

SWEETWATER,

Sofia Leiby: abcdefghijklmnop

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Sofia Leiby is fascinated by the ways in which marks and gestures are today both effortlessly meaningful—in the sense that they seem to automatically register as direct and considered—but also anemic—in the sense that this initial impression of directness is quickly revealed to be conditioned more by our expectations of meaningfulness than by any actual meaning or sensation that might underpin it.

We have all encountered this odd disjunction when we register our marks on our devices, from the video games we swipe and tap to pass time while riding the subway, to the iPads we sign when we pay with a credit card at our local coffee shop. In a digitized culture, the gestures of the hand, both actual and simulated, have new meaning and import, but this is more a function of technological advances syncing with social values than a new system of mark, touch, and gesture. That has yet to be invented. In line with this, a “hand-made” flourish still secures our identity when we interface with a touchscreen, even though there they look like perverse variations on our handwritten gestures. Yet, while our signature still validates our identity, children are no longer taught script in many schools across America, this having been supplanted by typing classes.

Leiby finds the medium of painting to be, like handwriting is today, far from necessary or inevitable. She is instead drawn to it because of the way that through it those cultural values can be explicitly and self-reflexively summoned, given that they are deeply imbricated in painting’s several millennia of history. Finding this new and changing aesthetic space compelling, she has said, “I think of painting as analogous to a distracted activity where gestures are documents of everyday content filtered through one’s arm, not unlike a doodle.”

In her work casual doodles comingle with considered compositions, textbook entries with children’s placemat illustrations. This occurs, not so much along the lines of appropriation, at least in the sense we associate with canonical postmodernist art—as when Sherrie Levine repositions, and in doing so recontextualizes, the photography of Walker Evans, for example—but more so as a sequence of propositions and mediations that enable her to start a painting and follow it through. These actions are as elemental and essential to Leiby’s practice as mixing paint or stretching canvas is to another painter’s. In this way Leiby does not subscribe to a macho Abstract Expressionist-derived fantasy of the artist as the sublime author of an action, working up a painting in a flurry of direct expression. For the fire of her gestures is always cooled by the intellectualism of the appropriated images she silkscreens alongside them.

In her earlier work, these kinds of hybrid marks and gestures—caught between the old paradigm of the handwritten and the new technologized forms it has morphed into—featured as something of an unconscious interest, animating the artist’s desire to make a painting, and to make it convincing. It is only recently that she has turned to this situation itself and made it the subject of her work. She has done so through her investigation of a range of materials related to forms of mark-making, and specifically handwriting, which first manifested itself in her exploration of the “pen test pads” she liberates from local art supply stores. Compelled by these kinds of marks—positioned, as they are, somewhere between spontaneity and banality—Leiby became curious about the ways in which something like handwriting is both taught and analyzed. In other words, something that is at once supposedly unique but also shared, insofar as it is legible to people other than its author.

As a result Leiby has discovered a whole plethora of materials related to the pseudosciences of graphology and handwriting analysis. This has further led, in turn, to Leiby’s interest in other didactic and pedagogical tools. From the stamps that teachers use to evaluate students’ work, to placemats that teach children elements of written language while they eat, Leiby is interested in the ways in which we learn language, and have these lessons repeatedly reinforced over time. Leiby—trained in printmaking—

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feels most at home when a gesture has been lifted and transposed through the matrix of her silkscreen. These she often adjusts and layers with her own marks, which in turn arise from the imported gestures, and respond to, and develop from, them. The result may then be scanned and repurposed as the substrate of an entirely new work. In this way no single work is ever completely finished, as it may be (re)appropriated by Leiby and (re)introduced in other nodes in the circuit of her painting practice.

The additive nature of this practice has led Leiby to develop a level of facility in her process such that she has scaled it back to a kind of zero degree of sorts in a recent series of predominantly black and white paintings, which she refers to as minimally functioning images. Leiby wants them to operate like banners, declaring their content rather than proposing that it should be decoded. It is this alphabet of options and possibilities that is suggested by the exhibition's title: A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H,I,J,K,L,M,N,O,P.

While for the most part black and white, some of these paintings have accreted layers of loosely-but-purposefully-applied paint that highlights their content. This establishes a dialogue between the comparatively more and less loaded paintings. Leiby displays an economy of means when it comes to the selection of subject matter, which she splices together from her ever-growing archives of materials, both analogue and digital, which she scans and downloads, taking part of a graphology instruction manual here, and a stamp there, to produce spare compositions that evoke the recent tradition of so-called provisional painting, and especially—formally—the computer paintings of Albert Oehlen and—in terms of process—the recent work of Christopher Wool where he appropriates images of earlier work via silkscreening and adds to them with painted gestures.

The main difference between Leiby's work and that of precedents like Oehlen and Wool is that, in the intervening years, both this style and the process by which it is arrived at have ceased to be cutting edge artistic techniques, but rather are now part of the everyday operations of visual consumption in a digital age, and of content far beyond an art context. The aesthetic of the pixelated computer image is not a novelty but is now a nostalgic thing of the past—consider: how often do we encounter pixels today? That these appear in Leiby's work is related to her source material: didactic materials found at an aging school supply store in Brooklyn dating from the mid-1990s, concurrent with when Oehlen was making this work. But Leiby's comes from an entirely different space than Oehlen's—that of children's education rather than “fine” art—located a new language in the possibilities of the computerized image. In a related way, Wool came of age in the era of appropriation art—the early 1980s—so it is no surprise that, a decade later, he found cannibalizing images of his own work to make new ones a viable formal strategy.

In Leiby's case, she is drawn to imagery from the late 1980s and early 1990s since it was the moment at which handwriting and gesture in general began to interface with computer graphics, a brief episode before the former overtook the latter, which it has increasingly supplanted. Returning to Oehlen and Wool, she discovers in their imagery the great differences that now exist between the functionality of the computerized mark. These new paintings of Leiby's throw light on her past work, making more evident than ever before that in the complex looping vicissitudes of her practice. Leiby constructs a machine of sorts in her studio. A far from flawless, but instead very human and variable machine that processes source materials and produces in turn a series of results, only to take back those results and put them through again.

In graphology there is the idea that you can decode a person based on his or her gestures, which is related to painting analysis, where we feel that we can trace the meaning of a given painting in the kinds of emotions conveyed by the artist in the gestures he or she makes on the canvas, a set of emotions that have a one-to-one relationship to the artist's personality. This is perhaps why an interest in handwriting analysis persists despite the fact that script is no longer taught in schools, as Leiby discovered firsthand when she did it at the Sculpture Center, exploring the performative aspects of the practice, taking on the role of the handwriting “expert.” It was there that one of her subjects produced the note that became the source of Leiby's exhibition title. After running through the first sixteen letters in the alphabet, he stopped himself with the disclosure that maybe he's overthinking the prompt: which was to prepare a brief, spontaneous example of his handwriting for Leiby to use to perform the analysis.

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This is not surprising if we consider another example, doodle challenge graphics that present boxes with fragmented images that are meant to be completed by the reader, and which are silkscreened into several of Leiby's paintings. This purports to perform two actions at once: it releases pent up creative energies, and provides a window into the reader's character. This question of thinking too much, is the same that today underlines our relationship to gesture, and by extension the identity that it is supposed to secure. We are not quite sure if what we do is meaningful, or if maybe we're thinking about it too much.