

## Kay Rosen

SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO.

Over the past four decades, Kay Rosen has made works that stage demonstrations of language's materiality—its visual and aural qualities—by marshaling her unique brand of wordplay and various typefaces, colors, and (most important) arrangements of spacing and scale. She has revealed, time and again, that words and phrases can distort, amplify, and sometimes even negate their own meaning. Rosen's cohesive oeuvre has always telegraphed her writerly obsessions more than any painterly concerns, and has often evoked, in my mind, one author in particular (who is also a woman born in 1947). When, in 2009, James Wood characterized Lydia Davis's very short-form fiction as

"probably unique in American writing, in its combination of lucidity, aphoristic brevity, formal originality, sly comedy, metaphysical bleakness, philosophical pressure, and human wisdom," did anyone else think of Rosen's spare but potent output—and its status in contemporary American art?

The artist's recent show offered a sampling of new works on paper, canvases, wall paintings, and even stained glass. In the small canvas *Constructed Landscape (Winter)*, 2011, a few shades of gray enamel sign paint serve up what at first appear to be a jumble of letters and only two legible arrangements: HIV and, below it, VALLEY. Closer inspection reveals that the letters H and I from HIV and the double L from VALLEY spell out HILL and form a hump. Likewise, R's positioned above and below the words combine with other letters to spell RIVER, which cascades down the right side of the mass. Amid the other gray-hued works were two wall paintings, including the lighthearted *Wideep (detail)*, 2012, which made the words WIDE and DEEP unrecognizable by pushing them together as if they occupied a thin, shallow area, leaving only white negative space in shapes such as rectangles and Palladian arches cut in half. Yet *Wideep (detail)* filled a sizably broad wall, indicating the artist's wry sense of humor. This resonated with *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 2012, which also suggested the characteristic political slant of Rosen's works. Here, couched between two walls, the titular phrase was cropped so that only the letters KANDAHAR remained, a witty and insightful monument to the war-torn Afghanistan city.

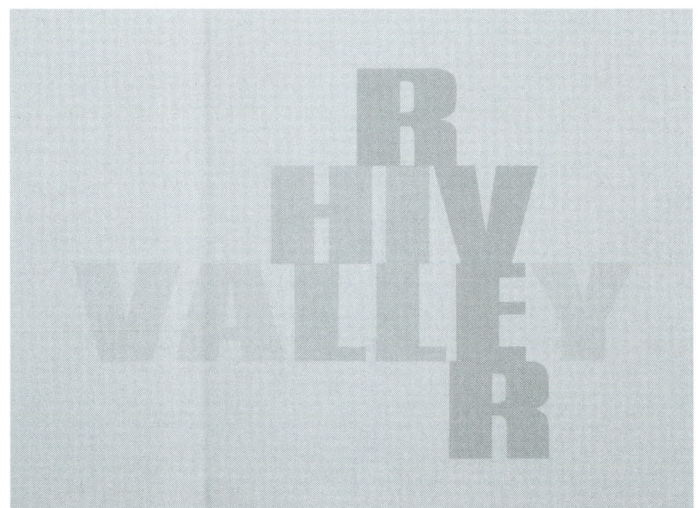
Interspersed throughout the exhibition, works on paper featured words and phrases whose individual letters are stacked atop one another. Rosen made these pieces, all 2011, according to a set of rules: Each pile must begin and end with the same letter and should be styled in a way that captures an aspect of the statement's meaning. In the case of *Cryptic Symbols*, the letters are transparent and indecipherable—and thus cryptic symbols. *Bacon Club* appears as one stack, *Pancakes and Syrup* another. The pink, gold, and neon green design of *Mayhem* resembles a piece of a psychedelic poster or what a smashed watermelon might look like on LSD.

Last but not least was the stained glass. The only three-dimensional work on view and installed in a room of its own, *Sweet Jesus*, 2012, with its stacked and translucent backlit letters, embodies a charming précis of Rosen's art—capturing the devoted, nearly religious, and yet playful qualities that have sustained her practice for so many years. Like Davis, who is often called a writer's writer, Rosen is an artist's artist, and most certainly she is a writer's artist, too.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Kay Rosen,  
*Constructed Landscape*  
(*Winter*), 2011,  
enamel sign paint on  
canvas, 22½ x 30".



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