

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

Pam Rosenblatt

### 249 A Street Building's Artist Jenny Lawton Grassl

*On one beautiful Tuesday, March 27, 2012, WHLR arts editor Pam Rosenblatt drove to and parked her automobile in the parking lot situated across from Fort Point's 249 A Street Building in South Boston. About fifteen minutes later, Pam walked across the street and rang the doorbell to the studio of Jenny Lawton Grassl and her husband, Anton. One of the Grassls pushed the button to let her into the building. Several minutes later, at precisely 10 a.m., Jenny opened the door and let Pam into the creative world of artist Jenny Lawton Grassl and photographer Anton Grassl. The following words are compiled from that day's interview with Jenny by Pam. Here's what Jenny said:*

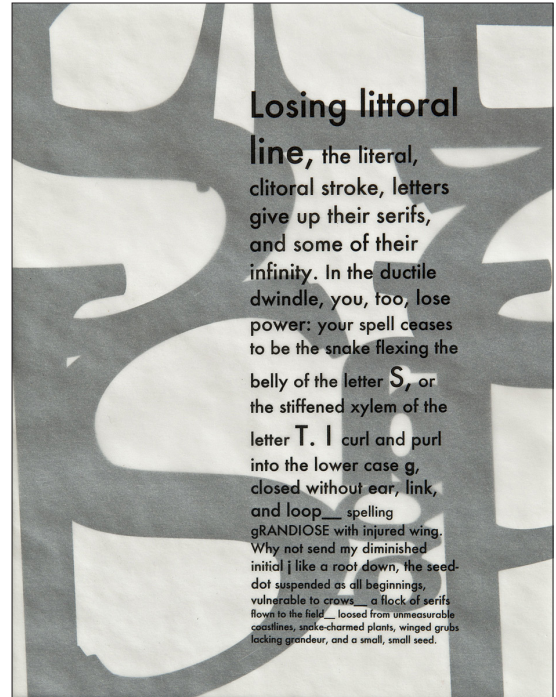
Okay. Let's go! In the studio there are one, two, three, four fairly large pieces that all come from a period when I was doing 'Automatic Writing' as I painted. And I took it from the poetic tradition of André Breton and Soupault. For example, their book, *Magnetic Fields* (1919).

And I would just create things as I went, create the words for poetry. And it was very spontaneous and exciting to do because I would keep my brush moving and write as I go. And inevitably things would layer and get obscured so that in the end you can't really read the poem. But it's a record of what was there. The painting is a record. And hopefully it shows something of the feeling of what I was writing or the basic shape of the language – and the line and form of art. And they all end up very different because when you write with 'Automatic Writing' you don't ever start from the same place. You're always creating something new.



So the name of this one is "Migrations" because something about the swoop of the way the letters went reminded me of when birds take off and go somewhere or butterflies when the Monarchs scatter before they fly and then they suddenly go. It's sometimes hard to remember but I would say it [took] about two weeks [to create].

These are acrylics on canvas, except this one over here has some col-



Poem-Typography-1 - Jenny Grassl

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lage elements as well. This one I can say is not exactly poetry with art because it's taken from *The Wall Street Journal*. There are elements of the newspaper pasted behind the painting, and some of it comes through. But I see it as found poetry – *The Wall Street Journal*. So these are stock quotes that I have layered together and hopefully created something quite different from stock quotes.

The stock market's going up a little. This was done...I took a page from February 6th of this year, and I think it's February 5th that it really went up significantly for the 1st time. So the piece is a more optimistic painting.

I have some other pages that I took from the Crash of '29 – from the Stock Market, I mean. It doesn't really look like a crash but I know what I was painting.

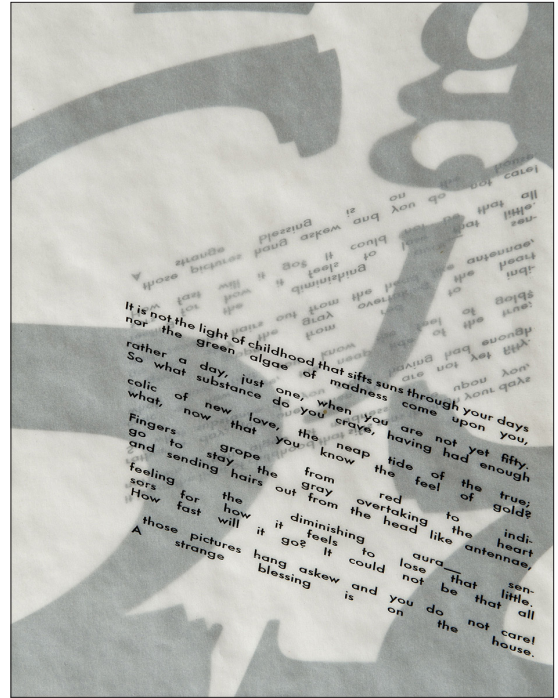
And this work is a triptych titled "Flag of the Heartland Reapers". I did a whole series of flags that were these panels placed as triptychs. And this, again, is 'Automatic Writing'.

