



If you steal a horse, 2014, Wacky wood and oil paint, 47 1/2 x 29 x 27 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

TAYLOR DAVIS

Aldrich Museum- Ridgefield, CT

Curated by Richard Klein

By Vanessa Platadis

The title of Taylor Davis's solo exhibition, appropriated from a short story by author William Gass, *If you steal a horse and let him go, he'll take you to the barn you stole him from*, is part of a series of exhibitions celebrating the Aldrich Museum's 50th Anniversary. The exhibition includes four separate, but interrelated, bodies of work: text cylinders, built forms, collages and shaped canvases that combine drawing and painting.

All of this work celebrates hermeneutics as a living experience, a matter of perceiving a moving horizon, engaging a strand of dialogue or multi-directional movement as an on-going articulation and re-articulation of the dynamic nature of all human thought.

Each of the five text cylinders requires the viewer to slowly circle a freestanding plywood tube stenciled with bold sign text. In the work *SOME HAE*, which uses a version of Selkirk Grace, a traditional Scottish prayer from the seventeenth century, requires multiple rotations for legibility:

SOME HAE MEAT AND CANNAE EAT, AND SOME HAE NANAE THAT WANT
IT. BUT WE HAE MEAT AND WE CAN EAT. SO LET THE LORD BE THANK IT.

The physical act of circumnavigating the text cylinder in an effort to de-code the meaning engenders uncertainty, ambiguity and contemplation. Language is stretched to the breaking point by the use of a circular form and four saturated colors referencing the four cardinal directions (N, S, E, W). The viewer is challenged to cobble together fragments of language to capture the narrative. Rather than treating language as if it were a clunky tool that functions one way-and one way only- Davis uses text for it's existential and political possibilities. Linguistic understanding is not a matter of only mechanical execution. In Davis's work the question "How to read?" is replaced by the question, "How do we communicate at all?" The fragmented and orbital power of the text undermines the idea of language as a fixed, unyielding network of authoritative patterns.

As the viewer tries to disentangle the numerous directions that collide and commingle within the forms, the exhibition's overlapping and complementary bodies of work indicates the direction for understanding the mutually referential works. *Tbox 1*, a small-scale sculpture made of birch plywood, is suggestive of an upside down cardboard box with the flaps splayed out. What appears to be casually torn and placed pieces of blue painter's tape is actually trompe l'oeil painted renderings of tape. The directional lines and arrows question the orientation of the object in space, the direction of the wood grain and the viewer's bearings. In spite of the one-dimensional world of signs, the apparent simplicity and supposed banality of a cardboard box tilts into an overlapping of various semantical planes. Inviting us to sit with, peer into and walk around the objects. The work calls attention to the threshold between physical orientation, identity and place.

Davis's work elicits experiences that are as accessible as they are refined, both unfussy and nuanced. The art-historical models, from Ellsworth Kelly to Bridget Riley to Robert Indiana are evident, without the quotations ever falling into mere copies. She replaces modern formalism with a process that never comes to a standstill and de-centers the contemporary and historical array of meanings in a constantly engaging manner.

Romantic American ideals are brought down to earth and into her studio where hands-on work and daily labor are conveyed with an unsentimental directness. The simple, even mundane materials Davis uses, and the craftsmanship to which she has subjected them, result in objects that are both refreshingly blunt and exceptionally sophisticated.

Many of the literary or historical text that Davis appropriates have characters whom are struggling with displacement and a desire for orientation. Placing the viewer in a similar mutable position, Davis has us right where she wants us: engaged in an intimate, personal way. It's an experience with more in common with reading novels or short stories where you lose yourself in the enthralling details, in the way narratives flow and insights are revealed- slowly, fluidly and most importantly unpredictably. Davis exquisitely highlights that our relation to the speech of others, or to the texts of the past, is not one of mutual respect and interaction. It is a relationship with an emphasis on the temporality and incompleteness of all understanding.