



# CAROLINE KENT

*A Form Walks Toward You In The Dark*

February 5 - March 15, 2020

TCNJ Art Gallery

Artists and archivists are typically presumed to occupy fixed, mutually exclusive places in the timeline of an art object's existence. The artist brings the work into the world; the archivist preserves this material relic of the genius who produced it even after they are gone. The archivist's care both uncovers and imbues the object with value, identifying its place and significance within the annals of art historical knowledge. The artist works in forms and images; the archivist in stockpiles of words. The artist is innovative, the archivist descriptive. The artist comes first, the archivist after; the artwork, their only conduit....

....These precepts do not apply in the work of Caroline Kent. Rather than await the verdict of the scholars and custodians who will presumably one day sort and assess her output, the Chicago-based Kent has long adapted a morphological type of archiving into her artmaking, producing a reservoir of works on paper to which she continually returns to rediscover and redeploy forms, often as permutations that bear distinct differences from the originals. This progeny includes large unstretched canvases that lay flush against the gallery walls; mid-sized conventional canvases; and three-dimensional, wall-mounted sculptures that activate the space of the gallery itself by their unconventional placements within it.

A Caroline Kent work begins always with black. Black appears within these works as neither color nor form, but as space, the dimensions of which are unknowable. If certain early, purist practitioners of abstract painting worried themselves into paralysis over fears that figure-ground relationships always imply some type of action, and therefore narrative progression,<sup>1</sup> in Kent's work the relationship between form and void never charts a straight course in time. In *The Shorthand Typist* (2015) it is not certain whether the diaphanous form teeming with individual, intertwined strands of pink beadlike forms is absentmindedly shedding bits of itself or adding to its bulk by sucking up new filaments, straight through the twin platforms of mauve that unsuccessfully separate them. If one is tempted to identify parallels between Kent's abstractions and real, familiar forms (as many compulsorily do with nonrepresentational imagery), one finds oneself still within wholly disorienting spatial environments: the void of space where forms phase in and out like crystalline starships leaping through time; the cold recesses of the deepest ocean where bioluminescent beings pulse green, yellow, and blue.

Veins of resemblance connect aspects of Kent's works on paper to components of larger two- and three-dimensional works, though forms rarely repeat exactly; here a mark has been enlarged and altered, or a pattern has shed a component that has mutated within another context. Kent's wall sculptures are particularly prodigal in their relationship to her paintings. Less busy than her large, unstretched canvases, they consist of simple, unique forms that manifest against wooden platforms cut to compliment them. Anchored in unconventional places throughout the gallery space, such as corners and doorframes, they have literally vacated the field in which works of art are typically beheld.

<sup>1</sup>A particularly extreme example of an artist constrained by parameters self-imposed with the aim of achieving "true" abstraction is that of the Polish artist Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), who was initially involved with Russian Constructivism before formulating the artistic theory of Unism. Dismissing even figure-ground relationships as inadmissible because they produce "opposites and contrasts" (and therefore a relationship between thesis and antithesis), Strzemiński severely curtailed the number of possible visual iterations he was able to produce from his own theories. "Statements" (1932), reproduced in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003): 376-78.

*No. 2 an expectant glance over one's shoulder* (2018) almost appears to twist about in search of its kin, like the similarly curio-shaped silhouettes that occupy the upper register of *signs and shadows* (2018); yet for this castaway the shift in medium forecloses the possibility of reunion with its two-dimensional forebearers. *No. 3 hands clasped* (2018) slouches tentatively towards a windowsill, afloat in its individual pod of black, looking a bit lost within this white expanse of wall, but not incomplete. The title of the work nods to Kent's collaborations with a pair of Minneapolis-based dancers who recently performed a piece built entirely by this title and the titles of four other wall mounted works. Kent is thus inspired effectively by herself, albeit via a crucial intervention on the part of two artists working with distinctively different tools.

In revisiting familiar forms across a diversity of media and thereby guaranteeing that even analogous forms do not “say” the same thing twice, Kent demonstrates her keen and unconventional understanding of semiotics. The central paradox of language is that the meaning of an individual word is consistent regardless of the form in which it is purveyed—the word “open,” for example, means the same thing whether it appears on the printed page or in a neon sign illuminating a window—yet the meaning of a word is simultaneously determined by the context in which it appears, in its difference from every other word that attends it. In their cross-media interplay Kent's forms perform this paradox, sometimes in ways that evoke actual letters. In a small work on paper (*raminations*), a mark resembling a cursive “m” repeats to the extent that its potential to function as a unit in a legible utterance is voided. A proliferation of strokes that similarly resemble penmanship exercises spiraling away from their logographic function appear in *A map pointing to a chorus set to perform a century ago* (2018), where a sea-green crescent bobs among the dips and crests of dotted peaks.

Kent's ability to draw out the aesthetic properties of the workhorse symbols that constitute alphabets is in part the result of her submersion in a language she did not understand, while traveling in Romania. Comprehending the intricacies of a foreign language is particularly difficult when the alphabet it employs is likewise unfamiliar,<sup>2</sup> and more difficult still when spoken and written expressions in said language overlap. Anyone who has attempted as much has likely occasionally surrendered in their struggle to understand, yielding to an aesthetic rather than a logocentric experience of the words on the page, a structure, or a screen. The written word ceases function as an empty signifier for something else and the formal properties of the glyph alone can be appreciated. Kent's work performs the formative type of corruption that translation produces, yielding families of images that despite their affinities do not speak an identical mother tongue.

-Lauren DeLand

<sup>2</sup> While the Romanian and Latin alphabets largely correlate with one another, the influence of Cyrillic upon the former is retained in special modified letters that add a layer of strangeness to Western readers otherwise familiar with the characters.

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**Essay** by Laura DeLand

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## Hours:

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 12:00-7:00 pm

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Art Gallery exhibitions are free & open to the public.

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