

Essay for the City of Los Angeles Fellowship 2008 catalogue by Rosanna Albertini

Erin Cosgrove is a calligraphy queen, a mediaeval scribe of contemporary disagreement about almost everything: religions, wars, global warming, social games, evolution, borders, political regimes, and family life. "Medieval means that life and place and the crops you plant and your wife and children, all are uncertain." Gertrude Stein, 1943. And now in 2007 we are still like that, with wars and terrorism and hurricanes and droughts and epidemics and bankruptcy heaped on our road. Cosgrove is a hunter of meanings. From the cold winters in Saint Paul, Minnesota she learned flatness and silence. Late in the night, a wolf waited for her outside the art school's door. Half frozen after standing for hours in front of the Federal Building protesting against the first Gulf War, she finally fainted into a big basket of candies at the nearby shopping center. She learned from Samuel Beckett that silence could be told if the voice springs from inside, and stops two steps from the feet.

She practices calligraphy as an art of living through time and space free from chronology, conventional cages, and high and low. In words and images her calligraphic characters are the faces of Darwin, Diogenes, Jesus, Trotsky, Karl Rove, Dick Cheney, Andreas Baader and of everyone else, including faces that are real, imagined, forgotten or effaced from history. No shadows on the ground. People only remember symbols and play with them to the exhaustion of meaning. In Cosgrove's mind, and in her art, stories melt into romance, drawings, tapestry, and animated films. Cosgrove is a conceptual artist who tears into shreds any scholasticism. Like Ockham's razor separating faith from reason, she stages a sarcastic comedy of contemporary life in which survival is possible on one condition: that we step outside our belief systems. The ones who believe do not see what's around them, if they see at all. Instead Cosgrove believes in looking, and earnestly says what she sees, looking at the immense variety of artifacts whose logo could be: Human Made. So much the better, we won't call it "culture". The more impersonal signs and images became, the more popular and down to earth, the better they function: an infinite number of alphabetic letters morphing themselves through ages and habits. But, as in any language, there is no exit: that's why, maybe, Cosgrove's art displays an encyclopedic style meticulously detailed; every symbol, every quote leads to a meaning and to a didactic explanation, which does not mean that the story is reasonable or reliable. It is what it is, not something to remember or to forget. It's romance. A heart lies beneath.

This art without moralism, dryly unsentimental, bloody sharp in our face burns any possible bad faith away. History is not past; it is a large body of insanity from which, by a miracle, we still emerge as living beings. For her COLA exhibition Cosgrove extends her hybrid language on a sixty-foot scroll that displays the epic pilgrimage of two faithful souls in a lost world. Their journey is reported in images and in a computer language--Leet, used in chat rooms, or by hackers, where letters are replaced by numbers and symbols and words are misspelled--echoing and inverting the use of Latin in mediaeval times. The scroll is accompanied by a didactic video interpreting and misinterpreting a delicately embroidered, violent iconography that asks of us all: What Manner of person Art Thou?