



KAY ROSEN
MAP OF THE WORLD



'SOMETHING IMPORTANT IS HAPPENING THERE!'

Kay Rosen in conversation with Justin Paton, head curator of international art

I wanted to start with a question about your marvellous wall painting *BLURRED*, which has just entered the Gallery's collection. Before you created this work, I don't think anyone had noticed that the word 'blurred' has two colours in it – 'blue' at the start and 'red' at the end. And certainly no one had blurred those two colours on the wall to make the 'r' in the middle purple. The solution is so surprising yet perfect that it makes me smile whenever I think of it. So my question is: How do you find these possibilities that no one else has seen or heard in language? Do you hunt them down methodically, or do you have to tune your radar and wait for them?

That's a great question and it's a little hard to answer. My conceptual process has entailed both – dogged painful trial and error and sudden inspiration. Sudden inspiration is by far my favourite, but it is more mysterious and harder to retrace my steps.

Language, both spoken and heard, written and read, is a continuous source of 'found' material for me, just as someone would find collage potential in scraps of detritus. My job, as I see it, is to recognise that potential through the 'radar' you suggest, pluck it out of the stream of everyday discourse, and enable it by showing off what it can do through art: colour, scale, composition, architecture, materials, and graphic styles. *BLURRED* is probably one of the most complete self-made texts that I have ever discovered, with its elegant confluence of meaning and structure. Since it has already done all the work, my intervention is minimal: applying the blue and red directives to their respective verbal parts and inserting the word into a space with two perpendicular walls meeting in a corner. The verbal 'meeting' of BLU and RED located at the letter R is reinforced by colour (blended purple) and by architecture (the meeting of the walls). The 'meeting' is the central gesture of accommodation between the two sides. It is a perfect verbal allegory.

In your project for the Gallery you're working not with a corner but a long horizontal wall in two parts, and the words you've chosen are the pronouns *YOURS* and *OURS*. If we can take up your image of words as 'found' material, what made you pick up these two verbal objects?

It was the architectural setting that led me to them. Not only are the words 'found', the support is also. The wall is a given that helps determine the verbal content, just as the perpendicular walls in *BLURRED* contributed to its content. The support for *YOURS OURS* is a long horizontal wall divided by a doorway into two unequal parts, setting up the frame of reference for the text. The two-part space calls for a binary application of language that will

reflect on area and distribution. The wall and the text are tied inextricably together. I'm not exactly sure where *YOURS OURS* came from, but when it did emerge out of a stew of ideas, I knew it was right for several reasons. It's succinct, efficiently sending a complex message using only five letters. It describes an adversarial relationship between two pronouns, more adversarial and less ambiguous than, say, 'his and hers' or 'mine and theirs'. *YOURS* and *OURS* are possessive pronouns, implying ownership. This notion of ownership is represented by the unequal amount of space each text occupies on its respective wall. It's as if *OURS* said, 'We have 80% of the letters and, Y, you have 20%. We'll stay on this side and you stay over there. You can't join *OURS*, or *OURS* will become *YOURS*.'

They're particularly loaded words to play with in the Gallery's grand entrance court, a space viewers have to pass through before reaching our collections. Indeed to reach the modern Australian paintings viewers will walk through the middle of your divided word. How do you think this public setting will inflect your verbal tug of war? 'Our' collections after all are not 'ours' at all but rather the people's – yours. Do you have strong feelings yourself about who art and art galleries belong to?

It's hard to say how it will work in this very public space. I hope that viewers aren't so inured to large-scale signage and messaging that they blithely ignore *YOURS OURS*. Perhaps its scale will envelope them as they pass by or pass through and not give them a chance to escape.

The work itself doesn't take a position, nor do I as its agent, because the message arises out of the structure of the language, not from my intentional or subjective voice. Personally however, I'm squarely in the art-belongs-to-the-people camp. I have been very disturbed by the current battle being waged against the Detroit Institute of Art by creditors of the bankrupt city who are trying to claim it to satisfy their debt. On a broader scale, *YOURS OURS* reminds me of the brilliant 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests by the 99% against the 1%.

I would be very pleased if at the very least viewers considered the bilateral equation presented by the work, and if on some level they questioned the blue triangle nesting in the Y.

It's such a curious interruption, that slice of blue – as though the hand of a mighty editor or art director had reached in and crisply amended your lettering.

I know! I found that V shape formed by the Y compelling, but I realise that the introduction of the blue triangle is quite a disruption in our expectations from text. All of a sudden the viewer is asked to change directions and see as well as read.

And then we have to reckon with what happens to that triangle across the entrance court, in a vast second wall painting called *AREA OF DETAIL*. Can you say a little about what becomes of the triangle there, and especially why it becomes so big?

