

Q&A with Carris Adams, conducted by Claudine Isé

*Claudine Isé: I'd like to start by asking a question about what the work in Signs All Kinds is not, following on your intriguing description of these works as, among other things, "not for the merchant or the customer. The work is not for the land. The work is not sign painting. The work is not graphic design." What type of consideration should we as your audience bring to these pieces? Should we consider these pieces as a body, a "body of work," or do they lie in some other category that's less easily defined, some nebulous space between process and completion?*

Carris Adams: The audience will always bring whatever they bring to the work and some will assign the work what they want it to be or become. I invite that. For a long time, I wanted to have an ongoing morgue of some sort that also acted as a palette cleanser in between projects. I started trying to find whatever that could be in grad school and it has many forms. So the process of getting to this place was nebulous. This body of work in its illegibility, legibility and materials is also nebulous. So I invite viewers to ponder about how these works have no place just yet and therefore can change at any moment.

*CI: I will never not be fascinated by, and curious about, the process by which you decide that certain words or groupings of words are worthy of your initial interest, and then later, worthy enough to integrate into a painting or drawing. This body of work plays a role in that process—can you share how it fits in (or doesn't) with your painting practice?*

CA: Yes. This body of work is the middle space between those decisions. I've clearly seen the object, usually while out and about, but it's only caught my interest at this point. They have yet to become something else. I always wanted a practice within my practice. I knew I wanted it to be two-dimension, quick, and simple. Over the years these were small drawings on watercolor paper, but I was still concerned with damn near designing the image which is the opposite of quick and simple. And by March of 2020, I was able to slow down and experiment with this form.

*CI: I find your description of this body of drawings as a "morgue" to be so rich and compelling. A morgue is a place where bodies are kept temporarily, especially for the purposes of identifying and/or claiming them. There are associations with violent acts as well – murdered bodies that wind up unidentified in the morgue. A morgue is also a waystation, it's never a final resting place. How does the concept of the morgue relate to how you see these words, and the body of work on view in this show as a whole?*

CA: Absolutely. Many artists have a collection of images or objects that they find interesting but don't know what to do with them yet. Or even a practice within their practice and these interests feed one another. I would say that the artist's interest in the word morgue is an emphasis on the holding or collection of things as well as their possibility to transition into something else.

*CI: Delving further into the meanings of the word "morgue," it is also associated with archives, and in fact, in some newspaper offices, "the morgue" is where they keep a collection of old cuttings, photographs, and information – it's a space for historical research. I like this idea because then the morgue isn't just a place to hold dead things/people that have nothing left to contribute but instead, a place where we could*

*potentially derive new/fresh meaning from the dead. Does your morgue function as an archive and a space through which to “refresh” or recontextualize things that have been put “out of commission,” so to speak?*

CA: It can. It’s definitely a space for change and a “refresh” to happen but I’m not sure what that would look like. Certainly, some of the signs included in the morgue were also not in use or “out of commission”.

*CI: In the press release, I described your forthcoming installation of these pieces within the gallery space as its own “type of speech act;” does that characterization seem accurate to you? It derives from what I imagine will be the physical process of your installing the works – the action of laying them out and affixing them to the walls in particular ways decided by you. Do you envision yourself making all of the layout and word layering/juxtaposition choices intuitively on site, or is that process something you’ll enact in the studio and then re-map (or re-enact) in the gallery? What role does the physical and mental action of arranging and re-arranging, combining and layering, play here?*

CA: I love this connection to “speech acts”. This is something I’ve grown recently familiar with, but not enough to connect to the work at this time. In terms of the installation, I am using this as an opportunity to experiment with the juxtaposition of these works intuitively on site. In past installations, I’ve over planned and curated my work. This time, I want to do less of that. They were collected and made in a random order and I am leaning into them being installed in a random order. I’m not intentionally creating statements between the layers of Dura-lar. That becomes a little too clever. I will be most concerned with the overall composition of the space. I’m treating the gallery like a drawing and the works on Dura-Lar are my mark.

*CI: What is immediately different about these pieces in comparison to your other paintings is that there is no color, imagery or complex pictorial composition; instead, we see minimal black text on a semi-translucent white background. There’s no play with typography or letter form, no associative imagery tying the word to an associated place, space, or circumstance as there might be in paintings like “Chez Bren” or “WigWigWig.” This allows the drawings to partake in different sorts of physical and mental movements, in that these “bones” can be reconfigured in various ways, and can be layered and juxtaposed again and again to suggest meaning while simultaneously clouding or erasing it. You’ve mentioned a growing interest in illegibility and I wonder if the process of exhibiting these “morgue” pieces offer a way for you to explore the illegible outside of systems of painting?*

CA: Yes, yes and yes. I’m also working on a new series of work that includes cutting and collaging old grad school paintings. It’s another way of exploring illegibility, layering of imagery, paintings within paintings and practices within practices.