Art as language, art as images

A trio of artists creates exhibits showing the power of both words and pictures

By HARVEST HENDERSON
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Driving through the Dakotas once, I saw a postcard that was nothing more than a plain rectangle of black cardboard. The caption: "Nighttime in the Badlands."

Barbara Tetenbaum, exhibiting in "Text as Image" at the L&B Viewing Room, springboards off a similar concept. Making wry note of the way visual art is often reduced to a few choice words for the sake of advertisement or critique, Tetenbaum displays a host of untitled non-images that deny the viewer that opportunity.

"This sad scene of profound desolation uses a muted palette of yellow, gray, and blue," reads one piece. "Jesus in the garden at Gethsemane; the dramatic 1950's version," says another — or how about simply, "A bad attempt at abstraction"? The typeset descriptions are centered in traditional frames, arranged salon-style across several walls of the small gallery.

In the same space, Katherine Kuehn displays a single piece, "Commute." It's a 16-foot swath of pale pink fabric, hung horizontally and embroidered left to right along its center. The embroidered text, excerpted from the essay "Without End," by French author Helene Cixous, was hand-stitched by Kuehn during her daily commute to work by train.

In her artist's statement, Kuehn discusses the way the text gained power for her as she slowly stitched it into the fabric. "As I sewed, I became absorbed in the slow construction of each word, of the visual characteristics of each letter's form, and of the inherent abstraction of the code that is language," she states.

In Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There," Humpty Dumpty has a conversation with Alice about the unruly nature of words:

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

The apparent cynicism toward words in Tetenbaum's exhibit is not ill-founded, but its brand of witticism may ultimately be the sort better left to postcards. By falling in that direction she lets the words take control of her rather than guiding them with her expression. Kuehn, on the other hand, literally pins the little beasts down, mastering each one up close through a series of tiny stitches.

While Kuehn experiences the process of text and Tetenbaum observes with gimmicked paraphrase, Julia Stoops — exhibiting at the Alysia Duckler Gallery — is a contender, working in the muddied trenches between verbal and visual vocabulary. Stoops fleshes out the relationships among words, images and emotion in her exploratory "Sign Paintings."

Stoops' mixed media "Sign Paintings," inspired by her observation of a Bureau of Parks sign while on a neighborhood stroll, muses on that officialism by extending it to the unlikeliest and most deserving of subjects. Stoops coins her own Bureaus of Sparks, Larks, Quarks, Fate and Ambition, to name a few. Personal declarations make their way into "Sign Paintings," too, with signs pleading "I need to remember where I've been" and "I need to remember who I am."

Painted in large capital letters that consume the entire surface of each piece, Stoops' words run together, overlap, and are unsentimentally cropped at the edges of the artist's busy "page." The left-brained temptation is to figure out what each one says and move on. But this would be failing to see each painting as a whole, and they're actually quite good.

The signs exhibit Stoops' characteristic penchant for intensive layering, so grasping the composition of each piece requires the viewer to look into the painting as much as at it.

Stoops maintains the upper hand in her relationship with words as both creators of image and images themselves.

"Help Me to Recall," by Julia Stoops, 11 by 15 inches, mixed media.

ART REVIEW

Text as Image

Who: Barbara Tetenbaum and Katherine Kuehn
Where: L&B Viewing Room, 1714 N.W. Overton St., 503-241-4144
Closes: Friday, March 2

Sign Paintings

Who: Julia Stoops
Where: Alysia Duckler Gallery, 1236 N.W. Hoyt St., 503-223-7595
Closes: Wednesday