'Automatic Writing' is from the past. Surrealists did it a lot. It was very popular in the early part of the century. And Dadaists also did some. People actually took it to extremes. They would try to get into a trance before they would do their writing and try to contact their subconscious. Some of them even tried to contact other worlds – you know, the departed.

I don't do that! I do get into a relaxed state and try to tap into something. I don't know what I would call it. Maybe the subconscious. This painting was

done (I think it was) in August of 2011. Definitely 2011. "The Flag of the Heartland Reapers".

As I previously mentioned, I was interested in the idea of a flag. And I thought that this work represents something from my activity of writing. And what is that? It's a circumstance. It's a state of feeling. So I played on the idea of the United States of feelings and what kind of flags you might have for that. This one took a little longer than "Migrations". Maybe three weeks.



Poem-Typography-2 - Jenny Grassl



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The length of time depends up how much time I have. I don't always complete from start to finish in one sitting, or in a full day. Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't.

Now, I don't know if you want to see more of this type of artwork, or would you like to see other types of things that I've done? Okay, I can show you the history of how I started. If it's history, we have to go in here. [*Jenny and Pam walk into another part of the room.*]

Over here I have a box. [*The sound of a box opening is heard.*] This is how I got started. I had a computer. I didn't even have a program yet for typography. But I did have something in Microsoft Word where I could enlarge letters.

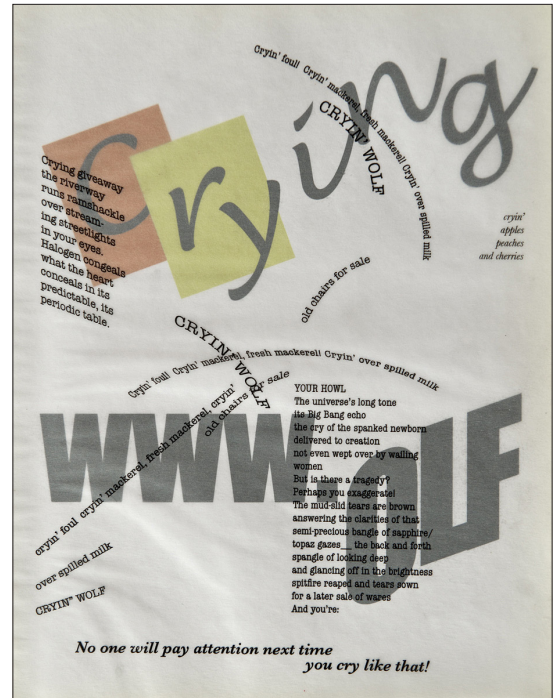
This piece is printed in the computer: two layers. One is in the background, and the top is a vellum layer with a poem on it that I wrote. And I was interested in the idea of something happening with the alphabet behind the poem and how they interact with each other – the design of the alphabet in the poem. I've always been interested in the alphabet.

This idea developed when I was writing poetry and I started placing things on the page in a very idiosyncratic way to achieve something visual. When I got more comfortable on the computer, I realized I could do more things that way. And then I got a program "In Design". And I was able to really play with typography and it was really an exploration of the possibilities of what you can do with words – visually as well as poetically. I never really named these pieces.

I have a whole lot of these. Not all in this box.

And then I got into Photoshop, and I used photographs with the poems. And that was a whole other exploration.

Nowadays I use a lot of color. Yes, I do. Color is very important to me.



Poem-Typography-3 - Jenny Grassl



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But in the early works, I didn't have color. I just had typography. Maybe red. But...here you can see it starts to get really layered so that you can't read it in parts. But these pieces you can still read in parts of what I was writing.

I wouldn't call my work 'conceptual' art because I'm very interested in the actual materials. The paint and this lettering maybe aren't so much dependent on materials, but I am very interesting in what is produced. It's not a process over a product. So I would just call over here what I do is 'painting'. And what I'm doing here is 'digital collage'. 'Typography collage' is what you would call it.

You could call the poetry that I write 'experimental poetry'. It's definitely not traditional poetry. I'm much more interested in taking risks rather than creating a nice, tight poem that works formally and thematically.

I could read some poetry if you want? Just so you get an idea...I'll just read one of these poems here:

*It is not the light of childhood that sifts suns through your days/ nor the green algae of madness come upon you, // rather a day, just one, when you are not yet fifty. / So what substance do you crave, having enough // colic of new love, the neap tide of the true, / what, now that you know the feel of gold // Fingers grope from red to indi- / go to stay the gray overtaking the heart / and sending hairs out from the head like the antennae / feeling for the diminishing aura\_\_ sen- / sors for how it feels how to lose that little. / How fast will it go? It could not be that all / those pictures hang askew and you do not care! / A strange blessing is on the house.*

And then I have a book here that I did. Let me show you. I combined poems and images in the book. I was always interested in how words



