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## Review: 'Illiterature' at Arena 1 Gallery

5:00 PM, March 5, 2009



A broad thematic show spiked with quiet thrills is now at [Arena 1 Gallery](#), bearing the vexing name "Illiterature." The title cleverly suggests an intellectual U-turn, a kind of internal canceling out. But the word also carries the whiff of illiteracy and its connotations of ignorance, error and blunder. The show is far smarter than that. Steeped in intelligence of all kinds -- textual and textural, emotional, visceral, formal, cultural -- it presents work by 21 artists in a range of media. All of them engage in some way with language, verbal coding and notation.

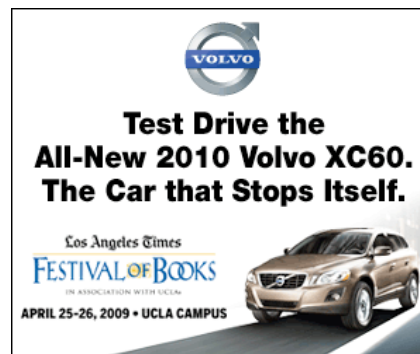
Like the absorbing group show on mapping ("Zoom +/-") held here in 2007, "Illiterature" applies a light touch to fertile terrain. Consultant and curator Mark Carter has selected an international roster of artists at various career stages. The art speaks for itself, and much of it is highly eloquent.

Each of Michael Joaquin Grey's ink drawings mines a specific moment, identified by date and time. Acts of reflection and meditation, they fuse scientific schema with a cryptic script, Surrealist automatic writing in private shorthand. The swirls, dashes, helices and letter-like characters are laid down with fluidity and urgency.

Yael Kanarek creates ebullient visual poetry out of the single word "lemon" spelled in 32 languages, repeated, fanned out, gridded, curled and meandering. Her laser-cut black rubber wall work brings to mind the pieces of a craft kit gone renegade. The words explode in a seemingly spontaneous free-form web -- Babel as beautiful filigree.

Masako Takahashi embroiders human hair onto panels of antique silk in text-like rows of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. The patterns evoke ancient, perhaps holy script, but are actually based on the Fibonacci Sequence, numerical keys to an underlying natural order. Mind and body converge in these exquisitely delicate testaments.

Word and image overlap and merge throughout the show, doubling or masquerading as one another. Communication is subverted more than encouraged (that intellectual U-turn in action)



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through erasure, fragmentation or an excessive density of symbols. Ed Ruscha's print of blank street signs makes a canny icon out of the intersection of place and placelessness. Mike Patten's inkjet prints from PalmPilot drawings are slight but poignant declarations ("I have to treat myself better," "I think about you all the time") that have been partially erased, as if retracted out of insecurity.

Apollinaire's calligrams are invoked in places, as are the chance-derived scores of John Cage, the conceptual austerity of Joseph Kosuth and the landmark novels of Herman Melville and James Joyce. In Larissa Nowicki's work, printed pages sliced in strips become the pulpy raw material of weavings. **Jill Sylvia excises the entries from ledger pages, leaving delicate tracery scaffolds -- practical information morphed into pure geometric form. On separate sheets, she rearranges the tiny extracted notations into neat, equally abstract mosaics.**

Words, both handwritten and typed, are converted to tonal values in the work of Linda Ekstrom and Mark Lawrence Stafford. Ekstrom inscribes lines by poet Edmund Jabès into dense blue smears of illegibility. The passages feel tight and intense, evidence of a kind of psychological endurance that corresponds to the writer's sensibility. Stafford's images are more whimsical. He types the classic speed-assessing line "the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" in multiple directions and repeatedly, so that his little 9-inch squares end up looking like monochrome cloud-scapes more than efficiency exercises.

The notion of language as a fundamental human impulse, akin to dance and song, threads through the show as well. In Stefana McClure's small paper pieces, words double as rhythmic beats, pounding into and shredding the page. In Linda Hutchins' tracing paper scroll, the words "right now" are printed continuously across front and back, making for a lovely metaphor of the perpetually unfurling present.

Not every piece in the show sings, but the whole is long on both ingenuity and nuance. Also represented are Pamela Birmingham, Vuk Cosic, Wolfgang Herbold, John Himmelfarb, Stephanie Lempert, Dan Miller, Greg Milne, Megan Murphy, Duston Spear and Cody Trepte.

-- Leah Ollman

**Arena 1 Gallery**, 3026 Airport Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 397-7456, through March 21. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays.

*Photo (top): Yael Kanarek's "Untitled (Lemon)" (2008), laser-cut rubber, glue. Credit: Arena 1 Gallery*

*Photo (bottom): Detail of Michael Joaquin Grey's "1/08/2008" (2008), ink on paper. Credit: Arena 1 Gallery*

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As an author who uses words to tell a story, it's rewarding to see words used in new and refreshing ways. Kudos to Carter for the exhibit.

Posted by: [Terry Odell](#) | [March 06, 2009 at 07:03 AM](#)

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