Rob Wynne

IN COG NITO

September 1–October 8, 2011

LOCKS GALLERY

IN COG NITO, 2011, poured and mirrored glass, 41 x 25 inches

BELIEVING IS SEEING

An interview with Rob Wynne by Alice Quinn

Alice Quinn: *Do you feel that each word has a distinct personality?*

Rob Wynne: I feel that each letter has a personality. Very much so, because there is no mold, each letter is uniquely poured . . . and I and my assistants have codes for different profiles that I want to give to each of the letters, so that, for instance, that "E" is a "straight E," that "R" is a "squiggly R," and so on.

AQ: *I can see that the "E" in "MAYBE" is the same as the "E" in "BEFORE," except that it is a different size.*

RW: So I think that each one does have a kind of personality and fits into the idea that I am as much interested in how they look as in what they say. One thesis in painting is, "when is a painting finished?" I apply that same idea as I live with and look at these text pieces. I tweak them and change them—all of a sudden I look at the "U" and feel it is not quite the right character, so I replace it with another "U" or I add a dot.

AQ: *And because you're working from left to right, do you make or place the "D" first and then the "E"?*

RW: I have a system. I have a grid, and I have drawings for each of the pieces before I start pouring the letters . . . and in the grid I'll say "extra small 'D,' medium 'E,' large 'L,'" etc. The part where it gets confusing is that lower case "d" can also be "p," and there is also no way to tell which it is because the letters are so hot—they're put away for days in an annealer for the temperature to cool down. Even when they come out, I can't say, "this 'D' belongs to 'DELUGE' as opposed to 'NO DOUBT.'" After the letters have been silvered and they're back here in the studio, then I have the opportunity to

start to play with them and figure out what I want to do.

AQ: *So you may be making a fabulous letter "L" that looks like a cowboy boot specifically for "DELUGE," but when you get back in the studio, it may end up in another phrase.*

RW: It could end up in "ALMOST" or in "FLOAT." At the time of making it, in my mind it belongs with one word, but by the time I am actually assembling it, it could be weeks or months later, after the whole process of cooling, drilling, silvering—it's random by then. I put all my large "L's" together and choose the one that works best with the "E" next to it.

AQ: *They sometimes almost appear to be choreographed, because they're so dynamic, and so expressive, and there's a spontaneity to them.*

RW: That's in the art making. The material that makes the art is the individual glass letter—but the magic part and the part where the art making really comes into a kind of formal setting is the selection of which letter works best with which other letter. This creates what you call a choreography—rhythm, visual interest . . .

AQ: *And these phrases are drawn from diary entries.*

RW: Sometimes, yes. I pick words or phrases from anywhere I find them—from existing poetry, from things that pop into my mind, snippets of overheard conversation, words that resonate in my mind rhythmically.

AQ: *"NO DOUBT" can be read axiomatically and as a vernacular phrase, but it also has a gravity to it. And a lot of them are instructions.*

RW: I never thought of it that way but it's true.

AQ: *And there's an intimacy to a lot of them. Have you always felt an affinity with Dada and Surrealism? Dating back to your art school days?*

RW: Very much so, yes, although when I was in art school, Marcel Duchamp was the

overwhelming influence. I was not yet using language or text. I was studying classic drawing, which ultimately went into abstraction—painting, collage making, and various experimentation I did at that time.

AQ: *I know that you're drawn to Symbolist poetry.*

RW: Yes, but also Gertrude Stein. I collected first editions of her works when you used to be able to find them in secondhand bookshops.

AQ: *In American poetry, is it poetry like Ashbery's or Stevens's that appeals most to you, work that doesn't provide a lot of connective tissue and isn't primarily narrative driven, but is associative and leapy and swervy?*

RW: Well, I do love Wallace Stevens. I found enormous inspiration and a range of ideas there that I've appropriated, but it's a recent thing that I've been reading a lot of Wallace Stevens.

AQ: *How did you arrive at this shimmery glass?*

RW: I'm not a trained glass artist. So when I started this experimentation, it was purely by accident. I was holding a ladle of glass and it slipped out of my hand and spilled

INVISIBLE, 1992, blown glass, sand, 96 x 18 x 7 inches

onto the floor, making a huge splat, which was absolutely spectacular. And at that moment, I thought it was a kind of cosmic explosion and that it would be so cool to silver it and see it really glimmer. That led me to realize that I could actually control it somewhat more than just letting it fall out of a ladle and could start making actual letters out of it. When they were clear glass they were invisible. The first text piece that I did in glass was called "INVISIBLE" [spelled out]. It was in blown glass, fabricated with technicians. It will be in the show at Locks Gallery, on a sand bar; it was originally shown at Holly Solomon, in 1992.

