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Kay Rosen: Little Sheep, 1993, enamel sign paint on canvas, 11 by 14 inches. Collection Rosina Lee Yue.

True to Type

BY EILEEN MYLES

In the beginning was the word, and artist Kay Rosen has done a 25-year dance with it—finding it, ducking it, morphing it, erasing language itself and inventing it again. Humor and coincidence are often her methods. Sometimes her words are just passing through, like a barreling truck with a name on its side.

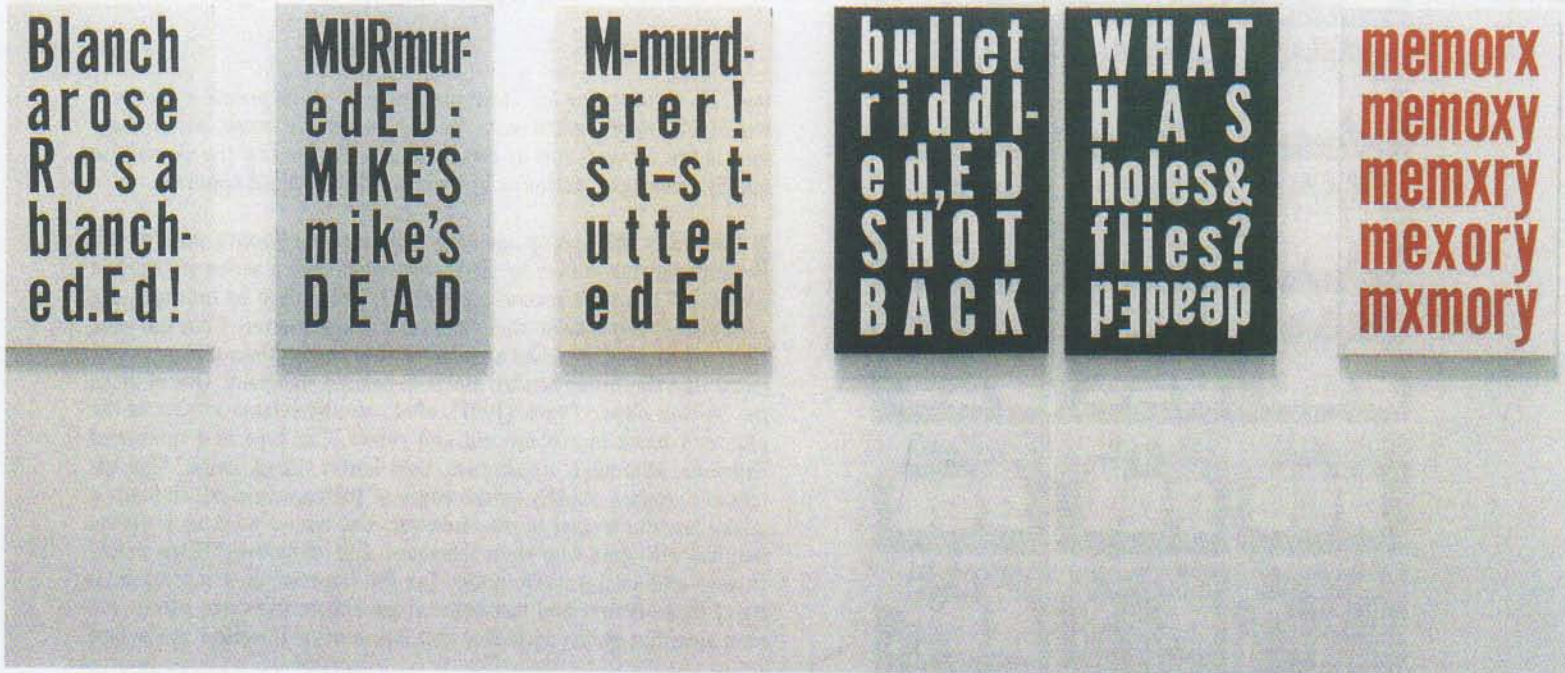
"Lifeli[k]e," the title of a recent two-venue retrospective of Rosen's work in Los Angeles, organized by Cornelia H. Butler and Terry R. Myers at the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Otis College of Art and Design, tags the place her word paintings "lie" in the context of life, or someplace "like" it, while also suggesting that some "lying" is definitely going on. The show at Otis included an intimate foray into the artist's early drawings, photos and notational performances, whereas the MOCA show contained a wider selection of canvases from the last decade, as well as large-scale wall paintings, artist's books and a video. Concurrent with both shows was a public work in the form of a single wall painting on the side of MOCA's Geffen Contemporary building. (This piece was first shown as a billboard in Lewisburg, Pa., as a project of the Center Gallery at Bucknell University.) In it, the first seven letters of the alphabet (A through G) ran in white, uppercase type across a blue background that resembled the L.A. sky; the last two letters ("HI") appeared in bright yellow, turning the wall into a friendly greeting.

