

I'LL DROWN MY BOOK

Conceptual Writing by Women

POETICS STATEMENT

Things are not as they seem, nor are they otherwise.
– *The Lankavatara Sutra*

My approach to “visual poetry” is informed by my practice as a poet. While a student at the New College of California, I became interested in pushing the boundaries of poetry and of narrative. The 12-pt font verse line became a sort of prison. While teaching poetry to kids in museums, I came to relate to my work space as more of a canvas than as an 8½ x 11” sheet of white paper. In 2000, I began experimenting with words and three-dimensionality in a series entitled *AMERICAN LETTERS: Works on Paper*.

Early on, I looked at Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligrammes and avant-garde musician and composer John Cage’s mesostics. Not perfectly content with only European models, I later came across work by the Brazilian Noigandres Group whose members included Augusto and Haroldo De Campos.

I became enthralled by poems that took the shape of their subjects. But then quickly I wanted to go even further. How could this work serve, not only as an instrument of freedom, but as a means of transformation, of liberation, of transcendence? African American poet Norman H. Pritchard’s work seemed to offer up some direction. He was an important contributor to *Umbra*, a major magazine of the Black Arts Movement. He published two books of mostly visual poetry: *The Matrix: Poems*, 1960-1970 (Doubleday, 1970) and *Eecchhoocess* (NYU Press, 1971). His work, the music of Alice Coltrane, avant-garde jazz, the writings of Sun Ra, and Tibetan Buddhist meditation have given me a rich palette from which to create the work that I am presenting engaged in.

UNTITLED (BIRD CAGE)

This work has the life and music of jazz saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker as its soundtrack. It is also a response to and dialogue with Paul Laurence Dunbar’s (1872-1906) poem “Sympathy”:

*I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;*

Dunbar’s poem also provided the title of the first volume in Maya Angelou’s series of autobiographies as well as her own poem of that same title:

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

The poem seeks to posit the question of the source of imprisonment. Is it the bird or is it the bars of the cage? The three-dimensionality also creates spaces between the bars. Is escape then possible? Who or what is jailed and who or what is the jailor? It perhaps is a matter of perception.

TIME: BEING OR PORTRAIT OF ALICE COLTRANE (1937-2007)

Harpist, organist, and pianist Alice Coltrane was founder of the Sai Anantam Ashram and also jazz giant John Coltrane’s wife. This work serves as not only an homage to the late spiritual leader and musician, but also as a model for alternative ways of relating to the time space continuum in order to explore/explode/expose the myth of linear existence. This piece is the size of a vinyl record cover as the circular pattern of the clock face is mirrored in the shape of a 12-inch record. Music, eternally universal, emits a vibration that then serves as the measure and marker of time and of being rather than that of a watch or calendar. The hour and minute hands are formed by the titles of two of Alice Coltrane’s albums *Eternity* and *Infinity* (an album that remixed recordings by her husband John Coltrane). Additional inspiration comes from Apollinaire’s *La Cravate et la montre*.

– *giovanni singleton*