AQ: *Some of these shapes in "ARTIST UNKNOWN" are reminding me of Arp.*

RW: Yes, the "W" was very challenging, because of the scale of it. It took two people and two ladle pours to make that "W."

AQ: *In one of the early shows of yours that I attended, there was a marble, also a rock held in place by a device . . . ?*

RW: Yes, that was a specimen of moon rock.

AQ: *There wasn't an emphasis on language then, but the framing impulse was present.*

RW: It was a postcard of when the astronauts went to the moon and brought back a specimen of the rock. I believe it's in the Smithsonian.

AQ: *How was it held up?*

RW: It's in a bell jar. A metal contraption holds the rock—it's hard to tell how big it is, but my sense is that is perhaps the size of a child's head. I appropriated the photograph and made a silkscreen out of it. The piece that you're referring to (Sphere Redux, 1981) was done at The Kitchen in the '80s. It was an installation of blueprints, with grids and a projection of a spinning marble. There was no text. It was transitional insofar as it moved away from abstraction and into some sort of narrative.

AQ: *In both Dada and Surrealism there's a big emphasis on choice. You choose the object and transform it by recontextualizing it, dramatizing it.*

RW: Why do you think I love that Wallace Stevens poem, "Anything is beautiful if you say it is"? It's art if you say it's art. The whole concept of permission and entry into a landscape of permission is really attractive to me.

AQ: *Would you say that France has figured strongly in your work? You've certainly read Rimbaud and other French poets.*

RW: Baudelaire maybe more than Rimbaud, I would say—Baudelaire's prose poems and art criticism. I dip into poetry with curiosity and some trepidation as well, because it's so poignant and so powerful. I show regularly in France, and it has affected my work. I did a show called "Artificial Paradise," which is from Baudelaire.

AQ: *Shall we talk a little bit about Ray Johnson?*

RW: That would swing us into the realm of some of my early pieces that have never been shown. When I got out of art school, I was friendly with Ray Johnson, who was then head of the New York Correspondence School of Art. Through Ray I got interested in the idea of using the typewriter and Western Union, and we developed a

I Am Still Alive, 1972, telegram, 9 x 12 inches

Letters, 2000, unique re-photographed photograph, 28 3/8 x 24 3/8 inches

kind of epistolary relationship. That was when I did the Western Union piece that I showed you—where I went to Western Union and wrote a telegram to myself, saying, "You are still alive."

AQ: *"I am still alive." As if you had survived something immense.*

RW: It must have been some post-teenage apocalyptic romance or something.

AQ: *Do you think any of the correspondence partakes of the spirit of the New York School? Particularly O'Hara? The writing to one another as a kind of cat's cradle of intimacy and connection—we're in it together, we're artists, and we're making it up.*

RW: Yes, and the whole relationship between visual art and word or text. I feel in some strange way even closer to Bloomsbury's Omega Workshop. When they were designing book jackets and doing wallpaper—really, in a communal way, making everything themselves.

AQ: *But you're doing it on your own really. You may have helpers . . .*

RW: A one-man band. Some of the early pieces were funny for me to revisit. They've been in my flat files for years, and out they came. There was that strange reality for me to see that a lot of those pieces actually used text in them, however obliquely.

AQ: *Let's look at the Maria Callas piece, the basket with the correspondence from her fans.*

RW: I love that. That's a direct appropriation, a wicker basket, sort of mid-century—hard to tell the size of it. I re-photographed the photograph from an auction catalogue of memorabilia that was going to be sold to the highest bidder. The poignancy of those letters stacked there, with the glimmers of different stamps—the emotionality of it.

AQ: *It's really wonderful. Correspondence, communication, language, contained within a frame, having a history and covering the span of her entire life. It's so suggestive of boundaries, also mortal boundaries. How about this piece, "A scented mantle of starlight and desire"?*

APPEARING, DISAPPEARING,
DO I NEED A BODY
FOR SUCH THINGS?
REAPPEARING.
TRANSGRESSION
PREHISTORY
NUDITY
FASHION
SCHOOL OF
FONTAINEBLEAU.
LONELY
I AM
FOR
MYSELF

RW: I pride myself on being able to remember exactly where everything came from, Bizarrely enough, I may have thought that up myself, but I'm not entirely sure I did.

AQ: *What era is this?*

RW: I would say that piece was done about 10–12 years ago.

