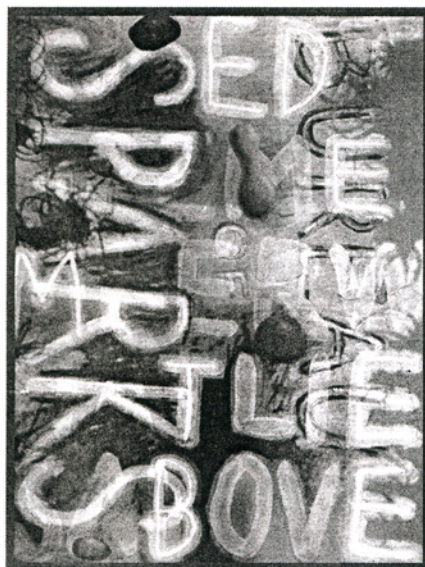
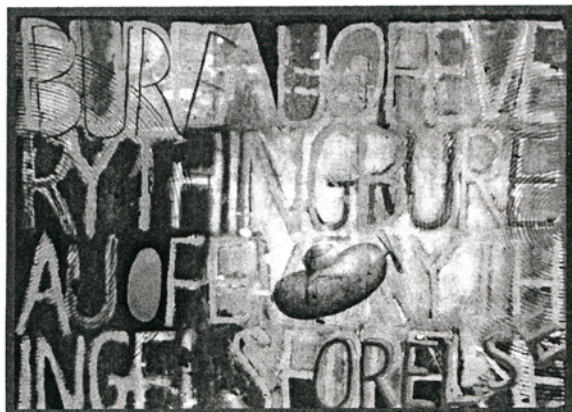


Oregon

Julia Stoops at Alysia Duckler Gallery

Word as image has been around for a while. But for

some reason, it has been coming up quite often lately. Several current New York shows—Cy Twombly's *Coronation of Sesostris* at Gagosian Gallery, a survey of contemporary text-based works called *A Way with Words* at the Whitney at Philip Morris and an exhibition of artists' diaries at the Archives of American Art, to mention a few—indicate that language has not lost its fascination as a subject.



Julia Stoops, *I need to Remember (Bureau of Sparks)*, 2000, mixed media on paper mounted on wood, 11" x 9", at Alysia Duckler Gallery, Portland.

Portland galleries weighed in during the month of February with a number of exhibits that placed language center stage. Among them, Julia Stoops's mixed-media "sign paintings" at Alysia Duckler Gallery wove the visual and the verbal into a vivid and curious mix.

The paintings were inspired by a Bureau of Parks sign Stoops encountered one afternoon while taking a walk. Struck by the thought of a government agency administering the affairs of birds, squirrels and trees, Stoops went on to create a collection of signs that might announce other equally important, if less likely offices. In Stoops's world there is a Bureau of Sparks, a Bureau of Quarks, and a Bureau of Marks. There are also bureaus of Ambition, Fate, Luck, Unhappiness and, just to be on the safe side, a Bureau of Everything. Scrawled end to end with the kind of hand lettering commonly seen when advertising garage sales, phrases are laid on top of each other or turned sideways over fields of spiraling comets and tiny explosions made by drips and splatters of brightly colored ink.

With an approach bordering on slapstick, Stoops fills in her O's, bounces polka dots in among the words or sends a fat, cigar-shaped submarine to explore their depths. On a formal level, she seems to be wondering how densely packed with information a surface can be while still retaining its coherency. Beyond that, she is toying with the authority of words. It is hard to take these playful, lushly decorated surfaces too seriously—which might be the point. For such is our habit of faith in officialdom that it is possible to imagine nonetheless that all of life's problems would vanish if only we could find the right office, file the pertinent paperwork and obtain the proper license.

A few of the paintings feature a single

female head painted in a deadpan illustrational style. Some are blanketed with gauzy clouds. In *Reading Poetry*, a woman peers up from the painting's bottom edge at a line of lights vertically arrayed in a deep, midnight blue sky. They could be UFOs or strangely aligned planets. Other paintings harbor systems of precise geometrical marks and are carefully printed with "I" statements that read like sticky notes to oneself, reminders of strategies for getting by. Together with the sign paintings, they hint at a cosmic bureaucracy through which one hopes to find one's way.

That shouldn't be so very difficult, however. One painting, titled *Ravens*, contains the words of a "found" fact: "RAVENSHA/ VEFIGURED/OUTTOW/ AYSOFCARR/YINGTWOD/ONUTS/ SMART." If ravens can be so clever, certainly the rest of us can somehow stumble along.

—Pat Boas

Julia Stoops closed in February at Alysia Duckler Gallery, Portland.

Pat Boas is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.