

# ORTHOGRAPHY IN DISREGARD

Elize de Beer

Review by Jonathan Brennan

*Orthography in Disregard* is a solo exhibition of new work from Cork-based South-African artist Elize de Beer at QSS Studios & Gallery, Belfast.

*Words Within I*, the first piece in this show of 28 works, is a small square format work on paper. The majority of the print, an aquatint with *chine-collé*<sup>1</sup>, is a mottled black, with the exception of three distinct clusters of letters of varying sizes that are distributed like an archipelago across the work. The letters are outlines, their shapes defined by an absence of ink, allowing swirls of blue, red, tangerine and purple, in the form of marbled paper, to burst through. Yet these letter-shaped gaps are not without texture – the body of each is cracked and peeling; they have a crumbling, weathered effect that feels very analogue (I suspect the process involves the vintage dry-transfer lettering system Letraset – a fact the artist later confirms). Set primarily at right angles to each other, as if composed in a typesetter's *chase*, the overlapping letters mix serif and sans-serif typefaces, and multiple font sizes, to form dense, intuitively-arranged masses. A companion piece follows (*Words Within II*) in which more of the *chine-collé*-ed marbled paper is revealed, the network of letters even more extensive. However, despite the use of typography, the letters do not form intelligible words. I'm reminded of the word 'orthography' in the show's title i.e., the conventional spelling system of a language; its being held 'in disregard' now makes sense.

This use of type is very different to how text is employed in the work of e.g. Kruger, Warhol or even Chris Ashworth's grungy arrangements. In de Beer's work, it is not intended to be read as text; there are no words as such, rather disconnected letter shapes used for their formal beauty, and as compositional elements. However, there is something else at work here. The gallery text makes reference to the show being (among other things) 'an interpretation of [de Beer's] dyslexic reading experience'. A quote from the artist herself, referring to letters shifting, becoming three-dimensional and 'layering on top of one another and becoming so intertwined that meaning can no longer be found', provides further insight. In short, there is an intent to replicate the dyslexic experience, to push the viewer into overriding the natural inclination to search for words and literal meanings, and to appreciate text as image.

Returning to these initial pieces, De Beer's use of marbling, type, plates, paper, and a sense of the analogue makes clear that a language of books as physical objects is being employed. Despite their size, *Words Within I* and *II* have a certain potency in containing, like an overture, many of the formal elements that subsequently feature throughout the show. However, having said that, nothing prepares one for the explosion in scale and dimensions that occurs on turning the corner and entering the main gallery space.

One notices further wall pieces, yet dotted over the generous expanse of the gallery floorspace, like sculptures in a vast park, are a series of unique 3-dimensional paper constructions, the largest of which is over 2.5 metres long, 1.80 metres wide and almost a

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<sup>1</sup> A technique, used in conjunction with printmaking processes such as etching or lithography, that results in a two-layered paper support: a tissue-thin paper, cut to the size of the printing plate, and a larger, thicker support paper below.

metre tall. *Off The Page VIII*<sup>2</sup>, the first of these pieces – de Beer refers to them as ‘pop-up sculptures’ – lies partially open in two sections and hinged down the centre, one side resting on floor, the other propped against the gallery wall like some giant pop-up book. The whole is difficult to take in in one go. The marbled paper reappears in shades of cream, coral red, azure blue and purple, this time in simulacrum (screenprinted and slightly offset) in some places collaged to the structure’s MDF base (or ‘cover’ if it were a book) and in other instances surging out in daring self-supporting mountain folds. Elsewhere, orphaned letters in black glossy Letraset drift over matt black paper. On the ‘marbled’ paper, and on sheets of plain white, are printed large letterpress letters in black, again forming clusters of letter groups over backdrops of swirling colour. Some of the screenprinted marbled sheets are left whole, others are cut at 45° angles into triangles and strips, still others seem to constitute scraps and offcuts from other prints. I recognise this urge to make use of the inherent waste generated in printmaking and bookbinding as a result of the various processes of making proofs, test prints, gauging press pressure, tearing paper to size, cropping, etc. I resist the temptation to close the piece and open it again to see its feat of paper engineering in motion, but thankfully the artist later provides a demo.

*Off The Page II*<sup>3</sup> is another pop-up sculpture, this time opened flat so the viewer can experience it from any angle. Again, the marbled paper features, here in shades of blue, yellow and purple, like the end-pages of some ornately-bound volume, and elsewhere in stark black and grey. The impulse to read the letterpress letters is still there – I also find myself intuitively aligning myself with the sculpture’s hinged spine, as if it were a book. A certain symmetry is at play in some of these pieces, I guess as a result of having to balance weight and counterweight, however, with letters set at multiple angles and certain sections hidden entirely from single viewpoints (photos do not do justice) these floor pieces defy single-viewpoint readings and demand to be seen in the round.

