



## **Text Message: Words and Letters in Contemporary Art**

January 21 – May 16, 2018

Written languages are just one of the many ways human beings attempt to communicate with one another. Phrasing, tone, and context can offer a myriad of opportunities for reinforcement and support, or misunderstanding and over-emphasis. In the twenty-first century, emailing and text messaging—often with new expressions or new forms of familiar phrases—dominate interpersonal exchanges. Contemporary artists, recognizing the power and complexity of the written word, utilize text—individual letters or words—to explore theoretical, social, symbolic, and aesthetic concerns.

While the title of this exhibition plays on the popular digital form of communication, the works gathered here are tangible three-dimensional objects made of fiber, ceramic, polymer, paper, and metal as well as two-dimensional works on paper. All works featured are drawn from RAM's collection. Letters and script are used as design and pattern elements as well as conveyors of meaning. Examples include teapots decorated with narrative scenes overlaid with accompanying text, contemporary prints that highlight letters from urban signage, and baskets accented with or formed by words and script.

**Text Message** also offers the opportunity to look at the relationship between the past and the present through artist-designed posters from the 1920s. These “work incentive” posters published by Mather & Co. Publishers detail interpersonal rules for workplace behavior. These pieces, combining striking colorful imagery with moralizing text, offer a perspective on the past that resonates with contemporary concerns.

### **Works Featured in the Exhibition**

Posters—produced in the 1920s by Chicago-based **Mather & Co.**—were meant to boost interpersonal rules for workplace behavior. Following the successful use of poster campaigns during World War I and echoing the spirit of workplace safety posters—which were also introduced at the beginning of the 1900s—they reflect a push toward greater productivity and worker loyalty. These posters emphasize motivational and moralizing text with bold lettering and colorful imagery. This series designed by American artists was available to factory owners as an annual subscription. The end of their production directly coincided with the crash of the stock market in 1929.

**Robert Cottingham** began his career as an art director for an advertising firm in the 1960s. Eventually he shifted to painting and printmaking, taking the urban American landscape as his subject, including images of neon signs, building facades, and store fronts. His working process involves photographing something of interest, translating that to a black-and-white drawing by projecting it onto graph paper, creating further studies on paper in color, and,

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finally, projecting the original image or his drawings in order to transfer them to a canvas or larger surface. While he is known for hyper-realistic detail in his work, Cottingham would change words or other elements as needed. His interest in typography and lettering extends to the meaning of words themselves. So, he would frequently isolate certain words in order to explore deeper psychological aspects.

Using polymer combined with found objects, **Elissa Farrow-Savos** investigates personal stories that address universal human emotions and relationships. Farrow-Savos, a self-taught sculptor, is constantly looking for materials that spark an idea for a piece. Her process involves sculpting with polymer. Pushing past its "intended size and boundaries," Farrow-Savos also incorporates found materials and coats the baked polymer with layers of oil paint. Her use of letters or text builds from the idea that she is crafting narratives with which a viewer can engage and use for self-reflection. Farrow-Savos states, "The stories I tell are about inner worlds revealed—the things that we are not supposed to talk about and perhaps not supposed to feel, about our bodies, our families, and our life's choices." RAM's piece, about the loss of words and meaning, is dedicated to the memory of the artist's mother who passed away after a long illness when Farrow-Savos was 21.

Trained as a painter and respected as someone who challenges the idea of an art quilt, **Michael James** utilizes computer technology to create two-dimensional wall hangings from printed and pieced fabric. A student of American quilt making and techniques, James was drawn to the tactile appeal of working with fiber. In 2005, he was commissioned by RAM to undertake a project involving the creation of new work based on the museum's holdings. **Home Economics** combines various inspirations. The piece is a response to **Karen Theusen Massaro's** ceramic sculpture, **Stacked Irons**; Depression era block-printed textiles produced for Works Progress Administration (WPA) program; and a striped textile that James had used previously. The iron motif connects James to his working class mother's attempts to keep up with laundry for seven children and reflects his praise of a common object. The text that overlays pattern on several of the panels is from a poem by **Pablo Neruda** entitled **Ode to Ironing**.

A portion of RAM's permanent collection of contemporary fiber art focuses on 21 works created in the 1990s and early 2000s by the late Canadian artist, **Rosita Johanson**. Born in Saarlouis in Saargebiet, Germany, in 1937, Johanson was raised in war-stricken Berlin. She later immigrated to Canada in 1953 at the age of 16. A dressmaker by trade, Johanson applied her natural ability to work with thread and fabric to creating colorful embroidered narratives full of people, animals, and activity. Drawing on childhood memories, her

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imagination, and some topical political and social issues, she would piece together compositions using appliqué, machine embroidery, and hand-stitching. Her designs, which often began as sketches, culminated in layers of thread and fabric. Johanson plays with letters as design and uses text to visually reiterate significant points or to offer more clues in building a narrative.

