

INTERVIEWS JUN. 21, 2012

## Tauba Auerbach's Peripheral Visions

by Courtney Fiske

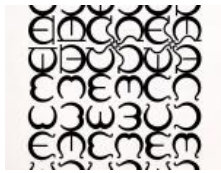
New York-based artist Tauba Auerbach works in series, pushing one subject to the point of conceptual exhaustion before delving into the next. Her early works, currently on view in "Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language," MoMA's survey of text in art, probes the material and semiotic properties of letters and phonemes. Executed in ink, pencil or gouache on paper, pieces such as *The Whole Alphabet (lowercase)*, *All the Punctuation* and *Morse Code Alphabet, no spaces, yellow* (all 2005) are driven by the compulsion to deconstruct: to take apart familiar systems of signification—the alphabet, punctuation, Morse code—and reassemble their elements so as to de-familiarize them.

A similar impulse carries into the artist's current work, recently on display in "Float," her first solo show at New York's Paula Cooper Gallery. Here, Auerbach's long-standing series of "Fold" paintings, created through a process of creasing canvas, spray-painting its contours, and stretching the result, hung alongside her new series of "Weave" paintings. In the latter, monochromatic strips of white canvas are threaded across a wooden frame, producing an orderly weave disrupted by rays, slices and waves of divergent patterns that prevent the surface from resolving into a basic, over-under grid. Collapsing the boundary between two and threedimensions, Auerbach's "Fold" and "Weave" series trouble Cartesian spatial logic, proposing a fluid and manifold alternative.

*A.i.A* spoke with Auerbach in her SoHo apartment, where the discussion ranged from typography to the limits of sensory experience.

Tauba Auerbach. *The Whole Alphabet, From the Center Out, Digital, V.* 2006. Gouache on paper on panel 30 x 22" (76.2 x 55.9 cm). Collection Suzi and Scott Lustgarten © 2011 Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York





**COURTNEY FISKE** What motivates your interest in flatness, depth and the unsettled nature of spatial experience?

**TAUBA AUERBACH** I probably think about higher spatial dimensions more than any other aspect of my practice. At the root of my interest is the question of what consciousness is: what it's made of and what its limitations might be. As creatures that operate in three dimensions, what capacity do we have to conceive of a dimension that's beyond, or even coiled within, the space that we experience? What if this 3D volume that is our space is in fact the surface or boundary of a 4D volume, just as a 2D plane is the boundary of a 3D volume, and so on down the line? You're right that the "Weave" and "Fold" paintings have a teeter-tottering quality: they oscillate between being flat surfaces and 3D objects. My thought was that if the work could soften the distinction between 2D and 3D states of being, it could efface, or at least imply the possibility of effacing, a similar distinction between 3D and beyond. Like a portal through which one might think about these things. I guess the attraction stems from a kind of faith that something beyond what is perceptible exists and can be imagined, even if it can't be experienced.

**FISKE** Flatness is a quality that many artists and critics have theorized. How do you position your practice in relation to this discourse, if at all?

**AUERBACH** To tell you the truth, I think much more about math than about art history. I don't have the sense that I am or that I want to be advancing a particular historical thread. It happens that as I bump into artists with similar interests, I'll trace my preoccupations back in time a bit. But my work is very much motivated by my own curiosities, rather than by a desire to engage with a certain discourse.

**FISKE** Your work in "Ecstatic Alphabets" concerns itself with letters and other signs. I'm curious as to what draws you to these signs: is it their self-contained logic, their permutational quality, their esthetics or something else?

**AUERBACH** Right now, I'm mainly interested in these signs as systems. But my theoretical interest in language and symbols came by way of a graphic interest, which developed while I was working as a sign painter in San Francisco. At the time, I was drawing lots of fonts, and I took the job because I loved letters, both aesthetically and formally. It wasn't that I simply thought type was

beautiful, but I was curious about its limitations: how much could you change the letter "S" before it stopped being an "S," for example. It was at that job where the graphic element of language opened into something more abstract in my thinking.