AQ: *So you were beginning to work with individual letters then.*

RW: Exactly. That's actually a photogram of cut-out pieces of opaque paper that were manipulated in the darkroom. I have a series of them, both positive and negative.

AQ: *That seems related to the concept of "Poster." You also have a deep connection to opera.*

RW: Yes, I do. It's the emotion that interests me.

AQ: *And production. Perhaps production is something that is a real impulse of yours, to "produce" on various scales.*

RW: I like a spectacle, I like an environment. I like to feel, when I'm deep into my work and really connected with it, that it's transportive in some way. It's not about looking at just one thing. It's a swirl that takes you somewhere else.

AQ: *You had the show at Holly Solomon Gallery that featured butterflies . . .*

RW: "Sleepwalking."

AQ: *And you made that enchanting wallpaper.*

RW: That was actually the first time I introduced glass into an exhibition. I made a mold of my feet and made a pair of glass feet.

AQ: *I remember.*

RW: And that was directly related to a libretto of an early nineteenth-century opera by

left: installation view, *Rob Wynne: Sleepwalking,* Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, NY (1996)

Bellini, "La sonnambula" . . . the sleepwalker. It obviously had no music, but the references all came from the libretto. The pictures were fabric, large silk pieces, silkscreened and embroidered. They were installed over the butterfly wallpaper, which was a metaphor for the "moth to the flame."

AQ: *Let's look at other periods of your work, Rob.*

RW: This is an early "typewriter piece," called "Someone told me that if you sleep on the left side, it wears the heart out faster."

AQ: *Like Joe Brainard's collages . . . do they mean anything to you? I think they're spectacular. I hadn't realized that Ashbery had made so many collages until I went to a recent show at Tibor de Nagy. But for Brainard, it seemed totally central.*

RW: Yes, I think so; he was more a visual artist.

AQ: *How about this "Exit" piece?*

RW: That was a chance, weird moment, probably from the '70s. It was at the old Planetarium at the Museum of Natural History, taken with a Brownie Instamatic camera. I noticed the exit sign as they turned off the lights and the stars came up, and I just snapped a photograph.

AQ: *And did you have a sense that's how the shape of it would be? That it would be at the bottom?*

RW: I think I saw it that way, from where I was sitting. It [the exit sign] must have been at the top of the doorway.

AQ: *It makes it look as if it is actually beckoning.*

RW: Well, it's another contained space, like the moon rock or the parameter of the basket with the letters in it.

AQ: *Do you like books of instruction? Here's "Use your breath as a form of expression."*

Exit, 1988, iris print, 23 x 18 7/8 inches

Glimpse, 2004, candle smoke on vellum, 20 3/4 x 26 3/4 inches

RW: I believe that's a Callas quote—part of my Maria Callas obsession. Visually, when you think of that statement, it's amazing.

AQ: *And it's amazing the way you've exposed the anatomy.*

RW: Well, I didn't expose it, it was a found photograph.

AQ: *It looks as if there are creatures within, sea creatures and turtles.*

RW: Yes, and that slimy green nail polish that I painted "Use your breath as a form of expression." This was from the early '80s as well.

AQ: *Here's "Glimpse." Was this made with actual smoke?*

RW: Candle smoke. These were done at the time I started making the glass letters in 2004. In order to transport the letters into the cooling oven from the table that they're poured on, they have to be slid onto a piece of wood. And when they're slid onto the wood, the wood catches fire and produces an enormous amount of smoke, which chars the surface of the wood. So it both imprints the letter—"brands it"—into the wood, and it also creates smoke, which is charcoal. So I thought to myself that if I could trap the smoke as a by-product of the process of making the glass letter, I could use that in a slightly ephemeral way to create a sort of "backwater of the text." I lit a candle and put paper on a piece of Plexiglas, so that I could look through the paper and trap the smoke onto it. So it really is a charcoal drawing.

AQ: *You don't consider yourself in any way an engineer?*

RW: No.

AQ: *But you do come up with these formulas.*

RW: I have a rather didactic brain, I think; one thing leads to another. I do something and it gives me an idea—or as Max Ernst said, "Never leave your studio empty, always leave something unfinished or in process so when you go back, you can pick up the thread again." I work from work. So when I'm working and I get an idea, I transfer that

to the next seemingly logical progression.

AQ: *It's very intuitive and smart to figure out how to use the candle to capture the smoke.*

RW: I should probably try to do a few more of them. Very often the paper catches fire, and they're ruined, so there's a good deal of chance involved.

