

# Kay Rosen on making art out of language



July 25, 2017 - Kay Rosen is an American painter whose work is largely text-based. Many of her works are representations of words in which certain letters have been juxtaposed or rendered in different colors or scales in order to reveal hidden messages or to draw attention to the relationship between language and meaning. Her paintings are included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. "I think of language almost like these little found objects that sort of suggest themselves to me," she says. "Sometimes I don't really go looking for them as much as they're just there. You have to be in a certain frame of mind to pluck them out of the air, to make them yours. They could be hanging around and maybe I don't see them. Your head has to be in a certain place."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2128 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Politics](#), [Inspiration](#), [Anxiety](#), [Success](#).

**I read that you studied linguistics when you were younger, which makes sense considering the text-based nature of your work. Did you always want to be an artist?**

Not exactly. After I got my Master's Degree I was teaching at Indiana University Northwest, a satellite school. It was kind of boring to me, kind of rote. I started doing art a little bit on my own, and the things that I loved about it were things that you still see in my work now: color and scale and patterns of language and the way structure intersects with meaning. I wasn't necessarily so clear about it then, but it grew out of that.

I think a dissatisfaction with teaching and academia fueled my desire to do something else. Then I took a couple of classes at the Art Institute and I got the bug. It bit me. I was a self-taught artist because I never knew how to stretch a canvas or anything. I figured out things as I went along.



*Under and Overcooked*, 2004, 6' x 7-1/2'

**It's nice to be reminded that if you end up doing something different than what you went to school for, that's actually fine. It doesn't mean your education was a waste.**

That's wonderful to remember. I always felt a little bit like I'd wasted my education somehow, but I was studying language, structures of language, small little phonemes, these little parts of language and all of that informs my art. With students I've taught or artists I know, some of the most interesting ones have come from other disciplines rather than straight

out of art school.

**Do you ever think of your work as concrete poetry?**

I don't think of myself as a poet, but I don't object to it when someone wants to view the work that way. Because I have the highest respect for poetry, I can't think of myself that way. I wish I was. I don't think I qualify. Kenneth Goldsmith, he's always trying to tell me I'm a concrete poet, and I love that. I accept it, but I don't think of myself that way.

**How do you approach your work?**

I used to think of a space when I was preparing new material. I tend to work kind of small—like easel-size pieces—except for big wall paintings. I think it's maybe because I myself am small [laughs]. My studio is large, but it doesn't have a lot of big stuff in it. Maybe it's because I never went to art school and I didn't learn how to wrangle big canvasses. I used to do more defined bodies of work, which were really an exploration of an idea that took maybe a dozen paintings or drawings to fully explore whatever it was I was exploring. They were generally designated for a space. Sometimes I'll just do the work. I'll just do it and it's like wherever it ends up, it ends up. Then sometimes it's site-specific or project-oriented, which requires a different kind of thinking.



*Blurred*, 2004/2015, acrylic paint on wall, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

**We think of language as being this vast and limitless thing, but when your work is made up so specifically of words and individual characters, do you ever feel stuck? Or like you've run out of ideas?**

You know, I keep expecting that to happen but it hasn't. There is always some new angle that interests me. This last group of work I just finished consisted of these little black and white paintings on paper. There were about 15 of them. I thought of them as little laboratories. In a way, they were provisional. They existed as themselves, but then also some of them had a potential to be larger paintings on canvas or wall paintings. I'd set up these parameters for myself with these paintings. They were all vertical, and all the text was written either vertically or in vertical lines. In that space of three-inch letters, you could only have five lines. There were all these limitations I imposed on myself, so it was really about the space that was either defining or constricting the language. So even when I feel like I can't do anything new with a specific bit of language, there's always something that can be done with the space or the materials.

**What do you do when you feel like something isn't working out?**

Get up and go. Watch junk on TV or something. If there's a momentum going, if I'm in the middle of a project, then I think that happens less, but when you're just beginning something new, it's kind of deadly. I'll either switch over to doing something else or really just get my head out of it. I have an ongoing garden, so when the weather's nice it's always great to go pull weeds. That's so therapeutic. I love that. I'll do that. I'm not sure that it always helps me though get to where I want to go, but it's a good break. Sometimes it's not productive to just sit there and exist. Sometimes the only way to solve a problem is by not trying to solve it.

I always feel confident that it will eventually work itself out. I think of language almost like these little found objects that suggest themselves to me. Sometimes I don't really go looking for them as much as they're just there. You have to be in a certain frame of mind to pluck them out of the air, to make them yours. They could be hanging around and maybe I don't see them. Your head has to be in a certain place.



