LAST WORDS

I have always been intrigued with Julia Couzens's work. I regard her as a visual alchemist. While living with ***LAST WORDS*** over the three-month span of the exhibition, I came to perceive the spiritual content that, for me, was endemic to this work.

Philip J. Hitchcock,
Director
University Library Gallery

Words may veer from the noble to the ignominious, but all express our selves and, for better or worse, our humanity. Yet, it's no secret that the truth and purpose of words are under siege in this era of alt-facts and tweets.

LAST WORDS was a memorial and an ode to the final words we say. Sometimes silly and inconsequential, sometimes meaningful and deep, sometimes droll, and sometimes heartbreaking, the last words before dying, spoken by those dear to us – or by the fateful stranger – resonate long after they are uttered.

The last words of people known to the world and of people known only to those close to them comprised the text of this installation. The identities of the speakers were intentionally anonymous, for it is the universality of this exchange that ***LAST WORDS*** honored.

Julia Couzens

LEGACY

An artist's legacy can be based on a body of work, a single masterpiece, or as a part of a historical art movement. It can be in the form of a manifesto, a grandstand, a poetic gesture. But rarely does the legacy derive from last words spoken. Even more rarely are the words so profound that they are chosen as a gravestone epitaph. They are not often heard at the time of death, with the exception of the most intimate who are close enough to hear the last gasps and utterances. And even when heard, they can be hard to decipher or remember. They are words that may be silly, banal, or droll aphorisms. Sometimes they are transgressive vulgarities, outside of the known character of the deceased. And yet, there is a fascination with the final words of the dying, as if these words sum up a life, much as an artist's last work is the summation of an entire life's vision. And often, like art, these words are lost upon death.

It is with a touch of irony (and an angel) that Julia Couzens created an entire art installation made from the last words said by known and unknown people on their death beds. In "***LAST WORDS***," she has created an unusual memento mori or Vanitas that within its spatial and temporal transitions embodies a moving back and forth from the living to the dead, and a simultaneous conjuring of the intimate and the universal. Hanging shrouds made of old and worn blankets, crinoline and semi transparent tulle (used in wedding dresses and ball gowns) are draped on the walls and unfurl onto the floor, blithely suggesting the feminine without frivolity. Simple wooden shelves placed high on the wall, hold table lamps evocative of the death bed. The lamps are turned on, lighting the walls and creating Proustian shadows of lost time and lost meaning to the world. Minimal, like the shelves that held Chris Burden's hidden body in his work, "White Light/White Heat," they may be a metaphor for the Unseen Witness Above, whose presence is pervasive but nowhere revealed. In the background is the sound of a heart beating, so subtle a soundtrack that you swear it is an aural hallucination, an echo of one's own beating heart. Wait. Do you hear the utterances of the dying as well? Not to say that the work is about the uncanny. The sound is more subliminal stimuli inviting recognition, and perhaps transference—a mining of the unconscious to the sentience of things.

There is a phantasmagorical quality to sections of the installation, reminiscent of the hallucinatory scenes of the fictional Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's film, "The Shining." Prominently hanging on one wall is a large piece of woven floral tapestry that could be a stand-in for peeling wallpaper. Next to it is a sculptural "drawing" of words made out of shaved pipe cleaners, twisted, and morphed into what seems to be a drawing making itself, each letter circling in and linking to the next as if composed in a trance or fugue of automatic writing. The consecutive circling cell-like lettering actually spells the last words, "I don't smell good," a harbinger of death itself. Couzens has long maintained a life drawing practice, separate from her publically exhibited work, and has written that she has "an abiding empathy for the expressive and conceptual potential of line." Beyond life drawing, this component of the installation draws out the words of the dead.

Much of Couzens's work utilizes repurposed handicraft made by other hands, suggesting another kind of transference. Throughout the installation there is a domestic economy—an economy of means. Sewing notions, embroidery thread, masking tape, plastic bags and pipe cleaners are used to fabricate the words, incorporating craft processes such as sewing, knitting, crochet, wood burning and papier-mâché. In her 1968 work, "Bea," Marisa Mertz crocheted the name of her daughter using nylon thread, leaving the crochet needles as evidence of its making. As the only female member of the Italian art group, Arte Povera, Mertz distinguished herself by using materials and processes characteristic of femininity, and in "Bea", most specifically as a mother. In reverse homage, Couzens, dedicates her own installation to her mother, Jean Little Couzens, the founding editor of WestArt, California's first publication dedicated to contemporary art.

Her dying words at age 103, "Why not?" (her response when asked if she wanted a bowl of ice cream) are displayed as if a declarative statement. The three-dimensional text is made of welded steel rods, some of the letters swaddled endearingly in green and blue swatches of tulle. The punctuation of the question mark is one of Couzens's mother's berets, hung as a visual pun.

The words that are the basis of this show are words that Couzens created by hand. They are written and sculpted, sewn or "drawn," and shared without being spoken. Some of the words resound with a painful familiarity, such as "I wasn't reaching for it," the last words of Philando Castile, and "I can't breathe," the last gasp of Eric Garner, the deaths of whom were witnessed by thousands who viewed cell phone recordings on the Internet and played endlessly on the news, and social media. Couzens constructed Garner's words out of bright yellow and orange scrap paper bound by tape, to form letters about three feet tall, hanging in front of a wall of draped tulle in an array of pastel colors. This, like the rainbow flag, signals a kind of solidarity. These were not only last words; now they are evidence.

