

## Augusta Wood at Cherry and Martin

**C**ombinations of words and images are everywhere around us, but the exact nature of the relationship between the two is murky. Text and image can amplify each other, contradict each other, illuminate each other, negate each other, confuse each other—but they seem to function as parallel universes

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that occupy different planes. The strange hall of mirrors that is the text-image gap has fascinated many an artist, writer and thinker, from Italo Calvino to Roland Barthes to Kay Rosen, Ed Ruscha and Barbara Kruger. Which is not to say the field is exhausted—on the contrary, as we move deeper into the age of communications, it becomes thornier and more compelling than ever.

In her first solo exhibition at Cherry and Martin in Los Angeles, recent CalArts grad Augusta Wood tackles the divide ambitiously, weaving snippets of handwritten text through nine lush C-prints in ways that obscure the distinction between the two media. In one work, the words “unfolding in pieces” are stamped out in the sand on a deserted beach; in another, “although she held both ends tightly” is stitched with black thread into a window screen. The text in the strongest works finds an ideal balance between ambiguity and significance—not an easy line to walk. *i used to live outside new memory*, painted in black pigment on a glass artist’s palette, and *unfolding in pieces* strike me as two good examples—phrases that branch into endless corridors of meaning, whose conceptual link to the images seems certain but just out of reach. *assembled by the residue of motion*, written in white dust on a windshield, and *family to go through*, penned in black marker on the flap of a cardboard box in which part of a framed portrait is visible, on the other hand, are a shade too literal, and so lack the expansive quality of Wood’s best works.

The origins of the phrases is unimportant, though depending on your frame of reference some might be recognizable; *where i’m calling from* is the title of a book of short stories by Raymond Carver, for instance, and *the chaos of warm things* appears in Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*. Overall, you get the impression that the fragments come from all kinds of sources, united by the simple fact that Wood happened to see them, think they were important for some reason, and file them away in her head. The balance of intimacy and mystery characterizing the most successful ones is equal-

ly present in the photographs themselves: Sized roughly to human scale, the images seem to capture quiet moments of the artist’s own life (there are no people in these photographs) yet leave the precise significance of the settings, and their locations, open-ended.

Our brains are thoroughly conditioned to process printed text on sight—witness the famous Stroop test, which demonstrates that when shown, for instance, the word “blue” printed in red, it takes considerable effort to shout out the color rather than the word itself. The same principle applies to Wood’s photographs: The presence of text acts like a sharp top-note; it’s only after we’ve gazed for awhile at one of her images that we’re able to stop *reading* the words and see them instead as compositional elements. Handwriting, of course, is a unique kind

of drawing that can flip-flop between image and text, and Wood’s photographs use its aesthetic properties to brilliant effect: in *although she held both ends tightly*, the spidery, threaded words mingle with a view of blurry tree branches; in *unfolding in pieces*, blades of



Augusta Wood, *unfolding in pieces*, 2006, C-print, 50-1/4" x 50-1/4", at Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

grass poke up in the foreground, echoing the lettering on the beach below; in *i used to live outside new memory*, bunches of paintbrush handles repeat the vertical lines of the neatly painted words. Wood also alters the lettering in certain photographs (*i used to live outside new memory* and *unfolding in pieces*) to mitigate the effects of perspective—rather than recede toward a vanishing point like the rest of the scene, the words appear to float slightly closer to the picture plane, subverting the documentary nature of the photo and further confusing the distinction between text as text and text as image.

In many text-image combinations, one element clearly generates, and often subordinates, the other. Illustrations accompanying a literary work don’t usually function as art on their own just as captions, titles, essays, or reviews accompanying a work of art don’t typically function as literature. Again, Wood’s strongest works achieve a remarkable equilibrium: In them, it’s unclear whether

text generated image or image generated text. Although each of Wood's photographs is carefully composed, a work like *i used to live outside new memory*, in which the means for creating the text (here, paint tubes) are included in the photograph, creates the illusion of spontaneity, as if the artwork arose naturally from an unseen situation. Likewise, *unfolding in pieces* gives the impression that the artist, walking along the beach, was suddenly compelled to carve out that specific phrase in the sand. Also sharing this sense of urgency and inevitability is *there goes the shape of my head*, which shows a desk area (it happens to be Wood's grandfather's) cluttered with photographs, newspaper clippings, bottles of prescription pills and books. Taped to a mirror is a piece of notebook paper filled with the text of what might be a journal entry, in the middle of which the title phrase appears written in ballpoint pen. In these works, text functions at a sophisticated level, as a kind of art in its own right, rather than paling in comparison to a richly colored, expertly composed image (it should be noted that Wood, a technically accomplished photographer, does her own printing). As a result, the entire artwork is elevated. Wood's first exhibition may be a bit uneven, but the high points are very high—an ambitious, and auspicious, debut by any measure.

—Katherine Satorius

*Augusta Wood: leaning on the margin* closed in July at Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

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