

Mural Marvel: Kay Rosen has her way with walls and words



Kay Rosen, "Blurred", 2004: Installation view, part of the exhibition "Kay Rosen: Halfull", University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara.

By Bill Clarke

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Born in Corpus Christi, Texas, language- and text-based artist Kay Rosen, who now calls Gary, Indiana, home has been producing work for almost four decades. After studying linguistics and languages Rosen, rather than pursuing a career in academia, started to explore language as art in the early-1970s. Although she set aside text-based work for much of the 70s to experiment with sculpture, photography and performance, by 1983 she had returned to text. Through her paintings, prints, drawings, books and, most significantly, her large colourful murals, Rosen remains committed to examining how, in a uniquely bold and often humorous way, language functions.

It seems that, at any time, multiple works by Rosen are on view someplace in the world, and right now is no exception. In September, the exhibitions *Don't Smile* at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, *A Thousand Words and Counting* at the Honolulu Museum of Art, and *Girl Talk: Women and Text* at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina all feature work by Rosen. Large outdoor public installations are also currently on long-term exhibition in Christchurch (New Zealand), Aspen and Chicago. Despite this busy exhibition schedule, Rosen found time to correspond with Magenta editor Bill Clarke about these projects, and the politics and humour that inform her work.

Bill Clarke (BC): I've read that you grew up in a

household hearing English and Yiddish, and that you also learned Spanish as a child. Is this where your interest in language came from?

Kay Rosen (KR): It's hard to say what from my past has influenced me, but it may have been my multi-linguistic exposure. I was aware that my small world in Corpus Christi was expanded by other languages and cultures and they made my childhood experience seem more exotic. But, the idiosyncrasies of English also fascinated me. My mother enjoyed word games, crossword puzzles, crazy songs and limericks, so that may have rubbed off. And, my parents had a great sense of humour. The name of my grandmother before she was married was Kitty Katz, and other kids used to tease me by saying, "If you see Kay."

BC: Many artists work with words and language - Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry - but I can't say that you are really like any of these artists. If I was going to compare you to anyone, it would be Ed Ruscha, especially in his paintings like *Lisp* (1968), in which the meaning of the word is tied to the visual qualities of the painting. Where do you think you fit in amongst these other text-based artists?

KR: I probably fit in with them only to the extent that we all use language as the sole image. But, I

think I fit in with them as much as they fit in with each other. I can't think of any two artists who use language in exactly the same way. They are all so distinct.

BC: What, for you, is a game-changing early work?

KR: If there was a game-changer, I would say it was *Dear Earl Bear Geart* (1969), which was one of the first text paintings I made after leaving academia for art. It established my interest in text as a found source of visual material.

BC: What and/or who are some of your influences?

KR: Since my academic background focused on language and not art, I started from square one when I began making art. I had made art informally but, basically, I knew nothing and no one.

In the early - 70s, I responded strongly to painting that included text, like Larry Rivers' *Lions on the Dreyfus Fund III* (1964), which I saw at the Art Institute of Chicago. In the late-70s and early-80s, my practice shifted a bit to systems and grids. At that time, I was influenced by performance minimalists such as Steve Reich and Trisha Brown.

Following those ten impressionable years, there was no one who really had a decided influence on me.

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That is not to say that I haven't loved the work of many artists whom I've followed or known, usually those whose work is quite different from mine, but which always includes wit or humour. I'm sure I've absorbed inspiration from them.

BC: Your work also reminds me of text-based pieces like Robert Indiana's LOVE paintings, which were inspired by his interest in concrete poetry. Do such things as concrete poetry inform your work, as well?

KR: No. I have been asked that question many times. Some people insist that I am a poet or a concrete poet, most notably the great poets Kenny Goldsmith and Eileen Myles, and the critic Ken Johnson. I'm honoured by that label and get a little thrill-chill when I'm called a poet, especially by them. But, I think the work is really informed by language in its most basic unadorned form.

BC: Where do your words come from?

KR: The ideas come from different places. Sometimes I come up with them out of thin air, sometimes they come from things I read, see, hear, or remember, but it's very intuitive. I can tell you where I was and what I was doing when an idea came to me, but I usually can't trace the thought process.

BC: Graphically, you seem to favour simple yet bold sans-serif fonts that bring to mind mid-20th Century print and billboard advertising.