**FISKE** Several of the other artists included in "Ecstatic Alphabets" have a very deliberate, programmatic take on the relationship between art and language. I think, for example, of Lawrence Weiner and Mel Bochner. Is your understanding of the relationship between the visual and the verbal so formed?

**AUERBACH** No, I don't have a clear, concise position on that. I think of language as both a technology and a material. Once we know them, letters and alphabets have an almost automatic ability to generate meaning. Certain of my works at MoMA, such as the drawings *Alexander Melville Bell's Visible Speech* (2006), try to make the mapping of the verbal onto the visual more logical. Bell was a phonetics specialist who, in the late 1860s, developed a set of symbols that diagrammed the movements of the tongue, lips and throat as they voiced each letter. The goal of this speech system was to make the shape of each letter reveal something about its sound. While I don't think that Bell's attempt was very successful, I'm interested, more generally, in how symbols take on their own life: how the ways in which they're treated can endow them with greater signifying power or strip them of the same.

**FISKE** Do you see a continuity between your early work with signs and your more recent "Fold" and "Weave" paintings, which lack an explicit semiotic element?

**AUERBACH** Absolutely. Towards the end of working with language in an explicit way, I became really interested in binary code as a linguistic structure. That catapulted me into thinking about binaries in general as logic-structures, and eventually I landed on the binary between flatness and not-flatness. The "Weave" paintings are a nod to this sort of logic: they consist of two discrete planes changing places over and over again; each strip can only be in front *or* in back at any given moment. The result is that the surface looks pixilated. As I worked on the "Weave" paintings, I became increasingly interested in this fact. Weaving is one of our oldest technologies, but it has an inherent esthetic and structural link to our newest, digital technologies. That continuity excited me.

**FISKE** Art historians tend to place a fault line between abstract and representational painting. Your "Fold" paintings, however, collapse this dichotomy: their abstract patterns are mappings of

pre-existing folds.

**AUERBACH** That's certainly something that I think about—though, when I started the "Fold" paintings, I had no particular agenda in mind. Initially, I thought it would be most interesting to repeat the folds several times. I would fold the canvas one way, paint it, then refold it in a different way and paint it, so warring topologies would be frozen on the surface. I left that behind, however, because it convoluted the balance between abstraction and representation that the series seemed to be achieving. For my recent show at Paula Cooper, I wanted to show those "Fold" paintings that I felt were the most challenging chromatically, almost to the point of being dissonant. Out of the entire series, this is the group that seems to best activate what you're describing: a place where representation and abstraction might just be the same thing for a moment.

**FISKE** Right. The surface and support of the "Fold" paintings are one and the same, as is the case with your "Weave" series. I wonder: did the design of the canvas weave inspire you? Did you have the desire to weave a surface that's already woven?

**AUERBACH** The canvas was something that I had taken for granted. I was, after all, painting on a woven surface, not a seamless plane. I stopped thinking about other dimensions as "out there" and started wondering if they were within everything else in some way. I felt a need to burrow into the structure of the plane, to take it apart and put it back together in a more deliberate, dynamic way. As I began to hunt for materials, I found canvas strips with many different patterns, from V-shaped to zigzagged. I ended up with the V pattern because it caught the light in a particular way that I liked.

**FISKE** Is there anything you do to find inspiration for your practice?

**AUERBACH** That's so hard to answer because it could be anything, and I don't think you can go hunting for it. I'll confess that I spend a lot of time lying on the couch, thinking and writing down notes. Of late, I've also been doing a meditation exercise about peripheral vision. I draw my attention to the sides of my visual field. I try to focus, at the same time, on the center of my visual field. I let my vision sink back further and further and try to imagine it connecting behind my head. Sometimes I'll get hooked on exercises like this for a while, and see where they take me.

Auerbach's work is also currently on view at LA MOCA as part of "The Painting Factory."

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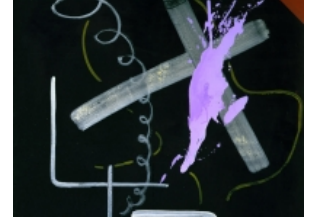
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