After the Tree Had Fallen: Recent Works and Collaborations By Alex Caldiero and Frank McEntire

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The Other Side of the Limit

In his introduction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes that the book’s
whole meaning could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one
cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.
The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking. . . .
The limit can . . . only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

Alex Caldiero and Frank McEntire are supremely curious about what lies on the other side of the limit, they approach that limit with all the canniness of Newtonian/Leibnitzian calculus, and neither of them has any inclination to remain silent in the presence of limits.

Although both are variously inclined to eclectic and infectious mysticisms, these two artists catch our eyes and ears and
imaginations precisely because (1) they practice the honesty of clarity and (2) they aim their wit at those of us who eschew clarity for occluding trivial mysticism.

And, quickly, whatever else we say about the meaning of these works, there remains the sheer beauty of them: the simple lines and textures of Caldiero’s drawings/paintings on golden-grained birch, the singular beauty of polished obsolete machines in surprising contexts in several of McEntire’s pieces, the bright splashes of red, white, and blue in and among the dominating muted colors of wood and paper and fabric and steel and tin and cinderblock. These works are, formally, simply breathtaking. And, as one expects from these two artists, the striking form is in the service of provocative content.

Caldiero’s “In Tongues” was first exhibited in 1994 in the Salt Lake Art Center’s show “The Unclosed Hand.” But much has happened to the original monoprints on birch since then.

These black-ink images of mostly upturned faces with flames burning deep inside the heads and with words forming inside mouths that emit an occasional upside-down or fragmented utterance have taken on patches of primary colors. Red clouds, a blue face, white stripes alongside blue ones, red flames, yellow streaks make the seven works shout from the wall where they hang.

What do the newly painted pieces say that the earlier versions didn’t? At least in part they proclaim the agony of the artist seeking an adequate form for his ideas.

The originals addressed the impossibility and inadequacy and yet necessity and brilliance of language. And now, as Caldiero paints over the birch, as he experiments beyond words and lines with acrylic and markers and oils and crayons and gessoes, as he speaks in additional tongues, he performs the limits of these
languages too. This is what I’ve got to work with, he seems to be saying, I can’t speak otherwise, and yet these media are completely out of my control. At first blush one might think this naïve painting, and Caldiero professes to have no formal training in these media. But on second thought, in context, it makes more sense to see the inadequacies on display as a statement of having approached an unapproachable limit. If Caldiero were a better painter (or poet), he would be less an artist.

Across the room from “In Tongues” stands McEntire’s “Royal Script,” a rather large crucifix being rolled into the carriage of a Royal typewriter raised up on a delicate wooden stand. A crucified Jesus Christ being (word)processed into a text! McEntire’s “Royal Script” constructs a string of signifiers, Nietzsche’s “mobile army of metaphors,” as a sculptural portrayal of the act of writing that depicts a crucifix that stands for a story written in a holy text, itself a representation of a supposed event. As if to emphasize this repeated and exponential distance from the “thing in and of itself,” McEntire has placed a bound and wax-sealed set of three books on a shelf beneath the typewriter.

Caldiero and McEntire continue to probe the limits of the languages that are their tools with a collaborative work they call “Tzim Tzum for Burroughs,” guided by the memory of the writer W. S. Burroughs, whose family owned the Burroughs company that manufactured calculating machines like the beautiful steel-and-glass Burroughs model perched on a tall and delicate wooden stand and by the Kabbalistic notion of “tzim tzum,” a teaching that in the beginning God was all encompassing and so, in order to create the world, had to withdraw to allow the other to exist.

It is jarring to see Caldiero’s handwriting on the calculating tape (manuscript written with three sizes of markers so the words contract and expand, thinner and thicker, systole and diastole) spool out of the fat rolled tape into the heavy machine whose keys read “error,” “repeat,” “non-add,” and “total,” to fall in loops and folds across the floor. The calculator can’t possibly translate the thoughts of the hand, yet it gleams as the only possible mediator. Impossible machine. Impossible communication. Incongruous beauty.
Speaking of incongruous beauty, McEntire’s “East Fork,” looms delicate and deadly on a bed of cinder blocks. Four long, sharp steel tines curve down from a light wooden-and-steel frame. It’s a salvaged “Jackson fork,” used to raise hay bales into a loft, and so the “East Fork” title has an agricultural flavor. But under the tines of the fork is a dark bronze woman’s head, Japanese letters on the back, resting on a steel bow that was once a leaf spring. The effect is a peaceful, Zen-flavored pure form. Conceptual art at its formal best. And like the best conceptual art, the piece has an aftertaste. It leaves one who has read Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” in a cold sweat.

With a harrow poised over a flat bed, Kafka’s steel-tipped machine inscribes a judgment on the body of any given prisoner. McEntire’s machine, with all its beauty, evokes (probably unintended) nightmares of guilt and harsh justice.

McEntire’s “Sealed Kali Upanishad” continues the themes of beauty and hidden truth and subliminal terror. Suspended in a striking steel-slat receptical/coffin lies a corpse-like heavy 110-foot roll of Jackson-Pollock-splattered tarpaper, decorated with colorful Hare-Krishna strings and beads, resting on a pair of silver boxes. The pure beauty of the piece reminds one again of McEntire’s uncanny ability to bring together found objects in awe-inspiring conjunctions. Like other works in the show, the sacred text remains almost entirely hidden, sealed. The title identifies the black roll with the fierce black Hindu goddess Kali. Sunken between steel slats, tightly rolled, and named Kali Upanishad, this sacred text promises to sever heads and hands of unwary readers/viewers.

Caldiero and McEntire dip their thoughtful and beautiful show in red, calling up disturbing memories as they explore the gifts and curses of tongues. Formally striking, conceptually challenging, witty and wily, the show threatens to cut out our tongues while giving us tongues we never had.

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