Rosen's work is alternately flashy, contentious, coy and smart. Her bold and often monumental word paintings are marvels of linguistic

economy and variety. They are also a bit sphinxlike in their stunning brevity. An abundance of them leads to a kind of euphoria rather than overload.

Whether it's a tiny canvas that calls out "wee ewe," *Little Sheep* (1993), or the immense blue and gray wall painting called *Big Talk* (1985) that self-reflexively states "Jumbo Mumbo," Rosen's use of language is infectious—a spin on William Burroughs's assertion that "language is a virus." In the catalogue for "lifeli[k]e," Butler describes how, in looking at Rosen's work, "you find yourself imagining what it's like to be in Kay's brain." Writing in the MOCA publication *The Contemporary*, Tim Porges suggests that the artist enables us "to see Kay Rosens everywhere." Her paintings accomplish what good art, I think, is intended to do: they change the world around us, not through exhortation, but by a cumulative alteration of the systems of seeing, hearing and reading.

The experience of her work depends not just on seeing the many astonishing feats that letters, typefaces, margins and color can perform, or on getting in sync with Rosen's linguistic jokes, but also on enacting the performance of reading itself, listening to the virtual sounds of words. Rosen draws this enactment from the viewer through an assortment of ploys. The mega (101-by-99-inch) speech of *Various Strata*—a blue wall painting that demurs in bold black type: "Hymn, Him, Hmm"—suggests an uttering giantess, a mouth speaking to us



The "Ed' Paintings," 1988, left to right, Surprise, Technical Difficulties, Sp-Spit It Out, Blanks (two panels) and Ex-ed, enamel sign paint on canvas, each 32 by 20 inches. Photo John Geiser.

Recently, a pair of exhibitions at L.A. MOCA and the Otis College of Art and Design examined the art of Kay Rosen, from early performance works to the language-based canvases and wall paintings for which she is best known.

from behind the wall. A vitrine at MOCA held lap-sized stuff, including *Lines from Beyond the Tale*, an artist's book with illustrations from fairy tales which contains this advice: "Had the wolf puffed and puffed rather than huffed and puffed, he might have succeeded in blowing down the third pig's house."