AQ: *Could we talk a little bit about what embroidery means to you?*

RW: Embroidery—I'm crazy about it. The first embroidery pieces I did—I don't know if you would call them embroidered as much as sewn—were the "thread drawings" that I started doing about 12–14 years ago, almost by chance. I felt I wanted to have a relationship with text. I didn't want to just draw the letters and have them just be letters, I wanted them to have some other feeling, visually and emotionally and conceptually. So in fooling around, when I started sewing these, I sewed them on vellum. Since it was transparent, you had this ability to read the text and at the same time look through it to see the threads unraveling in back of the text.

AQ: *So it's not unlike looking at the anatomy opened up of the body in the earlier piece—seeing the back-story, seeing the interior, seeing the process.*

RW: To me, in reading and thinking about language, I very often have another idea in my mind, or it conjures an idea, or an image of an abstract thought, or a feeling. I wanted to put that into the drawing, very much in the way that I want to put it into the glass work, and have that make you feel something when you look at it, not just read it. I want to feel the organic relationship of how the swirls work, and how the interplay of things unfolds, and how they relate to each other visually, in negative space and positive space, as much as what it says.

AQ: *Let's talk a little bit about scale. Here is a little interludian word . . .*

RW: That is just a pause . . .

AQ: *It's called "Then . . ." And it's royal; it's purple and includes the Napoleonic bee.*

RW: But it needs the dot dot dot.

AQ: *Which ends up looking as if the bees were dancing, somehow or other—it's theatrically evocative.*

RW: These were also done around the time that I was interested in Genet. I did a number of pieces based on his play *The Maids* and other things that were highly dramatic. Typically, I didn't just use the text, but also the stage directions. So, for instance, I have an actual dress on which I embroidered the stage directions from the final act of *The Maids*—where "Madame" is kicking someone on the floor. It's a violent, crazy thing, but also over the top and Baroque.

AQ: *So you loved the flavor of that instruction. I, too, like certain how-to books—language books particularly. Orchestration appears to play a big role in your art making.*

She Squats..., 1994, embroidery on fabric, 10 3/4 x 14 1/4 inches

RW: Yes, as I think I said, "I am like a frenzied editor"—if you'll pardon the expression. You know, flying over the landscape of language and plucking what I like—I take what I will.

AQ: *Now we're looking at the yellow piece "He makes the gesture of tossing back an invisible lock of hair."*

RW: Yes, using my eye. I also made wallpaper with an image of my eye. This piece, "He makes the gesture . . . ," is machine embroidered. It is sort of antithetical to "The plaster cast of my emotion," which is completely and utterly and naively hand sewn by me. I like frequently to use the high and the low levels of technology available to me.

AQ: *This one has an almost Hitchcockian feeling to it—it's very direct and suspenseful.*

RW: It's a Meissen figurine that has been transferred digitally onto canvas and hand appliquéd with diamond dust.

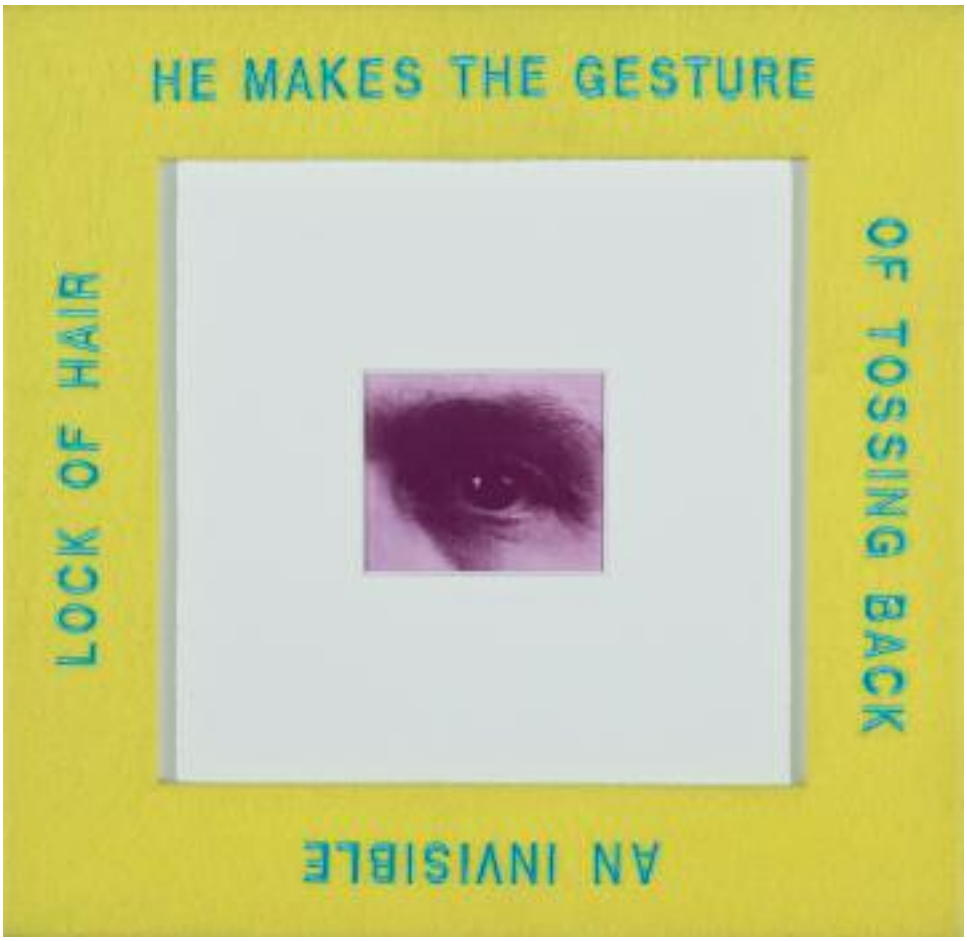
AQ: *The diamond dust creates the lipstick effect around the mouth. That's beautiful. How do these relate to the other pieces?*