*IOU*, 2008/2017, letterpress print, 25' x 44'



*(T)here to (T)here*, 2016, video projection in collaboration with choreographer Liz Gerring, Lincoln Center White Lights Festival, Barishnikov Arts Center, New York City (photo by Miguel Anaya)

When your work is so much about typography, fonts, and design, does that alter the way you look at things like books, magazines, or signage in general?

Not that I don't pay attention to content, but I tend to look at the way things are installed and strategies of installation and framing. The arrangement of paintings or drawings is always the first thing I notice. And fonts, yeah, I love to look at work that uses text and the way it's done. I'm kind of stuck on a certain type of font, which is just really generic. I've gone through periods where I've used more stylized fonts, but I don't want the font to affect the meaning of the piece or draw attention to itself. It's not about the font, but rather the meaning behind it.

I have one of the totes you made for Visual AIDS. I like it because the image works almost in the same way on a bag as it might if it were painted on the side of a building.

I sometimes feel like a leaf in the wind. You go where the work takes you and you embrace opportunities as they present themselves. I've been asked by big building developers to do things on the sides of buildings, which doesn't always feel like the right thing. It depends, but I love taking on smaller projects. Every kind of project—whether it's a poster or a bag or a video or a huge billboard—exercises different art muscles, brain muscles. It keeps things exciting.

It's also nice to contribute work towards something that feels helpful and meaningful. Not to sound too Pollyanna-ish, but I feel like as artists we don't contribute to society that much, you know? We don't do enough good. Sometimes we do, but not really. We don't necessarily make any difference in the world in terms of the quality of people's lives. I'm not saying art has no value or that it doesn't make people feel better, but it doesn't feed hungry people or clothe them. So when I have a chance to do any little thing, even if it's just to contribute to an auction or design something for a charity, it's important to me. I'm actually a very political person, so I often feel like I have two lives: one life as a protester, one life as an artist. It's nice when they mix, but they don't often enough.





*Go Do Good*, 2011, latex paint on brick exterior wall, State Street, Chicago, Illinois (photo: James prinz)

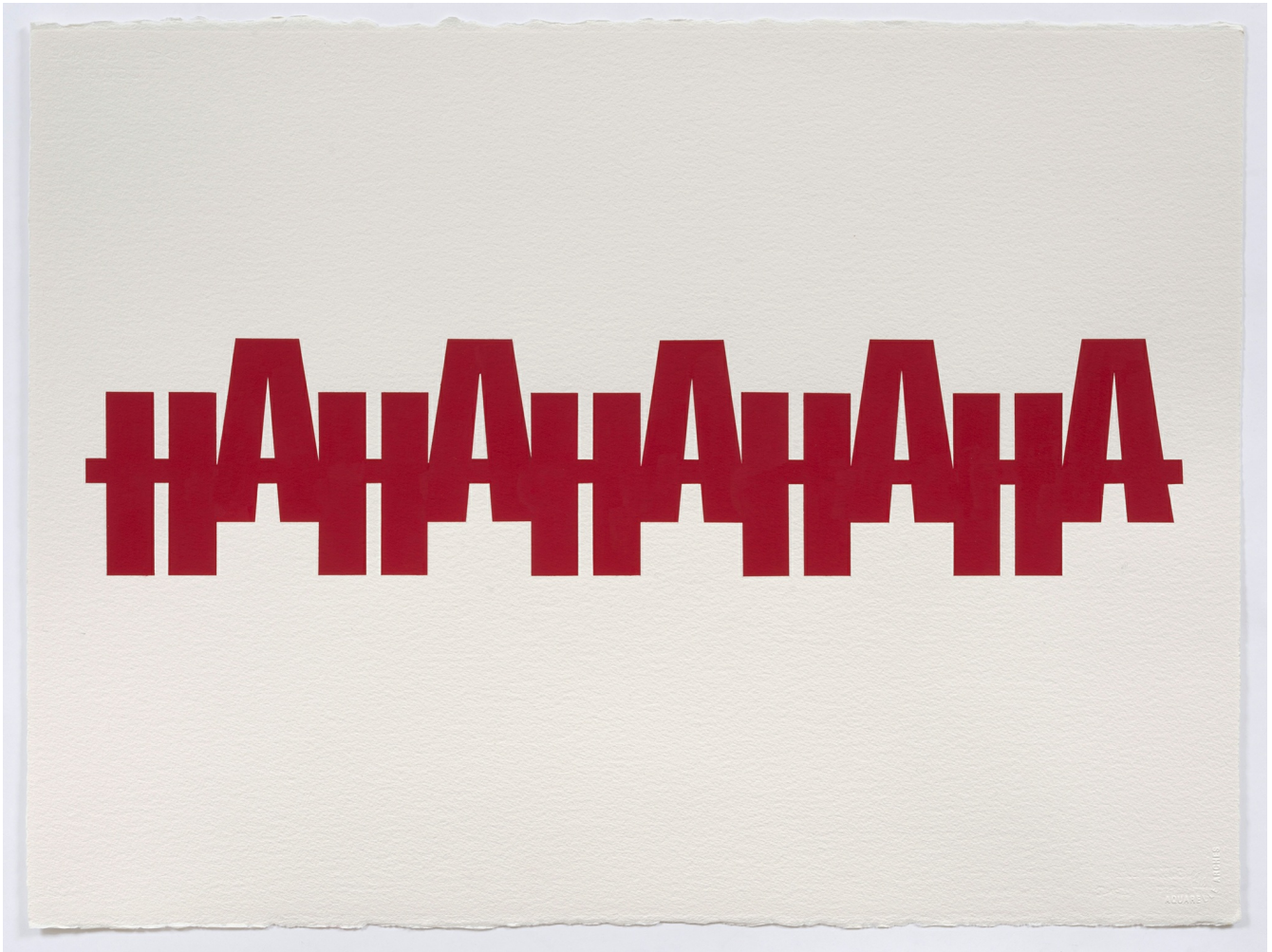
**Language is this always evolving creature that keeps changing and absorbing new things. As someone who plays with words, do you get bummed out when you see our vernacular becoming dominated by "LOLs" and emojis?**

