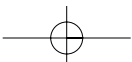


Art Feature



*DEBORAH
DAVIDSON*

Glyphs



DEBORAH DAVIDSON

Considering Language

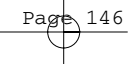
In my artist books and the mixed-media acrylic paintings that have evolved from them, I investigate how voice (in the form of text/words) can be given meaning in a visual way (shapes/glyphs).

Language has seeped into the work, insinuated itself, for the past ten years. The intersection of text and image, and especially the evolution of the image as an analogy or shadow of the text. Having begun with observations of my child's discovery of words, the *Naming* series tracks spoken language and its development. The forms in the work become a personal hieroglyph, signifying the growth and persistence of language, its survival and change.

In an earlier phase, I was interested in identity, memory, and family history; this also took the form of artist books and mixed-media paintings. In these, voice was addressed through the use of found texts and letters, which were combined with my own writing. I was obsessed with this family history, because at the time I wasn't interested in continuing it. With the birth of my child, my perspective shifted, and so did the source of the "voice."

My observations of his language development overlapped with my continued interest in trying to express voice visually. His efforts, from early utterances to later conversations, became the conduit, the means of my own exploration.

With the *Glyphs* series of paintings (which evolved from the *Naming* series and includes *How Much, Dragons and Magic*, and *Too Hard I*) and the more recent artist books, I have been investigating how language emerges, the evolution from sound to word to thought. The images are built alternately by layering and eradicating over a long period of time, revealing a history and accumulation comparable to language acquisition. Embedded in this process of burying and revealing I detect a deep-seated ambivalence of exposure.



I start from the beginning, where one always starts. The work was, in the most primary and primitive way, my attempt to understand my child and to try to capture his experience of learning.

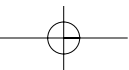
Within the books, the use of stitching, and sometimes piercing, and the undoing of the stitching, is related to my fundamental fear about things not being permanent, and my vain attempt to hold everything in place. Iconic childlike shapes are also made out of this crude stitching—a way of working reiterated in the building of layers, the undoing by sanding and sometimes gashing that expresses the anxiety of being able to control very little. The labor, the complete physicality of the effort, and the pace of working are a way of turning that apprehension into investigation.

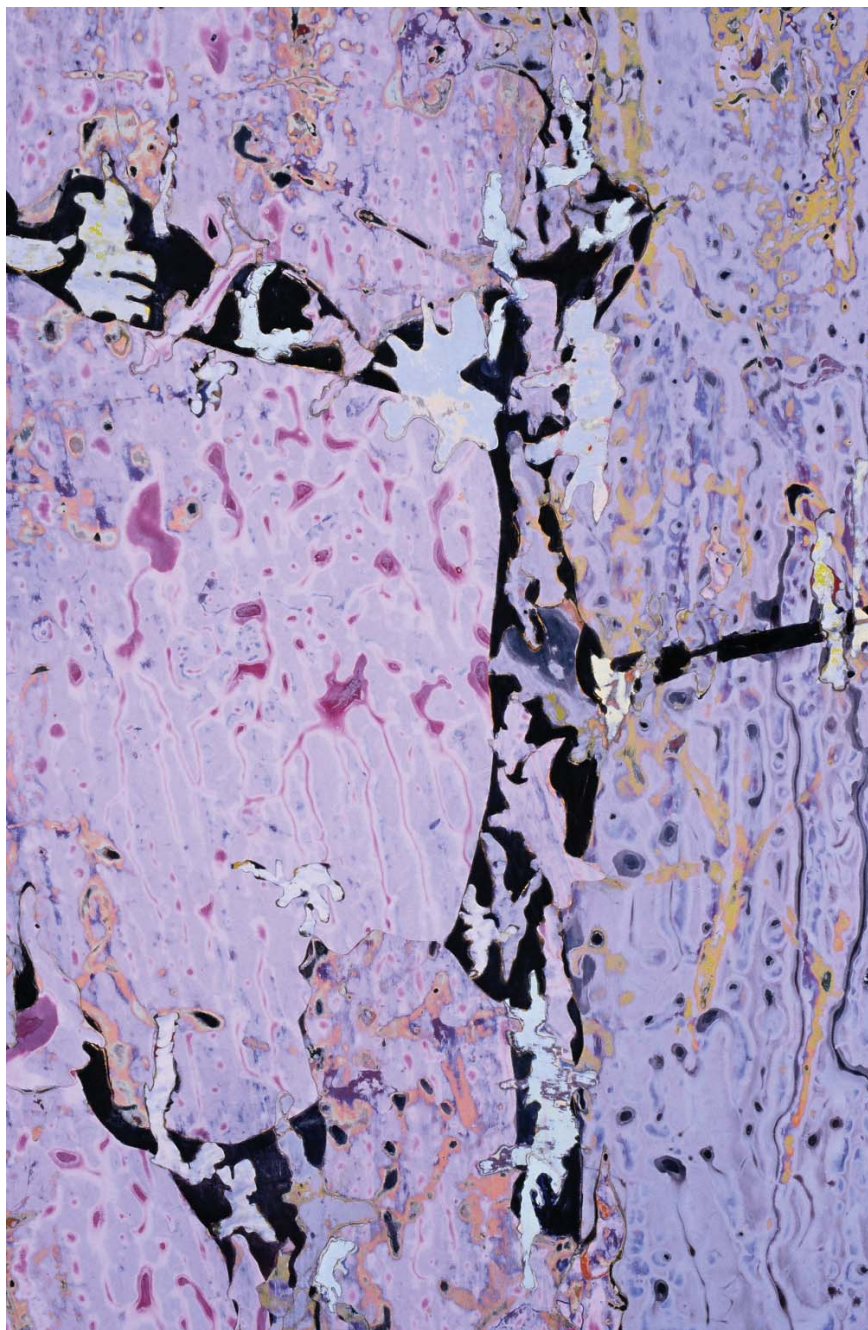
For the passages made of sewn marks, I looked at the very early drawings of my son as another equivalent of language-making and meaning. I looked at things drawn very quickly, and my versions were rendered very slowly with no particular skill in the sewing.