KR: My first exposure to fonts was through a small design job I had at a weekly newspaper, so maybe that's the influence you see. I have usually favoured generic sans-serif fonts such as Futura, English Gothic, Univers, Commanor and Gil Sans to avoid graphically influencing meaning. It's important to me that meaning is supported primarily by structure, not by style. That said, I love the shapes of letters; they are the architecture of text.

In certain types of signage I've also been drawn to the way dense blocks of letterpress type expand or contract to fit within margins. The fixed margins that I've used as one strategy since 1986, in works like *Various Strata*, *John Wilkes Booth*, *The Ed Paintings*, and others, reflect my interest in how they can (re)structure and affect meaning.

BC: In works like HI (1997), a version of which was wrapped around MKG127 gallery here in Toronto a couple of years ago, colour seems to play an important role in helping guide people through the work. Could you speak a bit about your use of colour?

KR: Yes, color is a way of distinguishing parts of text, as in HI, of reinforcing textual meaning or identity as in *Blurred* (2004), *The Forest* for the

Trees (1990) and *Phantom Limb* (1993), of creating a mood as in *Seascape* (2008), or to attract attention, as in the large public signage works.

BC: Indeed, some of your outdoor public installations are quite large. *Go Do Good* (2010) in Chicago, for example, is six-storeys tall and affixed to the side of a building. How does one even approach accomplishing a work like that? What are some of the challenges?

KR: After I selected the site and presented three proposals, the Chicago Loop Alliance (CLA), the sponsor of the project, selected *Go Do Good*. There were several challenges, but the biggest was getting permission and access from the owner of the Stevens building that the mural is painted on. Because we couldn't access the roof of Old Navy, the adjacent two-story building, the painters had to suspend the scaffolding from the roof of the Stevens Building and crawl, with all their paints and supplies, out of a window belonging to government offices. Access was approved only on the weekends and it rained every weekend! With one week to go before the unveiling, I sent a desperate S.O.S. to the CLA and we were able to get special permission to paint on the few remaining weekdays.

The one non-challenge was the painter, Tom Melvin of Thomas Melvin Studios in Chicago. I had worked him many years before and was confident in his ability to execute it. He is a superbly experienced painter of public murals. (I also love my other two sign painters, Stephen Reynolds and Norm Laich.)

BC: In a work like *Go Do Good*, there seems to be an underlying social message, while in a piece like *Between a Rock and Hard Place*, there seem to be political undertones. Are these underlying messages something new, or have such underlying messages always been there?

KR: The social and political messages have been there since the 70s, but I have had more public opportunities recently. I don't set out to send a message. They emerge as a natural product of the structure, self-generated by the words or phrase. My role is primarily cognitive, discovering a message that's concealed in a bit of text. For example, identifying KANDAHAR within BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE was a fantastic discovery.

The simple architecture of the site often helps set parameters for the work, such as BLU-R-RED on two walls meeting in a corner and Yours/Ours, which was made for the MCA Chicago in 2010. Yours/Ours sends a message on two equal length walls via the unequal structure of the divided word(s): Y-OURS. As a strong supporter of Occupy Wall Street, I see the unequal distribution of letters between Y (one letter belonging to Yours) on one wall and OURS (four letters) on the other wall, as

a verbal microcosm of the ninety-nine percent and one percent. I enjoy working within the strict limitations of a site or self-imposed linguistic rules and the economy that requires large messages from small texts.

Recently, Helga Maria Klosterfelde Editions in Berlin published an artist book of mine from the 80s titled *Mined*, which was inspired by my outrage over the policies of the Reagan administration, but not limited to that administration. The draft had been sitting in a drawer for 30 years; however the "centrefold" of the book was realized as the large multi-panelled installation *No Noose Is Good Noose* in 1983.

BC: You have been consistently making work for almost 40 years, and you always seem to have work on view somewhere, but you still seem like an artist who could be considered "under the radar". Would you agree with such an assessment?

KR: Yes, I would agree, but I'm not sure why. There are several possible reasons, I would guess.

BC: You recently completed the installation of a mural, *Here Are the People and There Is the Steeple*, in New Zealand at the Christchurch Public Art Gallery. The country is still recovering from the massive earthquakes that hit the island in 2011 and 2012. What was it like developing work in such an atmosphere?

