

CULTURE MONSTER BLOG

# Art review: 'Palimpsests' at Tarryn Teresa Gallery

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Whether you're reading this in print or online, it's likely that the meaning of these words matters more to you than their visual form. The elegance of written language's delivery system has largely become secondary to its efficiency.

Not so for the three artists in "Palimpsests," a thoroughly intriguing show at Tarryn Teresa. Each explores the sensual presence of words in time and space. In their work, message and medium resume an intimate relationship, not one that is sacrosanct

but pliable, in turns surprising, self-referential, contradictory, charming, wry.

A palimpsest is traditionally defined as a parchment or other material whose writing has been effaced to make room for a new entry. The show's guest curator, Elizabeth Williams, applies the term more broadly to art that subjects written communication to a variety of re-purposing and retooling strategies.

In a marvelous little etching by Christine Wong Yap, densely inscribed Gothic print fills the top portion of a lined page. It reads, at first glance, as the concluding section of an ecclesiastical text, but the crowded letters actually spell out a recitation far more secular and mundane: a shopping list for milk, yogurt, turkey and cheese. Yap, who lives in Oakland, stages another amusing temporal and stylistic dislocation in a hand-inked scroll of graph paper that ends in a curl on the floor. In elegant calligraphy, she transcribes gang-speak banter peppered with challenges, curses and threats.

Annie Vought, also from Oakland, takes handwritten correspondence and translates it into stunning new form — sheets of meticulous, cut-paper tracery, verbal lace with negative space excised. A few of her

works, in colored paper, are stationery-size and two are an impressive five 5 or six 6 feet high. Floating slightly away from the wall, the cutouts double as fantastic drawings in space, the words mingling with their own shadows. Vought eliminates the space between written lines so the rows of words stack tightly and, though legible, read also as pure idiosyncratic design.

One letter, written from father to son in the 1980s, is newsy, conversational and affectionate. It concludes with a few lines of parental advice — “Keep patient. Size up the situation and then react with restraint!!! Keep cool like James Bond.” — and a private joke of a postscript.

It's not evident whether Vought's texts are found or contrived, but either way they evoke personal artifacts conveying distinct voices and particular moments in time. Spectacularly crafted objects, they pay homage to the tenderness and intimacy of handwritten correspondence, the physicality of the link between sender and recipient. Vought is also represented by an installation of individual cut-paper words and marks, pinned to a large wall in an improvisational scatter, a delightful convergence of found and concrete poetry.

Houston-based Cara Barer (like the others, in her first substantial appearance in Southern California) enacts gorgeous transformations of her own by soaking a variety of reference books in water, manipulating the pages, then photographing the results. Her color pictures render books as textural landscapes, sculptural abstractions. In most of the images, Barer opens the volumes excessively wide, so their spines make a U-turn and their pages splay in moody bursts of angles and curls or tendrils of elaborate filigree.

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“Piece of Cake” shows a thick wedge of a book (seemingly a volume of “Who’s Who”), its contents humbled into rippled and sliced layers. In spite of the destruction and distortion involved in her process — she states that she never harms

“important” books — Barer’s work comes across as utterly respectful, a tribute even to the expanded potential of the printed page.

The reciprocity between text and image goes back all the way to pictographic communication, with text as image getting a boost from Conceptual artists since the ‘70s and interpretations of images as texts central to critical theory for at least as long. The field of aesthetic inquiry that Yap, Vought and Barer have ventured into is already rich and diverse, but their contributions are invigoratingly fresh and in this moment of digital dominance, especially poignant.

Tarryn Teresa Gallery, 1820 Industrial St. #No. 230,  
(213) 627-5100, through Oct. 29. Closed Sunday.

[www.tarrynteresagallery.com](http://www.tarrynteresagallery.com)

--Leah Ollman

*Above, top: Christine Wong Yap’s ‘Untitled (One half gallon)’ Above: Cara Barer, ‘Piece of Cake.’  
Photo credit: Courtesy of Tarryn Teresa Gallery.*

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