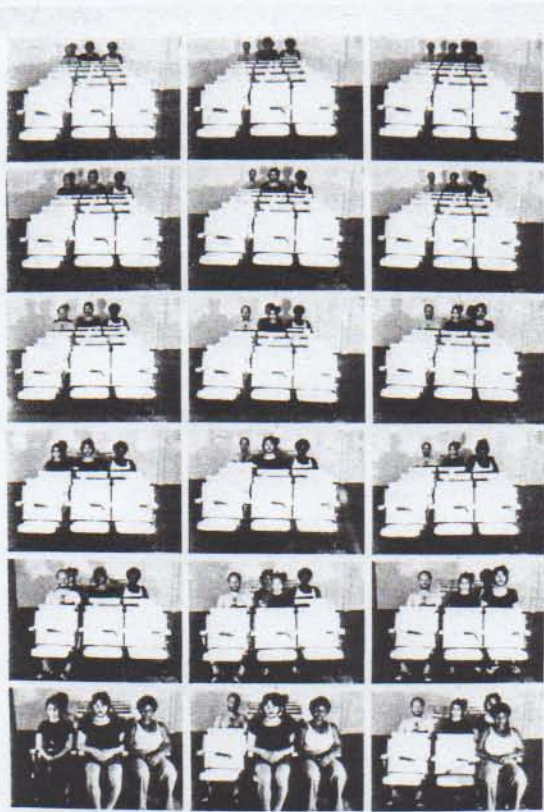
Unlike the obvious artists to compare her to—postmodern word-slingers such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Ed Ruscha—Rosen is entirely focused upon the capacities of language to enhance, distort and amplify meanings within its own system. The words she uses are very much an independent body, and she operates within the gestalt of language, calling on everything that compounds its existence—be it typeface, sound, spacing, color or, especially, scale. Though Rosen is not a writer, poet or playwright, for her, words are the beginning and the end. Her dedicated strategy is radiantly winning and has been gathering, since the mid-'80s, an ever-larger audience for her work.

Rosen was born in Corpus Christi, Tex., a town near the Mexican border where she learned Spanish in school. The public signs and talk in the street were a mix of Spanish and English. At home, her grandmother spoke Yiddish. All her life, Rosen reports, she's heard language "go round and round," and it was this active quality, "the athleticism of language," that drew her to it. Although she teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, this painter never went to

art school herself. Instead, she studied languages at Tulane and, later, linguistics at Northwestern. (Rosen says she was not interested in language as the subject of academic study; she wanted to play with it, treat it like art.) After graduation, she taught briefly and then moved with her husband to Gary, Ind., where they have lived for 28 years in the same house in Miller's Beach. She can hear the waves of Lake Michigan from her basement studio, which, she assured me in a phone interview, is light because of a dip in the dunes, so she can work there all day.

The Otis show began with a colored-pencil drawing from 1972, a piece of homemade, lined manila paper that bears a legend taken from Emily Post's *Etiquette*: "A sloppy letter proclaims the sort of person who has uncombed hair, run down heels, and a run in her stockings." Rosen's imparting of the information is willfully chaotic, like a mockup of a ransom note. One letter occurs in script, the next is made with a ruler. An "a" is formed by colored-in stencils, then parts of the next letter are absent, fallen away. It's youthful art, but the motley approach and her playful, almost tomboyish feminism are features that persist over the years in her work.

From the mid-'70s until the early '80s, Rosen stopped using language in her work almost entirely. It was a time of self-schooling, working in materials that were unfamiliar to her. Having been moved by the dance and musical compositions of Lucinda Childs and Steve



*Changing Seats, 1978, photo grid, 60 1/2 by 45 inches.
Photo courtesy Otis Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design,
Los Angeles.*

Reich, she made her own choreographed performances and documented them extensively. *Gateway Park, Gary, Indiana II* (1980) records a performance around a piece of public architecture. In a framed strip of color photos, a man in red and a woman in yellow position themselves against the different columns around a gazebo. Next to the photos is a meticulously hand-drawn chart with a vivid black circle representing the gazebo and a multitude of red lines that dart across its surface, indicating the movements of the pair. Other pieces from this time document movement along staircases and through archways and doors. Rosen's interest in these units of architecture was that they are "found"—like syntax.

An exception to Rosen's avoidance of words in the '70s is *A Song and Dance* (1978). Here, she created a chart of 45 tiny photographs of feet poised in ballet positions. Each row of five photos is accompanied by a line of text in flawless script. The first quotes one of Chicago mayor Richard Daley's lame pomposities: "Together we rise to ever higher and higher platitudes." In Rosen's playful imagination, the sentence distorts anew in 14 successive versions, from "Together we must ride to ever and ever plaid tutus," to the still more Ubu: "Together we must rise to have our high hair attired in a pompadour." She cinches the sequence tightly at the end: "Together we must rise like a hair-raising blunder from a malaprop character." The critique is complete.