*Off The Page II* feels like architecture: a large structure surges vertically upwards from the floor, formed by two sheets of stiff card or foam core shaped like the gable ends of a house. A lighter gauge sheet of black paper bridges the gap between them, folded in the centre but also bowed like a tarpaulin, and acting like a roof of sorts. Meanwhile, a semi-circle of black card at the base of one ‘wall’ is like a cartoon mousehole ‘entrance’. The collaged papers on the front seem to complement the structure, while on the reverse they seem to disregard it totally. It is a feature one notices in other pieces too: the collaged elements sometimes emphasise structural features such as hinges and tabs yet at other times obscure or work against them.

While formally reminiscent of pop-up books and architecture, the unusual scale of these pieces allows them to occupy an in-between space: too small to constitute architecture, too large to be books or even architectural maquettes – yet small enough to be folded and packed into the back of the artist’s car, as de Beer jokes with an audience during her talk at the gallery. It is a refreshingly-honest comment from an artist who, several times during her presentation and in our conversation, speaks about the joy and ‘fun’ she has with her chosen media of expression. Accidents are embraced too, for example in *Words Written*

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<sup>2</sup> Full title and details: *Off The Page VIII (red, blue, yellow, purple)*, 2023-24, pop-up sculpture made with screenprints, letterpress, paper, card, bookcloth and Letraset. 65 x 122 x 40cm (open, variable) / 65 x 61 x 3cm (closed).

<sup>3</sup> Full title and details: *Off The Page II (blue, yellow, purple, white)*, 2023-24, pop-up sculpture made with screenprints, letterpress, paper, card, bookcloth and Letraset. 168.5 x 122 x 90cm (open) / 122 x 84 x 5cm (closed).

(*Ghost*), the letterpress forms, which have been printed a second time without re-inking to produce a print known as a ghost print, take on the marbled effect of the screenprinted papers. It is a beautiful accident to do with oil and water-based inks repelling one another, but one Elize concedes cannot be reached by shortcut – one has to repeat the same procedure to replicate the effect.

Philip Taaffe is another artist that employs printmaking processes throughout his work and who has also made extensive use of marbling. In Taaffe's case, his interest in marbling seems to be linked with a wider interest in arcane knowledge and processes, or somehow symbolising chaos. According to de Beer, however, marbling was a way of introducing colour into her practice (she speaks about overcoming a 'fear of colour') and also to do with her falling in love with books as objects, and with the associated traditions of marbled endpapers and leather binding, even if, growing up, dyslexia sometimes made the information they contained inaccessible. Having said that, Elize's marbled papers do not conform to any traditional marbling patterns I have come across – fishtail, peacock, French curl, etc. In some pieces, e.g. *Off The Page VI* and *Off The Page VII*<sup>4</sup>, single colours from the marbled paper patterns have been extracted and printed in stark black and grey. Isolated in this way, they take on a more organic feel, resembling plants shapes and spatters, to such an extent that I question whether I would have recognised them as marbling had I not seen the 'full colour' versions.

There is great variation in these pop-up sculptures – *Off The Page VII* includes intersecting planes of card protruding through slots like open arms; *Off The Page VI* is more contained, its tent-like structure looks inward, concealing something; whereas *Off The Page III* protrudes outwards at multiple angles like an explosion in freeze-frame. Some of the pop-up sculptures are modular, achieving great complexity and scale through the combination of two pieces. *Off The Page IV*<sup>5</sup> is one such work. Circling around it feels like being treated to an aerial view of some vast esplanade flanked at one end by a colossal proscenium arch and a cantilevered pavilion on the other, or an ideal city by Niemeyer or Le Corbusier – yet more organic with its incorporation of pieces of torn paper.

During her talk, Elize speaks about the magical moment of opening the works and seeing the various elements slide into position, implying perhaps that this might be something she could incorporate into the display of these pieces in future, be it through mechanical means, performance or video. She reflects on the possibility of making the pieces bigger again, perhaps as installation or as something the viewer enters into. And while it is fascinating to speculate where de Beer might take her pop-up sculptures next, this is already a remarkably coherent, thought-provoking and unique body of work in its own right.

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<sup>4</sup> Full titles and details: *Off The Page VI (blue, yellow, green, white)*, 2023-24, pop-up sculpture made with screenprints, letterpress, paper, card, bookcloth and Letraset. 161 x 180.5 x 85cm (open) / 161 x 91 x 5cm (closed); *Off The Page VII (blue, yellow, purple, white)*, 2023-24, pop-up sculpture made with screenprints, letterpress, card, bookcloth and Letraset. 161 x 180.5 x 101 (open) / 161 x 91 x 5cm (closed).

<sup>5</sup> Full title and details: *Off The Page IV (blue, yellow, green, white)*, 2023-24, pop-up sculpture made with screenprints, letterpress, paper, card, bookcloth and Letraset, modular sculpture. 283 x 180.5 x 98.5cm (open) / 122 x 91 x 5cm (closed).