I'm sure you are familiar with newspaper stories, usually about a disaster or strife of some sort, accompanied by maps with a small inset depicting where the specific action is and titled 'Area of detail'. It is usually enlarged and shown beside the map of the overall surroundings. *YOURS OURS* refers to possession, occupation, and competition for ownership that often leads to the sort of mayhem that we read about in these reports. The blue triangle takes the text a step further by adding a bit of drama and turning it into a kind of map depicting the site of something happening. What viewers will see across the entrance court in *AREA OF DETAIL* is the same site of potential, but much bigger, almost 10 metres from top to bottom. The bigness suggests that we've zoomed right in – that this piece of territory is under close scrutiny.

Is the colour blue a clue to what is happening, or do you like to leave it open?

As with all art and language, it is up to the viewer/reader to interpret what the triangle represents and what the conflict might be about, as it is defined generically only as A-R-E-A.

The blue shape lodged in the junction of the Y where the branches fork might represent a pure blue patch of sky as seen through the limbs of a tree, or a pool of clear blue water, both of which in the context of *YOURS OURS* could suggest an environmental conflict: the fight for clean air and water against polluting forces, or a struggle for diminishing resources.

I am often interested in the negative areas created by the positive shapes of letters. *KEY* 2008, with the gold skeleton key shape between E and L is another example of a painting that asks that the background, as well as foreground, be considered. But whatever *AREA OF DETAIL* means, we know from its scale that something important is happening there!

The way the work pulls the eye on a circuit from A to R to E and then back to A reminds me of a related work of yours, *TENT* from 2010, where you use three judiciously placed letters to create a kind of imaginary shelter: T, E, N and then back to T.

A great example. In both of those works, *AREA OF DETAIL* and *TENT*, linear writing is replaced with an arrangement of letters that is shaped by structural necessity. I don't know if it's the poetic me or the sign-maker me that looks for this type of economy, but I find it's more efficient to reuse the redundant letters, A and T, than to repeat them. So three letters (A-R-E and T-E-N), instead of four, form the points that create the three-sided shapes. Like points on a map, the letters plot out their blue territory (*AREA*) or identity (*TENT*).

The words in your works seem to enjoy their new roles. It's as if they discover a gift for performance and self-reflection. What are the rewards of activating words in this way?

Yes, they're pretty proud of themselves. My academic background was in languages, not art, but early on I switched over to art because I found that some of the most interesting things about language had to be expressed visually. In a way, I feel like I am continuing my language research and I am most excited by new discoveries, the athleticism of words, beauty and the way work is rendered in paint or pencil, and of course sharing it all.



SKELETON

from far left:

BLURRED 2004
latex paint on wall
dimensions variable
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Purchased 2014
Photo: Tony Mastres

KEY 2008
enamel paint on canvas
33 x 57.2 cm

TENT 2010
acrylic paint on wall
dimensions variable
Barbara Krakow Gallery Boston





BIOGRAPHY

Trained in languages and linguistics, Kay Rosen rejected academia in favour of a visual approach to language early on, starting over as a 'self-taught' artist. Rosen's language-based paintings, drawings, editions, collages, installations, and one video have been exhibited in museums and institutions nationally and internationally for over three decades, among them the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1998–99); The Art Institute of Chicago (2000, 2011, 2013); Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2011–13); Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany (2013); Museum of Modern Art, New York (1996, 2012); and Aspen Art Museum (2012–13). Her work resides in collections worldwide and is the subject of the book *Kay Rosen: AKAK*, published by Regency Art Press, New York City, in 2009. Rosen lives in the midwestern part of the United States and has taught at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago for 20 years. More can be learned about her work at kayrosen.com.

READING/LOOKING LIST

by Kay Rosen

Life: a user's manual, Georges Perec, 1978

No 105 (1992), *No 109 2.793–12.15.93* (1993), *No 111 2.793–10.20.96* (1997), Kenneth Goldsmith [and anything else by him]

Mystery novels by British, Scottish and Irish women (Deborah Crombie, Tana French, Elizabeth George, PD James, Lynda La Plante, Val McDermid, Jill McGown, Denise Mina, Ruth Rendell)

Writings on music, 1965–2000, Steve Reich, 2002

Anne Bancroft and Lee J Cobb in the 'Yma dream' sketch, *Annie: The women in the life of a man*, 1970 (see youtube.com)

Breakfast at Tiffany's, Truman Capote, 1958, and sibling *The great Gatsby*, F Scott Fitzgerald, 1925

LIST OF WORKS

The project *Map of the world* comprises:

YOURS OURS 2014

acrylic paint on wall
354 x 840 cm and
354 x 2038.5 cm

AREA OF DETAIL 2014

acrylic paint on wall
978 x 3155.5 cm

The artist acknowledges
Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York

AGNSW Contemporary Projects is a proposal-based program jointly selected by the curators of contemporary art.

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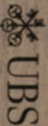
Artworks © the artist
Installation photography © AGNSW

left: AREA OF DETAIL 2014
cover: YOURS OURS 2014
Installation at the Art Gallery of
New South Wales, October 2014

also visible: David Aspden, *Brazil no 3*
1971, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Gift of the Rudy Komon Memorial Fund
1985 © Karen Aspden

AGNSW
CONTEMPORARY
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