The implied political intent of Rosen's early works is to artistically recuperate public spaces and discourse, to restore meaning to the rhetorical "we." It's no accident that Daley's statement evokes the virtuous words that often adorn public buildings. In *Changing Seats* (1978), a grid of photographs, Rosen retools the racial tensions of the

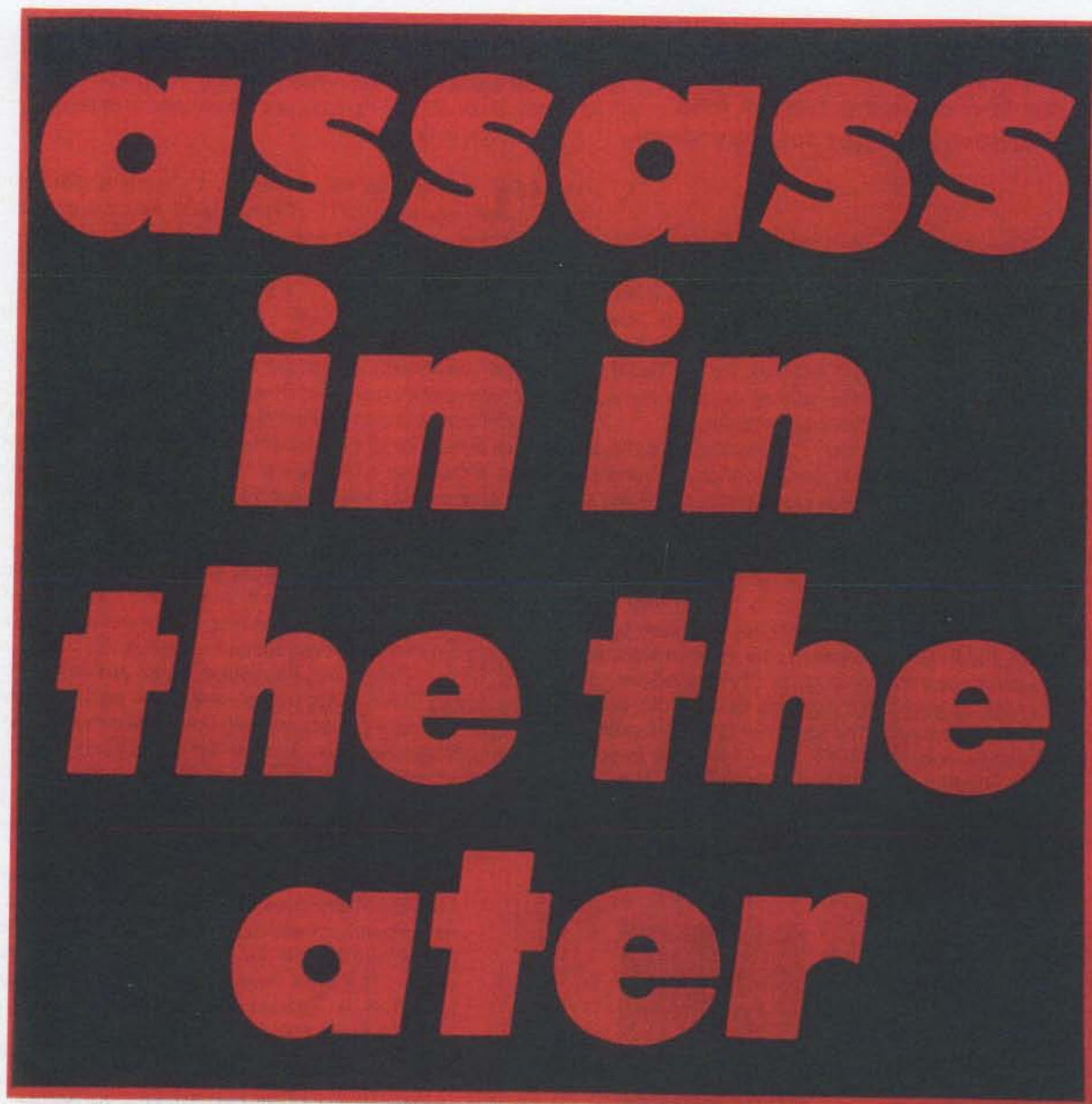
Rosen is entirely focused on the capacities of language to enhance, distort and amplify meanings within its own system.

late '70s by installing an interracial group of young people in the back row of a block of theater seats. In each successive image, her protagonists move forward, row by row, gradually confronting the viewer and mutely challenging authority by their quietly organized approach.