KR: The Christchurch Public Art Gallery has been closed since the first earthquake. Their curator, Justin Paton, who in 2004 had curated *Kay Rosen: Big Talk* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery on the south island, commissioned me to do a mural on the exterior of the museum so that it would continue to have a presence in the community even though it was closed. It was my choice to reference the historic Christchurch Cathedral, whose steeple was badly damaged in the earthquakes, and the huge controversy surrounding the demolition/reconstruction of the cathedral. Despite the raging protests, which continued right up until the installation of *Here Are the People and There Is the Steeple*, the cathedral was demolished, sadly. Hopefully, the mural serves as a reminder of what was lost.

BC: This was not your first public commission in New Zealand, was it?

KR: No. *Deep Beep* was a different work that was part of a 2011 exhibition, also curated by Justin, titled *Debuilding*. The first earthquake hit two weeks after the exhibition opened, and the museum was commandeered as an emergency centre. *Deep Beep* was painted on a structure over an underground parking garage but, after the earthquake, I came to think of the 'deep beep' as a prescient warning from deep within the earth, rather than just a sound from the underground garage.

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BC: You are featured in three group exhibitions that all opened in September. What are you showing in these exhibitions?

KR: In Liechtenstein, we are showing a 70-foot wall painting titled Unconstructed (Home); two gray paintings on canvas (Venus and the Sun and E. Rigby); a drawing titled Split Pea Soup, and the prints 9/11 and HI.

The Honolulu Museum of Art is installing Blurred, while the Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh is installing HI as a 47-foot wall painting. After the recent same-sex marriage amendment passed in North Carolina, we decided to also distribute my 1989 list Homophobia as a handout.

We just installed the wall painting Between a Rock and a Hard Place at the Art Institute of Chicago, who acquired it, and Constructitton Zone, commissioned for two barricade walls around the new Aspen Art Museum, opened last month and will be on view until construction at the museum is complete.

BC: You also work extensively in prints. To return to Ed Ruscha, you recently produced a print with Paul + Wendy Projects in Toronto called SPOOF PROOF (2011), which is based on the Ruscha painting OOF (1962-63). How did this project come about?

KR: The artist Micah Lexier made an introduction between Paul Van Kooy, Wendy Gomoll and me, and they invited me to make an edition. I had wanted to do something with the idea of 'completing' Ruscha's OOF with S-P and P-R for awhile but, for various reasons, I wasn't happy with my previous attempts. Making a print was a perfect solution, and Paul and Wendy liked it.

BC: Lastly, as someone who has dedicated her life to parsing language through art, do you have any thoughts on the impact that things like texting are having on how language looks?

KR: I don't text, so I'm a bit of a Neanderthal. But, I love the idea of substituting letters and numbers for words and eliminating excess. I love that people are exchanging bulky old learned rules for slim, new, made-up ones and economizing language the way I do to fit it into a limited space.

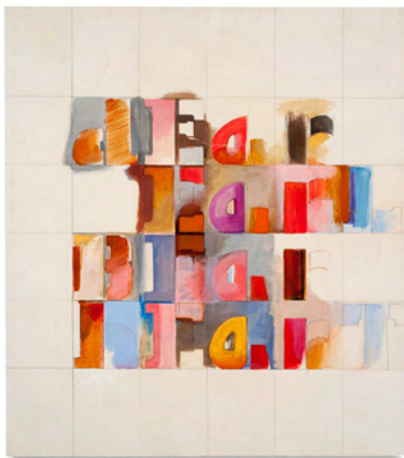
Works by Kay Rosen appear in the exhibitions Don't Smile at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein until Jan. 20, 2013; A Thousand Words and Counting at the Honolulu Museum of Art until Nov. 22, 2012; and Girl Talk at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Raleigh, North Carolina until Jan. 14, 2013. For this year's Art Basel Miami Beach, Rosen joins John Baldessari, Alan Ruppersberg, Martin Creed, Jenny Holzer and others in the project Plane Text, in which artist-designed banners will be trailed behind small planes flying over the city during the fair. Her work is also included in the exhibition Postscript at the MCA Denver, which is discussed in another of this issue's features.



Kay Rosen: "HI" (1989-99): Installation at Geffen Contemporary, Los Angeles. From the exhibition "Kay Rosen: Lifeli[k]e" at L.A. MOCA. Photo: Brian Forrest



Kay Rosen: Go Do Good (2011): Latex paint on brick wall, Art Loop, Chicago. Photo: James Prinz



Kay Rosen: Dear Earl Bear Heart (1969): Acrylic paint on board, 40 x 36 inches



SPOOF PROOF, 2011: Serigraph on archival paper. Courtesy Paul + Wendy Projects, Toronto

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