It doesn't influence me. In fact, I think it's necessary and great. I do kind of bemoan the fact that language has become so disposable and not respected—that does bother me—but I also accept the other stuff as a necessary part of our communication. I think I've become pragmatic about it. As long as all the beautiful parts of language don't go away completely, as long as there are still people to tend that flame, I think it's fine.

**Do you pay attention to what people have written about your work?**

I do read what people say. There are a handful of people who have written really great things about my work and I've learned from them about my own work. Rhonda Lieberman has written things about my work that have meant a lot to me. There's a woman in Chicago named Judith Kirchner. I've learned from her. Eileen Myles has written really beautifully about the work and I've learned a lot from her.

I feel like sometimes artists don't actually know what their own work is about or they have a very limited sense of it. I think sometimes it's really valuable to read reviews. It may not change the way you work or even the way you feel about your work, but I think it can help you understand yourself a little better. I sometimes think it's better for students *not* to understand their work too well, at least in the beginning. It can become too deconstructed and analyzed in the early stages that they become deeply self-conscious about it. Sometimes it's good to just kind of go along in your own little world and do your work intuitively without thinking about that stuff too much.



*LOL*, 2014, acrylic gouache on rough watercolor paper, 22-1/2' x 30'

**How do you know when something is done?**

With my work you actually know at the beginning what it's going to be. I plan everything out before I actually start making the piece. There's always a chance, and it's happened many times, that it doesn't work out. I take the canvas off and throw it away. But usually, because it's sort of done before it's started, I don't even have to make that decision. When something doesn't work, when I've had to abandon something, it's usually been because there was ultimately just no humor in it—or no "A-ha" moment—because there's something missing. I have a friend whose paintings are never done, he might pick something up years later and add something to it. I'm not that kind of painter, for better or worse. I look at work I did five years ago, and I can't imagine going back to it. I'm not the same person I was then. I'm not the same person I was even five months ago. When the moment is over, it's over. I'd rather not spend time rethinking something. Instead, get up. Go outside. Go for a walk. Then make something new.



FAL  
LOVE  
R

*Head Over Heels*, 2016, acrylic paint on canvas, 36' x 24' (photo: James Prinz)

**Key Rosen recommends:**

Murder mysteries by British, Irish, and Scottish women such as [E.D. James](#), [Elizabeth George](#), [Ruth Rendell](#) (Inspector Wexford), [Deborah Crombie](#), [Val McDermid](#), [Denise Mina](#), [Tana French](#), [Lynda LaPlante](#).

Reruns of the TV shows [Mank](#) and [Columbo](#).

[Writings About Music](#), Steve Reich, 1974

[Life: a Users Manual](#), Georges Perec, 1978

Anne Bancroft and Lee J. Cobb in the sketch [Yma Dream](#), 1978.

Name

Kay Rosen

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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