RW: I think it's about putting the language into a figurative format, as opposed to just pure language. It's putting it in a landscape, if you will, pairing it with an actual recognizable image—a figure, or a landscape, or an appropriated image as in "The Drama in the Cottage," which is a sketch for some kind of Wagnerian fantasy. It's a conceptually Baroque way of introducing text that I'm interested in putting into a pictorial format, rather than just pure language on its own—by giving it a theatrical form.

AQ: *It's very set-designed. Now, these forms, the natural forms, the scorpion or the shells, and the seahorse, in "What I remember most was the voyage there . . ."*

RW: It's these kinds of relationships that I'm interested in—and separated by decades.

AQ: *They have an elegiac quality . . .*



He Makes the Gesture, 1997, photograph and embroidered text on felt, 18 5/8 x 19 1/8 inches

RW: The “language” is lying, as if a curtain, over the image. Or a scrim.

AQ: *Here’s “The Drama in the Cottage.” It sounds like the title of a mystery novel.*

RW: I have news for you . . . it is the title of a mystery!

AQ: *That’s great! The “eyeballs” go back a long time in your work.*

RW: I have a fascination with eyes, what you refer to as “the swirling marble,” that sphere/eye idea. This is a self-portrait, from perhaps ten years ago—“Eyes open/eyes shut”—when I made eye wallpaper. I see it more as one foot in front of the next, figuring it out—one idea leads to another idea.

AQ: *I was out in Galesburg, as you know, celebrating Dorothea Tanning’s 100th birthday, and I was reading her memoir, Between Lives, on the airplane. In one of the passages she’s picked up a leaf—she’s describing a sere leaf, “Worthy of a birthday.” You have a lot of leaf imagery in your work, too. Here’s a leaf and eyelashes and an eyeball and a leaf within a glass globe. What’s the name of this piece?*

RW: It’s a self portrait—the glass is hand blown, to mimic the shape of a head in a biomorphic way.

AQ: *Do you feel the access to the unconscious that was so emblemized in Dada and Surrealism—the dream imagery?*

RW: I have enormous curiosity and interest in that period.

AQ: *This is perhaps a little labored, but how did it occur to you to put the eyeball against the leaf?*

RW: There’s a fantastic surrealist painting that I remember seeing many years ago. It was a portrait, and instead of eyes, there were leaves. A leaf, in fact, is rather “eye”-shaped, and that was the inspiration.

AQ: *It’s a beautiful piece. Dorothea manages to capture in her poetry both a kind of*

dreamy divagation of thought and a tart psychodrama. And there's a lot that you've gotten from that strain of Surrealism, I think. But at the same time the work is playful and inviting, and the viewer can bring his or her own associations to it entirely. Do you know the beautiful painting of Dorothea's, "Birthday"?

RW: Yes, I think that's in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Now, let's get something to eat.

Alice Quinn is Executive Director, Poetry Society of America; formerly Poetry Editor at *The New Yorker* (1987-2007) and at Alfred A. Knopf, (1976-1986).

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LOCKS GALLERY

600 Washington Square South
Philadelphia, PA 19106
www.locksgallery.com
info@locksgallery.com
215.629.1000 tel
215.629.3868 fax