Poem-Typography-4 - Jenny Grassl

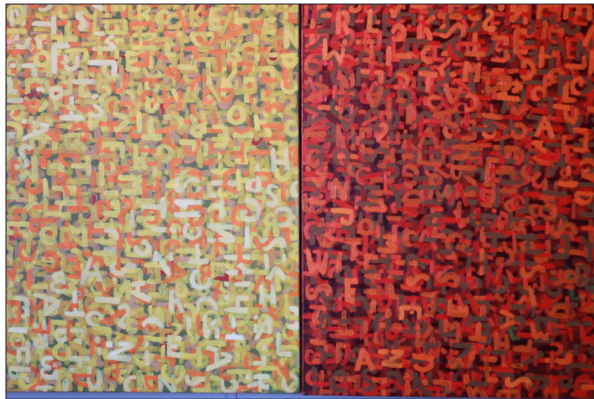


could be part of the image and not just a text next to a picture like in an illustration. I've always found that really limiting so I try to put the text in with the images. So that it's part of the image. It's not just extra. They're not on the side because I think a lot of words and images that what people do – they make an illustration with text and I mean you sacrifice something. You can't read the words quite as clearly when the words are part of the image, but I think you get enough of what's there. This book was quite a long process. I worked on it for a couple of months.

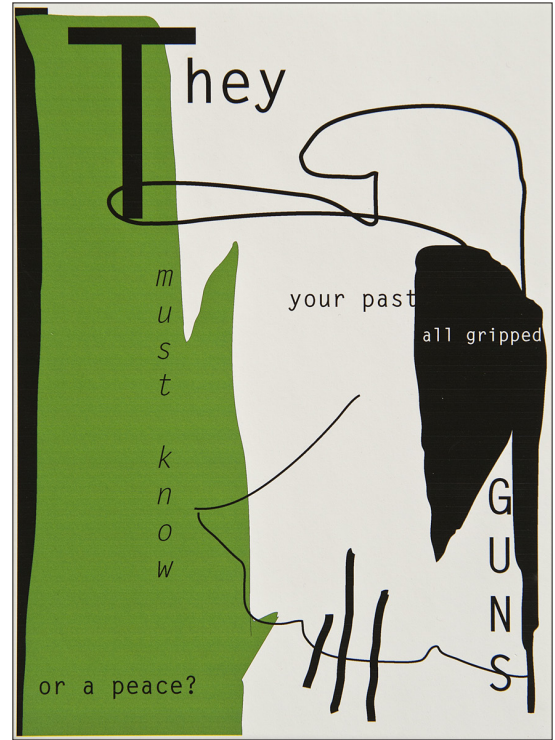
I'll just show you one more thing because it's what I did for so long. I'll just show you the top layer. I did a lot of these big panorama-sized images where I used poetry and photographs and some 'Automatic Writing'. That's how I got to the painting. In this panorama, I did painting that I then scanned and collaged in the computer. So it's a digital collage.

I think I started working on panoramas in 2004, and I really stopped doing it 2010. And Then I started painting. I mean I painted before in my life; but in this sequence I started again.

I studied photography [at RISD]. But I also took painting and drawing. I graduated in photography, abstract in the sense that I was making long panorama-shaped images that I collaged together using different images of one scene. Some close focused; some far away. And I strung them together as though they were a continuous landscape even though I had fragmented in the camera and put it together. And I worked on abstracts [paintings] when I was in school.



Matisse. And Picasso, very much so. In some way, I just can't pin point it, I've always been absorbed with his work. And, well, I love Irene Koronas. Let's see who else. Yes, there's somebody named Mitch Glassman. That's in the South End. I absolutely love his work.



Poem-Typography-5 - Jenny Grassl

Over the years, my taste in art has developed, and my favorite painters and/or photographers have moved on from one artist to the next. Right now I love people that don't necessarily influence my work. But sometimes they do. Anselm Kiefer. I love really opposite things, like I love Matisse. I still love Matisse. There's no way not to love

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I've been in this studio here now nine years. I like it a lot. It's a very old established community by this time. And sometimes it feels a little stodgy – people don't like noise of restaurants. We need restaurants here, you know. Stuff like that. Otherwise, it's a very comfortable community.

Changes have happened since I moved in 2003 to 249 A Street Building. (My husband was in there earlier.) Now we have a restaurant over there. We have the Channel Center. We have condos. Lots of good things. I had a show out of Channel Center this Fall 2011. It's was called 35 Channel Center. And the whole neighborhood is definitely developing. They're going to put a bank in the neighborhood.

I didn't mention that I got my MFA in Poetry from Bennington College. But that was in poetry, so I've these different trainings. I came out of the poetry program writing just poetry. But I kept getting these nagging feelings from my past that I wanted to use the visual side of my brain, so I did just that.

I would like my name to appear in this article as "Jenny Lawton Grassl". That's good because if people want to Google my website, they'll come up with my name. If you just give "Jenny Grassl", they won't find it.

*[Photographer and husband Anton Grassl enters the large studio room for photo session with Jenny. He comments about his relationship with his prolific, creative wife:]*

Interestingly, artists have to create a certain world around them. Sometimes you're a part of it; sometimes you not. So in our relationship, you have to develop a certain sensitivity to that.

I love [Jenny's artwork]. It's always new, and she's a very prolific artist. And that's very exciting!