In the earlier books and related projects, words have equal status with images, stitching, and objects; they seem to emanate from the surface. I was interested in crossing or obliterating the boundary between image and text, and these words act as images and exist in the field of the painting, or surface of the page. The presence of a child's objects, or images of those objects, has significance also, considering that so much early speaking is a struggle to associate words with those objects. I had—and still have—a notion that the pieces themselves could be articulate. If I could do this in any other way I would, but I cannot, so I endeavor to be heard in a way that does not render sound.

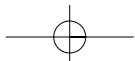
My process is a painstakingly slow, indirect way of getting to the images, and absolutely inefficient. But it appears to be the only way I have of getting to these particular results.

For the paintings, cut-out shapes are placed under drafting vellum; the images are created by sanding back through multiple layers of acrylic which have been painted on the vellum. This initial stage is then mounted onto a wood panel. I continue adding paint and collage, and I continue sanding, revealing different layers of color in ever-changing patterns and creating images that seem embedded in the surface of the painting. In the most recent pieces, much of the composition is created by the accretion of forms built up through a kind of physical work. They appear more topographical or map-like, allowing the surfaces to be read in an additional way and creating another kind of analogy to language. The built-up layers of color act as grounds or fields for the



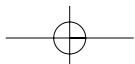


How Much (detail), 2005, acrylic on vellum mounted on wood panel





Messenger (detail), 1998, unique artist book, mixed media on vellum
(gesso, ink, acrylic, supracolor, Xerox transfer, thread)





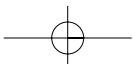
Mouth, 2001, acrylic, mixed media on vellum mounted on wood panel, 36" x 26"



Access (detail), 1999, unique artist book, mixed media on vellum
(gesso, ink, acrylic, supracolor, Xerox transfer, thread)

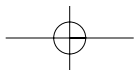


Heart Ladder (detail), 1999, unique artist book, mixed media on vellum
(gesso, ink, acrylic, supracolor, Xerox transfer, thread)



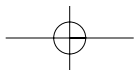


Dragons and Magic, 2004, acrylic on vellum mounted on wood panel, 36" x 26"



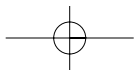


Too Hard I, 2002, acrylic on vellum mounted on wood panel, 36" x 26"





Messenger (detail), 1998, unique artist book, mixed media on vellum
(gesso, ink, acrylic, supracolor, Xerox transfer, thread)





forms, which are either held in by the space, or float through and out of the frame.

The phenomenon of and persistence of language itself can be seen as an accumulation, the result of the layering of history and culture over long periods of time. This is also the way my work evolves—the building-up of layers produces an internal grammar or “reading” as well as an external statement.

Eroding, excavating, finding what is underneath, then covering and adding—this is how language develops. Each stage, each layer is complete unto itself. The action of eroding reveals the earlier thought/layer, so that destruction and creation happen simultaneously. I arrive at the resolution of the work by accretion or layering of paint and the inverse process of deconstructing—eroding, sanding—so that both making and destroying determine my progress.

I am always learning or inventing a new set of vocabularies, always starting from the beginning, whether in a new project or in the same one as it is worked out over a long period of time. I begin not knowing what I am going to say. I am mute, with no words. Eventually, through what seems like endless labor, I am able to speak. I make a commitment to work until I become intelligible/legible—completing the journey from sounds to complicated thoughts. For each piece I go through this all over again.

As the body of work grows, I also recognize an evolution in the formal demands of the work—how color is used, the way shapes are cut, how the sanding functions, the scale, the building of colors from dark to light or light to dark, the relationship of forms to edges, and anticipation of the way the forms and layers will interface with each other.

These works finally record, in some way, what all parents do if they are able: listen, repeat, notice the sounds that will become words, then short phrases and sentences, thoughts, finally entering dialogue and conversation.

In the books, images of childhood—toys, animals, blocks, letter forms, pieces of hair—and sometimes not just images but the things themselves, were combined with evidence of the earliest discoveries of language. I also used detritus from my child’s world in my earlier paintings—the moon, animals, simplified figures. These were given new meaning in the paintings, and allowed to interact with my own shapes/glyphs.

These shapes and the resulting compositions and formats became then another version of language, my own signage, my own way of finding voice . . .

