



**THE
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BUT
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**ABBY
DONOVAN**

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THAT ARE NOT WORDS BUT COLORS**

MIDORI HARIMA: THIS IS A MIRROR

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THE COLORS ARE LIKE WORDS THAT ARE NOT WORDS BUT COLORS

THROUGH A COMBINATION OF DEEP LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL knowledge coupled with an exuberant sense of wonder at the world, Abby Donovan distills pathos and erudition into her installation THE COLORS ARE LIKE WORDS THAT ARE NOT WORDS BUT COLORS. This series of objects that Abby has likened to crumpled stained-glass cathedral windows and their colored shadows are imbued with myriad complex ideas about vision, optics, language, and philosophy. Light is projected through the stained-glass sculptures to miraculously create large projected images that are intensely vivid on the one hand, and ephemeral and fleeting on the other. The mutable relationship between the objects and the transmission of light through them creates constantly changing images determined by the interrelationships between glass, light, and perception.

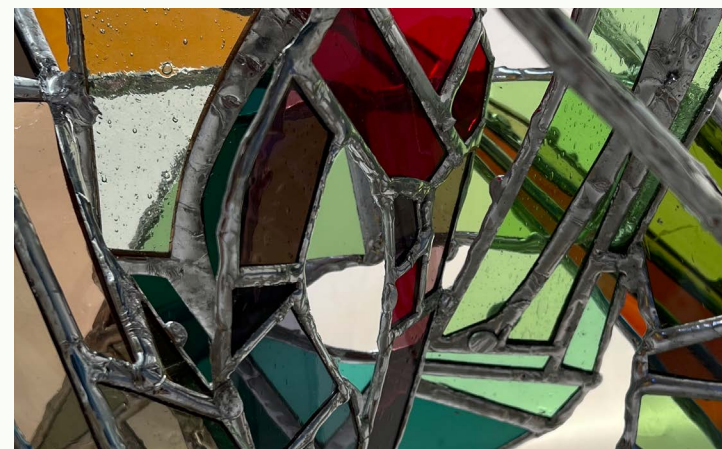
Through many conversations and emails, as Abby and I discussed this show and her thinking, free-form observations bounced around about topics and texts ranging from the 10th through 20th centuries. Abby pulls from everywhere—everything is fair game. Her titles of the individual works in this exhibition reference Ibn al-Haytham, a pioneering mathematician, astronomer, and scientist, born in Basra in 965, who significantly informed our understanding of the nature of vision and light. Others who figure in her thinking and our conversations include the pivotal 19th century naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, and Thomas Browne, the 17th century polymath and philosopher. I have never encountered someone quite as passionate as Abby about writings such as Browne's *Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk*—but her enthusiasm is infectious.

In the midst of our exchanges it became clear that when Abby reads these works (or any works) she is enthralled as much by how the authors write, as by what they write. Common to many of these texts are taxonomies—lists and names and classifications of things—that attempt to pin down knowledge about the world, and, while I think Abby is also trying to understand the universe in which we live, it surprised me that she was so captivated by these particular writers. Their approaches seem so different from Abby's, which almost refuses to pin anything down, as exemplified by her fascination with the “gaps” or “pauses” that exist in writing and language. I proposed that this tack is perhaps more in keeping with contemporary thinkers such as Derrida and his fundamental ideas on the arbitrary relationship between word and object, and the provisional condition of meaning. Abby emphatically defended the efforts of her 17th and 19th century writers, describing the glimmers of poetry she sees there, but was also happy to bring Derrida into the mix: “All are striving to understand the world and to understand other humans and their ideas about the world through

language ... I have no problems with contradiction in this space: Humboldt meet Derrida, Derrida meet Humboldt. And then turn and look at the work and think of something else entirely.”

I loved this thought of bringing these figures from across centuries into the same room, collapsing time and logic. “Contradiction” is generally characterized as two things that are inconsistent and cannot logically both be true at the same time. Interestingly, it is defined by the Cambridge online dictionary as “a combination of words that is nonsense because some of the words suggest the opposite of some of the others.” This stuck with me and I mentioned it to Abby and the fact that it made me think of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland/Alice Through the Looking Glass*; she excitedly replied by sending me a scan of a page with a margin note about *Through the Looking Glass* that she had scribbled in what she called a “eureka moment” while reading James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Joyce's book is a notoriously difficult novel published in 1939, that shattered conventions of language and writing. Abby, not surprisingly, delights in the nonsensical-ness of both those texts. Her work, much like theirs, seems to hold contradiction, and when looked at in different light creates something else entirely.

