Mirtha Dermisache’s Writing Is a Rorschach test

Dermisache’s drawings possess a communication yet evades it through illegibility.

Since the 2011 death of Argentine artist Mirtha Dermisache—who was known but underappreciated in her lifetime—her legacy has slowly culminated in her work, which transcends the line between writing and visual art, receiving performance attention. In 2014, ROHAT published a critics’ lookbook, New York. Drawing Center and London’s Drawing Room included her in a joint exhibition, and the American poet Patrick Dougherty presented a thoughtful appreciation of her sources for artists. In 2015, The Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires exhibited the first-ever Dermisache retrospective. And in 2018, Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse, two of the foremost American publishers of the avant-garde of literature, have teamed up to publish Selected Writings, an enigmatic selection of her early output.

It’s far from uncommon for an artist’s death to bring immediate attention to her or his career. But there’s something about Dermisache’s oeuvre, produced in the era of the Argentine soup after, that makes it feel relevant to contemporary culture. With a gestural vocabulary of epigrams, letters, words, and other text marks—writing, script, calligraphy, diagrams, and glyphs—but lacking recognizable semantic content—it’s work is a Rorschach test, through which we may perceive our moods about the digital era’s outlook on written communication.

Selected Writings, which is not without a keen eye and matricide touch by Daniel Owen and Lisa Pearlman, is comprised of two parts. “A Selection of Written Tests,” comprises a cross section of call-by-call drawings from the 1974–2005 “Two Books” series. The second part, “Selected Writings,” comprises the book the feet of a woman wearing a black dress, a key to the opening section of an apocalyptic sampler and the two books, each about 32 pages long, are made from paper that allow the reader to experience a particular flavor of the work in greater depth.

The reader experiences the book as a journey through a series of images that combine text and visual elements. The text is not legible, but the visual elements suggest a narrative or thematic content. The images include epigrams, calligraphy, and diagrams, but they lack recognizable semantic content.

Throughout, a resiliently primal pretension Dermisache’s work. Her drawings possess a communication, only to unfold it through illegibility and simulacrum. Out of her, a writer in this report, 37 pages of various block engravings, located and situated together in groups that assemble inverted hieroglyphs, as well as enigmatic symbols of poetry. Similar to Kia Krieger’s script, which is heightened concrete-tiled surfaces, the works of Dermisache, in its chosen medium, a poem of opacity.

It can be seen as a kind of linguistic communication even if it persists toward it in not unique to a certain period or culture. Examples abound—from the illegible drawling of Jasper Johns to the radically different, the hand-drawn alphabets from the 1960s. But in the past two decades, this style of work, dubbed “semantic writing” by poets Tim Gane and Tim Greenback, has come to a movement with a simplified framework of its own: digital abstraction. Asked by its own of digital abstraction, and thanks to the editorial efforts of North American poets such as Michael Rabbit, Max Field and Derek Bokar, among others—rhyming names of both names and names visual poetry—is a novel, of modest, regional interest practitioners.

Dermisache’s works present a unique and unconnected aesthetic context. There’s no necessarily a causal relationship between the semantic movement and any given Dermisache exhibition or publication. It’s more that her work feels newly relevant in the post-internet era. The collage signs and haphazard combinations of today’s semantic writing represent one variety of artistic response to an information glut facilitated by machines whose output is innumerable ready to specialize. Dermisache’s writings will forever elude all but the lucky few, but hopefully it has made easier to understand something of what they’ve been trying to tell us all along.

Selected Writings by Mirtha Dermisache, edited by Daniel Owen and Lisa Pearlman is published by Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse and is available from Amazon and other online retailers.