

# jacobs:

## larry mullins

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A few years back Larry Mullins would ride his bike through the streets of Washington looking for boarded up buildings. When he found a particularly appealing stretch of plywood he'd stop, get out his paints and brushes, and spend the day filling them with mysterious words, patterns, and colors. He says he was never challenged by the police, probably because it was daytime, there was no spray can involved, and he only painted on the boards, never the buildings themselves. He was a much better class of graffiti artist.

Mullins paints indoors now, currently as a graduate student and teaching assistant at the University of Maryland. His paintings, in oils on gesso-prepared paper, are mounted when finished on smooth birch plywood, attached to a carefully crafted cradling device and float-hung on walls-interior walls.

Expanding on the outdoor work, they yield rawness for maturity and trade confrontation for conversation. They energetically send words, letters, fragmented thoughts, and ornamented messages straight into our line of sight. The difference is in the subtleties. Think now of posters or those of flat, metal signs that used to be in old grocery stores, or even that archaic form

of communication known as the broadside. These paintings are frontal, direct. There are messages: bold letters, partial words, numbers, repeated pattern motifs. Layers of glowing color are complex in application but simple in overall color environment. The color statement alone suits each painting uniquely. There is intent in the words and letters chosen - visual and verbal poetry combined - street poetry with rhythms - the rhythm also, visual and verbal. Each letter looks brand new - its shape invented for just this context. Even the letters, words, numbers and patterned corners that repeat from one painting to the next are unique to their setting. These are playful and serious together - subjects range from a "portrait" of a friend to an AIDS memorial, a tribute to a rap poet of his acquaintance, his wife's amazing brown eyes, food, drugs.

Each of the four artists I've visited in the Critics' Residency program seem in one way or another to be dealing with literacy. Larry Mullins is most directly involved with the mixed message of both that which must be read and that which is purely painting, but there are others. Nancy Wallace scrapes old posters layered on walls from Washington's Chinatown, brings them home, soaks them to separate them, and cuts out the letters to use as essential figures in her collaged oil paintings. Unlike Mullins whose paintings look directly out at us and engage us in conversation, Wallace's paintings look inward. The dialogue takes place in the stresses and balances among the elements of the painting. Elaine Langerman takes verbal accounts of her friends' dreams, makes small paintings of the images they evoke, and has bound them into one dream book, anticipating others. Even David

Sheldon's walls of tiny paintings and arrangements of nature specimens in stacked glass cases, though not overtly verbal, are organized in grids of page like, sequentially arranged displays that invite a seeing akin to reading.

It would seem that writing about art with writing in it would be even easier than writing about a purely visual art. After all, we've shared a common language almost since the start of our lives, and experienced many precedents of arts and artifacts with a mixed message: illuminated manuscripts, Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, posters, billboards, comic books, product labels, even T-shirts. Not to mention, of course, that words and letters are constantly clamoring for good or ill in our urban landscape. But our response to an art object, placed before us to read and consider for the depth of its significance needs to be more complex. The drawing of each of Mullins' words, for example, involves making tiny paintings within paintings. Each word, sometimes each letter, has its own shape surrounding it - some are black letters on a tiny pale green field, outlined in turn with a red line. Contrasting opposites,



whether in color complements, lights and darks, direction the letters are headed, are important in they provide the rhythm, the bounce with which it then must be read. In the painting, Brown Oyster words, "brown oysters" are painted backwards in bright yellow on a dark blue-brown ground, and form an arc toward the top of the painting; while the w "sugar" and "pie," each face forward, are painted thick, glossy, dark impasto but in low contrast against the same dark ground and follow arcs of their own "sugar" above, "pie" below. This strangely gives sense that the viewer's head is being encircled by these letters, that "brown oysters" is on a sign in restaurant window facing out at the street, and they are on the inside with "sugar pie." And once we've got all that down on the page, there's the problem the sound of the words - does the size, the scale, colors, and shapes demand that we say them to ourselves in different voices? It seems at once to be both high and low art - sweet high notes and low throaty growls.

I think that the difficulty of pinning down Mullins' work is deliberately built in by the artist. Meaning not to be grasped at once but are left open by design. This is a tease. Words come and go; lights, color, brighten and dim. Thoughts evoked are passed on without completion. They may begin in his own p