In the early 1980s, language began filtering into Rosen's work. It had completely taken over by 1987, when she made a series of "stacked paintings" in which several canvases, held in place by brackets, are sandwiched together so that they jut out aggressively from the wall. Each painting quivers like a medieval effort of limitless patience, executed with tiny brush strokes and bold-colored sign paint. One of them, the diptych *Edgar Degas* (1987), offers an abbreviated version of the painter's name in routine red and yellow. The type is a thickened Helvetica, alternately upper case, then lower: "EDga, deGA." The letters are cropped slightly by the edges of the canvases, which lends a pushy forceful feeling to the endeavor. The names stick their chests out, like wise guys who know the score. And, of course, "EDga, deGA" rhymes and seeing it, we notice (as the Impressionist master must have) that his first and last name share almost the same letters. It's even more fun when you realize that Rosen made this piece in the face



*Tree-Lined Street, 1989, enamel sign paint on canvas,
16 by 10 inches. Collection Anstiss and Ronald Krueck.*



Above, John Wilkes Booth, 1987-88, enamel sign paint on canvas, 20 inches square. Collection Bill Arning.

Left, Edgar Degas, 1987, enamel sign paint on canvas, two panels, each 10 inches square. Bodi collection.



Once we learn the title of *Phantom Limb*, the blackness of the painting tingles like the missing hands and feet in an amputee's nervous system.

of an immense showing of Degas's work at the Art Institute in 1987.

John Wilkes Booth (1987), delivered in slightly tilted, urgent red type on a black background, reads "ass ass/in in/the the/ater." It takes several beats to regroup these word pairs into "assassin in the theater," reiterating the awful slaying of a great president. What does it mean, one wonders, that language can do this? And then, the fact that it can becomes glorious. Absurdly political, the painting uncovers the opposite gesture—stuttering, not firing—in a tragic situation.

Perhaps Rosen's best-known work, the "Ed' Paintings" (1988), are kind of a visual drama in six acts. The action (involving the characters Blanch, Rosa, Ed and Mike) is already in place in the first of the six panels. By the second, in black letters on a pale gray panel, tragedy's struck: "MURmur-/edED:/MIKE'S/mike's/D E A D." Then, in a cream-colored painting, Ed accuses the murderer. In the next canvas, he gets it himself. But just when you think it's all over for the guy, "ED SHOT BACK." Both this panel and the one to its right use white type against a black background. Unlike the other panels, the white-on-black pair are hung only a squeak apart from each other. (The second one contains a bad joke, with the punch line delivered upside down like on baseball cards and milk cartons: What has holes & flies? deadEd.) Unerringly, they make the point that this is a "noir" language painting. And there's even an afterlife, on the white background of a sixth and final panel. Here is a stack of red memories: the word "memory" piled, five-high, with an "x" moving like marks on a bingo card down through

the pile, replacing other letters as it diagonally escapes from the mortal realm of typography, like a bullet. This is Rosen at her most theatrical and virtuosic, and the smooth economy within which she manipulates the limits of color, spacing and punctuation is entirely exposed, and even epic in its reach.

