

Redefining Language  
Art of Natasha Bowdoin  
Stacey Holzer

Surrounded by extensive visual source material such as images of carnival sideshow art, and eastern philosophical references from India, Natasha Bowdoin is fascinated with crossover parallels in composition, color, pattern and form. She uses layered paper cutouts to create large scale fragile paper wall sculptures. Proportionately large with the intent of allowing the viewer to interpret a story of their own design, the strength of her work is in its ability to convey movement. Originally taken from personal experience and conversations in her mind Bowdoin's work evolved utilizing various classical texts. A variety of literary allusions alters the structure of her sculpture. Almost as a meditative process the words can dictate the configuration. Recycled, restructured words are formed in a linear fashion and then reshaped in stages. Thirty-five different parts are assembled in Tulgeywood, now part of the 2009 CORE group exhibition at the Glassell School of Art, Houston. Tulgeywood is a reference from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. It is the wood where the boy meets the jabberwock. Redefining language from literature in a deconstructive manner words are laid out, washed with color and then assembled. Tulgeywood winds around and around in segmented circles from large to small the viewer is captivated and drawn in and out. The words of the piece are primary to the structure, indicative of a vernacular that Bowdoin is taking apart. Jaberwocky is Lewis Carroll's famous poem included below to illustrate his play of words which become mysterious and rhythmic, often going beyond our expectation of meaning.

Tw'as brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

Just as Bowdoin's Tulgeywood winds around reconfiguring words, Carroll's use of discourse forms a unique pattern of its own making. This concept of reinventing language also raises the question, what happens to the context of the old vocabulary? Answers are ambiguous at best and considering developing an alphabet or coded language of her own has been a consideration for Bowdoin's future work as long as it remains accessible to the viewer.

Processing visual cues from multiple resources. Bowdoin researches materials that incorporate text in varied form. Shaker gift drawings are a new source of inspiration because they utilize text in form and pattern. From 1837-1860 or so Shakers who wrote

or drew were called instruments. A different form of “gifts” received by Shaker instruments was in the form of “sacred sheets.” These were composed of characters called “spirit writing.” These messages were not understood, as the symbols represented “unknown tongues.” Many of the “sacred sheets” appear to be abstract strokes that could be made from a pen and ink practice of various strokes used in penmanship. Interestingly enough Shakers at this time did not hang these images on their walls but the ministry kept them as secret gifts.

Bowdoin feels she has reached the point of breaking apart language and is now searching for the message she wants to convey essentially searching for a meaningful way to continue the expression of what she has already achieved. Her studio becomes a collaborative environment in which she constructs many works at once. The large scale of Bowdoin’s paper sculpture provides an all encompassing experience for the viewer. The size of them takes on an aggressive proportion. She feels on a small scale the letters disappear and the work becomes more decorative. Not limited by the story she allows sections to pile up on the floor, next is assembly where, often works get intermingled in the process. Each sculpture may be reassembled in a different configuration to suit the architecture of the space or alternate based on which segments fit together to convey a concept or spatial idea. A careful preparator and elaborate instruction is necessary to display each piece.

Dormouse is a work that appears next to the door of the Freed Auditorium. Five layers of words cut out in the form of a spiraling circle are framed by a square. The title of this piece is an allusion to the dormouse character from *Through the Looking Glass*. Dormouse is the mouse who sits between the March hare and the Mad hatter at the Mad hatter’s tea party, they use him as a pillow and he often falls asleep waking at odd increments of time to make an off center comment such as “Feed your head, Feed your head” Understanding the implication adds to the layers of depth in her work. Descriptive and funny, references could be dismissible to the text, relatively unrecognizable or in context to the space around the art.

Sitting on top of her art on the floor Bowdoin works in a circular fashion drawn out moving across the surface. It becomes a meditative process to draw them out, colorize and construct them. She enjoys the process so much she wishes it would never end yet realizes each piece must have a point of completion perhaps only to be reworked at a later time. Currently Bowdoin is exploring new materials for her constructions and has been playing with cards. The cards provide innate patterns lending to multiple forms of three dimensional expression.

Natasha Bowdoin is a 2009 core fellow at the Glassell Scholl of Art. Originally from the East coast she has relished this opportunity to experience a different region of the country and has found the art community in Houston as one to embrace whole heartedly. Differences in cultural climate, weather patterns, and community make this a rich exploration that may alter the process of her art. As an audience we have a lot to look forward to.

The Glassell School of Art CORE program is a two year fellowship in conjunction with the MFAH, designed to foster intense and innovative studio practice for emerging artists. To find out more go to [www.core.mfah.org](http://www.core.mfah.org). Visit [www.natashabowdoin.com](http://www.natashabowdoin.com) to see more of her art.