wosene: "Magic Scroll" (detail) (1987), acrylic on linen. (Josh Kuckens / Staff Photo)

Van Fleet prepared a curatorial guide to the show, noting that for an exhibition about text and language, some viewers might appreciate a bit of text about the artworks. It includes comments from many of the artists as well as words from Van Fleet. But she emphasizes that viewers should, "choose your own adventure."

Two live-edge wooden panels hang from the SPA ceiling in Tim Brookes' "Endangered Alphabets 1 and 2." Carved into each panel are sets of words and symbols in languages that are unreadable to most of us, but beautiful with their lines, curves, dots and

pictographs. The texts, Brookes explains, are translations of a short poem he wrote about the importance of preserving disappearing languages. N’Ko, Tifinagh, Balinese and Syriac are among the 10 languages, some of which have very few remaining native speakers.

Brookes founded the Endangered Alphabets Project in 2010, hand carving texts in danger of extinction on wood.

“On an artistic level each piece plays between the patterns involved in symbol creation and the deeper patterns in wood, which manifest forces as old as the universe,” Brookes explained.

Diane Sophrin incorporates Hungarian and English text from writings by Hungarian poet József Attila in her mixed media pieces on stitched paper. Sophrin speaks Hungarian and lives in Budapest part of the year.

“His audacious writing inspired an increase in the scale of my work, pushing the use of handwritten text as form-generating source material to a more developed level,” Sophrin explains in her artist’s statement.



Elissa R. Campbell: "Fine Art," paper, thread, ink, binder's board, bookcloth, PVA, magnet, steel. (Josh Kuckens / Staff Photo)

Six rows of six tiny paintings arranged in a grid comprise "Almanac #5" by Michael Chaney and Sara Biggs Chaney. From a distance, a letter emerges in each block. They spell out names associated with the month of March. A white "S" against a pink background is second letter of the Egyptian god Osiris' name. Up close, each letter block is a tiny painting. The "S" floats cloud-like in a pink sky with curves of words and flying crows.

The Chaney's "Almanac" series, they explain, explores, "the line between reading and seeing ... We're interested in that interplay of how the brain interprets something as text versus image."

On hand with the two Towers of Babel is a copy of the Old Testament story, Genesis 11:1-9, about the dispersal of people and language precipitated by the building of a tower with its top in the heavens. In Axel Stohlberg's "The Tower of Babel," white trimmed windows angled on a wooden frame climb upward. James Teuscher's rocket-shaped "Tower of Babel" juts upward, with hand-forged iron letters and symbols arrayed on its surface.

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents "Tell Me," through June 30, work by 19 local artists that explores language and communication (Main Floor Gallery); "Beyond Words," work by the Book Arts Guild of Vermont (Second Floor Gallery); "Jack Rowell: Cultural Documentarian," photographs from fifth generation Vermonter, (Third Floor Gallery), at SPA, 201 N. Main St., Barre. Hours are: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 4 p.m. Saturday; call 802-479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com. Expanded hours for Open Studio Weekend are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, May 26; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday May 27. (Eleven SPA artists will open their studios during the weekend.)