"L ifeli[k]e" was full of doubling. A group of smallish silver paintings from 1991 offered visual palindromes, with each delivering in a different way. In *Stunts*, the word of the title is turned upside down, revealing itself to be an almost perfect vertical and horizontal palindrome, the "u"s becoming "n"s and vice versa and the cross on the "t," being a little low-slung upside down, looks like a little cross. *Tidbit*, in which the title word remains rightside up, is a conventional palindrome, except for the mirroring "d" and "b." Who has considered the capacity of these letters to flip into each other's service? For most of us, this kind of reading last happened in grade school when we were being introduced to the alphabet, and frequently making such mistakes as reversing our "d"s and "b"s. Rosen possesses what such masters refer to as beginner's mind, the most valuable mind of all because of its big simplicity.

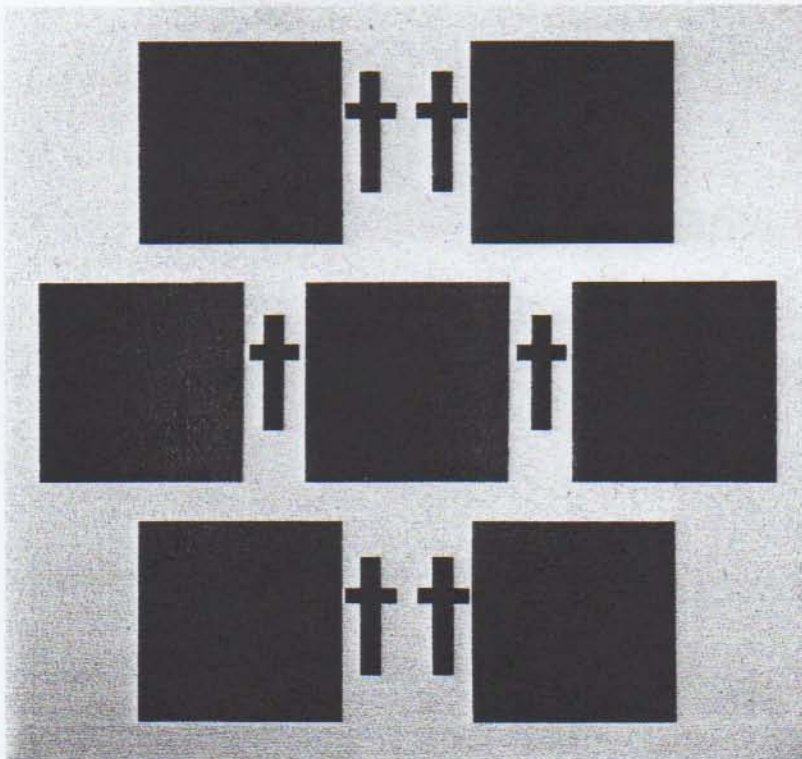
Another black-and-silver painting reads "Mémê," with the circumflex accents over the "e"s running slightly off the top of the canvas (the remaining marks look like two little acrobat's legs). The word *même* means "same" in French. By doubling the circumflex, Rosen makes the painting linguistically wrong but philosophically right.

In "Corpus" (1992), an installation of 13 pink and variously rouge-tinted paintings, Rosen plays on the name of her hometown and a fleshy reference to her own body of work. One of them, a little red "miami," seems straightforward, but because her paintings are "just" words, her titles are where she often gives the meaning an extra shove. This one is titled *Missing in Action*, so "miami" becomes the acronym streaming "mia mia" off the fluid edge of the painting. The penultimate piece in Corpus, "akak," is coyly titled *Also Known as Kay*.