Particularly painful for me, was the addition of small pieces of what appeared to be jewelry. They were actually little patches of brightly colored turquoise and green fabric, peeking out of holes or sewn on blankets. They brought to my mind not fashion or adornment, but the memory of cleaning out my mother's jewelry box and dresser drawers upon her recent death.

"*LAST WORDS*" is not without its humor. It hints that with tragedy, there is often comedy. A wall of moth-eaten and worn blankets have impressions from use so embedded in the fabric that they appear as a ghost image of the embroidered text of the last words that cover them. On these woolen grounds, in flesh tones of beige, pink and yellow, are written the last words, "Somebody screwed up," and "This is kind of a bummer." Perhaps Couzens's use of woolen blankets is a slight nod to Joseph Beuys, who used felt as a material because it could be molded and shaped and its function is for insulation and warmth. For him, using such a material was linked to the concept of sculpture as an evolutionary process. I think Couzens would agree, but with the following caveat. Leaning against the bottom hem of one blanket is a small child's wooden chair. The words "Go put your shoes on," are wood-burned into the seat. Like "somebody screwed up" and " ... bummer ..., " they are of an anonymous individual. The chair itself is like a titter slipping out from under the tongue in cheek towards "art making meaning;" which was how Joseph Kosuth defined his early work, "One and Three Chairs." It consisted of an actual chair, its printed definition displayed beside it, along with a photographic representation. With the chair, athwart to its historical significance and Kosuth's artistic legacy, Couzens reminds us that a chair (or an artwork) can still be an epigraph of something that goes beyond what is concrete. It can be evocative of the human experience.

"*LAST WORDS*," was an ephemeral artwork. It was installed specifically for the site—ironically in a gallery that is housed in the university's library where many last words are stored. Rather than the art (and perhaps the books), it is the endgame that is permanent. As if to echo this thought, embroidered in very small lettering on one of the blankets, are the last words of Frederic Chopin, "The earth is suffocating...swear to make them cut me open, so that I won't be buried alive."

Carole Ann Klonarides is a Los Angeles based independent curator, writer and educator of contemporary art and media.

BEFORE THE CURTAIN CALL: JULIA COUZENS'S *LAST WORDS*

Francesca Wilmott

We move through life encircled within a cloak of language. Rote platitudes woven together with profound statements of love, hope, and fear. Which words will be our last? Will they effortlessly spin past our fingers or will they loop back upon themselves during our final moments?

In Julia Couzens's exhibition, ***LAST WORDS***, deathbed utterances take material form. Couzens's signature bundled sculptures have exploded onto the walls, their inner contents revealed in a series of theatrical vignettes that envelop the gallery. On one wall, hand-stitched letters rise and fall as they traverse a curtain of found woolen blankets. A quiet request, "Don't waste your time worrying about me," tentatively crescendos toward an acerbic command, "Pour me a really big gin."

In the corner, large pretzel-like letters languidly float against a rainbow of tulle, bringing to mind a super-sized game of Candy Land. The text, "I can't breathe," however, is anything but carefree; the tightly bundled letters embody the physical struggle of their speaker. Across the room, a table lamp that belonged to Couzens' late mother casts a faint glow upon a wall that heaves with the motion of wispy pipe cleaner lettering. "I don't smell good," it repeats over and over again until the words are rendered illegible.

Within Couzens's tapestry of words, individuality falls away. Commonplace expressions ("Oh shit...") are intertwined with identifiable pronouncements, many of which have become battle cries against racially motivated violence ("I can't breathe," "I wasn't reaching for it," and "Tell everyone on this train I love them"). The powerful reverberations of these now-political statements breathe life into the exhibition, yet even the most recognizable last words remain universal. Indeed, "I can't breathe" were words spoken both by Eric Garner as well as the artist's friend.

Like the language that cloaks the gallery walls, Couzens's ephemeral materials—tulle, papier-mâché, pipe cleaners, velvet, satin, thread, twine, safety pins, and yarn—are executed with a deft combination of spontaneity and trained muscle memory. They are the stuff of childhood dress-up. Heralding a return to infancy that often besets the elderly, Couzens's installation reminds us of Shakespeare's words: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. . . . Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion; sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

Before rounding the corner to exit the gallery, Pancho Villa's dying wish, "Tell them I said something," hovers like a speech bubble on an expanse of white wall. The backdrop of multicolored tulle has now fallen to the ground. In this last burst of humanity before we take our final bow arrives the moment to say something. Anything.

Francesca Wilmott is an independent writer and curator based in Sacramento. She formerly held curatorial positions at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum at UC Davis (2016-17); The Museum of Modern Art in New York (2012-2016); and the Saint Louis Art Museum (2010-11). Francesca's writing has been published in Wayne Thiebaud: 1958-1968 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Marcel Broodthaers: A Retrospective (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016); and Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), among other outlets.