Lisa Panzera
Director, Shirley Fiterman Art Center



Abigail Donovan, *Ibn al-Haytham's Compositional Clause 9c* (detail), 2021, sheet glass, lead solder. Courtesy of the artist



I. *The Caesura*

I have been thinking a lot about caesuras. This idea that in the middle of every line of verse there is some gap, emptiness, void. Holes. Space that must be acknowledged and observed. The implication being that there is only so much one can articulate before pausing at the brink of what is unsaid/unsayable/mute. And the fact that what is unsayable interrupts and shapes the form of what is being said makes a great deal of sense to me—necessarily things are discontinuous. Such a splitting up of what is or might be reminds me of the dimensions of the sacred Hindu utterance, OM. By that I mean this: the *Upanishads* identify OM not as a word but as a syllable. The end is the beginning is what swinging surrounds, and that deeply resonating vibration is a syllable, not a word.

So then maybe comprehension can only be approached through fragments and the integral yawn or gulf of the incomplete. And I have started to think that maybe poetry is about a way of forming language that is meant to not only pause for, but also to emphasize, absence and loss. Maybe what actually anchors us in words, what actually makes words possible, is the soft gasp at taking the not-word into ourselves. The caesura then is not merely the practicality of having space for breath, it's about having—well like blinking, it's about seeing the darkness every few seconds, even when you are looking at the light.

And I think this is also why the glass compositions need to be pierced by holes, openings. Planar perforations.

II. *Instruments of Observation*

When does compression of a color result in expansion? And vice versa.
Can alternate dimensions be created by splintering up what surrounds?
Don't forget the melancholy of the final passages in *Finnegans Wake*.

A. Mark Smith translates the second line of the first chapter of the third book of Alhacen's *De Aspectibus* to read "But not everything perceptible to sight is perceived by it as it actually exists, nor is everything that seems to the viewer to be perceived as it actually exists correctly perceived." SED NON OMNE COMPREHENSIBILE A VISU COMPREHENDITUR AB EO SECUNDUM QUOD EST, NEC OMNE QUOD VIDETUR AB INSPICIENTE IPSUM COMPREHENDI IN REI VERITATE EST RECTE COMPREHENSUM. I am interested in what I think of as re-wilding (a deliberately messy, unresolved approach to translation), and my version would read: "But not all perceptible/evident from/by sight is seized/grasped/comprehended from/by it in accordance with that/which it is, and not all that is seen from/by the perceiving (one) its very self to be grasped/seized/comprehended in the matter/thing by/with truth is (it) correctly seized/grasped/comprehended." Do I even have a dictionary appropriate for translating medieval Latin? What form does this thought take in the Arabic original, the *Kitab al-Manazir* of Ibn al-Haytham?

Early in *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* Alexander von Humboldt describes the great care and preparation he took in selecting scientific instruments for his journey from Europe across the Atlantic Ocean

and throughout parts of South America and the Caribbean (this particular voyage lasted from 1799 until 1804). Among his selections Humboldt included a cyanometer, the printed paper tool invented a few years earlier by Horace Bénédict de Saussure as a way to measure the blueness of the sky. On a cyanometer gradations of blue are numbered in a circle that, if you follow it clockwise, segmented and successively curves into deeper and deeper hues before abruptly breaking back into almost-white. I think I am correct in recalling that one of the seven volumes of Humboldt's narrative contains a multi-page table of cyanometer readings. It is a seemingly endless set of otherwise isolated numbers that, for some inexplicable reason, ultimately left me imagining the sea instead of the sky.

Late in his life Humboldt tried to sum everything up in a set of lectures that were eventually published as *Cosmos, A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*. Attempting to describe whatever intergalactic vastness we might find ourselves tumbling in and through, Humboldt claimed that an accurate depiction was only possible by taking the wide and unknown dimensions of imagination into account (a faculty, I think it is important to note, he did not limit to humans).

Proximity to what is perceived, proximity to what is understood.