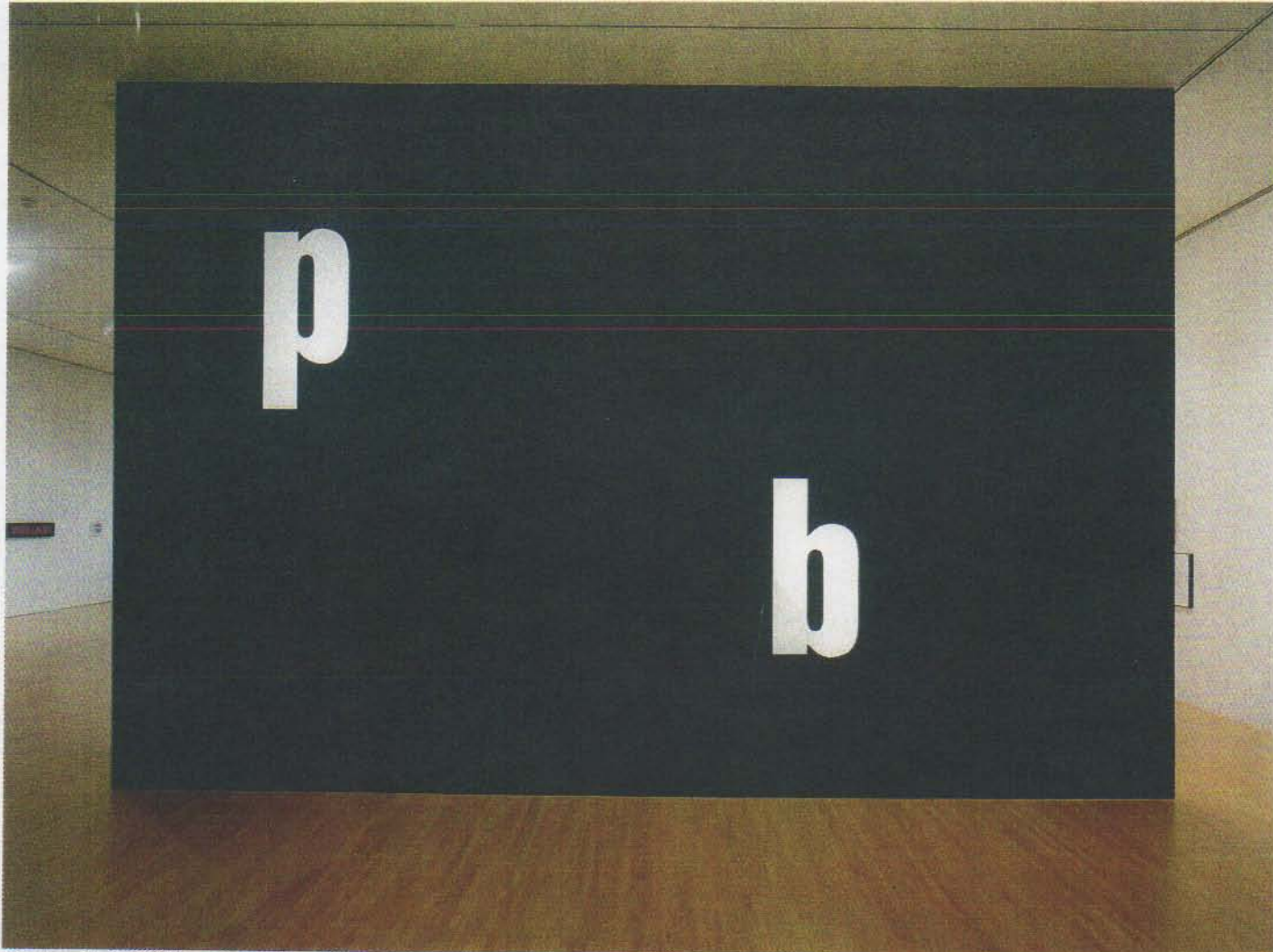
Once a device, say, the cropped or moving margins, is established in Rosen's paintings, it continues to resonate throughout her work. In *Tree-Lined Street* (1989), you get the title phrase in three lines of slightly elongated black capital letters. The word "tree" fits on the top line, but "lined," beneath it, is slightly vanishing into the margins, the "l" is shaved by what feels like fluttering movement, the "d" cut in half. By the time you get to the bottom line, the final word "street," you simply see "tree." It takes a moment to catch on that Rosen is using the margins to evoke the very trees that would partially block any view of a "tree-lined street."

