

TICK TOCK OF SIMEEN FARHAT

By: Brett Bourbon

Stevie Smith wrote a poem that turns on a visual pun:

*Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning;
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.*

This is a funny poem despite its unfortunate plot. And it has a moral: the difference between waving and drowning gets resolved by death. The art of Simeen Farhat is founded on a similar ambiguity, a visual pun between word and shape. She abstracts words and phrases and poems into sinuous shapes, layered in gradations of color and vector, that she forms into textured melodies and designs. Unlike Stevie Smith's resolution of waving and drowning in death, the doubleness of aspect between word and shape in Farhat's art sometimes gets resolved into the words and sometimes into pattern. The shapes of words made of letters absorb their possibilities of sense, if we can recognize the words. When we cannot recognize a word as a word? What is a circle that is not a circle? Maybe it is an ellipse or a triangle. But what is a word that is not a word? An analogy for a word? A faux-word: a bit of nonsense, a picture? A mistake? A slip? When the words remain disguised in their shapes (which they do not always in Farhat's art), we retain a sense of language without any actual language. This is the conceptual borderline between recognition and intimation, between shape and sense. It is the realm of poetry.

*You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats words without meaning.
In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things.
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon-*

The motive for metaphor, as Stevens calls it in this poem, is a "shrinking from the weight of primary noon," whereas the halfness Farhat offers us to inhabit is a cloud of words, an expansion into halfness, not a shrinking into it but as it expands we might be ourselves shrinking. Such are the risks of art. Sculptures of sensuous form, like those of Farhat, encourage our eyes to follow and trace their lines, colors, and shapes. Such sculptures offer us objects and shapes we can touch drawing our hands towards them. Sculpture does not just make images it makes objects, and our relation to these objects always has a visceral quality, for our eyes to follow how our hands would feel, and thus the static forms of sculpture become dynamic movements of our experience, even if only imagined. The art of Farhat describes in shape and edge abstract words, and thus in our touching these shapes we would be reading a kind of braille. Is her art an art for the blind? If it is such an art, what sense does her sculptured braille show?



Artist's Statement, 2013, cast and pigmented resin, 160x290x32cm. Courtesy of the artist.

To answer that question we need a comparison. The cursive filigree of Farhat's non-figurative sculptures cannot help but recall the lines of expressive pattern and texture of Jackson Pollock. Pollock describes, at least in the drip paintings of the late 40's and early 50's, one of the limits of abstract art, an attempt to renounce all figure, to give us palates of energy and curve, distress and line. Farhat's cursive arabesques of line and color resist that limit even as they remind us of it. Michael Fried points us in the right direction when he comments that "Pollock's line bounds and delimits nothing-except, in a sense, eyesight." That is the limit Pollock, at times, tried to reach. Farhat's sculptural line bounds and delimits words, so where does she leave our eye?

When I can't decipher the words distorted in her sculptures, when they remain suggestive non-sense, then my eye traces faux-words that are words by analogy not in fact. I get the idea of language from these shapes: I hold on to its promise, but now offered as a limit to my own understanding. So the first sense her art shows is the limits of sense. Does it have a further sense? I mark the affinities between Farhat and Pollock in order to establish a difference. Pollock transcribes sensation through a style and a method that is expressive; he fights against design, even when he falls into it. Farhat is making her own alphabet, but that alphabet is not a codification of sensation, even when it produces sensations in us. So what is this alphabet?

In his early drip paintings, like *Full Fathom Deep*, Pollock fused the stuff of life onto the canvas. When we look closely we see the detritus of his everyday life, the very stuff stuck and painted over on the canvas-partial cigarettes, tops of paint tubes, nails, matches, a button, thumb tacks, etc. When we step back the stuff disappears in the froth of lines, color and darkness. The lines make a thicket of the sea. Farhat's abstractions also emerge from detritus; but these leavings are not objects but words. But even when we look closely we cannot always resolve the shapes into their words; and I don't want to. I want to know the words, but I don't want to see them in the shapes of the art. What is enough for me is to see the shapes as descendent words, monstrous and decayed or translated and exaggerated. I see analogies of words. I want to read the words out which Farhat's sculptures are made, but in parallel, as part of the confrontation between sense and shape, implication and color, not as a secret to decipher. In Pollock the lines work against the objects on the canvas: to absorb them. In the later drip paintings, objects are foregone, so that lines and color can work more fully against likenesses, figures, and objects. With Farhat, the arabesques of line trace the figures of words, but words are already strange kinds of things, implying something non-physical we call sense and import. Whatever words are they are more than their shapes and sounds. This is their purpose here, too, but what they imply in these sculptures puzzle us into attention to shape and design, since

