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## Reading Beyond the Page

by Brendan S. Carroll on September 11, 2012 0

The other day I saw two solo exhibitions: *The Words* by Jen Mazza at [Stephan Stoyanov Gallery](#) and *Game Plan* by Alighiero Boetti at MoMA. Both artists want to show you what they value in their lives, but they use their inspiration to different ends. Mazza paints unassuming still lifes of books. Boetti, on the other hand, used various lines of attack to realize his many projects, which ranged from sculpture to mail art to collaborative embroideries.

As a lifelong reader, and as a voyeur, I had what only could be described as a preternatural need to see Mazza's new work. In my world, books are trophies (and scalps), as well as sources of entertainment and edification. They can reveal a lot about a person.



Jen Mazza: *The Words* at Stephan Stoyanov Gallery (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Jen Mazza, "The Ravishing of Lol Stein" (2012), oil on canvas, 9 x 10 inches (courtesy of the artist)



So the subject of Mazza's work is simple: a series of books. Each painting depicts a single book (sometimes open, sometimes closed) on a tabletop. The books range from pulp fiction to intellectual tomes, from mass-market paperbacks to artist monographs. Painting the books she holds dear, with sincerity and in a matter-of-fact style, Mazza's paintings function as meta-portraiture.

Each book is presented flat on its back, as if it were a corpse on a metal slab in a city morgue. The more I looked at these paintings, up close, from a far, the more they began to resemble minimalist geometric abstractions, as they compress foreground objects and background. When she nails it, as she does in "The Ravishing of Lol Stein" (2012), she strikes a balance between Giorgio Morandi and Ben Nicholson.

The pieces operate on more than just formal terms. The painting "Similar in the Dissimilar (pages 194-195)" (2011) radiates a sense of religious devotion. The book featured in the painting, *Swann's Way* by Marcel Proust, is open to pages 194-195. Mazza has painstakingly reproduced the entire text on both pages. One paragraph, in particular, hit me:

—gazed at her, at first, with the gaze which is not merely messenger from the eyes, but in whose window all the senses assemble and lean out, petrified and anxious, that gaze which would fain reach, touch, capture, bear off in triumph the body at which it is aimed, and the soul with the body ..."

The passage stirred so many questions for me ... what role does Proust play in Mazza's life? Why did she choose this book, of all books, and why did she choose these pages to re-create?

Jen Mazza, "Similar in the Dissimilar (pages 194-195)" (2011), oil on canvas, 13 x 15 inches (courtesy of the artist)



Jen Mazza, "Lover" (2012), oil on canvas, 11 x 13 inches (courtesy of the artist)

In "The Lover" (2012), the work alternates between theatric realism and minimalist composition. The painting is a realistic depiction of a tawdry domestic interior. A nude woman reclines on chaise longue, a martini glass in her left hand. To her back, stands a man in a white tuxedo jacket, sans head. (To my knowledge, the decapitation was the result of a torn book cover, and not a crime of passion.) Traces of the artist's hand are reflected in the texture of the paint and subtle variations of color. Paint alternates between opaque and translucent. The palette is all hothouse yellows and greens. If I had to use one word to describe the scene: fecund.

I imagine Mazza as a reclusive, medieval Irish monk, holed up in a stone hut overlooking the sea on the edge of the known world, bent-kneed before some classic of antiquity, copying its verses line by line, as unwashed barbarian hordes sack Rome, burning it, and all it created, to the ground.

To look at Mazza's painting is the equivalent of seeing a plane beelining through the night sky on its way to La Guardia midweek. It's serendipitous.

Before last Wednesday, Boetti was as unfamiliar to me, as Mazza was familiar. Organized more or less chronologically, MoMA's exhibition presents a no-frills (but fun) survey of the artist's oeuvre. Boetti, born in Turin during World War II, came to prominence in the context of Arte Povera, a radical Italian art movement that began in the late 1960s and incorporated common everyday materials like cement, iron, rags, and other largely unremarkable materials. In his early work, he made beautiful sculptures from the everyday materials that he found on the street. "Colonna (Column)" (1968) is a column constructed of paper doilies. "Legnetti colorati (Little Colored Sticks)" (1968) is what it is: an arrangement of little colored sticks, bunched together according to hue. It's as simple as it is beautiful.



Alighiero Boetti "Legnetti colorati (Little Colored Sticks)" (1968), wood, synthetic polymer paint, elastic bands, 35 cm height x 160 cm diameter. (courtesy of MoMA)

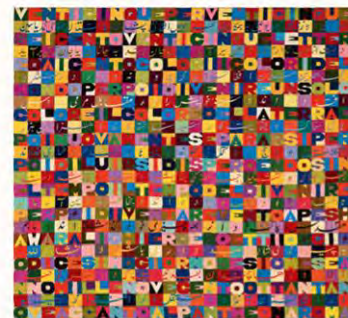


Alighiero Boetti, "Tutto (Everything)" (1992-93), embroidery on cloth, 167 x 345 cm. (courtesy of MoMA)

His embroidery, "Oggi dodicesimo giorno sesto mese anno mille novecento ottantanove (Today the twelfth day of the sixth month of the year nineteen eighty-nine)" (1989), is an expansive word field, which combines Italian text and Sufi poetry. It brought to mind the wooden alphabet blocks that I played with as a child, as much as NYC's graffiti covered subway cars from the 1970s.

In the final gallery, MoMA presents a suite of drawings in which Boetti laid paper over objects and then rubbed graphite over the surface to create the images. Like Mazza, Boetti chose objects of personal significance to enshrine — a violin case, which belonged to his mother; various materials and detritus that he found in his studio; and an illustrated book that belonged to his children. These objects — like Mazza's paintings of books — reveal what Boetti valued in his life. They reflect who he is, and what he cared about.

As Italy descended into political turmoil in the late 1960s, Boetti relinquished the notion of individual artistic authorship to create large-scale color embroideries with a band of Afghan artisans. With him, it seems everyone gets a part of the action (even the postman), and they get paid too. Often, he encouraged his Afghan collaborators to incorporate Persian text in their object-field compositions. To stand in front of "Futto (Everything)" (1992-93) is to play a game of eye spy ... the unicorn, the happy old man with no teeth, the horny toad, ad infinitum.



Alighiero Boetti, "Oggi dodicesimo giorno sesto mese anno mille novecento ottantanove (Today the twelfth day of the sixth month of the year nineteen eighty-nine)" (1989), embroidery, 104 x 112 cm. (courtesy of MoMA)