

DANIEL BARROW'S *MATBOARD POEM*

BY DON GOODES

I'm here to reflect on Daniel Barrow's screenprint *Matboard Poem* with you. I know it's just a picture, but as is the case for good artworks, there is a lot there. Let's take some time to see what the work can make us think about and feel.

One of the first things to sort out is the unusual composition. Who are those people and what are they doing stuck between the ruled lines?

Bands of hand-written words alternate between the lines with images. The structure references lined paper. Daniel frequently uses this iconic support for his drawings. Whether in scribblers or in loose-leaf form, this familiar stationary is steeped in meaning. From school days it evokes vulnerable beginnings: learning the demanding magic of the written word, and later the challenges in the lessons of expressing ourselves on paper. For some students, this lined plane, with its consistent divisions was reassuring, fun, a perfect fit for their ABCs and their thoughts. For others, sweating to fit, form and render the symbols, and properly string words together, it was a nightmare.

This simple but unsettling truth, that the same thing can evoke such different responses, from pleasure to pain, is important to our understanding of *Matboard Poem*, and Daniel's work in general.

Let's look deeper into the composition of the work. To the references mentioned above, Daniel would add another: his practice in letter writing. It is something he did when he was a teen and it continues to this day. *Matboard Poem* can be seen as a kind of letter, although a poetic one; a cue from the work's title. Furthermore, the artist takes this increasingly outmoded way of communicating and connects it to a most current one.

Daniel is interested in how texting has become the dominant mode of communication for the young generations—according to one



research group, six billion text messages are sent each day in the US! Daniel particularly likes the addition of visuals—emoticons (e.g. the smiley face), electronic doodles, animated effects—into text messages. In *Matboard Poem* the compressed figures and body parts are considered by the artist to be fleshed-out emoticons, images that stand in for words.

We can read the visual parts of the artist's "poem" like hieroglyphs, a pictogram, or, more appropriately, like the current trend of emoticon or emoji chains—strings of icons read as if they were words. We are also invited to consider how the words and images in *Matboard Poem* relate to one another and create other poetic messages.

The artist sees the words as compressing the images, assaulting or controlling them. The various overlays obscure and reveal parts of the text and images and encourage us to consider their interaction in various ways. This is a challenge that the artist offers us. Like a puzzle to be solved that has no specific solution.

Matboard Poem is part of a larger series of drawings called Poems. With one hand in the art of letter writing and the other in the art of texting, Poems is part of Daniel's larger artistic project: rather than flushing old technologies for the new, he has them speak to his current culture. He prefers to hold old and new together. He embraces their polygamous creative potential, scrutinizing their strengths and weaknesses.

What's lost as letter writing dies out? In Daniel's view, it's potentially dramatic: as teens speak less and less to each other and text more and more, they will eventually lose the ability to read their friends' facial expressions and body language. What's gained? Daniel sees the technology filling this void with endless new creative options on how we can say something using text messaging.

Admittedly there is something cynical in this view of creative destruction. The result is a piece that gives us neither the simple pleasures of nostalgia, nor those of a utopian futurism. Daniel's emoticons are not cute; they are somewhat grotesque and unsettling. His poem demands that we look beyond surface beauty to a deeper beauty. This theme is present in many of Daniel's works.

The artist mentioned a dream to better explain the feeling we are dealing with here. In the dream, he decides to do something unusual. He wants to go in the wall. So he climbs up to the ceiling and falls into that space in-between. In the tight space, he is very compressed, like the figures in *Matboard Poem*. How does he feel there? Surprisingly, he said, it was very comforting. "Like the cozy feeling of being hidden between the covers of a bed, where no one will find us." But then there is an avalanche that covers the house, and he begins to question if he has become excessively enshrouded and concealed.

In the dream, one-dimensional comfort gives way to chaos as his refuge collapses into entombment. In our times, when fundamentalisms everywhere offer the comfort of a simplified world, Daniel's work is part of the art tradition that pushes us away from these one-dimensional outlooks on life towards a more multidimensional one. It takes us out of our comfort zone.

Who are these people, and what are those words? If we accept to engage with Daniel's illustrated letter, his pictogram and poem, if we go beyond the restriction of the lined paper, and simple messages, if we leave our comfort zone, we will find that his work offers us permissions to expand the limits of how we can create meaning. Permission to be as complicated as we are.

Artist Bio

DANIEL BARROW

Winnipeg-born, Montreal-based artist Daniel Barrow works in projection performance, installation, video, sculpture, printmaking and drawing. He has presented his projection performances at The Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), The Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), The International Film Festival Rotterdam, The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's TBA Festival, and the British Film Institute's London Film Festival. Barrow is the winner of the 2010 Sobey Art Award—Canada's largest prize for young Canadian artists—and the 2013 Glenfiddich Artist-In-Residence Prize.

Daniel Barrow would like to acknowledge the support of:



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Author Bio

DON GOODES

In the late nineties, after a decade of publishing in periodicals and catalogues, Don Goodes deliberately left the confines of art writing to explore life and to test what he had learned from art. He continued to reflect on culture and communication, made web sites for artists and brought up two kids. Spending less time in galleries, he nevertheless followed the work of his friends, including Daniel Barrow, who he has known since 1997.

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Images

Cover: *Matboard Poem* (detail), 2017, screenprint, 28" x 37". Printed by Nicholas Shick under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency program.

Interior: *Words I Didn't Understand*, 2017, chalk pastel, 28" x 37".

Open Studio

401 Richmond Street West
Suite 104
Toronto ON Canada M5V 3A8
416 504 8238
office@openstudio.ca

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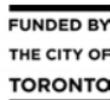


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