they don't make sentences (and I don't want them to). Farhat shapes words into lines that teeter between language and cursive pattern. Her wildness is in design and her faith is in emergent significance. On the surface, the drive to turn words into shapes is not the same drive that motivates Pollock's non-figurative passion. Certainly the non-figurative traditions of Islamic art intervene and offer Farhat a model for organizing abstract line opposed to non-figurative line of abstract expressionism. Farhat's model is calligraphic. Her sculpture transmutes the delicacies and expressive variations of line and shape in Pollock's drip paintings into something less expressive of passions of a person, of the artist, and more evocative of geometry gone awry. Farhat's shapes, while designed through drawing, are produced by saw and mold, and then cast. She manufactures objects. These objects do not immediately recall the human hand that made them. If her sculpture is expressive, it is not expressive in the way Pollock's lines of palsy and fervor can be (even if his lines were applied with calm judgment). I think the site of expressiveness of Farhat's work lies in the tension and distortion between shape and word, between the abstract harmonies of color and texture and the titles. And what about the titles for her abstractions? They offer vectors for our attention. The title of one her most interesting pieces seems critical to how we engage with its forms and particularities. The piece is called *The Timeless Clock*. If this sculpture had no title, we would not link it to time. Fragments of shape-abstracted words radiate and revolve, and so make a circle. But does a circle recall time? Maybe. Sometimes. Not always. The flutter of shapes and turns of line mimic also the patterns of the iris of an eye looking at us. Why not see an eye instead of a clock? But if it is a clock, how is it timeless? We can only answer that question with further questions.

Is the clock timeless because it fails to tell any time at all? Or because it tells only one time over and over? Or because it clocks timelessness, however it does it and whatever that means? I don't think we can decide. Art prompts questions that it cannot answer. Instead we must describe what we see. These words of sculpture make phrases of shape. The shapes are colored in three different hues. Those hues make a kind of archeology, temporal layers of echo and shine. The most translucent shapes, having lost the substantiality of color, seem like after-images of the dominant cream-colored shapes through which they are interlaced. These cream-colored forms have the substantiality of a body compared to the translucent word-forms. But even with this substantiality, they seem not quite of the present. We can see shapes that seem more present. These more present word-shapes sputter like bursts and streaks of pearlescent-silver, cursive shapes sparkling as if lit by some light, maybe the sun-and these push at us, give us this moment of our seeing by attracting our eye. The effect is beautiful. *The Timeless Clock* has an archeological