Abigail Donovan, *Crystalline Humour for Malebranche XI (with artist's hand)*, 2022, projection, with sun as light source. Courtesy of the artist

III. *From a letter written and then read aloud to a friend, Miami 2022*

For Silvia on quantum mechanics, after not having read a text in a long while (on quantum mechanics, that is, and when I did, it was *QED* by Feynman).

The attempts to comprehend quantum mechanics at night begin with that in-between state: Am I awake? Am I asleep? If I reach out my hand to touch what I think I see, will it be there or will the layers of what surrounds me collapse at that point into more restricted dimensions, and I lose my sense of what might be beyond? I think (in the morning as well as at night) that the fact that light is both a particle and a wave is a hint to us humans, one that we have been able to measure with western science, of the existence of multiple dimensions in what I perhaps inexactly will refer to as the time-space manifold. That the ancients had ideas of shape shifters is not irrelevant. I am also cognizant of the fact that scientists often tell us that times of change are very difficult to describe, and that there should be a separate language for this. I think about these ideas a lot, and at night when I try and train my mind's eye on that light particle, as I zoom zoom zoom in, can I possibly conceive of the instant when it shifts shape into the wave...it is impossible to maintain my mental momentum and I end up falling. I fall completely and thoroughly into sleep and I dream of ice, it is thick and black and clear and there is a myriad of colors trapped deep down, glinting up through the darkness and I am lying on the surface of the frozen river? lake? ocean? with my cheek pressed against the cold, trying to see.

(This is perhaps not the answer you were hoping for.)

Abby Donovan

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(right) Abigail Donovan, *Ibn al-Haytham's Compositional Clause 18k* (detail), 2021, sheet glass, lead solder. Courtesy of the artist





Dear Abby,

I was thinking about your work and your text describing caesura and OM, and how they relate to printmaking. I see objects and figures, as well as myself as elements of a larger constructed landscape, not as individual existences. A certain distance is required to see something as a landscape, and this is a kind of skill I adopted from the experience of being a foreigner; standing outside of the place you are in. As you know, there are many beautiful phenomena that artists encounter during the art making process. When printmaking, my eyes catch the shadow of the screen falling on the paper; soap bubbles forming tiny letters when I wash the screen. Those unfixed moments that are a strong presence in your work. You make a physical object to obtain a shadow from it; the object itself is not at the center. I see some essence in your work which is similar to printmaking—a conceptual translation through physical touch.

This experiment uses text as a printmaking plate that, when printed, produces layers of visual overtones and

vibrations. Traditionally, Japanese text is written from top to bottom, right to left. In other words, time and space in Japanese printed matter progresses vertically from top to bottom and from right to left. English text moves from left to right, from top to bottom, repeating that horizontal motion, and Japanese texts are now often arranged in the same way, like this:

従来日本語のテキストは上から下に右から左に進む、即ち日本語の印刷物は上から下に右から左へという垂直の運動を繰り返す時間と空間の進み方をする。英語は左から右で、上から下に水平の運動を繰り返しながら進んでいく。それに倣って日本語のテキストもそういう風にアレンジされることが多い。このテキストみたいに。

何かしらのアクションをする時、意味は保留にされている。現象や偶有性に自分を明け渡すことができるときに見えるものがある、それは見えないというプロセスや解らないという状態の向こうに存在していると思っっている。これは鏡であり、色としての光であり、インクの染みとしてのテキストであり、反転して方向を変えながら増殖していった、いくつもの摩擦を引き起こし、いくつものOMを鳴らす。それは反響して聞えない倍音となり、私たちが色と認識する光のスペクトラムの乱反射となる。聞えない音や見えないものとの概念的な接触はこのテキストが存在するような場所で起こっている。

I think that when you are able to surrender to phenomenon and coincidence it is possible to go beyond what you know, but this requires the courage to pass through the unknown. Text as a mirror; light as a color; foreign text as ink stains; the world multiplies, inverting and changing direction, causing multiple reflections, and sounding multiple OMs. Everything overlaps becoming an inaudible overtone, a diffuse reflection of the spectrum of light that we perceive as color, but this is a conceptual understanding and has nothing to do with the phenomenal world. There are sounds that cannot be heard and things that cannot be seen, and we make contact with them conceptually in places like this text.

Midori Harima

Abby

I am glad to have met you.

Where I grew up the sea was often green and always cold, and when gusts of wind touched patches of the water's surface we called them catspaws.

Midori,