The unlikely and often told origin story of **Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr.**—that he left a corporate career as a computer programmer when he saw a printing demonstration in colonial Williamsburg, Virginia—hints at the passion with which the artist pursues his work. Running a letterpress poster shop, Kennedy creates posters, books, and other printed materials. He is not afraid to provoke, and often engages in discussions of identity, race, and perception—regularly referencing racially charged images or slogans. Printing texts of all types appeals to Kennedy as a way to communicate with a larger audience. Of it, he states: “I had studied calligraphy for a very long time, about 10 years, but I wasn’t good at it. The letterpress appealed to me because I was attracted to books. I love letters; I love books. It was a way of working with letters, making books, and also the fact that you can make multiple copies.”

Often employing satire, **Barbara Kruger** uses slick advertising-like imagery and bold text to comment on contemporary society. Born in Newark, New Jersey, Kruger left academic studies to work as a graphic designer, picture editor, and an art director at various magazines including *House and Garden* and *Aperture*. Her earliest artworks were large-scale fiber pieces. While she gained some recognition for them, she looked for a more direct way to address her concerns about greater cultural issues. Kruger developed a somewhat confrontational aesthetic employing black and white photography and streamlined lettering. She uses pronouns like “your” and “I” often because they implicate the viewer. Confusing boundaries between art and commerce, many of her works have been translated into marketable products such as bags, t-shirts, mugs, and matchbooks like those in RAM’s collection. Kruger says of her work: “Do you know why language manifests itself the way it does in my work? It’s because I understand short attention spans.”

Referencing historical sources such as Greek vessels or eighteenth-century European pottery, Canadian artist **Richard Milette** approaches ceramics on both aesthetic and conceptual terms. Milette began studying studio ceramics at Cégep de Vieux Montréal, and eventually obtained his BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He independently taught himself the history of ceramics, filling in the blanks that college courses could not. Milette began making objects in his early years when, as one of eight children in a working class family, he pulled together things from around his home to make his own toys. He now crafts vessels by handbuilding, throwing, press molding, or some combination of all. Milette incorporates text as a way to build a narrative, which he also

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challenges by only including fragments of ideas or by blending letters and image. He may also black out words as if censored—such as he has done with RAM's *Teapot*—in order to confuse and negate any direct story-telling.

Employing collage techniques, **Joan Schulze** creates unconventional quilts using photo transfers and other materials, including cotton, silk, and paper. Schulze, who created her first quilt in 1974, is interested in layers, and adds information by painting or drawing on the surface. Featured in public and private collections around the world, her quilts are experimental—a fact that the artist vigorously pursues as she looks for ways to make them relevant within contemporary society. Schulze does this by using imagery from pop culture sources as well as contemporary technology—photocopies in the 1970s, photo transfers in the 1980s, and digital processes for the past few decades. For Schulze, the use of text connects her ideas directly to the cultural landscape but it is also a strategy to encourage engagement and further contemplation. In her own words, "I want to annoy people and force them to look again."

With her BA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, **Barbara Tetenbaum** is a key figure in contemporary bookmaking. The recipient of two Fulbright awards and Professor and the Department Head of Book Arts at Oregon College of Art and Craft in Portland, Oregon, Tetenbaum has also been operating Triangular Press since 1979. She uses books, prints, installations, and animation to explore the idea of reading itself. RAM has multiple works by Tetenbaum in the collection. *Oabecedarium* is an earlier work based on an abecedarium, or an inscription consisting of the letters in an alphabet. Of her recent work, she states: "In the last ten years, I've been focusing on books related to music, either directly or formally, and work that exposes the role of the reader and how they uniquely respond to a given text or set of images. I am also working outside the book form, but in ways that are informed by the book: text-based installations and a short animation film..."

Born in Onomichi, Hiroshima-Ken, Japan in 1936, **Masami Teraoka** has made a name for himself with provocative watercolors, prints, and paintings that reflect his interest in Eastern and Western culture. After obtaining his BA in aesthetics from Kwansai Gakuin University, he came to the US and received both his BFA and MFA from Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. For decades, he adopted a visual language that closely resembled Japanese Ukiyo-e paintings and prints as he explored fantasy, reality, history, politics, and society. Ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," were produced during Japan's Edo Period (1615-1868) and were associated with the rise of a moneyed middle class that wanted images reflecting their interest in Kabuki theater, Sumo wrestlers, female companions, travel scenes, erotica, folk tales, and flora. Teraoka combines a Ukiyo-e aesthetic with situations, fashions, and objects that reflect a contemporary time. As pointed out in *Paintings by Masami Teraoka*, he integrates text into the composition for both content

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and aesthetic appeal: "Teraoka taps the graphic power and elegant color of these works, including the use of seals, calligraphy, and ornately framed cartouches, and revels in covert meanings, combining verbal and visual puns with alluring color and pattern."

Lena Vigna  
Curator of Exhibitions