In contrast, the wall painting *The Forest for the Trees* (1990), sited at the entrance of the MOCA show, offered an excess of letters. It read "tthhee ffoorreesstt," and it looked like a blurred overgrowth of language. If you examined it closely, or obsessively copied the letters out on a piece of paper like I did and checked them off, "the trees" were neatly buried in the forest. You can "see the forest for the trees." Similar micro-management goes into making many of Rosen's feats work. For instance, in the video *Sisyphus* she offers a rainbow of misspellings of the existential hero's name. As each fresh error appears in italics on the cool blue screen, a distant thud can be heard on the soundtrack—it's easy to imagine a clown hitting the ground each time a wrong spelling shows up.

In other pieces, her seemingly simple effort is based on a lightning-quick assessment (and response) to the complexity of the world in which we live. Rosen created *Little Statuette* (1990), a work of polemical elegance, during a time when the censorship controversy in America was at its highest pitch.



Little Statuette, 1990, enamel sign paint on canvas, 20 by 21 inches. Collection Alvin D. Hall.



Phantom Limb, 1993/98, wall painting, 15 by 22 1/4 feet; at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the artist and L.A. MOCA. Photo Brian Forrest.

The painting capitalizes on two different kinds of weighty symbols. The first is a black square, a censoring block that might cover a face on TV or appear in the midst of a row of type, to void the unreadable. The second symbol is a cross, the ultimate metonym, which reverberates throughout her work, and our culture. As well as representing the Christian cross, that lonely marker of dead bodies, it can be associated with the vertical and horizontal axes of reading, which Rosen employs so literally in her palindromes as well as in the silencing and erasing trope of the margin. In the cemeterylike *Little Statuette*, Rosen underscores the moribund nature of censorship, of no words.

At MOCA, *9/10* occupied the large wall above the stairs, suggesting a summational return to Rosen's earlier fascination with public movement. The design employs taxicab yellow with black lettering, all in long caps which blare exceedingly loud. The piece begins: "TEN NO NINE/NINE NEIN10" and continues on in variations on a theme of 9s and 10s, with interruptions of negations in English and German ("no" and "nein"). Here, Rosen's typesetting is especially precise. The way each line ends (with a "9," "NINE," "10" or "TEN") tells us exactly how many characters it contains. This work was conceived a decade and a half after Rosen's performance pieces, yet one encounters the same inherent support structure—controlled permutations and a quoted, or appropriated, voice of authority. *9/10* is a confused military count, an indecisive stab at going forward, an amputated futurism. We watch "the thought" get lost in a sea of bilingual homophony. Oh give it up, our painter seems to say. She is reaching out to history, grabbing its microphone and proposing something different. It's an

idealist's project, but one with a precise and totalizing logic.

Phantom Limb (1993/98), Rosen's largest indoor piece to date, covered another entire wall at MOCA. Through the progress of the show one grew more familiar with her vocabulary and tricks, and one of Rosen's standards—the reversability of the letters p and b—was utilized here. Against an utterly black wall, vivid and strong like a blackboard or darkened movie screen, a white lowercase "p" loomed in the upper left corner and a "b" occupied the lower right. The two letters are the extremities of the absent phrase "phantom limb," which is prompted only by the title of the piece; without it the viewer is left in the dark. Once the title is read, however, the blackness fills with echoes, it tingles like the missing hands and feet in the shadows of an amputee's nervous system.

Phantom Limb suggests that there are ghosts in all kinds of universes. Rosen's work is predicated on evoking such powerful absences. Repression never works, she touts. Forbidden thoughts won't go away. They quietly remain like these vestigial letters clinging to the dark of their wall. □

"Kay Rosen: lifeli[k]e" appeared in Los Angeles at the Museum of Contemporary Art [Nov. 15, 1993-Feb. 14, 1999] and the Otis College of Art and Design [Dec. 5, 1998-Feb. 14, 1999]. Works by Rosen are on view this month at the Wynnewood train station in Philadelphia and in the group exhibition titled "Billboard: Art on the Road" at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Mass. [through Sept. 28].

Author: A New York-based poet and art writer, Eileen Myles has just completed a novel titled *Cool for You*.