temporality; or it does if we can see its colors as bound to the sun, and thus as a record of change. The circle that gathers these colored words does play a role in this archeology, but it takes time to see it. The words gathered into the whole which is the work of art are not organized into statements, and, therefore, not into thoughts. The work makes a 'sentence' of shapes and patterns, instead. The words are cells in the organism of the art. But I am unsure if this is right. The art, while coalescing into the singularity of a whole seems mis-described as an organism. But if I call the singular whole that is the work of art an object, and not an organism, and if I then shift the metaphor describing their constituent words from 'cells' to 'molecules,' then something seems wrong. I want to insist that the words are like cells-they carry our living humanity with them, but the shapes are not further organisms, but things-clouds, circles, water drops. This inverts the logic of Farhat's earlier work, where women were figured, draped and shaped in various actions-their bodies made of words, often streaming from their mouths. In that earlier art, the words were inhuman and invasive. Or the words were social, but still pressuring against and out of the organism of figured human beings. I leave these aside. I will speak here only of this newest work. Here, in this work, therefore, we find a fundamental tension-between an abstraction that carries our humanity, the word-shapes, and an abstraction that seems inhuman, these shapes of circles and clouds and water drops (maybe they are tears, but then they are monstrous). I want to return to the specific way *The Timeless Clock* invokes its title in its forms and color. First, we should always remember that clocks do not measure time, since time is nowhere present to be measured. Clocks measure change, or rather organize change so that it can be made visible. We see change, we suffer change; and in our measuring of change, by seasons or memory or clocks, we manifest time. Clocks measure other clocks, and that is just to measure by one change the changes of something else. Second, a clock that marks no change by its own change is no clock. But what about a sundial, you might ask. The sundial does not change, but it allows the sun to cast a shadow that changes and in that measures the changing movement of the sun. So what can we conclude from this? We must conclude that Farhat's clock is endless because it isn't a clock; or rather, like the words of which it is made it is a memory-clock, a clock by analogy and recall, and it is in that recall that we find change. The archeology of change still visible in her clock, intimated by its play of hues, is revealed by her words-both in their promise of meaning and in their distortions, their loss of sense in abstraction. Her shape-words, her faux-words are echoes of actual words, and thus suggest those absent words, and thus invoke loss and change, the loss (and maybe the recovery) of the language it distorts. Given the title, the shape of this failed clock recalls our everyday clocks, and thus invokes the changes they

measure. Her clock is a clock because it is not: she has made a visual pun. Farhat's punning abstraction goes behind Pollock's abstraction to Mallarme's aesthetic experiments. In *The Book*, *Spiritual Instrument*, Mallarme offers his vision of life transmuted by aesthetic means into a book, a graphing of everything into the forms of words, where even typography would become "a rite." He calls such a book "a tomb in miniature for our souls." Mallarme's typography is cousin to Farhat's word-shapes: the shapes into which they are collected become a book; and thus, do they become tombs "in miniature for our souls"? A timeless clock that abstracts phrases into sculpture and change into shape and color might seem a tomb-but for who or what? If we take it straight, a timeless clock would be a tomb for time; but that is wishful thinking. So maybe we want to say a tomb for ourselves-but I don't think we fit into these cursive shapes: they confront us. We might try to measure ourselves with them, but that would make our measurement the tomb of the sculpture. Is something entombed by this art? But I fear this is the wrong question, for this would be a tomb with nothing inside, because it has no insides. Again Farhat reveals an archeology, but one in which surfaces make other surfaces. It is an archeology of air not of earth.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Brett Bourbon received his B.A. from U.C. Berkeley, where he studied medieval philosophy and theology, and his Ph.D. from Harvard, where he studied modern philosophy and literature. He has been a professor at Stanford University, and is now an English professor at the University of Dallas. He is also a Visiting Associate Professor in The Program of Literary Theory at the University of Lisbon. He has received many awards, including a Fulbright to the University of Lisbon, a Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellowship, the Harvard English Scholar award, and the Walter J. Gores Teaching award from Stanford, as well as the Haggerty Teaching Award from the University of Dallas. His philosophical work ranges from the philosophy of language and mind to aesthetics and ethics. In particular, he has studied the philosophical grammar of sense and nonsense, the logical form of fiction, the nature of poems, the question of poetic experience and truth, and various problems in politics and ethics. While he is an expert in the work of James Joyce, he has also taught and written on the art of Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and on contemporary poems and novels, both British and American. He has taught courses on literary aesthetics, the history of the novel in relation to intellectual history, the logic of metaphors, and the relationship between science and art. In addition, he has a fanatical love for the poetry of Homer and Dante. Brett Bourbon is the author of *Finding a Replacement for the Soul: meaning and mind in literature and philosophy* (Harvard UP, 2004). He has also written and published numerous essays, including essays on the concept of culture, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, science fiction, the theory and practice of poetry, and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. He also writes art criticism. He has recently completed a manuscript, entitled *The Faces of Words: Six Lectures on the Ethos of Poems*. He is currently writing a book entitled *The Rationality of Description*, and he is writing a series of poems entitled *Color Boy against the Gods*.